**Turning the Page**

**Summary**

Tony receives a surprise late-night visitor who brings unwelcome news about the return of an enemy and a potential threat to those closest to him. The news and realization that it's time to move out of Gibbs’ shadow set the wheels in motion for his departure from NCIS. But first, a round of goodbyes and a confrontation with Gibbs that's been put off for far too long.

Warnings/spoilers: Spoilers for S12 finale arc and several S13 episodes. Consider this story AU shortly after the events of "Charade". While I wouldn't call it character bashing, the Gibbs as written here is very much the angry, impatient, sullen character we saw so much of in S13. If that bothers you, you've been warned.

This is the first story in a three-part series. If you're interested in the general idea for the follow-on stories, please visit the Turning the Page series link for a description and notes.

**Notes**

Author’s Notes: This is my first story. I’d like to thank those that encouraged me through the process and convinced me to give it a try in the first place; I think you knew something I didn’t. You know who you are, and I hope you see this because you should also know this humble story wouldn’t have happened without you.

Beta: Many, many thanks to my beta, who went over my mental rambling with a fine-tooth comb. Her suggestions and advice were always on target and helped make me a better writer. Any remaining mistakes are all mine.
Art: I’m honored and thankful to have cover art by Hinky_hippo for my first story. Her wonderful artwork captured the underlying theme of the story perfectly. Please check it out here: http://ic.pics.livejournal.com/hinky_hippo/19553029/12572/12572_900.jpg
Tony entered the stairwell in his apartment building, huffing in exasperation that the elevator was out of service again. He was tired and on edge after yet another repeat performance of alternately sparring with and being ignored by Gibbs as they worked to close a case. All he wanted to do was eat his takeout, check his email, and maybe watch a little TV before going to bed. He wearily climbed the stairs up to his apartment, absently noting the echoes of someone else’s footsteps in the stairwell. Reaching his floor, he exited the stairwell and headed toward his apartment at the end of the hall. His senses suddenly sharpened at hearing the stairwell door close a second time, followed by rapidly gaining footsteps. He was being followed. Turning his body slightly to hide his actions from the view of the person following him, he reached inside his jacket under the pretense of digging for his keys; he jingled them a bit then gripped his service weapon while continuing to walk. Once he reached his door, Tony suddenly whirled, simultaneously dropping the food and raising his weapon only to find he was pointing his gun at a familiar face.

“What the hell, Joanna!” he hissed at the woman in front of him. He lowered his weapon while his heart still raced with adrenaline. CIA Officer Joanna Teague, entirely unruffled at having a weapon aimed at her head, simply smiled enigmatically at him and replied, “Good to see you too, Tony.” After a pause, her smile melted like quicksilver as she said “We need to talk.”

Tony refused to entertain whatever Joanna had come to tell him on an empty stomach. The takeout had been salvageable in spite of being dropped and Joanna agreed to Tony’s offer to split the meal. They’d eaten and cleared the table in relative silence, though he noted her demeanor seemed off from what he remembered. He grabbed a bottle of water for each of them and they sat down once again. This little visit was clearly not a social call. Tony was at a loss as to why Joanna would practically stalk him in order to see him covertly, nearly giving him a heart attack in the process. Fatigue made
him impatient; he wanted to find out and send her on her way so he could get back to his original plans for the evening. “So,” Tony began, “what’s with the spook act out there in my hallway? You couldn’t see me at the Navy Yard or call first? Or is that against CIA rules these days?”

Joanna smiled and took his obvious irritation at her appearance in stride, though it seemed out of character. She wondered at the source of it as she answered, remembering how well they’d worked together despite Tony’s disapproval of her use of the CIA’s more ‘colorful’ methods of getting results. “You’ve seen for yourself in dealing with the CIA there’s not much in the way of a rule book.” Serious again, she went on. “The truth is I needed to keep this little side trip off the radar and speak to you privately, away from your team.”

Tony gestured impatiently, waving a hand in a ‘get on with it motion’. “You’ll be explaining that now, right?”

Joanna nodded. “First, you need the background. In recent months, the CIA has gathered intel indicating two terrorist groups out of Asia have been working to gain a foothold for their operations in the US by moving part of their network to large west coast cities. Intel indicates sleeper cells are already established and have been for some time. Some are geared more toward cyber-terrorism and others are being armed for operations and attacks against soft targets down the road. Historically, our efforts have been based here on the east coast. Now there’s an investigative presence focused out west, specifically intended to counter these new threats.”

Tony nodded, indicating he was following so far and Joanna continued.

“The CIA, ATF, and FBI have very quietly set up a joint task force based in Seattle, equipped to deal with both types of threats. There will also be civilian consultants and local law enforcement involvement. As you know, the CIA is limited in regards to the activities it can conduct on U.S. soil; that will be the purview of the FBI and ATF. Since we saw each other last, I’ve continued to work with the CIA’s counter-terrorism efforts in Asia and recently shifted to the CIA’s lead for the new task force.”

Tony looked at her questioningly. “That’s a lot of background and I don’t get why you’re telling me this. You’re clearly leading up to something. Normally I’m not one for spoilers, but I’ve had a crap day so would you mind skipping to the end?”

Meeting Tony’s eyes intently, all traces of humor gone from her face; Joanna hesitated then dropped a bombshell. “One of the groups we’re tracking is The Calling.”

Tony stiffened then stood suddenly, chair scraping across the floor and nearly toppling. He turned away from Joanna, pacing and scrubbing his hands over his face to hide his shock and anger at her revelation. It had been a rotten year and much that had happened since last summer had roots in NCIS crossing paths with The Calling. Tony’s thoughts inevitably turned to Gibbs. There had already been an unacknowledged, creeping distance between them for some time. Since Gibbs’ shooting, both their friendship and working relationship had seen a spectacular deterioration that remained the status quo. Tony knew the sudden change in Gibbs’ behavior toward him traced its beginning back to their pursuit of Daniel Budd and his little band of Lost Boys. The tension between them was becoming problematic for the entire team and making it damn near impossible for him to remain in his position as Gibbs’ SFA.

Joanna simply sat calmly, watching Tony pace in agitation and waiting for him to absorb the unwelcome news. As bad as that news was, he hadn’t heard the worst of it yet.

Tony couldn’t help his building resentment at the thought of The Calling gaining a foothold again after all that had happened. He turned back to her angrily, struggling to keep his composure. “How is
that even possible? CIA dropped the ball on the cleanup, right?”

Joanna ignored the jibe and gathered her thoughts. Tony was justified in his anger and she shared it. The Calling had taken something from them both and their shared personal connection gave them common ground. They’d worked quite well together; spending four months tirelessly tracing Daniel Budd and The Calling’s network from Iraq across the globe to Shanghai. Tony was well aware of her devastation over Ned’s violent death in Cairo and exactly how driven she was to bring Budd and those responsible to justice by any means necessary.

For her part, it was immediately clear how deeply Tony was affected by his mentor’s shooting; guilt and the need to make amends were primarily what drove him. Guilt, both at being unable to prevent it happening and at being ordered away from Gibbs’ side. She’d been impressed by Gibbs’ senior agent, but never more so than when he shoved down his overwhelming guilt and worry to carry on their mission as if nothing had happened. She only caught the barest glimmer of anger as Vance had them on a chopper back to Iraq even before the critically wounded man had been taken into surgery. She’d wondered what it cost Tony to shove down his emotions beneath a mask like that, as they were unable to learn Gibbs’ fate until days later. Ultimately, they’d both gotten a measure of closure in the aftermath of Tony’s final confrontation with Budd and now this development was like tearing open barely healed wounds for them both. Though judging by Tony’s reaction, perhaps not so healed as she’d assumed.

“Well?” Tony’s sharp tone pulled her attention back to the present.

Joanna sighed heavily. “Yes, mistakes were made and some of the operatives were already here before we knew about the sleeper cells. They had no connection to The Calling’s operations in Iraq and Shanghai so they were able to regroup and reorganize under our radar.” she admitted.

“Joanna.” He gritted out. “It’s been a long day and you’re making it longer. You still haven’t answered my question. Why are you here?”

“We’d like you to work with the task force.”

“Why us? At this point, there’s no Navy connection to merit bringing in NCIS. Vance won’t play this time around.”

“You misunderstand me. Not NCIS, Tony. Just you.” Joanna paused, tilting her head and giving him a speculative glance. “I’ve noticed you’ve been floating your resume around.”

Tony blinked and started a bit. How the hell did she know that and what else did she know about what had been going on? Tony fought back a sigh. He had been quietly testing the waters for a while, unsure if he even wanted to stay with NCIS once it became clear Gibbs had little use for him these days.

“I’m missing something. You’ve been keeping tabs on me? What the hell for?” Tony’s voice rose as his frustration began to bleed through again. “I don’t believe for a minute you’re playing the role of agency headhunter here to recruit me because you happened to come across my resume.”

His investigative instincts told him something more was going on here. He looked at her pointedly, “Come on, there’s something you haven’t told me yet, isn’t there?” Joanna looked at him steadily for a moment, her stalling told him in no uncertain terms he wasn’t going to like this.

“Yes. There’s something else you need to know.”
"Damn" Tony muttered. His stomach dropped a bit as he watched her shift uneasily. He mentally prepared himself...Joanna’s news was clearly about to go from bad to worse.

Joanna hesitated, wishing she could be certain as to whether the rest of the story would convince Tony to join the task force or make him angry enough to refuse and throw her out. She couldn’t let that happen; the stakes were becoming too high. "You remember Kenny Young?"

Tony nodded, recalling the young Asian CIA officer they’d worked with briefly in Shanghai. He’d been capable and had a quirky sense of humor. Tony had liked him immediately. "Of course I do. What about him?"

"He’s dead."

Tony was dismayed at the news and unsure how it fit into the big picture Joanna was painting. "What happened?"

"He and his wife died in an apartment fire in Shanghai. In fact several of our Shanghai operatives and their local informants have died in recent months in what appear to be accidents."

Now Tony was a beginning to get the picture and he’d been right. He didn’t like it one bit. "Appear to be?"

"On the surface, yes." Joanna said. "All suspicious deaths, but with no hard evidence of foul play as far as the local authorities were able to find. We conducted our own investigation once the pattern became clear and refocused our intelligence collection efforts. We have reason to believe The Calling is involved."

"To what end?" he asked. "This wasn't their style; targeting individuals. It’s a total break from their previous philosophy and goals. Like most terrorist organizations, they favored choosing significant, symbolic targets and bombastic, showy plots designed to induce mass casualties."

"Don’t you see it, Tony?" she began. "The Calling is targeting CIA officers and informants involved in helping us bring down Budd and their original network in Iraq and Shanghai."

"Why would they call attention to themselves like that? It doesn’t add up."

"They really aren’t" Joanna responded. "Hence the concerted efforts to make these deaths look like common accidents. If it weren’t for a fortunate intercept of their communications, we wouldn’t have looked deeper; at least not so soon."

"Still," Tony pressed, "what do they have to gain? They had to know the pattern of accidents would invite scrutiny, and it seems risky to their new operations."

Joanna shook her head, shrugging slightly. "We don’t fully understand why yet. It could be self-preservation, revenge, or an attempt by the new leadership to save face. What we do know for certain is that they are not only targeting the team based in Shanghai."

Another piece of the puzzle, Tony thought. "They’re here?"

"Yes, we believe so." Joanna replied. "There was an interrupted attempt to tamper with my car a few weeks ago. I’ve been working off grid since."
"That could have been nothing," Tony said. "What makes you so sure it was part of what’s going on?" He studied her, noting Joanna suddenly seemed uneasy again.

"Because of a more recent, successful attempt on another person related to the operation."

"Who," Tony asked quietly, suddenly dreading her answer. "Finish it, Joanna," he urged.

She began tentatively, "Luke Harris is also dead."

Tony inhaled sharply, feeling a bit shell shocked. He whispered, "How?"

"He and his adoptive parents were killed in a car crash. The brakes failed."

Tony had mixed feelings about the death of the boy who’d played such an integral role in The Calling’s plans last year. Half brainwashed, he’d been a very well-played pawn. Coached by members of The Calling to play on Gibbs’ sympathies and well known rapport with children, Luke had been the perfect lure to get the lead investigator off his game. It worked all too well as Gibbs misjudged both the situation and the youth, very nearly paying with his life. That Luke had also been instrumental in helping them after his second rescue from The Calling only redeemed him slightly in Tony’s eyes. The boy had been torn with guilt and nearly suicidal, believing he’d killed Gibbs. Even so, Luke had only helped them after they’d arranged the video call allowing him to see that Gibbs survived the shooting. Luke had been little more than a child when The Calling recruited him. Tony shook his head sadly. No matter what had happened, he didn’t deserve to die that way, and his family with him. His family…it suddenly hit him.

"Damn it," he swore. He must be exhausted and off his game not to have seen where Joanna was leading. He was angry at both himself for taking so long to catch on, and at Joanna for dancing around the real issue at hand. Job offer, his ass. He was finally seeing the entirety of the situation and the danger it presented closer to home. As the final pieces of the puzzle slid into place, he turned back to her with an angry glare.

"Tony, what…"

"Stop," Tony interrupted sharply. "Are you here to tell me I’m on The Calling’s hit list?"

Disconcerted by the suddenly low, cold tone of voice directed at her, Joanna replied "We don’t think so, but can’t be certain."

Tony erupted in fury at her noncommittal answer, slamming his hands down on the table and sending water bottles rolling across its surface. "How can you say you don’t think so!" he shouted angrily. "You at least strongly suspected the possibility after Luke, if not after what happened to you!"

"Tony, its not like that, not exactly," absentmindedly righting the water bottles as she spoke.

"Right," he snapped back, "Given this group’s clear disregard for anyone who might be with, or anywhere near their intended victim, you didn’t think it was necessary to tell me I was a potential target? That I could have been one for weeks, along with everyone around me?"

"Honestly Tony," Joanna held up her hands in a conciliatory gesture, knowing his anger mostly stemmed from the thought of his friends and coworkers becoming collateral damage in an attempt on his life. "We're almost certain you're not on their radar yet. Only Budd and his closest confidants in the group knew you by name; even fewer knew that you worked with the CIA team in Shanghai. They’re all dead now."
Joanna continued on, determined to convince Tony they hadn’t knowingly left him exposed to danger. "Think about it, Tony. Aside from Luke, you’re the most visible and easily accessible of those that would have been targeted here. They’d have gone after you before now if you were known to them.” Joanna paused to let him absorb her reasoning, hoping her effort to placate him worked.

"Alright." Tony said, somewhat appeased. "That’s not to say they wont find out at some point."

"Yes, that’s a possibility." she conceded.

"And the job offer?" Tony asked.

"I was perfectly serious about that," she answered emphatically. "Your prior knowledge of the network, experience as a field agent, and investigative skills would be invaluable to the new task force. As far as the resurgence of The Calling, you’ve got both reason and opportunity as part of the task force to take the fight to them, instead of the other way around.”

Tony sighed deeply and considered his options. "If I'm even going to think about doing this, you need to understand some things upfront. I won't tolerate information pertinent to my investigative work being withheld from me. I've been kept in the dark too many times and it has never come to any good. I'm also not going to be part of any vigilante efforts. If that's what's going on here, count me out. I won't work outside the law. Is that perfectly clear?"

Joanna nodded and started to speak. Wanting to drive the point home, Tony held up a hand to stop her and added "When that has happened, in my experience it leads to nothing but disaster. Call it a deal-breaker if you like and if it happens, I will walk away."

There was some history behind that, Joanna thought. While she felt it was unlikely he would elaborate on the basis for his conditions, they weren't unreasonable. Really, unless she wanted to go back to Seattle empty handed, she knew there was no choice but to agree. "I understand Tony, and accept your conditions."

Tony narrowed his eyes, unable to prevent a niggling feeling of suspicion at her easy acceptance of his terms, but asked the next obvious question. "So where would I fit and what would my role be on this task force?"

Joanna smiled; relieved he was actually considering the offer. "On paper, you'd be on staff to a private security firm for starters. We're using that firm as a cover to muddy the waters and misdirect any possible attention to, or monitoring of our task force's efforts."

Tony nodded, seeing the logic. "What about off the paper?"

"Tony, the task force wants you in a leadership capacity, with a significant pay raise commensurate with the risks and responsibilities. You can write your own ticket based on what your assessment of what we need, and a position will be created for you...CIA, FBI, Team lead, local LEO liaison, whatever you feel is the best fit."

Tony stared in surprise, a little stunned at both the offer to write his own position, and the strong vote of confidence. He’d been missing that at NCIS, among other things, and undecided as to what to do about it. Yes, he’d been half-heartedly exploring his career options. There had been plenty of interest in him, but for his part, nothing really appealed to his desire to make a difference and do something lasting and important...until now. Joanna was right. Being part of something designed from the outset to "take the fight to them” as she put it was appealing.
He couldn’t stay where he was, Gibbs had made that impossible. A better career opportunity was unlikely to come along; he had only to say yes. Was he really ready to cut ties with everyone and everything in Washington? There was no doubt if he joined Joanna’s task force, that’s exactly what would happen.

Joanna sat patiently as he deliberated, sensing some indecision. She had her suspicions about the reasons for his reluctance and wondered if she’d leave with an answer. "Tony…do you need some time?"

"You have to admit, it’s a lot to take in," he deflected.

"Tony," Joanna began hesitantly, afraid she was heading into hands-off territory. "You’ve obviously been thinking about leaving NCIS for some time. Is there anything we need to know about why?"

"Nothing that would affect my work," he answered evasively.

Joanna was concerned for him; as both a friend and colleague. It hadn't escaped her attention during her visit that the easy humor she’d come to associate with the man was absent. "Is it about what happened to Gibbs? You know you couldn't have prevented that."

Tony shook his head, "Not so much about the shooting, more about after we got back from Shanghai. He came back from rehab and recovery changed. Our working relationship has suffered." Not really wanting to go into detail, Tony left it at that.

"He blames you?"

Tony shrugged, "He says it's not about Iraq, but isn't exactly forthcoming on what it is about.

"I see," Joanna said, although she really didn’t. Sensing his discomfort with the topic, she switched gears back to the question at hand. "I'll be here for another two days. I don't need an answer tonight Tony, but I'd like to know your decision before I return to Seattle."

"No need to wait." Tony said. Speaking decisively, he answered. "I've made up my mind. Your task force has one less open spot."

"Good," she replied. Reaching across the table to clasp his forearm and emphasize her words, "I'm glad you're onboard and the other agency leads will be as well. It goes without saying; the information I've given you isn't to be shared with anyone at NCIS…certainly not Gibbs."

"Oh, don't worry. Gibbs is the last person I would go to with this." Tony replied dryly. "Finding out about The Calling would be bad enough, but I definitely don't want to see his reaction to hearing about Luke. You can bet he'd try everything he could to get NCIS involved officially. It that didn't work, he'd do it unofficially and on his own, if necessary. It would be a complication we don’t need."

Joanna nodded, reassured by his agreement and assessment of Gibbs' hypothetical involvement. "It's getting late; I should be going and you have a lot to think about. So, how much time do you need to wrap things up here in DC? Is there anything we can do to help?"

Tony paused, quickly considering the logistics of moving, resigning, and the more difficult personal conversations that he would need to have before his departure. "I shouldn't need long to close the apartment," he said, "but it would help if temporary storage and a place to stay initially could be arranged on your end."

"Done, Tony. How will you handle resigning?"
"I think it would be best if I waited until everything else is done and I'm ready to head west," he replied. "I'm thinking two weeks at the outside. I have more than enough leave to resign with immediate effect, so I don't expect it to be contested by the agency. My coworkers are another story. Leaving it to the end will help head off the inevitable questions and this is a group you don't want digging into what's really going on."

Joanna nodded in agreement and stood, signaling her intent to leave. "There's bound to be questions, but I leave it to your judgment on how best to handle things on your end." Reaching into her pocket, she handed him a card with a phone number on it. "I'll get things rolling on our end. This is how you can reach me when you're ready to coordinate further."

Tony rose, taking the offered card. He walked her to the door and affirmed, "I'll be in touch soon." Closing and locking the door behind her, he briefly rested his forehead on its' cool surface. He had a lot to do and little time to do it. Pulling away from the door, he grabbed his laptop and sat on the couch to start a list.
Resignation

The bullpen was unusually quiet even though it was a Friday and still early in the evening. Tony turned toward the large windows, watching the first few lights twinkling on across the river as the last bit of daylight faded. They’d had a breather over the last few days, with no active cases and nothing to demand their time except paperwork backlogs. He’d been working late over the last few days clearing the last of his routine reports and requisitions, including those which would come due in the next month. He emailed them to McGee and placed the hard copies Gibbs still preferred in his inbox. The rest of the team had gone home earlier, which suited him just fine.

“That worked out well for a change,” he mumbled to himself as he glanced around and noted he was still alone. The last thing he wanted was an audience for what he was about to do.

In the last week since Joanna’s unexpected visit, he’d cleared his apartment and put it on the market. Amazingly, it had sold within days and was now under contract. While working late without his team there, he’d also been gradually and surreptitiously clearing his desk, leaving only the few personal items on his desktop so as not to arouse suspicion. Retrieving a small box he’d placed under his desk, Tony packed the last few items that remained and placed the box next to his backpack. Quickly checking each drawer to ensure he hadn’t missing anything, his stomach flipped as he came to the lockbox far in the back of the bottom drawer. Gibbs’ medals.

“Forgot all about that, didn’t you Anthony.” He felt annoyed and taken aback by the rising tide of emotion brought on at the simple sight of the plain metal box.

He sat back down and pulling out a notepad, penned a brief message to McGee.

"Tim,

I think by now you understand why I have these, though Gibbs himself obviously never put much stock in them. If not, you will soon enough. It’s been an honor to keep them for him and there’s no one I trust more to carry on the tradition. Take care of them, and each other.

Tony"

He folded the note and taped it to the lockbox. There was an ache in his chest as he placed the box reverently on McGee’s chair. He rolled it under the desk, hiding the lockbox from sight. Tony took a few deep breaths to calm his emotions and gather his thoughts. “Time to do this. Decision’s made so get on with it,” Tony chided himself. He headed toward the stairs, picking up a plain sealed envelope as he passed his desk.

Vance was expecting him and had left the door open. Tony rapped lightly on the doorframe before pausing at the threshold waiting to be acknowledged. Vance was on the phone, but waved him in and Tony waited as he concluded the phone call.

“Director”, he greeted as Vance replaced the receiver and looked up at Tony.

“Agent DiNozzo. Friday evening’s a rather unusual time for a meeting. This couldn’t wait until Monday?”

“I appreciate you seeing me after hours, Director. I hoped to have privacy for this meeting. And I’m afraid it can’t wait” Tony responded.

Vance’s face took on a more serious expression as he gestured for Tony to take a seat at the
conference table. Vance rose to join him, responding wryly. “I get the feeling I may not like what I’m about to hear, Agent DiNozzo”.

Probably not, Tony thought to himself as he pulled the envelope from his jacket pocket and placed it on the table in front of the Director. Vance raised a questioning eyebrow.

“It’s my resignation Director Vance…effective immediately.”

He watched as Vance sat back quickly, his face clearly showing his shock. “I don’t understand. You’ve been with NCIS for 15 years; you’re one of our finest agents. It’s in the best interest of the agency that we retain you if we can. I’m aware you’ve had a rough year but why would you leave rather than pursue options within the agency?”

Vance had next to no clue about his “rough year” and Tony had no intention of enlightening him. “There are no Team Lead positions open currently, and no other openings elsewhere in the agency I’d consider a good fit.”

Vance narrowed his eyes slightly. “It’s Gibbs, isn’t it…he’s the reason?”

Vance’s query was close enough to one of the issues at hand but Tony had no desire to discuss his and Gibbs’ crumbling relationship with the Toothpick, of all people. No, that was a conversation he’d have with Gibbs alone. Keeping a neutral expression, he simply offered an explanation that was factual without going into detail. “I haven’t made this decision lightly, Director. There are a number of deciding factors. Gibbs is nowhere near ready to step down and as I said, there are no suitable positions open. I’m holding myself back by staying. I’m also holding McGee and Bishop back. My other reasons are personal and not relevant to NCIS.” Just people at NCIS Tony thought, fervently hoping Vance would be satisfied with the half-answer.

“Agent DiNozzo…Tony. We haven’t always seen eye to eye and I’ve treated you unfairly in the past. I think we’ve put that behind us. I’ve come to think very highly of you and value your contributions to the MCRT. If Gibbs is the problem, I can find a suitable temporary position until a lead spot comes available.”

Tony was somewhat amused at Vance playing that card. He was subtly fishing for information on Gibbs’ role in his decision and Tony wasn’t biting. Things had improved with Vance and their working relationship had thawed considerably but Tony still did not fully trust the man. As with Gibbs, he’d misused his position time and again, without ever being held accountable. Tony had to leave to keep his own integrity intact, and more importantly because he felt wasn’t making a difference any longer as part of Gibbs’ team. Yet more details he wouldn’t be sharing with Vance, who likely was far more concerned at losing his “Gibbs wrangler” than losing Tony’s investigative experience. Not that he’d had much success wrangling Gibbs lately. The man could barely stand to be in the same room with him.

“Is there anything I can do to change your mind?” Vance asked, a glimpse of frustration showing. Even if The Calling hadn’t made a resurgence Tony would still have resigned, though perhaps not so soon. He just shook his head as he responded, “No sir, I’m committed elsewhere now and even if I weren’t, it’s still past time for me to move on.”

“I see. I believe I understand why you’d request a private meeting. Am I to take it that Gibbs is not aware of this?”

“Not yet” Tony responded, “He will be. We have some things to discuss before I go.”

Vance gave him a knowing look, well aware Tony wasn’t giving him the whole story but unwilling
to force the issue. “And the rest of your team?”

“They’ll be informed of my intentions, Director. I wasn’t planning to have them blindsided on Monday.” Tony’s thoughts wandered briefly to the dinner plans with his coworkers later that evening. Breaking the news of his departure would be one of the most difficult things he’d ever done. His long overdue conversation with Gibbs even more so. It was also very likely to be contentious considering the man’s attitude toward him lately. He could put them off no longer now that he was just days from cutting ties and leaving Washington.

“May I ask what you’ll be doing?” Vance queried, bringing Tony’s attention back to the conversation at hand.

“I’m sorry to sound a bit mysterious but unfortunately, I’m not at liberty to say at this point.” Tony wanted this over with and he didn’t want to discuss his joining the Seattle task force with anyone at NCIS, much less the Director. He’d said all he needed to say to Vance for propriety’s sake and saw no reason to indulge the man’s curiosity. Tony stood, removing his badge and gun and placing them on the table in front of Vance, effectively ending the conversation. “Thank you Director Vance, for everything.”

Tony extended his hand and Vance took it, shaking as he spoke. “Thank you, Agent DiNozzo. I wish you well and as long as I’m Director, you’ll have a place here should you wish to return.”

Not very likely, Tony thought. “I appreciate that, Director. I’d better get going; I have to break the news to Gibbs and the team.” Tony grinned ruefully. “I’m sure you’d rather not have that task for yourself, especially when it comes to Gibbs.” He turned and headed back to the bullpen, feeling the weight of Vance’s stare following him.

Tony almost wished he was going to be around Monday, because Vance would get his pound of flesh from Gibbs after being stymied in his attempt to talk Tony out of leaving. That was Gibbs’ problem to deal with and Tony would leave him to it. The man had left little room for doubt that he didn’t need or want Tony’s help with much of anything these days.

Tony returned to his desk, taking a last look around the bullpen, his home away from home for the last 15 years. He blinked several times against the unwelcome sting of tears as he looked around, the skylights now dark and the evening lighting muting the orange walls he’d joked about so many times over the years.

He felt suddenly overwhelmed by memories both good and bad replaying in his head, unbidden and taking him back to where it all started. That alley in Baltimore when he tackled Gibbs and received a sock to the jaw for his effort. They’d made a connection during that case. Gibbs had brought him here and given him a renewed sense of purpose after his partner’s betrayal in Baltimore, and they’d gone on to build a partnership such as he’d never known before or since. NCIS became home and his team had become family of sorts, curing him of his flight instinct. Gibbs had given him that and more; a mentor, friend, and sometime father-figure back when his own father couldn’t be bothered with him. Ironically, Gibbs also had a lead role in taking it all away again. Tony had been despondent for a while, reaching a low point emotionally before moving past the anger and hurt, finally reaching an equilibrium that simply left him melancholy for what once was.

Gibbs had not just kept Tony at arms’ length; he’d shoved him away with both hands, even managing to isolate him from the others frequently. He’d had a lot of time to assess his life and the people in it as he floundered in the absence of support from his pseudo-family. Tony had come to the stark realization that NCIS wasn’t giving him what he needed any longer and was determined to pull himself out of the limbo he’d allowed himself to fall into. The position on the task force would help him do that. Now his only concern before leaving was to get Gibbs to open his eyes and take a hard
look at his own fitness to lead, even if that conversation broke that last tenuous bonds of friendship between them. He still cared for Gibbs, despite the man’s unwillingness to mend what was broken between them.

Looking round as he put on his coat, his thoughts went to the other agents who’d come and gone in his 15 years there. Some had resigned or retired and some had taken other jobs as he soon would. Far too many had been lost tragically, like Pacci and Kate in his early years, later Paula and her team, and most recently Ned. Some changes had been harder than others, but the team had moved on from each one eventually. Tony had no doubt the same would be true of his departure. Confident in his decision, Tony slung his back pack over one shoulder, picked up the small box and entered the elevator, heading to the parking garage for the final time.
Disclosure

Tony walked back toward the private dining room, wistfully glancing around the Italian restaurant. It was a longtime favorite near his apartment and scene of many a team gathering in happier times. Hoping to recapture some of that sense of family and belonging he'd once felt for a final time, he'd invited the team to join him for dinner before he left DC. Unaware of his true reasons they'd all readily agreed, except Gibbs who unsurprisingly had turned him down in typically terse fashion. Still, Tony was overwhelmingly relieved not to have to explain his resignation more than twice. Gibbs would almost certainly be unamused at being the last to know, but Tony found himself unable to feel concern for Gibbs' opinion on the matter.

He had to admit, he was actually glad Gibbs declined. The tension between them was palpable these days and would have cast a pall over the meal. Wanting to just enjoy the team dinner without any awkwardness about his announcement, he decided to wait until they finished dinner to break the news of his resignation. He'd left the table briefly to settle the group's bill, grateful for the brief respite that allowed him to gather both his thoughts and his nerve. With the likely exception of Ducky, he wasn't sure they'd understand his decision and there were things he wasn't going to be able to explain.

Tony paused in the doorway unobserved, smiling as he watched them. McGee and Bishop were huddled together speaking quietly as they often did while working on a case. Abby and Palmer on the other hand, were talking animatedly; Abby grinning and gesturing wildly while Ducky looked on indulgently. He felt like an absolute heel, knowing he was about to throw ice water on what had been an enjoyable evening. What he'd set in motion couldn't be undone now, even if that was what he wanted. Taking a deep breath Tony stepped through the doorway and took his seat at the table, thinking but still undecided on how to broach the subject.

"Tony!" Tony jumped slightly, as the sound of McGee's raised voice pulled him from his thoughts.

Tony looked around at the quizzical expressions on his team's faces, grinning sheepishly as he realized they'd been trying to get his attention.

"Sorry, everyone. I was woolgathering a bit. What is it, Tim?"

"Never mind Tony." McGee answered. "What I really want to know is what's got you so distracted this evening," he said. It's like you're here, but not here, you know?"

Abby chimed in next, while Ducky, Bishop, and Palmer looked on expectantly. "Something’s going on Tony. Is everything all right?"

Tony sighed, unable to put off his announcement any longer. "Everyone, I have a confession to make. I've asked you all here partly under, I guess you could say…false pretenses."

"What do you mean, Anthony?" Ducky asked, now scrutinizing him carefully.

"I’ve come to some decisions lately, and it's time I shared them with you all." Tony cringed inwardly, as the faces around the table took on a more apprehensive look. Best to just get it out, he thought and plowed on.

"I'm leaving NCIS," he said bluntly.

As he'd expected, there was a moment of stunned silence before the group erupted in shocked exclamations and protests.
Tony held up a hand to silence them. "Look, I know this is unexpected. I'd like to explain." Tony noticed Ducky looking at him intently and if he didn't know any better, with an air of disappointment. He wondered if that look was for him or for Gibbs. He suspected Ducky probably had more insight into the situation between him and Gibbs than anyone else. From the meaningful glance thrown his way, it was clear to Tony that at least one person at the table didn't find his news all that unexpected.

Tony looked around at each of them in turn and continued. "This may seem sudden to all of you, but it's not a decision I've made overnight. I've been thinking about leaving for some time."

"But why," Abby cried. "We're family…why would you want to leave?"

He was not surprised at Abby's resistance to the idea of him leaving. At times, she rivaled Gibbs in her stubborn refusal to accept change.

"Abby," he replied firmly, "You all mean the world to me, you need to remember that." Looking around at all of them as he spoke, he went on. "You all need to understand something else. This year has given me more than ample evidence that when it comes down to it, we aren't family and this is a job. A job I've outgrown."

Abby looked back at him with big, hurt eyes, unable to answer.

"Tony," McGee spoke up, gesturing around the table. "Are you saying we've done something to push you into this?"

Tony didn't want to revisit how he'd floundered in the face of Gibbs' cold, distant attitude and the lack of support from the others through most of it. He didn't blame them really; why poke the angry bear when someone else had his full attention? He fell back on deflection as he answered.

"No, of course you haven't…but you can't have missed that I've had more than a few knocks this year. I'd just as soon not rewind through it, if you don't mind. You were all there, think about it."

"I get it Tony," McGee said regretfully. "We should have been there for you and we weren't, not always."

"No Tim. This isn't on any of you. It's not like I'm the only one with issues. Gibbs has had a rough time of it, so has Bishop for that matter," he said smiling at her and receiving one in return.

"Agent Gibbs is a big part of this, isn't he?" Palmer asked, an uncharacteristically hard tone creeping into his voice.

Tony silently applauded the younger man for his Ducky-like insight. It also served his purpose well for the team to think he was leaving due to the events of the past year and Gibbs’ change in attitude toward him. He didn't want them to actually take Gibbs to task over it though; that wouldn't do. He wanted to them to accept his departure and be able to move on from it, without questioning the surface story behind it.

"It's pretty obvious to anyone who cares to look that Gibbs and I aren't exactly working well together these days." Tony said. "Even if that weren't the case, I should have moved on and up years ago. This year has just been the wake-up call I needed to make a change."

"What did Gibbs say?" McGee asked hesitantly.

"Weeell," Tony drawled, "since he elected not to join us, he doesn't know yet."
"What?" Abby almost shrieked. "How could you not tell him? Gibbs won't let you leave like that," she said, crossing her arms stubbornly.

Tony sighed inwardly. Abby definitely wore her 'Gibbs loyalty badge' tonight. "Abs, I'd be surprised if Gibbs will care that I'm leaving, much less object at all." His tone hardened as he went on, "Even if he did object, this is not his decision to make."

"How can you say that! Of course he cares," she defended.

"Abigail, enough," Ducky scolded gently. "Anthony's situation is difficult already. We don't need to make it more so."

Tony looked at the older man in gratitude before continuing. "Look, I can't stay as Gibbs' SFA forever. He's not ready to leave field work and there's no place else for me to go. You have to see that the friction between us is affecting our work. I see it if you all don't. Ultimately, I'm holding myself back and holding Tim and Ellie back too."

"I'm sorry Tony. I didn't mean to make this harder for you." Abby apologized quietly.

Tony shook his head and smiled, "No harm done, Abby."

“How much longer do you have here, Tony?” Bishop asked.

“Oh yes!” Abby said, bouncing slightly. “We need to have a going away party for you!”

Tony huffed unhappily. “No party Abs,” holding up his hand as she started to protest. “I appreciate the sentiment, but honestly I don’t feel like its cause for celebration. There’s no time anyway. I’ve already accepted a new position and I’m leaving soon to arrange for a temporary place to stay and store my things.”

“Wait,” McGee asked in shock. "Are you telling us you're not only resigning, but leaving DC? When exactly are you leaving?"

Tony looked down, unable to meet their eyes in that moment. "Yeah, I kind of skipped that part, didn't I?" Looking back up, he gave them the rest of the bad news. "I saw Vance right before coming here. I've already resigned and turned in my badge and gun."

"Tony, I can almost understand you're leaving, but no notice? Why so soon?" McGee asked.

“As it happens, the new job is with a private security firm based on the west coast and they need me onboard quickly...much sooner than I expected. I'll be starting out working overseas, and out of contact for varying periods of time.” Tony answered, giving them the same story he'd given his father. “It's a tailor-made job and great opportunity professionally. I couldn’t say no.”

The group sat in uneasy silence, all of them reeling at the news that not only was Tony leaving, it would be difficult to even stay in touch with him.

“Tony,” McGee asked in a voice still tinged with shock, “You are going to talk to Gibbs before you go, aren’t you?”

Tony couldn’t resist tweaking him just a little for old times’ sake. He offered a trademark grin with his answer, “A little worried about facing the lion in his den with this news, are you?” He didn’t have the heart to carry on as McGee actually paled a bit at the thought. “Don’t worry Tim; I’ll talk to him tomorrow. I’d like to ask you all not to mention this if you happen to speak to him before then. I haven’t left you in the lurch on paperwork either.”
“I’m sorry, Tony, I didn’t mean to imply you would. I’m feeling a bit lost, you know?”

“Well, don’t. You’ll get a handle on it all just fine.” Tony said confidently.

"What about your dad? Is he taking over your apartment?" Bishop asked.

Tony fought down a sick feeling as he remembered the possibility he could become a potential target of The Calling at some point. The thought of them paying a visit to his old apartment and finding the wrong Anthony DiNozzo made him decidedly queasy. No; a very public sale and change of ownership would head off that possibility.

Pasting on a smile, he answered. "No, Dad likes where he is and wants to stay. I've sold the apartment."

"You've sold it?" Abby asked incredulously. "You love your apartment!" It was really sinking in now, Tony was truly leaving. “Where are you staying?”

“Yeah,” Tony said regretfully, “I'll miss the apartment. I've been staying with Dad. It just isn’t practical to keep the place with all the traveling I'll be doing and Dad has the room to put me up when I visit.”

“When will that be, Tony?” Palmer asked.

“I honestly don’t know…maybe for the holidays. We’ll see,” he said, trying to strike a balance in their expectations. He wanted to reassure them he wasn’t pulling a total disappearing act. At the same time, he didn’t want them to be surprised or even suspicious if he were out of touch for some time due to the demands of his work on the task force. Not to mention the potential danger. “I don’t have a place yet, but as soon as I get settled a bit, I’ll be in touch, promise,” he said, smiling.

“You better, mister!” Abby said with a mock glare.

Tony held up his hands in surrender, then grinned and tossed her a salute.

Emotionally exhausted, he needed to steer the evening to an end. “OK, let’s stop putting off the inevitable. I’ve run you all thought the wringer tonight, and I’m sorry for that. I just didn’t have it in me to do this six times, so I hope you’ll forgive me.”

Tony rose, prompting the others to do the same. He felt a reassuring warmth inside as they formed a half circle around him. He looked around at these people who'd been such big part of his life for so long and fleetingly wondered what he was going to do without them. He was determined not to become maudlin over leaving again; the opportunity dropped in his lap could not have come at a better time. It seemed the others sensed it now as well, even Abby. He could see the shock, hurt, and confusion that had been in their expressions fading to acceptance and support, with a touch of sadness. He felt more than a little of that himself as he said his farewells to each of them.

McGee spoke first, a little catch in his voice, "I don't know what else to say. I don't blame you for leaving; I know this year has been hard. It's not only that you won't be at NCIS anymore. I just feel like I'm losing my best friend."

"Ah, Probie," Tony teased as McGee rolled his eyes good-naturedly. "I'm going to miss you too, my friend. You're not losing me; I'm going to a new job, not dropping off the face of the earth."

Turning to Bishop, he clasped her hands in his own as he spoke. "Eleanor Bishop you are a good agent. And you'll get even better; never doubt that."
"Thank you for everything, Tony. It won't be the same without you," she replied.

"Maybe it'll be better," he joked as he pulled her in for a hug.

Palmer looked at him earnestly and said "Tony, taking a job in another city doesn't mean we aren't still here for you. I hope you won't forget that, or us."

"Of course not, Jimmy. How could I forget my Autopsy Gremlin?" he said with a grin.

Handshakes turned into loose hugs for McGee and Palmer and then he turned to Abby, holding open his arms. She launched herself at him immediately. She gifted him with final, full-body Abby hug that made his ribs creak and left him breathless.

"I can't believe you're really going, Tony," she whispered in his ear. "I'm going to miss you soo much."

"I'm going to miss you too, Abs," he said softly, tightening his arms around her. "Everything's going to work out fine, I promise," he said, tugging one of her pigtails gently as he pulled away.

Ducky hung back as the others said their goodbyes and gathered their things. They seemed to grasp without being told that the two men would like their farewell to be a private one. With a final round of subdued waves good bye the group departed, leaving them alone. Without speaking, they took their seats again, and Tony poured each of them a glass of wine from the unfinished bottle on the table.

"Anthony…" Ducky began, taking a small sip of the offered wine, "I'm deeply sorry it's come to this. I'm only surprised you've stayed this long."

"You've talked to Gibbs?" Tony questioned, not meeting Ducky's eyes, instead looking into his own glass somberly.

"Some time ago," Ducky affirmed, "when the change in his demeanor toward you became evident, if not the exact reasons for it. I suspect you have as well, with roughly the same amount of success."

"I tried more than once," Tony said, nodding. "I thought he blamed me for the shooting. Nothing else made sense…at first."

"At first?" Ducky asked. "You don't think it's about you now?"

"Oh, it's about me alright," Tony responded bitterly. "It's just a little more complicated than what happened in Iraq."

"How so Anthony?"

Tony waved a hand dismissively. "It's not important Ducky, not now that I'm leaving. I think it's too late for us to mend things even if that's what he wants, and clearly it isn't. What is important is that he's not 100%. Not physically and not emotionally. I'd consider it a personal favor if you'd keep a close eye on him until he realizes it too."

Ducky nodded in agreement. "Yes well…Jethro can be remarkably stubborn about such things, and I believe you're right on both counts. Of course, I'll do as you ask. Your loyalty in the face of his prolonged mistreatment does you credit, though I'm not sure he still deserves it."

Tony slumped a bit, relieved that at least one other person agreed with him on Gibbs' condition. "Thanks Ducky. He won't see it that way, but I'm grateful someone other than me does. I have one
more favor to ask. I’d like you to serve as my medical proxy. You’re familiar with my medical history and I’d just feel better having someone besides Dad, who’s flighty on a good day.”

Ducky gave him a searching look as he answered. “I’m happy to do this for you Anthony, but I can’t help but question why you feel there’s a need. It hasn’t escaped my attention that you didn’t give us much in the way of detail about this new job.”

Tony wished he could tell Ducky everything; a selfish part of him wanted at least one person to know he was doing this partly for them. He decided it would do no harm for Ducky to know the bare minimum of detail. “All I can tell you is I’m joining a new Federal task force for counterterrorism. Even if I could go into more detail, I have my own reasons for not wanting the others to know.”

“Is there something about this work you haven’t told us? Some specific element of danger you didn’t feel it necessary to disclose?”

“I can’t answer that, Ducky,” he said grimly.

A note of worry crept into Ducky’s voice. “That is an answer in itself, Anthony. Are you very sure about whatever this is you’re doing?”

Tony smiled and clasped the older man’s arm, hoping to reassure him. “I’m sure Ducky. For the first time in a while, I’m doing the right thing for the right reasons.”

“Well then my boy, I can think of no better reason for you to go,” Ducky said.

Tony looked at the older man with shining eyes. “Thank you Ducky, that means the world to me.”

“As you do to me,” Ducky said, his own eyes misting. “Do an old man a favor in return and take very good care of yourself, so I don’t have to exercise that proxy.”

“You know as well as I do, there are no guarantees. I’ll do my best to make sure that phone call never happens.” The serious moment ended, as Tony went on with a smile and lighthearted voice, “Now, let’s get out of here. I need a decent nights’ sleep before I see Gibbs tomorrow.”
Confrontation

*Gibbs’ house, the next evening*

Tony pulled into the driveway and cut the engine. He sat for a moment staring at the soft glow from the basement windows, a sure sign Gibbs was at home and likely tinkering with the latest boat. He wasn’t looking forward to this long-overdue conversation but now that he was leaving for Seattle in less than 48 hours, it could be put off no longer.

Tony climbed from the car and walked toward the front door, the gloomy shadows of dusk reflecting his mood. He would do everything in his power to ensure the coming conversation would make a difference, but ultimately Gibbs would stand or fall on his own. At this point, he just hoped to prevent any of the others from being collateral damage in another one of Gibbs’ increasingly frequent missteps. Tony recalled those instances where Gibbs was compelled to go ‘lone wolf’ or bend, if not outright break the laws they were sworn to uphold. He knew they’d been incredibly lucky to have come out of them relatively unscathed. They’d come through those situations, but were all irreparably changed by them, even if no one saw it clearly in retrospect as Tony did now. He’d be lying to himself if he said he wasn’t worried about Gibbs in the absence of his influence. Tony steeled himself for the confrontation to come as he entered the house and headed for the basement stairs.

Gibbs looked up at the ceiling, listening to the unhurried footfalls of someone walking across the floor upstairs. People rarely visited these days, and he couldn’t begin to guess who might drop by on a weekend. His question was soon answered as the basement door opened and Tony stepped through. He turned back to the boat and continued sanding, hiding his surprise and bewilderment as Tony descended and took a seat near the bottom of the stairs.

“What’s the occasion? You’ve stopped coming around,” he said in greeting.

“Really?” Tony replied incredulously. “Are you all that surprised? Because I’ve gotten the distinct impression I’ve worn out my welcome. In more ways than one.”

“Door’s unlocked, like always.”

“Doesn’t exactly mean I’m welcome though, does it? And I don’t mean just here.” Tony replied shortly.

Gibbs finally stopped sanding and took a seat on a nearby stool. “You’re here. Something you want to discuss, DiNozzo?”

“C’mon, Gibbs. Playing obtuse doesn’t become you. You’ve had a problem with me for some time…maybe more than one. It’s not like you to hold something like that back. Question is why?”

“Is this about the Ramsey case? You can’t handle a little dressing down?” Gibbs challenged.

Tony huffed in exasperation that Gibbs went on the offensive right at the start. This was going about as well as he expected. Maintaining his calm, he answered. “It didn’t help. I mean what the hell were you thinking flaying me in the middle of the bull pen like that? But no,” he said emphatically, “it’s about a hell of a lot more than that. I’ve handled you for 15 years. That was far from the first time I’ve been on the wrong end of your unwarranted displays of temper and it’s certainly not the first time you’ve been out of line with me.”

“So I was out of line,” Gibbs said, waving a hand dismissively at the idea. “You here to file a
“Right…don’t be ridiculous Gibbs.”

“Alright then, so why are you here if it’s not about that?”

“I’m here for answers and in the absence of that, to tell you some things you need to hear.” Tony said, his tone low and serious.

Gibbs wondered where Tony was going with this. “Go on,” he allowed, his interest piqued.

“You haven’t always been fair but for the most part you’ve had good reason. I accepted that because I understood and trusted in your reasons being for the best. I’m not so sure that’s the case now. You’ve changed Gibbs, and I’ve spent the better part of a year trying figure out why you’re treating me, and only me, like a stranger or interloper in your domain. Tony went on as Gibbs’ expression turned decidedly icy. “I have to admit, I was floundering for a long time. At first all I seemed to get from you was cryptic questions and deflections. Then came the insults, anger, and impatience, or your typical stony silence until I got the message and stopped trying.”

“You think I owe you an explanation?” Gibbs demanded.

“Well yeah Gibbs, I do. I’ve been with you and on your six for over 15 years and your second for almost as long. Why is it that you don’t think so?”

“There’s nothing to explain. Maybe the problem is with you.” Gibbs said.

“Ah, deflection,” Tony said, nodding at the expected response. “Let’s try again. You’ve kept me out of the field, demeaned and undermined me, and when you weren’t doing that you were acting like you couldn’t stand to be in same room with me. It wasn’t all that long ago I was the guy whose ‘yabba’ you depended on, who you said you’d trust anytime and now I’m no better than a stranger to you. If you were trying to push me out of the nest, you could have just told me. I don’t really think that’s exactly what you’re trying to do. I think it was an excuse.”

Gibbs simply raised an eyebrow and asked “You don’t think you've brought some of that on yourself?”

“And how exactly would I have done that? By doing my job? By being loyal even when you didn't damn well deserve it?” Tony snapped back.

Gibbs just glared at him, remaining infuriatingly silent.

Tony couldn’t stop himself from rolling his eyes. “I hate to break it to you, but that look hasn’t worked on me in ages. Even now, you’re covering your problem by being adversarial and evasive.”

“What problem would that be?” Gibbs asked.

Wanting to tone down the confrontation and get Gibbs off balance, Tony shifted tactics. He studied his nails, suddenly nonchalant. “You know…I’ve done a little investigating. Exercised some of those skills and powers of observation you used to respect and rely on.”

A flash of confusion at the apparent subject change showed briefly in Gibbs’ eyes before his face settled back into the expressionless mask Tony had become so familiar with in recent months. “And?”

Determined to see this through and get to the roots of the problem, Tony plowed on. “And it
occurred to me I’ve seen you like this before. It reminds me a lot of how you treated me when you came back from your Mexican siesta.”

Gibbs snorted in derision. “That’s ancient history DiNozzo.”

“It’s not for me,” Tony said. Deny it if it makes you feel better, but it’s awfully familiar. You took a lot of satisfaction back then in kicking me back down the ladder. It was all about showing everyone, especially me, who was in charge. I know ‘the why’ for what happened last time and we eventually got past it. Question is, what’s behind it this time and why is it we can’t get past it?”

Gibbs sighed internally as Ducky’s assertion that his change in attitude and perspective had been tied to Tony came back to haunt him. The implied warning to talk things out with his SFA months ago had gone unheeded and now Tony was no longer willing to let things lie. He should have known it would come to this. “That has nothing to do with now,” he insisted.

“Maybe it does, maybe it doesn’t.” Tony looked at him intently for a moment and took a deep breath. Now we’re getting to the part that isn’t going to go over well, Tony thought as he continued. “You’ve been taking something out on me since you came back to work. You told me it wasn’t about Iraq, but I’m not so sure. Whatever it is, it’s something you don’t want to admit, to me or anyone for that matter.”

Gibbs suddenly felt uncomfortable at the direction of the conversation; and more than a little irritated because he was certain that was what Tony intended. "Just what is it you think I have to hide, DiNozzo?"

“Not an easy question to answer is it? You were barely speaking to me, so I was left to figure some things out on my own. Not sure you realize it yourself, but I’d like to think I know you pretty well after 15 years.” Tony went on, seemingly changing the subject again. “I’ve practically made a career out of interpreting Gibbs-speak; your moods and actions, anticipating what you would do or say. We were in always sync and it served us well in and out of the field. That’s all gone now and it affects the whole team; surely you see that. There’s a reason for it that needs to be addressed, so we can both go forward from here.”

Gibbs thought about what Tony was saying; it was true he’d always been highly attuned to and aware of Gibbs's moods and actions. Now, his insight seemed to be leading to a place Gibbs wasn’t ready to go yet. He hated being on the defensive and hated Tony being the one to put him there.

“So how did we get here?” Tony said, interrupting his musing.

“You’re the one with the theories DiNozzo, you tell me.”

“To be honest, I think its been brewing for a while, this change in state between you and I. But it was The Calling that was the final straw.” Tony saw a flicker in Gibbs' eyes at that, the response a dead giveaway he was on the right track. “All those kids recruited and brainwashed to do god knew what. That case had you off your game almost from the beginning and it only got worse. First there was the kid on the bus you couldn’t talk down. Oh…and then there was Luke.”

Gibbs shifted uncomfortably at the mention of the boy’s name. He wanted to end this, but knew in his gut Tony wouldn’t stop now, not until he’d had his say.

“You trusted that kid when everyone around you tried to convince you not to. You were so certain you knew better, so convinced you'd won him over in a matter of days when The Calling had been working on him for months. You were played by kids, Gibbs. You misjudged the situation, got complacent and it nearly got you dead. You had the whole summer to stew in that while you
recovered. Then you come back before you're ready and try to take control of the case with barely a clue about the previous three months’ work. Think I didn't hear about your impromptu prison visit to Matthew Rousseau? You most likely got a potential informant killed Gibbs…for nothing!"

“You don't know that. I didn’t get him killed.”

“No, you just stabbed him through the hand with a pen,” Tony retorted sarcastically. “What a coincidence then, he was murdered barely hours after your little talk. You just had to jump in and try to take control. Why were you so unable to accept we could do the job without you? By the time you came back we were on the verge of bringing down the entire network. McGee and Bishop stopped the cyber terrorist threat. Teague and I shut down their operations in Iraq and then Shanghai, and I took down Budd himself, the guy who engineered it all. Along the way we just happened to rescue the kid you couldn't save.”

“Enough!” Gibbs shouted, angry at having Luke and Budd thrown in his face.

Tony shoved down the intruding thoughts of the boy that ultimately, neither one of them had been able to save. He went on, ignoring Gibbs’ angry protest.

“I'm not done by a long shot. Now it circles back to you and me. We didn't have to wait long for your personal involvement and obsession with control to nearly make a disaster out of another case.”

“What the hell are you talking about DiNozzo?”

“Your DEA friend Mitch ring a bell? You tried like hell to bench me in that case, for no good reason. You refused to talk to me about what was going on, what you were thinking. I had to do an end run around you because you were intentionally withholding information vital to the case. Could you blame me for thinking you were going lone wolf again? If I hadn’t intervened, your buddy would have murdered Benson Long because you trusted that Mitch went back to his hotel like a good little agent. You only had a chance to talk him out of it because of me. We only got the evidence we needed because I brought everyone else in on it and we worked as a team. One of your rules, if I remember correctly. We practically came to blows over that case at one point. And you want to try and convince me there’s nothing at all wrong with you?”

He couldn’t answer the question, he barely understood it himself. He just wanted the last year behind him and Tony was determined to use it to make a case for something. The irrational anger he’d so often felt toward the younger man lately was rising to the surface again.

“What does this little trip down memory lane have to do with you and me DiNozzo?” he asked snidely.

“C’mon Gibbs. You barely look me in the eye or spare a civil word for months and it goes back to those two cases. Things have changed for you and you're taking it out on me. I deserve to know why.” Tony finished, his voice getting louder as hurt and anger bled into his tone for the first time.

“I don’t know what it is you’re fishing for.”

“Oh, for God’s sake Gibbs. Stop acting like you don’t know what I’m talking about! You don’t have the excuse of memory loss this time. This time you knew what you were doing and there’s an element of competition to it. Why would you feel that way about me of all people? As I stewed on that, things began to come together. You’re threatened.”

Gibbs laughed. “Are you serious…I’m threatened? Where is all this coming from, DiNozzo?”

“Listen...something around what happened in Iraq sent you off the rails, Gibbs. All this is about
nothing more than your angst and inability to deal emotionally with what happened to you. Not only that, your refusal to accept you're not back to 100% physically. You marinate in it, deflect attention from it by being a bigger bastard than usual, at the same time pretending everything is fine. It's got you questioning yourself; drives you to prove you can still do the job. You slap me down at every turn because I'm competition now and you've never been a fan of competition unless you were instigating it among your agents.” Gibbs’ jaw clenched and Tony felt a surge of satisfaction at having scored a point.

Gibbs wanted to deny what Tony was implying. Something about it rang true but his pride refused to let him admit to the possibility.

“Are you suggesting I’m not fit for duty with this crazy theory of yours? I was medically cleared!”

What are you trying to prove?” Gibbs ground out angrily.

“I’m not the one with something to prove, not any more. You actually came back to work before being physically cleared and your ability to snow your way past a psych eval is legend. Then you bullied your way back into the field and no one was willing to question your judgment. They should have…I should have before now.”

“Even if you’re right I don’t see the point to all this, DiNozzo.”

Tony shook his head at the man’s willful blindness. “The point is it couldn’t be any clearer to me that you want me gone. Maybe it was the knock to the head, yet another near death experience, and maybe you do actually blame me for the shooting or not being there afterward. Or was it for doing what you couldn’t? The Calling was brought down without you and you didn’t get a shot at Budd yourself. Whether you blame me or not, you sure as hell resent me. So how’d I do?” Tony asked, challenging Gibbs to dispute him.

“Well you sure seem to have it all figured out. What makes you so sure you’re right?”

“I’m an investigator Gibbs, and a damn good one even if you’ve lost sight of that.”

“I think you’re grasping at straws,” Gibbs shook his head in denial, unwilling to admit Tony’s conclusions were entirely too accurate.

“I’m not and you know it. You turned on me and you need to figure out for yourself why. You told me to take care of my team but you’ve spent months making it abundantly clear they’re not my team. I thought you’d step aside when the time came. It’s what you wanted, what you prepared me for. I’ve been ready for years and its past time for you to step aside.” Now you’re holding me back...holding what happened to you against me. I was your handpicked heir apparent until your ego got in the way of stepping back from the field. For some reason you need to keep doing this whether you’re fit to or not. So I put the same question to you. Is that what you call taking care of your team?”

Gibbs ignored the question and shot back “You expecting me to step aside for you now?”

“No, I don’t expect you to step aside.” Tony replied hotly. “You let your entire team resign once so you could keep your job. You think I want the job by forcing you out now? I expect you to get your head on straight because your team deserves better and your next SFA doesn’t deserve to deal with what I’ve been getting from you.”

“You’re quitting?” Gibbs asked in surprise.

“You broke me of quitting a long time ago Gibbs. No, I’m resigning and I’m doing it on my terms, not yours. I’d be crazy to stay.”
“So why did you?”

“Because for a long time, you still had things to teach me. Things I wanted to learn. In return I worked my ass off for you; gave you loyalty and trust. Respect. When did you decide I wasn’t worthy of the same? You *chose* me Gibbs and now it seems you’ve got no use for me. Actions speak louder than words. Why the hell would I stay? Do you think I could hang a resume like mine out there and not get offers?”

Gibbs slumped on the stool, taken aback by Tony’s decision. He’d never been much for self-recrimination when it came to how he treated his agents, Tony in particular. Tony’s uncharacteristic display of anger and hurt were more than ample evidence for him to see a line had finally been crossed somewhere. Did he still deserve Tony’s admiration and respect…his loyalty? Tony clearly didn’t think so any longer and he was more than a little surprised at how that rankled.

“You think you have all the answers DiNozzo. How can you have them when I don’t?” Gibbs asked wearily.

Finally a crack in the defenses, Tony thought.

“There’s nothing wrong with needing a little help finding them Gibbs.”

“You think I need your help?” Gibbs answered, clearly implying that was the last thing he wanted or needed.

Tony shoved down a stab of hurt as he answered.

“I think you need someone’s help Gibbs. I’m not just your senior field agent. I’m your friend; at least I used to be. I’d like to be there but it’s clear my help and support isn’t welcome. You’ve shoved away most everyone who cares about you, me in particular so that just leaves professional help. Taft knew you needed it that’s why he threw Dr. Confalone at you before he left. Why aren’t you letting her do her thing?”

“I talk to her.” Gibbs defended.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Please. You’re giving her the runaround. You’re trying to keep an iron grip on control. Let me tell you something, your control is an illusion. It’s wishful thinking that you’d bounce back with no effects after what you’d been through. There’s no shame in pulling back a bit...you can still do a world of good. If you keep on as you are you’re going to get yourself hurt again or worse. You might take someone else with you next time.”

Gibbs looked up sharply at that, clearly angry with the implication.

Tony hated himself a little for the plaintive tone that crept into his voice as he said, “Is it really such a surprise to you that I want to make sure you’re going to be OK before I leave?”

Gibbs ignored the question, asking one of his own.

“When are you leaving?”

Tony hung his head at Gibbs’ continued refusal to mend fences. Looking up, he met Gibbs’ eyes and answered.

“I gave my resignation to Vance last night. It’s effective immediately. I told the others last night as well. I won’t be back Gibbs.”
“What!” Gibbs said furiously. “Was this whole conversation was about you getting your pound of flesh before you cut and run?” He stood and took a step toward Tony, his body nearly vibrating with anger.

Tony stood and faced him, his own temper under tight control.

“I’m not cutting anything but my losses, you stubborn bastard! No, this was a final attempt to clear the air between us. It's no less an exercise in futility than it has been going all the way back to September because as usual, I'm doing all the talking.”

Tony took a step closer and extended one last olive branch.

“When you calm down, I hope you can think back on the respect and regard there used to be between us and know that everything I’ve said is meant to help you not hurt you. That’s it; I’ve said all I have to say.”

“So we’re done?”

“What do you think Gibbs? You haven’t said damn thing to convince me otherwise.”

“Is that what you wanted...for me to stroke your ego and convince you to stay? Why should I; you’ve already made up your mind.”

“So I have.” Tony said, nodding. So much for the olive branch. “There was a time once, when you would’ve tried to change my mind.”

Gibbs looked at him, really looked at him in a way he hadn’t in far too long. He didn’t like what he saw. Tony looked exhausted, the new lines on his face and eyes ringed with dark circles contrasted with his pale complexion and added years to his age. Gibbs knew he was partly responsible for driving Tony to this and yet something was preventing him from making it right. More than that, he was quickly coming to the realization he’d run out of time to do so.

“Where will you be going?” he asked.

“Like I said Gibbs, my terms not yours. You’ve lost the right to ask that question.”

Gibbs remained standing; stunned and silent as Tony looked around the basement that had once felt like a second home.

Meeting Gibbs’ eyes one final time he said, “Rule 11, Gibbs. So yeah, we’re done and I have regrets about it even if you don’t.” Tony turned and started up the stairs.

Pausing on the landing he looked back and said “One of these days you’re going to get your head on straight, and for all that’s happened, I really hope so. When you do Gibbs, you’re going to realize it didn’t have to be this way.”

Tony turned and left, pulling the basement door shut behind him, missing the stricken look on his former mentor’s face.

A profound sense of sadness filled him as he walked through Gibbs home for the last time and out to his car. He climbed in, closed his eyes and sat for a moment, trying to calm his chaotic emotions. He couldn’t just shrug off 15 years and pretend they never happened, but it was time he came to terms with his change in circumstance. It was time to look ahead, not back. This chapter of his life had come to an end and it was time to turn the page and start the next one.
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