Life Is Made

by colorguard28

Summary

After Tim's release from Bethesda, everybody figures his return to field duty will be the biggest challenge of the year. But a single event in the life of one family member ripples outward affecting everybody in ways none of them expected.

Notes

This is seventh in the Breathe universe and starts in February of Season 7. Recap for where we stand in Breathe: Tony and McGee are together and are waiting for DC to legalize gay marriage. Tim was badly injured in a case just before this and will be out of the field for several months. Tony is going through long-term treatment for his plague-scarred lungs, which were aggravated during the rescue mission in Somalia at the beginning of S7. He and Tim's dad, Commander Sean McGee who has asbestos-related lung issues, are both being treated by Dr. Brad Pitt (from SWAK).

The story is finished — I'll be posting somewhat slowly so I don't overwhelm people.
Chapter 1

Thursday, February 11, 2010

Gibbs walked into the bullpen and hung his snowy coat over the back of McGee's chair to dry. He sighed at the thought that the young agent wouldn't need it for a while. McGee was still stuck in Bethesda, though right now it was the snow, not his injuries, that kept him there. Two major snowstorms within a week had virtually shuttered the tri-state area. Gibbs had only made it to the Navy Yard because his ancient truck had four-wheel drive, but he wasn't betting on Ziva getting dug out. Tony was at the hospital with McGee, and if Vance asked, he was snowed in there. The team leader let a half-smile cross his face as he remembered his discussion with Tony on Tuesday.

"Boss, they're predicting another big storm for tomorrow," Tony said as he walked over to lean against the end of Gibbs' desk.

"We're not on call for this one," Gibbs said. "Vance has Kowalski's team on call for this one."

Tony just nodded. "I was planning on staying with Tim tonight, especially since Sean got out today, but if I do, I might get stuck there."

"Make sure you've got your kit." Gibbs glanced toward the stairs before adding, "I'll cover for you with Vance if he kicks up a fuss."

"Yeah, about that," Tony said. "Tim's worried Vance is going to use this as an excuse to bump him to CyberCrimes."

Gibbs turned to face his senior field agent. "It's my team. None of you leave unless I OK it."

"Boss." Tony's voice held a rare hesitation.

Gibbs just lifted an eyebrow.

"You know the doctors aren't guaranteeing that he'll be able to return to the field," Tony said. "They had to do so much repair work in there that he can't even move it for another week, and after two weeks strapped down, the chances that he's going to have a permanent decrease in his range of motion are almost 100 percent." He grimaced. "Sometimes being a Phys Ed. major sucks."

"Don't go borrowing trouble," Gibbs said. "You only had a 15 percent chance of surviving the plague, and I'm sure as hell not talking to your ghost."

Tony sighed. "Yeah. Because a senior field agent who carries an inhaler is just what you need."

Gibbs just let his hand speak for him, leaving Tony rubbing the back of his head.

"Yes, Boss. Sorry, Boss." He blanched. "I mean, won't happen again Boss. That wasn't an apology."

"Calm down, DiNozzo," Gibbs said. "You've spent most of the last week snowed in with nothing to do but worry about McGee. You just focus on helping him heal; I'll take care of Vance. And don't sell McGee short — I don't imagine his high school bullies ever imagined he'd become a federal agent on the best team in DC, capable of kicking their ass worse than they ever kicked his. He's tougher than you think."
Tony nodded. "Thanks, Boss. Just remind me of that when I forget. This whole worrying-about-Tim thing is new — usually he’s the one McWorrying about me. It’s almost as weird as you being nice."

That time, Gibbs smacked him just to show he wasn’t being nice, then sent him home. Only after Tony was in the elevator did he let his smile escape. McGee would be back — he was sure of it. And it would do both of them good to have their roles reversed for a while.

But now, with a summons from Vance waiting for him on his desk, Gibbs was less certain. He was sure McGee had forgotten all about their interrupted meeting with Vance before Brad went missing, and Tony hadn’t know about it. Gibbs, though, had been waiting for the other shoe to drop ever since and had been surprised it hadn't come Tuesday, the one semi-normal day between the two storms.

He left a cold case file on Ziva’s desk on the chance she made it in, then headed up to the director's office.

Vance’s secretary wasn’t there — no big surprise — but the director had his door open. Gibbs walked in.

"Gibbs," Vance said from his seat at his desk. "You made it in."

He nodded. "DiNozzo's stuck at Bethesda, and Ziva's probably stuck at home. Left a cold case for her if she does get in." He stood in front of the desk, preferring to have the height advantage.

"I wouldn't send you out anyway, not until we get a TAD agent for your team."

As Vance paused, Gibbs just looked at him. Whatever the director had in mind, Gibbs wanted him to bring it up.

"DiNozzo talk to you?" Vance’s poker face, as always, was too good for Gibbs to tell what he was thinking.

"DiNozzo talks a lot, Leon. Anything in particular you have in mind?"

"Last week, at Bethesda, when I went back to visit McGee while he was still out, DiNozzo was talking to him. After hearing some of what he had to say, I didn't go in. Didn't seem to be my place, since I'm not part of the family your people have become." Vance paused again, looking at him. "Have either DiNozzo or McGee talked to you about transferring to another team?"

Gibbs glared at the director as he fought to rein in his emotions before saying anything. "This why you called McGee and me up here last week, to tell us you were transferring him to CyberCrimes again?" He clenched his hands into fists at his sides.

Vance’s eyebrows rose. "So DiNozzo hasn’t talked to you." He looked over at the framed photos at his desk. "Close the door, Gibbs."

"You sure about that, Leon?" Gibbs said.

Vance just looked at him, so he walked over and shut the silver door, then returned to his spot.

"I'm not the enemy."

Gibbs just stood, waiting for the director to explain.

Vance didn’t speak, but Gibbs thought it was because the director was choosing his words rather
than forcing a power play. He waited, not wanting to say anything until he figured out what was going on.

"You're coming up on mandatory retirement age for field agents in three years."

Gibbs nodded.

"Some agents move into administration. Some petition to stay in the field. Others retire completely."

Gibbs nodded again, trying to figure out where this was going.

Vance folded his hands. "Never seen you as the administration type."

Gibbs shook his head. "Ass-kissing is a skill I don't care to develop." He hid a half-smile as Vance's raised eyebrow showed his dig had hit home.

"You planning on sticking around, or is that beach in Mexico calling your name?"

Gibbs tried to keep his face expressionless as he considered the question. Sure, he had known he would have to make that decision one day, assuming he wasn't killed in the line of duty before then. He'd always figured he'd stay on the job as long as they'd have him, though Tony was certainly capable of leading the MCRT. That would mean breaking up the team, though, since once Tony took the lead, McGee would have to shift to another team. Married teammates were one thing; married supervisor/subordinate would never pass muster.

"You got a reason for asking?"

Vance smiled. "You know, one of the reasons you hate administration is because we have to deal with the big picture. Not a single case or a single team, but an entire unit or an entire agency."

"You are not breaking up my team again." Gibbs stepped forward and put his hands on the desk, leaning forward to glare at Vance. "You've got the future of the agency there, and if you split them up, you're going to lose them."

"Agreed."

Gibbs opened his mouth to argue when Vance's words sunk in. "You agree?"

Vance nodded, and Gibbs pulled back.

"Sit down, Gibbs. This isn't going to be a short conversation." Vance settled back in his chair.

Gibbs conceded the point and took a seat, but didn't relax.

"Everybody had a lot of time to think last week at Bethesda, myself included," Vance said. "You have done this agency a service by building what is probably the most effective investigative team at any ARMFED agency."

Gibbs couldn't stop the surprise from showing in his expression. He knew that, but he never realized Vance did.

"I might not always like your methods, Gibbs, but I appreciate your results," Vance said. "You're tough on your agents. Some say too tough. Agents who couldn't cut it with you have gone on to do some good work for NCIS."
"Leon, where are you going with this?"

"Patience, Gibbs. I know you have it. You were too good a sniper not to be patient. Let me draw the big picture for you."

Gibbs suppressed a growl. He had no patience for this administrative bullshit, but with his team all out of the office for the day, he couldn't even argue he had a hot case that would give him an excuse to escape. And he wanted to know what Vance was plotting.

"As I said, administration has to look at the big picture, and I'm already planning for the future of this agency long after you've sailed off into the sunset." He paused. "I see the members of your team having a big part in that future."

Gibbs remembered what he'd told Sean and Eileen McGee back in the fall. "DiNozzo’s the next MCRT team lead. He's the best young agent I've ever worked with. McGee? He'll be sitting in your chair one of these days. Abby's already the best forensic scientist at any federal agency. And Palmer is going to be a fine medical examiner when Ducky's ready to hand over the reins."

"You're not telling me anything I don't already know," Vance said. "The question is how to get them there."

Gibbs shrugged. "Never worried much about that. Abby's there. Ducky will retire before I do, and DiNozzo's ready to step in. Led the team once before, did a good job by all accounts."

Vance nodded. "That just leaves McGee."

"Who has to move once DiNozzo takes over the team."

"Precisely. I had an idea, one I was going to present to you both last week." Vance paused. "Then I overheard DiNozzo when he was sitting with McGee that first night at Bethesda. That had me reconsidering my plan."

Gibbs frowned. "You going to share, Leon?"

"Only on the condition that this goes no further — for now."

Gibbs searched Vance's face for a signal, some clue of what he had in mind. "I don't like hiding things from my team that affect them. They trust me; I want to keep it that way."

"For now." Vance raised a finger. "I want us to work out some details before we talk to DiNozzo and McGee. And I want them to come to us. I thought DiNozzo would have talked to you by now."

"You wanna tell me what you're talking about?" He threw the question at Vance, only to be met with a return query.

"Did you know DiNozzo and McGee are thinking of starting a family?"

Gibbs raised a single eyebrow. "Hadn't heard that one." He thought for a second. "I knew McGee wanted kids. One reason he and Abby didn't work out. DiNozzo's never said anything one way or the other."

"And you thought with his family background, he wouldn't want them," Vance said.

"Never thought that much about it," Gibbs said. "Not like I have to worry about it happening accidentally. If they decide to adopt, it would be a year anyway, likely more. Plenty of time to
Vance nodded. "From what I overheard, one of their sticking points is the hours your team works. They'd been talking about one of them transferring, and they seemed to think I would have moved McGee to CyberCrimes."

"Wasn't that what you were pulling us in here to tell us last week?"

Vance shook his head. "Not exactly. I had something different in mind. But what I overheard DiNozzo say last week was that he knew McGee liked being an agent too much to go back to the cyber unit. Instead, he was planning to come to me this week and asking for a transfer to Cold Cases, with a recommendation that Dwayne Wilson take the empty spot on the MCRT."

Gibbs tried to process that information, but he was having a hard time. Tony had been on his team so long, he couldn't imagine the team without him. The week Tony was still on the Seahawk while McGee and Ziva were back on the MCRT never had seemed real to him. After almost 10 years — twice the length of either Burley or McGee — Tony had become a permanent part of the team in Gibbs' mind.

"Tony is going to ask for a transfer?"

"And I'm inclined to grant it — temporarily."

Gibbs wanted to be angry at Vance, but he also wanted to know what Vance was plotting.

"Spell it out for me, Leon."

"McGee doesn't want to be stuck in CyberCrimes; they both want one of them to have regular hours; and McGee needs team leader experience to move into administration. But he needs senior agent status first - a slot DiNozzo currently holds." Vance got up and went to stand in front of the conference table, looking at the plasma. Gibbs joined him.

"This is what I have in mind," Vance said, pulling up a diagram. "Until McGee returns, I'm assigning Wilson to you on a TAD basis. Break him in, make sure he can handle a spot on the team. Once McGee returns, Wilson will move back to Cold Cases. Jarvis hits 55 later this year. When he retires, I want to promote DiNozzo as the new lead on Cold Cases, McGee to your senior agent, and transfer Wilson to your team on a permanent basis." He clicked to the next slide. "When you retire in a few years, I'll move DiNozzo to take your spot on the MCRT. That will move David to the senior agent spot, and DiNozzo can pick his own probie."

Gibbs started to object, but Vance held up his hand.

"Since McGee will have done a stint as senior field agent, I can promote him to head up a new team, charged with providing computer forensics and investigative help to all the teams in the region. The team will be made up of field agents who also have the computer skills McGee brings to the table."

"Remaking the agency in your own image, Leon?"

Vance raised an eyebrow at the derisive tone. "You can hardly argue that McGee hasn't had an impact on your team's success. As it is, too many teams are relying on him for help, and that's not fair to your team. Listening to you and Agent Balboa last week convinced me of that."

"And you have a way to stop them from asking him for help?" He didn't try to hide the skepticism in his voice.
“Dr. Mallard tells me McGee will be on desk duty for at least two months after he returns, possibly longer.”

Gibbs nodded, since Ducky had told him the same thing.

“When he comes back, I'm giving him a couple of weeks to develop a training plan,” Vance said. “Then, he's going to run half-day training sessions in two-week blocks for agents in this region. Team leaders can nominate agents for spots, and McGee will have a say in choosing which ones get in. He'll have time to handle three, maybe four, classes before he's cleared for field work, and you'll still have him half days. My goal is for every team to have at least one agent pass this course during that time. That should spread enough knowledge around to keep them out of your hair.”

Gibbs thought about it. He didn't like the idea of not having McGee fully on the team for that time, but if it got everybody to stop asking his junior agent for help, it was worth it, especially while McGee couldn't be in the field. "How does this fit into your master plan?"

Vance smiled. "This gives McGee and myself a way to identify the most promising agents for the future cyber liaison team that he would lead," he said. "It will also help us build a case for the unit, so that by the time you're ready to retire, SecNav will authorize the budget."

Gibbs thought about it and realized Vance had developed a good plan. "Wilson showed promise when he worked with us that one time. Doesn't scare," he considered. "Will Ziva be off probationary status by the time Jarvis retires?"

Vance nodded. "As soon as she's naturalized, she will move to junior agent status," he said. "With four years on your team, nobody will question it. Only three agents besides her have ever lasted longer."

"DiNozzo, McGee, and Burley," Gibbs said. "Burley still afloat?"

Vance nodded. "I've told him if he ever wants to stay on land, he's in line for a team lead position, but he likes working alone."


"I would have thought that was McGee."

Gibbs tipped his head. "In some ways." He stood. "We done here?"

Vance nodded. "Just one thing."

Gibbs turned, looking back at him.

"Not a word of this, even to DiNozzo or McGee. Let them come to us."

Gibbs thought back to Tuesday's discussion with Tony. "They're both worried you're going to use McGee's injury as an excuse to send him back to CyberCrimes. If they ask, can I reassure them?"

Vance nodded. "And if it hasn't come up by the time McGee returns to work, I might change my mind about waiting for them to initiate the discussion since I'll have to talk to him about this training program."

"Six weeks easy," Gibbs said. "Maybe eight."

Vance nodded. "I think it will come up before then."
As Gibbs started to leave, Vance's voice stopped him. "Gibbs. You get an opening, you suggest they come to me."

Gibbs nodded, then walked out. He could see Ziva wasn't in the bullpen and was glad. Vance had given him a lot to think about.

He settled into his chair and sipped at the coffee cup he'd left there. He had to give Vance credit; the director had come up with a good plan. Wilson was one of the few young agents he thought he could tolerate on the team, and McGee was ready to take more of a leadership role. DiNozzo seemed to be ready for a change as well, hard as that was for him to accept. Didn't mean he was happy about Vance finding out this information before him. Sure, Vance only knew because he'd overheard Tony talking, but that didn't erase the sting of wondering if the boys were planning to talk to him about it. Vance had said Tony was going to go to him to request the transfer — not Gibbs. He couldn't help but wonder why he was being left out of the loop, especially since Tony had made it clear neither he nor Tim had much trust in the director. Did they not think he would be OK with the idea?

He swallowed hard. With everything that had happened in the past year, he'd forgotten somewhere along the line that they weren't really his kids. Tony, Tim, Ziva, Abby - none of them were his, not the way Tim and Sarah belonged to Sean and Eileen. He wondered if Tim and Tony had talked to the McGees about having children. They were family, in a way that it didn't matter what Tim and Tony did for a living or where they lived, the McGees would always be family. The way Jack was always his father, no matter whether they had last talked two hours ago or two decades ago.

He tried to ignore the logical conclusion of that, but couldn't help but realize the same held true for Tony. His father, his biological one, would always be Tony's father no matter how long it had been since they had talked. That didn't leave much of a place for him. Being the honorary dad, being on Tony's six in his personal life the way Tony always had his in the field, was that all just because of the job? Tony didn't need him outside of work anymore. He had Tim for when things got rough. It had been months since Tony had talked to him about how things were going with Brad, if there was any improvement in his lungs or any change in his health.

He wondered what other important discussions he may have missed. Would he only ever hear the ones that were case-related in the future? Damn Vance and his grandiose future plans. Gibbs had never thought ahead to when he turned 55. He'd always figured he'd be dead by then or the petition to stay in the field would just be a formality. Now he was beginning to wonder.

He didn't want to deny the boys their chance at a family. However short his time with Kelly had been, he knew eight years of her sparkle in his life was better than never knowing what it was to love somebody more than he'd ever thought possible. He wanted Tim and Tony to experience that, especially Tony. From everything he'd observed over the years, he knew Tony didn't realize that parents, real parents, loved their children no matter who or what they were. He thought the McGees were special, that Jack and Gibbs were unusual. Gibbs had never tried to explain to Tony that it didn't matter how long it had been since you talked to them, or what they did for a living, or who they loved. Your child was always special, always a part of you. He would never not be Kelly's dad; Jack would never not be Kelly's grandfather.

Gibbs forced himself to take a deep breath. If he retired, would he still be Papa Bear to the people he'd come to think of as his children? Would he still be part of family gatherings at Tim and Tony's house? Would he be Grandpa Gibbs? Or just Gibbs? Would he be just an occasional face, the way he was to Amira? He rarely saw his goddaughter, and he knew she didn't remember him between one visit and the next. Or would he be a fixture? Would the Gibblet children enjoy a growing collection of handmade wooden toys from Grandpa Gibbs? Or would he just be a name to them?
Would the team even consider themselves Gibblets when he left? He’d rolled his eyes the first time he’d heard Abby refer to the younger team members like that, but he’d come to realize it was an honorific, one that made it clear what place he had in their lives.

He leaned forward, resting his head in his hands. Maybe he needed his own master plan to ensure his kids would realize he wanted to continue being a part of their lives off the job even as Vance revealed his intentions for their future on the job.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

This was originally posted a couple of years ago - yes, there's a reason I'm finally posting it here - and I'm keeping some of the original author's notes with dates, like this one from September 2010:

Yay! S8 starts with a bang. In the post-show chat, I asked Gary Glasburg about McGee's dad and how come we hadn't run into him, even though he's Navy. He responded with "That's interesting. I would love to meet McGee's dad. I'll have to think about that one. Thank you." So while I'm sure the show would never have Daddy McGee anything like Sean in this uni, I'm still excited. :) Also, as always, huge thanks to Kyrie for helping me brainstorm and edit this story. There was a Slate article about how the best creativity comes in pairs, and she's the other half of mine. This story and the universe owe a great deal to her amazing talents!

Tony blinked his eyes open, taking a minute to catalog the smells and sounds before he remembered. How had he ended up back in the hospital? The last case they'd had was when Brad got kidnapped and- Oh, right. Not him, for once. Tim had been shot, almost bled out on the scene. He was in Tim's room at Bethesda. Snowed in - again. He sat up, pulling the chair out of its reclined position, and twisted, cracking his spine.

"Tony, you could have found a bed someplace." He looked over to see Tim smiling at him.

Tony reached over and kissed his partner. "I'll get one tonight, if they finally spring you from here," he said. "Sarah and the team were going to make sure the house was shoveled out." He paused. "Well, not Ducky and Gibbs. But if Dad promised to be good and stay inside, Mom was going to help, too. They're supposed to call me when it's clear for us to go home."

Tim's smile got even bigger. "Finally!" He tried to sit up, but with only his right arm, it was tough. Tony reached over and helped him, taking most of Tim's weight into his arms. "Thanks, Tony."

"No problem," Tony said. "I'm just glad you're able to sit up." He sat on the edge of the bed and wrapped his arm around Tim's good shoulder. "I do not want to go through another night like last Thursday — ever."

"Dad told me you stayed all night," Tim said. "I could kind of hear you, even though things were really floaty."

Tony nodded. "It works like that. I could hear you guys, too, when I was out of it with the plague. And I'm sure Gibbs could hear us when he was in the coma after Pin-Pin Pula tried to blow him up." He paused for a second. "Do you remember any of what I said?"

Tim shook his head. "No, why? Did you admit some deep, dark secret I should know about?"

Tony blushed. "I think you know all my deep, dark secrets," he said. "No, it's just..."

Tim pulled out the McEyebrow, and Tony felt his cheeks heat even more. He ducked his head into
Tim's hair, placing a kiss on his head.

"Tony, did Brad give you bad news?"

Tony jerked upright. "No!"

"Then would you spit it out already?"

Tony sighed. "You remember how we were talking about kids last week?"

Tim nodded. "Yeah." He frowned. "We might not have to worry about which one of us leaves the field — the PT folks seem pretty certain that I'm not going to be able to get full range of motion back. CyberCrimes might be my only option."

Tony shook his head. "They don't know you like I do," he said. "You might not get back the same range of motion you had before, but you'll have enough to be a field agent. Once everything heals enough that they can start moving your shoulder around, the PT will be rough, but you can do it." He smiled. "Compared to sparring with Gibbs or Ziva, it won't be anything."

"Oh, and that's nothing? I've never made it out of sparring with them without enough bruises to leave me sore for a week." Tim winced.

"You'll get through it," Tony said, rubbing his back. "I have a Phys. Ed. degree, remember. Anatomy, rehab, all those good things. The tough part's going to be keeping the scar tissue to a minimum. That's what reduces the range of motion."

Tim nodded. "That's what they said. I guess if this had been routine surgery, they would have hooked me up to a machine even before I woke up to start moving the joint to keep it from stiffening up, but there's too much damage that has to heal first."

"Another week and you'll be able to start rehab," Tony said. "Jimmy, Ducky, Sarah, and Abby volunteered to help drive you over if I can't get out of work. Vance already signed off on it."

"Vance did?" Tim turned to look at him. "I know he was here with the rest of you, but I thought that was just because he got stuck."

"No, he actually seems to have worked his way into this crazy family of ours," Tony said. "He and your parents were talking at one point, sharing kid stories."

Tim groaned. "Mom didn't tell the one about the time I got stuck up in the tree, did she?"

Tony couldn't help smirking. "I always wondered where you got your fear of heights."

Tim rolled his eyes. "Great. The director knows every embarrassing story my parents have about me."

"Oh, he knows the ones about Sarah, too," Tony said. "And Gibbs even shared a few about Kelly." He smiled. "It's the first time I've ever heard him tell stories about her and not seem to be in pain."

"I wish I'd been there for that," Tim said. "Every time Shannon and Kelly come up, it's been because of a crisis. I'd like to just hear stories about some of the good times. I mean, it's almost like..."

"They're family too?" At Tim's nod, Tony smiled. "I think we all feel that way." He snuggled closer to his partner. "Maybe while you're recuperating, you can get him to tell you a few. He's
made it clear he'll be stopping by while you're home, make sure you're OK."

"You think we'll be like that one day, telling stories about our kids when they were small?" Tim moved his right hand to Tony's leg. "Driving them crazy by embarrassing them in front of their friends?"

"Oh, yeah," Tony said. "How else will we scare boys like me away from our beautiful daughter? Or keep our sons from going too far with girls?"

Tim snorted. "Trust you to think of that." He paused. "So what are we going to do? I know you talked about moving to Cold Cases, but I might as well plan on moving to CyberCrimes."

Tony shook his head. "No way, Tim. While I was waiting for you to wake up, I had a lot of time to think about this. Now, if you can't return to the field, that's one thing. But I have faith this is only going to be a temporary set-back. You're too damn stubborn not to give 100% to your rehab and end up coming back stronger than ever." He reached up and smoothed his hand over Tim's hair. "So that means one of us has to give up being on the team, and it should be me."

When Tim started to object, Tony overrode him. "No, hear me out." He sighed. "Look, Brad's glad I've made progress — he's even talking about cutting my visits back to every other week even though it's still cold and flu season. But realistically — you see how things are with Dad. You met Steve and saw what his health is like. I'm not going to make it to 55 as an agent. Besides, I can convince Vance to swap me into Cold Cases and move Dwayne Wilson over to the MCRT. He can handle Gibbs. It won't be the same as being on the team, but it's still field work."

"But it's your team," Tim said. "You took over as team lead while Gibbs was gone, and you're going to lead it after he retires. You've earned that."

"It's our team, Tim," Tony said. He interlaced the fingers of his free hand with Tim's. "You've been on this team almost as long as I have, longer than Stan Burley. He had the record before — five years — we've both beaten that."

"You're coming up on 10 years on the team," Tim said. "I don't think anybody's going to break that."

"You will," Tony said. "Look, you've got almost six years now. Once I move over to Cold Cases, Gibbs will make you senior field agent, which you deserve. On any other team, you'd have been promoted years ago. Me not moving is holding you back."

Tim disentangled his fingers and reached back to slap him. "And you would have been team lead on any other team. If you hadn't turned Jenny down, you would have had Rota years ago."

"And leave you guys? Not a chance." Tony turned to look at him. "That would have meant going halfway around the world. This means moving 100 feet over in the squad room." He leaned in, their foreheads touching. "Being team lead isn't important to me. I'll happily work for Jarvis if it means we can start our family."

"You're not even going to look for a team lead position?"

Tony shook his head. "I'll take the rookie spot on Cold Cases. Dwayne's the only agent I can think of who can handle Gibbs. Well, except Burley, but he'd never come back. He likes his stomach ulcer-free."

Tim pulled away. "You're going to take a rookie slot? You've been a senior agent for as long as I've been on the team."
Tony shrugged. "If you move, Vance will want you in CyberCrimes. But I'm only good as a field agent. I move, the hours get better, and one of us can always be home at night with the kids."

"Kids?" Tim said. "How many are you thinking of?"

"Two? Three?" Tony shrugged. "I don't know. It's not like we can do this the old-fashioned way."

Tim snorted. "Yeah, I can only imagine Gibbs' reaction to that."

"What, I'm not good enough for you to knock up?" Tony feigned outrage. The two men broke down in laughter.

"OK, OK," Tony said, gasping for breath. "Look, let's figure out how we're getting kids, then worry about how many."

"My uncles used a surrogate," Tim said. "Uncle Jim is Kevin and Mark's biological father."

"A surrogate? I just figured we'd adopt." Tony turned the idea over in his mind. "The only time I've heard of anybody using a surrogate was that case a few years ago."

"Right after your car blew up?" Tim said. "That was an... odd case."

"You think?" Tony frowned. "That family almost got scammed by their surrogate. How do we make sure that doesn't happen to us?"

"Uncle Jim's best friend from high school volunteered to be the surrogate for them for Kevin," Tim said. "She wasn't married at the time and thought they would be great parents, so she offered."

"So she's Kevin and Mark's mother? Isn't that a little hinky?" Tony tried to wrap his mind around that. "I mean, can you imagine Abby or Ziva being the mother of our kids?"

Tim squeezed his eyes shut. "Ziva would never agree — she'd have to take time off from the field. And since Abby and I used to date, that's just... weird. Oh, and Jim's friend is only Kevin's mother."

"So where did Mark come from?"

"I'd remind you about the birds and the bees, but it would just sidetrack us again," Tim said. "His friend was married and planning to start her own family by the time they were ready for another kid, so they went through an agency to find a surrogate for Mark."

"That didn't worry them?" Tony said.

"I've never really asked them," Tim said. "But we could pick their brains. If the Supreme Court doesn't block the gay marriage law, DC will start allowing them in less than a month. They'll definitely come down for the wedding."

"Yeah, about that," Tony said. "Think we can get Abby to help plan it? She was all excited at Christmas, and she's got more energy than any three people I know. I don't even know what's involved in a wedding."

"Let's keep this simple," Tim said. "A priest isn't going to marry us, so we just need a justice of the peace and two witnesses. Basic ceremony, then we have everybody come back to our house for a party. I mean, it's not like we can really have a bachelor party or any of the other traditional stuff."

"True," Tony said. "But is our place big enough?"
"How many people are we going to have?" Tim said. "The team, Jack, my parents, Sarah, Uncle Aiden and his family. Abby's the only person dating somebody, so it's not like we have a lot of extra people. Just Keith."

"Jimmy would like to date Abby, but she still thinks of him as the autopsy gremlin, as far as I can tell," Tony said, smirking. "With us both in here, and Gibbs with Mom and Dad and Vance, she spent a lot of the time we were snowed in here using him as a substitute for Bert."

Tim snickered. "As long as he didn't have to fart every time she squeezed him."

Tony shook his head. "No, but he seemed to take on a permanent blush."

"Remind me to keep an eye on them if she and Keith break up," Tim said. "I don't want to say she's way out of Jimmy's league."

"You do remember his affair with Lee, right?"

"OK, so the treasonous mole is more dangerous than a forensic lab bat, but Abby's track record with guys isn't exactly stellar. Any time she gets beyond casual, somebody gets hurt, either her or the guy." Tim rolled his eyes.

"At least Jimmy won't stalk her."

"True."

"So, back to the wedding." Tony started counting on his fingers. "The team, plus Keith, is six. Your family is another seven. That's 13, and Jack makes 14."

"What about Brad?" Tim said. "Or somebody from your family?"

Tony snorted. "This is supposed to be a celebration, right? Nobody from my family's on that list as far as I'm concerned." He paused. "Brad's the only one I can think of I'd want to invite." He thought for a second. "You know, we should invite Vance and his family, too. He's done a lot for us: making sure this can't come back to bite us, standing up to the doctor last week."

Tim nodded. "Oh. That reminds me, Brad brought over a medical proxy form the other day, and I signed it. He added it to my file. If I have the bad luck to end up back here before we can make this legal, you and Gibbs are my proxies."

Tony smiled and bent over to kiss him. When they finally surfaced, he tipped Tim's chin up so they were looking in each other's eyes. "Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome," Tim said. "Dad was right, I should have done it a long time ago."

"It's done now," Tony said. "That's all that matters."

Before Tim could reply, a nurse walked in. "Time for your PT, Agent McGee."

Tony stood up. "Brad's guys are meeting in 15 minutes. I'm going to hang out with them for a while. I'll meet you back here when they finish torturing you."

"Don't rush," Tim replied. "I'll probably fall asleep afterward anyway."

Tony held back from kissing him because he didn't recognize the nurse and didn't want to start another incident. "Once they start telling stories, they'll be going all afternoon. You'll be awake by then."
"Probably," Tim said. "Go. Enjoy."

Tony headed two floors up to the pulmonary wing. When he reached the sun room, only few sailors were gathered there. He knew Steve, and he recognized Wilhelm and a couple of the others from the investigation into Brad's disappearance the week before.

"Hey, Tony," Steve said. "How's Tim doing?"

"Bored," Tony said. "They're willing to spring him today, since they shoveled out the hospital this morning. Sarah's supposed to call once the house is dug out. The whole team's over there."

"Sean's not helping, is he?" Steve asked.

"Eileen wouldn't let him," Tony said. "Besides, Jimmy's providing most of the muscle for the shoveling. And he can pull out the doctor card if Dad gets any ideas about helping, even if he's not quite done with medical school."

"I'm lost," said one of the sailors.

"Sorry, Mark," Steve said. "You remember Agent Tony DiNozzo, right? He's the one who was looking into Pitt's kidnapping last week. He's another one of us."

"Oh, right." The bald sailor waved, but didn't get up, motioning toward the oxygen machine standing next to his chair. "You're too young to be one of us, even if you joined up when it was still NIS."

"I got infected with pneumonic plague on a case five years ago," Tony said. "Then a desert mission this past fall aggravated things." He smiled at the expressions on the other men's faces. "I know it sounds crazy. My boss says I get in more trouble than the rest of the team combined."

"Sounds like it," Mark said. "You're doing OK now, though?"

He nodded. "My partner got shot while we were rescuing Brad, and with all the snow, they haven't sprung him yet. I came by Tuesday after work and got stuck here." He waited to see if anybody questioned that. Surprisingly, it was Steve who spoke up.

"That's Commander McGee's oldest, Tim, he's talking about," Steve said. "Mark, you ever serve with him?"

Mark shook his head. "No. We were comparing notes last week and realized we just missed each other in a couple of postings, but never overlapped." He paused. "So, McGee's son is NCIS, too?"

"Yes, we're half the Major Case Response Team, based at the Navy Yard," Tony said. "I joined the team almost 10 years ago, and Tim's been on the team for six." He smiled, remembering his earlier conversation with Tim. "Only one other agent in NCIS history has been able to work for our boss that long. The rest have nervous breakdowns and ask to be reassigned."

"He that bad to work for?" Wilhelm said.

"No, Gibbs is great," Tony said. "He's just got high standards, little patience, and learned how to scare people when he was a gunny."

"Gibbs" Mark said. "Gunnery Sgt. Jethro Gibbs?"

"You know him?"
"Served with him back in the '80s," Mark said. "His scout sniper unit was based at Pax River when I was doing a tour there. Good man. Met his wife and daughter at a couple of base events for the families."

Tony swallowed. "Shannon and Kelly?"

He nodded. "Nice girls, both of them. Kelly had her daddy wrapped around her little finger."

Tony had to blink back tears. "I believe it."

"What's she doing these days?" Mark said. "She must be, what, 25?"

Tony shook his head. "No. They were... A drug dealer killed them while Gibbs was in Desert Storm. Kelly was just eight years old. That's when Gibbs switched to NIS."

"I'm sorry," Mark said. "I didn't know."

"He doesn't talk about it much," Tony said. "We didn't find out until it came up in connection with a case a few years ago." He smiled. "I think his dad has told us more about them than Gibbs ever has."

"His father?" Wilhelm said. "You guys hear stories from your boss' dad; you spend the night here with your partner. That's more than just co-workers."

"We're a quirky kind of family," Tony said, then decided to take a chance. "Although you're right about Tim. When Steve said we were partners, he wasn't referring to the fact we're teammates. We're also getting married next month. And while Tim has Sean, Gibbs is the closest thing to a dad the rest of us have. Ziva, our other teammate, and Abby, our forensic scientist, are the daughters he lost with Kelly, and, well, he's more my dad than my own father ever was." He stopped, suddenly embarrassed. "But I'm rambling. So, anybody else waiting for the snowplows to spring them from here?"

"I'm headed home tomorrow," Steve said. "Wife called and told me our neighborhood still hasn't been cleared."

Mark nodded. "Pitt wants to keep me here another couple of days, but even if he didn't, I couldn't get home anyway. I love living out in the country most of the time, but this is one of the drawbacks."

Steve nodded. "We talked about that once, when I got stationed at Dahlgren, whether we wanted to live in Fredericksburg or out by the Bay. We decided we wanted to have what we could get near the city, but rural peace was tempting."

"Not me," Wilhelm said. "I'm a city boy, born in Jersey. Too much nature, and I get itchy. How about you, DiNozzo?"

"I've always lived in the city," Tony replied. "Spent some time in the Midwest for college, then my first police force. I'd rather be on the East Coast. We live right on the edge of Silver Spring now, because it's close to here and Annapolis. I was in Georgetown before that."

"So you moved to be closer to the hospital?" Steve asked.

"That was one consideration, but Tim's been living in Silver Spring since he moved up here from Norfolk," Tony said. "That just made it an easy choice when we moved in together. Plus, our dog needs a yard, and they're not as common in Georgetown."
That sparked a discussion about pets, which led to one about kids. Tony enjoyed it so much that before he knew it, almost two hours had gone by. As the group broke up, he headed back to Tim with plenty of stories to share, and a message from Mark for Gibbs.

He had just walked into Tim's room when his phone rang.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

For the folks wondering how this fits into S7, here's the deal. Most of the major storylines from the secon half of S7 will happen in this universe, but because Tim's out of commission for a bit, they're not going to necessarily happen in order. At this point in time, everything through Faith, plus Ignition, Jet Lag, Masquerade and Jack Knife has happened. The bromance subplot in Guilty Pleasure won't be happening because it's just not plausible in this version of NCIS reality. The rest of the episodes either haven't happened yet or won't be referred to. Draw what conclusions you will from this disclaimer. ;)

"DiNozzo." He smiled when he heard Sarah's voice on the other end of the line.

"Hey, Tony," she said. "Abby's just spreading salt on the front walk now. You guys are all shoveled out."

"Thanks, Sarah. Did you guys see the pizza money I left in the kitchen for you? I told Jimmy it would be there."

"You don't have to feed us," she said. "We want Tim home as much as you do."

"And I'm sure you all had better things to do than shovel us out while I'm sitting here with McSleepy." He snickered at the muttered "Hey" from Tim.

"Tim would never have let you do all the shoveling," Sarah said. "Besides, it's not like any of us had to shovel snow at our own places, and Mom and Dad always get the kids down the street to shovel at their house."

"Hmmm, we might need to look into doing that for the rest of the winter," Tony said. "Gibbs won't let me just call in because we've got snow." He pushed that aside. "Anyway, we'll be there as soon as I can get Tim sprung. If you guys are planning to eat there, make sure one of the pizzas is my favorite. Even if we don't make it by the time the pizzas arrive, we'll eat the leftovers. I'm not sure there's anything in the house to cook."

"Mom's already made a shopping list, with some help from the rest of us. She and Abby are going out now while I do laundry, and Jimmy and Ziva are getting Jethro from the dog walker's house and plan to wear him out so he doesn't tackle Tim."

"Good thinking," Tony said. "OK, now your brother's worried about what you've been plotting. He's looking at me funny."

"That's because you're funny-looking."

"Ha-ha. Remind me again why I wanted a little sister?"

"We're a package deal." At hearing the comment in stereo from both siblings on either end of the phone, Tony groaned.
"Wow. What is this, McESP? You two are scaring me. I'm hanging up now."

As he slipped his phone back in his pocket, he looked at Tim. "They've got everything organized, down to groceries, laundry, and Jethro."

"We really owe them one," Tim said. "More than one, actually, because we were backed up on laundry before this."

"Well, let's get you sprung and home so we can thank them in person." Tony pulled out the duffle bag he'd brought in Tuesday. "Come on, time to get you out of that hospital gown."

"Real clothes?" Tim grinned. "It's about time."

"Yeah, that designer gown needs to go," Tony said. He closed the door to give them privacy, then untied the gown in the back. "How much help do you need?"

"We'll find out," Tim said. He managed his boxers with one hand, though Tony made sure to be right there so Tim wouldn't try to break a fall with his left hand if he lost his balance. The jeans were a little tougher, but Tony only needed to help him with the button and zipper.

"There's something wrong about you getting me into my clothes," Tim said.

"Believe me, I feel the same way," Tony said as he stepped away to get Tim's shirt. "It's been a very long week, and we have most of the team waiting for us when we get home."

"Not like we can do a lot about it anyway," Tim said. "I'm not supposed to put any weight on this shoulder for another two weeks."

Tony motioned for him to raise his right arm, then smirked. "McInnocent, I can come up with lots of things we can do until your bum wing heals."

He worked the old T-shirt up Tim's useless left arm until it was on, then motioned for Tim to duck his head so he could get the neck hole over his head. Tim slid his right arm up, and Tony guided it into the right spot then pulled the T-shirt down to cover his torso. "Believe me, I've had entirely too much time to think about that this week." He helped Tim strap on the sling that supported his arm.

"And you'd rather think about that than the big issues," Tim said, running his right hand through his hair to try and comb it back into something orderly. "Hey, where'd you dig out this t-shirt from?"

"It was in one of your drawers," Tony said. "I know it's huge on you, but with all your bandages, one of your McSlim shirts wouldn't fit."

"True," Tim said. "I couldn't toss this one — it's the only MIT shirt I have left. I need to get a couple smaller ones."

"I found a smaller one in the same drawer," Tony said. "Black, with silver lettering."

"That's not mine," Tim said. "That's the one Sarah kept at my place if she stayed over. She likes them oversized to sleep in."

"No wonder I was confused," Tony said. "McSis isn't a large anything." That jogged his memory. "She's doing the laundry, by the way. She's not going to ruin any of my stuff, is she?"

Tim shook his head. "No, she's good about checking labels. Mom taught us both well."
"Good," Tony said. "One of the times I stayed with Gibbs, he threw some of my laundry in with his, and I lost a couple of shirts in the process."

Tim laughed. "I'd feel bad for you, but you should have known better."

"Oh, I do," Tony said, packing the rest of Tim's stuff into the bag. "He just threw them in without checking with me. It was not pretty when I found out."

"You yelled at Gibbs?"

"Hey! I yell at Gibbs when he needs it," Tony said.

"Yelling at him for leaving us in the dark over Domino is not the same thing as yelling at him for screwing up your laundry," Tim pointed out. "Now come on, let's get me out of here."

The formalities of checking out took way too long as far as Tony was concerned, but at least he'd been through them enough times in the past to do them in his sleep. Within half an hour, he was navigating his car through the streets. "You know, we really should think about trading in one of our cars for a Jeep or something with four-wheel drive if Washington is going to stay part of the Snow Belt," he said.

Tim groaned. "I'm so sick of snow," he said. "The white Christmas was nice, but the rest of it? I'm ready for spring."

"Aren't we all," Tony said. "Ziva's taken snow gear to a new level — I keep telling her she's left the desert and needs to adjust already."

"And she hasn't killed you yet?" Tim asked. "I read a mystery once where the weapon was an icicle jabbed into the base of the skull like an ice pick. That's even more deadly than office supplies."

"Hey! No aiding and abetting in my demise." Tony stuck his tongue out. "I've already got enough people who hate my guts."

"We don't hate you," Tim said. He snickered. "In fact, I think Ziva has a very sisterly love for you."

"You mean she wants to kill me all the time, like Sarah is always threatening to do to you?" Tony said. "Yeah, thanks for that."

As he pulled into the driveway, he marveled at the team's work. "They got every bit of snow up," he said. "Nothing to re-freeze."

"At least until the sun starts melting it mid-day," Tim pointed out. "Come on, I want to get inside."

"Your painkillers wearing off already?" Tony frowned.

"No, just want to get in a comfortable chair and have some real food," Tim replied.

Tony hit the button to release Tim's seat belt, then got out and walked around the car, reaching for his partner's right hand to pull him to standing. Once Tim was up, Tony grabbed the bag from the trunk and headed for the mudroom, staying close to Tim in case he hit an icy patch.

"Better let me go first," Tony said. "Ziva and Jimmy were going to try and wear Jethro out, but they don't know him like we do."

But when he opened the door, the dog was nowhere to be found. They walked in, and Tony took
Tim's coat from his shoulders, took off his own jacket, and then hung up both of them.

"We're home," Tony called.

"We know," Jimmy said, standing in the doorway holding Jethro back. "We just didn't want anybody to knock Tim over." He tipped his head toward the dog, who was whining softly and pulling at the collar. "Come on, pizza's still warm."

Once Tony got Tim settled into the chair where nobody could jar his arm, he detoured into the kitchen to grab two plates of pizza and a couple cans of soda. He would have preferred a beer, but Tim couldn't have any with his meds, and Tony wasn't going to drink in front of him.

All the seats were taken when he joined the rest of the crew in the living room, so he settled on the floor between Tim's legs. "Jethro, this is not your dinner," he warned the shepherd. "Abs, can you distract him?"


When Tony bit into his pizza after days of eating vending machine food at the hospital, he wasn't sure whose face was more blissful, his or Jethro's. The dog was sprawled on his back, paws waving in the air.

"Tim, do you want more pizza?" Eileen asked, getting up.

"Thanks, Mom," he replied.

Tony tipped his head back. "What did you do, inhale it?" he asked. "Even I don't eat that fast."

The whole room broke into laughter. "Never thought I'd see the day Tim would out-eat Tony," Jimmy said.

"Hey!" Tony replied. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"He is just pulling your foot," Ziva said.

"Leg, Ziva," Tim said. "Pulling his leg."

"Leg, foot. It is the same thing," she replied.

"It's a good thing idioms aren't on your citizenship test," Tony said. "You'd never pass." He winced at the head slap. "Hey! Your head-slapping arm is the one that's out of commission."

"Oh, like that's ever stopped Gibbs," Tim said.

"He's got a point," Abby said. "Even if Gibbs had both arms out of commission, he'd find a way to head-slap you, Tony."

"I knew I liked Gibbs for a reason," Sarah said.

As Eileen handed Tim his second helping of pizza, she laughed. "Jethro certainly has a unique approach to discipline. If I'd known head-slapping was so effective, I would have used it on you two when you were teenagers."

"Sorry, Mom, but you're not as scary as Gibbs," Tim said.
"He is right, Mrs. McGee," Ziva said. "Gibbs can scare anybody, even Eli."

"There are others scarier than him," Tony said.

"There are?" Abby said. "Oops, sorry, Ziva."

"Not, it is all right," she said. "I do not think there is anybody scarier than Eli out there, but that is because he hides his evil under concern. It is a skill that Ari, sadly, learned from him."

"But you didn't," Tony said, trying to convey his seriousness through his voice. "And you're the only David that matters."

Tim's knee nudged his shoulder. "What Tony said," he added. "You have other things to worry about — you're stuck with us for a family now."

"Stuck is right," Jimmy said. "I overheard Gibbs telling Dr. Mallard one time that if Eli David ever set foot in NCIS, the last place he'd visit would be Autopsy."

"I knew it," Abby said. "You totally eavesdrop when Ducky sends you to clean pipettes."

"I do not!" Jimmy crossed his arms. "I was coming back from delivering evidence to you, and Gibbs had come in while I was gone. I just waited until he had left before walking in, because I knew I'd be interrupting. Dr. Mallard knew I heard, because he said something to me."

"Sure, Jimmy," Tony said. "So, hear anything else good while lurking in Autopsy?"

"Are you sure you want to ask him that?" Tim said. "You've spent a fair amount of time down there yourself."

Tony thunked his head back, looking up at Tim. "Why did I agree to marry you, again?"

"Because you love me," Tim replied.

"Wait, wait," Abby said. "Tony, where's your ring?"

Tony pulled the chain from under his shirt. "Right here," he said. "Tim can't wear his for a few more weeks, and by then we should be able to get married legally in DC, so we're going to." He fingered the two rings on the chain. "Now that Tim's out, he can wear his around his neck. I've got a couple for dog tags upstairs someplace from old undercover ops."

"Wedding!" Abby said. "Can I help?"

"Ask Abby to help plan. Check," Tim said. "That's one thing off the list."

The rest of the team broke up laughing at that.

"Ooh, ooh, I've got so many ideas," Abby said.

"Calm down, Abs," Tim said. "We're keeping it simple. JP, two witnesses, team, family, Jack, Brad, and Vance, then a party back here afterward."

"Plus whoever gets TAD on the team while you're out," Tony said. "It almost has to be somebody who's worked with us before. Gibbs will chew up and spit out anyone else long before you're back in the field."
"Who does that leave? Dwayne?" Tim said. "Nikki's an analyst, not an agent."

"Crime scenes are too messy for her," Abby said. "Oh, wait, was that out loud?"

"Jimmy," Tony said.

"On it," he replied, head-slapping Abby.

"Hey!" she said. "I don't get head slaps, I get cheek kisses."

Tony snorted. "You heard the woman, Jimmy. Kiss her."

Jimmy turned bright pink, but brushed a quick kiss over Abby's cheek. Tim leaned forward to whisper to Tony, "You're evil."

"I know," Tony replied, keeping his voice quiet, "but it was too good an opportunity to miss." He raised his voice. "OK, so Dwayne and his family, assuming Vance TADs him over from Cold Cases. That will give Vance's kids somebody to play with."

"Wait, you mean there are actually agents who are married with kids?" Sarah said. "Who puts up with your crazy hours?"

As the team members snickered, Sarah looked at Eileen. "We're missing something, Mom," she said.

"There's being on a team, and there's being on Gibbs' team," Tim said. "My hours were normal when I was in Norfolk and when I was in CyberCrimes. And Cold Cases has mostly regular hours because they're not working hot cases. That's one reason Dwayne was glad to get that assignment."

"How many children does he have?" Eileen asked.

"Two, right?" Ziva said.

"Three, Zee," Tony said. "He and Maggie had a boy while you were gone this summer. He was showing me pictures a couple weeks ago when we ran into each other while getting coffee."

"He has new ones," Tim said. "He had them when I showed him how to dig into some bank records last week. They got pictures of the three kids done at Christmas to send out to all their family, and he finally brought an extra in for his desk."

"And Director Vance has two," Eileen said. "He was telling us and Jethro some stories last week."

"Yeah, I heard about that, Mom," Tim said. "Did you have to tell all the embarrassing stories about me and Sarah to my boss and his boss?"

"Stories?" Abby said. "Oh, I need to bribe Gibbs to hear these."

"I thought Gibbs bribed you," Tony said. "You'd have to set up a coffee IV for him at his desk. That's the only way he could have more coffee."

"I think we've got some supplies in Autopsy," Jimmy said. "We'd have to sneak them out, though. Dr. Mallard already thinks Gibbs drinks too much coffee."

"You're serious," Tim said. "They're serious." He nudged Tony's shoulder again. "You sure Dwayne can handle this craziness?"
"We'll find out," Tony said.

"He's got three kids," Eileen said. "You guys aren't much worse."

"Thanks, Mom," Tim, Tony and Sarah said in unison.

Abby started giggling at that. "She's right."

"I must admit, we are not your typical team," Ziva said. "Superglue and acetone are not staple supplies for a Mossad team."

"One time," Tony said. "One time with the superglue."

"Twice," Tim said. "Face and keyboard."

"Three times," Jimmy said. "Your shoes."

"That was Abby, not Tony," Tim said. "And I wouldn't talk — who got himself superglued to her arms that one time?"

By now Eileen was doubled over in laughter. "I see we were asking Jethro about the wrong kids," she said. "Instead of Kelly stories, he should have been telling stories about you kids."

"He told Kelly stories?" Abby said. "And we missed it?"

"I heard a few," Tony said. "You and Ziva were using Jimmy as a pillow."

"Kelly?" Sarah asked.

"Gibbs' daughter," Tim said. "She and his first wife, Shannon, were killed while he was in Desert Storm. She would be a few years older than you, about halfway between you and Ziva."

"Not Abby?" Sarah said.


"Hey!" Abby said. "Tony, you promised to forget that information."

"Wait, Abby's older than you, Tim? You dated an older woman?" Sarah snickered.

"I'm marrying an older man," Tim retorted. "What's your point?"

"Ouch," Tony said. "Can we not talk about ages, please."

"Yes, it is misleading," Ziva said. She had a wicked glint in her eye, and Tony braced for the verbal jab. "Tony is really much younger than the rest of us in his mind. He has not even graduated primary school yet."

"You're only as old as you feel," Tony said. "That's why Ducky manages to get younger every year."

"I need to find out his secret," Tim said. "Because right now, I feel ancient."

"OK, that's our cue to leave," Jimmy said. "Come on, ladies."

"Abby, can you give me a ride?" Sarah asked. "That way Mom can stay and do her mom thing."
"Jimmy drove me," she said. "My car's not great in the snow."

"You can ride with me," Ziva said. "I do not live far from Waverly."

"Thanks, Ziva," Sarah said.

"Buckle your seat belt," Tim said.

Tony was going to add a comment, but the death glare Ziva shot Tim dissuaded him. Instead he pushed himself to his feet. "OK, plates," he said, collecting the paper dishes from around the room.

When he got back to the living room, Eileen was sitting on the couch, looking fairly serious, as she and Tim talked.

"Is this a McGee-only discussion, or can I join in?" He perched on the arm of Tim's chair, making sure to be on Tim's good side and handed him a bottle of water for his next round of pills.

As Tim swallowed them, Eileen said, "Sean said he'd already mentioned this to you."

"Dad's planning on retiring," Tim said.

Tony reached down and took Tim's hand in his. "He mentioned it last week, but I was in the middle of investigating Brad's kidnapping and didn't really have time." He frowned. "He sounded like it was the hospital stay talking — I suggested he think it over."

"He has," Eileen said. "We have." She shrugged. "Brad was pretty clear — Sean's not going to pass his next fitness eval, and teaching exposes him to a lot of unnecessary germs." She paused. "He's not even going to be able to finish out the semester. He and the commandant talked Monday, and they're getting somebody reassigned within the next three weeks."

"That's quick," Tony said.

She nodded. "It is, but it makes sense to get the permanent replacement in right away. Sean's going to keep teaching until the replacement is assigned, then he'll be on terminal leave until his accrued vacation time is used up."

"He should have a lot," Tim said. "You guys never traveled much."

"We never needed to, with you and Sarah right here in D.C." Eileen paused. "That's actually one of the other things we've been talking about."

"Me and Sarah?" Tim said.

Eileen smiled. "Yes and no. With Sean going to Bethesda for treatment, and you and Tony pretty well settled in the area, we figured it made sense to move down here once Sean's done at the Academy. Even if Sarah moves after she graduates this spring, this would make it easier because she could visit all of us in one trip."

"Wow," Tim said. "You have been thinking about this."

"It's not like there's been much else to do the past few days," Tony said. He looked down at Tim and raised an eyebrow. Tim nodded, so Tony went ahead. "We've been doing some talking ourselves."

"We'd actually started before things got so crazy," Tim said, squeezing Tony's hand. "The past few days just... put some stuff in perspective."
"Are you going to tell me?" Eileen asked.

"We're thinking of starting a family," Tony said. "We'd been going around in circles on the whole jobs issue, but Tim almost dying gave us some pretty good perspective."

"I didn't almost die," Tim said.

Tony rolled his eyes. "You did. Deny all you want, but I saw Ducky's face while you were bleeding out. The only other time he's ever had that expression was right after Gibbs ordered me not to die from the plague."

"OK, so I almost died. The point is, I didn't." But he squeezed Tony's hand, and Tony squeezed back, glad he still could. "Anyway, once we figure things out, we need to talk to Gibbs and Vance about reassigning one of us to a job with regular hours so one of us can handle day care pickups and dropoffs."

"Day care?" Eileen said. "With your dad and I right here? We can watch your children." She paused. "As long as that's OK with you boys."

Tony turned to look at Tim, glad they knew each other well enough to communicate without talking. "It's OK with us, Mom," he said. "We just don't want to impose on you."

"You and Dad have been talking for years about things you're going to do once he retires," Tim said. "We don't want to get in the way of that."

"Timothy McGee. My grandchildren are not going to be in the way." Her tone was stern, but Tony could see the smile in her eyes. "Besides, as much time as your dad missed while you and Sarah were growing up because he was deployed, he's not going to want to miss a minute of time with his grandchildren." She paused and sobered. "Realistically, we both know that by the time Sarah has children, if she decides to, your dad probably won't be in the kind of shape where he can play ball or take them on trips into the city. We'll take as much time with our grandchildren as we can, because it's the one thing he won't be able to get back later."

Tony slipped over to the couch and hugged Eileen, knowing just what she was thinking, remembering his own thoughts along that line when he and Tim had first started talking about kids. "Sean's got McGee stubbornness and Brad as his doctor," he said. "He'll be there 20 years from now cheering when our kids graduate from high school." He said it to Eileen, but looked over at Tim, meeting and holding his gaze.

"Tony's right, Mom," Tim finally said. "He and I are going to talk to Uncle Aiden and Uncle Jim if they can get down here for the wedding, pick their brains."

Eileen straightened up, patting Tony on the shoulder. "I hadn't even thought of that," she said. "I guess it does take a bit more planning on your part than it did for your dad and I," she said.

Tim squeezed his eyes shut. "Mom, just stop there. Some things I really don't need to know."

Tony snorted. "I'm with Tim on this one, Mom," he said.

She smiled. "I understand." She stood. "Is it OK if I tell your dad about this?" she asked Tim.

"Sure," Tim said. "Just as long as he knows this isn't going to happen tomorrow. We're not even ready to talk to Gibbs or Vance about it yet. With all the logistics, especially getting one of us reassigned, it might be a couple of years before you get to be grandparents."
"That will give us time to get used to the idea," Eileen said. "It seems like just yesterday you were my little boy."

"Awww," Tony said, grinning. "We really need to get more pictures of you as Baby McGee."

"We've got a million photo albums," Eileen said. "After we move, you guys can go through them and pick out some to keep."

"Dad, part with photos?" Tim said. "This I have to see."

"We're probably not going to get as big a house here as we have now," Eileen said. "Some of them will have to go." She thought for a second. "Do you two plan to stay here?"

Tony looked at Tim and shrugged. "This house, probably not," he said. "We're just renting. And if we're not trying to split the distance between here and Annapolis, we don't necessarily need to be on this side of the city."

"Everybody else is either in Virginia or on that side of the city," Tim said. "I don't think the time to the Navy Yard would be any less, but it would make more sense to find a permanent place near the rest of our weird little family."

"Yeah, Abby isn't too far from Georgetown where I used to live," Tony said. "And Ziva's over near Waverly, so she's not too far from the Mall."

"Gibbs is in Alexandria, and that's probably the best bet," Tim said. "Either that or Arlington. They have better schools than D.C. does. Though I don't think I'd want to deal with the commute from Reston every day like Ducky does."

"Good point," Tony said. "Though there's no guarantees he'll stay out there now that his mother is in the nursing home."

"Do you think Gibbs might have some suggestions on neighborhoods?" Eileen asked.

"Probably," Tony said. "His is a nice one, but that's the only part of Alexandria I've ever spent much time in. I know there's a park on the edge of his neighborhood, and I think a couple of elementary schools and a high school nearby." He reached into his pocket and found a crumpled business card and a pen. Flipping it over, he scribbled on the back. "Those are his numbers, home and cell," he said. "Give him a call."

"We'll do that," Eileen said. "And now, I'm going to get out of your hair, because Tim looks like he's about to fall asleep."

"M'wake," Tim said.

"Not for much longer," Tony said. "Come on, up to bed."

"Good night, boys," Eileen said, hugging both of them. "Tim, I'll come by some day next week while Tony's at work to make sure you're not overdoing things."

"Yes, Mom," Tim said. Tony snickered as his partner rolled his eyes.

"Thanks, Mom," Tony said. "Abby and the team members who aren't in the field volunteered to come over at lunchtime, but I'm sure Tim will be pretty bored in a few days."

While Eileen gathered her stuff, Tony let Jethro out to do his business so Tim didn't have to deal
with navigating him and the stairs at the same time. Once Tim was upstairs, Tony let Jethro back in, turned off all the lights, and headed to bed.

Tim had managed to get his jeans off by the time Tony joined him, but that was it. Tony took the sling off, then helped Tim with his T-shirt, gently working it over his partner's right arm and head, then down the injured side, careful not to jar the healing joint. After replacing the sling, he tossed the clothes in the hamper. After arranging the pillows so Tim could sleep semi-propped up, he pulled the covers back.

"I'm glad you're home," he said, kissing Tim. "Our bed's too big without you in it."

Tim smiled. "You spent all of two nights here alone," he replied. "The rest of the time, you were mangling your spine in the chair by my bed." He sat down and swung his legs up on the bed, settling down as Tony pulled the covers around him. "You coming to bed, too?"

Tony nodded and shed his clothes and finished his nightly routine before slipping into bed next to Tim, before turning out the light.

"C'mere," Tim said, his voice slurred with sleep. "Wanna snuggle."

Tony scooted over and curled up next to Tim, sliding one hand over Tim's chest as he trailed kisses up his side. Tim's good arm snaked around his shoulders, pulling him close. "Missed this," Tim said.

"Me too," Tony said. "I haven't slept well since you got hurt. It just... It's not the same." He lay there running his hands over his partner, feeling Tim's chest rise and fall with each breath, and finally let go of the tension that had taken up residence in his muscles since the shooting. Soon, both men were asleep.
Tony tried to be quiet as he got out of bed to get ready for work, but when he stepped out of the shower, Tim was up and trying to squeeze toothpaste on his toothbrush with one hand.

"Want some help?" Tony asked.

Tim shook his head as he used his right hand to put his toothbrush in the left, then held it there while he squeezed the toothpaste with the right. He turned to Tony and smiled. "See, I've got it." He yawned. "I'll be glad when the stitches come out. I don't think I slept more than an hour or two at a time last night." He paused. "I didn't wake you up, did I?"

Tony shook his head. "After the past week, I was dead to the world. Literally. Ducky could have started cutting into me, and I would have slept through it," he said. He checked his watch. "Do you want me to cover your bandages so you can shower?"

Tim's forehead wrinkled as he thought about it. "No," he finally said. "I'll probably need help in the shower, and you don't have time for a second one. I'll just be grungy today. But maybe after you get home?"

Tony smirked. "I'm holding you to that," he said. "Come on, let's get you dressed. It's too cold for you to wander around with no shirt all day."

"I've got a box of older stuff in Jethro's room," Tim said. "There's probably some more big T-shirts in there."

"I'll go dig some out as soon as I get dressed," Tony said.

It took longer than either man expected, but soon they both were dressed — Tony in jeans, boots, and a sweater while Tim sported sweats, a T-shirt, and socks.

"Jimmy arranged for Allison to stop by to walk Jethro," Tim said. "That was good thinking on his part."

"Yeah, he's been a huge help so far," Tony said. "Want to invite him over this weekend for dinner? I can make my chicken cacciatore, and then we'll have leftovers for a couple of days for lunch."

"Sounds good," Tim said. "Check with him today, and I'll make sure Mom and Abby got all the ingredients you need for it yesterday."

"They should have," Tony said. "I saw peppers and onions in the kitchen, and I know we have canned tomatoes in the cabinet."

Tim opened his mouth, then stopped. "Tony, you're going to be late," he said. "Go. No need to tick Vance or Gibbs off, not if we're going to be talking to them about transfers."

"But not yet, right?" Tony said. "That's what you told Mom yesterday."

"No, not yet," Tim said. "Gibbs is going to be hurt that you want off the team, even if he understands why, so we should wait until I get into rehab. If I can't return to the field — and yes, I know you disagree, but just for argument's sake — then we'll have brought it up for no reason."
"Let's just wait and see."

"Fair enough," Tony said. "If you get a chance, can you explain that to your parents? Because if they mention it while talking to him about finding a house, you know he's going to ask."

"I'll call Dad in a bit. I want to see how he's doing, anyway," Tim said.

Tony let Jethro out in the yard, and by the time he was bundled up enough to brave the cold weather himself, the dog was ready to come back inside where it was warm.

As he navigated the icy streets to the Navy Yard, Tony decided they definitely needed at least one car that wasn't a sports car even if they weren't considering the idea of having kids. He had replaced his classic Mustang with a new Mustang after it blew up — two classic cars down the drain made him leery about risking a third beauty — so he could live with giving up either his car or Tim's Porsche.

When he walked into the bullpen, a cup of steaming coffee was waiting on his desk.

"Thanks, Zee," he said as he dropped his gear. "Where's the Boss?"

"Gibbs is in with Director Vance," she said, sipping her tea. "I believe they are discussing who will be assisting us until McGee returns."

"Oh, that ought to be a good discussion," Tony said. "They've never had a personnel discussion that didn't make me wonder if somebody was going to-" He paused. "He's right behind me, isn't he?"

Ziva laughed. "No, he is not."

"It's just me." Tony looked to see Dwayne standing there.

"Hey, Dwayne," he said. "The kids enjoying all the snow?"


"He's home," Tony said. "I give him a day before he's bored out of his mind."

"That's right, he was shot in his dominant arm, wasn't he? That's going to make it tough." Dwayne leaned on the partition.

"Yeah, he can't even write longhand," Tony said. "I'm half expecting to go home and find he's trying to type one-handed, because he wants to get started on his next book. He's got plenty of time to plot it out while he's home."

"Assuming he can stay awake long enough," Ziva said. "It did not take much to wear him out yesterday."

Before Tony could reply, Dwayne's cell rang. After he hung up, he turned to the pair. "Gotta go, the director wants to see me."

As he walked off, Tony smiled. "See — I was right. He's getting TAD to us. We might survive the next few months without needing to tranquilize Gibbs after all."

"That right, DiNozzo?"

Tony didn't even have time to brace for the headslap. "Just glad we're getting a good fill-in while Tim's out," he said.
Gibbs raised a single eyebrow at him, and Tony ducked behind his computer monitor. "Catching up on paperwork, Boss."

"Good," Gibbs said. "Ziva, make sure the desk next to Tim's has everything Wilson will need. He'll be with us until McGee's cleared to return to the field. Vance is telling him now."

"Yes, Gibbs," she said.

"And DiNozzo?"

"Yes, Boss?"

"Go see Abby in the lab. Get her to show you how to run some of the computer stuff she and McGee do — you're the next best with a computer until he returns. I don't want to have to rely on the geeks downstairs."

"On it, Boss." He headed down to the lab.

Once down there, he managed to sneak up on Abby.

"Tony!" She jumped when he tapped her on the shoulder. "What are you doing down here?"

"Gibbs' orders — he wants you to turn me into a mini-McGeek until Tim gets back."

Abby snorted. "I left my magic wand at home, Tony."

"Thanks, Abs." He tugged one of her pigtails. "No, seriously. He wants you to show me some of the tracking stuff you guys can do, because between me, Ziva, and Dwayne, I'm the best at computers — unless you think Gibbs should learn."

"He still breaks at least one cell phone a month," Abby said. "No way is he going to learn how to do traces or how to track GPS signals." She paused. "Wait, Dwayne? As in Wilson?"

Tony nodded. "He's working with us until Tim's back." Before he could say anything else, the alarm on his cell beeped. "Darn it," he said. "I forgot I'm supposed to meet with Keith today. Let me just call and see if he's in or if the snow messed up his schedule."

Abby opened her mouth, then closed it again.

"Abs?"

"He's not there," she said.

"Snowed in at Pax River?"

She shook her head. "Transferred to LeJeune. His replacement starts Monday."

"Abs, I'm sorry," he said. "When did he find out?"

"He found out last week, but with everything going on, I just found out last night." She shrugged. "We had fun, but we both agreed it wasn't worth trying the long-distance thing."

Tony stepped over and hugged her. "Still," he said, "I'm sorry it didn't work out."

She hugged him back and buried her face in his neck. "It wouldn't have worked long-term anyway. He would have been reassigned at some point, and I don't want to leave the Navy Yard."
straightened up. "So, let's start turning you into a computer genius."

"I'll settle for learning enough to not get Gibbs-slapped during cases. Well, any more than usual," he said, as he followed her over to the computers in the middle of the room.

Gibbs watched Tony leave and thought about what he'd overheard before he entered the bullpen. Wilson seemed to fit in with his team, and Tony seemed glad he was the TAD. That just supported Vance's description of what he'd overheard Tony say at Bethesda. He'd sent Tony to the lab to give himself time to figure out how to handle this. Vance and Tony both were right, he thought as he settled in at his desk. Wilson was probably the best fit for the team, especially if Tony was the one to leave. He had the street smarts that Tony brought to the team, and Jarvis had given him good marks for the way he put puzzle pieces together to break cold cases — another area where Tony added a lot to the team.

Still, he didn't like to think of the team without Tony. And he didn't like keeping the guys in the dark about Vance's plan. Of course, he wasn't crazy about them keeping him in the dark about their plans, either. He wasn't psychic like Abby always insisted, but he also hated being out of the loop, officially or unofficially.

He sighed. Ducky wanted to head to Silver Spring tonight, check Tim out, and see for himself how the junior agent was doing. He could go along too, use the excuse of bringing dinner and his toolbox to see if anything at the house needed to be modified to make it easier for Tim to maneuver one-handed. Maybe outside the office, his boys would open up a bit.

Gibbs forced himself to focus on the paperwork that last week's case had generated, plus some of the forms Tony usually filled out for the team. He hated doing them, but if Tony was going to be picking up some of Tim's computer responsibilities, it was only fair that he handle some of the admin bullshit. Ziva wasn't senior enough yet, though Tim could do it when he returned to desk duty.

That just reminded him that Tim could end up being his senior field agent in a few months. He'd do a good job — that wasn't the question. Knowing Tim, he'd even find a way to have the computer automatically generate the damn paperwork. He just couldn't picture the team without Tony. Or Tim. Or Ziva. He hated change, and this team had been together too long for him to like the idea of deliberately breaking it up. Some days, he had a hard time even remembering what it had been like when Kate sat at the desk Ziva now occupied. Kate's two years on the team put her in a select class, one only a few agents had occupied. Langer and Burley were the only ones, other than Kate and the current team, to last more than a year with him. Wilson had potential, and the rest of the team would teach him the skills he needed to survive. But Gibbs didn't have to like it.

Before he could get any further lost in his head, Wilson walked down the stairs and into the bullpen.

"Desk's over there," Gibbs said, jerking his head in the direction of where Ziva was still stocking it with supplies.

Dwayne nodded. "Do we have a case right now?"

Gibbs shook his head. "Paperwork, then cold cases until we get a call. You got anything you're working, bring it over. David will fill you in on how things work around here."

Wilson nodded and walked over to join Ziva.
Gibbs returned to his paperwork, hoping the phone would ring and they'd catch something easy. Not enough to make Tony stay late on Tim's first day home, but enough so he could see what Wilson's field skills were like.

But the hours ticked by with no calls.

After Tony left for the Navy Yard, Tim managed to make himself some cereal, though it was slower using only one hand. He'd never realized just how many things he did in a day that required both hands, even if one was just holding something steady. Now it seemed like everything took twice as many steps to accomplish.

Allison stopped by and promised to take Jethro for a long walk and leave him in the backyard when she was done. So Tim settled into the living room to call his parents.

"Hey, Dad," he said. "How are you feeling?"

"Not bad, Tim. You?"

"Tired. Bored." He yawned. "Considering I've done nothing but sleep for the past week, you'd think it would take more than half an hour before I felt like a nap."

"It's been two weeks since I got sick, and I only make it about five hours before I need a nap," Sean replied. "I'm glad the Academy isn't conducting classes this week. Hopefully by next week, I'll be able to make it through an entire day of classes." He paused. "Your mom told you?"

"That you guys are retiring and moving closer to DC? Yeah, she told us. Tony gave her Gibbs' number so you can talk to him about neighborhoods." Now it was Tim's turn to pause. "She tell you our news?"

"Wedding news or kid news?"

"I meant kid news, but she probably told you both," Tim said. "And news isn't the right word — nothing to announce yet. Just something we've started trying to plan for."

"All the more reason for us to move closer," Sean said. "The instructor who replaces me will need a place to live, and we're not sure we want to sell right now — market's too soft — so we're hoping we can find someplace quickly and move in, then rent out the house here to him."

Tim raised one eyebrow, then realized his dad couldn't see over the phone. "You sure about that?"

"My pension plus our retirement savings will be more than enough to live on," Sean said, "and we had put aside money to send you and Sarah to college. But since both of you got scholarships that paid for your education, most of that money is still sitting there, too. Since it doesn't sound like Sarah's planning on grad school right away, we can use that for a house."

"No, she said that she's been offered a manager position at the coffee shop where she works," Tim said. "She thinks if she can find an affordable place to live after graduation and works the opening shift, she'll be able to focus on writing in the afternoons and evenings."

"She can always stay with us for a couple of years," Sean said. "Then we might finally get to meet this Josh guy she's been dating."

"I haven't met him yet either," Tim said. "I think Abby might have or at least has talked to Sarah
about him, but I don't know details."

"Abby didn't share?" His dad sounded surprised. "She's usually pretty talkative."

"She is," he said. "If she thought there was anything hinky about him, she'd tell me, but otherwise I think it falls into the category of girl talk. Tony, Jimmy, and I don't try to find out what they talk about when we're not around. When Abby, Sarah, and Ziva get plotting, we're not really sure we want to know anyway."

"Good point," Sean said. "So, your mom said it might be a couple of years before you have kids."

"We still have to figure out whether we want to try surrogacy like Uncle Aiden and Uncle Jim did or adopt, and if we adopt, if we want a newborn baby or older kids," Tim said. "Not to mention we have to figure out what to do about work. Which actually is one of the reasons I called."

"Your mom and I would love to watch any children you have while you boys are at work," Sean said.

"Thanks, Dad. But that wasn't actually what I meant." He paused. "Tony and I are still trying to work out what makes the most sense to do at work. We want at least one of us to have semi-regular hours, which will require one of us to move off the team. Part of that's going to depend on if I can get cleared for the field, so we don't want to talk to Gibbs or Vance until we know how that's going to go."

"And you don't want us to say anything to Gibbs when we ask him about neighborhoods."

"Exactly," Tim said, glad his dad understood. "There's a big difference if Gibbs is looking to fill my spot versus filling Tony's spot because our skill sets are so different. Plus, Gibbs won't be happy if Tony leaves, so we don't want to mention the idea unless we're sure that's what's going to happen. If I can't come back to the team, there's no reason for Tony to leave."

"From what I know of Gibbs, he won't be happy having either of you leave."

"No, but it's different with Tony. He's been Gibbs' senior agent for so long, and Gibbs fought hard to get him back after Vance broke up the team a couple years ago. So the idea of losing him again, even if it's just to a desk on the other side of the squad room, isn't going to sit well. Besides, everybody figures Tony will take over the team when Gibbs comes up on mandatory field retirement in a few years."

"I can see that," Sean said. "And if Tony ends up leaving the team, that would reshape promotion expectations for lots of agents — in different ways than you leaving would."

"Exactly," Tim said. "And if Gibbs knows Tony won't be taking over the team, he'll probably fight Vance on retirement. He can petition to stay longer, and if Tony's not there, he probably would." He smiled. "I'm not sure I'd be ready to lead the team in three or four years anyway, not and do as good a job as Gibbs or Tony. I'm too focused on my specialities — I don't always see the big picture."

"You'll figure it out, Tim," Sean said. "Gibbs thinks you'll be the next director of NCIS."

"Really?" Tim wondered if he'd heard right.

"The day we helped you boys move he and Ducky were talking about how you kids were the future of NCIS. They said Jimmy would be the next ME and Abby is already the top forensic scientist. Gibbs said Tony would be the next head of the MCRT and you would be the next director
of the agency." He paused for a second. "I can see why you and Tony don't want to rock that boat until you have to."

"Pretty much," Tim said. He rubbed one hand across his eyes. "I start full PT a week from Monday, so hopefully we'll get a better sense of how things are healing by then." He stifled a yawn.

"You sound tired," Sean said. "You go take a nap, and if the weather stays clear, your mother and I will come down tomorrow and visit."

"Sounds good," Tim said. "Give Mom a hug for me."

"I will. Love you, Tim."

"Love you, too, Dad."

He closed the phone and dropped it on the end table, then let his eyes close. Next thing he knew, he could hear Abby's distinctive clomp on the wooden floors.

"Abs?" he said, blinking the sleep out of his eyes.

"Hey, Timmy," she said. "No, don't get up. Jimmy's unpacking lunch in the kitchen. Where's Jethro?"

"Thanks," Tim said. "He's out back. He'll probably stay out there until we drag him in. No hot case?"

She shook her head as she cleared a spot on the coffee table for their plates. "Gibbs has me showing Tony some McGeek basics, as he calls them. Vance has Dwayne working with the team until you're back, and he's no better with computers than Ziva."

"Better him on the team and Tony doing computers than Vance pulling in somebody from CyberCrimes. Not only aren't they agents, but there isn't a single one who could last more than three hours with Gibbs. Heck, I terrified them when I was down there."

Abby giggled. "No offense, Timmy, but Jimmy's the only other person you've ever been able to terrify."

"Hey!" Jimmy walked out of the kitchen juggling three plates piled with sandwiches and chips. "Even Kate scared me back then. Tim doesn't scare me now."

"Gibbs still does," Tim said, smirking.

"Gibbs scares everybody," Jimmy retorted.

"He doesn't scare me," Abby said. "He likes me."

"You're a special case," Tim said. "You can get away with a lot of things the rest of us can't."

"True," she said. "So, how's your first day at home?"

"I've spent most of it sleeping," Tim said. "Talked to my dad for a bit. He and my mom might come over tomorrow if the weather's good." He thought about mentioning dinner to Jimmy, but if it was going to be something special for him, that meant no Abby, and that would just be rude. Tony could catch him later and ask. "Is Dwayne settling in OK?"
"Seems to be," Abby said. "Nobody's called Ducky to examine a body on the third floor."

"Just as well," Jimmy said. "Dr. Mallard's busy examining a body for Balboa's team. I didn't think I'd be able to get free, but he said to go. I think he wanted to make sure you were OK."

"I'm fine," Tim said. "Just tired. I'll probably sleep most of the afternoon."

"Don't be surprised if Dr. Mallard comes by tonight," Jimmy said.

"I know," Tim said. "He can't drag me into Autopsy, so he'll come here. Better tell Tony to plan dinner accordingly."

"I'll tell him," Abby said. "He was working on some traces when I left. I told him I'd be up to check his work when I got back."

Tim laughed. "I'm surprised I haven't gotten a text asking for help."

"Duh, Timmy," Abby said. "He knows I'm here. He's not going to ask for help while I'm here and will find out about it."

"Good point," Tim said. "Knowing him, he'll use his charm to get one of the women in the cyber unit to help him." He smiled at the thought. "He'd better not use too much, though."

"You're not jealous of him flirting, are you?" Abby asked. "That's not cool."

"Of course not, Abs," Tim said. "But when he turns on the charm, he's pretty intense. Not sure most of them can handle that." He snickered. "Heck, you couldn't handle Tony when he's really putting on the moves."

"Oh, I've handled him before," Abby said. "He tried the first week he was at NCIS, and I froze him out. Didn't like the cocky cop who was trying to take Stan's place."

"Really?" Jimmy said. "You and Tony are almost as good friends as you and Tim."

"We are, but it took a while." Abby smiled. "He asked me one time why I warmed up to Kate faster than to him. I told him he was more like a piercing — painful at first, but once it heals, it's good."

Tim thought about that for a second, then nodded. "I'll take your word on the piercing part — a tat's as far as I'm going for body art — but that's a pretty good description of Tony. He's definitely an acquired taste." As Abby's eyes lit up and she opened her mouth, he backpedaled. "Not going to answer, Abs, so don't even ask."

"What is your fascination with Tim and Tony in bed?" Jimmy said. "You're always asking for details."

"Oh, come on, Jimmy," Abby said. "You never thought about two women in bed? It's the same thing."

As Jimmy's face turned red, Tim couldn't hold back his laughter. "Careful, Jimmy," he said. "Tony suggested Ziva and Abby kiss one time, and they both punched him."

Jimmy winced. "I've got a better sense of self-preservation than Tony does," he said. Then he looked at his watch. "And if I don't get back soon, it won't matter, because Dr. Mallard will kill me."

"Go," Tim said. "I'm ready for another nap anyway." He paused. "Abs, can you check Jethro's food
and water bowls and see if he wants to come in from the back yard? You'd think the dog had never seen snow before, the way he's been playing out there."

By the time Abby had taken care of Jethro and Jimmy had cleaned up lunch, Tim couldn't wait for them to leave so he could go back to sleep.

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When he and Abby got back to the Navy Yard, Jimmy headed directly to Autopsy. He found Dr. Mallard just finishing the preliminary examination of the body Balboa's team had brought in earlier that day.

"Ah, Jimmy. How is Timothy doing?" The medical examiner put his clipboard aside.

"He's doing well, doctor," Jimmy said. "Tired, but that's to be expected. I think he's spending most of today asleep, but he was parked in the living room chair, so he isn't running any risk of twisting his shoulder in his sleep."

"Good, good," Ducky said. "Now, Mr. Palmer, I've completed the first steps on this poor Marine's final examination. Since you did so well on the squirrel last month, do you think you're ready to perform this autopsy?"

Jimmy just stared at the doctor for a minute. "Me? I mean, yes, Dr. Mallard."

"Excellent," he replied. "I will take the notes on this one. As you reach the end of your formal schooling, it is time you get some more practical experience. I will not be here forever, you know."

Jimmy felt a chill settle below his ribcage. "Dr. Mallard?" He paused, trying to think how to phrase his thoughts. "You're not... I mean..."

"No, no," he replied. "Far from it. I continue to be in excellent shape for a man of my age." He frowned. "However, as Mother continues to deteriorate, it reminds me of my own mortality. I hope to be here for many more years, but I also believe that it is time to make sure you are, if needed, able to step into my scrubs. Metaphorically, of course. They would be rather short on you."

"Yes, Dr. Mallard," Jimmy said. "How is your mother?"

"She grows ever weaker, in both body and mind," the doctor said. "I do believe that Alzheimer's and dementia are the worst ways to end a life, the body trapped in this world while the mind has moved on to the next. I only hope that when my time comes, it is swift and painless." He walked around the autopsy table and handed Jimmy the scalpel. "But I digress. Your body, Mr. Palmer."

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Ducky watched all afternoon as Jimmy worked through his first solo human autopsy for a case, not a class. His assistant worked slowly and methodically, and the medical examiner was pleased with what he observed.

He allowed his mind to drift to his mother. She was sliding downhill dreadfully fast, and the nursing home staff had spoken with him a few times about what measures to take. He had reluctantly chosen to allow her continued slide. There would be no benefit to prolonging the life of her body, not when he knew her mental capacity would only get worse. She did not know anybody or anything these days, sinking into a gray cocoon of oblivion.

When Jethro had asked him to examine his father a few months ago, Ducky had braced himself to
deliver the same news he himself had faced some years earlier with his mother. Fortunately, that had not been the case. Jackson Gibbs was healthy, if emotionally scarred. And whatever the cause, Jethro had dealt with it by the time Christmas Day rolled around.

It had been a pleasure to watch Jethro with Jack and Anthony, as well as Timothy and Sean and the rest of their self-made family, enjoy the holidays together. Seeing the father and son relationships had reminded him of the things he had missed out on in his life. Still, he had young Mr. Palmer and the other children. He knew he shouldn't think of them that way. After all, they were all grown adults, old enough to have children of their own. But to him, they were his grandchildren. He was more likely to bandage bullet wounds than skinned knees, but he was still glad for that sign that they needed him.

As part of his plan for Mr. Palmer to gain confidence handling the responsibilities of a medical examiner, he excused himself and went to find Jethro. After searching, he discovered the team leader at the base of the stairs, looking out over the Potomac.

"Jethro?"

"Yeah, Duck?"

"I am stopping by the boys' house this evening to check on Timothy. Would you care to join me?"

Gibbs sighed. "You think they'd want me there?"

Ducky frowned. "Why wouldn't they?" He began cataloguing Gibbs' appearance. His shoulders were slumped, most uncharacteristic.

"Why would they?" he asked. "McGee's off work, and Tony's probably ready to kill me after I sent him down to the lab to get Abby to teach him all that computer stuff McGee does so he can fill in until he gets back." His tone was quiet, resigned. Quite unlike Jethro.

"I was rather thinking more of having their Papa Bear, as Abigail puts it, coming to visit, not their boss," Ducky said.

"Am I?" He stared out the window, his voice barely audible. "Just because I think of them that way, doesn't mean they do."

Ducky frowned. "Jethro?"

Gibbs shook his head and seemed to come back from wherever he'd been. "They know you're coming?"

"Mr. Palmer told Timothy," he replied. "As you haven't been by yesterday or today, I would be surprised if they did not expect you. Anthony, in particular, is most familiar with your brand of mother-henning when one of the team is injured. I rather think they would be hurt if you didn't come by."

Gibbs didn't seem to hear, but after a long minute nodded his head. "I'll bring my toolbox. See if there are things that need some work to make life easier for McGee until he has both hands back."

"I'm sure both boys will appreciate that," Ducky said. "Now, I should get back downstairs. Mr. Palmer is working on his first solo autopsy, and I should not leave him alone for too long. Just long enough to build his comfort level."

"He's come a long way since he started," Gibbs said. "Never thought he'd make it through the first
"Not all of us choose to scare off new staff members," Ducky said, his tone a gentle reproof. "And the same could be said of Timothy. He and Mr. Palmer had much in common when they started. Each has, in time, found a level of comfort in their role on the team."

"They have, Duck, they have." Gibbs turned away from the window. "Better get back down there before Balboa goes looking for answers and wonders what happened to you."
By the time Gibbs went home for his toolbox, picked up Chinese takeout, and drove to Tony and Tim's house, Ducky was just leaving.

"Ah, Jethro," he said. "The boys are expecting you."

"McGee OK?"

"He is making good progress," the medical examiner replied. "His pain is lessening, and he looks much better than he did a few days ago. He will still be tired for a few days, but I've prescribed red meat and broccoli for their iron content."

Gibbs lifted the bag in his hand. "Beef and broccoli's all his, then."

As he walked in the house, not bothering to knock, he lifted the bag up to shoulder height to keep it away from Jethro.

"Sorry, Boss," Tony said. "Not being allowed to jump on Tim seems to make him determined to knock everybody else over."

Gibbs snorted. "He just wants the food I brought." He followed Tony back to the living room, handing over the steaming bag of food.

"Hey, Boss," McGee said from his spot in the chair.

"Don't get up, Tim," Gibbs said. "You look better, more color."

Tim nodded. "Feel better, but I'm still tired. I slept most of the day, except for talking to my dad on the phone and eating lunch with Jimmy and Abby."

"She even managed not to hug him," Tony said from the kitchen doorway. "I knew it was cold this winter, but I didn't think it was that cold. Next thing we know, Ducky's going to stop telling stories."

Gibbs snorted again. "It's not possible for it to get that cold," he said. "I worked with Duck in Russia one winter, remember."

"Ducky was an agent?" Tim said.

Gibbs nodded. "After Franks left, before Morrow gave me this job, I was part of a team in Europe: Ducky, Jenny, and Decker."

"The agent who died a couple of years ago," Tony said.

Gibbs nodded. "Ducky wasn't part of the Paris op except as backup. They never knew he was involved, so he wasn't in danger when they came after us." He sighed, thinking about Jenny's last stand. "That whole thing was a three-ring cluster."

"Not going to argue with you," Tony said.

Gibbs mentally slapped himself for bringing up what he knew was a painful memory for Tony. "She went out on her terms," he said. "She'd be dead by now regardless, and she would have hated if it was long and slow."
Tim shuddered. "My grandfather McGee died of cancer," he said. "Nothing they could do about it, and he lasted almost a year after they diagnosed it. Give me a heart attack or a stroke any day. Something quick."

"Just not for a long time," Tony said. "I want to see Abby's take on our 50th anniversary party."

Gibbs swallowed, thinking about how he and Shannon had planned to take a cruise for their 10th anniversary, leaving Kelly with Joanne and Mac. "You two will be there," he said. "All of you will be, and your kids will be rolling their eyes as you talk about the old days when Tim was the probie and Ziva tripped over her idioms and Jimmy was so intimidated he couldn't get a full sentence out."

"Ziva still trips over her idioms," Tony said as he walked back into the kitchen, emerging a minute later with boxes of Chinese food and chopsticks for Gibbs. "Better stick to a fork," he said, handing Tim his food. "If you try chopsticks right-handed, Jethro will be licking you clean."

"I'm still probably better with them right-handed than you are," Tim said, smirking.

"And you'll note I, too, have a fork," Tony said. "One of these days you're going to teach me how to use those."

"We've tried," Gibbs and Tim said in unison.

As they dug into the food, Gibbs thought about another way to bring up the topic of kids. He had hoped they would say something when he mentioned them, but he should have known better. Tony never missed a chance to comment on Ziva's difficulties with English colloquialisms.

The right opportunity never came up, though, and before he knew it, Gibbs was getting ready to head home.

"Thanks, Boss," Tim said. "We really appreciate this."

"Always glad to help, Tim. You know that," Gibbs said. "You'll be doing better in a couple of weeks, once they get you into physical therapy."

"I hope so," Tim said. "The longer I can't move the shoulder at all, the more scar tissue that's likely to build up."

Gibbs just tapped him under the chin.

"Thanks, Boss," Tim said. "I am."

"Good."

Once he was in his car, Gibbs found his mind drifting back to what Vance had told him yesterday. He'd thought referring to kids would prompt Tim and Tony to say something, but they hadn't said a word. He knew it was irrational, but they had called him Boss all night, too. He'd always seen the title as a sign of affectionate respect, but now he wondered. Ziva and Tony usually used "Gibbs" when they were relating to him as a father figure. "Boss" was for work. He sighed. He knew they had a bond. He never would have gone over to Burley's house, or Langer's, like he had tonight. Never would have spent the holidays with them, much less brought Jack. But how much of that bond was from working together?

When Vance had first taken over as director and had broken up the team, they hadn't stayed in touch. Ziva and McGee e-mailed; Tony sent postcards to Abby; Abby and McGee had lunch together. But Gibbs hadn't stayed in touch with any of them. He'd told himself it was because it
hurt too much, but he also wondered if it was a sign of what would happen when they went their separate ways again. Not that Vance's plan meant that much change. Cold Cases was just the next row over in the squad room. Tony would have the desk that backed up to Gibbs' — he'd even be close enough for Gibbs to headslap him and close enough that he could still toss McNicknames at Tim. When Gibbs retired, he wasn't going to run off to Mexico again, so he could still stop by the Navy Yard or visit the team members at home. Ducky would just be out in Reston, same as he was now.

Except Ducky's mother wouldn't live forever. She'd been going downhill for more than a year. When she died, what's to say Ducky wouldn't decide to travel or even relocate? Jimmy could be the first promotion on Vance's list. The young man had come a long way from the shy, stammering medical student who'd started as a temporary fill-in for Gerald and had grown to become a full member of the team. Then again, he and Vance were assuming the younger men and women all would continue to work full time, but any one of the team could decide to start a family and stay home or look for a part-time position.

It didn't sound like Tim and Tony were considering that, but he only knew what Vance had told him, and Vance only knew what he'd overheard. That could be why the guys hadn't talked to him yet, because they were waiting to see. Thom E. Gemcity was still popular, and even Gibbs was aware of the buzz surrounding his third book, scheduled to come out in a few months. If Tim couldn't get field clearance, what's to say he wouldn't decide to stay home and write full time? Maybe Tony and Tim were waiting to see if Tim could come back before having any discussions. He frowned. Ducky had said they would have a pretty good idea of whether Tim's shoulder would recover enough mobility to qualify for the field by the time he was back on desk duty. That gave him four, maybe six, weeks. Hopefully by then he could figure out what was going on and if he was assuming a place in his team's life that he really didn't have.

Gibbs headed right for the basement when he arrived home, wishing he still had a boat down there. He needed to pick a new project, but wasn't sure what to tackle. Something for a wedding present for Tim and Tony, maybe. He thought about their house and wondered what would be a good gift for both of them.

The kitchen table they used was pretty battered, one Tony had carried through three police forces, plus his stint at NCIS. He could craft a new one of those in the time before the wedding. The only other thing that came to mind was a dresser big enough for both of them instead of their mismatched pair, but it would be big and bulky to move. That would be better saved for when they had bought a house, rather than just renting. Then he could also customize it for the space.

He had an entire bookcase of woodworking magazines and books upstairs with designs he could use as a template. Gibbs started upstairs, then jogged back when he realized his cell phone was still on the workbench. They weren't the first team on call this weekend, but if he left it, they'd end up get called in.

Fifteen minutes later, he was paging through a book he'd picked up before he'd married Shannon, thinking he would find a project he could make her to go with his proposal. The jewelry box he'd made still sat in the unused master bedroom upstairs, filled with her earrings and necklaces.

The front section of the book focused on small projects, but there were some furniture plans in the back. He glanced over the pictures, then grabbed a beer from the refrigerator, and settled on the couch to look over the designs for kitchen sets.

He was weighing the merits of a small table for the two of them against one that had leaves they could add or remove. If they continued hosting team gatherings, the bigger one would be better.
His phone rang, and he answered it absently.

"Yeah, Gibbs."

"Gibbs, Sean McGee."

He put the book down. "Sean. What can I do for you? I just left the guys, and Tim was fine."

"Oh, nothing's wrong," Sean said. "Actually, the boys suggested you might be able to help Eileen and me with something."

"Anything," Gibbs said. He rarely made that kind of open offer, wary of what might be asked, but he liked Sean and Eileen. More importantly, he trusted them.

As Sean explained about their plans to retire and move, Gibbs cataloged their needs with one part of his brain, while the other part considered asking him if he knew anything about the boys' plans for having a family.

"So we were wondering if you had any suggestions for neighborhoods," Sean finished. "We're going over to see the boys tomorrow, and we figured if the weather was good, we could drive around and see what's for sale in the afternoon."

Gibbs focused on Sean's question and realized he had a potential solution that might solve both problems. "Not much for sale right now," he said. "Usually homes will go on the market closer to the spring. Snow's definitely slowing things down." He paused, just to make sure he wanted to step out on this limb. If it worked, it would help him stay in the guys' lives, but it was a little hinky.

"Actually, my next-door neighbor's moving to Wichita in two weeks for work and his last two open houses have been snowed out. He's getting ready to drop the price just to get it moving." He paused to see if Sean had any reaction, and when he heard nothing, he continued. "It's a decent house. Could use a new coat of paint, and the front steps will need replacing in a year or two, but those are pretty small projects. I re-did my stairs and porch a few years back, and it only took me two weekends."

"I suppose that's a smaller project than a boat," Sean said. "And painting wouldn't be a big deal. We could either find some folks or see if the kids would help, depending on how bad it is."

"I'd be happy to help," Gibbs said. "And knowing the team, once word got out they'd all be over. Just don't let Abby pick the color."

"No, red and black aren't us," Sean said. He paused. "You wouldn't mind us as neighbors?"

He smirked, thinking that the McGees as neighbors was the best part of the idea. But he didn't want to tip his hand yet. "I can't see you throwing loud parties," Gibbs said. "Not that we have a lot of those. It's a pretty quiet neighborhood. The Ericksons down the street have a bunch of kids, but other than that it's a lot of people our age."

"Your age or my age?" Sean said. "You've got about 10 years on me, Gibbs."

"Both," Gibbs said. "The homes aren't real large here, so they were starter houses for folks. Shannon and I had planned on moving somewhere bigger if we ever gave Kelly brothers or sisters, but we were waiting until after the war to decide. By then, well, it wasn't an issue. So I stayed. Some of the other families did too, choosing to remodel or add on rather than move. Now they have grown kids and don't have to worry about downsizing."

"Sounds like we'd fit in well," Sean said. "And Eileen said Tony recommended your neighborhood
when he wrote down your numbers."

"Unless we get a case, I'll be around most of tomorrow," Gibbs said. "I have to run out in the morning to pick up wood for a new project, but otherwise I'll be home. If I don't answer, just come in and go straight back through the kitchen to the basement door. I'll be down there." He paused. "Do you want me to check with Rick in the morning, see if he's willing to show you the house?"

"That would be great," Sean said. "If we can get moved before my replacement arrives, he's willing to rent our house so we can hold onto it until the market improves. But that only gives us about three weeks, so we need to find a place we can rent until it closes."

"You'd have to ask Rick about that, but I know he's been frustrated that the snow keeps interfering with the sale of the house, so this might be a solution that works for everybody." As they continued making arrangements, part of Gibbs' brain wondered if this was a little too sneaky, even for him. But then he thought about Christmas and the family ornaments Jack had given to the team members and realized that this was more of an insurance policy than anything else.

After Sean got off the phone to fill in Eileen, Gibbs stuck his phone back in his pocket and rubbed his face. If he thought about it logically, he'd make himself crazy. In his gut, he knew they would always be the Gibbets to him, and he hoped he would always be Papa Bear to them. And if he let any more of Abby into his brain, he might not be sane enough to make it to 55. He snorted. All he could do was try to show the guys and the rest of the team what they meant to him.

Putting it out of his mind, he turned back to the book and compared designs until he found one that he thought would work in the boys' kitchen and that he could make in time for the wedding. He wrote out what materials he'd need and stuck it in his wallet so he wouldn't leave it at home, then settled in on the couch for some sleep.

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In the morning, Sean coughed until he'd de-gunked his lungs.

"Everything OK?" Eileen walked in the bedroom carrying a steaming cup of tea for him.

He nodded as he caught his breath. "Just the usual morning stuff. Brad said it would be a couple of weeks before it cleared out completely." He reached for the mug. "Irish Breakfast?"

"Of course," she said. "I just talked to Tony, and he said they're up. He was headed out to take Jethro for a run. Tim was getting antsy, and Tony said he offered to walk Jethro so Tim could join them, but Tim thought it would be too much. Tony suggested you two could go for a walk now that Brad has said you can go outside as long as you bundle up. Tim won't feel like he's holding you back."

Sean nodded as he sipped the steaming tea, enjoying the way the warm liquid seemed to loosen his lungs. "Sounds good," he said.

Within the hour, they were on their way to Washington, Eileen drove while Sean napped in the passenger seat. When they pulled up outside the house, Tony and Jethro were playing in the yard while Tim sat on the back steps, a jacket wrapped around his shoulders.

Sean opened his door, then bent over to scratch the dog. "Hey, boy," he said. "You enjoying the snow?"

"He loves the snow," Tony said, rolling his eyes. "He's been chasing snowballs for the last 20 minutes."
"And who threw the first snowball?" Tim said.

"The first," Tony said. "I wasn't expecting to throw a hundredth."

Sean chuckled as Eileen bent over and picked up a handful of snow, shaping it, then arcing the snowball across the yard as Jethro scrambled around the car and bounded after it. He made a couple while the dog made his way back, then sent him chasing after those.

"I think he's finally tiring out," Tim said, standing up. He shrugged the coat off to reveal a heavy sweatshirt underneath, his left arm tucked inside, left sleeve hanging free. "Toss me a snowball."

Sean lobbed one gently, and Tim fielded it with his right hand. As Jethro walked back, tongue hanging out, Tim reached back and threw it. His throw was awkward, and the snowball didn't go nearly as far as the others, but Jethro seemed just as glad to have an easy throw.

"At this rate, you're going to be ambidexterous by the time you get back into the field," Tony said. "When you can lift your arm enough to steady a gun, we'll have to hit the range and work on your right-handed shooting and my left." He picked up the jacket from the porch and led the way into the house. After they hung up coats and exchanged hugs with the McGees, Tony shooed Tim into the living room.

Sean followed his son and frowned at the way he slumped into the chair. "You OK?" he asked.

Tim nodded. "Just worn out," he said. "I'll be fine in a while. It doesn't take much these days to tire me out."

Sean nodded. "I'm just getting back to where I think I can make it through a full day at work without needing a nap," he said. "Good thing, too, since I've got classes on Monday."

Tim nodded and closed his eyes. Sean let him drift off and went into the kitchen, where Tony and Eileen were pouring coffee and boiling water for tea.

"I didn't think you kept any in the house," Sean said when he saw the kettle on the stove.

"Mom picked up a box and a kettle when she and Abby went shopping the other day," Tony said. "We should have done it before, but we never think of it except when you, Ducky, or Ziva are here. The rest of us drink coffee, except for Abby and her Caf-Pow."

"It took Eileen a few years to remember when we first got married," Sean said. "I was away so much on deployment that I only went through a box or two a year at home. It wasn't until my first stateside assignment that she got in the habit."

"It helped that I was pregnant with Tim for a lot of that tour," Eileen said. "I couldn't drink coffee, but I wasn't able to go cold turkey on the caffeine, either. My doctor suggested tea."

"She went back on coffee as soon as Tim was weaned, though," Sean said, wrapping an arm around his wife. "I never could convince her it tasted better."

"I'm with Mom," Tony said, leaning back against the counter. "Give me coffee over tea any day."

"Tim likes coffee too, though how you can call it coffee when you put that much milk in it, I'll never understand," Sean said. "I always figure if you don't like it enough to drink it black, why bother?"

Tony snorted. "You sound like Gibbs. He gives me all sorts of grief for my hazelnut creamer and
three sugars. He doesn't say anything about Tim's milk, though." When he reached over to get a fourth mug, Sean stopped him.

"He just dropped off," he said.

Tony nodded. "Not surprising. He said he slept most of yesterday, except for when he was on the phone with you or when someone was visiting."

Eileen blew across the rim of her mug before sipping. "He looks better than he did Thursday. He was even paler than Abby by the time you boys got home from the hospital."

Sean walked over to the kitchen table and sat down, motioning for the others to join him. "When will he start physical therapy?"

Tony flipped a chair around and straddled it. "He's got appointments every day next week, but just for half an hour each," he said. "They're mostly going to be moving his arm for him, see what kind of range of motion he has, how it's healing. They also have some things he can do with his hand and forearm to keep those from losing muscle tone. He won't start exercises for his shoulder until the week after."

"How's he getting to therapy?" Sean asked.

"Bethesda has evening hours for PT, so I can take him after work," Tony said. "If I get stuck because of a case, Ducky, Jimmy, or Abby will come over. And Sarah said she could do it if we caught a really big case and none of us could get free."

Sean smiled, enjoying this evidence of how close the team was and how much of a family they were. Somehow, he and Eileen had picked up another four kids without even realizing it, not to mention Gibbs and Ducky. Since he didn't have any siblings, and Eileen's only brother was up near Boston, it was unusual to be surrounded by so many people he considered family.

"Let me know if there's anything I can do to help," Eileen said. "I told Tim I'd come over at least one day this week to keep him company. I thought maybe Wednesday."

"Wednesday sounds good," Tony said. "He should be able to stay awake most of the day by then, and he'll be pretty bored. He was trying to type one-handed this morning and getting pretty frustrated."

"I'm not used to having to think about typing," Tim said from the doorway, rubbing his good hand over his eyes.

Sean was reminded of his son as a small child struggling to wake up after a long night's sleep. His face was more angular now, his hair shorter, but he could still see his little boy at moments like these.

"You still type faster with one hand than I do with two," Tony said, pulling out the fourth chair for Tim, then getting up to pour him a cup of coffee.

"That's because I use 10 fingers, not two," Tim said. "Even with one hand out of commission, I can still press twice as many keys."

Tony handed him a mug and put three pills and a banana on the table in front of him. "Hey, there's nothing wrong with hunting and pecking," he said. "Just watch 'His Girl Friday' or any other old newspaper movie. Those guys all typed with two fingers, and they were fast."
"It's not the fingers," Tim insisted before swallowing the pills and washing them down with coffee. "It's that they all have a place to go and keys to touch. With one hand, I'm missing half the keyboard, so I have to think about which finger goes where." He put down the mug and picked up the banana, looking at it for a second before handing it to Tony, who peeled it and handed it back.

"I could bring my Dictaphone home, and you could talk out your next book," Tony said. "It's in my desk drawer somewhere."

"No, it's not," Tim retorted. "Abby hid it after Gibbs came back, because she was sick of campfire CDs."

"At least she didn't smash it," Tony said, sighing. "Ziva threatened to do that a few times."

Sean couldn't help laughing at the exchange.

"Dad?" Tim looked so confused, Sean laughed harder.

"Listening to you two is like listening to you and Sarah sometimes," Eileen explained.

Sean nodded. "Except that you and Sarah usually end up with one threatening death to the other."

"That's Ziva and Abby's job," Tony said, grinning.

"OK, stop there," Tim said. "Because if I think about that analogy too much, this just gets hinky."

"Says the man who slept in the coffin," Tony retorted.

Sean raised one eyebrow. "Something you want to tell us, Tim?" He knew he probably didn't want to know, but couldn't help asking.

"Abby," Tim said, turning pink. "And we really need to change the subject."

Tony smirked, and Sean realized if he didn't want to learn things about his son he didn't ever want to know, Tim was right, they should change the subject.

"So, I called Gibbs last night," he said.

"About moving?" Tim asked.

"He actually has a neighbor who's trying to sell his house before he gets transferred to Kansas for work in a couple of weeks," Sean said. "We're going over there this afternoon to look around the area, maybe even go through his neighbor's house."

"Which one?" Tony asked.

"He said next door and that it needed a paint job," Sean replied. He thought back to last night's conversation. "He mentioned the guy's name, but I don't remember it."

"That wouldn't help anyway," Tony said. "I haven't met any of the neighbors. But if he said it needs a paint job, it's probably the house on the yard side, not the driveway side."

"You guys are thinking of moving next door to Gibbs?" Tim said.

Sean tried to figure out from his tone what he thought about it, but couldn't. "Is that OK?"

"It's fine," Tim said. "I'd say it was weird, but what about this family isn't weird?"
"Certainly would make holidays easier," Tony said. "Both sets of parents right next door. No arguing about where to go."

Tim rolled his eyes. "There is that," he said.

Sean almost asked about Tony's parents when remembered that they weren't really a factor. Instead, he said, "So, does that mean we're hosting the team for Christmas next year?"

Tony snorted. "It won't be Gibbs," he said. "Jack decorated last year, but Gibbs grumbled about it for weeks."

"He'll decorate," Tim said. "You know once he's Grandpa Gibbs he's going to be even more into Christmas than Abby."

"Is that even possible?" Tony asked.

Sean thought about that for a second. "I thought you didn't want to mention to him you were thinking about having kids," he said.

"We don't," Tim replied. "We will, once we figure out what we're doing."

"Papa Bear Gibbs will be excited, and a little sad because of Kelly," Tony explained. "But Boss Gibbs will want to know how we're going to juggle a kid and our jobs." He picked up the empty mugs and took them to the sink to wash.

Tim picked up the conversational thread. "We talked about it, and it's not fair to him to tell Papa Bear Gibbs until we're ready to have the discussion with Boss Gibbs. And we don't want to do that until we figure out which one of us is going to ask for a transfer off the team, and we won't know that until we see if I can get cleared for the field." He shrugged with his good shoulder. "I feel like we've had this conversation a lot this week."

"That's because we have," Tony said over his shoulder. "Mostly with each other. Unless you count Jethro being in the room. We really need to see what he thinks about having a human sibling."

"He's fine around kids," Tim said. "Anyway, yeah, all this talking just means we know we need to wait before we figure anything else out, so it's still not something we're telling Gibbs. You guys only know Papa Bear Gibbs, but we'd still rather you didn't mention it."

"Understood," Sean said. "We did the same thing, waited until I had a stateside, land-based deployment before having you, and then again before having Sarah."

"So that's why you two are so far apart," Tony said. "I always wondered."

Sean looked at the clock on the wall. "Tim, you want to go for a walk?"

"Are you sure, Dad?" Tim asked. "Did Brad OK it?"

Sean nodded. "As long as I bundle up. He said the exercise would be good for me, and you could probably use some yourself. Just be patient — I'm not all that fast these days. Your mother's always having to slow down."

"Go, Tim," Tony said. "I've got to do the prep work for dinner tonight anyway, and I'll make lunch."

"I can make lunch," Eileen said. "What are you cooking tonight?"
Sean shook his head as the two started discussing food and followed Tim into the mud room.

"Your mother's not going to be happy until she has all of Tony's recipes," he said. "I've had more Italian food since you two got together..."

"It's a fair trade," Tim said. "He likes most of Mom's recipes that I've mastered, so he's happy to share his with her."

"Now if only he could teach Sarah how to cook," Sean said. "Your mother finally gave up."

"You mean she got sick of losing pots because Sarah burnt out the bottom," Tim said as he slid one arm into a winter jacket he'd worn while in college. "Can you help me with this?"

Sean zipped up the jacket, Tim's left arm tucked inside. "Last time I did this, you hadn't even started school," he said, pulling on his own jacket.

As Tim started out the door, Sean called for him to wait. "Just need to-" He pulled the neck warmer on, then the ski mask. "OK, now I'm ready."

"Sorry, Dad," Tim said. "I should have remembered, as many layers as Tony has to put on in the morning."

"Your mom still has to remind me half the time," Sean said. He sighed. "I'll be glad when spring gets here."

"Tony, too," Tim said as they walked down the driveway. "Come on, let's go this way. Most of the neighbors have shoveled their sidewalks." He led the way, dodging icy patches. "He's sick of running on the treadmill."

"That was the worst part of being on a ship." Sean thought back. "The decks were pretty unforgiving to run on, and the treadmills were boring." He followed Tim as he rounded the corner to the next street. "One of the things we looked for when we moved to Annapolis was a neighborhood where we could run."

"Gibbs can probably suggest some routes for you and Mom," Tim said. "Tony's been running with him a few times when he's stayed there, and I know he's got a few different loops he takes."

"Your mom will be the only one running," Sean said, sighing. "Brad's already said the only running I can do is inside, on a track or a treadmill." He frowned, hating the limitations that were starting to take over his life. "How did Tony take it when he had to switch?"

Tim was quiet for a minute before speaking. "Not as badly as I thought he would, actually," he said. "He'd rather run four miles, or maybe even five on a good day, inside on the treadmill, than only the three he can manage outside." He paused. "When the weather's good, he still runs outside, and we try and arrange our runs so we can run together — his longer runs on the same days as my shorter ones." He sighed. "He's been doing better since we got back from vacation, even with the cold weather. I'm hoping that sticks around for a while."

Sean smiled as he listened to Tim worrying about Tony despite his own, more serious injury. "If I haven't said this before, I should have," he said. "You two are good for each other, and I'm glad Tony's part of the family."

Tim stopped and looked at him. "Thanks," he said. "What brought this on?"

Sean shrugged. "Seeing you two together last week at the hospital and now. Thinking about your
future kids. You remind me of your mother and I when we were just starting out. It's nice to see things come full circle.

Tim reached over with his good arm to pull him into a one-armed hug. "How did I never see you were the sentimental one until a couple of months ago?"

Sean hugged him back, being careful of Tim's left side. "Life looks different when you're a husband and thinking about becoming a father," he said. "It'll look even more different when you have your own children." He pulled away and started walking again. "Come on, your mom and Tony are going to wonder where we are."
Chapter 6

Saturday, February 13, 2010

Eileen looked around as Sean piloted their car through the residential streets off Route 1. "At the end of this street, we need to make a left. Gibbs said his house was the third one on the right."

It was a quiet neighborhood, filled with Craftsman-style homes. Gibbs' house was easy to pick out with his bright yellow muscle car in the driveway, even though the ancient pickup was in front of it.

"That must be the house he mentioned was for sale," she said, pointing at the faded blue bungalow to the right of Gibbs' house. "It's the right size."

Sean nodded as he turned the car off. "Let's go talk to Gibbs, see what he can tell us. He said to just walk in, through the kitchen and down to the basement."

Eileen nodded. "I wonder if he started another boat."

"We'll find out," Sean said.

Eileen led the way into the house. It was spartan, but seemed appropriate for the man they had gotten to know well in the past six months. "I can see what the boys meant about not decorating," she said, eying the off-white walls and 1970s furniture. Only a black and white reprint of the flag being raised on Mount Suribachi broke up the expanse of wall. They walked into the kitchen and found that a door near the refrigerator was ajar, a light shining from the other side. Eileen opened it to see wooden steps leading down.

"Jethro?" she called as they started down.

"Down here," he replied. She looked over the railing to see Gibbs sawing wood into three-foot sections.

"That's not a boat," Sean said.

Gibbs shook his head and cracked a smile. "Kitchen table. Wanted to make the boys something for a wedding present, and Tony's is falling apart."

Eileen smiled. "First the Christmas presents, now this. What else do you have planned?"

Gibbs shrugged. "Depends on what happens," he said. "Didn't know two weeks ago I'd be working on a wedding present." He paused to brush away sawdust, then looked up at Sean. "Why don't we head into the living room? The sawdust can't be any better for you than it is for Tony."

"No, probably not." Sean frowned, and Eileen knew he was trying not to complain about the restrictions that had become part of his life.

"So, Jethro, did you talk to your neighbor?" She led the way upstairs.

Gibbs nodded. "Rick should be there in-" He glanced at his watch "About 20 minutes. Said he had some errands to run." He grabbed some papers off the kitchen table. "He left these for you to look at, see if it even meets your needs."

Eileen started reading, while Sean questioned Gibbs.
"Have you been over there? What's it like inside?"

"Helped Rick finish the basement a few years back," he said. "Same basic layout as this place, two bedrooms upstairs. Downstairs is a little more open." He pointed to the half wall between the dining room and living room. "No wall there, so the two rooms blend in."

Eileen tried to imagine it. "That would be really nice when we have everybody over," she said. She thought back to what Tim and Tony had said. "If everybody lives on this side of the city except for them, we could host holiday gatherings. They mentioned you don't like to decorate."

Gibbs shrugged. "Been no reason to for a long time. This year was my first family Christmas since the girls." He sighed, and Eileen swallowed, wondering how Sean would have coped if she, Tim, and Sarah had been killed while he was deployed.

"The first," Sean said. "Not the last."

Gibbs nodded. "And I imagine this family will only get bigger over the years."

"Especially as-" Eileen broke off, realizing she'd almost spoken out of turn. "As the rest of the kids start bringing dates." She rushed on before Gibbs had time to question her. "I mean, they can't all date team members. I'm guessing Tim's the exception there."

Gibbs snorted. "It started as Abby being the exception, but Tim did such a good job at not letting it interfere with work that I didn't mind he and Tony dating." He smiled. "Didn't actually figure it out until they'd been dating for months."

"They didn't tell us for a while either," Sean said. "Not until after Tony had already started seeing Brad regularly. Sarah figured it out when she saw them after you got back from Africa."

"So are the guys planning on staying near Bethesda?" Gibbs asked as he led them through the first floor.

Eileen shook her head. "No, they figure now that we're not going to be in Annapolis and Tony's able to cut back on visits with Brad, it makes sense to be out this way."

"Southwest DC isn't bad, and they'll have a better chance of finding a place with a yard than they will in Georgetown or the other parts of Northwest," Gibbs said.

"No, they're planning on Alexandria or Arlington," Sean said. "Longterm, they didn't think DC would be a good choice."

"I could see them over in Old Town," Gibbs said. "It's got the feel Tony liked in Georgetown." He rolled his eyes. "His building was always having problems. If it wasn't the water flooding him out, the boiler was broken or the electric was under repair. About the fifth time he crashed here, I asked why he didn't move, and he said he liked the neighborhood too much."

"I don't think that's exactly what they're going to be looking for," Eileen said. She paused, carefully picking her words. "With Jethro and everything, I think they'll be looking for something like this. Quiet neighborhood, nearby parks, low-traffic streets."

Gibbs narrowed his eyes, and Eileen suddenly realized why he was so good at his job. "Nearby playgrounds?"

She felt her cheeks heat and looked away. "We should go talk to Rick. I'm sure he's expecting us."
Jimmy found a shoveled-out, unclaimed parking space two blocks from Tim and Tony's house and maneuvered his car into it, then walked the remaining way. He carried a small box under one arm.

When he arrived, Tony and Jethro greeted him at the door.

"Hey, boy," he said, crouching down to pet the dog. "How are you?"

"Excited," Tony said. "We wore him out this morning, but then he napped and now he's bouncing off the walls again."

"Wish I could say the same." At Tim's voice, Jimmy looked up to see his injured friend standing in the doorway to the living room.

"Getting shot is hard work," Jimmy said. "They fixed a lot of damage in your shoulder, and you lost a lot of blood. Give it time." He handed Tim the box he'd brought.

Tim reached out for it with one hand and looked it over. "A coffee grinder?"

"What? No. That's the only box I had handy." Jimmy felt his cheeks heat. "Open it."

Tim quirked an eyebrow at him.

"Oh, um, right. You can't open it with one hand." He mentally kicked himself for not thinking of that. "I can, I mean, if you don't mind-"

"I've got it, Jimmy," Tony said, plucking the box from Tim's hand. "Go toss your jacket in the mudroom and meet us in the kitchen."

He scrambled back to the small space by the side door before he could say something else dumb. When he walked into the kitchen, Tim was sitting at the table with the box lid open while Tony stirred something in a pan on the stove.

"That smells delicious," Jimmy said, sniffing. "What is it?"

"Chicken cacciatore, and it is," Tim said. "So, what's with the present? We're trying to thank you with this dinner."

Jimmy felt his face flush again and ducked his head. "You don't have to thank me," he said. "Abby and the others all helped, too."

"Told you," Tony said.

"Yeah, yeah." Tim replied. "So he's smitten with Abby. Name me one man who isn't."

"Vance?" Tony's tone was dry. "And yes, Jimmy, we do want to thank you. Between checking Tim out so Ducky wouldn't worry and arranging for Allison to walk Jethro during the week and doing the bulk of the shoveling Thursday. Well, you've gone above and beyond."

"That's what friends do," Jimmy said. "You guys have been good friends to me; I figure it's the least I can do to return the favor." He was uncomfortable with being thanked, so he turned the discussion back to the box. "Did you open it?" He pointed at the open container.

"I was waiting for you," Tim said. "Tony just opened it so I could lift it out." He reached in, but the object was a tight enough fit that the box lifted along with it. Jimmy reached over and held the
bottom so Tim could tug the item out.

"Thanks, Jimmy," Tim said as he pulled out the tissue paper-wrapped object. "I never realized how many little things take two hands." He placed the item on the table and tore the paper off. "It's... What is it?"

"It's a book stand," Jimmy said, rushing to explain. "You can put a book or a magazine on it and the lip at the bottom will keep the pages open while you read. That way you don't have to put it down every time you need to turn the page."

"Thanks, Jimmy," Tim said. The wide grin on his face said more than words could. "I was afraid I was going to be stuck watching movies all day while Tony was at work."

"Hey!" Tony looked over his shoulder and stuck his tongue out. "What's wrong with movies?"

"Nothing," Tim said. "But I already can't write for at least a couple more weeks, probably more. I was hoping to catch up on some of those books I didn't get to read on vacation and a few magazines. Now I can."

"You could have said that without dissing my movies," Tony said. "Cinematic masterpieces, all of them."

"Friday the 13th' is a cinematic masterpiece?" Tim smirked, and Jimmy had to hold back his laughter.

"OK, McCritic, see if I suggest we snuggle up and watch a movie next time we have a free night," Tony said.

"When was the last time we actually watched one of those movie night movies?" Tim retorted.

Jimmy was about to ask when it clicked what Tim meant. "Umm, guys. Not Abby here. That might be more than I really needed to know."

"Sorry, Jimmy," they said.

"No, it's OK. I just- um, yeah." He wasn't really sure what he was trying to say, but they seemed to get it.

"So, speaking of Abby, did you hear about Keith?" Tony asked.

"Keith, the guy she's dating?" Tim said.

"I try not to think about Keith," Jimmy said, then clapped his hand over his mouth. "Wait, that was out loud."

Tony snorted. "Yes, Jimmy, it was. And yes, that Keith, but they're not dating any more."

"What?" Jimmy was glad Tim seemed to be as surprised as he was.

"What happened?" Jimmy couldn't help asking. Not that he had any interest in Abby that way. Really. Oh, heck, who was he fooling? Of course he did. Ever since he first joined the team when she was dating Tim, he'd been fascinated by the woman.

"Keith got reassigned to LeJeune. I've got a new breath therapist starting Monday," Tony said. "Abby mentioned it to me yesterday, but I forgot about it when I got home because Ducky walked in right after I did."
"And then Gibbs, and then I feel asleep on the couch," Tim said. "I'm going to be glad when I can stay awake for more than three hours at a time."

"You'll get there," Jimmy said. "So Abby and Keith aren't trying the long-distance thing?"

"Abby doesn't do long-distance," Tim said.

"Norfolk's almost 200 miles from DC," Tony pointed out.

"Which meant we could still get together for an afternoon or evening without one of us having to spend the night," Tim replied. "Besides, it seemed like I was up here every other week anyway helping you guys out. That last month or two before Gibbs got me a spot on the team, I spent more nights in DC than in Norfolk."

"That's because the coffin was in DC," Tony said.

"I never said I didn't enjoy spending nights in DC." Tim smirked. "Besides, you always said Abby's responsible for us getting together."

"True," Tony said. "She is, and she was right." He waggled his eyebrows, and Jimmy was afraid to ask what Abby was right about. Still, years of working with a bunch of investigators had him opening his mouth anyway.

"Do I want to know?"

"Only if you want Abby's assessment of Tim's bedroom abilities," Tony said.

"No, I think- No."

"Good answer," Tim said. "Bad enough she shared it in front of Kate, Tony, and Gibbs."

Jimmy stared. "Gibbs? And he didn't kill you?"

"He was too busy getting evidence on our current case from Abby," Tony said. "Now, enough about sex. Let's eat."

"Hell has finally frozen over," Tim said. "Jimmy make a note of the time."

"1721, Saturday, February 13, 2010," he said. "Wait. Why am I making note of the time?"

"Because Tony just tried to change the subject away from sex," Tim said.

"Hey!" Tony set plates in front of them before walking away to get his own. "I don't always think about... Well, OK, so I usually do."

Jimmy snorted. "Usually?"

"Hey!" Tony repeated. "Can I help it if I enjoy sex?"

"Can we maybe stop this discussion here?" Tim said. "There's no good place for it to go."

At the glint in Tony's eye, Jimmy could see exactly where he was thinking of taking that comment. "This is really good," he said, spearing a piece of chicken. "Thanks for inviting me over."

"Tim, we're continuing this discussion later," Tony said. "Thanks, Jimmy. My Nonna died when I was little, but I have her box of recipes."
"Nonna?" Jimmy frowned.

"Italian for grandmother," Tony said.

"Not to be confused with Nana, which is what my great-grandmother was called," Tim said. "Mom called her Gram, but we always called her Nana."

Jimmy smiled. "My grandfather on my mom's side was always Grumpa. My oldest cousin couldn't say Grandpa correctly, and it stuck."

Tim smirked. "Oh, we have to save that for Gibbs when the first Giblet baby is born. Can't you see his face when he's Grumpa Gibbs?"

"So what are the chances Abby has the first baby?" Tony said, grinning. "Because you know she's the only one who can get away with calling him that."

"Um, guys, wouldn't she have to be dating somebody first?" Jimmy asked and regretted it as soon as they turned to look at him. "What? No, don't look at me. I mean, not that I wouldn't like to- Abby would be a great mom. It's just- Um, yeah, I'm going to, um, get some more water." He stood up and carried his glass to the sink to refill it from the tap.

"Relax, Jimmy," Tim said. "We're just giving you grief."

"Come on, let's finish dinner before McSleepy needs another nap," Tony said.

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Sunday, February 14, 2010

Sarah woke up to bright winter sun streaming in the apartment windows. She opened her phone and saw it was still early, not even 8 a.m. Josh was snoring next to her, his sandy hair sticking up in spikes, so she slipped out of bed and pulled on a T-shirt and boxers before padding into the kitchen to rummage up some breakfast.

She sniffed the milk in Josh's refrigerator before deciding toast was the safer bet. While waiting for it to pop, she opened her laptop and logged into her e-mail. Most of it was junk, but there was one from her mom and one from Abby.

Reading, she learned Abby and Ziva were spending the afternoon with Tim so Tony could do some Valentine's Day preparations to surprise her brother. "He doesn't know anything about this, so we're telling him we're coming over to help with chores and give Tony a chance to go to the gym for some pick-up basketball. If you and Josh don't have plans, wanna join us?"

Sarah replied back, asking when to meet them. She and Josh were going to a movie that was showing on campus, then getting dinner, so she wasn't busy until later. And she'd rather die than admit this, but she was still worried about Tim. It wasn't that she didn't trust Ducky, but Tim was her big brother/hero who could always save the day, whether it was giving her a ride to school when she missed the bus or saving her from a murder charge. Realizing how close he had come to dying had shaken her in a way little else ever had. The only thing that even came close was finding out her dad was retiring from the Navy because of his health. Having both things happen the same week left her wondering from which direction the next blow would come. If she was a betting person, she'd guess it would be Tony rather than her mom, although after finding out Tony had survived the plague, she wondered if anything could kill him.

She shook off her morbid thoughts to butter her toast and get some coffee — fortunately Josh had
his machine on a timer — then settled down to work on her Mark Twain paper until she heard Josh stirring. She cleaned up her dishes and headed for the shower, knowing that by the time she got out he'd have had his first cup of coffee and be borderline human.

When she walked back out, dressed in jeans and a sweater, he was just pouring his second cup of coffee.

"My friend Abby e-mailed me," she said. "She and Ziva are going over today to help out Tim, and they invited us along. Do you want to come?"

He shrugged. "Remind me again who Abby and Ziva are."

Sarah thought about how to describe them without saying too much about their jobs. Tim never told people where he worked or what he did, and she was sure the others were the same way. Josh knew Tim was a cop now because of the shooting, but she didn't have to mention the others were his coworkers.

"Abby is Tim's best friend. They dated for a couple of years when I was in high school, and they've stayed friends. Tony introduced them. I'm not sure exactly how Ziva got to know them, but the first time I met Tony was when he and Ziva were helping Tim with something. There's a few others in the family, including Tony's best friend, but Abby and Ziva are the ones I spend the most time with." Sarah was throwing her stuff in her backpack.

"Family?" Josh looked at her, raising an eyebrow. Sarah stifled a laugh at how much he reminded her of Tim with that move.

She shrugged. "Yeah, pretty much. None of us are related, except me and Tim, but we all spent Christmas together, the big group of us. Our parents, too. In fact, my mom e-mailed me today to say they've arranged to buy the house next door to Gibbs, who's like Tony's dad."

Josh frowned. "If it's a family thing, then I don't think I'd really belong."

Sarah laughed. "No, they just have a way of making friends into family. It's pretty cool, actually, the idea that you can pick your family."

"Still, I think I'll pass," Josh said. "Maybe another time. You going to be out all afternoon?" he asked, settling onto the couch.

She nodded and checked the time. "Abby thought we'd be over at Tim's all afternoon. I'd better head back to the dorm before Ziva picks me up." They hadn't realized until this past Thursday that Ziva's apartment was only four blocks from Sarah's dorm, and she was sure this wouldn't be the last time they shared a ride to something.

"Ziva. That's an odd name." He pushed the sleeves of his Giants shirt up as he reached for the remote.

"It's Hebrew," Sarah said. "She's from Israel originally and is studying for her citizenship exam in May." She smiled. "The first time we met, I asked her about her name. She said in Hebrew it means 'splendid.' Sarah's a Hebrew name, too. She said it means 'princess.' Tim rolled his eyes at that one."

"He still needs help?" Josh frowned. "What about his boyfriend?"

"Tony wants to do something special for him for Valentine's Day, so he's going to Ziva's house to make dinner since Tim's really not up to going out. We're just the decoys."
"I still can't believe you didn't tell me your brother was a cop until he got shot," Josh said. "I figured he was a computer programmer from the way you talk about him."

Sarah flushed. "That's pretty much how I think of him," she said. "He's always been a computer geek, and he doesn't generally tell people he's in law enforcement. He's never told any of his girlfriends he's a cop until he's sure it's serious." She rolled her eyes. "I think he should have — would have scared away some of the psychos. At least Tony's normal. Well, semi-normal."

"Doesn't it seem weird to you that your brother's ex-girlfriend is going to distract him so his boyfriend can prepare a Valentine's Day surprise?"

"It makes sense after you have to meet them," Sarah said. She thought for a second. "The guys usually host a game night on Saturdays for the whole group. One of these weeks you'll have to come along." She paused for a second. "At least, if I can get them to promise not to scare you. As a group, they're... a little overwhelming."

"Sounds like it," Josh said. He stood, his six-foot frame towering over her, and wrapped her into a hug. "Should I pick you up at your dorm tonight?"

She nodded. "Any big plans today?"

"Probably just watching college hoops," he said. "Couple good games on today."

She headed out and made the walk to her apartment in under 10 minutes, thanks to the frigid temperatures. She had just enough time to dump her stuff and change into ragged jeans and an old T-shirt before Ziva texted that she was on her way.

She was surprised at how quickly they made it to Tim and Tony's house, though Ziva's complete disregard for traffic rules probably had something to do with it. She'd heard them grumble about Ziva's driving before, and she was finally beginning to understand that they really hadn't been exaggerating.

"So what chores are we doing?" Sarah asked. "We did the laundry and basic cleaning Thursday after we shoveled. Are you sure Tim will buy this?"

"He is hairy on painkillers," Ziva said as she rounded a corner fast enough that Sarah would have sworn in court that two wheels had left the road.

"Hairy on... You mean fuzzy?" Sarah was still trying to figure out how to translate what the guys called Zivaisms.

"Yes, fuzzy! That is what I meant." She laughed. "It is better than Tony. He is stranger than normal on medication. McGee is just not all there."

"So, what did I sign myself up for today?" Sarah asked.

"Abby is planning on giving Jethro a bath, since that is one thing Tony does not like to do," Ziva said. "I thought I would make them two or three meals they can put in the freezer so there is something Tim can heat up if Tony gets stuck at work. Or perhaps I should say when he gets stuck at work. Being on Gibbs' team entails many late nights."

"Oh, I know," Sarah said. "I've lost track of how many times Tim's had to back out of plans because you guys had to work late or got called in on the weekend."

"It is a part of the job," Ziva replied. "But having some meals ready will make it easier for Tim
over the next few weeks." She paused. "I do not know what would make the most sense for you to
do, but they might have some ideas." She pulled up in front of the boys' house and parked the car.

"Oh, Tim will have ideas, all right," Sarah said. "Whatever chores they've been putting off he'll
gladly volunteer me for." She got out and walked up the driveway with Ziva, each carrying a bag of
groceries.

"My brother was much the same way," Ziva said. "And I always liked to make my little sister do
the chores I did not like." Her scarf hid her face, so Sarah couldn't judge her mood by her
expression. Sarah didn't know much about Ziva's family, but she knew both her brother and sister
were dead, and the other members of the team exchanged looks whenever Ziva's brother was
mentioned.

They knocked on the front door, and Tim opened it.

"Down, Jethro," he said, reaching for the dog's collar with his right hand.

"You're actually up and around?" Sarah said, reaching up to gently hug him.

"Sort of," Tim said. "Tony just left, and Abby's upstairs running water for Jethro's bath." Once Ziva
closed the door, he released the dog, who seemed to be satisfied with licking their hands in greeting
before heading upstairs, paws pounding the stairs. "You guys really didn't have to do this. I would
have been OK for a couple of hours while Tony's at his game."

"We are glad to help," Ziva said. "You know I love to cook, and this will be one less thing for
Tony to worry about when we have a case." She kissed both of Tim's cheeks. "Now, should Sarah
help me, or do you have other things she can do?"

Sarah grinned. "This is the one time I'm going to volunteer to do your chores, Tim, so take
advantage of it."

"I hate to say this, because it does sound like I'm taking advantage of you," Tim said.

"Name it, big brother. If it's that bad, I'll just remind you of it a million times." She smirked at him.

"With all the snow that keeps getting tracked in, the floors are a mess," Tim said, his expression
sheepish. "Jethro doesn't exactly get the concept of wiping his feet."

Sarah snickered at the idea. "Just show me where the mop is," she said.

"In the closet next to the washer," Tim said. "Any other cleaning supplies you need should be in
there, too." He turned to the stairs. "I'm going to keep an eye on Abby and Jethro, make sure she
doesn't let him get too out of hand."

"Am I going to need to add mopping up the bathroom to the list?" Sarah raised one eyebrow,
waiting for her brother's response.

"Abby promised to do that," Tim said. "Even after I loaned her some clothes so she wouldn't get
hers wet, so she knows what she's getting into."

"Not my MIT shirt?"

He laughed. "No, one of my old button-down shirts. She always stole them when we were dating,
so I figured it was a safe bet." At the sound of thumping upstairs, he smiled. "I'd better go make
sure Jethro didn't convince Abby to join him in the tub."
Both women laughed at that as Tim walked upstairs with more energy than they had seen since he was first injured.

"He is doing better," Ziva said as they walked toward the back of the house. "I did not expect him to be moving around so much."

"I don't know," Sarah said. "He might just be motivated by the idea of Abby and Jethro and a bathtub."

"This is true," Ziva said.

Sarah thought back to what Josh had said earlier.

"Hey, Ziva?"

"Yes?" She pulled ingredients from the grocery bags.

"I was talking to Josh this morning," Sarah said.

"Your boyfriend?"

Sarah nodded. "Yeah, we've been going out since October. I mentioned we were doing this, and he was surprised that Tony was OK with Abby coming over to distract Tim, since they used to date."

"Not for many years," Ziva said. "They were not together when I joined the team, although I think they still occasionally slept together, especially when Gibbs left for Mexico." She started pulling out dishes and measuring cups.

Sarah squeezed her eyes shut. "OK, that's way more information about my brother's sex life than I ever wanted to know."

"I am sorry, Sarah," Ziva said. "I did not think. I am so used to comments we all make on the subject that I did not think that it would be different for you."

Sarah opened her mouth to ask, then decided she probably didn't want to know. "Um, yeah. Too much information. So are Tim and Abby weird, or is Josh the odd one for asking?"

Ziva laughed. "Abby and your brother have always been unique," she said. "I would not want to use them as the standard for anyone else." She paused, thinking. "I have seen them interact for many years now. One thing that has never changed is the connection they have. I have often thought that they could only be as close and as comfortable as they are now, because they used to date. It is as though they know each other well enough to communicate without speaking." She started slicing vegetables. "I noticed that Tim and Tony shared that same comfort level after they started seeing each other, though I did not know the reason for it at the time. Tony has never seemed to mind Tim and Abby's closeness, and I think we all can agree that Tim would never abuse Tony's trust. It is not in his nature." She paused, and when she spoke again, it was slowly. "I think that Tony sees their relationship for what it is: two friends who are close, in part because they used to date, but who decided they were better off as friends." She dumped the eggplant, peppers, and onions in a bag and added some olive oil and spices.

"I also understand that they have a complicated relationship that does not make sense without knowing that. That is true, I think, of many of us on this team." She closed the bag and shook it to coat the food. "I learned the hard way that trust is important in our line of work. Trusting the wrong person... It can be dangerous. Not trusting the right people can even be more so. I did both and almost died because of it. But I did not die, because your brother and Tony and Abby never
stopped trusting me. That level of trust is important and rare. I had to experience it, because it was a trust I had not known before. I did not believe such trust was possible."


"Yes, we have seen this with some of the women he dated," Ziva said. "He is an interesting contrast to Tony. With him, trust has to be earned."

"You know why." Sarah didn't, but between the bits of Tommy's backstory in Tim's books and what she'd observed since he joined the family, she knew there was bad blood between him and his parents.

Ziva nodded. "It is not my story to tell, however," she said. "If you want to know, you should ask him."

Sarah thought for a second. "Because telling somebody would damage the trust between you?"

"Yes. And because I did not trust him when I should have once before." Ziva put the food down and looked out the window above the kitchen sink. "I found myself betraying Gibbs' trust, and I justified it to myself. Because I was not fully honest, I convinced myself Tony was lying as well. It was almost a fatal mistake for both of us, and one I will not make again." She turned to Sarah, and Sarah could see pain swimming in her dark eyes. Ziva's voice was thick with unshed tears when she said, "I think Tony or Tim would tell you if you asked, and you would understand both of them better for it. But you should ask them."

"I wasn't trying to ask..." Sarah was lost for words, so she just reached over and hugged Ziva. The older woman was stiff in her embrace for a second before relaxing.

"Thank you, Ziva," Sarah said. She didn't completely understand everything Ziva had said, but she suspected it was tied to the African mission Tony and Tim had gone on back in the summer. From Ziva's explanation, she began to get an inkling of just how much of a family the team had become, and why the guys always joked that they had three sisters, not one.

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Upstairs, Tim sat nearby while Abby massaged soap into Jethro's fur. She was already soaked, and Tim was glad he had given her some of his clothes.

"Abs, you know you're going to have to mop up all this water, right?" he said.

"I know," she said. "But Jethro has to be all clean first." She worked the suds into spikes on his back.

"He's a dog, not a dragon," Tim said, stifling a laugh. "Or a dinosaur."

"He's adorable," Abby retorted, as a clump of suds dislodged from Jethro's fur and landed on her head. "And he's having fun."

"He likes bath time," Tim said. "Tony just doesn't, because he gets so wet."

"Yeah, probably not a good thing for his lungs," Abby said. "Good thing I stripped down before putting on your clothes, because I'm soaked through and wet underwear sucks."

Tim shook his head. "Too much info, Abs." Although he had already figured it out by the way his
clothes stuck to her. "But Tony will be glad if he gets home before you dry off."

She turned to look over her shoulder and stuck her tongue out. He smirked at her. "Just because I haven't shared where all your tats are doesn't mean he's stopped wondering, and the clothes aren't hiding much."

"Oh, you guys love it," she said. "Tony's still hoping he can talk me and Ziva into that tongue kiss. I told him he can indulge his fantasies if we can watch you guys do the same."

Tim rolled his eyes. "Keep it up, Abs, and I'm breaking out the camera."

She started rinsing Jethro off and grumbled. "Isn't it enough that Tony has pictures of Kate in a wet T-shirt and Ziva in a bikini?" She stopped for a second. "Right, it's Tony. Dumb question."

"I was thinking more of something to thank Jimmy for all his help," Tim said. He knew it was unfair to tease the two of them, but couldn't resist. "I heard you spent most of the time at Bethesda snuggled up to him."

"We're just friends, Timmy," Abby said. "You and Tony were in your room, and Gibbs was talking to your parents and Vance."

Tim sighed. "Just be careful, Abs," he finally said. "He's always had a bit of a crush on you, and you could hurt him if you aren't careful."

She started to sputter, and he held up his right hand. "I know, I know, you don't mean to. You never mean to. Doesn't mean it won't happen."

She finished rinsing Jethro and drained the water from the tub. "I'll try not to, Tim," she said, then paused. "You really think he's interested in me? I mean, not just in my shoes."

Tim snorted at the memory of how they'd discovered Jimmy had a shoe fetish. "Pretty sure, Abs. He came over for dinner yesterday and basically admitted it."

She nodded. "Thanks. I'll keep that in mind." She looked around. "Towels?"

Tim stood and pulled a stack off the shelf above the toilet. "These are his."

Fifteen minutes later, Jethro was mostly dry, and Abby released him. Tim could hear him thumping his way downstairs.

"I'll be down in a few minutes," Abby said. "Just need to change."

Tim nodded and headed down to see what Sarah and Ziva were up to.

He found Sarah just finishing the floor in his study, and Ziva pulling a pan of something that smelled good from the oven.

"Wow, you guys got a lot done," he said as he stood in the doorway to the kitchen.

"None of the recipes are very difficult," Ziva said as she scraped roasted vegetables into a bowl with cranberry beans and brown rice. "I just need to package these into smaller containers and fill your freezer."

"Thanks, Ziva," he said. "This is really going above and beyond." He walked over and pulled her into a one-armed hug, dropping a kiss on her hair. "We really appreciate it."
"It is nothing," she said. "Besides, this means I will not have to listen to Tony worry about you starving to death when Gibbs keeps us late at work." Her smile was devilish. Tim wasn't fooled, but he played along.

"Oh, so this is all about keeping you and Gibbs sane," he said with mock outrage. "I should have known."

"How are you feeling?" Ziva asked, abruptly changing the subject.

"Fine," he said. "Tired, but I might actually make it until bedtime without a nap."

"You know, we are almost done here," Ziva said. "You could go take a nap on the sofa or in your room. We promise we will not damage anything."

"Thanks, Ziva," Tim said. "I can't sleep on the couch — it's not comfortable on my back, which is the only way I can sleep right now — but maybe once Abby's finished changing, I'll go lay down upstairs."

When she clumped down the stairs a few minutes later, he did just that. He hadn't felt that tired, but when he woke up, it was dark outside.

"Hey, McSleepy."

Tim looked over to see Tony lying next to him.

"What time is it? Did the girls already leave?"

Even in the dark, Tim could sense Tony's grin. "Yes, the girls are gone, and it's time for us to celebrate our first Valentine's Day."

"Our..." He groaned. "I completely forgot."

"You've had other things to think about," Tony said, "and I'm just glad you're here." He leaned over and kissed Tim lightly. "I'm also glad the girls distracted you while I was getting things ready."

"What things?"

"Dinner's waiting to be heated up whenever we're ready to eat, and I've got a DiNozzo family specialty in the refrigerator for dessert," he said. "But first, since you're well-rested, I thought we could start here." He slid over until he was lying on his side against Tim and slid a hand under Tim's shirt. "I told you I'd spent some time thinking about things we can do together until you're up for our usual activities."

As Tony's hands caressed his skin, Tim groaned. "Oh, I'm up for them," he said. "My shoulder's just not cooperating." As Tony moved to straddle him, Tim used his good hand to try to work Tony's shirt off.

"Let's get your shirt off first, since that's a big production," Tony said. "Then we can just... explore." He bent down and kissed Tim, one hand supporting himself and the other sending sparks over Tim's skin every place it touched.

Later, as they lay sated under the covers, Tim turned to kiss Tony. "You were right, you did put that time to good use thinking of alternatives," he said.
"Mmmm," Tony said. "I knew we had to do something. The last time I went a month without sex of some sort was when I was recovering from the plague and barely had enough energy to stay awake." He traced designs on Tim's skin, his fingers leaving trails of warmth in their wake. "Think of this as a chance to exercise our creativity."

Tim snorted. "Oh, I've got some creative ideas," he said. "They'll have to wait until I've got two good arms, though."

"I forgot you dated Abby," Tony said. "She probably defines bedroom creativity."

"Oh!" Tim remembered the conversation from earlier. "I mentioned Jimmy to her. She sounded like she might possibly be interested."

"An autopsy gremlin and a lab bat," Tony said. "Between Jimmy's penchant for sex in odd places at the office and Abby's ability to leave no evidence behind, that could make for some interesting possibilities."

Tim slipped his hand up and gently slapped Tony's head. "You're incorrigible," he said. "I'm not hacking the security camera feeds." He then ran his hand through Tony's soft hair. "So what's this dinner you mentioned?"

"Mmmmm," Tony practically purred at Tim's touch. "Chicken marsala is just waiting for me to heat it up, and I have homemade cannolis for dessert."

Tim leaned over to kiss him. "Thank you," he said. "For dinner, for this... for being you."

"Mmmmm... Thank you," Tony replied. "For being here and for loving me as much as I love you."
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Originally posted in October of Season 8: First, huge thanks to Kyrie, as always, for her stellar editing. So far every episode, including the preview for Royals and Loyals, has either a scene or a character development that is in a Breathe story, though the Short Fuse and R&L bits are in chapters you haven't seen, one from Life and one from the partially written story that comes after this. I've either gotten *way* too far inside the characters' heads, or the writers got McGee to hack my brain. :) If Gary Glasberg does bring Daddy McGee into an ep the way he said he might after I asked on premiere night, if he comes in as a Naval Academy instructor, I will be... Well, I don't know what I'll be, but speechless is probably a good place to start. ;)

Monday, February 15, 2010

Dwayne Wilson carried 6-month-old Kevin down the hallway, letting his son use his fingers as a teething toy in order to spare his blazer. Maggie was in the kitchen packing lunches for 8-year-old Kerry and 4-year-old Michelle before waking their daughters for school.

"Here's your lunch," Maggie said, using her elbow to point at a brown bag on the counter as she spread peanut butter on bread.

Dwayne leaned over and kissed her. "Thanks, honey," he said. "I wish I knew what time I'd be home tonight, but I don't want to try and predict Gibbs." He put Kevin down on his blanket in the adjoining living room and handed him a sunflower rattle with a mirror on one side. Walking back in the kitchen, he grabbed the bag off the counter. "Tell the girls I said to have a good day at school, please."

"Absolutely," Maggie said. "If you're going to be there late, you'll call?"

He nodded. "Of course." He sighed. "I was hoping Kevin would be in pre-school before I caught an assignment like this."

"We'll be fine," Maggie said. "It's just for a few months, and you said yourself that having experience on Gibbs' team will help you get a good assignment down the line."

"I know, I know." Dwayne hugged her. "OK, gotta go. I won't beat Gibbs in, but I don't want to be the last one in either."

Sure enough, when he walked into the bullpen 45 minutes later, there was a coffee cup sitting on the team leader's desk. Dwayne set his stuff down by the end desk, just outside the central area the MCRT occupied. He felt one step removed, but he wouldn't have been comfortable sitting at McGee's desk, even if Gibbs would have suggested it.

"Good morning, Dwayne," Ziva said, walking into the bullpen from another part of the building.

"Morning, Ziva," Dwayne replied. "I don't see Gibbs around. Should I just be working on a cold case until he tells me to do something else?"
Ziva nodded. "We will probably catch a case soon, but until then, we always have cold cases."

"In this weather, everything's a cold case." Tony walked into the bullpen, shedding his ski mask and other gear. He coughed a couple of times, then sipped coffee from the travel mug he carried. "I thought winters in Ohio were bad."

"You grew up in New York," Ziva said.

"I grew up on Long Island," Tony said. "We're not talking Buffalo or Albany. There's snow, but Ohio is worse." He dropped into his chair and looked at the clock. "I need to start getting up earlier. If the Boss had been here, I'd be in trouble for being late again."

"You are." As Gibbs walked into the bullpen, Dwayne stifled a smile at his timing. He'd heard the stories, but observing them firsthand made the tall tales about Gibbs having bat ears and ESP seem all the more true, which only added to the mythic quality of the enigmatic team leader.

"Gear up. Got a dead squid."

"Which base?" Dwayne asked as he grabbed his backpack and hurried across the floor. Gibbs' speed was one thing he remembered from his brief stint on the team a year ago.

"Hotel. Downtown."

As they piled into the elevator, Dwayne settled in the back and hoped he was able to live up to Gibbs' expectations. Crime scenes were one thing with which he had little experience, because the Cold Cases team rarely dealt with them. And on the few occasions they had, they were never fresh.

When they pulled up behind the hotel and the manager escorted them through the service entrance and upstairs via the service elevator, Dwayne tried to reassure himself that he could handle what was coming next. He'd dealt with Gibbs before, and it was just like his DI in boot camp.

Once in the room, Gibbs had Ziva take the manager's statement. "DiNozzo, sketch and shoot. Wilson, bag and tag." He paused to speak quietly to Tony, then went into the bathroom, evidence bags in hand.

Dwayne nodded and took a deep breath before setting down the boxes of crime scene gear by the door.

"What's the first step, Dwayne?" Tony asked.

"Wait for you to document the position of the evidence, then bag it up and label it." He reminded himself that he knew this, even if it was more theory than practice.

Tony smiled. "No. First step, put on the gloves." He pulled a pair of latex gloves from his jacket pocket and tossed them to Dwayne. "Rule No. 2." As Dwayne pulled on the gloves, Tony said, "But yes, then do exactly what you said."

As Tony started sketching and shooting, Dwayne studied the scene before them. The sailor was naked, sprawled on the bed. A vase of roses and some dessert dishes sat on the table by the window, and a terry hotel robe was draped across the chair closest to the bed. He sniffed and detected a faint scent of perfume.

"Smell that?" he asked Tony, who sniffed in response.

"Get Ziva in here," he said. "It's familiar, but I don't recognize it. She might."
Dwayne stepped out into the hallway, where Ziva was just finishing up with the manager. She raised an eyebrow, and he nodded in response to the silent question.

"Thank you, Mr. Andrews," she said. "I believe that is all the questions I have for right now. We will call you if we think of anything further."

"When can the cleaning crew get in here?" he said. "We're fully booked tonight, and we need this room."

"I am sorry, but it is a crime scene," she said. "We will not know how long it will be until we finish processing the scene."

As the manager walked away muttering, Ziva turned back to Dwayne. "Gibbs has not scared you already, has he?"

"No, Tony sent me out," he said. "There's a perfume scent in the room. I don't recognize it. He said it smelled familiar, but couldn't place it and thought maybe you could."

She followed him inside and sniffed, walking around the room. "I know," she said. "It is the same scent that Sarah wears." Dwayne was lost again, but decided to wait and see if things started making sense before asking another question.

Tony sniffed again. "That's where I know it from." He smiled. "So you know what it's called, right?"

Ziva shook her head. "No, I do not. I imagine it is fairly common though. Do you have her number?"

He nodded. "Dwayne, can you finish shooting?" He held out the camera, and Dwayne took it. "Ziva, help him while I call McSis."

"McSis?" Despite Dwayne's earlier resolve to not ask the question, it popped out before he could help himself.

"Sarah is McGee's sister," Ziva said as she walked over to him. "Now, what do you need to document in this section?"

As Dwayne pointed out the things he thought were evidence, Ziva added a few more to the list, other angles or items that hadn't occurred to him.

"Thanks, Ziva," he said. So far things hadn't been as stressful as he had anticipated. Tony and Ziva were helping him, and Gibbs hadn't yelled at him yet. Before he could continue with that thought, Ducky and Palmer arrived.

"TOD, Duck?" Gibbs asked

"Jethro, I have just arrived," Ducky said. "Perhaps you should ask Mr. Palmer what he can tell you about cause of death whilst I determine the time."

"Petechial hemorrhaging in the eyes indicates asphyxiation, and the ligature marks around his neck make strangulation the probable cause," Palmer said after examining the body. Dwayne didn't know the ME's assistant well, but he was obviously comfortable with the team. He reminded himself that the team worked with Dr. Mallard and Palmer all the time, so that made sense.

"Time of death is six to seven hours ago," Ducky said.
"Valentine's Day gone wrong?" Tony said. "First she seduces, then she kills?"

"She?" Gibbs said.

"Woman's body spray," Tony said. "Black Amethyst. Bath and Body Works - pretty common. Sarah wears it. She said you can get it at any store."

"And those stores are all over the place," Dwayne added. "That's not going to help us narrow things down."

"Could it be a woman?" Ziva said. "Jimmy, how much force did it take to kill him?"

Palmer frowned. "Whoever it was used a fair amount of force, but I don't see any defensive wounds." He pointed to the hands and arms. "He didn't fight back."

"Too bad," Tony said. "If he had, we might have been able to get some of her DNA."

"Enough about her. What do we know about him?" Gibbs asked. "Fingerprints, Mc-" He stopped short. "Who's got the portable fingerprint scanner?"

"I do, Boss," Tony said. He rummaged in his backpack and pulled it out. "I've got most of his gear."

"Redistribute it when we get back," Gibbs said. "So who is he?"

"Seaman Corey Cobb," Tony said, pulling out his phone and tapping the screen. "He's stationed at Pax River. Works in the supply department."

Gibbs nodded. "Wilson finish working the scene with me. We'll bring the evidence back to Abby. DiNozzo, pull security tapes, then take the car."

"Where to, Boss?"

"Back to the Navy Yard. You track down everything you can on Cobb. David, find out who was on duty when Cobb checked in."

"I will question the front desk staff, as well as any others who might have come in contact with him or who can identify the woman." Ziva turned and left the room, followed by Tony.

"Jethro, I believe we have examined everything we can here," Ducky said. "Mr. Palmer and I will take our seaman back to the Navy Yard to see what else he has to tell us."

Gibbs just nodded, then jerked his head. Dwayne followed the movement.

"You shoot the body?"

Dwayne nodded. "Well, Tony did. That was the first thing he did. I got the area around the body after he stopped to call McGee's sister about the perfume."

"Go ahead, keep shooting."

Dwayne just nodded and tried to remember what he and Ziva had talked about. He focused in on the table by the window, taking closeups of the dishes and cake, especially the half-eaten strawberry.

"Why zoom in on that?" Gibbs asked.
Dwayne jerked, not realizing the team leader was right behind him. "The berry? It has a bite mark in it. Chances are it won't be anything significant, but it might help place somebody at the scene if Abby can match it." At the team leader's nod, he felt the need to add, "Ziva suggested it."

Gibbs gave him a half-smile. "And you remembered. Now, what else?"

Dwayne looked at the table and didn't see anything he hadn't shot. He looked back toward the now-empty bed. "The bed?" It seemed logical, since that's where the seaman had died.

"Why?"

Dwayne opened his mouth, then shut it again. Finally, he said, "I figure since Cobb was lying there, I should document it."

Gibbs just nodded and motioned him over to the bed. He pointed to two spots, and Dwayne leaned closer to see a couple of long strands of hair.

"Our mystery woman?"

"Likely," Gibbs said.

"If we're lucky, Abby can match them to somebody," Dwayne said, snapping away. Once he'd recorded the location, Gibbs bagged them.

They finished the rest of the crime scene like that. Gibbs never gave him the answers, but pointed him in the right direction. It was starting to freak him out a bit. When he'd first joined NCIS, he'd heard all the horror stories about what a hardass Gibbs was. And his time with the team before going to FLETC had shown him that while some things might be exaggerated, most were basically true. Gibbs was a tough SOB who didn't put up with anything less than the best, a Marine to the core. He had chewed up and spit out more agents than Dwayne cared to think of, yet he seemed more like a teacher than a drill sergeant today. Dwayne frowned and vowed to ask Tony about it after.

By the time they got back to the Navy Yard, Tony had isolated a few sections of security tape showing Cobb and a woman in uniform checking in the night before.

"A captain?" Dwayne said. "Pretty brazen for somebody who's breaking regs."

"You got an ID?" Gibbs asked.

Tony nodded. "Abby found her through facial recognition. Capt. Jessica Snow, also stationed at Pax River in supply."

"Playing with ice," Ziva said.

Dwayne just stared at her as Tony snickered. "Fire, Zee," he said. "Playing with fire."

"Whatever," she said. "Was she really willing to throw her naval career away for Cobb?"

"Why be so obvious if she was planning to kill him?" Dwayne said, thinking out loud. "He knew what they were doing was against regs. She could have gotten him to check in while she met him at the room. He would have thought she was protecting herself from the Navy, not a murder rap."

"Maybe she did not do it," Ziva said.

"DiNozzo," Gibbs said.
"Checking into Snow's background and duties at Pax River. On it, Boss."

"David."

"Dwayne and I will go pick her up, Gibbs," Ziva said.

"Question the supply staff first," Gibbs said. "Get everything we can before they clam up."

Ziva nodded and headed out, Dwayne following behind.

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Tony dug into his work, determined to find enough to put Snow away so that by the time Ziva and Dwayne got back, Gibbs would let him go home and check on Tim. But everywhere he went, he found more questions.

"Boss, we've got problems," Tony said.

"Not what I like to hear," Gibbs said.

"Inspector General's office has been investigating inconsistencies in the Pax River supply depot for the past few weeks," Tony said. "I called a source over there, and they got tipped off by an enlisted sailor in the office who had noticed discrepancies."

"Cobb." Gibbs sighed.

Tony resisted the temptation to do the same. "She wouldn't say, but once I explained why I was calling, she started asking questions."

"They think Snow's behind it?"

Tony shook his head. "If it was just a captain taking kickbacks, they would have busted her," he said. "Sounds like it goes further up the chain of command."

Gibbs cursed. "How far up?"

Tony decided the next bit needed to be delivered quickly, like ripping off a Band-Aid. "According to her cell records, she and Admiral George Walker are talking a lot more often than you would expect. Walker's in charge of supply for all the tri-state bases. And his bank records show some suspicious transactions."

"Dammit," Gibbs said. "Call Ziva, get them to bring Snow in quickly. We need to get what we can from her. I'm going to brief Vance before SecNav calls asking him what the hell is going on."

Tony nodded and glanced at the clock. Almost 1800. He resisted the urge to sigh.

"And DiNozzo, call McGee, let him know you're going to be late. See if he needs Palmer or Abby or somebody to swing by and help him out."

Tony nodded. "Thanks, Boss."

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Vance watched from the walkway above the squad room as Gibbs' team worked leads. Any other team would be packing it in to go home for the evening, but they were still hard at work — all of them. It was one of the things that made them such a good team. His mind made up, he called
Jackie, then headed downstairs.

"Agent DiNozzo."

"Yes, director?" DiNozzo looked up from his desk.

"What are you working on?"

"Running down bank records for the various players, trying to find links." He grimaced. "Usually Tim would handle this, but with him out, I'm the next fastest at it."

"Go home," Vance said.

"Director?" DiNozzo sounded confused, and Vance had to fight back a smile.

"I'll do that. McGee needs help, and I can do what you're doing. I'll clear it with Gibbs."

"Clear what with me, Leon?"

Vance smiled, knowing the team leader enjoyed sneaking up on people. "Consider me your fourth agent for the night, Gibbs," he said. "Let DiNozzo go home so McGee doesn't hurt himself trying to handle everything with one hand. I'll take on his work."

Gibbs just raised one eyebrow.

"It's still your team, Gibbs," Vance said. "Consider this the one time you get to be my boss."

"Better take him up on it, Boss, before he changes his mind," DiNozzo said, grinning as Gibbs slapped him.

"DiNozzo, go," Gibbs said.

"Thanks, Boss, Director," DiNozzo said, before turning and leaving.

Vance watched him hurry out. "Think he wanted to leave before we changed our minds?"

Gibbs just tipped his head to one side, then headed to his desk. "You got what it takes to work on my team, Leon?"

"That a challenge, Gibbs?" Vance smiled and settled in behind DiNozzo's desk. He wasn't in McGee's league, but he'd get Gibbs the answers he needed.

Two hours later, Vance had shed his suit jacket and tie and rolled up his sleeves. Wilson had run out for barbecue about 1900, and Vance was still tracking down the people behind the dummy corporations linked to the bank records of the admiral they were investigating. He checked his watch and rubbed his eyes.

David was talking in French to an Interpol contact, while Gibbs was chatting in Russian to god only knows who.

"Wilson, got two more people for you to background," he said, e-mailing the agent the information.

"Maybe one of them will actually be a real person," Wilson said. "I'm sick of hitting names that don't go anywhere."
"Look for the common threads," he replied absently, as a trail he'd been following all night looked like it might finally be leading someplace.

"Common threads, sir?" Wilson said


Vance kept digging, but also kept an eye on Gibbs.

Wilson joined Gibbs in front of the large screen and watched as Gibbs scanned the enlarged documents.

"See, this birthdate," the team leader said. "Shows up on this application as the end of the social. Check this address change, and it's listed as the phone number."

"And it's in the e-mail on this form," Wilson said. "So that's the link." He paused. "But that just connects the different aliases. It doesn't get us any closer to a real person."

"Check the suspect list," Gibbs said. "Birth dates, socials, addresses. Somebody has to have it in their file."

"On it, Boss," Wilson said.

Vance smiled at the familiar phrase and turned his focus to the records on his screen. Wilson was fitting in just fine.

Tuesday, February 16, 2010

Tim had been restless the night before and had finally gotten up to sleep in the living room chair, which he had told Tony was as comfortable as the bed with his sling on. But Tony hadn't been able to sleep after Tim left him alone in bed and at 4 a.m., he'd given up and gotten ready for work. Satisfied that Tim, who had showered the night before and had dressed in sweats and a sweatshirt today, would be okay, Tony headed into the office.

The bullpen was still dimly lit when he walked in at 0530. He dodged Ziva's feet, which were sticking out from where she slept behind her desk. Gibbs wasn't around, but Tony was pretty sure he was on a coffee run. He saw Dwayne sleeping in Tim's chair, then stopped dead when he realized Vance was still at his desk, hidden from immediate view behind the monitors with his head resting on his arms. Tony was just wondering if he should wake the director when his computer started beeping and Vance jerked awake.

"Finally got you, you son of a bitch," Vance muttered as he scrolled through whatever the search results were.

"Director?" Tony wasn't sure what to say. "You're still here?"

"DiNozzo." Vance motioned him over. "Spent all night trying to nail this bastard." He glanced at his watch. "You're in early. McGee OK?"

Tony nodded. "Other than not being able to sleep more than an hour or two at a time. Last night was the first time I wasn't so dead to the world that I noticed."

"Jackie was like that the last few weeks before each of the kids was born," Vance said before
letting out a jaw-cracking yawn. He straightened up and stretched his arms overhead. His sleeves were rolled up and his normally crisp shirt was rumpled. His suit jacket and tie lay across the shelf behind Tony's desk. "Not that you two will have to deal with that if you have kids, but at least you'll be able to relate to some of your other co-workers when they're suffering through the sleep deprivation."

Tony kept his face expressionless at the comment, but filed it away to think about later. "Thank you, Director," he said. 'I really appreciate you pitching in. I could have come back once I'd gotten Tim squared away. Sarah would have been willing to stay with him, and he could have waited until tonight to shower."

Vance shook his head. "At least this way Gibbs has one agent who's had more than half an hour of sleep," he said. "And between your lungs and McGee's shoulder, I'd rather play it safe." His lips turned up in a slight echo of a smile. "I don't have another agent I can assign to the team if you get sick, too."

Vance stood and motioned to the chair. "Thanks for the loan."

Tony dropped his gear behind the desk and stowed his SIG and holster. "So, what did you nail down? When I left, we were trying to trace the admiral's black market ring."

"Oh, we traced it," Vance said. "Wilson and I spent all night linking dummy corporations. He got a crash course in financial shenanigans, but he also found the missing link, with a little coaching from Gibbs."

"Gibbs, coaching? What did you do, tell him he couldn't have another TAD if he scared Dwayne off?" As soon as he said it, he closed his eyes and braced. "He's right behind me, isn't he?"

"You had to ask?" The head slap that came with Gibbs' words wasn't as hard as usual. "Right, Boss. Won't happen again, Boss."

"DiNozzo, the day you stop speaking out of turn is the day I retire because Hell will finally have frozen over," Gibbs said. He handed Vance a cup of coffee. "The director was just about to share his big breakthrough," Tony said, trying to change the subject.

"Gibbs, the lead from your Russian connection helped crack it," Vance said. "The money from the admiral's black market supply chain is being funneled through Russia to Taliban forces in Afghanistan to support insurrection against al-Qaida ops."

" Sounds like something the CIA would run," Tony said, frowning over Vance's description.

Vance shook his head. "The CIA has been funding warlords over there, but not Taliban forces. The political climate is too uncertain for them to risk it considering the Taliban's treatment of women. Covert ops have gotten them in trouble too many times in the past for them to want to risk getting blown apart over this."

"I suppose having a female Speaker of the House who used to serve on the Intelligence Committee would make it tough to handle that political hot potato," Tony said. He hesitated before asking the inevitable question. "Kort involved in the CIA-sanctioned ops?"

Vance shook his head. "Not as far as I can find out. The only way to be certain would be to review the CIA's confidential files, which I don't have access to." He paused. "As far as I know, only one
person at NCIS has ever accessed those files."

Tony raised an eyebrow and looked at Gibbs, who nodded. "Of course he did," Tony said. "Let me
guess, Frog-hunting."

Gibbs just looked at him, and Tony smiled, knowing that was all the confirmation he would get.
"Is there any chance this is an unsanctioned CIA op? Because it's not like Kort is any stranger to
those, and he can't be the only spook who takes federal restrictions more as suggestions rather than
rules."

"At least here, when agents go off the reservation, they leave their badges behind," Vance said,
looking pointedly at Gibbs.

Tony felt his chest tighten a bit as he wondered how to divert this line of conversation before he
had to duck a punch. He swallowed. Before he could say anything, Ziva woke up.

"Gibbs?" she said, sleepily. "Do we have a break in the case?"

"We do, Agent David," Vance said. "Somebody want to wake Agent Wilson up so I only have to
go through this once?"

"Wilson!" Gibbs pulled out his drill sergeant voice, and Dwayne went from tipped back in the chair
to standing to attention in seconds.

"Hey, no scaring the probies, Boss," Tony said. "Director's found a lead, Dwayne."

Vance pulled up the information on the plasma. "The admiral's funnelling the money from the black
market sales to the Taliban." He walked them through the links. "I'll need to brief SecNav on this
before we take action." He checked his watch. "It'll be at least another hour before I can call him,
and probably two before you can go arrest anybody."

"DiNozzo. Go get breakfast for everybody, since you actually got some sleep," Gibbs said.

"On it, Boss. Abby too, or did she go home?"

"She was sleeping on her futon," Ziva said. "Major Mass Spec was running tests to link Snow with
the crime scene."

Tony nodded and took breakfast orders from Vance and Dwayne, since he didn't know what they
wanted.

As he headed out, he texted Tim. Vance cracked case, skipped your Frog-hunt tactics. Mentioned
us having kids. Think he suspects?

He figured Tim was still asleep, but he'd get it when he woke up - hopefully not for a few hours.

When he got back to the Navy Yard, he delivered everybody's food, then headed down to the lab,
which was silent for once. Abby was curled up on her futon, wearing the sweatpants she kept at the
Navy Yard for the nights she ended up crashing there, her hair down.

Tony placed her food on the counter and bent over to shake her shoulder. "Abs, I've got breakfast
for you."

She blinked her eyes open. "How's Timmy?" she asked, her voice gravelly and low from sleep.

Tony straightened and winced as his knees popped. "He's fine, Abs. Not sleeping all that well still,
but he got more than he would have if he'd been working last night." He stood and twisted a couple of times to unkink his spine.

"We need to get you back to yoga class," Abby said. "There's one tomorrow night if we don't catch a new case."

Tony nodded. "Eileen's coming out tomorrow to visit with Tim during the day, so he'll probably be too tired for anything besides dinner anyway."

"I'll check with Jimmy," Abby said. "He told me yesterday that he'd be willing to stay with Tim on Saturday so we could go to class. He might be willing to stay with him tomorrow, too. Even if Tim's asleep, he can study."

"How much longer does he have before he finishes his degree?" Tony said. "Seems like he should be done by now."

"I think this semester is either his last or his next-to-last," Abby said. "He was talking with the school about counting his experience here toward the practical portion so he doesn't have to take leave from here to do basically the same thing somewhere else, but they haven't ruled yet. If they'll count it, he'll basically be done in the spring, even though he won't officially graduate until December."

Tony nodded. "Sounds good. I'd better get back upstairs before Gibbs comes to hunt me down."

When he returned to the bullpen, Vance had gone to his office to call SecNav and taken his food with him. Tony settled into his chair and ate his rapidly cooling breakfast. Gibbs was working away at his desk, and Dwayne and Ziva weren't around — probably cleaning up in the locker rooms.

His computer beeped and he found an e-mail from Tim. It was written in Gibbs-ese, but Tony figured if he only had one hand, he'd be taking shortcuts, too.

V can't use my FH tactics - no plausible deniability. Kort on loose? What'd V say? Ducky take me to PT tonight, see what they have to say? He can translate.

Tony smiled at the idea, but thought it was a good one. He called down to Autopsy, but Ducky wasn't in yet, so he left a message.

"McGee having problems?" Gibbs hitched his hip onto the corner of Tony's desk. He hadn't even noticed the team leader walk over and wondered if he'd seen the e-mail. Tony figured it was a good thing he hadn't started typing his reply yet.

He shook his head. "With the shoulder, no. But he's scheduled to get the rest of the stitches out today — Sarah's taking him over this afternoon after her classes — and he's hoping that they can give him a better idea of his rehab schedule tonight at PT if Ducky's there to ask some questions and see him do the exercises." Tony rolled his shoulders. "I think he's hoping Ducky will clear him to come back by the first of March. I also think he's enjoying those pain meds a bit too much."

Gibbs snorted. "I'm glad you two are rubbing off on each other, but him picking up your hatred of using your sick leave is something I had hoped would go the other way."

Tony thought about it before deciding to tell a portion of the truth. "I think he's more hoping to get a definitive answer about whether he can expect to come back to the field or not. They won't let him try to lift his arm on his own until all the stitches are out, so he hasn't been able to really get a sense of how much scar tissue has built up in there."
“Still not going to be able to lift it on his own. Tomorrow's only two weeks after surgery. Usually takes closer to three.” Gibbs rolled the shoulder Ari had put a bullet through. "Your impatience rubbing off on him, too?"

"Not mine," Tony said. "He's still worried that Vance is going to use this as an excuse to move him to CyberCrimes." Tony looked around, then lowered his voice. "The sooner he has an estimated return date, the sooner he can do the paperwork and force Vance to approve it or tell him about a planned reassignment so he can fight it."

He looked at Gibbs, expecting to see approval in the team leader's eyes. Instead, he saw uncertainty.

"Boss?"

-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-

As Tony mentioned Tim's worries about being transferred, Gibbs remembered his comment to Vance that this might come up. In a week, Tony had mentioned it twice. As Tony spoke, Gibbs wondered if he should just tell Tony that Vance had a master plan. But he hesitated too long, and Tony noticed.

"Boss?"

"Not letting Vance move him," Gibbs said. "Not letting any of you go — unless you want to. He wants to stay, he's staying." He waited for Tony's response, wondering if he would finally say something.

"I'll tell him, Boss." Tony shifted in his chair. "How long does it take Vance to brief SecNav, anyway? If the admiral gets wind we're on to this — which he will as soon as he knows we've got Snow — he's going to run."

Gibbs frowned and forced his attention back to the case. "Since when does politics cooperate with catching the dirtbags?" He made himself walk back to his desk, mentally head slapping himself. He needed to keep his head in the game. Had to pick up the dirtbag.

He was glad Vance chose that moment to call his cell phone and derail his train of thought.

"Gear up," Gibbs grabbed his SIG and holster. "SecNav's got the admiral tied up in a meeting at Anacostia. We've got 30 minutes to get there."

Ziva looked at her watch as she and Dwayne walked back into the bullpen. "But Gibbs, with traffic we will not make it."

He tossed her the keys. "That's why you're driving, David."

He smirked at Tony's muttered "Oh, god."

They made it to the conference room at Anacostia with two minutes to spare.

"No breaking down the door, DiNozzo," he said quietly. "The commandant's secretary is going to buzz us in."

Tony nodded. Gibbs looked around to see Ziva and Dwayne at the ready, hands on holsters in case
this didn't go smoothly.

As they walked in behind the secretary, Gibbs pinned the admiral in his chair with a gaze.

"Admiral George Walker?"

At the admiral's nod, Gibbs flashed his badge. "NCIS. You're going to have to come with us."

Walker stood. "Agent...?"

"Gibbs."

"Agent Gibbs, do you know who I am?"

"You're the leader of a black market ring funneling money to the Taliban," Gibbs said, lips quirking up as Walker turned white.

"Don't forget the man who ordered Capt. Jessica Snow to kill Seaman Cobb for blowing the whistle on said ring," Tony said, his voice cold.

"David, Wilson, cuff him," Gibbs said.

"Is that really necessary?" Walker said. "I'll come quietly. Just don't make a scene."

Gibbs wasn't fooled by the conciliatory tone. Walker was just trying to keep this low-key, thinking he could skate later.

"SecNav said we could use whatever means necessary to bring you in." He hadn't thought the man could get any whiter, but he did.

Three hours later, when he still hadn't cracked Walker in interrogation, he was beginning to wonder if he was going to have to pull Vance in for a round of bad cop, worse cop. He stalked out, leaving Walker to cool his heels in interrogation. Ziva was waiting for him in the hallway.

"Snow has given Tony and Dwayne a full confession," she said. "Dwayne has better skills in interrogation than I would have expected."

"Need 'em working cold cases," Gibbs said. "People who think they've gotten away with it don't give themselves up that easy." He thought for a second. "Send them in with Walker. I haven't cracked the guy yet. Let's let them have at him."

Ziva nodded. "Also, Abby has some additional evidence for you."

Gibbs nodded. He headed for the Caf-Pow machine for his usual thank-you for Abby. When he got to the lab, he could hear Abby and Jimmy talking. As soon as he heard Tim's name, he paused outside the door to see if he could learn anything.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I hope you all enjoy this chapter — it's the longest so far: almost 10,000 words!

Somebody asked this last chapter, and I thought it was worth answering for everybody. If you're reading this primarily for Tim/Tony and are tempted to skim over the Jimmy/Abby sections, please know that in this hugely complicated tale I'm weaving, there are lots of interlocking bits. Skip or skim parts that don't seem T2-ish enough now, and down the line your reaction at a key point is likely to be more "what the ^&**($)%^ is she smoking?" instead of "OMG, I should have totally seen that coming." ;) And on that note, thanks to Kyrie for editing and harempriestess for her comments. Oh, and if you're looking for a soundtrack to this chapter, it's Listen To Your Heart, Edmee's Unplugged Vocal Edit. Especially the last two scenes. ;)

Jimmy took a deep breath as he headed up to Abby's lab. Ducky hadn't been at Tim and Tony's last week to see him kiss Abby's cheek, so he couldn't know Jimmy hadn't been able to get it out of his mind since then. He'd been interested in her since he first started working at NCIS, but first she had been seeing Tim and then he didn't think she would actually be interested in him.

The past couple of weeks had just made it harder on Jimmy. With Tim in the hospital and Tony spending as much time with him as possible, Jimmy had been the one nearby when Abby needed a hug. And as the respective best friends of the two guys, they had been over to the house, together and separately, several times to help the guys out.

He got off the elevator and reminded himself that Abby just thought of him as a friend, and even if she was interested, she'd just broken up with Keith. So when he walked into the lab, he was mostly back to normal.

Her usual music blasted from the speakers.

"Abby!" Jimmy tried to make himself heard over Brain Matter, but Abby was engrossed in her computers. He walked closer and tapped her on the shoulder.

"Abby."

She jerked around, then reached for the remote to turn the music down.

"Hey, Jimmy. What's that?" She pointed to the specimen jar in his hand.

"Tissue samples from the dead petty officer Balboa's team is investigating," he said. "Dr. Mallard sent them up and wondered if you'd had any luck with the stomach contents on the lance corporal Cassie's team is investigating."

"You guys are going to start running out of tables down there," Abby said, signing for the jar and taking it over to Major Mass Spec. "Still working on the GI analysis, but it should be done soon. I'm trying to get out of here on time tonight."

Jimmy felt a sinking sensation in his gut. Maybe Abby had moved on quicker than he thought.
"Big plans?" He was proud he managed to keep his tone even.

"Yoga class, if I can manage it," she said, turning to face him. "There's an advanced class tonight I want to try. I usually go to the one on Wednesdays, but Tony hasn't been in a couple of weeks, so I suggested he come with me to one of the beginner classes tomorrow night if Tim's mom is willing to stick around that late."

"She doesn't need to stay," Jimmy said. "I can go over, as long as Tim doesn't mind if I study."

"He won't mind," Abby said. "He'll probably sleep."

Jimmy nodded and decided to take a chance. "Do you want me to pick you up?"

Abby smiled. "Jimmy, that would be so sweet. You know my baby doesn't like going out in this weather."

Jimmy smiled back. Sure, she didn't think it was a date, but it was progress, of a sort. "I thought Major Mass Spec and his buddies were your babies."

"My car's my baby too!" Abby spread her hands to encompass all the machinery in her lab. "I have many babies." She stopped. "Well, not really. I mean, don't get me wrong, Major Mass Spec and the rest of the gang are like kids to me, but they're not really my babies." Her expressive mouth briefly dipped into a frown. "Although at the rate I'm going, they're the only babies I'll get."

Jimmy was surprised — Abby usually was the wild and crazy one. It seemed really out of character for her to be talking about having kids of her own. But then he thought back to the fall and her renewed interest in Tim, before she had found out he and Tony were a couple. "Is that why you were interested in Tim a few months ago?"

"No!" Abby glared at him, before her face softened. "I mean, not really." She sighed. "We were good together when we dated before, I just wasn't ready for serious and he was. I'd always figured in the back of my mind that he'd be there when I was ready for serious and forever. And after seeing how quickly things could change, after Ziva almost died, I realized I couldn't just keep putting things off." She frowned. "Wait, you knew I was interested in Tim?"

Jimmy pressed his lips together so he wouldn't smile. "Um, yeah." He rubbed the back of his neck. "You see, I showed up for game night right after you guys had finished talking, and Tony told me what had happened so I wouldn't stick my foot in my mouth. I mean, I knew you were interested in him before then, and that you didn't know they were together, but, um, yeah. I'm going to stop talking now."

"Good idea, Jimmy," she said. Then she sighed. "You know, this would be easier if I was a guy."

Jimmy could feel his forehead wrinkling as he tried to puzzle through that. He finally gave up. "You lost me."

"You guys have it easy — you don't need to have kids by a certain age. Take Tony. He's a year older than me, and he doesn't have to worry about having kids in the next year or two or risk not having them."

"Um, Abby, you do realize Tony and Tim can't actually have kids. I mean they can adopt, but they can't, you know..." He stammered to a halt.

"Oh, I know, Jimmy." She pulled him into a quick hug, then released him. "Don't get me wrong, it would be so cool, like a total science project to see if Timmy could knock Tony up. Just think of all
the implications."

Jimmy wasn't sure exactly which of the several ideas spinning around his brain he actually wanted to pursue — if any. "What do you mean, Tony..."

"Oh, totally," Abby said. "I knew that from the beginning." She turned back to her microscope. "I hope they are having kids. Can you imagine how cool it would be to have our first baby in the family? Tim would make a great dad."

"What about Tony?" Jimmy said.

"Tony would learn," Abby replied as she adjusted the focus. "You should totally ask Timmy tomorrow night if they're thinking about it."

"What? No!" Jimmy made a face. "Abby, that's their business, not ours."

"But-"

"Abby, think about it. You just said you had been thinking about kids. Say you were with somebody and you were talking with them about having kids. Would you really go around announcing 'Hey, we're trying to make a baby lab bat'? And say you got serious about a guy. How would you feel if Ziva or Tony asked you if you were going to have kids?"

"I totally would tell Ziva about something like that," Abby said. "That's complete girl talk."

"OK, so not Ziva." Jimmy thought for a second. "What about Ducky or Gibbs? Or Vance?"

Abby thought about it for a second. "You might have a point there, Jimmy," she said. "That's a little... hinky. I mean, that would be like telling my dad about my sex life."

-Ducky studied the x-rays of the dead lance corporal on the light box. The pattern of cracks on the ribs reminded him of something, but he couldn't place what it was. He frowned, sorting through his years of memories, but hadn't yet found it when young Jimmy returned from his foray into Abigail's lab.

"What did you find, Dr. Mallard?" he asked as he walked up.

Ducky decided to answer his question with a question and test his young apprentice at the same time. "What do you make of these cracks?" He pointed them out on the x-ray.

"That's odd," Jimmy said. "It almost looks as though he was struck, each blow just a few inches to the side of the previous. Very methodical."

"Of course," Ducky said. "I knew it reminded me of something. One summer during my medical studies, I was spending the holiday in Manchester working with a physician who provided medical care at several of the factories there. Many of workers were treated quite dreadfully, horrid working conditions." He shook his head at the memory. "This particular day, we were called out after a worker got his arm stuck in one of the machines. The owner had been reluctant to spend money on what he termed 'fripperies' such as safety guards. By the time his co-workers extricated him, the man's arm had been pounded by a metal bar several times, each time pulling him further into the machine. The pattern of cracks in his radius and ulna was quite similar to this."

He looked up to see Jimmy looking at him, the familiar expression of puzzlement on his face. "So
"a machine killed the lance corporal?"

Ducky shook his head. "Oh, I quite doubt it. But whatever caused these breaks in his ribs was methodical, working its way across the body. It could have been a machine, but I suspect our deadly weapon was wielded by a human."

Jimmy nodded. "That would rule out something accidental, or spur-of-the-moment, then," he said. "If you're striking out in the heat of passion, you aren't going to take the time to precisely space your blows."

"Correct, Mr. Palmer. Cassie will be quite interested in this." He walked to his computer to send an e-mail to the Pentagon team leader.

"Did Abigail say how long it would be before she had results?" he asked as he typed.

Jimmy shook his head. "She said she wanted to get out of here on time tonight, but that doesn't narrow it down much." He hesitated. "Dr. Mallard, can I ask you a question?"

"Of course," Ducky replied. He noted the pink tips of his assistant's ears and suspected he knew what was coming.

"What do you think of Gibbs' rules?"

Ducky raised one eyebrow. "While I have thoughts on many of Jethro's rules, perhaps you should tell me which one in particular you have in mind, else he might walk in as we are discussing it."

Jimmy shook his head. "He was in Abby's lab when I left, and I think he wanted to talk to her about more than just a case, so he'll probably be there for a while."

"The rule, Mr. Palmer?"

Jimmy flushed pink, so Ducky wasn't surprised when he said "Rule 12."

"Ah, that rule." He stifled a smile, not wanting Jimmy to think he was laughing at him. "Yes, that rule has a rather interesting past. You know, of course, that Jethro himself has broken Rule 12. And he has obviously allowed exceptions in the past, as Timothy has dated both Abigail and Anthony."

"But..." Jimmy paused and chewed his lower lip. "Abby and Tony are his favorites, and he trusts Tim with them. Would he..."

As Jimmy's voice trailed off, the pink tint of his skin spread down his neck.

"Would he trust you with Abby?" Ducky kept his voice quiet, wanting to encourage the young man.

Jimmy just nodded. "I know he never said anything about me and... and Michelle, even after we found out she was the mole. And I wasn't really part of the team then, not the way I am now. But Michelle was a lawyer, and he doesn't think much of lawyers. He thinks the world of Abby."

Ducky raised one eyebrow. "Have you mentioned to Abigail that you are interested in breaking Rule 12 with her?"

Jimmy shook his head. "Tim and Tony have been encouraging me — Tony even tricked her into letting me kiss her cheek the other day — and we've been spending a lot more time together lately, but I'm not sure if she's interested, or if she's just being Abby. It's hard to tell sometimes."
Ducky chuckled. "Yes, I can quite believe that. So you are debating if it is worth the risk of suggesting you two-" As the doors hissed open, he stopped. "Good morning, Jethro. Do you have a dead body for us?"

Gibbs shook his head, and Ducky could tell he wanted to talk. "Mr. Palmer, why don't you go wait in the lab for those test results. I myself have to leave on time tonight, so that I might accompany Timothy to physical therapy and assess his progress, so the sooner Abigail gets those results, the better."

Jimmy nodded and left, the back of his neck still a bright pink.

Once the doors had closed behind him, Jethro spoke. "You playing matchmaker, Duck?"

Ducky shrugged. "Merely testing to see if repeated exposure either cools young Mr. Palmer's interest or increases Abigail's. They have been spending quite a lot of time together, and she seems to be relying on him more and more these days."

"Yeah, Duck, I know." Gibbs sighed. "Heard them talking in the lab earlier."

Ducky raised an eyebrow. "And the topic of this discussion?"

"Kids." Gibbs boosted himself up on the one free autopsy table. "Having them."

"Abigail and Jimmy?" Ducky frowned. "Mr. Palmer had given me to understand he had not yet asked her out, nor had he decided if he would."

Gibbs sighed. "Not their kids." He paused. "Well, Abs was talking about wanting kids and how she can't wait much longer. She realized she took McGee for granted, assumed he'd be waiting when she was ready to settle down. Sounds like she's decided she wants something different now."

"Are you worried you're going to lose your forensic scientist?" Ducky was having trouble following Gibbs, which was a rare occurrence indeed. The team leader might not say much, but as many years as they had been friends, Ducky could almost always tell what was on his mind. And yet this was the second time... "Jethro, are you afraid the children will not want you to be Grandpa Gibbs?"

Gibbs raised one eyebrow. "You taking up mind-reading now, Duck?"

Ducky smiled. "Au contraire, my dear Jethro. I just investigate in my own manner." He paused. "What I don't understand is what put such a thought into your mind."

As Gibbs started telling him about what Vance had overheard, Ducky connected the dots. Before he could say anything, Gibbs told him why he'd come down.

"Abby and Jimmy were talking about the guys and kids. She wanted Jimmy to ask them if they were having kids, and he was explaining why that was none of their business." He sighed. "He was right, it isn't. Shannon and I didn't tell our families we were trying to have kids until she was a few months along with Kelly." He sighed, and Ducky could see the grief that entered his eyes anytime he thought of his long-lost family. "But Sean and Eileen are moving down here — next door to me, actually — and from some things they said and didn't say Saturday when they came by, I think the guys have talked to them about it."

Ducky nodded, understanding the real problem. "And you wonder why they told one set of parents, but not the other?"
"You know me too well, Duck." Gibbs dropped off the table and started pacing. "They're both worried about Tim getting booted to CyberCrimes, and meanwhile Vance has this whole plan mapped out to keep them both doing what they want and have one of them able to get home to their kids. But Vance wants us to wait for them to approach us, and they haven't said anything." He ran a hand through his hair. "If they say something to me, Vance will tell them about the plan, but they haven't."

Ducky stepped in front of him, forcing Jethro to stop pacing. "Perhaps that is the answer there," he said. At the puzzled look on his friend's face, Ducky tried to explain. "You are a parent to them, especially Tony, but you are also their boss, and one who has fought to keep the team together against great odds. While you know that there is this master plan, they do not, and I wager they are not sure how you will react."

When Jethro didn't say anything, Ducky continued. "We both know Timothy is worried about being cleared to return to field duty. I rather suspect the boys are waiting on that information before deciding what they want to do, and they do not want to inform you of their plans until they make some decisions." He saw the look Jethro always got as he was putting puzzle pieces together. "Sean and Eileen don't need to know those details, so there is no reason not to tell them. And as they are moving down here, I imagine the topic came up during that discussion. Indeed, I would consider it an excellent sign that they are moving to your neighborhood. To me, that rather suggests the entire family expects you to remain an integral part of it long into the future." He smiled. "Or at least until you run off to Mexico again."

"Not going to-" Gibbs rolled his eyes. "Nice try, Duck. You made your point. I'm jumping to conclusions, and in a way that I'd have their heads for if they tried it during a case."

Ducky just smiled at him. "Jethro, go work on your case. Put this out of your mind. Let the boys handle this in their own way."

Gibbs just nodded and strode out.

-Ziva rolled her shoulders as she paused from filling out the copious paperwork for the case. Arresting an admiral for funding an unsanctioned op in Afghanistan generated far more than the usual amount. And she had helped Dwayne several times with his reports as he tried to describe the research he and Vance had done last night. She opened her e-mail program to find a dozen new messages. After reading the one personal one, smiling, and making a note on her calendar, she looked at the others. Several were junk mail or interoffice memos that she had little use for. McGee always... She paused and realized McGee wasn't here to read the e-mail and fill the rest of them in on anything important. Ziva frowned and went into her deleted e-mails to make sure there was nothing important. She read through them, pausing a few times to decipher the formal language that seemed designed to confuse rather than explain. She'd thought her English had been steadily improving since her return from Somalia, but a few lines in this baffled her.

Still, she did not see anything that was important for her to know, unless she suddenly decided to take up striking the vending machines as Tony did. She thought the memo warning of a video camera installed by the machines was probably designed to stop Tony from cheating the machine out of his favorite chocolate bar.

She would have to mention it to McGee the next time she saw him, as that was one of Tony's habits that never failed to make him roll his eyes. Not for the first time, she smiled at the idea of her two
partners together. They were so different from each other, yet they fit. Perhaps it was something about McGee. He and Abby were the least likely couple she could think of. When she had first learned they were together while researching the team as Ari's control officer, she had not believed it. And yet, over the years she had come to wonder how anybody could not see them together. They were oddly suited.

And again with Tony, it seemed an unlikely pairing. Now she could no more imagine them not together than she could imagine either of them paired with, well, Gibbs. McGee balanced Tony, gave him the anchor he struggled to find on his own. Not for the first time, Ziva wished she had been able to dig up more information on Tony's family during her research for Ari. She knew all was not right in the DiNozzo household when Tony was growing up, but she only had odd comments from Tony on which to base that conclusion. She wished she could meet Tony's father, ask him why he treated Tony so poorly. Eli she understood, on some basic level. He placed Israel's safety and security above all else, even his family. She did not agree; instead she had chosen a father who would always put his family first, who had learned that lesson in a way nobody should have to.

Gibbs was one of the most dedicated agents she had ever met. Some would say obsessive. But if he had to choose between his job and protecting his family, he would choose his family every time. She knew now that Ari had signed his death warrant the moment he had shot Gerald in his first encounter with Gibbs' team. The team now was very different from what it had been back then: Gerald was gone, replaced by Jimmy. McGee had rounded out the team to its full complement. Kate was dead, and she now filled that place on the team. Two directors had come and gone, and now Vance sat in that chair. For the moment, Dwayne was a part of the team. One day Ducky would retire. Gibbs... Well, she thought Gibbs would be an NCIS agent until the day he died, most likely in the line of duty. It was a risk they took every day. Tony would be there, always. As would Abby. They were the most consistent, despite being two of the most unpredictable team members.

She sighed, then jerked back as Gibbs stood in front of her desk. "Something boring you, probie?"

He smirked.

"It is this... this paperwork," Ziva said. "I have experienced torture sessions that were not this painful." She looked at the file on her computer. "I have been at this for two hours already, and I am only on page 6 of 77. Some of my forms have forms."

Gibbs nodded. "Go on, get lunch for everybody. Be back in 30."

Ziva nodded and headed out, stopping by Abby's lab to see if she wanted to go with her. They had not had a chance to talk in ages.

"Sure!" Abby punched a few buttons on her computer. "These tests won't be done for at least an hour, and Sarah is stopping by to see Timmy this afternoon." She grabbed her cape and followed Ziva out. "So how did you get out of Bossman's clutches?"

"I compared paperwork to Mossad torture tactics," Ziva said as they got in her car.

"Ugh," Abby said. "But that doesn't explain why you're barely hiding a smile."

Ziva shook her head and thought back to the e-mail. "Damon is back in town."

Abby turned to look at her. "Damon? I thought he was in Ohio."

"His friend's wife and daughter have moved on. She is engaged and planning to be married this spring. The only reason he had gone out there was to honor his promise to his friend to look out for
them." She allowed the smile to fill her face. "He didn't even have time to find a job there, so he decided to return."

"Really?" Abby said. "You should... Never mind."

"Abby?"

"I was going to say you should bring him to the next game night, once Tim can stay awake long enough to not face-plant on the board, but I forgot Tony's still not a big fan of his." She frowned. "I mean, I get it. I didn't like him at first either, because he hurt you guys. He hurt your face and broke Tony's nose and dislocated Timmy's shoulder, and he was really seriously scary. But then he saved Layla and Amira and you guys when Col. Bell's men were after you, and you guys worked together to catch the man who killed his friend. And if that lawyer Gibbs and Tony linked to Col. Bell shows up again like she did in the jet pack case, he might be a good guy to have around, especially since Timmy's not really up for a fight right now. But Tony... Tony still hasn't forgiven him for the broken nose, I don't think."

When Abby paused to breathe, Ziva put out her hand to stop the flow of words. "Abby, Abby, please," she said. "When Damon left for Ohio, Tony gave him the name of a fraternity brother to help him find a job. It is true, Damon is not somebody Tony is close to. But I think in time he will come to accept him." She paused. "I was thinking... Damon and I are meeting tonight for coffee near campus, just to catch up. Maybe I will see if he wants to meet all of us for lunch one day next week."

Abby nodded. "Maybe Timmy can even come. Jimmy or I could go pick him up if the day doesn't get too crazy. By then, he'll probably want to get out of the house a bit."

Ziva smiled and asked the question she had wondered about since she had seen Abby snuggled into Jimmy at the hospital two weeks ago, his face the picture of bliss. "You and Jimmy seem to be spending a lot more time together," she said. "Are you...?" She let it trail off to see how Abby would react.

"Are we what?" Abby wrinkled up her forehead, her expressive face telegraphing puzzlement. "Oh, no. We're not." She paused. "But you're the second person who's said something about that. Am I... Do I seem like I'm leading Jimmy on? Because I don't mean to, but everybody saying something makes me wonder. Because I know he's had a little bit of a crush on me since he got here, and I never thought much about it before, but..." This time it was Abby's turn to trail off.

"You did not seem to mind when he kissed you last week," Ziva said, allowing just the hint of a smile to curve her lips.

"Ziva, that wasn't a real kiss," Abby said. "Gibbs kisses me like that all the time, and he doesn't mean anything by it. I mean, not like you're talking about."

Before Ziva could reply, they had arrived at the take-out place, and she had to let the conversation drop for the time being. While Abby ordered lunch for her, Ducky, and Jimmy, Ziva took out her phone and sent a quick text to Damon. Then it was her turn to order for the rest of the team. As they walked over to the pick-up area, Ziva's phone buzzed, and she looked to see a reply to her text.

Ziva held off until they were back in the car, talking about the yoga classes Abby had been taking and her own martial arts classes. As she piloted the car toward the Navy Yard, she brought the subject back to her meeting with Damon tonight. "Abby, about tonight. Do you have any plans?"

"If I can get out in time, there's a 5:30 yoga class I want to try," she said. "Why?"
"I was just thinking. I do not want Damon to think this is a date. I do not think he does, but we have flirted in the past." She sighed, forcing herself to confess a little information she had not previously shared with anybody. "I am... After Somalia, I am not sure I am ready to date again. Every other time Damon and I have see each other, it was boats passing in the night."

"Ships, Ziva," Abby said, placing a hand on her shoulder and rubbing small circles.

"Yes, ships." She mentally filed it away. "Now that he is back and here to stay, we will be seeing each other regularly. I do not want to rule something out, but tonight... A coffee shop is not the place to have the type of discussion we would need to have, and I do not want to lead him on. I know how I react around him, and I am afraid I would find myself acting as though I am ready when I know I am not." She sighed. It was mostly the truth, even if she was not being entirely forthright with Abby. "I was going to ask you if you wanted to come along, but you are busy. Maybe I can ask Jimmy, though he has not met Damon before. And Tony is obviously busy, as is McGee."

"I know!" Abby said. "My class is over at 7. Why don't we see if Jimmy will go, and I'll meet you guys there? That way you won't be alone with Damon until I get there, and it won't be weird for Jimmy to be there if I'm coming too. It's almost like the team getting together with him, except that Tony and Tim aren't there."

Ziva smiled. "Thank you, Abby. That would be a good solution. I will go ask Jimmy when I deliver lunch to him and Ducky."

Abby shook her head. "No, let me," she said. Her face flushed a bit. "I want to ask him. I... Maybe I am a little interested, and I can kind of see if he might be interested, if this is a good idea, without going all the way on a real date. Because I don't want to ask him out and then find out it's a bad idea, because that would be awkward. That's why Gibbs has Rule 12, because those things are always awkward."

Ziva smiled. She had thought Abby was returning Jimmy's interest a bit, but this had given her the perfect opportunity to confirm it. She could not wait for tonight.

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Later that afternoon, Abby walked into Autopsy, Ziva's question still circling her brain. Ducky and Jimmy were bent over a body on the table farthest from the doors and were so engrossed in what they were doing they hadn't heard the doors hiss open. She stepped closer, careful to keep her steps quiet, and watched the two work. She was surprised to see that Jimmy seemed to be leading the way and Ducky was assisting. She was so used to it being the other way around, it hadn't occurred to her that it would ever change. Ducky had lowered the lights in the rest of the room, so she was back in the shadows a bit, and she decided to just watch for a minute. She hadn't said anything to Jimmy when she delivered lunch earlier, wanting to take some time to think. Ziva wasn't the first person to comment on her and Jimmy, and she wondered if this was another one of those times she was so blinded by having a conclusion in mind that she had overlooked evidence.

She'd always considered Jimmy kind of like her younger brother: goofy, and impossibly innocent. Except that he'd been on the team for years now, and you could only be so innocent when you worked with dead bodies every day. She'd seen another side of him, too, the past two weeks. He'd been there for her at Bethesda when she'd needed somebody to hold while waiting for news that Tim was going to wake up and be OK. And he'd been there for the guys since they'd been dug out from the hospital. He wasn't a kid anymore, hadn't been for a while. And watching him do an autopsy, she realized he was no more a kid than McGee or Ziva or her or Tony. He was a man, and a good one. He was loyal to his friends, and if he was occasionally a little too excited that
somebody had died, well, she just considered that a sign of passion for his work. She couldn't fault that, not when it was what drove her and everybody else on Team Gibbs.

So if she liked him as a friend and respected him as a person, the only real question was if she was attracted to him as a man. And watching him, his face serious as he puzzled over something he had found, she thought maybe she was.

Just then he straightened up and looked over at her. "Abby."

"Hey, Duckman, Jimmy," Abby said, bouncing over. "Didn't want to interrupt. I've got a question for Jimmy, but it's not work-related."

"I have to go fill Agent Balboa in on Mr. Palmer's findings, so take all the time you need, Abigail," Ducky said. He smiled at her and winked, and Abby began to think maybe she really was the last one to figure this out. She definitely needed to start using her forensics skills on her personal life.

"What's up, Abby?" Jimmy asked, lifting the plastic shield from his face.

"Well, it's like this," she said, explaining Ziva's request. "So would you? I know you've got a lot of studying to do, so if you can't, I understand, but..." She decided to stick her neck out. "I'd really like it if you were there."

"You... you would?" Jimmy looked stunned, and she couldn't help but smile at how cute he was when he was befuddled. But she didn't say that, knowing it would just embarrass him. "I would. It'll be nice to hang out and not have it be because we're checking on Timmy or helping Tony or waiting for news from doctors. Just relaxing together for once."

He swallowed and nodded, but Abby could tell from the tips of his ears that he wanted it to be more than just friends, too. "I wish I could be there the whole time, but if I didn't have yoga class, Ziva probably wouldn't have thought of inviting you, so I guess I'm glad. You'll save room for me?"

"Me? Save...?"

"At the table," she said, letting a wicked grin flit across her face. He really was cute when he got flustered. "You know how crowded it can get at coffee shops, and this one's right near campus, so I'm sure it will be busy. Save me a spot?"

He nodded, and Abby decided she'd better pull back before somebody walked in and caught her flirting. Tim had already warned her once to be careful with Jimmy, and she had every intention of it, but she didn't need more lectures on the subject.

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When Ziva arrived at the coffee shop, Jimmy and Damon were both standing inside the door. She wondered why they were not sitting at a table and was about to ask when they each greeted her and then turned to face each other.

"Wait, you're Damon?" Jimmy said.

"And you must be Jimmy," Damon replied.

"Oh, I am sorry," Ziva said. "I did not realize you two had not met."

Jimmy shook his head. "I had exams the week you guys caught the hijacking case," he reminded
"It's OK," Damon said. "I just got here, and I think you did, too. We weren't standing around for long."

"Yes, enough standing around," Ziva said. "Let us get something to drink and find a table."

"It's filling up quick," Damon said. "Tell me what you both want and I'll get the drinks, then you can find a place to sit."

"Are you sure?" Ziva asked.

Damon nodded. "Unless either of you wants something really complicated, then you'll have to get your own because I won't remember it."

Ziva shook her head. "I would just like a cup of Earl Gray tea," she said.

"That I can remember," Damon said, smiling. His hair was still short, like the last time she had seen him, and his jeans and navy sweater looked good on him. She smiled and looked away, not wanting to be caught staring. She had meant what she'd said to Abby earlier about not wanting to lead him on.

"Jimmy, how about you?"

"Just plain coffee is fine," he said. "Just have them leave a little room for cream in it."

Damon nodded and headed to the register.

"So," Jimmy said. "Do you see a free table?"

Ziva scanned the room. "It appears this is a popular place to study," she said. Spying a possibility, she pointed to the corner. "What about there?"

He nodded, and she led the way to the overstuffed leather couch and chairs. She took one chair, waving away Jimmy's offer for her to take the couch. "I would... prefer the chair," she said.

"Why... Oh, right." He nodded. "Abby can sit with me on the couch."

"Toda."

He smiled and relaxed back on the couch, shedding his coat and other winter gear. "This is a nice place."

She nodded. "I had been coming here for several weeks before I discovered Sarah works here. I usually stop by in the morning before work, and she works evenings."

"That's right, Waverley's not far from here," he said.

Before she could reply, Damon walked up, two mugs in one hand and one in the other. He handed the one to Jimmy. "Here's your coffee." She took the proffered tea as Jimmy went to doctor the coffee to his standards.

"It's nice to see you again, Ziva," Damon said as he settled into the other chair. "Good to be back in DC, too."

She smiled as she sipped her tea. "You are looking good, Damon. Did going to Ohio help?"
He shrugged. "I don't feel as responsible for Heatherton's wife and daughter," he said. "They'd split up after he returned stateside, so she'd moved on, gotten engaged. Wasn't really a place for me there. At least I know folks in DC." He paused. "I have to thank Tony for giving me the name of his frat buddy, though. Mike was a good guy."

Ziva nodded. "Tony is a good guy, too, though he tries to hide it." She smiled. "Abby and I were thinking maybe you could meet us all for lunch one day. She or Jimmy could even get McGee so he could get out of the house."

"Wait, what am I doing?" Jimmy settled back on the couch, his coffee now a dark tan instead of black.

"Abby and I were thinking Damon could meet us all for lunch one day, and she said one of you two could probably go get McGee."

Jimmy nodded. "Sure. He's already getting pretty bored at home all day, even sleeping half the time. He's ready for a change of scenery."

"What happened to McGee?" Damon said.

Ziva and Jimmy started filling him in, pausing only when Damon got lost.

"So Tim and Tony were living together the last time I worked with you guys?" Damon shook his head. "How did I not pick up on that?"

"They are among the best I have seen at separating work and personal," Ziva said. "They were dating for several months before any of us suspected anything."

Before she could say more, Jimmy waved toward the door, and Ziva looked over her shoulder to see that Abby had entered. A few minutes later, she settled down on the couch, slipping her boots off so she could tuck her feet under her, her shoulder touching Jimmy's. Ziva managed not to smile as she introduced Abby and Damon.

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Abby walked in the coffee shop and scanned the room, finally seeing Jimmy wave to her from the cozy sitting area in the corner. She waved back and felt a little bubble of happiness when she realized Ziva and Damon had chairs, so she would be sitting on the couch with Jimmy. Yeah, definitely needed to start doing forensics on her personal life. How had she not realized she had a thing for him until now?

She walked up to the counter and scanned the menu, finally deciding on a fruity, red tea. It wouldn't have the punch of Caf-Pow, but it would have some of the taste. She was so relaxed from yoga, she wasn't really sure she wanted to wind herself up again anyway.

She walked over to the pickup window and smiled when she saw Sarah there.

"Hey," she said. "How's it going?"

"Not bad for a weeknight," Sarah said. "Busy enough to not be boring, but not so crazy that I'm pulling my hair out." She looked around. "Meeting somebody? This isn't your neighborhood."

"Didn't you see Ziva and Jimmy?" she asked. "We're meeting a friend of Ziva's who just moved back to town, a former Marine we met on a case a couple of years ago."
Sarah shook her head. "I must have missed them somehow." She looked at the clock on the wall. "I get off in a bit, and Josh is coming by to meet me. We'll stop by if you're still here."

"Great!" Abby took her tea. "I'd hug you, but you know, there's the whole counter in the way. But you're getting one later."

Sarah just laughed as Abby headed over to the others.

Abby put her giant tea mug down on the coffee table before slipping off her clunky boots and tucking her feet under her. She picked a spot close to Jimmy, her knees touching his leg, their shoulders brushing. "Hey, guys," she said. "What did I miss?"

"We were just catching Damon up on Tim and Tony," Jimmy said, turning to look at her. "I didn't think you drank anything other than Caf-Pow."

She smiled. "They don't have Caf-Pow here. Besides yoga class mellowed me out — I've never taken this instructor's class, and he's really good at the relaxation/meditation part. I figured I'd actually stay mellow for a while."

Jimmy and Ziva laughed, while Damon just looked confused.

"I'm usually totally wired on caffeine," Abby explained.

"The guys in the mailroom call her Energizer Abby," Jimmy said. "She's the only person I know who can bounce in six-inch platforms."

"Hey!" Abby said. "I don't bounce."

"You bounce," Ziva said. "I have seen it."

"Well, OK, so I bounce. But Gibbs is totally the enabler with all the Caf-Pows he brings me." She sipped her tea, feeling the warmth flow through her body. "This is great. It's freezing outside — must have dropped 15 degrees since I went to class."

"Oh, great," Jimmy said. "I walked so I wouldn't lose the parking space I found in front of my building."

"Is your apartment far?" Ziva asked. "I did not realized we lived near each other."

"We don't." Jimmy sighed. "I live almost a mile in the other direction, but I figured it was OK walking. I didn't expect the temperature to drop any more since the sun was down."

"I'll give you a ride," Abby said. "Ziva, do you need one too?"

She shook her head. "In the time it would take you to warm up your car, I could be home," she said. "It is only two blocks."

"I drove, too," Damon said. "I'm staying outside the city because it's cheaper, at least until I find a place and a job."

As the others started talking about job hunting and other things, Abby just settled back into the couch to watch. Jimmy was different here, and she wondered how much was because she was looking at him differently. He wore a sweater and faded jeans, instead of the suits or scrubs she was used to seeing him in at work. As they talked, she realized he didn't stammer. She'd noticed it a few times before, when they were just hanging out. But she was so used to his verbal
backtracking at work that she'd always assumed that was the norm for him. Seeing him quietly
talking with the others had her reconsidering.

He smiled at one of Ziva's mangled idioms, and Abby caught herself staring. He had such a big
smile and a dimple in his cheek, and she had never noticed either before. She hadn't noticed a lot of
things, apparently. He glanced over, and she felt her cheeks turn pink and looked away. Definitely
hadn't noticed, because she never blushed. McGee and Jimmy, sure. All the time. But she never
did, no matter what turn the conversation took. She was usually the one making the others blush.

Before she could get too far into that line of thought, Sarah walked up with a tall, blonde guy. He
wore khakis and a sweater over an untucked button-down.

"Hey, guys," she said.

"Hey, Sarah." Ziva performed introductions. "Sarah, this is my friend Damon. Damon, this is
McGee's younger sister, Sarah. She works here."

"Right, she made our drinks," he said.

"That's why I didn't see you guys before," Sarah said. "I remember because you were juggling three
mugs." She beckoned Josh to come closer. "Josh, this is Ziva, Abby, Jimmy, and Damon."

"The friends of your brother's." Josh said, holding out a hand. "Nice to meet you guys."

"It is nice to meet you as well," Ziva said. "McGee and Tony have mentioned wanting to meet
you."

"Tim and Tony are just being over-protective big brothers," Sarah said, rolling her eyes.

"Yeah, not so sure about meeting the big brother who's a federal agent," Josh said. "Even hurt, he's
probably pretty scary."

Abby saw Ziva put a hand on Damon's arm to keep him from saying anything, but then she started
giggling.

"Sorry, sorry," she said. "Timmy will kill me for saying this, but he's not usually scary." She
giggled again. "Right, Ziva?"

"I am scared when he starts talking computers," Ziva said. "But yes, Abby, you are right. If you
met McGee on the street, you would not realize he was a federal agent."

"Well, it's not like you see me and think scientist, or Jimmy and think medical student, either," 
Abby said. "Although, Damon, I have to say, even without the buzzcut, you definitely look like a
former Marine." She hoped what she was saying gave Damon enough clues to go along with Ziva's
warning.

"That he does," Ziva said. "Just as Tony looks like a former athlete."

"Sounds like you guys are an unusual bunch," Josh said. "It was nice meeting you after hearing
Sarah mention you."

"Nice meeting you, too," Jimmy said.

Abby sighed as they walked away after a round of goodbyes and her promised hug for Sarah.

"OK, I'm missing something," Damon said.
"We do not usually volunteer where we work," Ziva said. "It is not always safe."

Abby nodded. "Josh only knows Timmy's NCIS because he got shot."

"Ziva, what would you have said if he had asked you what you did?" Jimmy said. "Abby and I could mostly tell the truth, and Tony used to be an athlete. But what would you have said?"

"Oh, I would have made something up," Ziva said. "I usually just tell people I work in an office when they ask. It sounds boring enough that they don't usually ask for details."

"That's true enough, I guess," Jimmy said. "Minus, you know, the guns, the martial arts, the investigating..."

Ziva smiled. "It is not what you leave out that usually matters," she said. "Only the details you include register with most people."

Abby finished her tea and set it down on the coffee table, her arm brushing Jimmy's. She felt a tingle and kicked herself yet again. Definitely missed what was right under her nose. He looked over, and she smiled at him, nudging his shoulder with hers. She was rewarded with pink at the tips of his ears.

She spent the rest of the evening wondering if she could suggest they do something after this or if she should just ask him to go out with her on Friday.

"I hate to break things up, guys, but I've got to get going early tomorrow to try finding a job," Damon said, getting up from his chair.

"We, too, have to be to work early," Ziva said. "It is of no consequence."

Abby nodded and started gathering her stuff. "It was good to see you again, Damon," she said. To her surprise, she really meant it. She pulled on her boots and cape, before wrapping the scarf around her neck. As Jimmy bundled up and pulled a wool hat down over his ears, she renewed her offer to give him a ride.

"Are you sure?" Jimmy said. "It's not really on your way home."

"You're giving me a ride tomorrow," Abby said. "Besides, you'll freeze before you get home. The wind chill is down below zero. You really don't want to explain to Ducky why you have frostbite tomorrow."

"No, that wouldn't be good," Jimmy said. "Thanks, Abby." He blushed, the way he had earlier, and Abby couldn't help but smile. He was really cute sometimes, even when he wasn't trying.

Once outside, she led him quickly to the car, not wanting to linger in the freezing weather. She cranked the heater as soon as she turned her baby on, giving the engine a minute to warm up. "Sorry, Jimmy," she said. "She's a little grumpy in weather like this."

"It's OK," he said. "I'd be a lot colder walking."

Jimmy only lived about a mile away, so it wasn't long before they were pulling up by his apartment.

"Do you want to come up for some coffee?" he asked. "I mean, no, that's dumb, we just came from having coffee, why would you want more, especially since it's late and we have to work tomorrow and-"
It had been a long time since she'd had a guy this nervous around her, at least a guy that she actually thought was cute when he was nervous. Most of the guys she met out clubbing overestimated their appeal. Abby interrupted his rambling and stammering. "I'd love to come up. Maybe not coffee though." She smiled, so he would know she really meant it.

"Hot chocolate?"

Abby grinned. "Hot chocolate would be perfect!"

He pushed his glasses up his nose and smiled back at her. She found a place to park, and soon they were headed up to his third-floor apartment.

Once inside, they shed boots, jackets, and the rest of their cold-weather gear by the door. Then he motioned her to the living room, while he disappeared into the small kitchen. "Just make yourself comfortable," he said.

Abby looked around. The room wasn't anything special, some worn furniture that looked as though it was chosen for comfort rather than appearance. A picture of Jimmy and an older woman she figured was his mother sat on the bookcase, along with a few others. She wandered over to look more closely at the pictures, which included one of Jimmy when he was little with a man who had the same curly hair — both on bikes in the street. Jimmy's still had training wheels and was a little big for him, but he grinned over the handlebars, his dimple evident in one chubby cheek. Tucked in a corner of the frame was a memorial card from his father's funeral. Looking at the date, Abby realized his dad had probably died not long after this picture had been taken.

She felt her heart melt and had to walk away before she teared up. As she looked out the window, she saw snow start to fall. This was light, just enough to seem wintry — nothing like the swirling snows that had blanketed the city twice in recent days. She smiled and watched it fall.

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Jimmy finished pouring the hot chocolate and pulled out a can of whipped cream he kept on hand, spraying a big pile on top of each mug. He opened his mouth to speak as he walked back into the living room, but stopped when he saw Abby looking out the window. Setting the mugs down on the end table, he walked over to stand behind her. Without her boots, the top of her head only came to his nose.

"Abs?"

"I was just thinking about how my dad taught me the sign for snow one Christmas when I asked what all the white stuff was on the holiday specials," she said, her voice quiet. She fluttered her hands, and Jimmy could almost see snowflakes falling from her fingertips. "I didn't really get it, so he shredded up some paper and shook it out of a cup to fall on the coffee table. Bubba came over and sniffed, and his ears got in the way and swept it all on the floor. It took me an hour to get it all picked up." She giggled. "But I was 18 before I experienced snow for the first time. Dad's paper snow hadn't prepared me for how cold and wet the real stuff was." She shivered at the memory.

Jimmy found himself rubbing his hands along her bare arms below the sleeves of her T-shirt to warm her up.

She leaned back into him a bit, and he slid his hands down to rest over her hands, tugging her closer. She sighed and relaxed back even more. "So now every time it snows, I make a snowman, take a picture, and send it home."
He moved his head to try and look at her. "So that's where you disappeared to when they started shoveling out Bethesda?"

She nodded and looked back at him, her face inches from his. "Couldn't let a storm pass without making a snowman for Daddy." She smiled, and Jimmy found himself leaning in. He let go of her hands and reached up to frame her face. Their lips were about to touch when his watch snagged on one of the spikes on her collar, jerking her head a bit.

"I'm, really, really sorry!" He pulled back, trying to unhook his watchband from the spike, but then the end of her pigtail got tangled up in it, too.

"Jimmy, just stop moving," Abby said. She unbuckled her collar, lifting it away from her neck. He tried to hold still while she untangled her hair. Once she was free and had separated his watchband from her collar, she put it down on the window sill. He started to stammer out an apology, but she put a finger to his lips. "It's OK. Now I don't have to worry about stabbing you with my spikes."

She stretched up on her toes and placed her lips on his. Automatically, his arms slid around her waist, pulling her close as she wrapped her arms around his neck, and he wasn't sure which one of them deepened the kiss. When they finally had to pull apart, they were both breathing heavily, and her lipstick was completely smeared. He opened his mouth to say something, then gave in to his greater need to just kiss her again. Her hands moved down his chest and up under his sweater.

"Whoa!" she said, pulling away. "Jimmy, where have you been hiding these muscles?"

He grinned. "Oh, I've got all sorts of muscles." He reached down and nipped at her neck, then backed her against the sofa.

"Not the couch," she said. "Bed." Her hands were roaming over his skin, sparking sensations. He slipped his hands under her shirt as he walked her back toward the bedroom.

By the time they made it there, they had left a trail of clothes between the living room window and the bed. Jimmy pulled back slightly, fighting the urge to keep kissing her long enough to ask, "Are you sure about this?"
Chapter 9

I'm finally getting back to posting the rest of Life here. If you've been waiting to read it, I apologize for the delay. Real life has been insane for the past several months, so converting this over to here feel down the to-do list. My goal is to get it all posted by next weekend. Then I'll have a new, non-Breathe story from this year's WEE at NFA posting here and at FF through July and August.

Abby didn't answer, just pulled his head down to kiss him again. They dropped to the bed, rolling over until she was stretched over him. Jimmy couldn't believe this was happening, but at the same time it seemed like the next natural step of their relationship since she fell asleep snuggled on his lap at Bethesda. The sensation when she rubbed her body along his brought him back to the present, and he lost the ability to think.

It wasn't until later, as she cuddled against him half-asleep, that he thought back to the first time they had snuggled.

Gibbs had gone to look in on Tim by the time he, Abby, and Ziva returned from their caffeine run. They handed out drinks to Vance and the McGees, who were huddled with Ducky and Brad, talking in low tones. Sarah was staring out the window, and Ziva moved to speak to her. Jimmy was at loose ends as to what to do with himself, until he saw Abby sitting on the floor cupping her tea in both hands. He walked over and slid down the wall next to her.

"So what's with the tea?" he asked, not commenting on the way her hands trembled around the paper cup.

She took a sip and leaned against him, so he wrapped his free arm around her shoulders. The rest of her body trembled like her hands. "They didn't have Caf-Pow, and if I drink coffee, I'll get too wired," she said. "I know I can't go see Timmy again until tomorrow, and I really should try to sleep. Gibbs knows he'd better wake me up if something happens, because otherwise I'll kill-" Her voice broke. "Kill him if he doesn't, but I can't seem to stop shaking."

Jimmy set his coffee on a nearby table and wrapped both arms around her. "Tim's going to be OK, Abs. He's not going to be out in the field for a while, but Dr. Mallard and Brad both said he's going to be OK. You helped too, giving blood." He rubbed one hand in long strokes down her back, hoping it would soothe her just the way it had him when his aunt had done it during those long, unbearable days right after his dad died. He could still feel her trembling. "Abby, let it go. I've got you."

She shook her head and buried it against his chest, mumbling.

"Abby?" He pulled back a bit so he could see her face. Tonight was one of the few times he'd seen her with no makeup. She'd washed it off after crying in the blood donation room and had never bothered putting it back on.

"Gibbs said I couldn't," she whispered.
Jimmy looked up to see that the team leader had returned and was sitting with Tim's parents and the other "adults" as he thought of them. He bent down close to her ear. "Gibbs said you couldn't what?"

"Cry," she said, her breath hitching. "When I was giving blood. He said I needed to pull it together for Tony's sake."

Jimmy exhaled. "Abby, that's because Tony was barely holding on himself, hoping Tim would be OK. But he's in with Tim now, and nobody here is going to mind if you cry." He pulled her into his lap so they could more easily hold onto one another. "Come on, let it out. You'll feel better." When she shook her head, he said, "If you want, I can ask Dr. Mallard over here to tell you a story about a time he once..." That got a weak giggle out of her. Then her giggles developed into hiccups, which turned into gentle sobs. He pulled her closer and felt her arms tighten around him the way they did when she squeezed Bert. Finally came the big, heaving sobs, and her body shook with each one. Jimmy caught movement in the corner of his eye and looked up to see Gibbs getting up. But when he shook his head, the team leader nodded and settled back where he was.

Though Jimmy remained aware of the older man's watchful gaze, he was determined to be there for his friend. Abby might never return his affection, but he was resolved that he would show both she and her honorary father he could be more than just Ducky's sidekick and the family's comic relief.

That night, Abby had finally fallen asleep in his lap. Having her wrapped around him had led to thoughts that had been completely inappropriate. And, OK, he was always thinking stuff that was way more inappropriate upon reflection than it seemed to him when it first popped in his mind, but even he didn't have to examine the situation to realize that getting turned on by his friend who was snuggled against him for comfort after her best friend almost died was wrong. The kind of wrong that would have Dr. Mallard chastising him and Gibbs dishing out one of his head slaps.

Tonight, though, she was snuggled into him after they'd had mind-blowing sex. Those kind of thoughts were completely appropriate. He grinned as he ran his hands gently down her back, not thinking of comforting her this time. After a couple of minutes, she lifted her head, her voice heavy with sleep. "Jimmy, I should go home, but if you keep doing that, I'm not going to want to."

"Stay," Jimmy said. Then he was struck by a moment of panic — he never asked women to stay over, but he wanted Abby to stay curled close to him all night. "I'll set my alarm for early so you can go home and change before work."

"Mmmm." She scooted up his body to kiss him. "I like the way you think."

"And maybe..." He hesitated.

"Speak, Jimmy," she said, fully awake now. She looked up at him, and in the glow of the streetlights through the window, he could see her wide green eyes just inches from his.

"I could drive over with you and give you a ride into work, since I'm giving you a ride to Tim and Tony's," he rushed on. "That way you wouldn't have to take your car out in the cold to work, and it would be easier after work and-"

She silenced him with a kiss. "On one condition."

"Anything."

"Bring a bag," she said. "That way you can just stay at my place tomorrow after we leave the guys' house." She grinned. "I think you'll really appreciate the coffin."
He laughed. "An autopsy table, the ME's van... I think a coffin fits right in."

She laughed hard, dropping her face into his chest. "Just so you know, Ducky is NEVER finding my underwear in Autopsy."

"Well, of course not," Jimmy said. "Ballistics has a lot fewer people in and out." He grinned and pulled her up so they were nose to nose. "But if we're sleeping together at night, I think we can make it through the day without jumping each other at the Navy Yard."

"Mmm... I like the sound of that." Abby shifted, brushing against him. "Especially when it's very clear you're interested in more than sleeping." She reached down with one hand and distracted him with a kiss at the same time, so he didn't have a chance to reply.

The next morning, Jimmy groaned as he reached for his alarm. He felt like he was wading through muck, but Abby bounced right out of bed.

"I'll go make coffee while you shower," she said, grabbing one of his T-shirts and sliding it on as she walked out of his bedroom. The sight was enough to snap Jimmy to wakefulness. By the time he had showered and was buttoning his shirt as he walked into the kitchen, she was redressed in last night's clothes and pouring two cups of coffee.

"Glad to see you're awake now," she said, grinning. She headed for the living room, but he wrapped an arm around her waist to stop her for a kiss. "Definitely awake," she said, when she finally managed to pull away.

He watched her walk into the living room, while sipping his coffee. When she walked back into the kitchen with a small plastic compact, he raised one eyebrow. She popped a pill out and chased it with coffee. "No baby lab bats yet," she said, grinning.

Jimmy thought about their discussion from the day before. "Yet," he added, grinning in return. "I can hear Tony now, grumbling about how crossing lab bats and autopsy gremlins is a sign of the coming apocalypse."

Abby rolled her eyes. "Like he can talk." She looked up at him over the rim of her mug. "So, we're going to totally blow everybody's minds when they find out we went from being just friends to discussing baby lab bats in what, 12 hours?"

"Technically, we talked about the babies first," Jimmy said. "That's how I know this is a 'yet.'" He pulled her close. "And we should probably keep that bit to ourselves. I don't want Gibbs to come after me with a shotgun."

"Oh, he wouldn't use a shotgun," Abby said. "He'd use his sniper rifle." She stood on her toes so they were at eye level. "Except that I would tell him it was my idea and that I thought he wanted to be Grandpa Gibbs."

Jimmy snorted. "No, Tony, Tim, and I decided that he should be Grumpa Gibbs. But only if you tell him — he'd kill anyone else who suggested it."

Abby giggled. "You guys were talking about what Gibbs will be called by the Baby Gibblets? They're totally planning on having kids!" She put her coffee cup down. "Come on, let's go, or we'll be late and totally busted."

-Ducky had just tucked into the mountain of dreaded requisition forms when Mr. Palmer walked-
into Autopsy with a rather goofy smile on his face. While the younger man hung up his coat and
suit jacket, Ducky stifled the smile that threatened to overcome his own countenance. Perhaps
Jimmy and Abigail had finally realized what had been apparent to most of the rest of the team
these past couple of weeks.

"Good morning, Dr. Mallard," Jimmy said as he approached the table piled high with papers.
"Requisition forms?"

"No time like the present," Ducky said. "We have no guests with us, and we can hope that will stay
true for a day or two." He handed a stack to Jimmy, whose smile never wavered even as he started
sorting through the many papers.

"I went to physical therapy with Timothy last night," Ducky said. "He appears to be doing quite
well, given the extent of his injuries."

Jimmy looked up. "Oh, good," he said. "I know he's been frustrated waiting to see what will
happen."

"I expect he will be back on desk duty within a few weeks," Ducky said. "Not as quickly as he
would like, perhaps, but at the early end of the range I had estimated when he first was injured."

"He'll be glad to get back, and I think Tony will, too," Jimmy said. "Not that Abby and I mind
going over to check on Tim at lunchtime."

"But you two wouldn't mind a chance to enjoy lunch alone perhaps?"

"Yeah, that would be nice." Jimmy's head jerked up. "Wait, how did you know? We didn't even
know until last night."

Ducky smiled at the confirmation of his suspicions. "Ahh, Mr. Palmer, when you have been
around as long as I have and worked with people as closely as I work with you and Abigail, it takes
very little to deduce these sorts of developments." He held up a hand to pre-emptively halt the
explanation or excuses sure to come out of Mr. Palmer's mouth next. "I have no need of details,
Mr. Palmer. Indeed, once Anthony learns of this development, I daresay you will prefer nobody
have details to be able to share. He is quite persuasive once he gets going." He paused. "I just have
one question for you."

"Yes, Dr. Mallard?"

"Are you and Abigail happy?"

At the big smile on his face, Jimmy's answer was evident even before he said, "Oh, yes! We're very
happy. In fact, we're-" He broke off, flushing. "Never mind. That's one of those details I'd rather
Tony not know."

"Understood." Ducky turned back to the forms. "And now, to conquer this bloody paperwork."

It wasn't only the paperwork that had the M.E. looking for an excuse to visit Abigail's lab later that
morning. Not that he didn't trust her, but he wanted to be certain that she and Jimmy were on the
same page in regard to this change in their relationship.

When he walked into the lab, she had her usual music on loud enough to rattle the windows.

"Hey, Ducky!" She turned down the volume as soon as she saw him. "I know you don't have
evidence for me because the team's just investigating a robbery today, and not even a difficult one,
"What brings you to my lab?" As she bounced between the various machines in her lab, he could almost see the happiness radiating from her.

"I'm just glad to find that Mr. Palmer isn't the only one in such a wonderful mood today," he said, unable to resist smiling. Abby's emotions were so strong, they were infectious on a normal day. He rather suspected that today even Gibbs would smile after being exposed to the forensics expert's joyful spirit.

She turned to him. "Really? You can tell Jimmy's happy? I mean, really happy? Like happy the same way I'm happy?" Her grin stretched even wider.

"Yes, really happy," Ducky confirmed. "I don't think even Jethro could squelch him today, though with no need of our services on the current case, I don't imagine he'll get a chance to try."

"Thanks, Ducky," she said. "I'm glad it's not just me."

"That is one thing you need not concern yourself with, my dear."

After leaving the lab, Ducky headed upstairs to the bullpen. He had spoken with Anthony last night after returning Timothy from physical therapy, but he was sure Jethro would have questions for both of them on the younger man's condition. By fortuitous circumstance, he arrived at a time when neither Ziva nor Agent Wilson were in the bullpen, so they would not need to adjourn to another room.

"What's on your mind, Duck? No dead bodies on this one."

"Yes, Jethro, I am aware of that. I merely thought you might appreciate a progress report on Timothy, as well as the chance to ask questions. Anthony, you as well, of course. Since you are both Timothy's medical proxies, I can tell you anything you think Timothy would feel comfortable with you knowing."

Tony walked over to join the other men. "He is going to be able to return to the field, right, Ducky?"

"As you know, Anthony, Timothy has many weeks of rehabilitation ahead of him before we will know for certain. Setbacks are always possible." As the younger man's face fell and he opened his mouth, no doubt to protest, Ducky held up a finger. "That necessary medical disclaimer out of the way, as well as a reminder that I am not omniscient, I do believe Timothy will easily return to field duty. He is already able to move his arm under his own power, and when they moved his arm through its available range of motion, it was greater than typically expected following surgery. Since the required procedure was quite extensive because of the damage from the gunshot wound, that also is a good sign."

"So when will he be back, Duck?"

"Patience, Jethro. Timothy will not be the only one to require that virtue during the coming weeks." He looked pointedly at the two men standing before him.

"We know, Ducky," Tony said. "But it's the uncertainty that's been the problem. Well, at least for me and Tim. Not trying to speak for you, Boss."

"Yes, well, I'd wager that Timothy will be back on desk duty in about three weeks, give or take a few days," Ducky said.

Tony nodded. "That's not bad, actually." He looked around Gibbs to the calendar on his wall. "The
Supreme Court ruling is supposed to come down in about two, so we can do the wedding that first weekend in March and then there's another week before he comes back.

"You had your honeymoon, DiNozzo," Gibbs said, but Ducky could tell from his slight smile that he wasn't really angry.

"Not that, Boss. But this way if the waiting period pushes the wedding to that Sunday, he doesn't have to turn around and head into work the next day."

"Actually, Anthony, I'd prefer if Timothy came in on the Friday before he is scheduled to start," Ducky said. "Mondays Mr. Palmer has class all morning, so if we have a case, I will be rather overloaded. If he comes in on a Friday, Mr. Palmer can handle any case-related duties whilst I perform the exam. Unfortunately, he will not be able to handle those until he formally graduates, even though he is quite qualified at this point."

"Shouldn't be a problem, Ducky," Tony said. "He can just ride in with me, and then if we catch a case and I can't take him home, he can either hang out here, or Sarah or Abby or Jimmy can drive him home."

Ducky smiled. "I have enjoyed watching you children all pull together to help each other out through this. While the team has always been close, the last two weeks have rather taken that to a new level." He knew it was not his place to say anything about the new development in Jimmy and Abigail's relationship, so he didn't mention it, but it was one of the changes he approved of in recent weeks.

"Any idea how long he'll be out of the field?" Gibbs raised a single eyebrow.

"That, my dear Jethro, is difficult to determine at this point." Ducky thought back over the information he had and what he had seen last night. "While it is always possible Timothy could need either more or less time than I predict, I would not date his return much before the end of May, and it could easily be mid-July before he is able to re-qualify. Even once he is cleared medically, taking that much time off means he will have to rebuild his stamina to pass the fitness exams, not to mention his firearms proficiency test."

Tony nodded. "He said something last night about using a recumbent bike before or after PT when we go over to Bethesda so he can keep in shape."

"An excellent idea." Ducky nodded enthusiastically. "He will find it difficult to get the level of workout he had been used to with his daily runs, but since he is limited to activities that will not jar his shoulder, it is the best of the available options." As Jethro opened his mouth, Ducky went on. "Yes, Jethro, Timothy and I did have this discussion last night, in conjunction with his physical therapist."

"Thanks, Duck." Gibbs looked at him. "Anything else I need to know?"

"Not at the moment." As he headed for the elevator, Ducky assured himself that he was correct. Jethro did not need to know that Jimmy and Abigail were seeing each other, though he didn't imagine it would be a secret for long, as happy as they both looked.

As he walked into Autopsy, his assistant was just finishing up the stack of requisition forms.

"I'm sorry, Jimmy," Ducky said, abashed. "I didn't mean to leave you with all of those dratted forms."

He shook his head, the grin from the morning still on his face. "It's no problem, doctor. I've got
them done, and now we don't need to worry about them for another quarter."

His irrepressible good humor confirmed the impression Ducky had gotten both earlier and after his visit to the forensics lab. "I must say, Mr. Palmer, after seeing you and Abigail this morning, I do believe your decision to begin seeing each other is long-overdue."

His assistant's eyebrows shot up. "You approve, Dr. Mallard?"

Ducky nodded. "I do, Mr. Palmer. And I will tell that to anybody who asks me, should it be required." He was rewarded by an even-wider smile.

Eileen McGee was just pulling a meatloaf out of the oven for dinner when Jimmy and Abby arrived. Though Tim had insisted he could heat up some of the food Ziva had made Sunday, Eileen wouldn't hear of it and had insisted on cooking.

Tim started to get up, but Tony motioned him to sit back. "I've got it, McEager," he said. "Just sit there and look cute — Oh wait, that's my job. See you in a couple of hours."

Tim just rolled his eyes, but part of him was glad to see Tony returning to his usual antics. "Don't tie yourself into a knot we can't get you out of."

Jimmy walked into the living room carrying a backpack just as Tim heard Tony close the front door behind him.

"No sling?" Jimmy dropped his bag on the floor by the sofa.

Tim grinned as he shook his head. "Nope. I can't go all day without it, but the physical therapist wants me to spend some time not wearing it so the muscles get used to holding up the weight of my arm." He grimaced. "I still have to wear it when I sleep, though."

"Give it time," Jimmy said. "And I'll bet you're sick of people saying that, aren't you?"

"He bit my head off when I said it this morning." Eileen stood in the kitchen doorway drying her hands on a towel. "Jimmy, Tim, I've got dinner waiting for you."

"Thanks, Mom," Tim said. "We really would have been fine." He got up and walked over, giving her a one-armed hug and cheek kiss. "Go on, Dad's going to be wondering where you are. It'll be almost 1900 by the time you get home."

"We'll cut that time in half in another two weeks," At the confused expression on Jimmy's face, Eileen clarified. "We're moving a week from Saturday."

"They're buying the house next door to Gibbs," Tim said. "Tony and I are already planning to move down to that area when our lease is up here, so everybody will be on the same side of the city."

Jimmy nodded. "That makes sense," he said. "Then Abby will be the only one more than a half hour away, and we might-" He broke off as the tips of his ears turned pink.

"Wait, 'we'? You mean as in you and Abby? Why didn't Tony tell me?" Tim frowned. "I miss all the news stuck here at home."

"No!" Jimmy said. "I mean, you didn't miss anything. Ducky's the only one who knows about us.
We decided we weren't going to broadcast it, because it's too new. There weren't any dead bodies today, so nobody came down to Autopsy, and Abby was just — "A goofy grin slid across his face. "Well, more Abby-like."

Eileen gave him a fond smile. "Sarah mentioned she saw you two, Ziva, and another friend of yours last night at the coffee shop, but she didn't mention you two were dating." She turned to the sink and started washing pans. "If it was a double-date, you boys make sure Ziva knows her young man is invited next time we all get together."

"Wait, Ziva's dating somebody?" Tim dropped into a chair at the kitchen table with a thump. "When did this happen?" He was beginning to think he needed to get back on desk duty just to keep up with the developments in his friends' lives. And how did Tony become Mr. Tardy-to-the-Party when it came to office gossip?

"No, Ziva's not dating anybody," Jimmy said as he joined Tim at the table. "Damon's back in town, and she wanted company when she met him for coffee last night so it wouldn't seem like a date. She originally asked Abby to go along. I agreed to meet them, and Abby joined us after her yoga class. Sarah and Josh just stopped by to say hi after Sarah's shift was over."

Tim had so many questions, he didn't know where to start. "You met Josh? What's he like? Do I need to remind him Sarah's got two big brothers? Well, three counting you, Jimmy. And how is having you and Abby coming along make it less date-like? Seems like a double-date to me."

Jimmy just gaped like a fish.

"Ignore him, Jimmy," Eileen said as she rinsed mixing bowls. "Honestly, Tim, you're more protective of Sarah than your father. She's an adult who can make her own decisions."

"Mom, I just want to make sure some jerk doesn't hurt her." He protested, even though he knew if Sarah was here, she'd rip into him for saying that.

"Dear, any man who messes with your sister doesn't know her very well. I'd pit her against anybody." Eileen set the last pan in the dish rack and dried off her hands, turning back to face them. "Not to mention once she tells them her father is a Navy commander, her older brothers and sister are federal agents, and her other brother and sister are a medical examiner and a forensic scientist respectively, I'm pretty sure they're going to know not to mess with her."

"Um, yeah, she only really knows about Tim," Jimmy said.

Tim grinned at his mother's look of confusion. "Mom, we don't advertise that we're federal agents," he explained. "Not everyone reacts well to it. Josh only knows I'm a federal agent because Sarah had to explain why I had been shot, but he doesn't know about the rest of the team." He turned to Jimmy. "Or does he, now?"

Jimmy shook his head. "No, we just said we were a scientist and a medical student. Oh, and Tony is a former athlete. Damon played along even though he didn't understand at the time, and we explained to him why after Sarah and Josh left the coffeehouse."

"Does Tony know Damon's back?" Tim said. He was pretty sure that was another tidbit Tony had missed, because otherwise Tony would have been grumbling about it as soon as he got home.

"No, I don't think so. We were talking about all having lunch tomorrow if the dirtbags allow us to," Jimmy said. "Abby and I figured one of us could pick you up so you could get out of the house for a while."
Tim thought about it. "Better make it you," he said. "I should wear jeans and something more presentable than a T-shirt if I'm going out to lunch with you guys, and I'm pretty sure we'd all rather you helped me get dressed instead of Abby."

"That's my cue to leave," Eileen said. She walked over, and Tim reached up with his good arm to hug her.

"Thanks for coming, Mom," he said. "Tell Dad I said hi."

"Nice to see you again, Mrs. McGee," Jimmy said. "Thanks for dinner. It's delicious."

"Good to see you too, Jimmy, and tell Abby I said hello also." Eileen straightened up. "Tim, don't push that arm too much, too quickly, and save some of that meatloaf for Tony."

Tim huffed. "Tony had a sandwich before he left."

"Because he said he wouldn't make it through the whole class if he didn't eat something," she countered.

"Yes, Mom." Tim rolled his eyes.

"I'll keep an eye on him," Jimmy said, grinning at Tim.

Tim waited until his mom had left before sticking his tongue out at Jimmy. "I'll save some dinner for Tony, but I've gotten more than enough lectures between the physical therapist, Tony, and Ducky. I have not turned into Tony — I'm not going to do anything crazy like come back to work early after recovering from the plague."

He was rewarded by a snicker from Jimmy.

"Now that my mom's gone — because my parents do not need details about anybody sleeping in the coffin — are you really thinking about moving in with Abby already after just hooking up with her last night?" Tim stared at Jimmy, using his best impression of a Gibbs glare. It wasn't all that great — he was out of practice after more than two weeks on medical leave — but Jimmy wasn't exactly a tough case.

"Yes. I mean, no. I mean-"

Tim couldn't keep a straight face and broke down laughing. "OK, Jimmy. Just spit it out."

"Abby and I are, well, seeing each other." Jimmy shrugged his shoulders. "Have you ever seen a fuse of dynamite? You know, it fizzles along for a while and then it goes ka-boom?"

Tim nodded, realization dawning. "And you two finally went ka-boom?"

Jimmy nodded. "While she was getting dressed to leave, we-" He stopped and flushed.

"Oh, you really went ka-boom, didn't you?" Tim smirked. "So what time did she finally get home last night?"

"No, that was this morning before work. We-" Jimmy stopped again.

"She spent the night?" Tim rearranged some thoughts and looked at Jimmy. "Abby doesn't spend the night at a guy's house," he said slowly. "She'll let somebody stay over in the coffin, but she has this thing about not spending the night at his place." He paused. "The only time she makes an exception is if it's a friends-with-benefits situation. I don't understand why, but then, I don't"
understand half of Abby's mind."

"Really?" As a grin spread over Jimmy's face, Tim realized things might be more serious than he expected.

He hated to throw cold water on his friend, but this was Abby, and even though he had warned her about being careless with Jimmy, he had to ask. "You're sure this isn't a friends-with-benefits situation?"

Jimmy nodded. "I'm sure. And if it makes you feel better, Ducky went up to talk to her after he figured out what was going on and when he came back, he told me he was very happy for both of us."

Tim was relieved. "It's not that I don't trust you, or Abby. I just..."

"You know Abby's track record, and this is happening really fast." Jimmy nodded. "I know. And we know we have some things to talk about. But we talked some yesterday afternoon — on a different, but related, topic — and this morning we had just enough time to bring it back up. And we have more to talk about, but we're both serious about this." He frowned. "Of course, I might need some tips from you about what it's like to have Gibbs as a father-in-law. Because I really, really don't want to have him coming after me with a shot-" He broke off when Tim dropped his fork onto his plate.

"Wait, you're that serious? Abby, who runs from commitment like it's sunlight and she really is part vampire, is considering..." He trailed off, his mind officially boggled.

"Don't ask any questions you're not prepared to answer yourself." Jimmy smirked. "Abby is dying to know if you two are planning on kids, but I told her to back off. It isn't any of our business."

Tim considered several answers to that, but discarded all of them. "OK, let's just drop this for now." He focused on the other bit of news. "So Damon's back in town? For good?"

Jimmy nodded. "Seems like it. I hadn't met him before, but he seems like a nice guy."

Tim rolled his good shoulder, the one Damon had dislocated. "Yeah, he is. Though the first time we met him... Well, I think Tony's finally forgiven him for the broken nose, but I don't think he's forgotten the experience."

"If Ziva's thinking about dating him, this could get ugly." Jimmy made a face.

"Wait, I thought you and Abby went along so it would be clear it wasn't a date?" Tim rubbed his forehead with one hand. "When did Silver Spring turn into Siberia? I'm completely out of the loop."

Jimmy frowned. "We did. But..." He sighed. "Look, I don't know details, and I don't think Abby does either. All Abby told me was that Ziva wasn't ready to date yet after what happened in Somalia, and she needed, well, a buffer because she and Damon have always been attracted to each other." He put his fork down. "You were there, at least at the end. Do you and Tony know what happened?"

Tim frowned, his gut tightening. "No, but you know what that sounds like, don't you?"

Jimmy nodded. "Would Saleem and his men...?"

"They weren't the type of men who think women have much value," Tim said. He swallowed.
"We've all seen the scars on Ziva's back, and I know she hasn't worn a skirt or shorts around any of us since she's been back, at least not that I've seen, so I suspect she has more on her legs. But I don't think even Ducky ever got much out of her about what actually happened in Somalia."

"Maybe we should ask Abby when they get back," Jimmy said. "If she's going to talk to anybody, it's Abby."

Tim thought for a minute. "Actually, I think she and Sarah are getting to be good friends. They were talking pretty seriously about something on Sunday when they were over here. Abby... She feels too much. If we're right, just hearing about what Ziva went through would hurt Abby, and for something this intense, Ziva won't be able to get through talking about it if the person she's talking to is falling apart."

"Ducky?" Jimmy frowned. "Or does it have to be a woman?"

Tim shook his head, lost. "I don't know. When we interview victims of sexual assault, it's usually Ziva or me because she's a woman and I'm not all that intimidating to most people. But Ziva's not exactly typical." He frowned. "Maybe mention it to Ducky, see what he thinks."

Jimmy nodded. "Will she be mad that we're talking about this, or that I'm talking to Ducky about it?"

Tim let out a big sigh. "I don't know, Jimmy. I really don't. But unless we know she's talked to somebody, I think it's worth the risk."

"Wait. Wouldn't she have to have talked to somebody to be cleared for the field? Especially since she had to apply to be an agent, not just get a regular field clearance."

Tim snorted. "If you don't think Ziva could fake her way through the psych battery, you don't know her very well. Tony's done it dozens of times." He frowned, wondering how much he should say. "Most of the time, they're just checking to make sure an assignment hasn't broken you. If you come into this job with masks and coping mechanisms for things in your past, they're generally not going to pick up on that if you've hidden yourself well." He sighed. "Without going into details, let's just say that if they could pick up past traumas that scarred you for life, Tony wouldn't ever have made it onto Gibbs' team."

Jimmy frowned. "You aren't... He isn't..." He took a deep breath. "Just tell me Tony finally got some help."

Tim nodded. "I don't know that Ducky would consider either me or Gibbs a qualified psychologist, but we understand Tony, and he trusted us enough to let us help. He still has his moments — we all do when a case hits too close to home for whatever reason — but he's in a much better place, and he's found better ways of handling things."

Jimmy nodded soberly. "Ziva got a lot of practice hiding her emotions when she was Mossad."

Tim fought down the anger that always threatened when he thought about Eli David. "Her father made sure of that." He shook his head. "I'm not sure we can do or say anything, except be there if she decided she wants to talk. Ziva... She doesn't like people asking her questions about things she doesn't want to talk about."

Jimmy just nodded. "Sorry, I didn't mean for this to turn into a really heavy discussion."

"No, it's OK." Tim smiled. "We can go from the Three Stooges to serious angst and back faster than most people." He pushed away from the table. "Come on, let's clean up. Do you need to
study?"


"No, I'm good," Tim said. "I probably should put the darn sling back on, though." He wrinkled his nose. "At least all the bandages are off, and I can wear more than the T-shirts that I used to wear when I weighed 50 pounds more."

"Yeah, I'll bet that's nice. How bad is the scar?"

Tim reached up and slid the neck of his T-shirt over to show Jimmy. "I've got a matching one on the back from the exit wound," he said. "It's not as bad as some of Tony's scars, but I'm hoping it fades over time." He lightly traced the reddened, raised tissue. "Tony's don't stand out nearly as much, but as he points out, he actually has color to his skin."

"Yeah, yeah," Jimmy said. "It's OK, some of us have to be pasty to make guys like Tony look good."

Tim dropped his head to his chest, laughing. "We're not mentioning that to him," he said. "He'll never let us forget it." He stood. "Come on, let's just hang out." He looked at the clock. "They should be back fairly soon anyway."

Jimmy picked up both plates. "You go relax; I'll clean up," he said.

"You don't have to," Tim replied. "You're helping us out."

"Tim, go," Jimmy said. "Relax before Abby gets here and gives you all the hugs she's been saving up for when your stitches were out."

Tim couldn't argue with that, so he didn't. Back in the living room, he sank into the chair. It had been Tony's, but since they'd moved into together, Tim used it most of the time, even before napping in the chair became more restful than sleeping in bed. He let the chair support his arm and settled back. He was still trying to wrestle with the idea of Jimmy and Abby, not to mention Abby actually talking about kids. Or so he figured from what Jimmy had said — and hadn't said. But then he thought back to the fall when Abby had been oblivious to the change in his relationship with Tony, and some of the things she'd said then, and maybe it wasn't so unexpected after all. Tony had never wanted kids either until fairly recently. He smiled. At the rate things were going, Gibbs was going to have more grandchildren than he could handle. Although if Jimmy and Abby were already talking about it, they probably would be the parents of the first Baby Gibblet. He and Tony hadn't thought much about what to do to have kids beyond wanting them, and Jimmy and Abby probably had that part down. He winced at the thought. No picturing naked co-workers, he ordered his subconscious, even if he did have detailed knowledge of what one of them looked like. And he knew Abby — marriage wasn't her style. She'd be perfectly happy to skip the wedding and go right to the kids. He snorted. No wonder Jimmy was worried about a shotgun.

Jimmy joined him a few minutes later, sinking into the couch. "Hey, Tim?"

"Yeah?"

"Is it weird for you, I mean, me and Abby?"

Tim thought about it, then shook his head. "No. Well, not you and Abby."

"Huh?"
"I think you and Abby fit together." He sighed, trying to figure out how to phrase this. "I know what Abby liked about me and what didn't work well between us. The things that didn't work with her are the reasons Tony and I fit together as well as we do. You have a lot of the same traits that Abby liked in me, and I think the places where we differ are the ones where Abby and I didn't click." He hoped Jimmy wouldn't ask for specifics. "If I didn't think you guys had potential, I wouldn't have encouraged either of you, and I would have stopped Tony from encouraging you."

"Wait, you talked to Abby about me?"

"It came up the other day. I warned her not to be careless with your feelings; that if she didn't share them, not to let you think she did." He smiled ruefully. "One time, she told me she loved me, then added 'like I love puppies.' I could have done without the comparison, but when I protested, she just said, 'But I love puppies!' Abby's great, and she has a heart big enough to soften even Gibbs, but she uses the word 'love' for all of us, in different ways." He sighed. "Abby's special, and if she loves you the way I love Tony, you couldn't do any better. Maybe she's ready for that now; she wasn't five years ago. And I wasn't the right person for her, anyway."

Jimmy nodded. "I get it, I think." He smiled. "I don't know that I would have believed it, except that I made her blush-"

"Wait, you made Abby blush? What did you-? Never mind. I do not want to know what could make the woman who once asked Gibbs if he had any fetishes actually be visibly embarrassed."

Jimmy shook his head. "No, it wasn't like that. At the coffee shop last night, I looked over and smiled, and she was just looking at me. Then she looked away, and her cheeks turned pink." He smiled. "It was kind of cute, actually."

Tim just stared at Jimmy. "All you did was smile?"

He nodded.

"I stand corrected. She might really have fallen this time." He smiled. "Congratulations."

Now it was Jimmy's turn to flush. But before Tim could say something, he heard the back door open. Tony and Abby walked into the living room in sock feet a minute later. Well, Tony walked. Abby bounced.

"Timmy!" She said. "Now I can hug you!" She reached down and wrapped her arms around him, being careful not to jar his shoulder.

"Thanks, Abs," he said. He decided not to say anything about her and Jimmy and see what happened.

She got up, leaving room for Tony to rest a hip on the arm of the chair.

"You all uncrunched?" Tim asked, looking up at his partner.

"I-" Tony stopped as Abby landed on the couch next to Jimmy, snuggled next to him, and reached up to kiss him. "What the-"

Tim couldn't hold back his laughter and doubled over in the chair, while Abby and Jimmy just looked at Tony.

"When did this-?" Tony put a hand on Tim's shoulder. "You knew! Wait, how did you know? Why didn't I know? Does Gibbs know?"
"If you two are trying to keep all of us from knowing about this, kissing in front of Tony is the wrong way to go," Tim said, still snickering.

"Oops." Abby grinned sheepishly. "Sorry, Jimmy. I wasn't thinking."

"It's OK. I goofed and said something earlier so Tim and his mom guessed."

"Wait, Mom knows about this before me?" Tony made a face.

Tim reached up and patted him on the back. "It's OK, Tony. Nobody stays champion of the office information network forever." He grinned, knowing Abby and Jimmy would kill him. "Besides, they apparently just started seeing each other last night, and Jimmy's already worried about Gibbs coming after him with his sniper rifle."

He'd expected Jimmy to turn red, but wasn't prepared for Abby to be the one doing the lobster impersonation. He filed that away to think about later as Tony stood up.

"Jimmy, if you've done anything to Abby to make Gibbs come after you, he's going to have to wait in line." Tony glared.

"Ignore him, Jimmy," Tim said. "His gun's locked up, so you're safe."

Tony turned his glare on him. "How can you be so calm about this?"

"Because I was able to keep my mouth shut for two minutes so he could explain." Tim grinned at him. He didn't often get to stir up the kind of trouble Tony managed on a regular basis, but he was starting to see the attraction of it. Jimmy and Abby were just sitting on the couch. Jimmy had turned white, while Abby was trying not to laugh.

"Timmy, you've spent too much time around Tony," she said. "Besides, how long did you two keep your romance secret from everybody?"

Tony sank back onto the arm of the chair. "Ouch. OK, OK." He crossed his arms. "But Jimmy, just so you know, you hurt her and Gibbs will be the least of your worries. And Abby, same goes for you. Hurt him, and you will not like the consequences."

Tim snorted. "So now you're turning into Gibbs?" He shook his head. "OK, definitely time for you to go to bed."

"You just want to get me into bed." Tony waggled his eyebrows. "Not that I'm complaining."

"I think that's our cue to leave," Jimmy said. "Besides, I need a good night's sleep if Tony's going to tell the entire Navy Yard about us tomorrow."

"Why stop at the Navy Yard?" Tony said.

Tim used his good arm to push himself into a standing position. "OK, that's enough. Night, guys." He walked over to hug Abby goodbye and whispered into her ear. "No asking about baby plans, Abs, or I'll let it slip to Tony that you and Jimmy really are thinking of beating us to the punch."

She squeezed him tight. "My lips are sealed, Timmy." She kissed his cheek, leaving a lip print.

Within a few minutes, Jimmy and Abby had gathered their stuff and left.

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When they walked into Abby's apartment, Jimmy explored while she headed back to shower and change into pajamas. It was surprisingly normal compared to what he'd expected. OK, so the colors were dramatic, but there was color — it wasn't all black. And the weighty furniture fit in well, even if it was more traditional than he would have expected. After looking around, he brought his bag into the bedroom and changed into flannel pajama pants and a T-shirt, then took his kit into the bathroom, where the mirrors had steamed up from the hot water.

"Do you want coffee, Abs, or something else?" he asked.

She pulled aside the curtain just enough to peek out of the shower. "I've got some hot chocolate mix in the cabinet above the toaster."

He smiled. "Two hot chocolates, coming up."

By the time he had finished stirring the mix and warm milk together, she was padding around the kitchen in an NCIS sweatshirt and purple flannel pants covered in bats. He handed her a mug and got a quick kiss as a thank you.

"Come on, the living room's more comfortable," she said, leading the way.

They settled down, cuddled together, and sipped at their drinks. Her hair was tied up in a ponytail, out of the way. He wrapped his free arm around her so she was snuggled up against him.

"So how was your day?," she asked. "We were so rushed getting over to the guys' house I never got to ask."

"Requisition forms." He made a face. "But Ducky gave us his seal of approval, so that was good. He knew as soon as I walked in."

She giggled. "Yeah, Duckman said he could tell as soon as he saw me it was a good thing that we were together. Well, that's not exactly what he said, but he said he could tell we were happy." She smiled.

Jimmy nodded. "Tim is good with us, too. He was worried at first, I think, that I was in over my head. But then I told him how you'd blushed last night, and he decided that was enough of a sign for him to be OK."

"I wondered what you guys had talked about when he told Tony to chill out," she said, laying her head on his shoulder. "He knows we were talking about baby lab bats and baby gremlins."

Jimmy nodded. "I told him not to ask any questions he wasn't prepared to answer, though, so he didn't hear anything other than my shotgun comment." He pulled away slightly so he could look Abby in the face. "And after hearing him and Tony tonight — we're moving in together before we start making baby bat-gremlins so none of them shoot me. Tim and Tony are the reasonable ones; Ziva and Gibbs really scare me."

She grinned at him. "I can live with that," she said. "So, when did you say your lease was coming up?"

Jimmy started laughing and had to set his drink down on the table before he spilled it. "End of April. Yours?"

"Not until December." She made a face. "I didn't realize I'd have any reason to think about moving before then."
"Your apartment's bigger than mine, anyway," Jimmy said.

She kissed him, then settled back against his shoulder. "We'll work it out," she said.

He picked his mug back up and sipped his hot chocolate as they sat there, comfortable together. He was down to the dregs of his drink before it hit him.

"You know, Michelle and I never did this," he said.

Abby looked up at him. "OK, I know since I'm best friends with Timmy and you and Tony are best friends, it's impossible to avoid discussing our exes, but why are you bringing up Michelle?"

"What-! No, I didn't-" He sighed. "Sorry, Abs. I just realized why I'm not freaked out about this. Well, OK, maybe a little, but not a lot considering we're talking about moving in together and baby bat-gremlins and all sorts of things you usually don't talk about in the first two months you're seeing somebody, let alone the first two days."

"Spit it out, Jimmy," she said, laying a hand on his chest.

"You said you didn't want Ducky finding your underwear in Autopsy, and I joked that we'd use ballistics. But I just realized that wasn't right." He sighed, looking for the right words. "Michelle and I only ever had sex. It wasn't anything more, so any time we got together, all we could focus on was getting each other's clothes off. Eventually I called it off because I thought she was just using me, and during the mole hunt, I realized she had hidden so much of herself from me that I never knew her, not really." He stroked his thumb along her arm. "It's not like that with us. You're still my friend, Abby. Someone I've talked to every day for years, the person who keeps me sane when the team's out on cases and Dr. Mallard is rambling even more than normal. So when I see you at work, I don't immediately think 'Hey, let's have sex!' and when we're home, we can enjoy each other like this without thinking we're wasting time that we could be spending in bed. I've never dated a woman I was friends with before, but — maybe it's just me — but the whole idea that we're still friends and co-workers, but we also can share time cuddling and planning a future together and practicing for that future-" He couldn't help smirking at her and was rewarded with a snicker. "I feel like I've fallen in love with one of my best friends, and it's all the wonderful friend stuff with all the great love and sex parts added in and-" He broke off, realizing he'd just said he loved Abby and he hadn't even admitted that to himself before.

She pulled away and looked at him, her smile spreading slowly across her face, green eyes shining. She stretched up and kissed him, a light kiss that was as sweet as she could be. "I've never said those words before," she said. "Not like that. I mean, I say them all the time to you guys. And I mean it, but I mean it like I love my brother or my parents or my friend Carol. I've never been able to say them to a guy before and mean them the way he wanted me to mean them." Her smile faltered for a minute, and Jimmy remembered what Tim had said earlier.

"And hearing that you love them like you love puppies wasn't enough." He smiled as he said it, and she nodded.

"But when I hear you say the words, I want to say them back, and it's scarier than anything I've done before. I wish I'd been able to just ramble them out the way you have, but I didn't. And I know it sounds like I'm saying this because you just said it, but if I could do that I would have done it years ago, and I've always been too scared." She took a deep breath. "Somehow I realized in the last couple of days that what I feel for puppies is nothing like what I feel for you. And if it's love, then I know why I could never say the words before and mean them like the guy wanted me to mean them. Because I've never felt this way before."
She looked down, and Jimmy slid a hand under her chin to tip it up. "So you're saying we're both stupid in love?"

She nodded, and he pulled her close for another light, sweet kiss.

"Come on, little Lab Bat," he said, grinning and leading her back to her bedroom. "Let's figure this out together."
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

AN: This chapter's a bit shorter than the others, but I hope you enjoy it. We'll call it a little break before some major events. :) Huge thanks to Kyrie for her usual stellar job of editing and brainstorming evilocity!

Thursday, Feb. 18, 2010

Tony walked into the bullpen to find Ziva and Dwayne at their desks, Gibbs nowhere to be found. He dropped his gear behind his desk, stowed his SIG, then walked over to perch one hip on Ziva's desk.

"So how is it that I find out all the news around here from McHomebound, who heard it from Eileen, who got it from McSis?" He tipped his head to watch her squirm.

"And what is this news you are referring to, Tony?" She barely spared him a glance as she kept typing.

"Damon is back in town, and Jimmy is trying to stay one step ahead of Gibbs' shotgun." He was rewarded to see her fingers fumble on the keyboard as his words registered.

"Jimmy is what?" Her voice was loud enough to attract Dwayne's attention, and he joined them.

"Our autopsy gremlin is doing things with everybody's favorite lab bat that are going to make Gibbs break out his sniper rifle."

"Since when?" Dwayne raised his eyebrows.

"Tuesday, and apparently Ms. David here set them up," Tony said.

"I still do not understand what Gibbs' marksmanship has to do with Jimmy and Abby," Ziva said.

Tony buried his head in his hand. "Zee, you've been here almost five years. You've never heard the term 'shotgun wedding' before?"

"Jimmy and Abby are not dating, let alone thinking of getting married," Ziva said. "I think Abby is considering it, but that was just Tuesday. And why would Gibbs bring a gun to the wedding?"

"Well they move faster than you do, Ziva, because they're definitely together," Tony said. "In every sense of the word, if Jimmy is seriously worried about Gibbs. I told him if he did anything to hurt her, Gibbs would have to wait in line behind me."

"Not pulling out the sniper rifle, DiNozzo," Gibbs said. Tony winced as the team leader's hand landed on the back of his head. "Not pulling it on Tim in two weeks, either. Last time I checked, you kids all were adults, though there are days that I wonder."

Gibbs just quirked an eyebrow at him as he sat down behind his desk, and Tony winced. "Shutting up and working, Boss."

He went back to his own desk and started checking e-mail.

"Tony, you are right about one thing," Ziva said. "Yes, Damon is back in town, and if we don't catch a case we are talking about going to lunch with him. Jimmy volunteered to go get McGee so he could get out of the house. You will join us?"

Tony frowned, but nodded. "Yes, I will join you."

"Who's Damon?" Dwayne asked.

"Former Cpl. Damon Werth," Gibbs said. "Subject of a case a few years back, helped us out on two cases a few months ago."

"Broke my nose. Dislocated Probie's shoulder. Bruised Ziva's face," Tony grimaced. As Ziva glared at him, he admitted the rest. "Saved Ziva's and my ass, plus Gibbs' living room, earlier this year, helped us put away some dirtbags."

She nodded. "He is a good friend, and now that he has returned to Washington for good, I look forward to seeing him regularly. Dwayne, I know you do not know him, but you are welcome to join us. Gibbs, you as well."

At that, Tony decided he was keeping a close eye on what happened at lunch today. Ziva would never admit to not being able to take care of herself, but after Jimmy and Abby had left last night, Tim had mentioned the concerns he and Jimmy had about her. Tony still was kicking himself for not thinking of the possibility earlier. Now all he could do was watch out for his ninja sister.

It was a quiet morning, filled with paperwork, and they headed out for lunch about 1130. Jimmy had left before to get Tim, and when they got to the restaurant near the Navy Yard, they already had a table, along with Damon.

Tony snagged the spot on Tim's left, knowing he'd remember not to jar Tim's healing shoulder.

"Hey, Tony," Damon said. "Good to see you again. Mike says hi."

"Good to see you too." And OK, so it was a bit of a lie, but nobody else had to know that, especially since the others all seemed glad to see him. "I need to give Mike a call. Haven't talked to him since the last time you were in town."

"Yeah, they were telling me about everything that's been going on," Damon said.

As everybody got settled in — only Ducky had stayed at the Navy Yard — and ordered, Damon met Dwayne and they compared notes on their tours in the Corps.

"Good to see you out again, McGee," Gibbs said. "How's the shoulder?"

Tim shrugged his good one. "I'm glad all the bandages are gone, but I'll be happier when I can finally ditch the painkillers."

"Better you than me, McFuzzy," Tony said.

Abby smirked. "I don't know, Tony. You're pretty fun when you get loopy on painkillers. I'll bet we could talk you into almost anything."
"Abs, still not letting you watch," Tim said.

"And DiNozzo knows the minute he headslaps me is the minute before Palmer here has to repair injuries to his hand," Gibbs said.

"Hey!" Tony said. "Boss, I'm hurt."

"You would be."

Tony looked over to see Damon just staring at them. "I know I said you guys were crazy before, but I'd forgotten just how much."

"Oh, they're crazy all right," Dwayne said. "It's contagious, too. I'm not sure Jarvis is going to want me back on Cold Cases after I'm done TADing with you guys."

Tony nudged Tim's knee with his own, knowing nobody could see under the table. "We can always find something for you to do, Dwayne," he said. "What do you think, Boss?"

"I think we'd better eat our food before Dispatch calls with a case," Gibbs said.

"So what are you doing now that you're back?" Tim asked Damon.

The former Marine shrugged. "Job-hunting, right now. I'm hoping to find something soon. Too much free time bores me."

"Oh, you don't have to tell me," Tim said. "This is the first time I've really been out of the house for anything but PT since I got shot two weeks ago. I'm going stir-crazy at home, even with everybody taking turns coming to visit at lunch."

"We like visiting you, Timmy," Abby said. "We just wish we could stay longer."

"I do, too," he replied, and Tony could hear the boredom in his partner's voice.

"I could stop by," Damon said.

Tony knew his surprise must be showing on his face by the way Damon looked at him.

"No, Tony, I'm serious. I've got time on my hands and not enough to do, at least until I find a job, and McGee's bored. Now, I'm probably not as entertaining as Energizer Abby-" He paused as the whole table broke into laughter. "But I've got to be better than nothing."

Tim looked over at him, and Tony knew his partner wanted to make sure Tony was OK with it. He thought for a second and realized Damon wasn't the same 'roid rage grunt who'd broken his nose two years ago. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd really appreciate it," Tony said. "I know McGenius here thinks his brain is wasting away because he can't do anything, and we wouldn't want that." The knee nudge Tim gave him under the table cemented his conviction he'd made the right decision.

"Tony's right," Tim said. "I would appreciate the company — not that I don't appreciate all of you stopping by." He looked around the table.

As the conversation turned to more general topics while the group ate, Tony just observed, trying to see everything he'd been missing. Jimmy and Abby seemed to be able to communicate with a look or a smile, and the usually frenetic Goth seemed more centered, like she'd been able to take her yoga class calm and carry it with her. Maybe Tim was right and he had jumped to conclusions yesterday about them.
And Damon seemed comfortable in the group, even with Dwayne, whom he'd never met. Ziva wasn't flirting with him, but Tony could sense the attraction that had always been between them. She seemed to be OK with things, but he vowed to keep a closer eye on her and have a word with Damon, if needed.

Before he could think anything more, Gibbs's cell rang. He answered and listened. As he hung up, he was already standing up. "Gear up. We got a case."

"I can give McGee a ride home," Damon said.

Jimmy looked at Tim, then Gibbs, and Tony stifled a chuckle at his uncertainty.

"Thanks, Damon," Tim said. "Jimmy, go. Gibbs, I'll get the check — we can sort it out later. Tony, I'll be fine. Call if you're going to be late."

"Yeah, yeah, McMom." He leaned over and kissed his partner, then followed the rest of the team.

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Saturday, February 20, 2010

While Tony de-furred the first floor, Tim got out the chips and veggies Tony had pre-cut. He still couldn't move his shoulder much under its own power, but he could at least use the rest of his arm, so he was able to open the chip bags and dump them into bowls. After getting out the dill ranch dip and the hummus Ziva liked, he arranged the vegetables on the tray around them.

Tony walked into the kitchen carrying a puppy-sized pile of fur and shaking his head. "Isn't he supposed to shed when it's warm, not when we're imitating an outpost of Antarctica?" He dumped the fur in the garbage can. "Need any help there?"

Tim smiled at the outburst and shook his head. "Jethro sheds year-round," he said. "It's just worse in the summer." He piled the last handful of carrots on the tray. "Look, Ma, two hands!" He smirked as Tony stuck his tongue out. "Hey, after two weeks with one arm out of commission, this is a big thing for me."

"I know," Tony said. "You sure you're up for this crew tonight? I know we set this early because Dwayne and Maggie didn't want to keep Kevin out too late, but even once they leave, the rest of the bunch can go all night."

"Longer," Tim said. "At least, Abby can with Caf-Pow." He looked around. "You did get Caf-Pow for her, right?"

Tony rolled his eyes. "Do you honestly think I'd forget Abby's lifeblood? I try not to piss her off any more than necessary."

"Good point." Tim cleaned off the counter so it was just the food and cups and the ice bucket. He sniffed the air. "The chili smells good."

"That's because you can smell the atomic version," Tony said. "Not that mild stuff."

Tim just raised an eyebrow. "Do you really want to share a bed with me after I eat your atomic chili?"

"I bought more Pepto-Bismal yesterday."
Tim rolled his eyes. "Yeah, thanks." He headed into the living room, but before he could sit down, the doorbell rang. "Tony, grab the dog," he said, walking toward the door. Subdued woofling from the kitchen told him Jethro was secured, so he opened the door to find Dwayne with a woman behind him and a baby carrier on one arm.

"Come on in," Tim said. "You must be Maggie. I'm Tim."

She smiled as she unwound a scarf from her head, revealing dirty blonde curls. "Hey, Tim. How's the shoulder?"

"Better than it was," he said. "Here, let me get those." He reached for the jackets to take them in the study. "Tony's got Jethro, but he should be fine around Kevin. If not, we can put him in the study. Jethro, not Kevin." He leaned over to look in the baby carrier. "At least, I'm guessing that's Kevin under all those clothes."

Dwayne nodded. "As soon as I put him down, I'll un-mummy him."

Tim's good arm was full of coats, so he used his head to indicate the living room. "Through there, you can put him on the couch."

When he walked back into the living room, Dwayne had a handful of baby clothes, and Maggie was bouncing Kevin on her lap while Tony held Jethro's collar a few feet away.

"Should I just put these in the same room as our coats?" Dwayne asked.

Tim nodded. "Just toss them on my chair."

He walked over to kneel down next to Maggie and Kevin. "Hey, little guy," he said. "How's it going?"

Kevin waved his hands and babbled, reaching to grab Tim's sweatshirt arm. Maggie disentangled his little fingers from the worn fleece. "Tony, I think you can let the dog go," she said.

"OK, Jethro," Tony said, releasing his collar.

The shepherd walked closer and sniffed at Kevin's sock-covered feet. He kicked and almost planted one heel on Jethro's nose. Tim was ready to reach out and grab his collar, but the dog just blinked and shook his head.

"Good dog, Jethro," Tim said, scratching his ears.

"You named your dog after Gibbs?" Dwayne joined Maggie on the couch.

"Abby." The guys spoke in unison.

"It's really a long story," Tim said. "The short version is Abby named him, and when her landlord wouldn't let her keep him, she talked me into taking him. She still comes over a couple of times a week to play with him, assuming work isn't crazy."

"In other words, she gets over here about twice a month," Tony said.

Maggie laughed. "I'm beginning to get that. Dwayne warned me you had crazy hours, but I didn't realize just how crazy."

"At least Gibbs isn't in obsessive mode," Tim said.
"He's not?" Dwayne said.

Tony snorted. "Oh, no. This is happy, friendly Gibbs you've seen so far."

"Yeah, Tony hasn't had to tell him to back off in at least six months," Tim said. "Actually, more than that."

"He was pretty obsessed when Ziva was missing," Tony said.

Tim just looked at Tony, who flushed and dropped his gaze. "OK, so that's a bad example." Before they could continue, Jimmy and Abby walked in.

"Coats in the study, guys," Tim called.

Abby joined Jethro on the floor to wrestle.

"Jeans, Abs?" Tim said. "No skirt?"

She snickered. "Do you guys really want me playing Twister in a skirt?"

As Tony opened his mouth, Tim reached over to put his hand over it. "Don't answer that, Tony," he said.

"What isn't Tony answering?" Jimmy said as he joined them, snagging a spot on the floor by Abby.


"Umm, yeah, that was a little... distracting the last time we played," Jimmy said. "Not in a bad way."

Tony reached over and head-slapped him. "Focus, Autopsy Gremlin."

"Oh, he's focused," Dwayne said, taking Kevin from his wife. "Focused on Abby."

Tim snickered, but was glad to see Dwayne seemed to be fitting in OK. Maggie looked a little taken aback, though.

"Don't mind us, Maggie," he said. "We're a little... quirky when we all get going."

"That's one word for it," Jimmy muttered.

Before anybody could respond, the doorbell rang. "That's got to be Brad," Tony said. "Ziva and Sarah would have walked in."

"Brad?" Dwayne said. "And Sarah's McSis of the perfume, right?"

"Huh?" Tim just looked at the young agent. "Yes, Sarah's my sister, and McSis is Tony's McNickname for her. But you lost me on the perfume."

"At the crime scene," Dwayne said.

"Sarah's perfume was at a crime scene?" Tim turned toward the front door. "Tony, you did not tell me NCIS was investigating Sarah again."

"What?" Tony stuck his head in the living room. "We didn't. And I wouldn't. Not tell you, I mean."

"Again?" Dwayne said. "You investigated your sister once before?"
"She was implicated in a sailor's murder," Tim said. "Abby helped me clear her. It's kind of a long story."

"If there's one thing I've learned with this bunch, it's that everything's a long story." Brad pulled out the piano bench and straddled it.

"Thanks, Wolverine." Tony made a face as he dropped down into the armchair. "Brad, the two you don't know are Dwayne Wilson, who's covering Tim's spot until he comes back, and his wife Maggie. Oh, and Kevin." Tony waved a hand in their direction. "Guys, this is Brad Pitt — yes, that's his real name — who broke my leg in college, saved my life when I got the plague, and has become an odd adjunct to Team Gibbs."

Tim snorted as Maggie just kind of stared. "Another one of those really long stories."

"You really need to write those down, Mr. Gemcity. A handbook for newcomers to Team Gibbs." Tony smirked. "Oh, right. You did."

Tim just stuck his tongue out, then winced when Kevin stuck his tongue out before starting another round of babbling. "Oops. Sorry. Um, shouldn't be setting a bad example."

"Yeah, corrupting the Baby Gibblets is my job, Probie," Tony said.

"That's because you've run out of Gibblets to corrupt," Tim retorted.

But before Tony could argue, they could hear Ziva and Sarah come in the front.

"Saved by the door," Tony muttered.

"OK, now that everybody's here, we've got chili in the kitchen," Tim said. "The big pot is the radioactive stuff, smaller pot is normal."

"Or, for those who actually have taste, the big pot is the good stuff and the smaller one is for those who can't handle the heat," Tony said.

Brad snorted. "You two really have the old married couple thing down pat by now, don't you?"

"Not married yet," Tony pointed out. "Not for a couple more weeks."

"So what is the plan for the wedding?" Sarah asked as they all shuffled in and out of the kitchen loading up bowls of chili and grabbing cornbread. "Mom was talking about how she and Dad are hosting the party at their new house, since it's closer to everybody than you guys are, but she didn't know what you wanted to do."

Tim shrugged. "We're just getting the JP at the courthouse to do the wedding," he said. "It's just that and the party, and I think we just want something low-key, right Tony?"

His partner nodded. "That first weekend, there are going to be news photographers everywhere, and I don't really want the ceremony to make the 6 p.m. news so the next time one of us has to interrogate a homophobic sailor or Marine they go ape-shit on us. And I hate to say it, but we're a pretty noticeable group."

"I've got a friend who's a justice of the peace," Maggie said. "She's put the word out that she's willing to perform gay marriages once the law changes. If you don't have a preference for who does the ceremony, maybe she could do one at your parents' house. Then it's not out in public."
Tim thought about it and nodded. "That could work," he said. "Tony?"

"Sure. But does the wedding have to be in the city limits?"

Tim shrugged. "I don't know. Anybody?" He saw Abby bouncing, her hand up. "Abby?"

"Do the wedding at my place, then we can go to your parents' house for the party. I'm in the city, and my living room is bigger than either Ziva's or Jimmy's." She smiled. "I can even set up a camera ahead of time to tape it, so we'll have a record of it."

Tim exchanged looks with Tony. "Works for us." He turned to Maggie. "Can you ask your friend if she's willing to perform the ceremony?"

Maggie nodded as she swallowed a mouthful of cornbread. "I'll e-mail her when we get home and have her get in touch with you."

"I'll write down our e-mail addresses," Tony said. "They'll be more legible than McScribble's handwriting these days."

The conversation broke up into smaller groups as everybody settled in to eat. Tim looked over at Tony, who nodded and managed to break Jimmy and Abby off so the four of them were at the kitchen table.

"We have a question for you," Tim said, keeping his voice quiet.

Jimmy's eyebrows went up. "Why do I have a bad feeling about this?"

Tony shook his head. "Nothing like that," he said. "Tim?"

Tim nodded. "Tony and I talked the other night about who we wanted as witnesses for the wedding, and we thought since you two are our best friends, we would ask you."

Abby nodded and squealed as she reached over to wrap an arm around both of them, almost knocking her Caf-Pow over. Jimmy had to grab for it, catching it just before it tipped over.

"Well, I know Abby's answer," Tim said.

Tony looked over at Jimmy, and Tim hoped Jimmy would say yes, because he knew this was important to Tony.

Jimmy nodded. "You really want me?"

Tony clapped him on the shoulder. "You were the first person who came to mind," he said. "I would have thought you'd ask Gibbs," Jimmy blurted.

The two men shook their heads.

"We didn't want to ask Gibbs unless we also asked my dad to be the other witness," Tim said. "And I thought that was leaving my mom out, which didn't seem right. So we decided instead of going for our respective dads, we'd go for our best friends. Besides, we wanted at least a little bit of tradition in this thing." He smiled, and Jimmy matched his smile with one of his own.

"Absolutely," Jimmy said.

"Oooh, does this mean we get to do the toasts at the party?" Abby said.
Tim got a sinking feeling in his chest. "Uh-oh." He turned to Tony. "What did we just let ourselves in for?"

"Oh, you know she'd be toasting us all afternoon anyway," Tony said. "Besides, what can she say that she hasn't already said."

At the gleam in Abby's eyes, Tim groaned. "Great, Tony. Now she's going to be trying to figure out what she can say to embarrass us."

"I wouldn't do that, Timmy," Abby said. She walked behind him and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, carefully avoiding the healing scar, the way she had done a million times before. She rested her chin on his shoulder and turned to whisper in his ear.

"I owe you, Tim. You helped me realize what was right under my nose, and I'll always owe you for that. And you guys are getting a toast worthy of that debt." She turned back to the others. "So, should I e-mail your mom to make party plans?"

"Hey, enough secrets in the corner," Sarah said as she walked in to get more chili. "We're just waiting on you guys to start the games."

"What are we starting with?" Tony asked.

"Balderdash," Sarah said. "Should be right up your alley, Tony."

"She's got you there," Tim said, pushing away from the table. "Come on, let's go play."

As they walked into the living room, Brad was saying, "We're going to have to team up — there's only six pieces and nine of us."

"So we do four teams of two and one team of three," Tim said.

"No, I'll sit out with Kevin," Maggie said, balancing the baby on her hip.

"No, don't do that," Abby said. "I'll play with him." She unbuckled her collar and cuffs and dropped them on the end table.

"You wouldn't mind?"

"No way!" Abby said. "He's a cutie, and I haven't had time to play with him yet."

As she took the baby and settled down on the floor with some of his toys, the others quickly divided into pairs. Tony and Brad teamed up, while Tim picked Ziva, figuring that her usual confusion about English idioms could help them make up good answers. Dwayne and Maggie decided to work together — Tim thought she was still a little overwhelmed by their craziness — leaving Sarah and Jimmy paired up.

He and Ziva got to go first, and they drew a definition. As Tim read the word, he knew this round was going to be deep in the gutter. Forcing himself not to laugh, he read out "eructation" and watched as Tony and Brad smirked at each other.

The pairs scribbled notes back and forth for a bit before passing the answers to Ziva, who shuffled them and handed them to Tim.

"Abby, better cover Kevin's ears," he called as he scanned the answers. "He's not old enough to hear these."
Brad turned to Sarah. "At least he didn't say you weren't old enough to hear them."

Tim snorted. "That's because I saw her suggestion." He rolled his eyes. "I'd say we've completely corrupted her, but I think she came that way."

"Hey, right here, Tim," Sarah said, making a face.

"Oh, just read the possible answers, McBicker," Tony said, setting off a round of laughter from the rest of the group.

"OK, here goes:

"Eructation: A sexually aroused rooster"

"How exactly does one determine that?" Ziva asked. "And why would you want to know?"

"Eructation: Chemically-caused erections that last more than four hours"

"I'm sensing a theme here," Jimmy said.

"Eructation: A burp or belch"

"Oh, my frat buddies would love that definition," Brad said, exchanging high-fives with Tony.

"Eructation: The act of causing a ruckus." Tim couldn't help laughing at that one. "In that case, Tony's got a permanent eructation."

"Hey!" Tony said. "Good thing Gibbs isn't here to hear these."

"Eructation: The steam that escapes from a volcano before an eruption."

"Speaking of Gibbs...," Dwayne said.

Each person went around and guessed, then Tim revealed the correct answer.

"Sure, the two teams with doctors know it's a burp," Tony said.

"You're on one of those teams, Tony," Tim pointed out. "You're just mad that nobody picked your rooster answer."

"Yeah, because they all liked your volcano answer."

"Sorry, Tony, but the sex ones were all too obvious," Sarah said.

"Says the woman who actually used erection in her answer," Tony retorted.

"I was going to use another word, but Jimmy made me change it," Sarah said.

Tim scrubbed his forehead with his hand. "Thank you, Jimmy. I think I'd need a brain brillo if I had to hear my little sister's version."

"Moving on," Tony said. "Pass the cards, Tim."

An hour later, Tony cheered as his and Brad's piece crossed the line, beating out Tim and Ziva. Sarah and Jimmy finished at the back of the pack, while Dwayne and Maggie were halfway through the board.
"What now?" Sarah asked.

"Scrabble?" Tim said.

"My favorite game," Maggie said.

"I'll see if Abby wants a break," Jimmy said. "Count me out."

"Me, too," Tony said. "You guys mind a little music?"

"Music would be good," Tim said, knowing Tony meant the piano, not CDs.

Dwayne and Brad ended up sitting out, too, setting up the checkers board at the kitchen table. As Tim settled in to play against Ziva, Sarah, and Maggie, he noticed Jimmy join Abby and Kevin on the floor at the entryway to the room. Sarah drew an A, so she started the game, leaving him to go last each round. Since there was no point figuring out which words he could play until he saw what was on the board, he just settled back.

Tony was playing the piano, soft jazz that filled the air. He hadn't had much time to play the past few days, so Tim was glad he was taking the opportunity now. He leaned back against the wall and watched Abby holding Kevin on her lap, her hands moving his to play patty cake with Jimmy, who wore a grin almost as big as Kevin's baby smile. When they finished, Jimmy took him with practiced ease that made Tim blink. He didn't realize Jimmy had any experience with babies, but watching Jimmy lift Kevin over his head and blow raspberries on his tummy, he knew this was yet another facet of his friend he had never heard about, like the tap-dancing Tony had discovered last month.

He looked back at the game board and realized he was up next. Ziva had given him the perfect opening for his "Z" and "Y," so he played "zygotes" and got the double word score, with a double-letter score for the "Z."

"Tim, you suck," Sarah said, her words without heat. "You've got a 23-point lead on all of us."

He just smirked at her. That round set the pattern for the rest of the game. He'd settle back between turns and watch Jimmy and Abby. It wasn't that he didn't trust Ducky's assessment that they were good for each other, but he wanted to see for himself.

They spent most of the game playing with Kevin, before he started to nod off in Abby's arms. She put him in his carrier and rocked it back and forth until the six-month-old fell asleep. Jimmy had come to sit on the floor by Tim, his long legs extended out in front. She settled down between Jimmy's legs, leaning back against his chest, his arms wrapped around her waist. Tim played his next turn, but couldn't get over how content Abby looked, how still she was, just sitting there, her eyes closed as she and Jimmy talked, occasionally asking Tim a question.

He just watched, realizing Abby had been totally serious earlier when she said she would owe him. Tim smiled, a warm feeling spreading through his heart. Somehow, he wasn't worried that Abby would hurt Jimmy anymore.

While Abby was taking out her pigtails and changing for bed later that night, Jimmy made some hot chocolate. He figured this time they would get to drink it, especially since he had a question for her.

She came out in flannel skull pajamas with her hair loose around her face and snuggled next to him.
on the couch. "Mmm," she said, licking the whipped cream from her upper lip. "We never did
drink the hot chocolate you made Tuesday night, did we?"

Jimmy shook his head. "No, and I forgot about it until we spent the night here again — Thursday, I
think. It wasn't pretty." He made a face at the memory. "Hard to believe that was only a few days
ago; it seems longer."

Abby nodded. "I know. Like you said, from friends to really serious in less than 12 hours." She
sipped her drink. "It sounds crazy, but it feels right. At least, it does to me."

"It does to me, too." He turned to look at her. "You know earlier tonight, when you were playing
with Kevin?"

"Isn't he adorable!" Abby's face lit up. "I'm so glad Dwayne and Maggie brought him along. I
almost had more fun with him than I did playing the games."

Jimmy nodded. "Yeah. I looked over at one point, and all I could think was 'So that's what Mama
Lab Bat looks like.'" He searched her face to see what she was thinking.

This smile was slow and gentle. "I wondered when we were going to get back to that 'yet.' It... I
know kids aren't fun and smiles all the time. But you're right. When we were playing pattycake
with him, I could picture us with our own baby." She swallowed. "And it's a little scary to me that
I've always avoided serious and committed, and now I not only want a baby... But I'm not able to
imagine having one with anyone else but my you, even if 'us' is less than a week old." She sniffled.
"And I sound like a crazy, needy girlfriend, don't I?"

He set down his mug and pulled her onto his lap, the way they had first cuddled at Bethesda. "I'll
buy the girlfriend part of the description," he said. "But if I describe you as crazy and needy, I have
to describe myself the same way because I was pretty much thinking the same thing." He decided
to bring up the elephant in the room. Which actually made it really crowded, to have an elephant
and a baby lab bat or baby autopsy gremlin. He shook his head. He was spending too much time
around Tony. "I was doing some research this week... One of the advantages of buying all those
expensive medical textbooks —"

"And you realized my biological clock is like one of those bombs Ziva and Gibbs are always
defusing?" she said, laying her head against his shoulder. "Ticking down a lot quicker than we
want it to?"

"Um, yeah. I mean, I know you said you were about Tony's age, but I don't know if that means late
30s or 40 or early 40s. But I know you've worked at NCIS for a long time, and you've got a bunch
of degrees, so I'm guessing you're, um..."

"I'll be 41 in a couple of weeks, Jimmy," she said. "And I didn't do all the research you did, but I
know the basics — there's no guarantee I can even have a baby. And it will probably take me a lot
longer, maybe a year or more to even conceive."

Jimmy nodded and, when he felt the tremble in her body, pulled her closer. "Hey," he said. "It's
OK. Well, I mean, maybe not OK because I can't say that until you're actually pregnant. And you
can't be, at least not yet, because it's only been four days, and um, I'm going to stop talking now."

Abby was still shaking in his lap, but this time with giggles. "I know, Jimmy. Don't worry, I'm not
going to get mad because you're pointing out reality." She sighed.

"You're just saying you want 'yet' to be soon," he said. "Because we could start trying tomorrow
and still not add a Baby's First Christmas ornament to your test tube tree in the lab until 2012."

She nodded. "And it's kind of scaring me because, well-"

"It's been four days, and we're already talking about kids and part of you just wants to go ahead and start trying and figure everything else out during that year or more we'll probably be waiting before we find out if it's possible to cross a lab bat and an autopsy gremlin." Jimmy rubbed her back.
"Yeah. Me too. I mean, I'm excited about the idea, but I'm also afraid that I'm going to wake up and this will all be some crazy dream I had after eating Tony's atomic chili too late at night. Because this is so not normal or traditional or anything else, and it's not going to make sense to people. And Gibbs is probably going to come after me with his rifle, but I don't care because it works for me. And I want it to work for the two of us... or the three of us or however many baby bat-gremlins we have." He paused and sucked in a breath. "And how do you ever manage to say that much at one time without keeling over from lack of oxygen?"

She didn't answer, just laughed until both their bodies were shaking from it, before reaching up to kiss him. After they broke apart, she said, "So you're saying this is right because we're the only two people this crazy?"

From her smirk, he knew she was just messing with him, so he kissed her breathless. When he could speak again, he said, "You know, if we're going to get serious about baby bat-gremlins, we really should practice."

"Good thinking," she said. "Practice tonight. Tomorrow we figure out Operation Baby Lab Bat." She hopped up and pulled him to his feet, leading him back to their bedroom. Oh, yeah, he was officially half of the craziest couple on the team. And maybe this would crash and burn around him, but right now, he just wanted to hang on for the ride.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

AN: It's another moving day. :) The bulk of this chapter has 22 characters all in it at basically the same time, so Kyrie gets huge props from me for not letting me lose anybody along the way. Hope you guys enjoy!

Friday, February 26, 2010

When Gibbs finally broke the gunny in interrogation, Tony looked at the clock, then dropped his head back. "Thank god," he said. "We might actually get out of here on time tonight."

Dwayne just laughed. "Why did you decide to have us all over tonight, again?"

Tony shrugged. "You're all helping Mom and Dad out with the move tomorrow, so we figured feeding you tonight was the least we could do."

"Thanks for inviting the girls along," Dwayne said. "It'll be nice for them to have a chance to meet everybody."

Tony nodded. "Oh, and Tim wanted me to ask. Are you guys OK with the kids calling us by our first names, even if there's a Mr. or Ms. in front of it? Or would you rather last names?"

Dwayne shrugged. "First names is fine, especially since they're helping tomorrow, too. There are too many McGees to use last names."

Tony snorted. "Gibbs is usually good at family events, but he's so used to calling Tim 'McGee' here at work that sometimes he slips, and all four of them turn around. They're going to be there tonight, too. They had movers pack up a van this morning and drove it down today. They're staying with us tonight, so they'll be around. I think Mom is making her baked spaghetti casserole for dinner. And it's not just multiple McGees you have to worry about tomorrow. Jack, Gibbs' dad, is coming down today and staying through the wedding."

"What's he like?" Dwayne asked. "I'm having trouble picturing Gibbs with a dad. I mean, that would mean he was a little kid once, and... He's standing right behind me, isn't he?"

"No, it is just me," Ziva's voice was quiet, but carried a hint of laughter, and Tony could see the glint in her eyes even with the lights low. "Dwayne, Gibbs would like us to escort Gunnery Sergeant Schiedler to lockup."

"Guess that means it's my turn to see what Abby's got that we can use for court," Tony said.

He headed for the lab but stopped in the doorway when he saw Jimmy in there.

"Dr. Mallard found residue of some sort of epoxy on the private's feet," Jimmy said. He was leaning against the station in the middle of the lab, his back to the door, while Abby worked on the computer. "It's mostly on the balls of the feet, but there are traces on the heels. Nothing on the arch."
"That matches what I found in the shoes," Abby said. "Major Mass Spec is working on it now, but I'll bet money it matches the epoxy the repair crews were using on the floor of the room where Schiedler stashed the money."

"Yeah, I'm not taking that bet," Jimmy said. "Last I heard Gibbs had him ready to crack in interrogation. I remember what happened last time I lost a bet with you."

"Oh, you loved it," Abby said. "Not until later, though. Remember, the guys are having us over for dinner?"

Jimmy nodded. "That reminds me, I've got another bunch of boxes in my car."

Tony figured he'd seen enough. "Good thinking, Jimmy. Abby never bets unless she's sure she'll win. Gibbs got him to confess, sent me down here to check on the evidence. Sounds like we've got plenty." He paused. "But Mom and Dad have everything packed up — they drove the van down this afternoon. They don't need boxes."

Jimmy shook his head. "Not empty boxes. Full boxes, of my stuff."

"We're trying to avoid the whole one day of moving craziness, so he's been moving his stuff over a little at a time," Abby explained.

"Wait, you two are moving in together?" Tony just stared. "Already? Even we didn't move that fast."

"You two fought moving in with each other like Kate would have fought the idea of sharing a place with either of you," Abby said. "I thought Ducky, Gibbs, and I were going to have to sit on McGee until he agreed."

"Not the same, Abs," Tony said. "Not to mention, you all thought we were getting separate bedrooms when we moved in together. Well, OK, Gibbs didn't, or at least didn't by the time we actually moved."

"Yeah, I never did understand why Tim was so reluctant to move in with you," Jimmy said. "I figured you'd be the one fighting that."

"Long story, Jimmy," Tony said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Let's just say Tim wanted to make sure I'd dealt with some of my issues before agreeing to move in together." He narrowed his gaze and looked at the couple. "You guys have talked about it? Really talked about it?"

"Yes, big brother." Abby rolled her eyes. "Are you done worrying that Jimmy's going to ruin my virtue?"

"Yours?" Tony said. "I'm more worried you're going to ruin his."

Abby snorted. "That's like Ziva worrying that you were going to ruin Timmy's."

"Really?" Tony grinned. "Jimmy, there's this whole side of you I never knew about."

"Yeah, I'm going to head back down to Autopsy," Jimmy said. "The conversation tonight is going to be even weirder than normal, isn't it?"

Tony shook his head. "Mom and Dad will be there, and Dwayne and Maggie are bringing the girls as well as Kevin." He paused. "Actually, I think Tim was going to see if Ducky, Gibbs, and Jack wanted to come, so we might have everybody. Even Damon."
"Josh?" Abby looked over at him while her fingers tapped away on the keyboard.

Tony shook his head. "No, Sarah said he wasn't coming. I can't decide if she doesn't want to bring him or he doesn't want to come to these things."

"I don't think it's her," Abby said. "She seems pretty serious about him."

Tony growled. "Yeah, and that's what worries me. Tim said this is the only long-term boyfriend she's had that he hasn't met. Sarah doesn't often bring them home to meet Mom and Dad — must run in the family — but she usually introduces them to Tim."

"Maybe that's why she hasn't," Jimmy said. "I mean, he seemed a little worried about McGee being a federal agent the one time we met him, and it's not just one he has to meet, it's both of you. And all the rest of us. And we're a pretty scary bunch-"

Tony couldn't help snorting.

"OK, so you guys are scary," Jimmy said. "But think about it. Even at the game nights, you guys are basically married. Dwayne and Maggie are married. We're as close as it gets since Abby refuses to get married. Ziva's the only single person, and now Damon, but you wouldn't know it to see them together."

Tony held up a hand, stuck on Jimmy's previous sentence. "Wait, Abby refuses to get married?"

"I'm right here, Tony," she said. "And does that really surprise you that I'm not interested in the whole marriage as a way of legitimizing a relationship thing?"

Tony just looked at her.

"What?"

"Abs, what almost happened a month ago because Tim and I weren't married?"

"Vance had to pull rank and threaten to call SecNav so you could be treated as his husband at Bethesda," Abby said. She grinned sheepishly. "OK, so it has its benefits. But you guys are fighting a lot of stigma and assumptions." She shrugged. "Men and women have been together without being married for long enough that it's not usually an issue. And we're getting away from Jimmy's point, which is that bringing your boyfriend to a gathering of couples is a big step, even when the boyfriend isn't worried about the whole federal agent-big brother thing."

"Brad's not married, and he never brings a date," Tony said.

"Because we'd either scare her off or think he was serious about her," Jimmy said. "It's like bringing your date home to meet the parents. You don't do it until you know you're serious."

"Oh, so how did it go when you brought Abby home?" Tony said.

"Um, I haven't- I mean-" Jimmy flushed and stammered to a stop.

"Tony, go work on your reports," Abby said.

He just nodded and left the lab, wondering who was in trouble over his last question. He mentally head slapped himself. He should know better than anyone that families weren't the same. It's not like his father even knew he was seeing somebody, much less living with him and marrying him in a little over a week. His thumb drifted to his bare ring finger, then his hand came up to pull the ring
on its chain out of his shirt. He couldn't wait to put his ring back on, for Tim to do the same. And this time, they weren't just a symbol, but would carry the weight of law.

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As Tony left the lab, Abby turned back to Jimmy. "He has a point, you know?"

"He had a couple of points," Jimmy replied. "And we've talked them to death in the last week."

She looked away. "I know." She sensed Jimmy come up behind her, so she wasn't surprised to feel his strong hands working the knots out of her shoulders. "If we were getting married and doing the whole traditional ring and white dress bit, would you take me to meet your mom?"

She felt the breath from his sigh on the back of her neck. "I don't know," he said, finally. "She-" He paused. "My mom depended on me after my dad died, even though I was little. It was like I was her whole life. She was heartbroken when I finally moved out, and the longer I've been on my own, the more I realize she and I don't have a real healthy relationship." His hands slowed and moved down her arms to wrap around her waist, and she leaned back into him. "She's not good at standing on her own, and with me not around, she gets involved with these guys who don't treat her well. Every time I've tried to say something or suggest she talk to somebody, she ignores me."

"That would mean admitting something's wrong." Abby lay her head back on his shoulder as she started putting together the puzzle pieces.

She felt, rather than saw, his nod. "And she'd lash out at you. She'd see you as taking her baby away, and she would resent your strength."

She nudged his hands away so she could turn and face him, his arms around her waist. "You're not ashamed of me; you're ashamed of her."

"Yeah, kind of." He looked at her, their faces so close, she could almost reach out and brush his nose with hers. "It took me a while to work myself away from her, to retrain her until she was used to not seeing me all the time, not talking to me every day. I had to retrain myself, too, because that was normal for me. Moving away for school helped, and the crazy hours we put in on the job. But I don't know what she would do once she met you, and I don't want to introduce you two until I can figure out the best way to do it."

She kissed him lightly. "Why don't you take Ducky along the next time you see her? He might have some suggestions. He does have that psychology degree, you know."

She was rewarded with one of Jimmy's smiles, the one that brought out his dimple. "He does. And if he wasn't so worried about Victoria, I would, but I think he has enough on his mind with her."

"How's she doing?" She hadn't thought of Ducky's mother in a while, and she realized she should have paid more attention to her old friend. "She's still in the nursing home?"

Jimmy nodded. "She's slipping, and I think from something he said a week or so ago that she's not going to be around much longer. But he doesn't share unless I ask, and he gets so sad when I ask that I don't all that often."

Abby stepped back, and Jimmy released her. "I'll have to make some time to go down there for tea one of these days when it's quiet, just spend some time with Ducky."
"He'd like that," Jimmy said. He looked at the clock on the computer. "What he'd like more is for me to get back to Autopsy. Meet you at your place?"

She nodded. "I should be done on time," she said. "And it's our place, even if you're not there all the time yet."

"Our place." At his grin, she couldn't resist kissing the tip of his nose, then giggling as he tried to rub the lipstick off with his hand.

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When Tony walked in the door to the mudroom, he could hear the rest of the family in the kitchen. After hanging up his coat and putting away all his winter weather gear, he joined them and found Eileen taking two huge casseroles from the oven and Sean sitting at the table with Tim.

"How many people are we feeding tonight, Mom?" he asked as he joined the men at the table, exchanging a quick kiss with Tim.

"I lost track when Tim started listing them off," she said.

"22."

Tony turned to face Tim. "Wait, 22? Where are they all coming from?"

"When Sarah and I stopped by the Navy Yard to invite Gibbs and Jack, you guys were out on a case, but Vance was around. When we explained about moving day tomorrow, he volunteered to help, and then he called back later to say Jackie and the kids had offered to help, too. So I figured I'd better invite them tonight." Tim shrugged. "I figured I can get Kayla, Jared, Kerry, and Michelle to unpack stuff as it comes in, things like dishes and books and stuff. Jack can help me keep them busy, since he shouldn't be doing any heavy lifting either."

"Oh, and Gibbs called my cell earlier," Sean said. "Jack always insists on cooking for him, so they're making a pot of chili and another one of beef stew to simmer at Gibbs' house tomorrow to feed this army of help." He turned up his hands. "What could I say, but 'thank you'?"

"At this rate, you guys will have everything not just moved in, but unpacked too, by the end of the day," Tony said. "So how are we going to do this tonight? We don't have that many places to sit."

"I'll get my chair from the study," Tim said. "And the kids can sit on the floor — they'll enjoy an indoor picnic. We'd better put Jethro either out back or upstairs, though, or he'll eat all the food. Jimmy and Abby will probably take floor spots, too."

"Yeah, did you know he's moving in with her?"

"I didn't know, but I'm not surprised," Tim said.

"Wait a minute," Eileen said. "When I was over here two weeks ago, they had just started dating the night before."

"Oh, they're definitely crazy," Tim said. "But just watch them tonight. Abby's still Abby, but she doesn't get nearly as wound up as she used to — they really do fit together."

"Just like you two do?" Sean said.
Tony nodded. "Abby's even cutting back on her Caf-Pows. Gibbs brought her one this afternoon, and she was only halfway through her morning one."

"Well, that would explain why she's not as wound up," Tim said. He paused and looked at Tony. "She's not giving up caffeine again, is she?"

"Doesn't seem to be." He thought about what he'd seen earlier in the lab. "It was more like she'd forgotten the first one was there, so she hadn't finished it. And the second one was still mostly full when I was in there checking on evidence for the case about 1600."

"OK, then," Tim said. "If she had given it up, I'd worry."

"Why would you worry?" Sean said.

Tony looked at Tim, who was turning pink around the edges and seemed to be having a tough time finding an answer. "Oh!" He realized what Tim was thinking. "You mean they really are talking about bat-gremlins?"

Tim opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again, but said nothing.

"Bat-gremlins?" Sean raised one eyebrow, so like Tim that Tony had to laugh. "Is that supposed to make sense?"

"No," Tony said. "It's, well, the explanation would take longer than it's worth." He turned to Tim. "Seriously?"

Tim shrugged. "They haven't actually said it, but what they haven't said basically told me."

Sean was still looking between the two men, trying to puzzle things out. He started to say something, but Eileen cut him off.

"Honey, just let it go. Tim and Tony don't seem worried about them, and they're adults. And we're not actually their parents, though there are days I have a tough time telling which of you kids are McGees and which just come as part of the package." Tony looked over to see her smirking at him.

"Hey, can I help it if I have a big family?" He smiled. "We're pretty lucky on our end, too. Gibbs makes a great Papa Bear, but it's nice to have a mom, too."

Before she could reply, the doorbell rang.

"It's got to be Vance," Tim said. "Everybody else would just walk in."

Tony went to let him in, but before he got to the front door, Jimmy and Abby, who had arrived right after the director and his family, had opened the door and let them in.

"What smells so good, Tony?" Jimmy asked.

"Mom made her spaghetti casserole," he said. "It just came out of the oven, and we have way too many people coming to sit at a table, so just head on back and help yourself, then find a seat someplace."

He turned to greet Vance and his wife. "Director, let me take your coats. Nice to see you again, Mrs. Vance."

"Hello. Tony, right?" Jackie said. "And this is Kayla and Jared."
"Hi," he said to the kids, who were busy playing with Jethro. "We're going to put him upstairs in a
minute so he doesn't try and eat dinner with us."

"What's his name?" Kayla asked, her arms wrapped around his neck.

"Jethro," Tony said.

Vance turned to look at him. "You named the dog Jethro?"

"Abby did." He rolled his eyes.

"Honey?" Jackie said.

"That's Gibbs' first name," Vance said.

"Middle, actually," Tony said. "Though you knew that, of course, Director, since you have access
to his personnel file. And only Jack calls him Leroy."

"Did I hear somebody say my boy's name?" Jack walked in the front door, Gibbs on his heels.

"Hey, Jack," Tony said, giving him a hug. "Boss, we were just explaining to the director and Mrs.
Vance how the dog ended up with your name."

"Please, Tony," she said. "It's Jackie. Now, it's getting a little crowded here in the doorway. Where
did you say we should go?"

"Straight back into the kitchen. Tim and his parents are back there."

Tony followed them, pointing Jack to the armchair so he could get a comfortable place to sit. "We
don't have nearly enough chairs, Jack, so why don't you stay there and claim that one? I'll get you
some dinner."

Jack muttered under his breath but stayed put. By the time Tony had made his way through the
crowd in the kitchen and brought a plate and a beer to Jack, pretty much everybody else had
arrived.

Tim had herded Jethro upstairs with some rawhide chews, and the four older kids were eating on
the floor. Sean had found a fleece throw in the closet and spread it on the floor for their "picnic,"
which was set up by the front window, out of the way of traffic.

Ducky, Brad, Sean, and Eileen were at the kitchen table, while Gibbs had snagged the study chair
and was sitting near Jack. Vance and Jackie had part of the couch, while Maggie, holding Kevin,
had the third spot. Dwayne sat at her feet, and they passed Kevin back and forth. Tony knew it
wouldn't be long before the baby got passed around the room. He was too big and squirmy for Tim
to handle still, but Tony thought he was getting pretty good with him by now. At least Kevin didn't
start crying as soon as Tony picked him up anymore.

He took his filled plate and joined the rest of the Gibblets on the floor in the living room, finding a
spot between Tim and Damon.

"How's the job hunt going?" he asked.

Damon shrugged. "A few calls, but nothing's panned out so far." He sighed. "I found the perfect job
yesterday — even hand-delivered my application — but it's too soon to have heard back."

"What's the job?" Tim asked.
"You know the Wounded Warrior Regiment?" Damon asked. "Its mission is to help soldiers, sailors, and marines who come back from a tour injured, either physically or mentally, connect with resources that can help them and with others going through the same thing."

Tony nodded. "One of my frat brothers, Steve, is part of the civilian staff for the regiment."

"Steve, the one Kate dated?" Tim said.

Tony nodded. "I forget how he got involved in the program, but I know the last time I talked to him, he was really enjoying it. Said it gave him a sense he was helping." He thought for a second. "Damon, do you want me to call him, put in a good word?"

"You'd do that?" The former marine looked surprised.

Tony nodded. "From what Steve's told me about it, you'd be a good fit. You know a lot about what these guys are going through, and you know the military." He didn't add that during the past couple of weeks, he'd come to trust Damon as he'd spent more time with Tim, time Tony didn't have to give up.

"If you would, I'd really appreciate it," Damon said. "I know I can find a job doing something, but I want to try and find one that matters, where I can do some good. I never thought I'd like a job that's mostly desk work, but the idea of helping guys like my buddies find the help they need makes paperwork sound almost appealing. There might be some chances to go and speak with units, too, let them know about the regiment and explain that it's not a sign of weakness to get help from Wounded Warriors. Especially with PTSD, a lot of grunts don't want to admit we need help."

Gibbs chimed in. "Put me down as a reference," he said. "Tony's right, you would be good at it."

Vance nodded. "DiNozzo, when you talk to your friend, find out who's in charge over there, and I'll put in a good word of my own behind the scenes."

"Wow," Damon said. "You guys are really going above and beyond — Gibbs, this is way beyond Semper Fi."

"You helped us out twice this past year," Gibbs said. "And if I didn't think you'd be good at it, I wouldn't have offered."

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Ziva gathered up several of the empty paper plates and took them into the kitchen, where Sean was pulling cookies from the cabinet above the refrigerator.

"Eileen hid them so Tony and Tim wouldn't find them," he said. "She made the dough and froze it last weekend, then baked them while Tim was napping today."

Ziva smiled. "I think I will just bring a plate into the living room," she said. "Everybody is too comfortable to move."

Ducky nodded from his spot at the table. "Perhaps we should bring these chairs out there and join in. If, of course, there is room."

"There is room," Ziva said. "Not much, but I believe we can figure something out."
She picked the plate with the most cookies and brought it out, setting it on the coffee table.

"Sweet, Mom made cookies!" Sarah reached over and snagged a handful, passing some to Jimmy and Abby, who were too far away to reach the plate themselves. Personally, Ziva suspected they were also too comfortable to move. Once they had finished eating dinner, Jimmy had stretched his legs out, and Abby was now sitting between them, leaning back against his chest, his arms looped around her waist.

She took two cookies herself, then moved just in time to avoid the four kids scrambling forward.

"Jared, Kayla, what do you say?" Jackie said.

"Please, may we have some cookies?" her kids said in unison.

"Yes, Mommy, can we?" Kerry said to Maggie, as Michelle nodded her agreement.

"Say thank you to Mrs. McGee for making them," Dwayne said to his kids.

All four of them turned to Eileen and parroted his words, making everybody smile.

"You're welcome," she said.

"Oh, yeah, thanks, Mom," Sarah said, sheepish.

"Yeah, thanks, Mom," Tim and Tony added.

Ziva settled back in her place on the floor as she watched everybody. Now that people weren't busy eating, Kevin got passed from hand to hand. He settled for a while on Jack's lap, while he and Gibbs played with him, tickling him until he squealed. After a few minutes of that, Tony joined them and ended up coming back over with the baby.

"Figured I'd better rescue him from the tickling machines," he said quietly as he bounced Kevin on his lap. "Yeah, you like that," he said to the baby. Kevin grabbed his finger and started gnawing the knuckle. "Ouch!" Tony pulled his finger out and checked it for damage, then let Kevin take it back. "Dwayne, he's got sharp teeth."

"His bite is definitely worse than his bark these days," Dwayne said, grinning. After a few more minutes, Tony passed him along. Ziva took him for a minute, rubbing noses with him and holding him so he could "stand" on the floor. She offered him to Sarah, who shook her head, before passing him to Abby, who had worn an unspiked collar and cuffs. She snuggled him against her chest so he could look over her shoulder at Jimmy, who was making faces at Kevin.

Damon just shook his head. "Man, you guys all have the touch. I get within two feet of babies, and they start crying."

"Not me," Sarah said. "I never even liked babysitting as a teenager. I'd rake leaves and cut lawns for money before I'd babysit."

"She would," Tim said. "My parents always joked that I got all the maternal genes in the family."

"Didn't you?" Tony said, smirking. "You're the one who taught me how to hold a baby."

Gibbs shook his head. "About time, McGee," he said. "That one case, with the Korean sleeper cell, you were holding that poor baby like it was a bomb about to explode."

Tim turned red. "Yeah, well, after I saw how you held her and she quieted down, I started to figure
it out. Before that, my only baby experience was when Sarah was little, and to a 10-year-old, she was a bomb waiting to explode. Or at least her diapers were."

"Gee, thanks, Tim," Sarah said, sticking out her tongue. "And you wonder why I didn't invite Josh?"

"She does have a point, McGee," Ziva said, smiling.

"Yeah, yeah," he said. "I know."

Ziva settled back against the wall, just watching the entire group hang out together. With the food gone — the cookies hadn't lasted more than a few minutes — Tony had gone upstairs to let Jethro out, and the kids were playing with him. Tony had then moved over to the piano bench and was now playing, his jazzy music a light counterpoint to the hum of voices from a dozen conversations. Jack had challenged Brad to a game of checkers, and Sarah had set up the Scrabble board on the kitchen table, where Ducky, Maggie, and Jackie joined her. Gibbs had taken over the armchair and had Kevin on his lap, the baby bringing out his rare smiles. Jimmy and Abby were still cuddled together, talking quietly with Tim, while Eileen and Sean sat with Dwayne and Vance, looking at family pictures each man carried in his wallet.

"This is a pretty special group," Damon said, his voice quiet as he scooted next to her. "Marines, we become brothers. Semper Fi and all that. Gibbs and Dwayne might be the only marines in this bunch, but you guys all live that out."

Ziva nodded. "We are a family," she said. "Some by blood, some by love, but all of us by choice."

He sat cross-legged, their knees touching. "You didn't have to bring me into this," he said. "Fact is, the way Tony reacted the last time I was around, you could argue it was putting an outsider above family. But you did, and they-" he paused. "They just accepted me in."

Ziva nodded. "It is our way," she said. "I, too, was an outsider once. Tony did not trust me, but after I put much on the line to help Gibbs out, Gibbs did. And his trust is the reason the others accepted me." She smiled. "It is the same in your case. I am family, and they trust me, so you were welcome because of me. Now, you are welcome because of you. Tony will always be the last person to accept somebody new into our group, but once you have his approval, you are, as they say, part of the family."

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Saturday, February 27, 2010

It was still dark when Tim woke up the next morning. He got up and rolled the kinks out of his injured shoulder, stretching out the rest of his body more fully, then waking Tony. "Come on," he said. "We've got to get over to Mom and Dad's new house with the truck before everybody else shows up."

Tony groaned. "I'm up, I'm up." He twisted on the bed, cracking his spine. "Go on, shower. I'll let the dog out."

Tim nodded and headed into the bathroom. He still had to wash his hair one-handed, but he could lift his elbow out to the side until it was chest-level, so that was some progress. In the front, he could almost make it up to shoulder-level.

He kept his shower short so the house's aging water heater wouldn't give out before the four of them were done and was just pulling on his old NCIS sweatshirt and paint-splattered jeans when
Tony returned, just polishing off a waffle.

"Mom's making breakfast," he said. "The waffles are in the oven staying warm, and she's about to make bacon."

"Yum," Tim said. "Between that and all the food Jack was talking about making, we're going to eat well today."

"Yeah, well we'll burn it off with all the moving," Tony said. "And you'll burn it off running herd on the kids."

After a quiet breakfast, they headed off to Alexandria. Tony drove his car, while Tim rode in the truck with Sean, and Eileen drove her car. Sarah had Sean's car and would drive it over to the house, then ride home with Ziva.

Gibbs walked out of his house as soon as they pulled in the driveway, so Tim was sure he had been watching from the window. The others wouldn't arrive for another half an hour.

"Morning," he said. "Got a pot of coffee going in the kitchen."

"We're good," Sean said. "So, how do we want to do this?"

"Let's just start bringing in boxes," Tony said. "Tim, you want to organize them as they come in?"

Tim nodded. "You marked them all with the rooms they belong in, right?"

His mom nodded. "I'll show you which room is which while your dad and Tony start unloading boxes."

She gave him a quick tour of the house, which wasn't that much different from what he'd seen of Gibbs' house. The second floor was the only part he'd never seen before, and that was pretty basic — bedrooms, bathroom.

By the time they'd gone back downstairs, Tony, Gibbs, and Sean had piled several boxes in the living room and kitchen.

"Jack should be over in a bit," Gibbs said. "I'll send him in to help, McGee."

Tim just nodded and started opening the kitchen boxes. He knew basically how his parents would want the dishes organized, and he could do that, even if it would take longer because he could only lift one at a time.

He had just finished with the plates and bowls when he heard the thump of Jack's cane.

"Mornin' Tim," he said. "My boy sent me back here. What should I do?"

Tim looked around. "If I show you where they want the dishes, can you do those? It's taking me forever because I don't want to risk breaking any."

"Course I can," Jack said.

Tim showed him where to put things, then walked back to the living room, where the number of boxes had grown, along with the number of helpers. Jackie and the kids walked in. "Jared, Kayla, you help Mr. Tim and Mr. Jack, OK?" she said.

"Hey, guys," Tim said. "Go put your coats in the kitchen, and let's see what there is to do."
Neither of them was tall enough to help Jack with the dishes, so Tim set Kayla to putting away silverware and had Jared handle the pots and pans that went in the lower cabinets.

The wall of boxes in the living room was much larger, and Tony, Jimmy, and Gibbs were just carrying in the sofa when Tim returned to the living room.

"Can you guys get the bookcases next?" he said. "Then I can get the kids to start filling those up once they're done in the kitchen."

Tony nodded. "Damon, Sarah, Abby, and Ziva were getting those," he said. "Mom and Dad were getting Dad's chair, and Vance, Jackie, and Brad were getting the kitchen table and chairs."

"And we're running late," Dwayne said as he walked in, followed by his family. "Sorry, guys."

"No worries," Tim said. "You guys had more people to get together than anybody else, and we had to get a bunch of stuff in before there was anything the kids could help with anyway."

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Vance took one end of the kitchen table as Brad passed it down to him, while Jackie took the other to keep it off the ground.

"Let me just pass down some chairs," Brad said. "Then I'll help with the table."

Vance nodded and grinned as Abby climbed back up in the truck and passed the chairs down to Jimmy, who stacked them on the side. "There you go," she said. "Jimmy, looks like one of the beds is next."

He nodded. "Tim said we had most of the downstairs furniture once the kitchen table and chairs come in."

Brad hopped down from the truck and took Jackie's place at the other end of the kitchen table. "We've got that," he said.

Vance looked over his shoulder as he walked backward to the house. Once inside, he chuckled as Tim herded the kids out of their way. Kayla was showing Kerry and Michelle how to put the books on the shelves on either side of the fireplace, with McGee handling the higher shelves. Jared was in the kitchen with Jack, helping him put away boxed goods on the lower shelves.

He and Brad set up the kitchen table, pushing it against the wall to leave the way clear for people carrying in furniture and boxes.

"You do this for all your patients?" he asked Brad as they headed back to the truck.

"Nope. You do this for all your agents?" The doctor grinned at him.

"They're a special bunch, that's for sure," Vance said.

Abby and Ziva were passing down pieces of beds, so Vance and Brad grabbed an oak headboard and headed back into the house.

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Jimmy and Tony followed Tim's directions to put the headboard they were carrying in Sean and Eileen's room. Damon and Dwayne followed with the footboard, and Maggie, Sean, and Eileen carried the rest of the frame pieces.

"OK, let's get this put together so we can bring in the mattress and box spring," Tony said.

"I've got it," Sean said. "Dwayne, if you and Maggie can help Eileen and me, we can get this put together by the time they get the bedding in."

Jimmy stepped out of the way and headed back downstairs, followed by the other guys. They stepped aside to let Vance and Brad up the stairs, then headed for the truck.

"Abs, we need the queen-sized mattress and box spring next," he said as they reached the truck.

"The twin ones are in front," she called back. "Can you guys take those up first?"

"We can do that," he said. "Damon, you think we can handle these each alone?"

He nodded. "Tony, you want to wait for Brad and Vance to get Mr. and Mrs. McGee's bed?"

"Sure," Tony said. "And Damon, you can call them Sean and Eileen."

Jimmy snickered. "Tony, even I call them Mr. and Mrs. McGee."

Tony just rolled his eyes. "You really don't have to," he said.

Jimmy just hopped up in the truck and picked up a mattress to hand down to Damon. The kiss from Abby as she handed it over was a bonus.

As he handed the mattress down, Tony started laughing. "Jimmy, when will you learn you can't sneak a kiss from Abby without getting red lipstick on your face?"

"We weren't sneaking," he said, using his now-free hand to rub at his lips. "All gone?" He paused. "Wait, why am I asking you? You wouldn't tell me if there was some left, just wait for Gibbs to head-slap me."

"Playing grab-ass on the job again?" The team leader walked up just then.

"Gibbs, leave him alone." Abby's voice floated out from the truck. "Jimmy, hop down, and I'll pass you the box spring. Gibbs, you're helping Tony with Sean and Eileen's mattress."

"Yes, ma'am," Gibbs said.

They all started laughing as Abby stuck her tongue out at him.

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Jack finally finished putting everything away in the kitchen with the help of the little boy. Jared was his name. They walked — well, Jared ran and Jack walked — into the living room to find most of the books already unpacked.

"Tim, you need a hand with that?" he asked, seeing the man on the floor behind the TV.

"I've got it, Jack," he said. "Just hooking up all the wires. And until the beds and the rest of the
bedroom furniture is in, we can't do a lot more of the small stuff. I don't want to start hanging anything on the walls yet." He paused. "Actually, though, there is something you and the kids can do."

"Name it."

"There are a couple of big boxes in the dining area that have framed photos in them. My parents have a whole wall of them, all family shots. If you can all figure out how to arrange them and put the hooks in the wall, we can hang them later."

"Sure," Jack said. "I'll bet Jared here, and Kayla, might even be able to help me with the nails."

"What about me?" Kerry said.

"Oh, you and Michelle have an important job, too," Jack said. "You need to help me draw a picture showing where each photo goes so we know where to hang them later on."

He led the kids back and found the boxes stacked along the wall labeled Family Photos. Jack was about to put his cane down and lift them when Sarah walked in.

"I've got them," she said. "Where do you want them?"

"On the dining room table?" he said. "We're going to mark where they go. Are there any that have a special place?"

She shook her head. "No, and Mom and Dad rotate some new ones every few weeks, so just find a way to hang them that looks OK. The way Dad was snapping photos at one point last night, I'm sure a few of those will get added in once he has a chance to get them printed." She put the three boxes on the table and sliced the tape open with her car key. "Here you go. I'll see if Tim knows where the hammer is."

Jack opened the first box to find a bag of hooks and nails inside and set those aside. He sent Michelle into the kitchen to get the notepad and pen from the set on the counter by the phone.

"OK," he said. "Let's get started."

"What should we do, Mr. Jack?" asked Kayla.

"We need to see all the pictures first," Kerry said. "Right, Mr. Jack?"

"Sounds like a plan to me," he said. "Let's lay them out on the table. Jared, why don't you go ask Mr. Tim about the hammer."

"OK, Mr. Jack!" The boy dashed into the living room, then up the stairs.

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By the time they all headed to Gibbs' house for lunch, the van was empty, and everyone was starting to help unpack boxes.

Abby perched on the stairs to the second floor with her bowl of beef stew, Jimmy a couple of steps above her, his legs reaching past her. The kids were having another indoor picnic in the entryway.

"Miss Abby, how did you get a spider web on your neck?" Kerry asked.
She ignored Jimmy's snicker behind her. "It's a tattoo," she said. "I got somebody to put it there."

"Why?" The little girl pushed her curly brown hair back behind her ear. "Did it hurt?"

Abby nodded. "It hurt a lot," she said. "But I wanted it there, so I decided I was OK with it."

"Do you have other tattoos?" Kayla sat up tall.

"I do," Abby said. She remembered Carson, the kid in McGee's ranger troop, and decided to head off the discussion before it got into an area she didn't want to go, especially with the director's kids and a 4-year old in the room. "I have some on my arms, but you can't see them because of my sleeves." She scooted away from Jimmy and stood up. "Come on, let's go unpack the rest of Mr. and Mrs. McGee's stuff."

Back at the McGees' house, they found Tony and Brad were already there, and she could hear people upstairs.

"Mom and Dad are putting away their clothes," Tony explained. "Brad and I just brought a bunch of boxes filled with books up to the guest room. Kayla, do you think you, Kerry, and Michelle could put those away?"

"What about the high shelves?" Kayla asked.

"When Miss Sarah gets done with lunch, I'll send her up to help you with the high shelves, OK?"

"OK, Mr. Tony!" The three girls ran upstairs.

"What about me?" Jared said.

"You see all these empty boxes?" Tony said. When Jared nodded, he continued, "Follow Mr. Brad downstairs, and he'll show you where they go."

"OK!" Jared almost tripped over his feet in his haste to follow Brad to the basement.

Abby waited until they were gone before laughing.

"What's so funny, Abs?" he said.

"Just surprised to see you finally figured out how to handle kids," she said. "I always knew Timmy would make a great dad, but you were doing a pretty good dad imitation there, too."

He grinned. "I've always been known for my impressions, Abs. You know that." But he still had the smile on his face as he turned away, and Abby was glad she'd said something.

She settled down in the corner by the small wall that marked the separation between the living room and dining room. There was a smaller bookcase here, or at least a shorter one. It was deeper than the others, though. When she opened the top box in front of it, she realized why. It was full of photo albums. She couldn't resist opening the first one and started giggling at pictures of Timmy as a toddler.

"Uh-oh."

She looked up to see Tim standing behind her.

"Oops," she said. "Sorry, McGee. I opened it and couldn't resist."
"Couldn't resist what?" Tony walked over.

"Baby McGee photos," she said.

"Oh, these are the ones Mom said we could take some of," he said, grinning.

Tim just shook his head. "I'm never going to hear the end of this, am I?"

"Nope!" Abby passed the album to Tony and opened the next one.

"I thought lunch break was over?" Gibbs walked in, leading most of the rest of the group.

"Baby McGee photos!" That was all Abby needed to say, and everybody was passing around albums as Tim buried his face in his hands, just the tips of his red ears showing.

"Aww, it's just because we love you, Timmy," she said, wrapping an arm around him in a hug.

"Jimmy, your girlfriend's hugging my almost-husband," Tony said as Jimmy walked in.

"She does that every day, Tony," he said. "What's your point?"

Tony wrinkled his face in thought as the rest of the group started laughing.

"Hey, there have to be Baby McSis pictures in here, too. Right, Tim?" Tony asked.

Tim sat up, and Abby grinned at the expression on his face, especially when Sarah rolled her eyes. "Oh, there are definitely Sarah pictures in here." He looked over. "Abs, there should be a green album in there."

"Tim, you are so dead," Sarah said, sticking her tongue out.

"I must say, I quite enjoy seeing these glimpses into the past and hearing the stories that go with them," Ducky said as he settled on the couch. "And I think a break to allow us to digest our food before continuing with the unpacking would be most wise." Abby hid her laugh at the glint of mischief in Ducky's eyes and focused on sorting through the boxes.

"McGee, there are at least three green albums in here," she said. She pulled out one to find pictures of Tim crawling around. "Not this one," she said, passing it to Jack.

Eileen crouched down to peer into a box. "Oh, I know which one Tim's looking for," she said.

Abby opened the next one to find a picture of a pre-teen Tim and a pregnant Eileen. "This one?" she asked.

Eileen shook her head. "No, those are all my baby belly photos with Sarah," she said. She took the third album from Abby's hands and opened it. "Here you go, Tim," she said, passing it on.

Meanwhile, Abby was flipping through the one she held. After the first page, each page had a picture of Eileen from the side, some with Tim in them, some with just her. Each one was labeled, starting at eight weeks.

Abby started turning the pages, watching the changes. "Wow," she said. "You look like--"

"Like I swallowed a basketball?" Eileen laughed. "I was like that with both of these two."

Abby looked back a few pages. "You were showing really early," she said.
"Second child," Jackie said, as she and Maggie joined them. "I showed a lot sooner with Jared than with Kayla."

Maggie nodded. "Same here. And with Kevin, I felt like I'd just found out I was pregnant, and I was already starting to show."

"That's part of it," Eileen said. "But I showed early with Tim, too. I wasn't even 12 weeks before I started getting asked when I was due."

Abby nodded. "My mom was like that," she said. "My brother's younger than I am, and I kind of remember when she was pregnant with him. But all I remember is her just having a big, round belly. She said she was the same with both of us, and I would be the same way because all the women in her family carried really big."

Eileen nodded. "My mother told me that when I was pregnant with Tim," she said. "She was right, too."

"What was Nana right about?" Tim asked.

"That Keegan women show early when they're pregnant," Eileen said. "I'd tell Sarah she's in for the same fate, but she seems pretty adamant that she doesn't plan on having kids."

Abby smiled. "Yeah, I said that 20 years ago," she said.

"You said that five years ago," Tim said.

"Really?" Eileen looked at Abby, then Tim. "You two were that serious?"

Abby looked at Tim, who shrugged. "We didn't really talk about it that much," she said finally. "I was just generally not into the whole settling-down thing."

"And now you're 180-degrees in the other direction," Tim said. He smirked. "Never say never, Abby."

She shook her head. "Don't start conversations you don't want to finish, Timmy."

"Yeah, right." Tim's ears turned pink. "I'm going to go hang photos."

-Gibbs finished stacking boxes in the basement and straightened, feeling his back crack and his knees pop. He headed upstairs to find the house had emptied out some, with just the McGees, including Tony, plus Ziva and Jack in the living room.

Sarah was just putting the last DVD in the case under the TV. "OK, Ziva, I'm ready," she said. "I'm sorry you had to stay late. I could have gotten the guys to give me a ride."

"It is no problem," Ziva said. "But I am sure your parents are ready to have their house to themselves."

"We're fine," Sean said. "And we really appreciate your help — everybody's help."

"Glad to do it," Gibbs said.
"It was a treat," Jack said. "I got more conversation today than I will in a week with Leroy."

"Dad."

"I'm just telling it like it is, son," Jack said.

Gibbs rolled his eyes.

"Jack, you're welcome to come over this week while Gibbs is at work," Eileen said. "We're not going to be doing much except getting ready for the party next Sunday."

"Yes, the party," Jack said. "It will be nice to see the first of the kids get married."

"Might be the only ones for a while," Tony said.

"Jimmy and Abby?" Sarah said.

"Abby's not big on traditional marriage," Tony said.

"Abby's not big on traditional anything," Tim retorted.

Gibbs snorted. "You two know something I don't?"

"You're the one who knew about the shotgun comment, Boss," Tony said.

"You letting them use your sniper rifle, Leroy?" Jack said.

"They're not kids, Dad," Gibbs said. "Any one of them could fire your Winchester at least as well as you, except maybe Jimmy."

"Not me," Sarah said.

"I still do not understand why Tony keeps mentioning shotguns in the same sentence with Jimmy and Abby," Ziva said.

Gibbs raised one eyebrow. "You serious, Tony?"

Tim turned and glared at his partner, then turned to face Gibbs. "Boss, I know this is something you don't normally do, but let it go," he said. "If Tony's right, they'll say something when they're ready for everybody to know. And I'm fairly certain he's not right."

"About the facts today, no, I'm not right," Tony said. "But you know they're thinking about it. They're not talking about it, but they're thinking about it."

"And if they're thinking about it, that's their decision," Tim said.

"True," Tony admitted.

"I still do not understand," Ziva said.

"I'll explain it in the car, away from these two," Sarah said, pointing at her brother and brother-in-law. "Come on, let's go."

Once they left, Gibbs opened his mouth, about to follow up on what Tony had said, but then shut it. They might be talking about Jimmy and Abby, but he was pretty sure Tim's comments were as much about himself and Tony, and Gibbs decided he was going to respect that. Tim didn't stand up
to him often — that was usually Tony's role on the team — and Gibbs knew him well enough to know that when he did, it was because he felt strongly about something. He wasn't going to push back against that.
Chapter 12

Monday, March 1, 2010
Ducky straightened up from the corpse on his autopsy table, feeling the muscles in his back protesting the change in position. Days like these, he envied Jimmy's youth. It had been many years since he could claim that attribute in regards to his body, even if he did try and keep his mind active.

That particular goal had taken on new meaning several years ago as his mother began her slow slide into dementia. If that was indeed his genetic fate, he could not hope to stop it, but he did what he could to stave off the possibilities for as long as he could.

Sighing, he bent to his task again. Two bodies lay in drawers, their secrets already revealed at his hands. Three still remained, and he rather thought he and young Jimmy would have the latest night of all the team today. Jethro and the rest of the team were staking out their suspect's home, but they were able to work in shifts. Anthony and Dwayne were out there now, and Jethro and Ziva would take the overnight shift. Ducky knew it was no coincidence that Jethro had given the two men the earlier shift, allowing them to get home to their families. He would not have given a thought to such a consideration when they had first met almost 15 years earlier, but time was beginning to mellow the team leader. Time and his willingness to allow his team to take the place of the family he had lost those many years ago.

He sighed and looked at the clock.

"Mr. Palmer."

"Yes, Dr. Mallard?"

"I do believe we will be here well into the evening searching for the answers Gibbs seeks. A break would not be amiss, and indeed might make us sharper when we return for having given the mind a brief respite."

"Yes, doctor?"

Ducky smiled. "Go find Abigail, and you two enjoy your dinner. Corporal Emmet will be here when we return."

Jimmy nodded. "Thanks, Dr. Mallard," he said. "We brought in some leftovers from dinner yesterday, and we have more than enough to go around if you would care to join us."

He shook his head. "No, lad, you two have both been hard at work since Gibbs called us in early this morning, and that won't change the rest of the evening. Take these chances when you get them, or work will take its toll."

"Yes, sir," Jimmy said. "I'll be in the lab if you need me."

As he left the autopsy suite, Ducky smiled after him. He had rather enjoyed seeing love blossom between his two young friends. It seemed to be in the air these days, with Anthony and Timothy planning their wedding for Sunday unless something delayed the court ruling. He hoped they would finally get to meet Sarah's young man at the event. Perhaps Jimmy would know if Joshua was planning to attend.

He settled in at his desk and pulled out the meal he had hastily packed that morning. Long
experience had taught him to keep enough essentials on hand to be able to bring in two or three meals if it seemed as though a body would keep him as his station long into the night.

Before he could begin his sandwich, however, his phone rang.

"NCIS Autopsy," he said, answering it. At the voice on the other end, he felt his heart sink. He listened to the news the caller provided, then gave the answers he knew were required. When the call ended, he hung up the phone and stared sightlessly at the wall. He had known this day was coming, but he had not thought it would be this soon. His mother's doctor was quite clear. The infection that raged in her body would overwhelm her weakened system in short order without medication, and though it pained him to do so, Ducky had chosen to abide by her request back when she was still competent that he take no unnecessary measures to preserve her life. At this point, it was a minimal life at best, her mind too fogged to even enjoy the gardens she once had loved, the neurons unable to fire in the proper sequence to allow her to walk or even eat without somebody feeding her. Unless nature allowed her body to fight off the infection, a most improbable outcome, she would not last more than a few days.

He closed his eyes and swallowed, feeling his grief as a lump in his throat. The simple sandwich on the table before him seemed as appetizing as wallpaper paste, but he forced himself to eat. If he didn't, Jimmy would notice when he returned, bless his observant heart, and he would ask. More, he would share his concerns with Abigail. Ducky knew he could squelch the curiosity and concern of either of them, but he suspected the two of them at once would be more than he could handle. They would mean well, but he did not want this to dampen what should be a joyous week for their little family. Yes, most of the people he considered his family knew Mother, but not well enough to mourn for her. Rather, they would mourn on his behalf, and he felt it his prerogative to decline that in advance. If they knew, they would, and just knowing that was enough for him. Mother had outlived all her friends, and there was no family close enough to contact. Just him and his adopted family. And after everything the boys had been through in recent weeks, he would not allow this to sadden what should be one of the happiest days of their lives.

As he finished his basic meal, he put the water on to boil for a post-prandial cuppa, a tradition he and Mother had often shared on evenings he was able to make it home in time for dinner. Tonight, he would share his tea with Jimmy, the closest he had to a son, and perhaps invite Abigail to join them if she was able. He could use a reminder that life would continue, and there was no better example of that than Abigail's warm-hearted exuberance.

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Tuesday, March 2, 2010

After Leroy returned from the stakeout that morning, Jack decided to go see Sean and Eileen so his son could sleep in peace.

Sean answered the door, book in hand.

"Jack," he said. "Come on in."

"Thanks," he said. "Leroy's asleep — he and Ziva were on a stakeout all night — so I thought I'd get out of his hair."

"We're still getting things sorted out after the move, but if you don't mind a bit of clutter..."
"Not at all," Jack said. "You've seen my boy's house. Not that I'm saying he's messy, mind you. Too many years in the Corps for that. But he's got a habit of just keeping everything he needs out where he can find it."

Sean smiled and led the way into the kitchen. "Nothing wrong with that," he said. "Now, Jack, are you a coffee drinker like Eileen or would you like some tea?"

"Coffee, if it's no trouble," he said, taking a seat at the kitchen table. Eileen was standing at the kitchen counter, mixing ingredients into a bowl.

"No trouble at all," she said. "After all the food you made Saturday to feed the crew, not to mention helping Tim ride herd on the kids, it's the least we can do."

"Oh, the kids were a pleasure," Jack said. "Been a long time since I've gotten to spend much time with kids. Sure, my neighbors bring their kids by the store, but it's not the same."

"No, it isn't," Eileen said. "It seems like just yesterday Sarah was the same age as Kayla, and now she's about to graduate from college."

"They grow up fast," Jack said. "Course, the wife and me, we just had Leroy, and he was a stubborn one, always determined to do things his way, even if that was the hard way."

"You don't need to tell us about stubborn kids," Sean said, bringing over a cup of coffee for Jack. "We raised two of them."

Jack nodded. "I can see your girl's a little spitfire, probably takes everything as a challenge." He thought back and smiled. "Shannon was like that, Leroy's wife. She'd disguise it with her beautiful smile, but she could be as hard-headed as he was if she had her mind set on something. And Leroy. Well, he has his own way of doing things."

"So we've figured," Sean said, his voice dry. "He certainly inspires loyalty, though. The kids would do anything for him, and I think he would do anything for them."

Jack nodded. "The first time I met them, first time I'd seen Leroy since he joined NCIS, they came back to Stillwater to investigate a murder. Tim set himself up with his laptop in my store and started working his magic, you know how he does."

Eileen nodded. "I don't understand half of what he says, but he's always been good with computers."

"He was working away and Leroy came in, asked what he had. He called him 'Boss,' and I couldn't believe my ears." Jack shook his head. "In Stillwater, the only boss was Old Man Winslow up at the mine. Man ran the town. If you weren't under his thumb because you worked at the mine, he'd find another way to control you. Me and LJ, we started the store to get out from under that, never did like buckling under." He sighed. "It'd been a long time since I'd seen Leroy. Not since the girls' funeral, almost 20 years earlier. It changed him, and when Tim called him 'Boss,' I thought maybe it had changed him too far, taken him away from his roots. By the time they solved the case, I'd come to realize that they use it as a sign of affection, of respect."

"The first time I heard Abby call him Papa Smurf, I thought I was hearing things," Eileen said. "Either that or it was an Abby-ism. But the more we've come to know Jethro, the more I realize that she was just describing him. He's somehow turned them into not just a team, but a family." She smiled. "If you'd told us five years ago, when Tim joined the team, that one day we'd be buying a house next door to his boss and that we'd end up with six kids instead of two, I wouldn't have
"Seems to me, that's mostly because of Tony," Jack said. "Oh, don't get me wrong, Tim looks up to Leroy as much as the others. But just the few times we've met, I can tell he doesn't need Leroy to be his dad, not the way the others do." He thought back to New Year's Eve at Ziva's, to her story about her family, the one she'd been born into and the one she had chosen. "I don't know all their stories, but I know Leroy's picked up most of those kids because they don't have a dad, and in some cases, no mom either. Tim and Sarah are lucky to have both. Tony doesn't seem to have either, at least that I can tell." He didn't mention Ziva, not knowing what they knew of her story and not sure it was his to share.

"We're both looking forward to the wedding," Sean said. "Tony, well, he's just who Tim needs in his life, and vice versa." He smiled. "Of course, it wouldn't be the first time a geeky McGee fell for a basketball-playing people person."

Eileen walked over and lay her hands on Sean's shoulders as she stood behind him. "Oh, hush, you," she said, laying a kiss on top of his head+. "Now, why don't you two go look through those photos from Friday night and figure out which ones should go up on the wall?"

"Yes, ma'am," Sean said, his eyes twinkling. "Come on, Jack, the captain has spoken."

Jack followed him into the dining room and took a minute just to look at the photo wall, the one he and the kids had hung. "You've got a fine family here, Sean," he said. "And I can tell you're a man who respects family." He could hear the younger man behind him spreading out photos on the table.

"I'm lucky, I have to say," Sean said. "The first time Tim told us about Jethro's family, all I could think about was how easily that could have been me, could have been Eileen and the kids. I don't think you ever take family for granted when you're away on tour, but it made me grateful I'd always done as much as I could to stay in touch with them when I was gone, to spend as much time with them as I could when I was home."

Jack nodded and turned to take a place at the table, giving his leg a rest. "You raised a fine boy," he said. "Not too many out there willing to stand up to Leroy, and he did a good job the other night."

"You caught that, did you?" Sean looked over at him.

Jack nodded. "Caught enough of it." He shook his head. "Being a parent when they're little is one thing. Those teenage years, well, there were days I thought Leroy would drive me to drink. But watching the birds get ready to fly the nest and letting them, that's one of the hardest things, I think as a parent." He nodded. "Tough to adjust to if you've never done it before, to realize the kids you've raised now have somebody more important in their lives. And tough to realize you might not be the first person they go to about the important stuff, that somebody else has more say."

Sean smiled. "You caught more than I thought you would."

"Give me some credit for knowing my boy," he said. "I can understand his concerns about the kids. He's had something on his mind since I've been here." He paused. "Jimmy and Abby don't seem too much of a secret, more something they've all agreed not to talk about. Your boys, though, they're keeping things close to the vest." He could see the conflict in Sean's eyes. "Now, I'm not asking you to betray a trust, mind you. I've got eyes and ears, and they're lots of things you learn from just listening to what people say and don't say. Leroy's good at that when it comes to work, not so much on the personal side of things. I might take a moment to point some of what I see out
to him."

Sean nodded. "He's definitely got a piece of the puzzle," he said. "I don't think I can say something to him, not without betraying the boys' trust. I just hope when the time comes for them to talk to him, Jethro realizes that they had good reasons for not saying anything to him until then."

Jack nodded. "Oh, I think he will."

Before he could say any more though, Eileen joined them, a plate of steaming cookies in hand. "Hot out of the oven," she said. "I've got milk in the refrigerator, too."

Jack smiled. "Can't beat warm cookies and cold milk on a winter day," he said.

-Gibbs woke to find the sun low in the sky and sounds of his father in the kitchen. He quickly showered and dressed in jeans and his red Corps hoodie for the stakeout. Tony hadn't called, nor Ducky, so nothing had broken in the case. When he padded downstairs in socked feet, Jack was just taking a roast from the oven.

"Hey, Dad," Gibbs said. "You didn't have to make dinner."

Jack smiled. "No, no, I didn't. Sean and Eileen invited me to join them, but I figured you could use a good meal before you headed back out."

"You spend time over there?"

Jack nodded. "I helped Sean pick out some new pictures for the wall." He smiled. "He's got a good eye. Gave me some of the ones he didn't frame to bring over here. We thought you could bring some of them in to pass to the rest of the family." He motioned to the table. "Go, look. I'll bring this out in a minute."

Gibbs settled in at his table and picked up the stack of photos. Years of crime scene photos had given him a sense for composition, and he could tell Sean had some skill there. He started flipping through them. Ducky looking thoughtful as he perused the Scrabble board. The kids enjoying their indoor picnic. Michelle sitting on Jethro's back, trying to convince him to give her a ride. Tony playing the piano, his eyes closed in the profile shot. Tim, Damon, and Ziva all biting into their cookies at the same time. Jack and Brad concentrating on the checkers board.

The next photo made him blink. He was sitting in the armchair, Kevin nestled in his arms, his hands forming the movements for "The Itsy Bitsy Spider." Kevin was reaching for his hands, and he had a grin on his face he hadn't seen in years. Not since... Not since Kelly. He swallowed, feeling the memories like a lump in his throat, and set that one aside.

He almost wished he hadn't thought of Kelly when he saw the next photo. Sean had captured Abby and Jimmy as they sat on the floor, her between his legs, his chin resting on her shoulder. Their long legs stretched out in front, her arms on top of his as they wrapped around her waist. She was giggling at something he had said, and he could see the adoration in Jimmy's eyes. He dropped the stack of photos and went to stand by the windows, looking out.

"Something wrong, son?"

He turned to find Jack had set down two plates covered in slices of roast beef with green beans and
potatoes. The older man sat at the table, waiting for him.

Gibbs joined him at the table, but didn't say anything. He should have known he didn't have to. Jack tapped a finger on the photo of Jimmy and Abby.

"This what's bothering you?"

Gibbs opened his mouth, but stopped, suddenly not sure how to respond.

"Leroy?"

"Friday is Abby's birthday." He looked down. "We always..." He paused. "I always take her out to dinner the night before. It's a tradition we have."

"Did she tell you she was busy?" Jack said.

Gibbs shook his head. "We don't usually make formal plans," he said. "I just show up at her apartment that night, and we go out."

"Talk to me, son."

"Aw, hell, you heard them yesterday, Dad." He sighed. "Jimmy's pretty much moved in with her, and it sounds like they're talking about having kids, from what McGee said yesterday."

"It's tough to watch the baby birds fly the nest," Jack said. "Why, I remember when you were a teenager. You'd already enlisted, but hadn't shipped out yet. You got into it with Chuck Winslow. I could see you from the store, you two pounding each other. You know, I wanted to step in then, but I knew you needed to fight your own battles. Wasn't until Ed got involved, made it an unfair fight, that I stepped in."

Gibbs just looked at Jack, trying to figure out where he was going with this.

"You see, son, part of kids growing up is figuring out when to step back and let them live their own lives. It's not always easy. Fact is, some of the hardest things for me as a parent were the things I didn't do. After the girls died, well, I knew you were mad at me. Didn't know why, and you weren't going to talk about it. You know me, that's not my style. You always said I'd talk something to death, and you weren't half-wrong. But you were an adult, a man who'd just lost his own family, and it was your decision, not mine."

Gibbs watched Jack's face and realized for the first time what it had cost his dad to step aside all those years ago, to let him be at a time when he was grieving the loss of Shannon and Kelly as much as Gibbs was mourning his wife and daughter. If he hadn't, if he had forced his way in, would Jack have stopped him from the path he'd chosen? Or would it just have created an irreparable rift between them, one that the LaCombe case couldn't have patched over?

"Should have let you in, Dad," he said.

"Leroy, you're missing my point." Jack thumped his cane on the floor. "It's one thing to be daddy to a little girl. You did a great job at that. But at some point, even the best-loved daddy isn't his girl's first priority. At some point, a father has to step back and let his son make his own decisions."

Gibbs just looked at him.

"I heard what Tim said to you Saturday," Jack said. "Now, I don't know what any of those kids are thinking, but he's right. That's for Abby and Jimmy, and Tim and Tony, to talk about with each
other first. I know you're like a father to them, and I couldn't ask for better grandchildren."

Gibbs started to protest, but Jack held up his hand.

"If your director asked you a question, you'd have to answer it, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, but-"

"Son, listen to what I'm saying. You're their dad, but you're also their boss. And I know they say it as a sign of affection, but it doesn't change reality." Jack paused, and Gibbs took the opening.

"Dad, Vance knows about Tim and Tony. He told me."

At Jack's look of surprise, Gibbs explained what Vance had overheard.

"So you're telling me they don't know you know?"

Gibbs shook his head.

"Son, I know you investigate things for a living, but I think you've got the wrong end on this one."

Jack shook his head. "Tim and Tony aren't suspects that you can interrogate. You have to listen to them, hear what they're saying. You know what I hear?"

"No, Dad, what?" Gibbs flexed his fingers into a fist.

"I hear two men who value their work and value family, as they should. You and Shannon didn't have to talk about things like this when Kelly was born. She stayed home. Same with your mom and me. Now I'm not saying that's always the right decision. Abby and Jimmy, those two are anybody's guess. But like it or not, there's a way most people do things, and they don't have that option. Now, would you be thinking about this if Vance hadn't told you what he heard?"

Gibbs shook his head.

"And Tony wasn't talking to him. He was talking to Tim. Do you really think that if the boys thought you knew that they would be avoiding it?"

Gibbs just stared at Jack. "How?" Fortunately, his dad knew him well enough to understand.

"Sometimes it's easier to see things when you're not in the middle of them," Jack said.

Gibbs thought for a second. "So how do you figure out when to let go?"

Jack smiled. "You trust that you raised your kids right, and you think about where you were at their age. Now the first I heard that you and Shannon were thinking of starting a family was when you called to tell me I was going to be a grandfather. Sure, I'd wondered before that, but I didn't ask."

He nodded as he thought. "Thanks, Dad. I mean that."

Jack smiled. "I know, son."

Gibbs turned over what Jack had said in his mind over dinner, then decided to swing by the Navy Yard before meeting Ziva at the stakeout. He started at the lab, where he found Abby and Jimmy sitting at her desk eating dinner together.

"Gibbs," Abby said. "I don't have anything for you."
He smiled. "Not looking for results, Abs," he said. "Your birthday's this week, remember?"

"Of course I remember, Gibbs," she said. "Are we still on for dinner Thursday?"

He breathed a sigh of relief. "As long as we wrap this case by then," he said. "Jimmy, you joining us?"

"Me?" His eyebrows shot above the rim of his glasses.

"Awww, Gibbs, you're so sweet," Abby said. Then she narrowed her gaze. "Wait, this isn't some 'lull him into a sense of security then grill him about his intentions' thing, is it?"

He let his lips quirk up. "Not actually your dad, Abs," he said. "Although I did hear rumors of a shotgun."

"Tony." The couple spoke in unison.

He nodded.

Abby looked at Jimmy, who sighed, then nodded.

"Tony does not hear a word of this." She pointed at him.

Gibbs just lifted an eyebrow.

"OK, OK, so you wouldn't blab to him," she said. "You remember it's my birthday, right?"

"Even remember how old you are." He said it every year, and every year she told him to forget that part. "Oh." Suddenly he thought he had it. "Too late for a shotgun?"

"Gibbs, I'm not that old," Abby said. "Well, OK, so I am getting close to that point. Anyway, my point is that we might be thinking about it. We might be doing more than thinking about it."

He held up a hand. "Too much information, Abs."

She smirked. "If you're going to be Grumpa Gibbs, you'll be the first to know."

He raised an eyebrow. "Grumpa?"

"It's a name in Jimmy's family," she said. "Come on, you wouldn't want to just be Grandpa, would you? That's so boring."

"DiNozzo will have a field day with it."

"Well you need something to make yourself different from Sean. Grandpa Gibbs and Grandpa McGee is just so blah." She clapped her hand over her mouth. "Oops."

"They talked to you?"

Abby turned to look at Jimmy, who sighed, then spoke. "The only things either of us have said to them is not to ask questions they aren't willing to answer."

Gibbs smiled. "And they haven't actually asked you anything, just made shotgun comments."

"Gibbs, go investigate something else," Abby said, waving her hands in a shooing motion. "You need to solve the case so we can all have dinner."
He nodded. "Consider this case closed."

He headed to Autopsy to see if Ducky had any information that might help crack the case.

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It was a long 48 hours trying to extricate clues from the five bodies. After they finally finished the autopsies at 0200, Dr. Mallard declared Wednesday a day off for both of them unless somebody dug up yet another body.

"Catch up on your sleep, Mr. Palmer," he said.

Jimmy just nodded and headed for his car, wanting to get home before he fell asleep on his feet.

When he walked into the bedroom, Abby was already asleep, the black skull comforter pulled up around her chin. He undressed quietly and slipped into bed, hoping not to disturb her.

"Mmmmm," she said, curling into him. He pulled her close and dropped a kiss on her head before finally letting his eyes shut.

By the time he woke up the next morning, she was gone. He looked over at the clock to see that it was after 1000. He pulled on his glasses and grabbed his cell, pressing the speed dial number for her lab.

"Hey, sleepyhead."

"You were quiet when you left," he said. "I didn't even notice you were gone until I woke up just now."

"You were dead to the world. I thought about poking you a couple of times to make sure you were actually alive, but I didn't want to have to drag Ducky in for an autopsy if you weren't."

"Cute, Abs," he said. "We both have the day off. I thought I'd go see Tim, maybe see if he wants to get out for a bit."

"I'll tell Tony. Whoops, Bossman's here looking for results. See you tonight."

Jimmy dragged himself out of bed and showered and dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, then called Tim. By noon, he was pulling in the driveway.

When he walked in, he could hear typewriter keys, so he looked in the study. Tim was typing, pausing every few seconds to roll out his healing shoulder.

"How's it going?"

"Slow." Tim sighed. "At least I can do this without it sending stabbing pains up my shoulder."

"Wouldn't your laptop be easier?"

Tim shrugged and pushed away from the desk. "I can't write on my laptop," he said. "Which sounds crazy, I know, but I've never been able to." He walked into the living room, and Jimmy followed. "So what's the plan?"

"You have anything in particular you want to do?"
Tim frowned. "You know, I wouldn't mind going to the Smithsonian," he said. "The American History museum has a Hot Spots of Invention exhibit that focuses on MIT, and I've been meaning to go and never found the time."

"Sure," Jimmy said. "Can your shoulder handle the Metro?"

"You might have to do some blocking for me so it doesn't get bumped, but I'd rather do that than fight for parking," he said. "And it'll be good to get out and walk around, even if it is a little cold. I'm going to be so out of shape by the time I can finally start running again." He led the way outside, and they started walking toward the Metro station.

"We could do the monument walk," Jimmy said. "It's not as interesting during daylight, but it's a decent walk."

Tim nodded. "Tony's been so busy with the latest case and trying to get to the courthouse today to get the marriage license that I'm out of the loop. What's going on at work?"

"Wait, would it be easier for us to pick up the license?"

Tim shook his head. "No, we both had to go in person. We went in this morning, then he dropped me here and went to see Brad. He hasn't been in a couple of weeks, so Gibbs was letting him take a half day today so he could take care of both." He grinned. "I'm getting out twice in one day — I don't know if I can stand the excitement."

"You've been living with Tony for too long," Jimmy said. "His sarcasm is rubbing off."

"Probably true," Tim said. "Speaking of living with, how's Abby doing? Oh!" He paused. "I need to find something for her birthday."

"Want to look while we're out?" Jimmy said.

Tim nodded. "Please. Have you figured out what you're getting her yet?"

"Already have it," he said.

"Can I ask?"

Jimmy flushed but figured it wasn't anything Tim didn't already know. "I got her a gift certificate to that store in Georgetown she likes."

Tim smirked. "Oh, you'll both enjoy that present. The one on Wisconsin, right?"

He nodded. "Um, yeah." He felt his face heating. "The other part, well, that's, ummm..."

Tim held up his hands. "Not asking," he said. "If it's making you blush, though, I'm sure Abby will enjoy it."

"No, it's not like that. Well, it is, but it's-" He decided to quit while he was behind. There was no way to explain the stuffed mama and baby bats he'd found the other day without telling Tim... "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure." Tim followed him into the Metro station, and Jimmy had to wait until they were down on the platform. The next train was still eight minutes away, so he had time before it arrived.

"Gibbs... He's as much a dad to Tony as he is to Abby, right?"
Tim nodded. "Maybe more to Tony," he said. "Tony doesn't have anybody, well, anybody who actually gives a damn. Abby's got her mom, and Ziva's only realized how evil Eli is these past couple of years."

"Is it... Does he..." Jimmy sighed. "I'm not saying this right."

Tim raised an eyebrow. "He's not going to hurt you, Jimmy." He paused for a second. "Well, not unless you hurt Abby, but it also works in reverse. If Tony ever did anything to hurt me, Gibbs would kick his ass."

Jimmy nodded. "Thanks."

Tim frowned. "Jimmy." He hesitated. "I know, this is none of my business, and I'm not asking. But Tony's shotgun comments? They probably go double for Gibbs. Not that he wouldn't be happy if it's what you both want, but if he thinks it's because you were careless, well, that's not going to go well."

"We talked to him about that," he said, smiling. "He understands. Oh, and I think we got him to back off of you guys."

"Us?" Tim's look of surprise made Jimmy laugh. "What did we do?"

"He's not wondering if we're going to give him baby bat-gremlins," Jimmy said. "I mean, he wasn't. He thought Tony was just being Tony. But he's definitely wondering about you guys. I mean, not baby bat-gremlins, because you're not lab bats or autopsy gremlins, and not in the literal sense, because that's not exactly possible."

Tim scrubbed his forehead with his hand. "Do we have a sign saying 'Thinking of Adopting' on our backs?"

"You are?" Jimmy looked at his friend. "I mean, that's great if you do. But I didn't think you were. Abby did, but you know Abby."

Tim blew out a breath. "Look, we're just in the talking stages," he said. "We can't both be field agents on the MCRT and have a child — it's too dangerous, not to mention unfair to the kid with our hours. So we've got a lot of logistical things to work out first."

"Oh, hours." Jimmy frowned. "We haven't even thought about that. I mean, we have time, probably a lot of time..."

"Jimmy, stop right there," Tim said. "There's some information I don't need to know."

"Right." Before he could stick his foot in his mouth again, Jimmy decided to change the subject a bit. "You know how Gibbs and Abby always go out to dinner for her birthday?"

"Sure."

"This year Gibbs invited me to go with them." He made a face. "I mean, I guess that's a good sign, but I always put my foot in my mouth around Gibbs."

"You do it enough that he pretty much expects it at this point," Tim said. "Don't worry about it."
Thursday, March 4, 2010

Abby stood in front of her closet looking through her dresses before picking one. Jimmy had gone to his apartment after work to get another load of boxes, so she had taken some time to pamper herself and enjoy a hot bath. She had just slipped on a black off-the-shoulder dress when she heard him walk in the front door.

"Need a hand with that?" he asked as she reached back to zip up her dress.

"Thanks," she said, following it up with a kiss. "For the dress and for coming tonight."

He smiled. "If Gibbs is willing to let me come along on your special night, I'm not going to say no," he said. "Speaking of special—" He handed her an envelope and a box.

"Awww, Jimmy," she said, giving him another kiss. She opened the envelope and grinned when she saw the gift certificate. "Oh, and is this a present for me or for you?"

He flushed. "Since you get to pick, probably for you," he said. "But I'll enjoy it, too."

She put it on top of the wooden chest in the corner where she kept all of her toys and tools, then joined him on the bed to open the box.

As she unfolded the tissue paper, she found a box, a card, and- "Awwww! Where did you find a mama bat and baby bat?"

"The Natural History Museum," he said.

She looked at the box. "Tea?"

"It's the tea you had at the coffee shop that night," he said. "The stuff you said tasted like Caf-Pow, but without the kick."

She looked at him. "Jimmy?"

He smiled. "Open the card."

So she opened the card, to find he'd drawn a baby with bat wings, pigtails, and round glasses, wearing a set of green scrubs. She read the message inside and felt herself beginning to tear up. "Really?" She pulled him into a hug. "You said you wanted to wait until you move in the end of next month."

"I know," he said. "But I was thinking, and everybody knows we're moving in together. And thanks to Tony, everybody seems to suspect we're considering it. So why wait, especially since the clock's ticking?"

She pulled him in for a kiss, quickly becoming breathless. When they finally pulled apart, she was speechless.

"Abs, I hate to say it, but I need to change before Gibbs gets here." He took deep breaths, trying to calm himself down. "And I need you to go in another room, or you're going to distract me."

She nodded and took the box of tea with her to the kitchen. While she was there, she looked in the fridge to find two Caf-Pows there. She looked from them to the tea, then took them to the sink to pour out. She had just dumped the first one when she heard the doorbell.

She walked back into the kitchen and poured the second Caf-Pow in the sink, then tossed both cups into her recycling bin. She turned to find Gibbs watching her. He lifted an eyebrow.

"You said you didn't want to know," she said.

He nodded. "I'll have to find something else to bring you."

She grinned. "You'll come up with something," she said. "You always do."

They walked back into the living room just as Jimmy came out of the bedroom.

"Ready?" Gibbs looked at her boyfriend, who managed not to blush or stammer. Of course, all he did was nod.

Gibbs had brought his Challenger, and Jimmy insisted she take the front seat since it was her birthday and she was wearing a dress. Gibbs drove them to a Thai restaurant in another section of Georgetown.

When they were settled in and ordered, talk turned to Tim and Tony's wedding.

"Eileen and I have everything worked out," Abby said. "And she said Jack is helping her with some of the cooking."

Gibbs shook his head. "He's been over there every day this week," he said. "I told Sean to let me know if he was bothering them, but they seem glad to have him."

"Well, of course they are," Abby said. "Jack's a wonderful man!"

"So what's the plan for the wedding itself?" Jimmy asked. "We're going to have to move furniture around, aren't we?"

Abby nodded and started explaining what she'd figured out. "I was going to ask Ziva if Damon was free to help us move furniture," she said. "Some of my stuff is pretty heavy."

"I can help, Abs," Gibbs said. "I'll come over Saturday, and we can take care of it."

"Thank you!" She reached over and hugged him. "This is going to be so great, seeing them finally get married."

"Don't forget, we still need to write the toast, or toasts," Jimmy said.

"Oooh, right!" Abby bounced up and down in her seat. "We need to figure out how we're going to do that."

"Stand up and say them?" Gibbs' tone was dry, and she just glared at him.

"Gibbs," she said. "Of course we're going to stand up and say them. But do we each do a toast for them? Or do we do two joint toasts? Or do we do one toast to both of them? Or..."

"Breathe, Abs," Jimmy said. "We'll figure it out."

"I know, I know," she said. "I just want it to be really special." She smiled. "Did they tell you what they're doing for vows?"

When both men shook their heads, she grinned. "If I wanted to be evil, I wouldn't tell you."
"Abby." They spoke in unison, and she couldn't help giggling. "Awww! My two favorite guys." She relented. "When they gave each other the rings at Christmas, they made something up as they were exchanging it. Timmy said he remembered enough of it to write them down and clean them up a bit so they sound nice."

"He is the writer," Gibbs said. "You should get him to help when you two write your vows."

Abby rolled her eyes. "Gibbs. You promised you weren't going to give Jimmy a hard time about his intentions." She interlaced her fingers with Jimmy's. "Besides, he'd marry me in a minute if I'd let him."

Gibbs looked at her. "But it's getting married that bothers you, not marrying him?"

Abby could see Jimmy starting to squirm. "Yes, Gibbs." She sighed. "If I were going to marry anybody, it would be Jimmy. And if you really want to walk me down an aisle, I've got a perfectly good hallway in my apartment we can use when you drop us off." She stared at him, trying to get him to drop the subject.

"Shouldn't have put you on the spot, Jimmy," he said after a minute, and she knew that was as close to an apology as Gibbs could get.

"It's OK," Jimmy said. "I mean, I'm glad you're looking out for Abby, not that she needs looking out for, just that it's good you're- With her mother in Louisiana- And, um, I'm going to shut up now."

Abby couldn't help giggling. "OK, Gibbs, time to send Papa Bear back into hibernation. And Jimmy's coming down with me next month to meet my mom, anyway."

After that, conversation turned to other topics, though Gibbs made them stop when they got too enthused about discussing some of the more esoteric causes of death they had found over the years.

"Eating here," he said.

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Sunday, March 6, 2010

Tim woke up before the alarm went off, only to find Tony already sitting up in bed.

"Wait, you're up before me?" he said.

"Too excited to sleep," Tony said. "I know this is just a formality, it's not doing anything other than making legal what we committed to at Christmas, but I kind of feel like a kid on Christmas."

Tim snorted. "So, what, you're going to unwrap me?"

Tony waggled his eyebrows. "You wish."

Before they could continue that train of thought, which Tim knew would derail the entire morning, the alarms on both their cell phones went off.

"Come on," Tim said. "Let's get going."
They had chosen just to wear suits for the ceremony and had encouraged everybody to either dress casually or bring clothes to change into for the party. So when they headed to Abby's later that morning, both men wore jeans and sweaters, while Tony carried a bag with both their suits.

When they arrived at Abby's, she sent them into her bedroom to change. Tim looked around, noticing the framed photos on the walls, mostly woods and other fall landscapes. The bright autumn leaves popped against the black walls of the bedroom. A second nightstand and a bookcase filled with textbooks were more evidence of changes since the last time he'd been in here.

He changed quickly, but got stuck when it was time for his tie. He turned to Tony to find he was still looking around.

"Tony, people are going to be here soon," he said.

"Huh?" Tony looked at him. "Oh, sorry. I've just always wondered what Abby's bedroom looks like, I mean other than the coffin." He pointed at the piece of furniture, which took up one wall. "It's not quite what I expected." He stepped over to knot Tim's tie.

Tim smiled. "That's because it's not just her bedroom," he said. "A lot of this stuff is Jimmy's."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Well, that makes sense," he said. "Should I be worried that you still remember what our mistress of the dark's abode looks like well enough to notice changes?" He winked, and Tim had to stifle a snicker.

"Oh, bite me," he said. He paused. "On second thought, not here. I'm pretty sure Abby's not part vampire, but why take chances." He smirked at Tony. "Come on, we've got a wedding."

Tony dressed quickly, his black pinstriped suit setting off his darker skin, while Tim wore charcoal gray so he didn't look ghostly. But they both wore pewter-colored shirts and green and pewter striped ties.

"You have the rings?" Tony said.

Tim nodded and pulled the two chains from his pocket. "Let's take them off the chains. Abby will be in soon looking for them."

That done, they slipped the chains into the empty suit bag, just as Abby opened the door.

"Everybody's here," she said. "The rings?"

Tim handed them over. "You know which is which?"

She nodded. "You wear the darker green, because it's the color of Tony's eyes," she said. "Don't worry, we'll make sure you guys end up with the right rings."

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Sarah stood in Abby's living room, where the furniture had been moved to open up space. As the youngest adult there, she had chosen to stand in order to leave a seat free for somebody who needed it more.

Even though the guys had said casual clothes were fine, everyone had chosen to dress nicely. She wore a long skirt with a green sweater that would also be casual enough with jeans for the party
later. She looked around the room, seeing everybody there. She couldn't believe that a year ago, she only knew most of the people here casually, if at all. Now, they were friends and family.

Maggie's friend Deborah stood at the front of the room, and Abby had music playing on the stereo. Gibbs stood up at the front with her mom and dad, and she remembered the first time she'd met the gruff marine. He'd pushed her, and she'd hated him for it, right up until he told her Tim had resigned over her. She'd grown to respect him, and now he seemed as much a member of the family as Tony. As she looked around, she realized that she regretted not inviting Josh. She’d thought about it, but he'd assumed he wasn't invited, so she hadn't. But this was a special day, and he would have had a chance to meet everybody while there was enough chaos to keep him out of the spotlight.

Before she could think any more about it, Tim and Tony walked into the room and took their spots at the front, facing Deborah. Jimmy and Abby stood on either side, Abby's pink and purple flowered dress a splash of color compared to the men's dark suits. The room quieted, and Deborah spoke.

"Welcome, everybody, to this wonderful occasion when we celebrate with Tim and Tony as they join in legal matrimony." The tall woman wore a black suit and white blouse, her sandy hair pulled back with clips on either side. "When Maggie asked me if I would perform this ceremony, I was honored to be asked. After meeting all of you, I'm even more privileged, as all of you seem to have embraced each other into a family of choice. And today, we celebrate two members of that family committing themselves to one another in love for the rest of their lives.

Sarah swallowed, surprised to find a lump in her throat. They had made this a casual event, something Tim and Tony said was more a formality than anything. But it felt much bigger as she watched it unfold.

"Gentlemen, you chose to write your own vows, so I ask that you each make your promises to the other."

Tim and Tony turned to face each other, and Tony spoke first.

"Timothy — no middle name — McGee, I love you. I'll be here for you in good times and bad. When we're enjoying lazy Saturdays around the house and when we're working our 49th straight day and can barely keep our eyes open. When we're playing in the bullpen like a couple of little kids and, many years from now, when we're helping each other up the stairs, canes in tow." He paused. "When we're happy to spend every minute together and when we're driving each other insane — which will mostly be my fault."

Sarah wasn't the only one to try and stifle a laugh at that, and she could tell from the grins on her brothers' faces that they had planned it that way.

"You will be my husband for the rest of my life, and I'll love you until we're both McAngels in heaven."

Sarah blinked back tears as Jimmy handed Tony a ring, which Tony slid onto Tim's finger.

Tim reached out to hold Tony's hands in both of his.

"Anthony Dominic DiNozzo Jr., I love you. I'll be here in sickness and in health. I'll be here for you when we're running through the neighborhood with Jethro and when I'm exiled to the spare room with the flu. When we're chasing our kids and when we're chasing dirtbags." It was Tim's turn to pause. "When we're together 24-7, and when we don't see each other for a week. You will
be my husband for the rest of my life, and I'll love you longer than any couple in any movie in your collection."

Abby handed over the ring, and Tim slid it on Tony's finger, then went back to holding his hands. As they gazed at each other, Deborah announced, "By the power vested in my by the District of Columbia, I now join you in marriage." She grinned. "I'll let you decide who kisses whom."

And as Tim pulled Tony in, his injured arm low on his waist, the other around Tony's shoulders, they kissed as Abby cheered, setting the rest of the room off.

It hadn't taken more than five minutes — probably less — but Sarah knew she'd remember it for the rest of her life. She worked her way up to the front and wrapped her arms around them — both her brothers, now. "Congratulations." She smiled. "You almost made me cry."

Tim pulled her into a one-armed hug. "Thanks, sis." He passed her to Tony, who hugged her. "Yeah, thanks, sis." He winked, and she couldn't help but laugh as she pulled away. "So when's the party?" she said. "Mom and Jack have been cooking all week."

"Good point," Tim said. "Come on, gang. Let's head out so everybody can get comfortable."

-Ziva was glad to shed her pantsuit in favor of a pair of cargo pants and a sweater. Gibbs had offered his house so more people could change at one time. When she made her way next door to Sean and Eileen's house, delicious smells filled the air, and the dining room table was covered with food. Ziva loaded a plate and snagged one of the folding chairs from a stack in the kitchen.

She saw an empty spot next to Abby, so she brought it over to where her friend sat next to Jimmy.

"So when are you doing these toasts?" she asked.

"Oh!" Abby said. "Tony!" She reached out a hand to stop him as he walked by. "We have to toast you."

He grinned. "Jimmy promised me we wouldn't regret letting you guys do this."

Abby shook her head. "You won't." She looked around until she found Gibbs, then signed to him. Ziva did not know what she had said, but Jimmy started snickering.

Gibbs' ear-piercing whistle split the room, and everybody turned to look at him.

"Tony and Tim told Abby and Jimmy they could make a toast," Gibbs said. He motioned to Abby and Jimmy, who moved to stand in front of the fireplace, while Tim and Tony leaned against the wall opposite them.

"When Tim and Tony asked us to be the witnesses at the wedding, the first thing Abby said was that we got to deliver the toast," Jimmy said.

"And then the first thing Timmy said was 'Uh-oh,'" Abby said, grinning. "At least until Tony pointed out that we couldn't say anything we hadn't already said."

"But there are a few things we've never said, and I think we speak for everybody here," Jimmy said. "Tim and Tony, we each remember when we found out you two were dating. There are a lot
of people who were surprised to learn that."

"Most of them are in this room," Abby said, and Ziva had to hold back a laugh. Then Abby continued. "We were surprised because we didn't look past the surface, the way Tim did with Tony."

"We were surprised because we didn't consider something different, the way Tony did with Tim," Jimmy said.

"And we were surprised because once we knew, we realized it was blindingly obvious that they each bring out the best in the other in a way nobody else does," Abby said.

"But we were not surprised that they still shut Abby down when she asks if she can watch," Jimmy said, amid groans. "There is one thing we don't have to ask to see, and that's that Tim and Tony are partners in every sense of the word."

"To Tim and Tony," Abby said, raising her glass.

Ziva lifted her glass and clinked it against the one Ducky held up, then with Abby. As she looked around, she felt nothing but happiness that she was together with her entire family.

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As Ducky exchanged toasts with the rest of his extended family, he managed to find a smile. It had been a difficult few days, seeing to the arrangements for Mother. Her body had finally expired Thursday, and the funeral home had been able to arrange for the burial to take place Saturday so he would not need to intrude his grief on this happy occasion. In truth, he wondered if this might not be a prescription for all grieving loved ones, to have a joyous occasion in close proximity as a way of remembering that life, indeed, goes on.

Seeing Anthony and Timothy express their love for each other in a way so characteristic of each had lightened his heart. And dear Abigail and young Jimmy had captured what was so special about not only the boys, but also the whole family that had formed around them, in their toast. Ducky was sure this would just be the first of many celebrations of life among the children, as he persisted in thinking of them. Weddings, engagements, births — these years were so full of ripening promise for all of them. As he looked around, he hoped the difficulties of the past year were finally behind them all.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

AN: We're getting far enough into the story that some plot threads are going to start tangling together and that breadcrumbs from earlier will start bubbling back up. So now that I've hopelessly mixed and mangled my metaphors, just a reminder warning for folks: In this story and universe, as in real life, anything can happen. Issues might arise that will be sensitive to some readers but don't fall into standard warning categories. If you have a particular concern based on some plot threads that are out there, please PM me so I can let you know if there's a chapter you might need a special warning on. Close the window if you become uncomfortable — I'm happy to respond to a PM with needed info so you can keep reading after that moment if you choose. This is a story, and it often requires the characters find themselves in situations where they can react and — at least when I write — survive and overcome. Life is not easy for anybody, and the NCIS gang in particular seems to attract more than its fair share of whumpage. ;)

Tuesday, March 7, 2010

When Tim got up, Tony was gone. He vaguely remembered hearing Tony move around in the dark but didn't think he'd actually woken up all the way. Which was a good thing, since most nights since the shooting, he had slept fitfully at best, unable to find a comfortable position.

He'd slept soundly Sunday night but had put that down to the fact the post-wedding party hadn't broken up until after 2200, when his mom had finally shooed them all out.

For an event that was supposed to be a formality, Tim had found himself oddly touched by the day. Even though he and Tony had said almost the same things to one another when they had exchanged rings at Christmas, somehow doing it as part of a legal ceremony made it special in a different way. And the toast by Jimmy and Abby... Well, if they ever made it legal, he and Tony owed them something equally special as a tribute. Tim hadn't realized it was possible to laugh and tear up at the same time.

He'd spent most of yesterday relaxing, except for a trip to the physical therapist. He was down to two visits a week, with lots of in-home exercises to do each day. Yesterday had been a longer-than-normal session as the PT staff put him through a battery of assessments to gauge his progress. He'd finally been OK'd to start running, though they'd given him an immobilizer sling to reduce the strain on his shoulder muscles. Damon was coming over this morning to go running with him, and even though he knew he'd be slow, Tim was looking forward to it. His first run was just one more step back to normal. Running this week, working next week. Ducky was still saying he wouldn't be back in the field until summer, but Tim was determined to prove him wrong.

When Damon walked in at 11, Tim was all ready to go in his running gear and sling.

"You going to able to run in that thing?" Damon said.

"They won't let me run without it, so I'll find a way," Tim said. "Tony always tells me I've got lousy form anyway, I don't move my arms enough, so how different can it be?"
Damon laughed. "I guess the sports expert has spoken," he said. "Do you have a route in mind?"

Tim nodded. "There's one that's about three miles, but it's probably going to take me almost a mile of that just to get warmed up with a fast walk. I'm out of practice."

"No skin off my nose," Damon said. "I don't have anything until 1500."

Tim looked over. "A nibble on one of those applications?"

Damon grinned. "Wounded Warriors called me last week. I must have passed round one, because after a phone interview they asked me to come in this afternoon."

Tim clapped him on the shoulder. "That's great!" He grinned. "I was reading about the program online last night, and they're doing a really important job. I can see why you're so interested in working for them."

He led the way outside, locking the door and bending down to tie the key to his sneaker laces. "Tony called Steve last weekend, but he said Steve had already flagged your application for a phone interview."

As they started off at a brisk clip, Tim tried to get used to not being able to swing his left arm.

"So if Tony and Steve are such good friends, how come he wasn't he at the wedding?" Damon said.

Tim thought about it. "Tony never mentioned wanting to invite him," he said finally. "It's not that Steve has an issue with us; he and his wife sent us both a Christmas card. But I think we both wanted the wedding to be just family."

Damon looked over at him. "Ziva was right," he said.

"About what?"

"She told me I was part of the family now, that once Tony accepted me, that was the last hurdle. I guess I knew she was serious, but..." He paused. "All of you would make great marines. Semper Fi... it's not just words to you."

Tim shook his head. "Not working for Gibbs," he said. "There have been times, lots of times, when he could have taken the easy way out, let one of us fend for ourselves." He thought back to when Chip had framed Tony for murder, when he had killed the Metro cop, when Ziva had disappeared into a Somalian prison camp, and when Vance had shipped all of them off to different postings. "It's funny. Getting posted to Gibbs' team is considered a punishment to most of NCIS. He's got a reputation for chewing up and spitting out agents. After I got promoted to a spot on the team, I went to pick up my stuff in Norfolk and arrived around lunchtime. When I went to the break room to say goodbye to the other NCIS staff there, they didn't see me coming," He laughed. "They were taking bets on how long I'd last before Gibbs broke me. Cassie, who had been a probie on the team next to the MCRT in the squad room, said I was stubborn enough to last six months, and they laughed at her."

"How come?"

"Because in all the years Gibbs had been a team leader, only three agents at that point had ever lasted even half that," Tim said. "Stan Burley, who's now an Agent Afloat, lasted five, which everybody thought was going to be the all-time record. At the time, Tony had only been on Gibbs' team about two and a half years, and Kate had been there one."
"Kate?"

Tim swallowed as he remembered his fallen friend. "Special Agent Caitlin Todd. She joined the team the year before I did. About a month after Tony got the plague, she was killed by a Hamas double agent, shot by a sniper rifle at 600 yards."

"I'm sorry," Damon said. "I didn't realize."

Tim shook his head. "No, it's OK," he said. "Kate deserves to be remembered. She was a good friend." He picked up the pace to a slow jog.

"Did they catch the SOB who shot her?"

"Catch? No." Tim sighed, remembering. "He's dead. Shot in the head in Gibbs' basement, where he went to kill Gibbs a couple days later. He hadn't specifically been after Kate. He'd wanted to hurt Gibbs, and he started by picking off members of the team. He shot at me first, but there was a gun battle going on and I got pinned down behind a car. Ducked just before the bullet would have gotten me right between the eyes."

"Gibbs killed him?"

Tim shook his head. "Ziva."

"So Ziva shot the man who killed Kate, saving Gibbs in the process. So that's what she meant," Damon said.

Tim looked over at him. "She said something about Ari to you?"

"No, she mentioned that when she joined the team, Gibbs accepted her for something she had done, and because he did, you guys did, too." Damon hadn't even broken a sweat.

Tim sucked in a deep breath, starting to feel the run. "We didn't know. Gibbs' report said he had shot Ari, and we took it at face value. After all, the FBI had thought Ari was a Mossad operative undercover with Hamas. Ziva was his Mossad handler and his half-sister."

Damon stopped dead. "She-" He started jogging again, but didn't say anything. Finally, he spoke. "Is that why she doesn't have anything to do with her father?"

Tim shook his head. He hadn't realized Damon didn't know this, but he decided maybe it was best coming from him, not Ziva. "This all happened years ago. She didn't wash her hands of Eli until a few weeks before our run-in with Col. Bell last fall."

"Her father didn't care that she had killed her own brother?"

"Her father ordered it," Tim said. "Ziva took the assignment to try and find a way to save Ari, until she realized he was even more out of control than their father thought." He shook his head, trying to ignore the fatigue in his legs. "She shot him to save Gibbs, not because Eli told her to. It wasn't until this fall when Ziva left Mossad that the rest of us found out the truth. Back when she joined the team, Gibbs just accepted her, and we didn't know why. But we knew Gibbs."

"Like I said, you guys live Semper Fi better than most marines I know," Damon said. "Being accepted, well, it means a lot."

Tim nodded and tried to speak, but realized he didn't have the wind. He slowed to a walk and caught his breath. "Ziva's as much my younger sister as Sarah is," he said. "She resigned from
Mossad after her father left her to die on a Mossad mission gone bad." He thought before adding, "We went after her, because she's family. She doesn't talk about what happened when they had her, but she was there more than three months. Tony, Gibbs, and I went to hell and back to rescue her, risked our lives on a mission so crazy it looked like a suicide run."

"I'm not going to hurt her," Damon said. "We're just friends, and I figured she wants to keep it that way for now. I respect that."

Tim stopped and waited for Damon to turn to face him. "Good. Because nobody's indestructible — although I think Gibbs and Tony forget that sometimes — and if anybody hurts my sister — any of my sisters — they have to deal with all of us."

"Understood." Damon grinned. "But you know, I think I could take you right now."

Tim could tell he was kidding, so he just rolled his eyes and picked up the pace again. "Come on, I want to see if I can get at least a little more in."

"Just don't make me carry you back," Damon said.

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"Come on, Tony!" Tim shifted his weight from foot to foot in the living room. "Let's go."

Tony walked downstairs. "You do realize, McImpatient, that Ducky probably won't even be in by the time we get to the Navy Yard. It's only 0600."

"So I'll go hang out with Abby in the lab," Tim said. "You know she's always in early. And that means Jimmy will be there, too."

Tony just shook his head. "I have never seen you this excited to go to work, even during the jet pack case."

Tim made a face. "The jet packs were seriously cool," he said. "And you'd be excited too if you'd been on leave for more than a month. You're the one who refused to take all of your leave after the plague." He smirked as Tony's face showed his point had hit home.

"OK, OK," Tony said. "Come on." He headed for the door, grabbing his backpack on the way.

Tim went to grab his, but stopped.

"You'll be bringing it in Monday," Tony said.

Tim shook his head. "It's all my field gear," he said. "You know I'm not going to get cleared for the field for months."

"You can still bring it," Tony said. "Don't forget, desk duty means you get to join us in the all-nighters."

"Think if I do, Gibbs will let Dwayne get home to help put the kids to bed?" Tim was surprised by Tony's shrug.

"He let me come home because the director was there to take my spot," he said. "And your
computer stuff can all be done overnight; most of the stuff Dwayne's best at can't be."

"Is that your way of saying Gibbs might actually not hate us when we ask for one of us to transfer?" Tim kept his tone light, not wanting to get too serious.

"Dwayne's fitting in pretty well," Tony said. "If this had happened a couple of years ago, I would have worried that Gibbs would decide it was time for me to leave so he could get fresh blood."

Tim reached over and head-slapped him. "That's because you have a lower estimation of your own skills than anybody else."

They got into Tony's car and headed in. It was early enough to miss the worst of the morning traffic, and they were at the Navy Yard before 0700. As soon as they walked into the squad room, Tim headed for his desk and sat down.

"It's so good to be back," he said, looking at his computer.

"Not back yet." Gibbs walked in, coffee in hand. "Ducky sign off on you yet?"

Tim shook his head. "I didn't think he'd be in, but I'll head down now. If he's not, I'll go see Abby."

"Palmer's in." Gibbs sat down at his desk and started looking through a folder.

Tim headed down to Autopsy, knowing Gibbs must have dropped Abby's morning Caf-Pow at the lab before coming upstairs.

Sure enough there were lights on in Autopsy, but no Ducky or Jimmy, so he headed to the lab.

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Tim found Abby and Jimmy in the lab eating breakfast at her desk.

"Sorry, didn't meant to interrupt," he said, turning to leave.

Abby shook her head, pigtails smacking Jimmy in the face. She swallowed as she jumped up. "Timmy!" She rushed over to hug him. "You're back!"

"Not yet, Abs," he said, grinning as he returned the hug, his left arm making it up high enough for him to put his hand on her shoulder. "Ducky's got to check me out today, clear me to come back next week."

"Well you're totally going to pass," she said, pulling him over to the desk.

Tim grabbed one of the chairs from around the lab table and pulled it over. "I hope so," he said. "I've been running with Damon all week, and I can almost go three miles without having to stop to walk."

"How does your shoulder feel?" Jimmy asked.

He shrugged. "I still need the sling for support when I run," he said. "But that's about the only time I'm wearing it, and I'm starting to be able to lift more than a pound or two."

"That's pretty good for not even being out six weeks," Jimmy said. He offered one of his apple slices to Tim, who shook his head.
"You have no idea," he said. "I'm hoping by next weekend I'll finally be able to get back to sleeping normally, which means Tony can get back to sleeping normally."

Abby started giggling, and Jimmy turned to look at her, confusion wrinkling his brow.

"Yes, Abs," Tim said, sighing. But he smiled so she would know he wasn't really mad.

"I'm lost."

Abby wrapped her arm around him. "Timmy sleeps the same way you do," she said.

Tim grimaced. "OK, didn't need that much information, Abs." It was too easy to picture her draped across Jimmy in bed, and he didn't really want that mental picture. Judging from Jimmy's expression, he felt the same way.

"Changing the subject," Tim said. "Has Gibbs said anything about whether Dwayne is going to stay on the team until I'm back in the field?"

Abby shook her head. "Not to me, he hasn't," she said.

"Gibbs doesn't usually say much to me," Jimmy said. "I mean, other than when he's reminding me Abby's like a daughter to him, but that's not really relevant."

Tim snorted. "You know, when I was dating Abby, he was more worried about her hurting me."

"You didn't have Tony walking around making shotgun comments," Jimmy said.

"True," Tim said, grinning. "So no word on whether Dwayne's staying?"

Abby made a face. "The only thing I've heard is that Agent Krone has been sniffing around to see if you're going to come back or not. I think he wants a spot on Gibbs' team."

"Krone?" Jimmy said. "He's one of the solo agents, right, not part of a team?"

Tim shook his head. "And he doesn't investigate the same types of crimes. He's usually handling the minor stuff that needs more investigation than the MPs can handle but isn't a big enough deal for us to take."

"Doesn't mean he isn't bucking for a promotion," Abby said. "Which is crazy on his part. I mean you're going to be back — you are going to be back, right?"

At Tim's nod, she continued. "You're going to be back and even if you weren't, Vance would probably just leave Dwayne on the team, let Jarvis pick somebody else for Cold Cases. Krone wouldn't last a week with Gibbs."

Tim smiled. "The whole Norfolk NCIS team thought the same about me," he said. "Cassie was the only one to give me more than a few weeks in the pool."

"Cassie's smart. That's why she heads up the Pentagon team now," Abby said. "If Director Shepherd hadn't added Ziva, she probably could have put in for a spot on the team then."

Before he could say anything, Jimmy's watch beeped. "I've got to go," he said. "Dr. Mallard should be here any minute."

"I'll go with you," Tim said. "The sooner I get cleared, the happier I'll be."
When they entered Autopsy, Ducky was just tying on his surgical hat. "Ah, Timothy," he said. "I was rather hoping you would be in early."

Tim nodded. "Tony was ready to kill me because I was all set to leave an hour before he normally does."

"Eager to get back to work, my dear boy?" Ducky motioned for him to take his shirt off, so Tim pulled the sweater over his head, working it down over his left arm.

"Still working on range of motion?" Ducky asked.

Tim nodded. "I have it in some ways, but I still have to be cautious about moving my arm, so it's safer to take my shirt off this way. The PT folks said I should be back to normal in a few more weeks."

"That is good news, indeed," Ducky said. "Now, let me take a look at that joint."

As the medical examiner poked and prodded, Tim just sat there, afraid to ask questions. He knew he had made a lot of progress since leaving Bethesda, but he didn't know if it was enough.

Before he knew it, Ducky was signing the paperwork. "You have made excellent progress," he said. "I know Jethro will be anxious to see this, so I suggest you take it right up to him. And I do look forward to seeing you back here Monday."

"Thanks, Ducky," Tim said. "It'll be good to be back."

"Yes, I quite imagine," Ducky said. "Now, do you have a way of getting home, or should I send Mr. Palmer up when he is done inventorying the supplies for the director's report?"

"I don't know. Gibbs wanted to see me when I was done, so let me check. I'll call him or Abby if I need a ride and Tony can't get free."

"Good, good," Ducky said. "Now, I look forward to seeing you on Monday."

Tim nodded and walked out. He had to wait for the elevator, and when the doors finally opened, Agent Krone stepped out.

"Hey, Krone," Tim said. Thinking of what Abby had said, he decided to needle the agent. "How's it going? I'm looking forward to coming back Monday."

"Back?" Krone said. "Already? Well, I guess Gibbs will be happy. Being stuck with two probies if you'd been out much longer was bound to be bad for his temper."

"Gibbs never likes it when one of us is hurt," Tim said, stepping past Krone into the elevator. Once the door closed, he kicked the wall and cursed. Yeah, Abby was right, Krone was both ambitious and clueless. Sure, Tony called Ziva probie to give her grief, but nobody else was allowed to do that. Maybe he and Tony needed to talk to Gibbs sooner rather than later, before Krone said something to the wrong person.

Ducky overheard enough of Agent Krone's comments to Timothy to give the agent a rather chilly reception after making him wait until he finished filing Tim's paperwork with the director's office.
Cold enough, in fact, to have the agent beating a path out of the Autopsy room, though not before he tripped over Jimmy's foot. Ducky enjoyed the look of innocence on his assistant's face. Perhaps having a reputation as somebody who stumbles about a bit had its advantages. Krone's hasty retreat confirmed Ducky's perception that the agent was unsuited for a spot on Gibbs team. The medical examiner thought perhaps he should warn Jethro about Krone.

That reminded him of another warning he wanted to deliver, one he had only become aware of yesterday when seeing Jethro carrying an unusual beverage to Abigail's lab.

"Mr. Palmer," he said.

"Yes, Dr. Mallard?" Jimmy finished tying on his surgical hat.

"I noticed yesterday that Abigail seems to have eliminated from her diet what formerly had been her addiction of choice," he said.

The quizzical look on his assistant's face made him stifle a smile.

"Caffeine, Mr. Palmer."

"Oh! Yes, doctor, she has."

"Does that mean congratulations are in order?"

"What?" Jimmy shook his head. "Oh, no, Dr. Mallard. I mean, we do want, and we are- We don't think- Not yet." He stammered into silence.

Ducky puzzled over his assistant's words for just a moment. "Ah, I see. Trying, but no success as yet."

Jimmy nodded. "We don't- Abby figured-" He paused and took a deep breath. "Because of Abby's age, we know it's going to take months, so we're starting now, figuring in a year we might finally be successful."

"I understand, my boy." He walked over to the drawers to remove the body upon which they were to perform an autopsy that morning. "Just remember that while it might take that long, it also might not. I would not want either you or Abigail to be caught unprepared if you were to find out that her cutting out caffeine was not just a sensible preparation, but a necessity, in the next few weeks."

"Yes, doctor," Jimmy said. "I mean, no, doctor. I mean, we know."

He joined Ducky in moving the body to the table and before long they were immersed in the day's work. Still, Ducky made a note to find Jethro later and update him. He rather figured Timothy would not mention Krone's ambitions. As for Abigail, well, she and Jimmy seemed to have considered all the possibilities. At least Ziva and Sarah were not having difficulties at this point. Six honorary grandchildren did keep one rather busy.

-Gibbs sat at his desk, waiting for Ducky to finish with McGee. He had sent Wilson and Ziva to Annapolis to run down leads on a cold case, so it was just he and DiNozzo in the bullpen. That was part one of today's plan.-
He heard the elevator ding and looked over to see McGee walk off, a big grin on his face saying more than any paperwork Ducky could sign. Still, he asked.

"You clear to come back, McGee?"

Tim nodded. "Ducky said I'm more than ready for desk duty. He OK'd me for interrogations, too. Just nothing outside the building."

Gibbs nodded. "Wilson and David are out on an assignment, but Vance wants to see the team, so it's just the three of us." He got up, noticing Tony and McGee exchanging glances, McGee's damn eyebrow asking more questions than his mouth dared.

They followed him upstairs and into Vance's office. Gibbs looked at Vance. He'd done his part, getting the guys in here without Ziva and Dwayne. Now it was up to Vance for Part Two.

"Agent McGee, good to see you back," Vance said. "Dr. Mallard sent your paperwork up a minute ago, and I'm glad to see you're going to be back with us Monday."

"I'm looking forward to it," McGee said. "It's been a long five weeks."

"And an eventful one," Vance said. "First your parents moving, then your wedding last weekend. That's a lot of change."

McGee nodded, his expression making it clear his mental gears were hard at work. "The wedding was more a formality," he said. "But yes, a lot of change. It's one reason I'm glad to be getting back into a routine."

"Yes, about that routine," Vance said. "As you know, Dr. Mallard estimates it will be another three to four months before you can return to the field. Because of that, the MCRT will continue to utilize Agent Wilson until such time as you are cleared to return to the field."

"We'd figured that, Director," Tony said.

"Agent Gibbs, you will also have Agent McGee's services during that time, leaving you temporarily overstaffed," Vance said.

Gibbs saw his two agents exchange glances. He shot a glare at Vance, wanting him to get to the point before either of the younger men started freaking out.

"Agent McGee, I'd like to use part of your time on a project I've been planning for a while now," Vance said. "As you know, your particular skill set is in short supply among our field agents, and your field experience is something our cybercrimes team lacks."

McGee just nodded, while Tony watched, his green eyes wary. Gibbs mentally applauded their restraint.

"What I propose is that half of your time be spent helping Agent Gibbs and the MCRT with their current caseload," Vance said, leaning forward in his chair, his hands folded on his desk. "The rest of the time, I would like you to run a cyber boot camp for field agents. Two weeks in duration, half days. The sessions will be small, only six to eight agents in each session, and I expect we can run at least four sessions while you're on desk duty. That will allow us to spread two to three dozen agents with these skills throughout the Mid-Atlantic offices, including the Navy Yard."

Gibbs decided to nudge the discussion along. "This mean the other teams will have to stop 'borrowing' McGee once he's back in the field?"
"It will," Vance said. "Team leaders and the lead agents in regional offices will be asked to nominate an agent in their purview best suited for this training. Agent McGee, in addition to training these agents, I want your assessment after each session of the potential of each agent for further training. In turn, the team leaders and lead agents will track the impact of this training on their clearance rates and case turnaround times."

"Director, I know I'm not the McGeeking expert, but this sounds more involved than just some training." Tony had that expression on his face where he was slotting puzzle pieces together. Gibbs wondered if the guys would figure out what was going on before Vance told them.

"Yes, Agent DiNozzo. I'm also using this as a chance to gather some intel on how this type of training can improve our effectiveness as an agency. With budgetary dollars being so minutely scrutinized, any new program must be justified with hard data to have even a chance of getting approved. Before I can make any decisions, I need to see what can reasonably be accomplished in a training program that works alongside agents' other responsibilities, as well as what agents who have little previous experience can learn in that time frame. It might be that we need to adjust requirements for our agents, add additional training at FLETC, or consider a special hybrid cyber-agent job description to ensure teams have access to these resources."

"Yeah, we can't all be MIT McGeniuses," Tony said. Gibbs was heartened by both the joke and the smile on his face, as well as by the relaxed set of McGee's shoulders, though the junior agent hadn't spoken a word since Vance started outlining his plan. Gibbs knew better than to think he didn't have an opinion; McGee was just better at biding his time than DiNozzo.

"Any questions, McGee?" Vance said.

As they talked about general timelines and topics to be covered in the training, Gibbs waited for one of the men to follow up on the threads Vance had left trailing. But neither man said anything.

"We done, Leon?" Gibbs said.

The director nodded. "Fill in the rest of your team when they get back, but keep the plan quiet beyond that, please. I need to communicate with the team leaders first, and I don't plan to do that until McGee and I finalize some of the details."

"What about Ducky, Abby, and Jimmy?" Tony asked. "They're not technically on the team, but they're going to know something's up."

"Give them the basics, not the details," Vance said. "Miss Scuito is probably the one who would get most of the questions from other agents if word were to leak out, so make sure she understands the importance of quashing rumors."

"She will," Gibbs said. "She's always careful with information like that." He stood to leave, and the guys followed him. Once they were on the catwalk, Tony looked over at McGee, and they stopped walking. Gibbs turned to look at them.

"Now?" Tony asked, looking at McGee.

"Yeah, feels like now," McGee said. Gibbs had a flashback to almost a year earlier, when they had tag-teamed him about finding a replacement for Ziva. McGee looked at him. "Boss, can we go talk someplace outside the office?"

Gibbs nodded, wondering if this was finally when they were going to let him in on their plans.
Tim noticed a slight change in the set of the team leader's shoulders when he asked if they could talk, and a part of him wondered if Gibbs knew what they were going to ask. He was Gibbs, after all. He and Tony followed as Gibbs led the way to his favorite caffeine dealer. When they entered, Tim looked round for a table where they could have at least a bit of privacy, while Tony and Gibbs went to the counter to order.

He settled at a table in the corner, making sure his left shoulder was close to the wall in order to protect it from anybody jostling it accidentally. The table was small, but it was tucked in an odd corner that made it unlikely anybody would overhear them either.

He looked up as Tony and Gibbs joined him, Tony setting down both their coffees before pulling out his chair.

"What's on your mind?" Gibbs asked.

Tim looked at Tony and nodded to signal the older man should start.

"Boss, we've been talking," Tony said. "It started before Tim got shot, but, well, that kind of put some stuff in perspective for us."

Gibbs quirked an eyebrow, but didn't say anything. Tim just waited to see how Tony decided to explain this. They hadn't really talked about how they would tell Gibbs; just that they would at some point.

Tony paused, and as he searched for words, Tim realized he wasn't any more sure of how to say this than Tim himself was. Finally, Tony said, "I'm not sure exactly when Tim started thinking about this; I'm not going to speak for him. Although I know in general he's been thinking this since before he even joined the team. I didn't start seriously thinking about it until Christmas, when I saw him helping out Abby's friend's nephew." He took a deep breath. "I don't know why this is so hard to say; it doesn't seem like it should be."

"Spit it out, Tony," Gibbs said. The words were blunt, but Gibbs' voice was gentle.

Tim looked at the expression on Gibbs' face, at the way his fingers worried the coffee cup, shifting it a few degrees in one direction, then back the other way. Realization dawned, and he put his hand on Tony's. His partner — no, husband — looked over at him.

"He knows, Tony." He didn't know where his certainty came from, but he could tell as clearly as if Gibbs had asked them outright. And watching Gibbs' eyes take on a guarded watchfulness, he realized something wasn't right. "Boss?"

Gibbs held his gaze a minute before letting his eyes drop, then looking up at both of them. "About your plan to have Tony transfer to Cold Cases, switch places with Dwayne, so you can start a family?" He nodded. "I know."

Tim exchanged looks with Tony. "How?"

"Vance."

"Vance?" They spoke in unison.

"How does Vance know?" Tony said.
"Not just the kids, but the plan we'd been talking about," Tim said. "My parents knew we were talking about kids, but we didn't tell them what we were thinking work-wise. And Abby and Jimmy suspect we're talking about having kids, but they don't know anything else either."

Tony nodded. "We thought you deserved to hear from us first, especially since we weren't even sure if it was possible."

Gibbs snorted. "Talk about your goat rope." He shook his head. "Vance overheard you, Tony, talking to Tim while he was still unconscious after surgery."

Tim looked over to see Tony was blushing. "Vance heard that?"

"Heard what?" Tim asked. "Somebody want to catch me up, since I was out like a light?"

Tony reached over and grabbed his hand, interlacing their fingers. Tim could feel the cool metal of Tony's wedding band on his ring finger, and it grounded him.

"While you were out, Tim, I was just talking." Tony sighed. "All night long, hoping you could hear, hoping it would help you wake up. At one point, I said what I said to you after you were awake." He sighed and looked up at Gibbs, keeping Tim's fingers firmly in his. "Boss, before Tim got shot, we'd been talking about having kids, and we kept getting hung up on our hours. Sean was away at sea a lot when Tim was a kid, and, well, the way my family turned out, my dad never being around was probably a good thing." His tone turned bitter, and Tim squeezed his hand for support. "Better the drunk ignoring me than beating on me the way the rest of the family did." Tony rolled his shoulders a couple of times, and Tim could feel the tension rolling off of him. "We don't want that for our kids. We don't want to give up working for NCIS, working for you either, but we want to be there for our kids, even if one of us is always running off at odd hours to catch a dirtbag." He sighed. "And... Well, it's not fair to our kids to have both of us on the same team. If something happened, if we had all been on the Chimera when it blew, or if we had been the team on call instead of Paula's that weekend... Once we decided we wanted to perpetuate our craziness on a new generation, we realized pretty quickly that our responsibility to them had to take precedence over the fact we would happily work on your team the rest of our careers."

Tim nodded. "The way things were going before I got shot, we figured Vance would make the decision for us, pull me back into CyberCrimes. And I don't want that, but it would solve the problem." He rubbed his thumb over Tony's knuckles on their still-interlaced hands. "I wasn't about to ask Tony to give up being on your six. It's where he belongs, and it's always been his team to lead after you retire — although hopefully not to Mexico this time."

Tony nodded. "Yeah, our kids are going to want all their grandparents around."

As he said that, Gibbs closed his eyes and dropped his head. When he looked up, his eyes were bright, and Tim realized this was the closest he'd ever seen Gibbs come to tears.

"Boss?" He nudged Tony's knee with his own. "What did we say?"

Gibbs shook his head. "Nothing. I'm an idiot. Should have listened to Duck. Jack, too."

"Umm, you lost us," Tony said.

"Vance told me what you were thinking," Gibbs said. "He seemed surprised you hadn't already talked to me about it. And when the days went on and you still didn't, I started..." He huffed out a sigh. "I jumped to conclusions that I would have head-slapped any of you kids into next week for making during an investigation." He paused. "I didn't think..."
Tim realized what Gibbs was having trouble admitting. "Boss, you're always going to be Grandpa Gibbs to our kids. Vance could reassign us both to a post in Siberia, and you would still be Grandpa Gibbs. We'd just have to get Abby to teach you how to use a webcam so we could do video chats."

Tony reached over and put a hand on Gibbs' arm. "Boss, if I didn't think you'd actually make good on your threat to hurt me if I did this, I'd headslap you."

Tim couldn't help it; despite the serious discussion, he snorted back a laugh. "Sorry, sorry," he said. "I was just trying to picture that."

Even Gibbs laughed at that. "I probably deserve that," he said. "I could just tell from some things Sean and Eileen said that you guys had talked to them, and I realized I was assuming a lot that you guys would want a grouchy bastard as your kids' grandfather."

"You're my dad in every way that counts, Gibbs," Tony said. "You'll always be their grandfather, no matter if Vance reassigns us or you retire to Franks' beach or whatever happens." He shrugged. "We just didn't want to tell you until we had worked out what we wanted to do work-wise. Just because you're Papa Bear, doesn't mean you're not the boss when we're on the clock. We didn't want to put you in an awkward spot with Vance, and I guess we did anyway."

Gibbs shook his head. "The director's going to surprise you," he said. "He's got a plan in mind, got it all worked out with diagrams and everything."

Tim looked at Gibbs, then Tony, then back at Gibbs. "A plan?" He thought a minute. "Why do I get the feeling this training program is part of this plan?"

"Because I trained you to be a good investigator, Tim," Gibbs said. "Thought one of you two was going to call him on it in the meeting."

Tony shook his head. "I knew he had something going on, another one of those wink-wink-nudge-nudge things, but I didn't know what and wasn't going to say anything until we'd talked to you."

Tim nodded. "Can you tell us, or do we have to go back to the Navy Yard to see Vance?"

Gibbs pulled out his cell and punched in a number. "Leon? Gibbs. It's time. You want us to come back or meet us here?" He listened, then hung up.

"Vance wants us back — some elements of the plan are classified, doesn't want to discuss them in public."

They headed back to the Navy Yard, and Tim dropped back a bit to let Tony and Gibbs walk side-by-side. He realized they had been dumb to think Gibbs wouldn't have figured out something was up and dumber to realize Gibbs wouldn't have gotten the wrong idea when they avoided the subject. All those times they thought Vance or Gibbs had guessed, they were right, and he realized that not saying anything at any of the opportunities had spoken for them, and said the wrong thing.

Tony was reaching the same realization as they listened to Vance explain his master plan. And he realized that they had misjudged the director. This plan was created by the same man who had promised to protect them from being split onto different teams, the same man who had threatened to bring in SecNav to make sure Tony could sit with his husband at the hospital while Tim fought for his life. Vance wouldn't have shunted Tim off to the subbasement, not a second time. Not now.
that he knew them.

As Vance finished explaining things, Tony tried to take in the whole plan. It covered everything and was better than either of the options he and Tim had come up with. They both could stay in the field, and neither one would have crazy hours at the same time. And while Vance didn't say it, Tony could see how this would let Tim move up into administration as the cyber-agent program grew. He had no desire to go there; he'd happily follow in Gibbs' footsteps and retire as head of the MCRT. But Tim could sit in Vance's chair one day, and he'd be damned good at it. And Tony would happily retire when Tim got that chance. With the age difference between them, he'd probably be close to mandatory age anyway. Vance could stay for another 10 years if he wanted to, and that would put Tony past 50.

"I don't know what to say, Director," Tony said. "Other than we really appreciate this."

Vance gave them a small smile. "You two are among the most valuable assets this agency has, DiNozzo. I'd be a poor director if I didn't find a creative way to keep you both here just because there wasn't a place on the organizational chart that fit what you needed."

"Thank you, sir," Tim said. "This is way beyond anything we ever imagined."

"No, thank you," Vance said. "I came up with this because I was trying to find a way to keep you, but at this point even if you two decided against leaving the MCRT, I would find a way to make this new program work. I think it will put us a step ahead of other investigative agencies and position us to succeed as technology becomes more and more a part of what we do without sacrificing the street smarts our agents need to have." He paused. "I haven't always fully appreciated those, but watching your team — especially you two — work together, has made me realize just how the two skill sets need to co-exist for us to really succeed at this job."

Gibbs got up to leave, and Vance held up a hand. "Agent McGee, can you stay a bit longer so we can work out some of the details?"

Tim nodded and turned to Tony. "If you guys get called out, I'll just find Abby or call Sarah for a ride home."

Tony nodded. "If we do, I'll see you at home tonight. Well, hopefully."

As he and Gibbs headed out, the older man skipped the stairs and went for the the elevator. Tony followed on his six, knowing what was coming. Sure enough, as soon as the elevator was in motion, Gibbs threw the emergency stop.

"Yes, Boss?"

"Didn't ask you out there," Gibbs said. "Didn't want to put you on the spot. But I've known you for a while, Tony. Kids haven't ever been something I've heard you talk about, even with Jeanne. What changed?" He paused. "Not saying you wouldn't be a good dad; I think you and Tim will be great parents. I'm just wondering."

Tony rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. He wasn't going to brush this off; he knew this was Papa Bear asking, not just his boss. And Papa Bear deserved an answer.

"Tim," he said finally. "He's always wanted the white picket fence and a family. Why do you think he and Abby broke up all those years ago? And yes, I know he wants me more than he wants a family, if he had to pick. But I don't want him to have to pick, not when he'd be a good dad."

"What about you?" Gibbs said. "What do you want?"
Tony tried to figure out how to put it into words. "Gibbs, you're a great honorary dad, and the team, well, I always wanted brothers and sisters. But as close as we are to family, I never really understood what family was until I became part of the McGee family." He smiled. "I was nervous the first time we went to meet Sean and Eileen, really nervous. I was never one to get as far as the meeting-the-parents stage. Only time it happened before was Jeanne, and you know how well that went over." He snorted. "Tim assured me when he asked me to come with him for a visit that his dad wasn't EOD, so he could promise my car wouldn't blow up this time."

Gibbs let out a short bark of laughter.

"They accepted me. It doesn't matter to them who I am or what I've done or whether I'm going to get killed at work or end up on disability because of my damned lungs. As far as they're concerned, Tim's happy, and I make him happy, so I'm family." He swallowed, trying to push back his emotions so he didn't get sappy. "At Christmas, when we were opening all of those ornaments you guys gave us? We were opening them together, unwrapping Abby's at the same time, then Sarah's..." He paused. "I couldn't find the one from Sean at first, because he'd written 'Dad' on the tag." He felt himself beginning to choke up and pushed it down. "That's... I'd never really understood the idea that family does that. That saying? 'Home is where you go, and they have to take you in'? Never understood it. Not in my family. Not the DiNozzos. But I get it now, get it in a way I never did from watching a million movies with families in them. And I want the chance to give my kids what I didn't have. This is going to sound crazy, and maybe Abby's dragged me to one too many yoga classes, but the DiNozzo name has unleashed a lot of bad karma on the world, and I want to do what I can to fix that. My father was a shitty dad, and my grandfather and uncle were criminally abusive. It would be really easy for me to say I'm just screwed, not cut out to be a parent. Bad genes. And as much help as you and Tim have given me, as much as Ducky would be willing to give me if I asked, I know I might need to see a professional at some point to make sure I don't start slipping into the same patterns my family did. But whether we have our own kids through a surrogate or adopt a baby from somebody who's not ready to be a mother or adopt older kids who have had a rough life, I think we can be good parents."

He took a deep breath. "I know none of us, not even Abby or Ziva, will ever replace Kelly in your heart. She's your girl, and that's special. But I've seen you with kids, and I know us having kids isn't like if she was still around to give you grandkids, but, well... You'd be a great grandfather, Gibbs, and I can't wait until our kids are old enough to start asking you how you get the boats out of the basement as they stand on a chair to help you sand the darn thing." He stopped, because he could feel the words choking his throat.

Gibbs hadn't said a word the entire time, just watched his face. As Tony stopped, he reached over and flipped the switch on. "You have a son, just..." He swallowed. "Just don't saddle him with either Leroy or Jethro as a name," he said. He put a hand on Tony's shoulder. "I'm proud of you, Anthony. Couldn't be prouder of Kelly than I am of you right now."

And then the elevator doors were opening, and they were headed back to the bullpen.
Chapter Notes

This chapter is shorter, but there's a fair amount going on. As always, huge thanks to Kyrie for editing and helping me herd my plot bunnies!

Saturday, March 13, 2010

Tim mixed the ingredients for pizza dough with a spoon, while Tony cut up toppings. "So what do you think about the plan?" he asked as he stirred.

Tony took a minute to answer. "I think Vance is a good guy to have on our side. He managed to find a way to give us everything we wanted and did it without anybody asking."

Tim snorted. "He's been taking mind-reading lessons from Gibbs," he said.

"Now that's a scary thought," Tony said. "It's going to be tough not saying anything to anybody, though."

Tim nodded. "Yeah, but we've got time before anything major happens. And it's not like anybody's going to be surprised when Vance promotes you when Jarvis retires. Most team leaders don't have nearly as much experience as you do."

"That's not what I'm worried about," Tony said.

"You mean Krone?"

"He wants on the MCRT bad," Tony said. "That two probies crack you mentioned was out of line."

Tim nodded. "If Gibbs had heard that, he wouldn't have to worry about applying for a spot, because Gibbs would have vaporized him with a glare." He set the spoon down and pulled the dough out to start kneading it. As he dug the heels of his hands into it, his left shoulder protested.

"You OK?" Tony looked over.

Tim nodded, dividing the dough into thirds, and began kneading again. "They said it would hurt when they suggested this as physical therapy. I'm managing." He turned the discussion back to Vance's Master Plan. "So we don't say anything to anybody," Tim said. "We still haven't decided what we're doing about kids anyway."

"I vote adoption," Tony said. "Although we could still talk to your uncles about surrogacy, see what they think."

"Oh!" Tim remembered the e-mail he'd gotten. "When Uncle Aiden e-mailed to say they couldn't come to the wedding because Mark had SATs, I asked him about it. He said they wouldn't have done it if they hadn't had a friend who was willing. They know too many other couples with horror stories about going that route for them to feel comfortable with it. The second time, they chose a woman who had been a surrogate a few years earlier for one of Uncle Jim's college buddies, because they knew what they were getting into and knew she was OK with the process."
"Well that knocks that out," Tony said. "I think we'd be pushing Vance's patience — not to mention Gibbs' — if we asked Ziva, even if she's willing."

Tim nodded. "Abby would be willing if this were five years earlier. But I'm pretty sure she and Jimmy have plans that would conflict with ours."

"Not to mention she's my age," Tony said. "Vance's Master Plan sounds like it only works if we wait a couple of years."

"Not necessarily," Tim said, pausing to work the kinks out of his shoulder before starting to knead the last portion of the dough. "All we really have to do is wait for Jarvis to retire next January."

"So all that really rules out is adopting a baby from somebody who's pregnant now," Tony said. "If we waited until the fall — if we decided to adopt a baby — it would work, because by the time the baby is born, I'd be settled into Jarvis' job."

"Do you want a baby?" Tim asked. He combined the dough and checked it over to make sure everything had mixed in, then oiled it, put it in a clean bowl to rise, and put the bowl in the oven to rise.

Tony stopped chopping and turned to look at him. "Yes. And no."

Tim snorted. "Try that again?"

"I kind of like the idea of taking in a kid that's stuck in the system," Tony said. "My family, well, you know the basics. Just because you and Gibbs finally patched up all the places they broke me doesn't mean every kid can be fixed at that point. It would be more challenging, but..."

"But you want to keep at least a couple of kids from going through what you went through?" Tim finished washing his hands, then walked over to wrap his arm around Tony's shoulders. "That sounds like a plan to me."

"Really?" Tony turned to look at him. "You don't have your heart set on a baby?"

Tim was going to brush him off, but instead he took a minute and really thought about it. "You know, I really don't," he said. "Don't get me wrong, I like the idea of seeing our kids grow up from the beginning, especially if we can also help a teen mother or somebody who doesn't have another option." He sighed. "This sounds bad to say, and I'd never repeat it, especially not to any of our friends who can have kids of their own. But I feel like there are so many kids out there who have nobody, either because their mothers gave them up at birth or because the system got involved at some point, for us to say 'sure, let's create another baby.'" He shrugged. "If we could have our own, maybe. But it's not like my dad will be upset if no McGee genes get passed on."

He felt, rather than heard, Tony's snort. "Yeah, unlike my father, who would love to hear about Anthony DiNozzo III." He sighed. "The kids are getting your name. I don't want to add any more DiNozzos to the world."

Tim reached over and dropped a kiss on his temple. "I'm pretty happy with the DiNozzo in my world," he said. "And if we adopt an older child, he or she might want to keep their name."

"You know, that's the other thing with adoption," Tony said. "We can pick if we want a boy or a girl." He shuddered. "I'm not sure I want to try and raise a girl, at least not once she hits the teen years. At least I understand teenage boys."

Tim laughed. "Ziva would say that's because you are still a teenage boy."
"Ziva has no idea," Tony said. "But seriously, I'm not sure I'd know what to do with a girl. My frame of reference is basketball, not Barbies."

"I dare you to say that in front of Mom," Tim said. "And Sarah loved to play sports — she's vicious with a field hockey stick — and she hated playing with dolls."

"OK, OK, so we could end up with a daughter who goes to karate with Ziva and a son who is allergic to any game that involves a ball," Tony said. "But it's not just that. I mean, I can explain wet dreams when he hits puberty. I'm not sure I'd know what to say to a daughter, and I'm not sure it's fair to her to have no mom around for that."

"She'd have Abby, Ziva, and Sarah," Tim said. "I mean face it, all the Baby Gibblets are going to have more parents and almost-parents than they know what to do with."

"Not to mention grandparents," Tony said. "Mom, Dad, Gibbs, Ducky, Jack..."

"Gloria, too, and Jimmy's mom."

"They don't live around here, at least Gloria doesn't," Tony said. "She's still in Louisana. And I don't know what's up with Jimmy's mom. I thought he grew up somewhere around here, but we never hear him say anything about her."

"And how often do you talk about your father?" Tim said.

"But my father's an alcoholic SOB," Tony said.

"And Ziva's is a sociopath. Why assume Jimmy has a functional family? Nobody else on the team does."

"Your family is about as functional as they come," Tony said.

"We have our moments," Tim said.

"That's insanity, not dysfunction," Tony retorted. "Something all the Baby Gibblets will consider normal."

"Can't argue with that," Tim pulled away and looked at the clock. "Come on, let's declutter before Abby and Jimmy show up. You know they're going to be early. Abby's early to everything. It's all that caffeine."

"I don't know about that," Tony said. "I haven't seen a Caf-Pow in the lab all week. I even spotted Gibbs with a No-Caf-Pow in hand a couple of mornings."

"Really."

"Hey, that's my line!"

"Wasn't that in the vows?" Tim grinned. "We can steal each others lines?"

"Does that mean I can steal your line about leaving the whole bat-gremlin issue alone?" Tony smirked. "Besides, I'd much rather torture Josh."

"We're finally getting to meet him," Tim said. "Don't scare him off."

"I thought that was part of my job as an older brother."
Tim snorted. "Only if you want Sarah to eviscerate you on her blog. Besides if he's a nice guy, we don't want to scare him away."

"But that takes all the fun out of it."

"She's not your only sister, you know," Tim said. "Go scare Jimmy or Damon."

"But Abby and Ziva really could kill me," Tony said, shuddering. "And not to regress to kindergarten or anything, but words can't hurt. At least nothing that Sarah could dish out. She's an amateur compared to my family." He sighed.

Tim walked over and wrapped his arms around him, though his left arm only made it halfway up. "They're out of your life, and they're not coming back," he said. "We're your family, and you know we're only kidding when we give you a hard time. Even Sarah. Even if you do scare off Josh."

They heard the front door open and looked up.

"Who's scaring who off?" Abby stuck her head in the living room as she unfastened her cape.

"Tony wants to scare Josh," Tim said.

"Would you rather I scare Jimmy?" Tony said.

"No!" Jimmy held a stack of board games in front of him like a shield.

"Relax," Abby said. "Tony knows better than to scare you away."

"Right, because you'd kill me and leave no forensic evidence."

"No, because Duckman would decide he needed an autopsy model to practice on."

Tim started laughing at Abby's smirk.

"OK, OK, I give in," Tony said. "No scaring the boyfriends."

"Yeah, nobody scared you off," Tim said. "Besides, do you really want to explain to Gibbs why Abby's going to have to raise a bat-gremlin alone because you killed Jimmy?"

"Timmy," Abby said, the warning clear in her voice.

"Right, I know, no asking questions we aren't willing to answer. But I didn't ask." He was tempted to ask about Tony's No-Caf-Pow observation, but decided that was too close to asking and changed the subject. "What are all the games, Abs?"

"Oh! I brought a new one," she said. "Carol, you know, my friend at the VA, she told me about it and let us borrow hers."

As Jimmy put down the boxes on the end table, Tim walked over to look at the top one. "Qwelf?"

"It's totally cool!" Abby opened the box. "You get to do all kinds of stuff. Like, I might draw a card that tells me I have to hop around on one foot until somebody says the word pirate, or you might get one where you pick a topic and we all have to give answers that fit the topic and the first one who can't find one takes a penalty."

"That does sound like the perfect game for this crowd," Tony said as Brad walked in.
"Should I run now?" he asked. "Because I'm afraid of what the perfect game for this bunch of lunatics would be."

"And yet you come every week," Tony retorted.

Tim just rolled his eyes as the two slipped into their usual banter and headed to the kitchen to check on the dough.

The next several minutes were the usual confusion of people arriving, getting dinner ready, and passing Kevin around.

Tim settled on the couch so he could finally hold the squirming baby, not wanting to risk dropping him even though his left arm sort of worked now.

Jimmy stuck his head in the living room. "Hey, guys? We are telling Josh what we do, right? Because I don't think we can keep that a secret for an entire night."

"He's got a point," Tony said. "Besides, then he really won't think of messing with Sarah, not when he knows we all carry guns."

"Not me," Brad said. "I'm supposed to do no harm, remember?"

"Huh," Jimmy said. "Maybe that's why Supply won't trust me with firearms?"

Tony opened his mouth, and Tim went ahead and slapped him before he could say anything.

"I didn't say-"

"You were going to," Tim said, smirking at the sheepish look on Tony's face.

The first pizzas were already in the oven when Sarah and Josh walked in. Dwayne took Kevin back from Tim so he could go meet his sister's boyfriend. Dwayne decided it wouldn't be a bad idea to shift back to the edges of the room, away from any potential fireworks. Not that he thought there would be any, but he'd heard Tim and Tony muttering enough times in recent weeks about not getting to meet Josh. Even that first lunch with Damon had been a little awkward, and not just because he hadn't met the former marine before. Damon and Ziva weren't even dating, and Tony had been protective of both Ziva and Abby. Dwayne still hadn't quite figured that out, since Tony and Jimmy were as good friends as Tim and Abby. He couldn't picture Tim warning Abby not to hurt Jimmy.

Not for the first time, Dwayne marveled at the odd group of friends he'd found himself inducted into. Even as he tickled Kevin's feet until he giggled and squirmed, Dwayne remembered what it was like to meet Maggie's older brothers. He'd been petrified that they wouldn't approve. He'd been a grunt then, and among the top in his unit on fitness tests, so he wasn't worried they would literally kick his ass. But he'd wanted them to approve of him. Josh was probably feeling the same way, and this group was pretty intimidating. So when Brad wandered over to see Kevin, Dwayne had no problems handing his wriggly son over to the doctor, especially since Tony was just joining the group by the door, a plate of pizza in hand.

He worked his way over to where Sarah, Josh, Tim, and Tony stood, with Abby and Jimmy sitting on the floor not far away.
"Josh, this is my brother-in-law, Tony," Sarah said.

Josh stuck out his hand. "Nice to meet you, sir," he said.

"Sure, make me feel even older," Tony said, shaking the hand.

"That's what you get for robbing the cradle," Tim said.

"Hey!" exclaimed Abby from her spot on the floor. "You didn't have a problem with us dating, Timmy. Or me and Jimmy. You even encouraged us."

Dwayne stifled a laugh as Tony turned to glare at Tim. "You encouraged them?"

"You did a little encouraging yourself," Tim said, smirking. "But Abby's right, neither of you are robbing the cradle."

Josh was looking a little apprehensive at this point, and Dwayne figured a rescue might be in order. Once Tim, Tony, and Abby started in on each other, they could go for hours.

"Hey, Josh," he said. "Dwayne Wilson."

"Agent Dwayne Wilson," Tony said. "Dwayne works with us at NCIS."

"Wait, you're all federal agents?" Josh said. He turned to Sarah. "Sweetheart, you didn't mention that."

"Not all," Tim said. "Abby's our forensic scientist, and Jimmy's the assistant medical examiner."

Abby waved. "Abby Scuito," she said. "We met the other night. Also known as Tim's ex-girlfriend."

"The one who washed the dog?" Josh frowned. "And the other two I met - Ziva and Damon?"

"Ziva's in the kitchen," Jimmy said. "At least she was."

Dwayne looked around. "I don't see her, so she must be. She was behind Maggie waiting for the oven."

"Maggie?" Josh's eyes were beginning to glaze over.

"My wife," Dwayne said. "And our youngest is over there with Brad."

"Brad?"

The grin on Tony's face tipped Dwayne off that his usual Brad introduction was coming.

"Dr. Brad Pitt," he said. "No relation he says. We think he just doesn't want to bring Angelina to our parties."

"I heard that, Buckeye," Brad called over.

"Yeah, yeah," Tony said. "You only wish, Wolverine."

"Wait, you two went to Ohio State and Michigan?" Josh said.

Tony nodded. "We both played football," he said. "Brad broke my leg in the big game senior year, but he saved my life a few years back, so we're even. Besides, if I had gone pro, I wouldn't have
met this gang."

"Brad, why did you break his leg again?" Sarah asked, causing Tony to stick his tongue out at her.

"You played for Ohio State?" Josh said.

Tony nodded. "Football and basketball."

"Wow." He didn't seem to know what else to say, so Dwayne decided to rescue him again. "Damon was out back playing with the dog."

"In the dark?" Tim raised an eyebrow.

"Kevin pulled Jethro's ears one too many times, and he was getting grumpy, so Damon figured he could use some one-on-one time," Dwayne said. "This might be the last time we bring Kevin to game night, especially since he's getting close to crawling."

"OK, you guys, break it up and let Sarah and Josh get some pizza." Maggie walked over and wrapped an arm around Dwayne's waist. "The oven's almost free — Ziva's pizza will be done in a minute."

Sarah headed off, but Josh seemed to have decided to ask about Tony's college career.

"So what position did you play?"

"Point guard and running back," Tony said. "You a fan?"

Josh nodded. "There wasn't a big sports school near where I grew up, but my father was a big Notre Dame fan, so we watched a lot of the Big 10 schools, since that's who the Irish often end up playing."

Dwayne tried to do the math in his head, but Tony seemed to beat him to it. "You would have been a baby when I played," he said. "But ask your dad if he remembers Tony DiNozzo playing."

"DiNozzo?" Josh straightened up. "Tony Jr., right?"

"You've heard of me?" Tony grinned, and Dwayne realized just how much Tony must have loved being an athlete.

"Your father and mine have done business together," Josh said, and Dwayne could see the tension easing from his stance. "I grew up in the same part of Long Island as you did."

"Really," Tony said. "What's your last name?"

"Pritchard," Josh said. "But the family business is Southward Industries, from my mother's family."

Tony nodded. "Sure, I remember your father," he said. "He's about the same age as my father, though. I didn't realize he had any kids as young as you."

"Third marriage," Josh said. "You know how it goes. I've got some half-sisters who are closer to your age."

"Meredith and Ronnie, right?" Tony grinned, all his teeth showing. "I dated Meredith a few times, back in the day."

"She's married now, three kids," Josh said. "Second marriage. Or maybe third. I'm not sure if she
married the one before this guy."

"Well, you know how it goes," Tony said.

"Hey guys." Abby interrupted. "I hate to break up the memories, but Josh had better go make his pizza if we want to start playing any time soon." She turned to Dwayne. "Can you show him where to go?"

Dwayne nodded and motioned for Josh to follow him.

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As Josh walked away, Jimmy felt Abby relax in his arms. She'd been getting tenser and tenser ever since Josh mentioned he knew Tony's dad, and Tony's smile had been getting more and more fake. With Josh gone, Tim let his face fill with worry.

"Tony?" His voice was so low, Jimmy barely heard it.

"Later," he muttered. "Just some old ghosts." Shaking himself, Tony straightened up. "So," he said, his voice bright. "What's this game with the crazy name you brought, Abby?"

"But-" She stopped when Jimmy squeezed her hands in his, where they looped around her waist. "Right. Qwelf. Carol — you guys know my friend Carol — she had it at a girls night a month or two ago. You pull cards on your turn and have to do what the cards tell you to do. Sometimes it's really crazy stuff, like standing up and saying 'Quelf, land of the kingdom' every time somebody lands on a space that's not yellow; or acting out a phrase for everybody to guess." She grinned. "It's a great party game, so I thought we could give it a try."

And just like that, things seemed to get back to normal. Except that Tony was really loud and exuberant, like a mockery of himself. Jimmy began to wonder if the issues Tim had mentioned last week were related to Tony's dad. It would explain why he hadn't come to the wedding last weekend and why Tony seemed to rely on Gibbs as his dad. Jimmy had always figured Tony's dad was dead, but maybe not.

Tony drew a card and started hopping around, waving his hands.

"Pirate on caffeine?" Abby asked.

"Tap-dancer with a broken toe?" Jimmy guessed.

"Mime with a broken leg?" Maggie asked.

At that Tony sat back down. "You get to move two," he told her.

They went around the circle, each one taking a turn to do something outrageous.

"OK, name ways to get your leg out of a spring-loaded, steel bear trap," Dwayne said.

"Use your Rule 9 knife to hack off the leg," Tony said.

"Unscrew the nuts in the hinge," Tim said.

"Now how are you supposed to do that?" Maggie said.
Tim pulled a Swiss Army Knife from his pocket.

"Of course," she said. "OK, pour acid on the trap until the metal weakens and you can break your way out."

"I don't think that would work," Abby said.

"Force it open with your hands," Josh said.

"Yeah, like that would work," Tony said. "Even Damon couldn't do that... Well, OK, so maybe when we first met him."

"I did shred a straightjacket back then," Damon said, grinning. "How about you, Miss Ninja?"

"I would drop a rock on it to break the trap," Ziva said.

Jimmy frowned and tried to think of a solution.

"Well, since we're OK with ones that wouldn't actually work, have Dr. Mallard talk to the trap until it falls asleep and the jaws unlock," he said.

"Wow, Abby, you've completely taken Jimmy into your own crazy world," Tony said. "He's going to be sprouting bat wings next." He flapped his arms.

By the time everybody stopped laughing — everybody but Tim, who Jimmy noticed kept watching Tony's face — Sarah had given up.

"Looks like I lose this round," she said, rubbing her ear.

"You OK?" Tim asked.

Sarah nodded. "I think I'm getting an ear infection," she said. "I thought it was just allergies, but I can feel it when I swallow."

"You're going to student health, right?" Tim said. Jimmy had to smile at how much he sounded like a big brother.

"Yes, Mom," she said, rolling her eyes as the rest of the group snickered.

"I'll make sure she goes," Josh said.

"Thanks, Josh," Tim said. "I'd hate to have to sic Mom on her."

"You wouldn't!" Sarah made a face. "Wait, yes you would." She stuck her tongue out.

Tony grinned. "Well, we have two doctors here. We could always turn them loose on you. Or call Ducky."

At that, Tim, Ziva, Abby, and Jimmy started laughing.

"What's so funny?" Dwayne asked.

"Usually we're having to drag Tony kicking and screaming to see Dr. Mallard," Jimmy said between snickers. "Tim and Gibbs are the only ones who can even get him to think about it. Tony suggesting we call Ducky? I think hell might finally have frozen over."
When Qwelf finally ended, the group broke into smaller teams, since most of the other games were for no more than four or six people. Tim just flopped into the armchair, waving everybody off. "That last question about killed me," he said when Abby invited him to join the Clue game. "You guys play; I'm just going to chill for a while."

Brad stopped by. "Chess once you've stopped feeling like you got run over?"

Tim nodded. "I'm rusty, but sure. You've probably got time for one of the other games first."

Brad joined the bigger group at the coffee table with Clue, while Sarah, Josh, Maggie, and Ziva disappeared into the kitchen with Scrabble.

Tony settled down at the piano and started playing. Tim frowned as he heard the power and anger in the music. Tim had picked up a few Miles Davis albums to play when he was trying to write action scenes in his novels, where he needed that dark tension, the worry about whether L.J. Tibbs and agents McGregor, Tommy, and Lisa would survive. Tony sounded like he was channeling those albums, and Tim hadn't heard him play like that in months, not since right after the nightmares that had plagued him back in the fall.

Tony had been off all night, ever since Josh had made the connection with Tony's family. Not for the first time, Tim damned the DiNozzo family, especially Tony's dad, for everything they had put his husband through.

He stifled a sigh and tried to relax. At least he'd be back at work Monday where he could keep an eye on Tony. As he settled down and tried to just let his ears pay attention to Tony, he saw Abby glancing over toward the piano between turns. They'd never talked much about it, but Tim knew Abby had a sense of the issues Tony had with his family, just from being friends with him. And as he saw the open worry in Jimmy's face, Tim knew either Tony had mentioned something to his friend over the years or Jimmy had gotten good enough at seeing behind Tony's masks to know something was up.

For the first time, game night couldn't end soon enough for Tim. When everybody finally packed up and headed out, he left Tony at the piano and went upstairs to set the bedroom lights on low and change into his sleepwear. He knew he needed to let Tony play everything out first, but they also needed to talk, and that would take a little manipulation to get him to open up; it always did.

When he went back downstairs almost an hour later, Tony was still playing, but the music had shifted from angry to angsty blues. Tony's shoulders had relaxed, but the music was enough to tell Tim just the piano wouldn't be enough tonight.

He walked up behind Tony and put his hands on his shoulders, gently rubbing them. As Tony's hands stilled, Tim tried to dig a little deeper with his thumbs, though his left shoulder protested almost immediately. Tim lightened up on that side, and after a minute, Tony pulled away and turned to face him.

"I know they said kneading bread dough was supposed to help you, but I'm not sure my shoulders count," Tony said. "They're a lot tougher."

Tim took a hand and tipped his husband's chin up. "You need it more than the dough did," he said.

Tony just nodded, but made no move to get up.
"Come on," Tim said. "Upstairs."

"I'm not tired," Tony said.

Tim just raised an eyebrow.

"OK, so I'm tired, but I'm too wired to sleep," Tony said. "I just..."

"Come on," Tim said. "Let's at least get into bed."

He led Tony upstairs and waited until the older man had joined him in bed, pulling Tony close with his good arm. Tony's breath was warm on Tim's chest, but he could feel the tension in Tony's body.

"Hey," he said. "Talk to me."

"About?"

"Josh. Your dad. His sister. His dad. Whatever it is that has you tied in knots."

Tony sighed. "I don't want to talk," he said. "If I talk, I'll dream, and if I dream, I'll wake up screaming. I don't want to go back to that."

"And you'll sleep fine if you don't talk about it?" Tim didn't even bother to keep the skepticism from his voice.

"I've slept fine for years not talking about it," Tony said. "This isn't like back in the fall. It's not my uncle; it's not my grandfather. Those SOBs didn't have anything to do with the Pritchards." He looked at Tim, his green eyes pinning him with their gaze. "It doesn't involve Josh," he said, finally. "If I knew anything that made me think Josh was bad news for Sarah, I'd say something."

"But?"

"There is no 'but,' Tim," he said. "If every spoiled rich kid in the Hamptons turned out just like their dysfunctional parents, the families would have collapsed a long time ago. Some perfectly normal parents produce really screwed-up kids, and F'd up families have produced normal kids." He grinned. "Just look at me."

Tim looked at his face, searching his expression for the little signs he'd learned meant Tony was shading the truth. Nothing.

"I'm not trying to push," he said, finally. "I just don't want you to get hurt, and I don't want Sarah to get hurt."

"I hate to say this," Tony said. "But after all the comments I've made about scaring Josh off and about looking out for the girls, I have to admit they can take care of themselves. All of them. Even Sarah. You can't let the fact that Josh knows my dad factor in."

"You're sure?"

Tony nodded. "I'm not the same kid who could be hurt when he ignored me all those years ago," he said. "OK, yeah, I'd like it if I'd been lucky enough to have a dad like yours or like Jack or Gibbs, but he never actively hurt me. He just ignored me. If Sarah and Josh are serious, the worst that will happen is we'll run into each other, and he'll keep ignoring me."

Tim didn't know what to say to that. He'd been there for too many of Tony's nightmares to brush it
off, but he could also tell Tony really didn't want to talk about it. Stifling a sigh, Tim decided to table it for now.

"If you say so," he said. "So Damon seems excited about starting his new job Monday."

Tony nodded, and Tim could feel him begin to relax. "I talked to Steve a few days ago — he called to ask me about a couple of the things Damon had said in the interview, and it sounded like he was pretty sure Damon was the one for the job."

"Bad things in the interview?" Tim allowed himself to relax.

He felt, rather than saw, Tony shake his head. "He was explaining about his discharge, and Steve just wanted to double-check the facts. Sounds like the fact Damon was candid about what happened back then worked in his favor, might even have been the deciding factor."

"Really?"

"Yeah, Steve said he could tell Damon really understood the mentality of sailors and marines who think it's a sign of weakness to not be invincible, which is one of the main things they battle in trying to get resources out to those guys — getting them to realize they need help." Tony snuggled closer, and Tim could feel him relax even more. "Think maybe he can help our little ninja chick with that?"

"If anybody can, I'd say he'd be the one," Tim said. "If she were going to talk to one of us, she probably would have already."

"At least she's letting us get close," Tony said. "The past couple of months, she's been more relaxed than I've ever seen her."

"And Abby's calmer, and Jimmy's less nervous," Tim replied. "I don't even remember how we started these game nights, but hanging out all together every week really seems to be making a big difference. I just wish it wasn't such a trek for them all. Well, all but Brad."

"Well, we've talked about moving down near Gibbs and Mom and Dad," Tony said. "I know there's more than six months left on our lease, but maybe we should start looking at neighborhoods and figuring out finances and stuff."

"I should be getting more money from the publishing company when the next book comes out in a couple of months," Tim said. "That should take care of a big part of the down payment."

"I've still got some money in the bank from my grandmother DiNozzo," Tony said. "Under the terms of her will, I didn't get full access to it until I turned 40, so I've never tapped into it. I'll have to check Monday and see how much is in there."

Tim nodded, sleepy. "We'll figure it out. Like you said, we've got time."

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When the game night broke up, Abby and Jimmy headed home. As he drove, Abby thought about how quickly her apartment had become home for both of them. There were times she still found everything that had happened in the past few weeks hard to believe. But when they got home and were getting ready for bed, she couldn't help but realize how they already had meshed their evening routines to work together. He heated up water for tea or hot chocolate, whatever they had
decided on, as she cleaned off all her makeup and took out her pigtails. Then they would snuggle on the couch and just talk. Sometimes it was about their respective days, sometimes about plans for the future. They debated about video games or their respective tastes in music.

But tonight, she had a feeling their topic of discussion would be much more serious. Sure enough, when she joined Jimmy on the couch, he dived right in.

"Was it just that Josh knew Tony's dad that had him acting all hinky tonight?" he said.

She had to smile at how he'd adopted her favorite adjective, before quickly sobering. "How much do you know about Tony's dad?"

He shook his head. "He doesn't talk about him, and I've never really asked," he said. "I figured he was either dead or kind of like my mom, not really healthy to deal with."

"Yeah, you could say that," Abby said. She blinked back tears. "I don't know a lot of details; I think Timmy's probably the only one who does, maybe Gibbs. But at best Tony's dad neglected him."

"And at worst?"

She shook her head. "There's some abuse there, but I'm not sure if it's physical or mental, and I don't know if it was his dad or his mom." She sighed. "About the only thing I'm sure of is that it wasn't sexual abuse."

"That's not exactly good news," Jimmy said. "I mean, yes, it is good news because if that had happened it would be really bad news, but, um, yeah."

She couldn't help smiling. "I know," she said. "It's pretty bad when hearing it's not the worst possible news qualifies as good news, isn't it?"

He nodded and rested his cheek on her head. "Is there something we can do?"

"I wish." She sighed again. "He won't talk about it, and the couple of times I've tried to persuade him, he's avoided me. I learned to listen to his 'No Trespassing' signs the first year we worked together, at least on this."

"And talking to Tim about it is just going to get him worried about Sarah and Tony," Jimmy said.

Abby could only nod. "Gibbs can get him to talk."

Jimmy interrupted. "Gibbs can get anybody to talk."

"True. But not my point."

"If Gibbs thinks Sarah's dating somebody who could hurt Tony, he'd probably say something to the McGees."

Abby nodded. "He's protective of me and Ziva — even though Ziva almost beat him the last time they sparred — but Sarah? She's almost the same age Kelly would be. And she's not an agent."

"So what can we do?" Jimmy said.

Abby shook her head. "I don't know. And I wish I did."
As Damon piloted the car back toward Ziva's apartment, he asked the question that had been on his mind all evening. "What was up with Tony?" he said. "He seemed fine when Sarah and Josh first got there, then he just seemed off. It was... He didn't like me. Didn't trust me. But the first time I came to game night, he was fine."

He glanced over when Ziva didn't reply. "Hey, Ziva. What's going on?"

"I do not know," she said. "I suspect it has something to do with Tony's father. They... do not get along. I do not know why. Even when I was compiling dossiers on the team members as part of my Mossad duties, I was not able to determine what had happened between them, other than that it was of long-standing duration and involved no records that could be accessed."

"What kind of records?"

"Medical reports, social services case files, newspaper clippings," she said. "All are tools we use to background people as we investigate them now, and I did the same for Mossad."

He nodded and thought about what Tim had mentioned to him. "So you knew a lot about the team even before you joined."

"Yes." When she did not say anything more, he let her answer hang in the air. Soon, they were pulling up to her apartment.

"Damon."

"Yes?" He looked over at her and saw her eyes bright with tears.

"You are right to be concerned about Tony," she said. "I know, only too well, how fathers and children can have difficulties. I do not understand how Josh fits into this, but I am worried."

Damon nodded. He wanted to reach out, to do something to comfort Ziva, but he wasn't sure how she would react. What Tim had said... He didn't want to trigger anything. He understood, too well, how even something innocent could cause pain to a mind affected by extreme stress.

"Ziva... You and Sarah have gotten to be friends, right?"

She nodded. "We have talked about her moving into the second bedroom in my apartment when she graduates in a few months."

"Maybe next weekend at the game night, you could suggest to her that the four of us do something Sunday afternoon. We might be able to figure out what's going on if it's a small group, with no big brothers around." He hesitated. "I know you're not interested in dating; I'm not trying to suggest-

"No, Damon, I know," Ziva smiled. "I did not take it that way. I think that would be an excellent idea. To get them out together, it would need to be as a couple. Abby... She would mean well, but she wears her heart on her shirt."

Damon thought for a second. "On her sleeve?"

"Sleeve, shirt. It is of no matter," Ziva said. "She would not be able to observe and be herself if she suspects Josh of anything. And Jimmy is not an agent."

"Neither am I." He grinned.
"I am." She let a small smile slip onto her face. "And I am skilled in undercover work and interrogation. With you there to maintain my cover, we will, as you say, make a good team."

"Then I'll see you next week," he said. "Sooner, if you have a free night and want to get coffee." He paused. "Just coffee."

She nodded. "I would like that," she said. "And I appreciate that you understand."
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Author's note from the original posting date: Hope everybody in the U.S. enjoyed the extra hour of sleep last night! As always, thanks to Kyrie for editing, especially since this 11K-word monster of a chapter had her up until the clocks flipped back in time last night. Also, one section of this started as a Help Pakistan fic for Celli, who was nice and didn't share it until Breathe caught up with the events in this story. :)

Sunday, March 14, 2010

Tim kept an eye on Tony the rest of the weekend, discreetly. Well, he thought he was being discreet.

"Tim, I'm not going to break," Tony finally said while they were working on dinner together in the kitchen.

Tim just looked at him.

"I'm not," he said. "My father's a neglectful SOB, but he's always been that way. Lots of people know him. The only reason this hasn't come up before is that most petty officers don't rub elbows with the New York elite, and people raised like that don't go to boot camp; they go to Harvard and major in medicine, law, or business."

"You went to Ohio State and majored in phys ed," Tim said, his voice quiet.

"And I'd say it made me the black sheep of the family, but I accomplished that just by being born." Tony twisted his lips into a sardonic grin. "Look, I'll be fine."

"Tony, you'd insist you were fine if you were dying of the plague," Tim said. "Oh, wait-"

He was rewarded by a genuine laugh. "Hey, I didn't die," Tony said. "And I couldn't let Kate think some crazy germs were enough to take me out." His grin faded. "God, I miss her sometimes. Can you imagine what she would say if she saw us now?"

"She'd probably stop giving me grief about looking up her skirt that one time. Of course, she'd just switch to asking me how on earth I can stand being married you," Tim said. He thought back to their friend. "You realize it's been almost five years?"

Tony nodded. "You know, she always swore we'd kill ourselves with all the crap we eat compared to her disgusting tofu wraps." He sighed. "You know, I think about her sometimes, and Paula. Your friend Jim, Langer, my partner in Philly... Even Jenny. Are we crazy for wanting to have kids, knowing the odds against both of us dying from old age suck big time?"

Tim pulled out a chair at the table and motioned Tony over, then took one himself. "Life sucks sometimes," he said. "I mean, don't you think Gibbs and Shannon figured if one of them would die when Kelly was a child, it would be Gibbs in combat? They couldn't have planned on that Mexican drug dealer. Gibbs' mother died early; so did yours."
"My mother was an alcoholic with major health problems," Tony said.

"Ziva's mother died."

"Yeah, well, living in a war zone tends to do that," Tony said.

"Jimmy's father is dead. Car accident, I think." Tim shrugged. "We can't make plans based on what might happen. We can minimize it by you switching to Cold Cases, and we know we have Mom and Dad, Gibbs, Jack, the rest of the team. Even Sarah. She's not a kid person, but I have to think she'd step in if we needed her to because something had happened. Ziva's another one who might not choose to have her own kids, but would help out if we needed it."

"And Abby has enough room in her heart for a dozen little McGees," Tony said. "Jimmy would go right along with her, I'm pretty sure." He slumped back in his chair. "I know. We've got a good family, and we can trust all of them with our kids. Well, our hypothetical kids."

"Even Josh?" Tim slipped in, thinking he might get Tony to spill about what was on his mind.

"Josh seems fine," Tony said. "Sarah wouldn't put up with him if he was abusive, and none of the classic signs are there. She spends more time with us now than she did a year ago."

"So what's got you so worried?" Tim said. "Your dad or Josh?"

Tony stared up at the ceiling, and Tim let him. Tony liked to talk too much to leave the silence hanging for too long.

"Both. Neither." He paused, and Tim began to think he was going to stop there. Finally, Tony continued. "My dad doesn't know about us. But gossip is part and parcel of the package in that circle. Oh, it's all very discreet, very quiet. But if Sarah and Josh are really serious, sooner or later our families are going to meet, and I want to keep my father far away from you, from Mom and Dad, from the team..." He let out a breath. "I've cut myself off from that life for a lot of reasons. Everything Gibbs lives — integrity, passion, justice, commitment, Semper Fi — that's what I want in my life. My father and the rest of my family, the rest of their circle, they wouldn't know what any of those mean. He ran a hand through his hair, dislodging the carefully arranged spikes. "Like Josh — he asked how come you weren't working for a big computer company. That's how it is in that world. You're a genius; you use it to make money. Not catch dirtbags."

Tim thought about that for a moment. "You know, a couple of weeks ago, I was worried that Josh wasn't serious about Sarah, because she seemed to really have fallen for him. Now I'm beginning to worry I had it wrong — maybe I should worry that he is serious."

"Tim, you'd McWorry no matter what," Tony said, sitting up, a smile on his face. "Look, I don't know Josh, and all my feelings on this are wrapped up in some pretty crazy baggage. Do you trust Sarah?"

Tim wanted to reply right away, but took a minute to think about it. "I do," he finally said. "Sometimes I have a hard time remembering she's an adult, not my baby sister anymore, but she is. And I trust the adult she's become to make the right decisions."

"Then don't worry about Josh," Tony said. "And let me worry about my dad."

"Hey, your worries are my worries now," Tim said. "I put it in the fine print when I typed up our vows." He grinned at Tony.

"Oh, you-" Tony reached over and grabbed the dish towel from the counter and tossed it at him.
"Come on, let's finish dinner and make it an early night. The way our luck runs, we're going to catch the mother of all cases tomorrow and end up sleeping at the office."

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Monday, March 15, 2010

By 1300, Tony was cursing his casual comment the night before. Six dead bodies, three other agencies claiming jurisdiction, and a turf war that went way above what Gibbs and Fornell could work out in the elevator meant it was going to be a long day, if not a longer week. And that didn't even count the snafu with his bank confusing his trust fund account with one of his father's — if he didn't straighten that out soon, he was going to actually have to call the man.

While Gibbs was up in MTAC with Vance fighting to keep NCIS as the lead agency on the case, Tony pulled the rest of the team in around the plasma.

"OK, what do we know?" he asked.

Ziva started. "We know somebody shot petty officers Hammond, Cole, and MacDougall while they were at a meeting with Mitchell Randolph, Derek Whitaker, and Susanna Moretti, who also were shot."

Tim picked up from there. "Randolph was on the Homeland Security watch list as a suspected terrorist. Whitaker was part of La Grenouille's arms dealing operation in the U.S., and Moretti has been affiliated with Mike Macalusso, the noted Baltimore mob boss you put away as a cop." He grinned, and Tony knew his partner was happy to be back in the middle of a case.

"We also know that Hammond and Cole worked in EOD, and MacDougall was a supply clerk," Dwayne said. "They had access to explosives and the skills to build a bomb."

Tony nodded. They had spent the morning uncovering the information, but it helped to make sure everybody was on the same page. "Do we have any prior connections between our bomb-making petty officers and the trio of bad guys occupying the Boss and the Director's time with this turf war?"

Tim shook his head. "Nothing so far, but I'm digging deeper," he said. "There has to be some contact point among them. They weren't in Rock Creek Park together by accident."

"And they did not shoot themselves," Ziva said. "Ducky confirms that all were shot from a distance, and Abby said they were all shot with the same weapon."

Dwayne motioned to Tim, who pulled up the sketches and photos from the crime scene. "The bullets came from above, which puts the shooter on this hillside," Dwayne said. "There's an access road that crosses about 25 feet above the shooter's likely position, and there are two or three parking areas on that side. At that time of the morning, anybody who saw a car would have assumed it belonged to a jogger."

"Ziva, you and Dwayne head out to Pax River and talk to the COs and anybody who was friends with these guys," Tony said. "McGoogle, background them, go as deep as you have to. I'm going to make some calls to Baltimore, see what I can find on Moretti."

"Is Lodestone still in play, or did that die with the Frog?" Tim asked.
"Perhaps Gibbs should go find Kort," Ziva said as she grabbed her gear.

"Yeah, pretty sure he's already thought of that," Tony said. "First he's got to finish his pissing match with the rest of the three-letter boys."

"Four letters beats three." Tony wasn't surprised to feel the team leader's hand on the back of his skull.

"We still in charge, Boss?" he asked.

Gibbs just looked at him as he got his SIG from the desk.

"Right, Boss. You off to talk to our favorite frog-wrangler?"

"Fornell will be by in 20 with the FBI files on Moretti," Gibbs said. "He's representing the other agencies on this one."

"Lost the coin toss?" Tony grinned at Gibbs and ducked in a failed effort to evade another smack as Gibbs made his way out of the bullpen. "We've got it, Boss."

Tony started working the phones, though he could see Tim, tapping away on the computer, his face furrowed in thought. While he filled his notebook with details from some of his Baltimore contacts, he missed Fornell's arrival until he looked over to see the man sitting in Gibbs' chair.

"Hey, Fornell," Tony said. "So I hear Moretti's been handling the rough stuff for Macalusso. Unusual for them to give a woman that job."

"Nice to see you too, DiNozzo," Fornell said, using the Italian pronunciation. "McGee. I heard you'd been shot."

Tim nodded. "Desk duty started today."

Tony looked over at his partner. "No sling?"

"I'm fine, Tony," Tim said. "Ducky said he only wanted me to use it if my shoulder got tired."

Fornell grinned. "That's right, Gibbs told me you two had tied the knot. Congratulations."

Tony smiled. "Thanks, Fornell. Now, what have you got on Moretti?"

"You didn't have McGee hack it out of our servers?"

"Why bother?" Tim said. "Gibbs said you were bringing it over. As he turned back to his monitor and started typing, Tony joined Fornell at Gibbs' desk to review the files."

Gibbs found the park bench empty and sat, waiting. Within minutes, Kort joined him.

"Gibbs."

"Kort. You heard about Derek Whitaker?"

"Small-time." The CIA agent looked over at him. "What's you interest in Whitaker?"
"Turned up dead, along with three petty officers and a couple other dirtbags. You didn't know?"

When the CIA agent didn't say anything, Gibbs risked a guess. "Getting Siravo's money didn't get you off the bench, did it? Otherwise you'd know, because I just spent too much time fighting off Langley on this case."

"Lodestone's closed, Gibbs."

"The biggest deep-cover operation the agency ever ran is closed because the Frog is dead?" He risked another poke at the tiger. "You killed him. Why didn't the agency just move one of his men up to take over?"

"You known damn well who killed him," Kort said. "Lodestone is closed. Besides, American soil."

"Never stopped you before."

"We're done, Gibbs." He got up and started to walk away.

"Kort, I find you're holding out on me, DiNozzo gets to interrogate you."

"You have a one-track mind, Gibbs," Kort said, quickly leaving the area.

Gibbs had a feeling Kort would be back before this case wrapped, but he didn't seem involved. Whether any information he would bring would be worth the price was another story all together.

He headed back to the office. When he got there, Tim was deep in the zone on his computer. Gibbs spared a minute to enjoy how right it seemed having him back, especially since this case was shaping up to need his hacking skills. He stopped and stood in front of his own desk, glaring at Tony and Fornell.

DiNozzo was the first to look up. "Uh, hi Boss," he said. "We were just--"

"Using my desk? Yeah, I see that DiNozzo." He jerked a thumb, and the two men moved. "OK, Fornell, what's the connection between your RICO caper and my dead petty officers?"

"Moretti wasn't your average mafia lieutenant, Boss," Tony said. "First of all, she's a she, which is rare. And she worked her way up the ranks. Macalusso's her uncle, so she was already in the family, but she started with enforcement as a teenager. I never thought I'd see the woman who could best Ziva in a fair fight, but she might be the one."

"And this is relevant how?"

"Moretti's in charge of the muscle," Fornell said. "And the family's been rumored to be getting heavily involved in the dockworkers' dispute. Macalusso's brother Rick is the head of the organization now, and he's been going toe-to-toe with the Russians. Rick was 'offering' the dockworkers protection, and they weren't going for it."

Gibbs just looked at them.

"We think Moretti was looking for explosives to blow up a target at the docks," Tony said. "That would explain why they went to Navy EODs."

"What about Randolph and Whitaker?" Gibbs wasn't convinced. "Kort insists Lodestone is closed, and the Frog's old network isn't CIA anymore."

At Tony's curse, Gibbs let his lips quirk up. "That's pretty much what I said. Kort knows
something, but he's not in a sharing mood. And Langley's sure as hell not going to tell us."

"Maybe the target at the docks involves a shipment of weapons?" Tony said. "Be a pretty good way to steal them. Get them off the ship, blow it up so it sinks, and the weapons are assumed to be lost and destroyed, not stolen."

"Then that would make Randolph the buyer," Fornell said. "Gibbs, he's been linked with half a dozen extremist groups just in the last year. He could be working for any of them, everything from Al-Qaeda to Abu Sayyaf to the IRA."

"McGee!" Gibbs was glad to see McGee jump - it always meant he was deep in his head.

"Yes, Boss?"

Gibbs outlined their theory. "You find anything to support that?"

McGee nodded. "Moretti's the one who made the initial contact with Cole," he said. "And it looks like she brought Whitaker into it. He's the only one who's made contact with Randolph, so he probably jumped at the idea of using her plan to simplify his arms deal."

"Who's Randolph working for?"

"I'll get right on that, Boss," McGee said.

But Gibbs could see he was listing a bit, his left shoulder sagging.

"Get Abby to help," he said. "And put your sling back on — this is going to be a long night, and you're probably going to have to do a lot of the heavy lifting on it."

McGee nodded and headed off to the lab.

As soon as he was gone, Gibbs turned to Tony. "He ready for this?"

"A case where he gets to be a key part? Definitely. Even if he were cleared for the field, you know he'd be spending most of this one on his computer," Tony said. "Just feeling back to normal's big for him."

"Physically?"

Tony shrugged. "He's going to need a couple of naps, but you know that or you wouldn't have sent him down to the lab. Abby will chase him over to the futon when he needs it." The senior agent stepped back so he was leaning against his desk. "Don't try to pull him back, Boss. Abby and I can do it, and he'll just take it as us worrying. You do it, and he's going to think you're saying he's not ready to come back yet."

Gibbs had to restrain his hand. It wasn't fair to head slap DiNozzo when McGee was the one he thought needed a smack. "He's worse than you sometimes," he said, settling for that. "Call Ziva, see what they've found. We've got to figure out how these dirtbags hooked up with our petty officers. We've still got at least one missing link out there — the killer."

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Abby was in the ballistics lab when she caught movement in the main lab out of the corner of her eye. She finished firing the test rounds and labeled them, then walked out to find McGee at her
"What does Gibbs need?" she asked. "And why do you have your sling on? You didn't do something stupid, did you?"

"No! Abs, I wouldn't do that. It's just been a long day, and Gibbs saw I was listing to one side and said to put it on. Then he sent me down here to get some hacking help - it's going to be a long night." McGee rolled his left shoulder, wincing. "You wouldn't think sitting at a desk would wear me out this much."

She moved behind him and gently worked the tension out of his shoulders. "OK, fill me in," she said. "All I know is somebody had it in for our six dead guys."

As McGee outlined the complicated theory, Abby mentally sifted through the evidence she'd analyzed so far. "So either we're looking for somebody else who was involved in the deal trying to keep everything for themselves — himself? herself? — or somebody trying to stop it."

She could feel his nod as she kept massaging. "I've managed to get into the e-mail accounts and cell records for these guys," he said. "Fornell mentioned the Russian mob was competing with Macalusso's bunch, so I'm going to see what I can dig up there. Can you sift through what I've already got and see what turns up? Until we get more information from Dwayne and Ziva about the petty officers, we need to work on the dirtbag end."

Abby stepped away and nodded. "Come on, let's go use the computers in the other room," she said. "And if you start tilting anymore, you're taking a nap. I'll get Ducky and Jimmy up here to order you to if I have to."

She stepped away and was rewarded with an eye roll. "You're worse than Tony and my mom," he said.

"Come on, McGee. It's been too long since we've hacked together. Let's remind Gibbs what he's been missing." She grinned at him and headed into the other room.

As they settled in and started hacking, she saw he was starting to fade, but he was determined to keep going, straightening up any time he caught her looking. Finally she said, "There's a Caf-Pow in the cooler. Take it."

"You sure?" He looked over at her.

"Ahh, the magic power of caffeine," she said.

"Now that's the Abby I know," McGee said. "I was beginning to wonder."

"Huh?" She turned to face him.

"No Caf-Pow?" He raised an eyebrow as he looked over. "Usually you're sleepwalking with no caffeine."

"I didn't exactly go cold turkey," she said. "I had cut way back before last week."
"So Tony said." He paused, opened his mouth, then closed it again.

"Spit it out, McGee," she said.

"This mean it's possible to cross a lab bat and an autopsy gremlin?" he asked.

"We'll see," she said. "Hasn't happened yet." She grinned, realizing he'd given her the opening she'd wanted. "What about you two? I told you not to ask any question you didn't want to answer."

He laughed. "Abs, last time I checked, that was biologically impossible."

"You're not thinking about kids?"

"Not what I asked," McGee said, grinning. "I asked if you were pregnant. You said not yet. And I can safely say neither Tony nor I is pregnant, nor will we ever be."

She punched him in the arm, glad he was sitting to her left. "You're splitting hairs," she said.

"One of you better be splitting open this case," Gibbs growled as he walked in. "McGee, DiNozzo's running down a list of names from Ziva and Wilson. He'll send you any that need a deeper look."

"I've found some contacts between Russian mobsters and other members of Macalusso's organization, but nothing involving Moretti or the folks that Tony said reported to her."

Gibbs nodded. "Abs?"

"Moretti's definitely the key to this ring," she said, pulling up e-mails and call logs. "But it looks like Cole made the initial contact, so he had to have found out she was looking somehow. And frequency of calls among him, Hammond, and MacDougall didn't increase after the Moretti contact, so I'd bet money that they were in on this together and approached her."

"Great," Gibbs said. "SecNav's going to love this." He sighed. "Fornell's around. Don't mention this to him, yet. I want to make sure we keep jurisdiction over this damn case."

Abby nodded. "Gibbs, tell McGee it's naptime," she said. "I can run down the names from Tony, and we're going to need him later, once I've done that."

To her delight, he nodded. "She's right, McGee. Sleep. Futon." He looked at his watch. "I'll send DiNozzo down whenever we make a dinner run."

McGee opened his mouth to protest, but yawned before he could get out more than "But-"

"Come on, Timmy," she said. "Bedtime."

She tugged the futon over by the cooler and handed him a blanket and Bert. As his head settled into Bert's belly, she grinned at the familiar sound of hippo flatulence, then turned back to the computer.

Two hours later, she had sent everything up to Gibbs, who told her to take a break until the rest of the team could run down some alibis to narrow the field.

"It's going to be an all-nighter, Abs," he said. "Jimmy volunteered to get food in another hour or so, once it's too late to call people. Take a break until then, because once we've got a smaller list, we're going to need you and McGee to start digging again."

"OK, Bossman," she said. She unfastened her collar and cuffs, took the chains off her belt and
settled in behind McGee on the futon. Careful not to disturb his shoulder, she wrapped an arm around his waist and snuggled close, like he was a giant teddy bear.

Tony headed down to the lab to check and make sure Tim was actually sleeping and hadn't hopped onto Abby's computer. He got off the elevator and almost ran into Jimmy, who was coming from the direction of the stairs.

"How's Tim holding up?" Jimmy asked.

"Gibbs made him crash on the futon a couple of hours ago, but you know Tim. I'm half expecting to see him and Abby huddled together at the computer trying to hack the CIA." Tony shook his head. "It's a good thing CIA has no jurisdiction on American soil, or Kort would be over here trying to get Tim tossed from the agency."

Jimmy gulped. "He wouldn't- He's not in trouble, is he?"

Tony grinned. "No, Vance would get him out of trouble," he said. "He and Gibbs always give Tim a get-out-of-jail free card when they have him do something illegal."

"Oh, good."

They walked into the lab to find the futon in the middle of the floor, Abby curled up against Tim's back, arms around him.

"I should have brought the camera down," Tony said, smiling at the sight of Abby's one pigtail flopped over Tim's cheek. "The sleeping geeks."

Jimmy snorted. "You know, most people would be ready for a fight if they walked in to find their boyfriend sleeping with an ex-girlfriend."

"What do you want me to do?" Tony asked. "Start a cat fight?"

"Um-"

"Husband, Palmer. No fighting, DiNozzo. That's how you end up paying alimony."

Tony jumped and turned to the door, but Gibbs was nowhere to be seen. "Boss?"


"It's OK," he said. "We're still getting used to it." He turned to face the small screen. "Which one of us do you need, Boss?"

"All of you. Autopsy. Now."

"But they're asleep-" Jimmy stopped. "Right. We'll wake them up."

"We're up." Tim's voice was slurred with sleep. "You have any idea how loud you guys are?"

"McGee."
"Coming, Boss!" Tim scrambled to his feet, dislodging Abby. "Come on, Abs, Boss wants us."

Jimmy stepped over and reached his hand down, pulling Abby to her feet. "Dr. Mallard must have found something."

"What part of now don't you lovebirds understand?"

At Gibbs' voice, they hurried to the elevator.

The elevator was busy, so Tony led the way down the stairs. They walked into Autopsy just as the elevator opened, revealing Fornell, Ziva, and Dwayne.

"Whatever Ducky found, it must be big," Tony said. "Palmer?"

The assistant ME just shook his head and shrugged.

"What's up, Boss?" Tony said.

"Duck?" Gibbs deferred to the medical examiner.

"Ah, yes," he said. "As you know, the bodies were all shot within minutes of each other, too close to determine the exact order."

"We got that," Gibbs said.

"Patience, Jethro," Ducky said. "Mr. Palmer and I did not find anything out of the ordinary on petty officers Cole or Hammond. But after Abigail and Timothy determined Ms. Moretti was the key to this case, I decided to examine her next." He beckoned them over to the raven-haired Amazon lying on the steel table. "As you can see, she is in excellent shape, more than capable of taking on most men."

"Ziva could take her," Tony said.

"Somebody certainly tried to," Ducky said. He pointed to remnants of bruises that faintly shadowed the skin in several spots. "While Mr. Palmer was collecting dinner, I began to notice these older injuries and took a closer look." He pointed to where he had sliced into one on her legs. "If you look below the skin, you can see from the excess blood that remains that these were inflicted between 10 days and 2 weeks ago."

"After Moretti was contacted by our sailors," Abby said.

"But before the other members of Macalusso's organization started talking to the Russians," Tim added.

Tony considered the timing. "So maybe somebody in the organization is making a power play, trying to force Moretti out of power." He thought back to what he'd learned from his Baltimore contacts. "Mike Macalusso is scheduled to get out of prison in a few months. Time off for good behavior." He grimaced. "He's expecting to take back control, but maybe Rick has other ideas."

Tim nodded. "I talked to some members of his family back when we were trying to figure out who had framed you," he said. "They were pretty glad he was in prison. Would he have let Moretti become his chief enforcer?"

Tony shook his head. "He was as traditional as they come. She didn't become active until I put him away, but my contacts said that she'd wanted in from the time she was a teenager. Rick let her help
with small jobs, ones he could keep out of Mike's line of sight, but she wouldn't have stood a chance with Mike in charge."

"Title IX for mobsters?" Jimmy frowned. "Guess she couldn't exactly file a lawsuit, could she?"

Tony stifled a snort as Gibbs and Fornell glared the assistant into submission.

Dwayne picked up where Tony left off. "It would be tough for Rick to maintain control if his chief enforcer was dead or in jail," he said. "You think Mike's supporters set them up to get rid of Moretti?"

"It's a theory," Gibbs said. "Let's get some facts, see if we can back it up."

The team scattered, leaving Jimmy and Ducky alone in the morgue.

Tim followed the rest of the team up to the bullpen, Abby at his heels. While Tony huddled with Ziva and Dwayne, he passed his laptop to Abby and logged onto his desktop so they could start running down the playing field within the Macalusso organization. Gibbs dropped a pizza on his desk for the two to split.

"Tony, need your help here," he called at one point.

"With what, McHacker?" Tony joined them at the desk.

"We've got contacts among the Russians and members of the organization, and among members of the organization and Mike in prison," Tim said.

"But we're still trying to figure out who lines up on which sides," Abby said. "Some of these characters are tough to pigeonhole."

Tim sent the information he had up to the plasma. "The ones we know are on Mike's side are on the left, and the one's on Rick's on the right," he said. "This group in the middle are the ones we're not sure about."

The team tracked and backtracked into the night, pausing for naps as needed. At one point Jimmy came up to check on Abby, who insisted she was staying, but he could go. When he volunteered to stay and help, even if it was just making coffee runs, she pulled him into a big hug and kiss that left the rest of the team laughing — or cat-calling in Tony's case. Tim just shook his head and dived back into his computer. He was exhausted, and the sling had come back hours ago, but just being back at work felt great. He was starting to understand why Tony never wanted to take all his sick leave, and he was glad Vance had come up with a plan so he and Tony could each keep doing what he loved.

About 0400, Ziva chased him down to the lab to rest. Jimmy and Abby were curled up on the futon, so he settled for the table in Abby's office, wadding his jacket up under his head for a pillow. It was hard, but much less noisy than the controlled chaos in the bullpen. Sleeping in shifts, Gibbs had kept at least three of them going all night long.

When Tim headed back to the bullpen at 0700, Abby was sitting at his computer typing away, and Jimmy was just coming back with breakfast. He could see Tony stretched out in his tipped-back chair, his snores ruining any claims he might try to make about meditating.
Tim took the burrito from Jimmy with a quiet thanks and motioned for Abby to give him back his seat. She grabbed an extra chair and settled in to enjoy her breakfast. Gibbs walked back in the bullpen wearing fresh clothes, and Tim realized he still wore the jeans and shirt he’d had on yesterday.

"Everybody up." Gibbs didn't even have to yell; Tony and Ziva were rising to their feet. Dwayne put his breakfast down, and Jimmy and Abby stopped talking.

"Fornell will be here in 30," he said. "We need to figure out if this was one person acting alone or a team of people conspiring."

"Boss, from what we've been able to determine, one of Mike's supporters tipped off the sailors about Moretti's intentions," Tim said. "That's the first contact we can find between any of them and anybody in the Macalusso organization."

Tony motioned to the plasma, and Tim pulled up the right files. "Gus Macalusso, one of Mike's nephews," he said. "My contacts in Baltimore say that he's definitely a supporter of Mike, not Rick. When Fornell's boys got too close a few years ago, Rick sacrificed Gus's baby brother to keep the organization intact. Gus is no fan."

"We have checked into the backgrounds of all of the sailors, and Petty Officer Hammond is from Baltimore originally," Ziva said. "He is the same age as Gus, and they belonged to the same church, a St. Barbara's."


"Really?" Ziva turned to look at her. "I do not believe you."

"Just ask the sisters," Abby said. "They'll-" She broke off. "Right, Gibbs. Shutting up."

"So we think Gus put the petty officers in contact with Moretti, then tipped off the Russians," Dwayne said.

Tim picked up the explanation. "Except Gus never talked to the Russians. He had two of the lower-level thugs in the organization make the contact, probably because they could be disposed of if anything went wrong."

"And McHacker and our Lab Bat managed to trace the cell phones of two Russian mobsters to the area where we believe the gunmen picked off the people cluttering up the morgue," Tony said.

"The problem is we don't have enough proof to link this back to Mike," Tim said. "And if we don't handle this right, those two thugs will be killed off before we can make the connections."

Gibbs stared at the screen for a minute. "McGee, you brief Fornell when he gets here. DiNozzo, David, Wilson, with me. Abby, trace the cell phones of those two and let us know where to pick them up. Once we have them in custody, we'll be able to preserve the link between Gus and the Russians, and then we can break them."

"But Gibbs, what if Rick takes out Gus?" Ziva said as she grabbed her gear.

"He won't," Tony said. "He knows if we nail Gus, we might be able to put Mike away for longer, and then he can avoid fighting to keep control of the organization."

The team headed out, and Tim and Abby settled into hacking, Abby taking Gibbs' computer.
"I'll just go down and help Dr. Mallard," Jimmy said.

"Thanks, Jimmy." Tim said, even as he focused his attention on the computer in front of him.

Almost an hour later, he had finished explaining the case to Fornell.

"I've got to stop going home," Fornell said. "You folks accomplished a lot last night."

"You had Emily, though, right?" Tim said.

He nodded. "Diane had to go out of town for work."

Tim nodded. "Then that was where you needed to be. We managed."

"You've more than managed," Fornell said. "You might have enough here to take down the entire Macalusso organization."

"Even with Rick..." Tim let his voice trail off. "I'm an idiot." He called across the bullpen. "Abs, did you trace Rick's contacts?"

She nodded. "He had contact with pretty much all the main players in the organization, but you'd expect that."

"Including Gus?"

"Sure," she said. "You heard Tony, Gus was in charge of the drug trade."

"But did he talk to Gus right before Gus talked to any of the other players?"

She shrugged. "It was a lot of calls, McGee. We'd have to go back and... Oh! You think-?"

Tim nodded and started pulling information from what they'd collected.

"Does somebody want to fill me in?" Fornell said.

Tim sort of heard him, but was too focused on the computer to answer.

The next thing he knew, Tony was dropping a sub on his desk. He looked up to see it was 1400.

"So what's this brainstorm?" Tony asked. "Fornell said he gave up on getting any information out of you and Abby hours ago."

"Huh? Fornell?" Tim looked up and saw the FBI agent sitting in front of the plasma. "Oh, Fornell. It was actually his idea."

"It was?" Fornell looked at them.

"Sure," Tim said. "You said this was enough to take down the entire organization. But we thought this was just Rick trying to keep Mike from taking it back. So then I wondered if maybe Rick had set Gus up to try and set Mike up so he could keep control."

Tony just stared at him. "That's... crazy." He paused. "But you know..."

"What do you know, DiNozzo?" Gibbs said. "And make it quick; those two are cooling their heels in interrogation rooms. David and Wilson are watching them."

"Tim's got a theory," Tony said.
Tim grinned when Gibbs turned to look at him. "I not only have a theory, I have facts, with some help from Abby."

"Are you going to share, McGee?"

"OK, Boss, so we know Rick's in power and Mike's in prison. One of Mike's supporters set up Moretti by getting a childhood friend to contact her and offer her the equipment she needed to make her point with the dockworkers. Then he tipped off the Russians about the plan, and we're guessing they killed everybody."

"McGee, we don't guess."

"Hang on, Boss." Tim ignored the growl, too excited at explaining what he'd found. "We figured we could get the lower-level guys, turn them to get Gus and use Gus to get Mike. But that doesn't seem very smart of Gus."

"There's no IQ test for mobsters," Fornell said. "Sometimes they do dumb stuff."

"And sometimes they try and get too devious," Tim said. "Look, Abby and I mapped out all the contacts between Gus and Rick over the past six months. They followed a pretty regular pattern, up until the parole board granted Mike an early release date last month." He put the information up on the plasma. "Then Rick started making additional calls to Gus."

"He set him up." Gibbs stared at the screen. "Rick set up Gus to bring Mike into this so we would put him back in prison and Rick could keep control."

Tim nodded, unable to keep the grin from his face. "And he'd stay out of it. We'd nail the Russians for the killing and get Gus and Mike for conspiracy to commit."

"Well now we're going to get Rick for trying to use us," Gibbs said. "DiNozzo, McGee, with me. Let's go interrogate those bastards. Fornell, are you guys watching Macalusso's organization?"

Fornell nodded.

"Step up surveillance," Gibbs said. "We need to be able to nail these bastards."

"Gladly," Fornell said. "We've been trying to bring down this ring since before DiNozzo took down Mike 10 years ago."

Tim followed Tony and Gibbs downstairs, finally feeling like he was back in action.

The rest of the week flew by in a blur of interrogations and computer tracking. Monday was the only all-nighter Tim pulled, though Tony had a couple more, but between the case and planning for the first set of training sessions, Tim didn't think he was getting much more sleep. He was glad when they broke the case Friday afternoon. Tony was still wrestling with his bank in New York — had even put in a call to his father to try and straighten it out — but otherwise it promised to be a quiet weekend.

By Thursday, Sarah had finally managed to make it back to class without feeling like somebody was trying to stab an icepick through her head, and by Friday she actually felt fairly good. An e-mail from Tim assured her game night was on; they'd managed to close a case that had kept them
busy all week.

So when she headed to Josh's after finishing her shift at the coffeehouse, she was looking forward to date night with her boyfriend. She still had midterms coming up, but she could study tomorrow before they headed over to Tim and Tony's.

When he let her in, she could see candles on the coffee table and raised one eyebrow.

"I thought we could stay in tonight, sweetheart, have an indoor picnic," he said, wrapping her in a hug.

She followed as he led her to the floor of the living room, a thick fleece blanket covering the carpet. A bottle of wine was chilling in an ice bucket on the coffee table, glasses beside it.

As she sat down, he turned on the stereo, and warm jazz filled the room. When he returned from the kitchen, he carried two fancy white boxes. Placing them on the floor, he then folded his long legs under him and settled next to her, pulling her close for a kiss.

When they pulled apart, he kissed the tip of her nose. "I'm glad you're feeling better," he said. "I missed you this week."

His words were as warm around her heart as the blanket was under her toes. "I missed you too," she said. "But I was pretty miserable; you wouldn't have wanted to be around me."

"I always want to be around you," he said. "Even though I probably needed the time. Between classes and applying for summer internships, it was hard enough finding time to study for midterms. You would have been an irresistible temptation."

She wrinkled up her nose. "Don't mention midterms." Sarah groaned. "When I wasn't sleeping, I was studying, and I'm going to be doing more before game night tomorrow."

Josh's eyes dropped.

"Josh?"

"Sweetheart, I hate to do it, but I've got too much studying to go along tomorrow." He rubbed a hand along her back. "I figured I have enough time to either spend a romantic evening with my beautiful girlfriend tonight, or I could go to game night with you and your family tomorrow. What can I say? After a week without you, there was no other choice."

She pulled his head down into a kiss, enjoying the heady sensation of knowing he thought she was really special. She was beginning to understand what Tim and Tony had together, what Jimmy and Abby had discovered in each other. "I understand," she said. "I've missed you, too."

He reached over for the wine bottle and poured them each a glass. "To us," he said, offering his glass in a toast.

"To us." She clinked the glass, remembering the last toast she'd been witness to, two weeks ago at the wedding. "This was a really great idea," she said. "And my brothers will completely understand why you're not there. I know they've had some weeks when they're glad they work together, because otherwise they would never see each other."

"Oh, good," Josh said. "I wouldn't want to get on their bad side."

She giggled. "Still worried because they carry guns?"
She could feel him shudder. "Tim seems very protective of his baby sister," he said.

"Oh, he is." She rolled her eyes. "Sometimes a little too much. And Tony just loves it. He's as protective of all of us as he would be if Abby, Ziva, and I were his real sisters. I'm surprised he hasn't given Jimmy heart failure yet."

"You know, you're family's great, but I'd really rather talk about us," Josh said, putting his glass down and pulling her onto his lap.

"So what type of summer internships are you looking into?" she asked. "Anything around here?"

He shook his head. "I've been looking for something in financial services, and most of those are in New York and Boston," he said. "I don't like the idea of being away from you for three months, but it will give me more options after I graduate next year."

"I understand," Sarah said. "I'll be busy anyway, getting used to working full time and trying to finish my novel."

Josh grinned. "You know that's another reason it's probably good for me to get out of town for a bit," he said. "If you're staying with your parents, I'm a little afraid to have you stay over. I wouldn't want your dad to come after me."

Sarah snickered at the thought. "No, actually Ziva suggested I stay with her," she said. "She has a second bedroom, and she lives near the coffeehouse." She smiled.

"Are you thinking about that long-term?" Josh asked. "Because I was going to suggest we get an apartment together in the fall."

"Really?" She twisted to look up at him. "Are you sure?"

He nodded. "Will your parents be OK with that?"

"They should be," she said. "They didn't have any problem with Tim and Tony moving in together. We could tell they were serious, but they didn't make it clear that they were together for good until Christmas when they exchanged rings."

Josh raised his eyebrows. "So are you saying I shouldn't give you a ring in the fall when we move in together?"

Sarah just stared at him.

"Sweetheart?" He put a finger under her chin and tipped it up so she couldn't help but look into his cornflower blue eyes. "Do you not want...?"

She shook her head. "I do," she said. "I just... I wasn't expecting..." She mentally head slapped herself — the team really was rubbing off too much on her — and tried to explain. "I just... I think you rendered me speechless."

"I can think of better ways to make you speechless," he said and bent down to kiss her.

As they stretched out on the floor, she spared a thought for the boxes. "Dinner?"

"They'll keep," he said between kisses. He pushed the dinners under the table where they were out of the way and rolled her underneath him.
Tony unclipped Jethro's leash as they walked in the back door, and the dog dashed away into the kitchen. Tony just rolled his eyes at the dog's eagerness and hung up the leash before placing his sneakers on the shoe rack and hanging his windbreaker on the hooks above the washing machine. He walked into the kitchen to find Tim just putting the pizza dough back in the bowl for a second rising and Jethro slurping water from his bowl.

"How's the shoulder?" he asked.

Tim rolled it around a little. "Sore, but I was able to knead the dough as one big batch instead of three smaller ones this time, so I'm making progress. I have to admit, this was a tasty form of physical therapy they suggested." He pointed to the peppers waiting on the counter. "Not enough energy to try chopping, though, unless I want to do it right-handed."

Tony waved him away. "I'll get them," he said. "I don't want to ask Jimmy for his professional services to stitch you up." Tony refilled the dog's water bowl and poured some food into his dish to keep Jethro occupied. "What else can I do?"

"Nothing else needs chopping, but if you want to cook the bacon and crumble it, that would help," Tim said. "The sausages are almost done broiling, and Sarah said Josh wasn't coming this week, so we don't need to bother with onions."

Tony looked over his shoulder while he washed his hands. "Did we scare him off?" Not that he was sure that was a bad thing, knowing Josh's background.

Tim shrugged. "If we did, would that be a bad thing?" he said.

Tony thought back to last week's game night and shrugged. "I just want Sarah to be happy." He waggled his eyebrows. "So, besides top-your-own pizzas — and can we make Sarah sit in another room while she eats hers? — what's the plan for tonight? Clue? Monopoly? Scrabble? Apples to Apples? That crazy game Abby brought last time?"

"Qwelf." Tim replied. "I'm not up for that one. If I get a card where I have to get up and do something every time it's my turn, you're going to have to carry me to bed. This first week on desk duty has been more exhausting than I thought it would be." He sighed. "At this rate, it's going to be Christmas before I'm 100 percent, if then."

"You'll get there," Tony said. "I wasn't 100 percent after I came back from the plague, either."

"Yeah, but that means by the time I'm back to normal, you're going to be taking over for Jarvis and trying to sort that out, get used to running Cold Cases."

Tony knew his partner was going somewhere, but he hadn't figure out where yet. "Your point?"

"Maybe we need to wait on kids, at least another year," Tim said. "It's going to be at least this time next year before we've found any kind of routine for just us, let alone trying to work a kid into it."

Tony thought about it. "Can't argue with you there," he said. "I'm OK with that. Abby and Jimmy can take responsibility for giving Gibbs his first Baby Gibblet to spoil."

Tim snorted. "He'll never build another boat, he'll be so busy working on toys and furniture." He pulled paper plates and cups from the cabinet, yawning as he did. "Who knew desk duty could
make me feel like I've run a marathon?"

"Oh, and it has nothing to do with the work you've been doing every night? I like that Vance found a way to share your skills and keep you on the team. But do you really need to spend a couple hours every night prepping for the training sessions?" Tony said. "Between that, physical therapy, and hacking half the three-letter agencies in DC for that crazy case, no wonder you're exhausted." He shooed Tim out of the kitchen. "Go, chill. Everybody will be here soon. I'll take care of everything else."

He prepared the rest of the pizza toppings, and when the timer went off, he pulled the dough out and divided it into smaller portions so everybody could have two mini pizzas. He turned the oven on to pre-heat it to the inferno temperature Abby had decided was best for crispy crust and was just washing flour off his hands when he heard people coming in.

As he walked through the living room, his husband — even after two weeks he still loved saying that — was slumped in the armchair, and Tony decided this was going to have to be an early night. Before he was halfway across the room, he was enveloped in an Abby hug.

"Hey, Abbs, Jimmy," he said. "The pizza dough's ready to go, and by the time you get yours rolled out and topped, the oven should be ready, too."

"Thanks, Tony. I brought more games," she said.

He spied Qwelf on top of the pile and shook his head. "Not that one, Abs. Tim already said he's too tired for that. It's been a long week for him."

Jimmy spoke up from his place behind her. "Does that mean he's also too tired for beer? I brought a couple of six-packs now that Tim's off the painkillers."

"Thanks, Jimmy," Tony said. "We've got a couple, too, but with this crowd, we can always use more."

Abby and Jimmy headed back to the living room as Dwayne and Maggie walked in the front door. "No Kevin?" he asked.

Dwayne shook his head. "He started crawling this week. We figured he'd either drive Jethro crazy or get into the games, so the sitter has him and the girls tonight."

"Good point," Tony said. "This place isn't kid-proofed either, although we probably need to think about it." He put that on the list of things he and Tim needed to talk about, right after they worked out the details of their big career shuffle. But at Dwayne's raised eyebrow, he just shook his head. "We're not there yet. Another year, maybe two. But we want you guys to be able to bring the kids over." He lowered his voice. "Besides, we're betting on a bat-gremlin by New Year's, or shortly after that."

"Didn't they just start dating, like a month ago?" Dwayne said.

He nodded. "Yeah, but Abby didn't give up Caf-Pows for nothing." He thought back to when she had asked Tim out back in the fall. "Not to mention she's my age. Just because you kids have all the time in the world..." He pulled out his imitation of Jackson Gibbs and got the couple to laugh before they headed back to start on their pizzas.

By the time Damon, Sarah, and Ziva each had arrived, the two couples were on the couch, Abby curled in Jimmy's lap. The others took spots on the floor, leaving the space by Tim's feet clear for
Tony, though Abby had to coax Jethro away from it a couple of times by promising ear scratches.

As Tony walked into the room, he noticed Tim didn't have any pizza yet. "Want me to get yours?" Tony asked. When Tim nodded, he headed back into the kitchen. "One sausage and pepper coming up."

"Thanks, Tony," Tim replied.

Tony could hear the rumble of voices, but not distinct words while he made their dinner. As they crisped in the oven, he snagged a couple of beers from the fridge, picking the pale ale he knew Tim liked best. When he brought their sizzling pizzas back into the living room, juggling two plates and the beer, Damon jumped up to help him.

"Thanks," he said.

"No problem. You folks had a much rougher week than I did." He put one plate and a bottle of beer on the end table next to Tim as Tony settled between Tim's legs. "All I did was paperwork."

"I thought you were going to be working with the Wounded Warriors in this job?" Jimmy said from his spot next to Abby on the couch. "You know, going around, talking to them."

Damon shook his head. "That's part of it," he said. "But mostly they have other Wounded Warriors who have found a level of peace with where they are do that. My job is to help connect them to resources in their area that can help them with their injuries." He shrugged. "If it means getting these guys the help they deserve so none of them end up like some of the guys from my unit, I'll do all the paperwork they can throw at me."

"Hey, don't mock the paperwork," Tim said. "Paperwork kicked my butt this week." Tony reached behind him to pat Tim on the knee in sympathy.

"No, Gibbs kicked your butt," Ziva said. "He was a bear while you were gone. None of us are anywhere near as fast as you on a computer."

"Hey!" Abby said.

"Yes, Abby, you are fast, but you have been busy processing evidence." The Israeli smiled. "And I believe I know how you feel, McGee. My citizenship test is in another two months, and the pile of materials I still need to study feels like it will fall and bury me alive one of these days. Paper can indeed be lethal."

"In you hands, anything is lethal," Tim retorted. "Tony still has nightmares about paperclips after your threats that one time.

Tony stifled a chuckle and forced a mock-mad expression on his face. "Hey! I thought we agreed never to share that information, McBlabber."

"Agent Ziva David, capable of killing with the office supply of your choice," Jimmy said. "I'm waiting for the day we get a body that's been killed by office supplies, just so I can hear what story Dr. Mallard will have to share."

"A long one," chorused the team members.

"Come on, enough talking," Abby said. "Let's finish the pizza so we can start the games."

"Pick a short one to start, and Tim and I will sit out while we eat," Tony said.
When Damon and Dwayne got outvoted and out came the Clue board, the former marines decided to sit the game out as well and joined the guys.

"So how has the first week back been, other than the killer paperwork?" Damon asked. "You look even more tired than you did when you guys helped me out by finding Heatherton's killer."

"I thought keeping up with Gibbs was hard," Tim said, referring to the days he'd helped the team leader out while his shoulder was dislocated. "Just keeping up with myself this week has been worse. Who knew six weeks would make that big a difference?"

"You did spend the first two of them pretty much sleeping," Tony pointed out. "And between cases, that project for Vance, and PT, you've put in more hours this week than I have."

"What project?" Damon asked. "Or is it classified?"

Tim shook his head. "No. The director's taking advantage of the fact that I'm out of the field to have me train other agents on computer investigations. I've been trying to pull materials together all week." Tony smiled at how Tim was able to tell the truth without even hinting at the role this training class was playing in Vance's master plan.

"Yeah, and using us as the guinea pigs," Dwayne said. "Though I have to say, it's helping. Jarvis is going to be glad to have me back on Cold Cases now that I have these skills. I can think of a couple leads I might be able to pull together using the things you've taught me."

"Jarvis isn't getting you back that quickly," Tim said. "Ducky said I won't be cleared for field work until at least the end of May, so you've still got almost three months with Gibbs."

"I've learned more in the last six weeks than I learned in a year with Jarvis," Dwayne replied. "Another couple of months, and Jarvis might even stop calling me probie."

Tony snorted.

"Don't count on it," Tim said. "Tony still calls me probie, and I've been on the team for five years."

"Oh, come on," Tony protested. "You like being my probie." He flashed a grin at Tim.

"Don't answer that," Sarah called over. "There's no answer to that that isn't going to be too much information."

"Says who?" Abby said.

"Abby!" the guys said in unison.

"And you wondered why Josh didn't come this week?" Tim said, looking down at Tony.

"Yeah," Sarah said, rolling her eyes, "these discussions would permanently scare him off."

"OK, OK. Point taken." Tony grinned. "So, Abs, if you're in a sharing mood, you wouldn't mind us asking Jimmy some questions about you, would you? Because I've always wondered just how many tattoos you really have."

"Tony." When Tony tipped his head back to see Tim's pink face, he sighed. "OK, OK. No questions."

"Thank you," Sarah said. "Once you guys get going, I'm afraid I'm going to find out all sorts of things I really don't want to know about any of you."
"Same goes," Tim said. "Last time I looked at your blog, it almost scarred me for life."

"Oh, really?" Abby said.

"Maggie, it is a good thing you did not bring Kevin," Ziva said. "He is not old enough for these discussions."

"He's not the only one," Damon said. "I thought I'd heard everything in the Corps, but the whole brother-sister vibe you guys have going makes this a different level of crazy — and I thought you guys were pretty crazy to start."

"And yet you hang around with us," Tony said. "We got to be friends because we all live in Gibbsland. Nobody forced you to join us — it's a little late to be calling us crazy."

"He's got a point," Jimmy said. "Most of the Navy Yard steers clear of us."

"No, they steer clear of Gibbs because they're afraid he'll kill them, and they avoid Ducky because they think he'll bore them to death," Dwayne said. "After word got around that I was getting TAD with you guys until Tim was back in the field, I got a couple of sympathy cards from other agents."

"I do not understand why Gibbs frightens that many people," Ziva said. "He has never shot an agent. In Mossad, the director would consider that a sign of lax discipline."

"He's scary, not a sociopath," Abby said. "And he has his warm, fuzzy side." Tony winced at her words. Just because they all thought that about Eli David didn't mean they went around saying it, especially in front of Ziva.

"Abby!" Jimmy said.

"Oops. Sorry, Ziva. I didn't mean to call Eli-"

"No, you are right, Abby. I will just be glad once I have passed my citizenship test and can put him out of my life for good." She looked at the board. "So, Maggie, I believe it is your turn."

As the game resumed, Tony settled back between Tim's legs and just let himself relax. By the time the others finished Clue, Tim was almost asleep in the chair.

"Now which game?" Damon asked.

"Um, guys, I think we should call it a night," Jimmy said. "Tim's almost asleep."

"M'wake," Tim mumbled.

"No, you're not, Timmy." Abby walked over and kissed his forehead, leaving red lip prints. "If we wear you out, Gibbs will kill us all on Monday. Even me."

"Your body needs more sleep than normal," Jimmy said. "You've still got a lot of healing to do."

"And this has nothing to do with you wanting to spend some quality time with a certain forensic scientist of the Goth persuasion?" Tony smirked, knowing teasing Jimmy would deflect attention from Tim.

"No! I mean yes, but um... No... I just... Tim needs his rest." Tony had to fight to hold back laughter as Jimmy stammered.

"Come on Jimmy," Abby said. "Tony's just being Tony." She offered her hands to pull Ziva and
Sarah to their feet. "Let's clear out, let McGee get his rest."

Maggie looked at her watch. "We need to get home anyway. This is the first time we've left all three kids with the sitter, and I'm sure she's pulling her hair out."

It didn't take long for everybody to clear out once Abby and Maggie led the way. Tony carried the paper plates to the trash can, dumping the beer bottles in the recycling bin on the way. When he returned to the living room, Tim was still sitting in the chair, but his eyes were open. Tony reached down for Tim's right hand and hauled him to his feet. "Come on. Bed." He pulled Tim into a standing hug, frowning as Tim's left arm didn't come up. "You OK?"

Tim nodded, his short hair tickling the side of Tony's neck. "Just tired. I'll be fine in the morning."

Tony reluctantly disentangled from Tim's arms. "If you're not, I'm calling Ducky." He led Tim upstairs and helped him shed his clothes. But when they got into bed, Tim pulled Tony on top of him.

"Missed this," he murmured. "Like you on me." Tim's left arm was snuggled under Tony's side, but his right wrapped around Tony's shoulders. As they lay there, Tony realized how much he'd missed sleeping snuggled with Tim since he'd been shot. He closed his eyes and smiled at this sign that things were finally returning to normal.

The next thing they knew, the sun was barely above the horizon, and somebody was banging on the front door.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

This is a short chapter, but there's a lot packed in here. Kudos to Kesterpan, Claire and my mom for guessing who was knocking on the door. :)

Saturday, March 19, 2010

After leaving Tim and Tony's house, Sarah looked at the time and decided to head straight to Josh's apartment. She was just as glad they had cut game night short after seeing how exhausted her brother looked. Besides now she'd be able to spend some time with Josh even if he was going to be studying. She could use the time to finish "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court" for her Mark Twain midterm.

When she walked in, his papers and books were stacked neatly on the counter between the kitchen and the living room, but she could see the bedroom light was on. She headed toward the doorway but stopped as she saw jeans and a purple bra on the floor. She scanned the living room and saw a light blue jacket on a chair and a purse she didn't recognize on the floor by the coffee table.

If there was one thing she'd learned from the team, it was to look at the evidence, and she didn't like what she saw. Josh's insistence that he had to study today sounded a lot different when some other woman's clothes were strewn across his floor. She thought about how he'd been so sweet last night. He'd talked about marriage and a life together, everything she envied about Tim's relationship with Tony. The warm, fuzzy feeling she'd had last night was replaced with gnawing dread in the pit of her stomach. He'd just been stringing her along. No wonder he'd never pushed to go with her to family events. She should have noticed something then. Sarah cursed and squeezed her hands into fists. She thought about walking out and just never coming back, but she couldn't do that. She was not going to run away from this. Sarah walked back to the bedroom, careful to not make any noise. She looked in and saw some naked, blonde bimbo riding Josh.

"You bastard," she said. "You smarmy son of a bitch! You said you wanted to be with me so much that you made time for a romantic night with me yesterday and then had to beg off tonight to study because of it. All you wanted was an excuse to shack up with this, this... skank when you thought I wouldn't catch you."

She should have been happy at how the bitch slid off Josh and how her rant had deflated his libido, but all she cared about was the lies.

"No, Sweetheart," he pleaded, pulling the sheet up to cover himself. "It's not what you think."

She stalked over to the bed and slapped him. "It's not what I think? You waited until I was visiting my brother the federal agent to cheat on me? You miserable SOB. I should get them all over here to show you what they do to dirtbags like you." She grinned as his face paled beneath the tan he'd picked up during winter break in the Caribbean.

"It's not like that, Sweetheart. This isn't anything. It's just a thing. You're the one I really love." He reached over for a pair of boxers and got up, pulling them on. But when he reached out to hold her, she shoved him away.
"You call this love?" she said.

"Josh, who is this bitch?" The bimbo pulled a bathrobe from the chair, and Sarah barely held herself back from screaming.

"Hold on. You're calling me a bitch? You're not only sleeping with my boyfriend; you're wearing my bathrobe."

The blonde sauntered over and looked down at Sarah. She had to be at least as tall as Abby, if not taller. "Well he obviously doesn't think of you that way, or he wouldn't have invited me over."

Josh turned to her. "Shut up." He took a step closer to Sarah. "She's lying. I didn't invite her over. We were talking, and she invited herself over."

Sarah snorted. "Yeah, like I'm going to believe anything you say now."

"Why you-" The bimbo whirled to face Josh. As tall as she was, she could almost go toe to toe with him. "You're the one who invited me. You e-mailed me yesterday." She turned to look at Sarah. "I can even show you the e-mail."

"Oh, I believe you," Sarah said. "And believe me, you're welcome to this asshole." She turned and walked out, grabbing her backpack from the living room as she left.

She headed home, tears clouding her eyes. Just when she'd thought she'd found somebody special like Tim had found in Tony, he'd turned out to be just another jerk. She wanted to call her big brother but knew he would be asleep by now, and she wasn't going to wake him up, not when he'd almost fallen asleep during the party.

She spent the rest of the night alternately writing in her journal in the dorm's lounge and pacing the halls, cursing Josh under her breath. After the 20th time he'd called, she turned her phone off. There wasn't anything he could say that she wanted to hear, that rat bastard. And if the journal pages were smeared with a combination of tears and ink, well, nobody had to know that. She hadn't cried in public since she was in the library and was told she was suspected of stabbing her ex-boyfriend, but right now, she didn't care.

Finally, at 5:30 in the morning, she lost what little patience she had. She needed her big brother, and by the time she got to Silver Spring, it would be light. OK, so it would barely be dawn, but Tim would understand.

When she got to the house, she found the door locked and started pounding on it. Her cell phone was still sitting on her desk back at the dorm, so she had to hope Jethro would wake up Tim and Tony before the neighbors called the cops on her.

It felt like forever, but had probably been less than a minute when Tony opened the door wearing just a pair of sweatpants.

"Sarah?" His voice was thick with sleep.

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The dog stood in front of the door wagging his tail, and Tony pulled it open.

"Sarah?" His sister-in-law was shivering, still wearing the same shirt he'd seen her in last night. Her eyes were swollen and red, and tear tracks stained her cheeks. He went to pull her into a hug, but held back. "What's wrong?" He motioned her in. "You didn't get attacked after you left, did you?"

"What?" She stopped and looked at him. "No!"

Breathing a sigh of relief, he pulled her in for a hug. As she clung to him, he called up the stairs. "McGee! Down here, now!"

Tim pounded down the stairs, wearing just a pair of pajama pants. "Tony?" He stopped at the foot of the stairs. "Sarah?"

She pulled away from Tony, who was happy to let Tim take her. "Come on," he said. "Coffee should be almost ready." He led the way into the kitchen, where the timer on the coffee maker had less than five minutes to go. "OK, what's going on?"

Tim pulled out a chair, but Sarah paced around the kitchen instead.

"Sarah?" Tim said.

"I went to see Josh last night," she said. "I figured if he was still studying, I could finish the last book for my Twain midterm Monday. I didn't expect to find him doing a hands-on anatomy lesson with some bimbo."

"Oh, shit," Tony said. "He was..."

"Oh, he was," Sarah said. "And do you know what he had the nerve to say after I caught the two of them in bed together? He said it was nothing, that I was the one he loved and she didn't mean anything."

As Tim started cursing, low words that Tony had never heard him use all in one sentence before, Tony fought the urge to punch something. He should have known better. As soon as he found out Josh was one of those Pritchards, he should have warned Sarah, or at least Tim. He knew the world Josh came from. And he knew what that meant.

"Sarah." He paused. "I know this normally wouldn't be any of our business, but you two were having sex, right?"

She nodded. "Just two nights ago he planned this whole romantic indoor picnic. He was so sweet and loving and..." She sniffled. "I stayed over. I've been staying over a few nights a week for months now."

"You were using protection though, right?" Tim said.

She nodded. "I mean, I'm on the Pill. But after we'd been dating for a while, we stopped using condoms."

Tony cursed and slammed his hand into the wall. He hadn't aimed for a stud, but fortunately he hit one so there wasn't a hole in the wall they'd have to fix later. "Let me guess, he said he didn't like wearing them, and since you two were together..."

"Yeah." Sarah hugged her arms around her. "What an idiot I was to believe that."
"He would have gotten you to believe it, one way or another," Tony said. He frowned, remembering all the tricks he’d learned growing up. "We'd better call Abby."

"Huh?" Tim looked up at him.

"Josh would have been careful — condoms with the one-night stands, even if he wasn't using one with Sarah, but she still needs to get tested. Abby and Jimmy can run them discreetly."

Sarah nodded. "I feel like such an idiot." She turned to Tim. "Don't tell Mom and Dad. Not yet."

He raised his McEyebrow, and Tony wished he could find that funny because this was starting out to be a hell of a day.

"Tim, I'm serious," she said. "Tony's right, I do need to get tested, and I don't want to tell Mom and Dad until I have the results. I mean, if it comes up, I'll tell them Josh and I broke up. But not how or why. Not until I can give them answers to all the questions Dad's going to ask, because you know how he worries."

Tim sighed. "I don't like it," he said. "This isn't like when you were mixed up in that murder. Mom and Dad were in Annapolis, and they didn't know anybody else on the team. Now they're living next door to Gibbs, who has better radar than anything Navy scientists can dream up, and they've met everybody. If they find out from somebody else, it's not going to be pretty."

"Tim, just for a few days," she said. "However long it takes Abby to run her tests. It's midterms anyway, so it's not like they're expecting to hear from me."

Tony decided to pour the coffee, not wanting to get in the way of their dispute. He could see both sides, and he didn't think there was any way to get involved without having one of them mad at him.

Finally, Tim said. "OK. I won't say anything. But you have to promise to tell them once Abby gets all the results." He looked at Tony. "Can you call her?"

Tony nodded and headed upstairs for his cell phone. He was just as happy to have privacy for this call.

"Hello?"

"Abs, we need your help."

"Tony? Do you know what time it is?"

"Oh, believe me, I know. I said the same thing when Sarah woke us up 15 minutes ago."

"What's wrong?"

Tony outlined the situation. "Can you guys come get her and do a full workup? STDs, HIV, pregnancy, everything. Just to be on the safe side."

"We'll be there in half an hour."

Tony headed back downstairs, two sweatshirts in hand. "They're on their way," he said.

Sarah gave him a weak smile. "Thanks," she said. He walked over and squatted down to hug her. "Anything to help my sister," he said. He looked over at Tim, who was barely containing his anger. "Well, anything legal, that is."
"Who cares about legal?" Tim muttered.

"He's a civilian, McTriggerHappy," Tony said. "Even Vance couldn't cover for us."

Sarah broke into small giggles. "No killing him," she said. "That's my job." She reached over and hugged Tim. "Um, if Jimmy and Abby won't be here for a bit, do you guys mind if I shower?"

"Your MIT shirt is in the top drawer of my dresser," Tim said. "I don't think you've got any other clothes here."

She shook her head. "I'll be OK," she said. "Even a clean shirt will be an improvement."

As she headed upstairs, Tony walked over to stand behind Tim, gently rubbing his shoulders. "Come on," he said. "Put this on."

Fully dressed, they headed for the living room, where Tim sank into the chair. Tony knew once Sarah left, Tim would have more to say, but he seemed to be keeping it in check for now, and Tony was glad.

Before too long, Sarah was walking into the living room, wet hair pulled back, the bottom of her MIT shirt hanging out below one of Tim's worn NCIS sweatshirts. Before they could say anything, the doorbell rang. Tony opened the door to find Jimmy and Abby. She had just pulled her hair back into a ponytail instead of her usual pigtails, and her face was bare of its usual lipstick and other makeup.

"Come on in," Tony said. "Sorry about the early morning wake-up call."

"It's OK," Jimmy said. "So when do we kill Josh?"

Tony shook his head and shushed them. "Not now," he said. Then he raised his voice. "Sarah, they're here."

"I'm not deaf," she said, walking over. "Thanks for coming, guys." The last of her words was muffled as Abby wrapped her in an Abby hug.

"Come on, Sarah," Abby said. "Let's get this over with."

Sarah nodded and followed them. Before she walked out the front door, she turned to look back at her brothers. "No killing him," she said. "I'm the idiot who got fooled; I get to kill him. You two couldn't have known he was a sleaze."

When they walked into NCIS headquarters, Jimmy automatically headed to Autopsy. "I can draw the blood," he said. "Abby, how long will the tests take?"

"A few hours," she said. "I won't get all the results today, but by lunchtime, I should have most of them."

"Sarah, do you want me to bring you home after we get what Abby needs for the tests, or do you want to stay?" Jimmy gathered the supplies he would need.

"Stay," she said. "I don't feel like dealing with anybody at the dorm, and I want to know just how much of a rat bastard he is."
Abby nodded. "We can hang out in the lab," she said. "Nobody will be around today, so it'll be quiet. We can trash Josh all we want."

Jimmy let them talk as he drew three vials of blood, enough for Abby to do all the tests she would need.

"You know," he said. "I think that sounds like a ladies-only conversation. Why don't I go and come back at noon with lunch for all of us?"

"Good thinking, Jimmy," Abby said, hugging him. "Maybe I should put a 'No Boys Allowed' sign on the door."

Sarah giggled. "I did that once when I was little. Tim was driving me crazy. And I thought boys had cooties, so I wouldn't let him in my room."

Abby smiled. "I did the same thing, except my brother's younger. I was a teenager when he was just a little kid, and I didn't want anything to do with him."

"And that's my cue to leave." He handed the vials to Abby. "See you in a few hours."

As they left Autopsy to go up to Abby's lab, Jimmy put away everything he had used so Dr. Mallard wouldn't know he had been in. Not that he wanted to keep it a secret, but Sarah probably didn't want everybody knowing about this, at least not right away.

Once he finished, he pulled his jacket back on and left the Navy Yard. Without even thinking, he found himself headed back to Silver Spring. As much as Sarah needed Abby right now, he had a sneaking suspicion Tim and Tony needed somebody to talk to as well.

Except he could hear shouting as he walked up to the front door. He opened it just in time to hear a door slam.

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Once Jimmy walked out, Abby turned to Sarah, who was pacing in front of the plasma.

"Come on," she said. "Let me call Ziva, and we'll spend a few hours trashing Josh."

Sarah nodded and sniffled. Abby put down the vials she was holding and pulled her friend into a hug. "I know," she said. "I know."

When Sarah stopped sniffing, Abby sent her to get herself some coffee while she called Ziva.

"Caf-Pow for you, right?" Sarah asked.

Abby shook her head. "No, but some herbal tea would be nice."

"You?" Sarah said. "Who are you and what did you do with Abby?"

Abby turned up her hands. "You're looking at the decaf Abby," she said. "Jimmy and I are trying to have kids, and I don't want to risk exposing our baby bat-gremlin to my usual caffeine levels." She paused. "Wow. That's the first time I've said that straight out to anybody."

Sarah frowned. "Tony's been making comments since you guys got together," she said.
"Oh, comments, sure," Abby said. "We've hinted at it, alluded to it, warned the guys not ask any questions they don't also want to answer. But that's the first time I've actually said the words 'we're trying to have kids' to anybody. Well, except Jimmy."

Sarah nodded and sniffed, swiping at her eyes.

"Sarah?"

"Tony told you to run a pregnancy test, didn't he?" she asked.

Abby nodded. "It's standard anyway, when I'm running this battery of tests," she said. "Do you think you are?"

Sarah shook her head. "No, I'm on the Pill, and I'm really careful about taking it at the same time every day," she said. "I just... That's the one thing I don't know if I could deal with. I mean, I know you want kids, and Tim wants kids, and you guys are great with them. You and Jimmy and Tim and Tony are going to be great parents. But I'm just not interested in kids, never have been. I didn't like baby-sitting; I have no desire to play with Kevin when he's around."

"If you're on the Pill and you're that careful, the chances are pretty miniscule," Abby said, putting her arm around Sarah's shoulder. "I'm more worried he might have passed on an STD, but at least we can test and we'll know and you can get it treated."

Sarah nodded. "I'd better... I'd better get to the coffee shop. What should I get Ziva?"

"Earl Grey tea," Abby said. "At least that's what she always drinks with Ducky." She pulled out her cell. "You go, and I'll call her."

Once Sarah was out of the lab, Abby called Ziva. The news about Josh was greeted with fluent Hebrew curses.

"I will be right there."

"No breaking the sound barrier, Ziva," Abby said. "We're not going anywhere, not until the tests are finished."

And still her teammate made it to the lab before Sarah returned. When the younger girl walked in carrying a tray of cups, she stopped dead.

"Ziva, how did you get here before me?" She paused. "No, wait, I've ridden with you before. I take it back. How many tickets did you get?"

"I do not get tickets," Ziva said. "Not since my first year here."

"That's because Director Shepherd said you had to keep a clean record to be able to drive the agency cars," Abby said, giggling.

"Point taken," Ziva said. "Although I do not understand where I am supposed to be taking it."

Abby was glad to see Sarah start laughing. "It's an expression," Sarah said. "I'm not sure it's supposed to make sense."

"Yes, that is true for many American idioms, I have discovered," Ziva said. "So we are here to mash Josh?"

"Bash Josh," Abby said. "Or trash. Either one works."
"Mashing sounds pretty good, too," Sarah said. "He deserves to be squished like the bug he is." She slumped into a chair. "I can't believe I actually believed him when he mentioned proposing in the fall."

"He what?" Abby slammed down her cup of tea. "When? Do the guys know?"

"Friday night," she said. "He planned this whole romantic indoor picnic and said all this really sweet stuff, and now I find out the entire time he had plans to meet with that skank Chrissy while I was at game night."

"Oh, mashing is too good for him," Ziva said. "We should put him in interrogation with Gibbs."

"Can you see him lasting more than a minute with Gibbs?" Abby said. "He'd wet his pants."

"What's wrong with that?" Sarah said. "He deserves a little humiliation."

"Oh, no," Abby said. "Put Tony in there with him. Tony will get him to say everything possible to incriminate himself, then Tim can go in there and threaten him like he scared that bully one time. Then we send Ziva in."

"Yes, I would quite enjoy that," Ziva said. "Men like him deserve to rot in hell."

"Then we send Gibbs in," Abby said. "He still won't last very long, but we'll have lots of humiliating footage, and Timmy and I can edit it down so he looks like a sleaze without having any mention of you. We can post it on YouTube, make it so no woman will want anything to do with him."

Sarah started laughing. "Now that I can get behind," she said. "I can't believe I let myself get fooled by that rat bastard. Can you guys believe I made such a dumb choice?"

"Sarah, we all have been fooled by men before," Ziva said, her voice soft. Abby knew she was thinking of Rivken. "My father once encouraged another Mossad officer to start a relationship with me as a cover for his activities in the U.S. I did not know, and it almost cost many people their lives."

"Really?" Sarah looked up at Ziva. "What did you do to him?"

"To Michael?" Ziva sighed. "I did not have the chance to do anything to him. He was already dead when I learned the truth. I did not want to believe it, but I heard my father admit it."

"He told you?" Sarah's jaw dropped. "I mean, I've heard you talk about your father, and I know nobody's a big fan. But he actually told you he sent somebody to use you?"

Abby reached over and put a hand on Ziva's shoulder, encouraging her. When the Israeli finally spoke, it was barely audible. "He did not tell me," she said. "Tony... Tony got him to admit it. My father was trying to get Tony to confess to killing Michael on purpose, because he was jealous of us, and Tony played him into admitting he had set me up." She blinked her eyes, and Abby knew the long months hadn't made the story any easier to tell. When Ziva didn't continue, Abby continued the story.

"Ziva stayed in Israel," she said. "And when she didn't come back, Tony made sure we found her and rescued her."

"I could not ask for a better older brother," Ziva said. "And if not for the fact that he would get in trouble, I would wish the same fate upon Josh."
"Killing is too easy for him," she said. "I want him to suffer." She took a deep breath. "So Abby, what's your story?"

"Which one?" Abby thought back. "I've made some pretty poor choices in men before. Actually, there are times I think the only good choices I've made have been Tim and Jimmy."

"There have been others? Besides the crime scene clean-up guy?" Ziva said.

"Oh, no, Mikel was definitely the craziest," Abby said. "I don't usually get stalked by a guy who needs to spend time in the psycho ward."

"Really?" Sarah said.

"Oh, yeah," Abby said. "Of course, if I hadn't had somebody else trying to kill me at the same time, it wouldn't have been as bad. The only thing Mikel actually did was break into Timmy's apartment."

"What?" Sarah jumped up. "Why did he break into Tim's apartment?"

"Calm down, Sarah," Ziva said. "This was many years ago, the first year I was on the team."

"After crazy guy No. 1 tried to poison me in my own lab and Timmy saved me, Gibbs had me stay with him that night for protective custody," Abby said. "Mikel broke in while Tim was getting my toothbrush from the car and only left because Timmy was back."

"You? Tim? Wow." Sarah dropped into a chair. "That's... crazy."

"That is one word for it," Ziva said.

"So some men are jerks," Abby said. "At least we've got good ones on our side: Gibbs, Ducky, Tim, Tony, Jimmy, even Damon. And your dad, Sarah."

"So is this the whole 'you have to kiss more than one frog to find your prince' bit?" Sarah asked, rolling her eyes.

"Why would you kiss a frog?" Ziva asked. "That would be disgusting."

Abby couldn't help laughing, though she usually tried not to when Ziva got lost in the pop culture thicket. She was just glad to see Sarah was laughing, too.

"It's from a fairy tale," Sarah said. "The princess kisses a frog and breaks the spell so he turns back into a prince."

"Oh." Ziva wrinkled her forehead. "I see. I think."

Abby was going to jump in and explain when one of her computers beeped. "Results!" She walked over and checked the chart that popped up. She let out a sigh of relief before turning to Sarah.

"Good news." But before she could tell her friend, the computer by Major Mass Spec started beeping. "Hang on."

She checked that one, then the third computer in the main lab. "All sorts of results," she said.

"So what are they?" Sarah said.

"The STD screen came back negative, thought I'm going to have to wait another two days on a couple of them," Abby said. "Pregnancy test is negative, too. Even the HPV test came back
negative."

"That makes sense," Sarah said. "I had the vaccine for that one when it first came out."

"Smart move," Abby said. "So there are a couple more STD tests that have to come back, and you should get HIV tests at three months and six months, just to be absolutely sure on those, but I think those are pretty unlikely anyway."

Sarah sank into the chair. "Thank goodness," she said. "I mean, OK, so there's a couple more, but Josh didn't leave me with anything permanent."

Abby shook her head. "Doesn't look like it. If he has to be a cheating SOB, at least he's a careful one."

"He still deserves to rot in hell," Sarah said.

"Oh believe me, he will," Ziva said. "Your brother will make sure of that. If he does not, the rest of us will."

"I know," Sarah said. "At least I-" She broke off. "Oh, hell."

Abby reached out to rub her back. "What's wrong?"

"I have a bunch of stuff at Josh's. I don't want to have to see him again, but I don't want to leave it there."

"Timmy would go with you," Abby said.

"And probably get arrested on assault charges," Sarah said. "You didn't hear him this morning. I didn't even know he knew some of those words." She sighed. "Josh has done enough to screw up my life; I don't want him to hurt Tim, too."

"I can go with you," Ziva said. "Josh will not try anything with me, I do not think. And I can inflict much more harm without leaving a trace, should he try."

Abby nodded. "You go, Ziva," she said. "And don't forget to remind Josh who he's up against."

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Tony was pacing around the living room, his hands clenched into fists, when Tim walked back inside after watching Sarah drive off with Abby and Jimmy.

"Dammit, I should have said something," he said.

"You knew Josh was going to cheat on my sister?" Tim stood in front of him. "You said-"

"I said what I needed to," Tony replied. "I didn't have any proof. Sarah wouldn't have believed me. You would have, but then you would have just worried over something you couldn't do anything about." He cursed. "I should have done some digging this week, should have called some people I know." He watched Tim's face darken in anger.

"Did you know something or not?"

"I knew anybody who thinks my father is a nice guy has a warped sense of reality." Tony turned
away. "If I'd said something last week, this wouldn't have happened. I should have trusted my gut."

"So you didn't know."

"If I'd known, if I'd had anything I could point to besides the fact I grew up in a viper's nest of deception, I'd have said something," Tony said. "I should have said something anyway."

"Because Sarah would just believe you when you said the guy she was in love with was cheating on her?" Tim stepped in front of Tony again. "She only believed it this time because she walked in on him and that... that..."

"Skank." Tony said. "You don't get it, Tim. That's how things are. You've got a wife; you've got a mistress. Nobody's faithful."

Tim crossed his arms. "Nobody?"

"My worthless excuse of a father has been married at least five times," Tony said. "That's how it is. Nobody escapes."

"You escaped."

"You think?" Tony looked away. "You don't know that."

Tim tried to step in front of him, but Tony turned away again.

"You don't know, Tim." He drew his hands up to chest level, fingers gripped into tight fists. "Nobody escapes. I'm no better than my father."

Tim stared at him.

"Yeah, you heard me right," Tony said. "All that advice I gave Sarah? It's because I've been there. I am that guy. There are people you marry and people you just get into bed, and everybody knows the difference. Josh was just sloppy because he got caught."

"And I'm the one you marry, right? And all those women you mentioned when we were dating before anybody found out about us were just a smokescreen, right? Because like you said, you're just like Josh, you're just like your damned father." Tim stalked away. "You're an idiot, Tony."

Tony reached out and grabbed Tim's left shoulder to stop him.

Tim let out a hiss of pain and pulled away. "Sure, screw it up, just when it's finally getting back to normal," he said. "You're doing such a good job of screwing up our relationship, why stop there?"

Tony let his hand drop and turned away. "That's it. I'm leaving," he said.

"What? To go for a run?" Tim said. "You'll go out there, run too hard, have an asthma attack, and we'll be right back where we were six months ago." He scooped up one of Jethro's chew toys and hurled in against the wall, cursing as it pulled the healing muscles in his shoulder.

"Yeah, but you'd know better than to get involved with me this time, wouldn't you?" Tony said. "I knew you were too good for me, Tim. And now you know it too. Too bad you wasted most of a year with me, gave up your chance to get Abby back."

"You know, I'm beginning to see why Stephanie brained Gibbs with a seven-iron," Tim said. "Fine, go take a walk. Hell, go for a run. Why the hell should I care if you kill yourself? You don't."
He turned his back on Tony and walked into the study, slamming the door behind him.
Chapter 17

Sunday, March 20, 2010

Jimmy heard the sound of a door slamming inside the house as he opened the door. Before he had time to consider the source of the noise, Tony barreled into him. Force of habit had him apologizing to the other man. "Sorry, Tony. You okay?"

"Yeah, fine." Tony glanced back at the house then turned and stalked away, turning right when he reached the sidewalk. Unsure what he could do, but knowing that anytime his friend said he was fine, he was anything but, Jimmy followed him.

He wasn't familiar with Silver Spring, so Jimmy tried to keep track of their route while trailing Tony as he muttered, arms flailing to emphasize the argument he was having with himself. They went on that way for probably a quarter-mile before Tony spun around. "I'm not exactly the best company right now, Jimmy."

"What?" Jimmy stumbled at the unexpected stop and took a moment to right himself. "Oh, yeah. Well… I didn't…"

"Jimmy!"

"I just wanted to make sure you're okay."

Tony stared a moment, and then a wry grin formed across his face. "Yeah, 'okay' isn't exactly happening here."

Jimmy shook his head. "No, of course not. I mean Sarah's… And she and Abby are… Well, it's a heck of a wake-up call. "Both literally and figuratively, seeing as how it's still early and, of course…"

"I get it," Tony said. He took a deep breath and started to cough.

Jimmy stepped closer when Tony bent over as the coughing got worse. "Tony. Tony, look at me."

He glanced around to see what was nearby. "C'mon. Let's get you inside and something to drink," he ordered, pulling him by the arm toward a coffee shop up the block.

Once inside, Jimmy settled Tony at a table and went up to the counter to place their order. While he knew the other man would prefer coffee, tea seemed the better choice to sooth both his lungs and his emotions. He was pleased to see that by the time he returned with the two large mugs Tony had regained his breath and was looking a little healthier, if not happier. "Here."

Tony peered into the mug and fingered the tab at the end of the tea bag. "Tea?"
"Drink it," Jimmy ordered. "Or I'll call Ducky."

"You wouldn't."

"Try me."

They stared at each other for a moment, before Tony broke down and picked up the mug. "I'm not sure who's having the bigger influence on you — Ducky or Abby."

Jimmy ducked his head. "I was going for Gibbs."

At that, Tony choked on his mouthful of tea, and Jimmy jumped up to slap the other man on the back.

Tony raised his arms in protest. "I'm fine. I'm fine."

Jimmy sat back down and stared at his friend. "The minute you say you're fine, we all know you're the exact opposite. And that I did get from Ducky. He often says he wishes he could 'banish that word from young Anthony's lexicon' and I can't say as I blame him."

"Hey, I'm supposed to be the one doing the impressions." Tony frowned. Jimmy just kept his eyes focused on his friend, who looked away.

They sat there for a few minutes sipping at their tea before Tony cleared his throat. "So how much did you hear?"

"Me?" Jimmy shook his head. "I was too far behind you to make out anything but that you were talking to yourself."

"Back at the house, Jimmy. Back at the house. What did you hear?"

"Ummm… Nothing? Well, I heard a door slam." He pushed his glasses up and took a moment to think about what Tony was asking. "I mean, I figured you and Tim were-" He broke off, not sure how to say it.

"Fighting?" Tony supplied. "Yes. It's my fault, of course. With my history, you'd think I'd have learned by now that I am a walking disaster when it comes to relationships."

Jimmy sighed. "Tony, you don't suck at relationships."

Tony gave a mirthless chuckle. "Don't I? The one, and only, long-term relationship I had before Tim took pity on my sorry ass was with a woman whom I only started dating because I was trying to get dirt on her father so we could arrest him." He picked at the napkin on the table in front of him. "And of course, let's not forget that not only did that relationship go up in flames — literally — but I also failed to get any information to put her dad in jail. How's that for being a disaster?"

Jimmy had to admit that was a pretty spectacular disaster. "Tony, Tim is not Jeanne."

"No. No, he's not. At least with Jeanne I had the excuse of being undercover for screwing up her life. I ruined Tim's just because I can't seem to help myself."

Scrubbing his hands over his face, Jimmy realized what he had to do. His friend could be unmerciful about his own failings when he got started. "Okay. We'll table the you're-a-disaster-at-relationships argument for the time being. Assume you're right and you've screwed things up. Now what, Boss?"
Tony opened his mouth but closed it again. He scrutinized the man across the table. "Who are you?"

Jimmy cocked an eyebrow. "You can call me 'Black Lung.'"

Patrons at the other tables stopped to stare as Tony threw his head back and laughed, and Jimmy grinned in response. This was a step in the right direction. If he could short-circuit Tony's self-flagellation long enough, there was a chance they could get to the heart of the matter.

"Okay, Black Lung," Tony said, nodding. "Sit rep."

Jimmy sat up straight. "Abby and Sarah are at the lab to wait for the test results. They were planning to call Ziva in for a round of men-bashing from the sound of things when I left to come see you guys."

"That could go on all day," Tony said. "How's Sarah doing?"

"More mad than anything." Jimmy thought about what he'd seen and heard. "She and Abby were talking about posting a 'No Boys Allowed Sign' on the lab door. I guess they both did that to their brothers as kids."

"That sounds like Sarah," Tony said. "OK, so she's holding up all right. Abby and Ziva are taking care of her — and if I know them, they'll take care of Josh, too."

"Where did Tim storm off to?" Jimmy risked the question.

"Study." Tony said.

"So Mr. Gemcity's channeling everything into the adventures of L.J. Tibbs." Jimmy nodded. "What do we do when Sarah's done? She doesn't want to go back to the dorm."

"Depends on how anti-men she's feeling," Tony said. "She might want to stay with Ziva."

"I could always go back to my place for the night," Jimmy said. "I've still got a few things there."

"Ziva's got the extra bedroom."

"Abby would just sleep in her coffin and give Sarah our bed," Jimmy said.

"Point."

"What about with you guys?"

Tony huffed out a breath. "She could. But I think I'm going to be sleeping in the spare room tonight, and having her around isn't going to help."

"Tim's not going to kick you out."

"He's sure as hell not going to want to snuggle, either," Tony said. "I'd rather sleep in another bed then share ours while we're mad at each other."

Jimmy knew he needed to get Tony onto a different track. "He'll be fine once he blows up a few buildings and murders some dirtbags in his book," he said. "Come on, let's head back."

The 15-minute walk passed in silence, but the edge seemed to have disappeared from Tony's attitude.
Tony walked into the house, Jimmy right behind him. The study door still was closed, and he could hear Tim typing away.

"I'm hitting the treadmill," he said to Jimmy.

"Not too fast?" His friend slipped around him to block the stairs. "And you have your inhaler?"

Tony shook his head. "You're as bad as Ducky and McMom. Yes, I have my inhaler. I'll program the treadmill for my normal speed and incline and everything."

"OK. I'll be here if you need me," Jimmy said.

Tony nodded and waited for Jimmy to move. Once upstairs, he stripped down and put on his running gear. He picked the running playlist for his longest run on his iPod, but dutifully punched in a program that would keep him at a reasonable pace. He was not going to wind up back at Bethesda, not because of Josh.

God, he was such an idiot. He should have said something last week. Tim had given him every opportunity, had all but begged him to tell him, and Tony had shut him down, lied to avoid confessing all the dirty little secrets about what he came from. Sure, he'd never cheat on Tim. Tim was like the white picket fence personified, the dream of a happy family Tony had looked for his whole life. He was baseball and mom and apple pie and everything wholesome, even if he did have a tat and had once slept in a coffin. Tony always thought that was a dream, an archetype movie directors conjured up to give the backdrop against which bad things could happen. The worst evil in films came when everything looked normal. Just a quiet day, a happy family.

It wasn't like Tony had never walked in on a girlfriend cheating on him, or found out he was the other man. That one woman, Monica, back during Ziva's first year on the team... Hell, he'd had to admit to Tim and Ziva he was the other man. He'd told Ziva he broke up with her because he found out she was married, said that's what he did. He'd never said that he hadn't always cared about that.

Back in college, he'd take any woman, no matter if she was with somebody or not. Hell, he'd gone after a few he knew were taken, just to prove he could. To prove he was the Big Man on Campus. And he hadn't asked them to break up with the guys they were seeing either. It just added to the adrenaline thrill, knowing he had the head cheerleader in his bed when she was supposed to be dating the president of their rival frat.

He'd started going after the women who looked most out of reach back in high school, when he was home on breaks from the military academy. That's when he'd dated Josh's older sister — much older sister, as she was in college when he was just 15. Being away at an all-male boarding school, he'd figured out pretty quickly that he swung both ways and that admitting it was a ticket to the outer circle of hell. No big deal, right. He liked girls, too. They were different, but had their own attractions. And by snagging the most popular ones, the ones that men like his father tried to seduce to become mistresses, he just showed he was a ladies' man like his father.

And Meredith. Well, she was one of his biggest scores. She wasn't his first, but she wasn't long after, either. She'd been 22 at the time, to his 15. And his father was after her. He'd been married at the time. Stepmother two, or maybe three. Tony never bothered keeping track anymore. But he was a DiNozzo, and so he was looking for a little extra on the side. He'd married for business and money that time, to ensure a merger with one of his competitors. But business and money didn't
always come in the most attractive packages, and his father always had an eye for the ladies. So he pursued Meredith, and Tony tried to steal her away. He figured maybe then his father would pay attention to him. Grandfather Paddington was dead by then, and Uncle Carmine had moved to England to handle the family's businesses over there, so there was no abuse. Just an alcoholic father who would rather ignore his son than get to know him.

Tony had hoped that once Uncle Carmine moved out, once Grandfather was dead, his father would pay more attention to him. Instead, his father shipped him off to military school. Starting as point guard his freshman year hadn't gotten him noticed. Leading the football team in pass receptions hadn't even merited a "good job." Acing his exams led his father to wonder aloud if he was turning into a nerd, so he'd started doing just badly enough to be a solid B student.

But out-charming Anthony DiNozzo Sr. was something that would get his attention. So Tony set his mind to winning Meredith over and found it didn't take much. That first summer home from school, she'd succumbed to Tony's charm within days. And if he felt a little sleazy every time they had sex, well, he'd convinced himself that was all part of the experience.

Up there, in that culture, it was. Sex was something done for fun or for profit. To secure a business deal or to ensure a bloodline continued. Love rarely factored into it, though romance was key. Seduction was a skill learned early on. Josh had obviously learned well, and Tony had forgotten too much if he'd thought anything different.

It was a world completely foreign to Tim, to Sarah. The McGees were the family Tony had always wished for. He sometimes thought Tim was the odd one out on the team, the only one with a functional family. He couldn't call Tim innocent, not knowing he'd once dated Abby. But he was in a lot of ways. Tim was like Superman — Truth, Justice, and the American Way. It was why he fit so well on Team Gibbs, because he believed in all those things, wanted to make sure they were there for others.

Tony didn't believe in them. He wanted to, went out there every day with a badge and a gun trying to find them. But they weren't the default, not in his world. Good didn't win out over evil all that often, and all those good virtues like patience that were supposed to be rewarded usually just ended up with somebody getting shafted. Gibbs was the exception. Tony knew there were dark parts of his past, knew there were parts of what had happened in Kuwait and after Gibbs left the Corps that he had never shared. Sometimes he thought that drove Gibbs more than anything, wanting to atone for his past. Wanting to give people the happy ending he'd never had, the justice Shannon and Kelly had never received. That drive was what had first attracted Tony to NCIS and Gibbs' team back when they first met in Baltimore.

Tim hadn't been touched by that darkness when he'd joined the team, had never experienced anything that made the evil seem the rule rather than the exception. Now he and Sarah had been thrown headlong into that world. Tony could have said something, could have stopped Sarah from getting blindsided by Josh. At the very least, he could have prepared Tim better for this, kept him from thinking everything was fine. But no, Tony hadn't wanted to reveal all his nasty secrets and that selfishness had a price, one Tony deserved to pay.

 Tim slammed the door and dropped into his chair, feeling the thunk beneath him. Yanking a sheet of paper from the stack beside his typewriter, he threaded it between the rollers and started typing, his fingers pounding the keys.
Tony could be such an idiot sometimes, taking everything on himself. Listening to him you'd think he was the one who'd been cheating on Sarah. Not that rat bastard sleaze of a boyfriend. And then for Josh to tell Sarah that she was who he really loved. Yeah, some definition of love that was. Sure, I'm sleeping with her, but I really love you. How could anybody think like that? OK, sure, he got that not everybody was into forever and serious, and sex didn't mean love in all cases. Hell, Abby was one of the best examples of that, or at least she had been. She had never wanted serious before Jimmy. And OK, that hurt a bit that Jimmy was right for her and he hadn't been, but then Tony was right for him and Abby wasn't, so it was fair. But Abby had never led him on. She could have. That day in the coffee shop when they were at the open mic and he had asked where they were going, she could have led him on, could have said what he wanted to hear. But she didn't and it had hurt then, but he respected her for it. And when they'd stopped dating, she had suggested friends with benefits. He had never thought about that before, had always seen sex as part of love, not something two friends could share, but he'd learned differently. And while it was odd — and not something his parents ever needed to know about; bad enough Gibbs did — it wasn't cold or heartless. What Josh had done, the attitude Tony described — that was just wrong. On every level.

And the way Tony talked, what he'd said to Sarah, to Tim, like he had done that before. Sure, Tony had always played the field. That wasn't any surprise. But he'd never seemed like the type to sneak around or lie to a woman. Well, OK, so he had with Jeanne, but that was undercover work. And more of the lies were to Tim, Ziva, and Gibbs than to Jeanne. Which didn't change the fact Tony had ripped himself apart with guilt for months afterward. Even though Tim thought Director Shepherd should get most of the blame. He'd never been able to think of her as Jenny, especially not once he knew what she had done to Tony, to Jeanne. Listening to Tony earlier, no wonder that assignment had caused him so many problems. He was basically doing what he'd run away from, being the deceptive person his father was.

And dammit, every time he thought of deception he was back around to Josh and what he'd done to Sarah. She'd walked in on him. And she hadn't said it, but Tim was sure that if he hadn't been about to crash, that if the game night hadn't broken up early, Sarah would have never known and Josh would have gone on cheating, continued sneaking around behind her back. Part of this was his fault, but if she hadn't walked in, she wouldn't have known and Josh would have kept going, Sarah falling more in love with him even as he cheated on her again and again.

Tim knew that Josh wouldn't have changed. He might have promised, if he'd been caught by somebody with less of a temper than Sarah. He could hear the slimy words now: I didn't mean to. It just happened. I'll never do it again. Josh probably would have said all those and more if he could have gotten away with it. And maybe another woman would buy them. Hell, if Sarah had been engaged to him, maybe she would have bought it. Would he have caved if he'd caught Tony cheating? He wouldn't have back when they first started dating. But if he'd caught him a few weeks ago, when they had made a life together, had the wedding scheduled? Or would he have wanted to believe that Tony had just slipped up, that he hadn't meant it?

Hell, Tony had just walked in on him and Abby snuggled together the other day. Not that they were doing anything wrong, and not that Tony and Jimmy didn't think it was cute, but that wasn't a normal reaction. Sure, if you knew Abby it was, if you knew how she dispensed hugs like water and always had a soft spot in her heart for McGee, just like he did for her. Jimmy could have jumped to the wrong conclusion, too. But he knew them, knew them well enough to trust him and trust Abby.

But then Sarah thought she knew Josh well enough to trust him. She'd brought him to game night, had subjected him to torture by older brothers. She wouldn't have done that if she didn't think he might be somebody special. Sure, she would have introduced Josh to Tim at some point, maybe even brought him by so Tony could meet him, too. But she wouldn't have brought him into the
family game nights, which is what they were. There's a reason Steve never came, or Abby's friend Carol. Why Tim and Jimmy never invited any of their local gaming buddies, but Brad and Damon were welcome. They were family, adopted in as surely as the McGees had absorbed Tony.

Tim pounded the desk with his fist and winced at the pain it sent up his shoulder. He stopped and rolled his shoulders out like the physical therapist had taught him, did some of the stretches. He didn't know how long he'd been like this, but the sun was high in the sky and he had a stack of filled pages on the desk. He wasn't even sure he knew what he had written. He straightened his fingers, then wiggled them to work out the cramps. He hadn't written this much since before he got shot, and his hands and arms were letting him know that. Before he could get up, he heard a knock on the door, and Jimmy stuck his head in.

"Jimmy?"

"How's your shoulder?" He slipped into the room, letting the door shut behind him. "Have you been writing since Tony slammed out of here-" He checked his watch. "Almost an hour ago."

"Has it been that long?" Tim shook his head, trying to clear it. "I didn't even realize- Wait, Jimmy what are you doing here?"

"Abby kicked me out," he said. "She was calling Ziva, and the three of them were planning on devising painful methods of killing Josh and other evil men. I figured I'd better leave, just to be safe."

"Wait, what do you mean Tony slammed out of here?" Tim kicked the leg of the desk. "Do not tell me that idiot actually went out running."

"No, no he didn't," Jimmy said. "He was walking, but not running. And yelling at himself."

"Of course he was," Tim said. He slumped down into his chair. "What a screwed-up mess. I can't handle this."

"Tim?"

He looked up to see Jimmy standing there, eyes wide, mouth forming an 'O.' "No, I mean I can't-" He sighed. "Sarah, Tony, everything at work." He broke off, remembering Jimmy didn't know about the Vance Master Plan. "I've got to fill the director in on that training course on Monday, and Gibbs is running us ragged. Sarah's determined not to tell our parents about Josh, and I know Abby and Ziva are great and she needs them, but I'm her big brother and she needs me, too, or she wouldn't have come this morning. And Tony's got more issues than any three people I know, and normally I'm fine with that because he wouldn't be the man I love without all that crap that got him to here but right now it just feels like one more thing to deal with. I can't tell Vance or Gibbs about Sarah — Vance would tell Gibbs, and I can't put Gibbs in that position, not living right next door to Mom and Dad — so I still have to do all of that stuff, and I can't not help Sarah. She's my sister, and she just got everything kicked out from underneath her. Hell, she mentioned this morning when she was telling us that he had brought up the idea of them getting married just two days ago." He sighed.

"You've spent too much time around Abby if you can say all that," Jimmy said. "Do you want me to keep an eye on Tony? I mean, just for the next few days? Because I can, and I'm just kind of the innocent bystander in all of this. We're friends, so it's not like Gibbs would notice. And maybe I can get Abby to talk him into a couple of yoga classes; those always seem to unwind her when she gets twisted up."
"Now who's spent too much time around Abby?" Tim slumped in his chair, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. "Would you mind? Just for a couple of days? Sarah said she'd tell Mom and Dad once all the test results are back, so it won't be for too long."

Jimmy nodded. "He's upstairs now on the treadmill." He opened his mouth, then closed it again.

"Spit it out, Jimmy," Tim said.

"Why don't you go out for a walk," Jimmy said. "Get some space. Tony's still pretty down on himself, and once Abby finishes with Sarah, you're going to have a lot to deal with. I'll keep an eye on Tony."

Tim thought about it, then nodded. "I'll take my notebook, maybe do some writing at the coffeeshop." He got up to leave, then turned to face Jimmy. "Thanks." He smiled, though there was little pleasure behind it. "We owe you for this one."

"Hey, I'm dating Abby," Jimmy said. "At some point, I'm going to probably need your help with her."

"Good point." Tim grabbed his notebook and pen. He needed to go upstairs and change. If Tony was deep in his run, he wouldn't even notice Tim in the hallway, and Tim could get out without dealing with his husband. For now.

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When Tony finally came downstairs, he looked wrung out from the run, but Jimmy couldn't detect anything unusual in his breathing. His hair was wet from his shower and sticking out in spikes where he'd towed it dry, but otherwise he just looked like Tony.

Before Jimmy could say anything, his cell rang.

"Hey, Abbs," he said. After listening for a few minutes, he ended the call.

"What's the word?" Tony said.

"All the tests that could come back today came back negative," Jimmy said. "Ziva was taking Sarah over to Josh's apartment to get all her stuff, and then the three of them are going out tonight for girls' night."

Tony made a face.

"Is that not a good idea?"

"Just tell Abby to make sure Sarah doesn't get completely wasted," he replied. "She doesn't handle her alcohol well, and the last thing we need is her doing a character assassination on Josh on her blog while she's drunk."

"Oh. No, that wouldn't be good." Jimmy shifted from foot to foot. "I'll tell her. Oh, and Tim took his notebook to the coffeeshop to do some writing. He walked, decided he'd walk off some of his energy."

Tony sighed. "You mean he's still mad, right?"

Jimmy frowned as he tried to decide how to explain Tim. "He's not mad, not really. At least not at
you. He's definitely mad at Josh. I think he's more overwhelmed by everything. You, Sarah, trying
to get everything ready for Vance."

"Yeah, I'll bet his McBrain's gears are smoking," Tony said, his voice quiet. "I hate that I'm one of
his problems."

"You're not," Jimmy said. "Not really. He's just... He's worried about Sarah."

"I know. And he doesn't have time for my issues. Can't say I blame him," Tony said. "Guess I
should be glad we got married before all this. At least he knows I'll still be here when things settle
down, and I know he's not going anywhere."

"That's not just because you're married," Jimmy said. "If this had happened a month ago, the same
thing would have been true."

"Would it?" Tony said. "I'm a hard case, a lot to take on. It would be easier for Tim to give up, easy
for me to think he'd given up." He sighed. "We vowed we'd be there for each other when we
wanted to be and when we were mad at each other. And I was right, it's mostly my fault we're
fighting. Maybe even all my fault. But we'll work it out... eventually. If we don't, Gibbs will stick
us in a room until we either make up or kill each other."

Jimmy nodded, not sure what else to say. After a minute, he said, "Well, I'm going to pick up
Abby. If you guys need anything..."

"We'll call. Thanks, Black Lung."

Jimmy just grinned and headed out.

When he swung by the Navy Yard, Abby was out front waiting for him.

"So what's the plan?" He headed the car to their apartment. "Oh, and Tony said to make sure Sarah
doesn't do any drunk blogging."

"Tony said that?" Abby turned to look at him. "Usually Tim's the one lecturing Sarah."

"Tim wasn't there." He paused, trying to decide what to say. "I'm not exactly sure what prompted it,
but the two of them are, well, not not speaking, because they're not little kids, but I didn't actually
see them both in the same room at any point during the four hours I was over there."

"What?"

"Abs, I don't know," he said. "I got there right after Tim had stormed off to his study and slammed
the door, and Tony came out of the house and slammed into me, then stalked down the street
arguing with himself." He sighed. "Tony's blaming himself for not realizing Josh was a sleaze, and
I think Tim's just too overwhelmed to deal with it right now on top of everything else."

"Of course Tony's blaming himself. Tony blames himself for everything: Ziva, the director... Heck,
he'd blame himself for Gibbs getting blown up that one time if he could." Abby ranted on for a few
more minutes. "Tony is his own worst enemy sometimes."

"Tell me about it." Jimmy sighed. "I think that's what's got Tim frustrated. He asked me to keep an
eye on Tony for a couple of days."

"I'll drag him down to the lab," Abby said. "Now that Brad's letting him back down there, I can
give him Bert and hug him."
Jimmy smiled. "Abs, I'm pretty sure that as good as Abby-hugs are, they're not going to be enough to fix this. They'll help, but the guys need to work it out themselves."

She sighed and settled back in her seat. They let the discussion shift to more innocuous topics for a while.

After they'd been home for a while, Jimmy made a decision. "Hey, Abs?"

She stuck her head out of the bathroom, one pigtail up, the other side of her hair flowing loose. "Yeah?"

"Why don't I crash at my place tonight and you three can have your girls' night here? That should cut down on any drunk blogging episodes."

"Are you sure?" Abby said. "We can probably go to Ziva's."

Jimmy nodded. "Stay here. Make a voodoo doll of Josh. And don't get so drunk that Gibbs figures out something's up tomorrow."

"You're the best, Jimmy," she said, ducking back in the bathroom. "But Gibbs will figure it out no matter what — he's Gibbs."

Jimmy smiled at her insistence that Gibbs had ESP, then grabbed a few things he'd need to stay at his apartment, including his books for his morning class, and threw them in a backpack.

"See you at work," he said, stopping by the bathroom.

Abby put her lipstick down and reached out to wrap him in a hug. "They're all going to be OK," she said. "Tim and Tony will figure things out, and Sarah will be OK, and Josh will rot in hell."

He returned the hug, breathing in the scent of her hair. "I know," he said. "We just have to be there for them until then."

But as he drove over to his apartment, he began to wonder. Abby was so sure Tim and Tony would work things out, but even they weren't sure about that. Well, they were. But they both talked like part of the reason they were sure was because they were married. Even though they'd been together for months, friends for years, and partners on each others' six for longer then that, it wasn't enough.

Could he and Abby say that? Jimmy wondered all the way up to his apartment. Inside, he wrinkled his nose at the dust lying everywhere and checked the cabinets to see if he had anything edible. He'd have to find something for dinner later.

Settling down on the couch with his books, he tried to study, but his mind kept circling back to that last question he'd asked himself in the car. Could he and Abby guarantee that if something major happened, they would work it out? He wanted the answer to be yes, but he wasn't sure. Tim would have some advice, but the last thing he needed was more on his plate. Tony was his best friend, but also the first to admit he knew nothing about functional relationships, his own with Tim notwithstanding. Gibbs fell into the same category, plus Jimmy didn't want to admit to him that he had doubts. He didn't quite feel close enough to Ziva to ask that kind of question. Asking Ducky would be helpful, but it would also lead to the doctor worrying about them, and he didn't want that. Jimmy frowned and realized for as close as they all were, there really wasn't anybody he could talk to about this. After that, he gave up trying to study. He'd just have to try and talk to Abby tomorrow.
When Tim finally surfaced from the world of L.J. Tibbs, the coffee shop was closing, and it was dark outside. He walked home, wondering why Tony hadn't tried to call him.

The house was mostly dark, downstairs the only light on was in the entryway. Upstairs, the light in their bedroom was on, but Tony was nowhere to be found. Tim looked out the window to check what he thought he'd seen coming in. Sure enough, Tony's car was in the driveway. He looked in Jethro's room, where they kept the treadmill and weights. The dog was sleeping on his bed, but there was no sign of Tony. He figured Tony had fallen asleep downstairs watching a movie, but a trip down there didn't turn him up either.

Finally Tim thought to check the spare room where his old bed was kept. The small light by the bed was on, and Tony was asleep under the covers. Tim walked in and looked down at his husband, curled up cuddling an extra pillow. He reached down to wake him up, then thought better of it. Tony was sleeping here for a reason, and as long as he wasn't having a nightmare, Tim figured he should let him be. Tomorrow would be time enough to straighten things out.
Chapter 18

Monday, March 21, 2010

Tim woke up just as Tony stepped into their bedroom, his footsteps quiet. He stayed still for a minute, waiting to see what Tony was going to do before letting him know he was awake.

Tony rifled through their closet for a suit and shirt, then pulled the rest of his clothes from his dresser and placed them on top. Tim thought he was going to take them to the other bathroom, but instead Tony left them there and walked into their bathroom. Once the shower started, Tim got up. Since he was desk-bound, he pulled out jeans to go with his dress shirt and jacket, then walked into the bathroom.

"Morning, Tony," he said. Taking a deep breath, he added, "I'm sorry I was out so late last night. I lost track of time, and then I didn't want to wake you." He continued his morning routine as he talked, not wanting it to seem like he was cornering Tony.

"I wasn't very good company yesterday, anyway, McWriter."

Tim waited as he brushed his teeth, hoping Tony would say more, but his husband left it at that. After spitting and rinsing, Tim said, "I missed you last night. Our bed's too big with only one person."

"Yeah." Tony paused. "How's your shoulder?"

Tim tried not to frown as he started to shave. Pausing, he said, "It's fine. Sore from too much typing, but that's my own fault."

"So I didn't screw it up yesterday?"

Tim thought back, then remembered Tony grabbing it. "No, you didn't screw it up," he said. "I was just mad. It hurt, but you couldn't do any damage with what you did." He heard the rustle of the shower curtain and turned to see Tony sticking his head out.

"You're sure? You're not just saying that?"

"Tony, I'm sure," he said. "Jimmy even looked it over before he'd let me go to the coffee shop because it was sore from typing. It's like Gibbs head-slaps. They always make you squeak when he smacks you, but he's never actually hurt you."

"I do not squeak." He released the curtain and went back to his shower.

Tim snorted. "Yes, you do." He finished shaving and rinsed the razor. "Look, I was mad at Josh, and you were an easy target so I yelled at you. I shouldn't have; none of this is your fault."

"Yeah, right," Tony said. "If I'd just-

Tim cut him off. "We're not going there again. If you want to self-flagellate, Abby's got plenty of equipment you can borrow, but I'm not going to help or listen to you blame yourself."

"You're not- Wait, Abby has what?" Tony turned off the water and got out of the shower.

Tim grinned, his plan to distract Tony working perfectly. "On second thought, better not. Jimmy might not want her lending it out. I'll just head-slap you next time I hear you blaming yourself."
Come on, let's get ready for work."

"Even though I deserve-"

"Tony." Tim cut him off, while managing not to sigh. "The only person I'm blaming for Josh is Josh. You know Sarah — without proof, she wouldn't have believed us if we said Josh was up to something. And we didn't have proof. If we'd spent all week looking, we might have been able to find some, but we barely had time to sleep, much less investigate him."

"But if I'd said something, she might not have gotten hurt."

Tim decided to try another approach. "You remember the crazy woman I dated who stole my identity?"

Tony nodded.

"And the assassin who dated me just to try and find Kai?"

Another nod.

"And polygraph girl who had me thinking I was this close to getting fired just because she wanted to see if I was dating anybody?"

"You were," Tony said. "Me."

"Well, she didn't know that," he replied. "And you're missing my point."

"That I haven't tried to steal your identity or kill you so I'm better for you than your usual choice in women? That's a pretty low bar to clear, Tim."

Tim groaned. "OK, enough with the self-loathing for a minute. My point is that everybody has at least a couple of dating horror stories. I can only imagine the ones Abby and Ziva shared with Sarah yesterday. I survived them, and Sarah will get through this. She's hurting and mad, and Josh probably shouldn't come anywhere near any of us in the next decade, but Jimmy said all the tests came back negative. And nobody ever died of a broken heart — otherwise Gibbs wouldn't have survived losing Shannon and Kelly."

"True." Tony frowned and padded into the bedroom to dress.

Tim hopped in the shower, going as quickly as he could. By the time he toweled off and walked back into the bedroom, Tony was just knotting his tie.

"Hey, where's Jethro?" Tim said.

"Out back," Tony replied as he headed into the bathroom to style his hair. "I put him out first thing. He's probably hunting for bunnies under the spruce tree again."

"Those bunnies are going to be really happy when we buy our own place and they're Jethro-free again," Tim said as he hurriedly dressed.

"Oh, hell." Tony stopped and stared at him.

"Tony?"

"The bank. My father."
"Huh?"

"I called him last week, remember. To try and get this bank account snafu straightened out." Tony muttered, and Tim decided not even to ask what he was saying. "He's the last person I need to deal with today."

"He didn't call you back last week. What makes you think he'll call back today?" Tim finished buttoning his shirt and looked at his watch.

"Point."

"Come on, let's get going. I want to check in with Abby and see how Sarah's doing."

Tony just nodded and followed him down the stairs. Tim knew things weren't fixed — that would take some time and — the bane of Tony's existence — serious discussion, but at least they could get through the day working side-by-side without setting off Gibbs' gut.

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Abby's alarm went off, and she fumbled for her cell, which had slipped down into the cushions of her coffin. The noise woke Ziva, but Sarah was still a slumbering lump beside her in the bed.

"I am not going to have time for my run this morning," Ziva said.

Abby yawned. "Forget time. Who has the energy?"

"I still do not believe you did not drink last night," Ziva said. "You and Jimmy, you are serious about this."

"As serious as it gets," Abby said. "Come on, we're going to wake Sarah if we keep talking." She climbed out of the coffin as Ziva headed to the bathroom.

"Too late." Sarah stretched and yawned. "How do you sleep in that thing?"

"What do you mean?" Abby asked. "I used to sleep in it all the time — it's really comfortable. I don't now because it's a little cramped for two on a regular basis."

"Wait, you mean you and Jimmy sleep in there?" Sarah shuddered. "That's- That's just weird." She made a face. "He doesn't find it creepy?"

"At least this is designed for living people," she said. "I'm not the one who's had sex in the medical examiner's van and in body drawers." She grinned. "Besides, it's not like the coffin is any big secret at the office. Even Gibbs asked McGee about it the first time—"

"Do not go there," Sarah said. "There are mental pictures of my brother I do not need, and anything involving the bedroom is at the top of the list." She shuddered. "I hear enough innuendo from Tony at your game nights; I do not need actual information."

Abby smirked. "Yeah, Timmy still hasn't decided if he should be weirded out or not that Tony and I can compare notes."

Sarah put her hands over her ears. "No, I am not listening to this."

Abby smiled, confident that she had succeeded in distracting Sarah from Josh. "OK, OK, I'll stop,"
she said. Glancing at her cell phone, she jumped up. "Yikes, I'm going to be late." She grabbed
clothes from the closet. "Ziva," she called.

The Israeli walked out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her hair. "Abby, I am done," she
said. "I just need a few minutes to pull back my hair, and I will be ready."

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As Ziva squeezed the last of the excess water from her hair and ran a comb through it, Sarah
gathered up the extra clothes she had brought with her.

"Do you need us to drop you back at campus?" Ziva asked as she began to comb her hair back,
securing all the strands.

Sarah shook her head. "I don't have class until noon; I can walk back. I'm not real crazy about
spending time on campus right now, not when Josh and I cross paths a dozen times a day." She
rolled her eyes. "I used to like that Waverley had a small campus, not one of those schools that
sprawls across hundreds of acres."

"Space makes it much easier to evade a person," Ziva said. "Although I do not recommend most
people go halfway around the world to accomplish it." She thought for a second. "Sarah, you are
most welcome to stay with me for a few days if you wish. I cannot promise I will be home for
much of the time, depending on what cases we are working, but I have an extra key I can give
you."

Sarah dropped onto the bed. "Are you sure?"

Ziva nodded, her sure fingers never faltering as she secured her hair. "I know... It is difficult, when
one has been betrayed, to handle things that had seemed simple before. A change of scenery, it can
put things into perspective. A bit of distance and some time to think, they often can provide a
different view, one we are not able to see when we are too close." She finished her hair and began
gathering up her belongings and repacking her kit. "I am not trying to minimize what you have
been through or what Josh has done to you. But if I can be an older sister, the way I once was to my
sister Tali?"

Sarah nodded. "I could use a big sister, Ziva."

"What Josh has done is a reflection of him, not of you. The only thing that reflects upon you is your
reaction and your actions going forward. I think if you talk with Abby or Tony, they will agree
with me. When we have had relationships go badly in the past, what we look back upon and regret
most is not how the other person acted, even if they were in the wrong, but how we acted and
reacted."

"Not Tim?" Sarah sat up, looking at Ziva.

"You would have to ask him, but I think one of the things that makes your brother special and helps
him be the glue that holds us all together is that he acts with integrity. I do not mean there are not
things he has done that he has regretted, but that, at least as long as I have known him, he has been
careful in his reactions. If he was not, I do not think it would be possible for him, Abby, and Tony
all to work together and be as close as they are." She paused in her packing and looked at Sarah.
"Your brother has many faults, as do we all. But this is one area in which I have learned much from
him. After..." Her voice faltered, but she continued. "After Tony killed Michael, I was not sure I
could forgive him. Even after he led my rescue, I still was not sure I could trust him, not the way I needed to. Your brother, though, he did not treat me differently. He was the only one who did not. And now that I know he and Tony were together then, had been together for a while, I find that even harder to believe." She blinked, forcing back the tears that threatened whenever she thought of that time. "Tim did not make a big deal of my return. He simply stopped while I was sitting outside, drinking my tea, and wished me well. He reminded me that we are family in the best sense of the word, no matter what we might do to each other." Ziva stood. "But I am talking of myself too much, and we were talking about you. I know it is tempting to say things and to do things to Josh, tempting to go out of your way to avoid him. But then he will know that he has gotten to you. Take these few days to find a balance, to allow yourself to feel that he has hurt you. But do not spend too much time there, or change your life too much to avoid him."

Sarah nodded. "Thanks, Ziva." Anything else she was about to say was cut off by an exuberant Abby bouncing out of the bathroom.

"All yours, Sarah," she said. "Ziva, I'll be ready to go in a few minutes."

Ziva looked at her watch. "It is of no matter," she said. "We have no active case. I will call McGee and let him and Tony know we are running late, but that Sarah is fine."

Abby nodded as she began putting her hair into its pigtails.

Ziva dialed McGee's number on her phone.

"McGee."

"It is Ziva. Abby and I will be leaving soon. If Gibbs is looking for us, could you let him know we are running a bit late?"

"Sarah?"

"Is fine. She is in the shower now, and she is in a better mood than yesterday. She just needed some time with her big sisters."

"Thanks, Ziva. We're on our way in now."

"McGee. You are also OK?"

The only response she heard on the other end of the line was a sigh.

"McGee?"

"Getting there, Ziva. We're a little... This thing with Josh brought back up some of Tony's dad issues."

She could hear Tony's muffled "Hey!" in the background.

"You do not need to tell me, McGee," she said. "I understand, it is his business, not mine."

"Hopefully." He paused. "We really don't want Gibbs to know about Sarah, not until she's had a chance to tell Mom and Dad, so if we're getting a little snarky today, threaten us with a paperclip or something."

Ziva laughed. "It will be my pleasure, McGee. I always enjoy threatening either of you."

She was rewarded with a snort on the other end of the phone. "OK, you don't need to sound that
excited about it."

"We will see you in the office, McGee," Ziva said, before ending the call.

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Once Abby and Ziva had left, Sarah gathered her things and prepared to walk back to campus. It was long, about three miles, but her backpack wasn't that heavy and she could use the time to think. Except her thoughts kept returning to Josh and what he'd done, how she'd trusted him when he didn't deserve it. But then she reminded herself of the stories Abby and Ziva had told. They both had trusted men who shouldn't have been trusted. Ziva in particular. She swallowed as she thought of how Ziva had started their discussion that morning, asking if she could be her big sister. Sarah had never had one of those, and while Tim was great, it wasn't the same.

Ziva had been there yesterday too, going with her to Josh's apartment. He hadn't been there, so they had been able to go in and clean out her stuff without running into him. Her stomach churned at the idea of seeing him. She hadn't been kidding when she told Ziva how often they ran into each other. That was how they'd started dating in the first place. He always studied at the coffee shop, and after running into her a dozen times when she either was working or studying, had asked her out. And this semester, they had several classes near each other because the Arts and Sciences building was under renovation, so several of her classes were in the adjoining business and economics buildings. It seemed great in January because they could sneak in extra time together even on crazy weeks. Now it just seemed like torture.

The word drew her up short. She'd seen the condition Tim and Tony were in when they came back from rescuing Ziva over the summer, how they'd said Ziva was in worse shape. Nobody had used the word torture, but it didn't take a mind-reader to figure out that the terrorists who had held her hadn't exactly played nice. Compared to that, she could handle facing Josh.

In fact, she was going to go a step further. Ziva had been right — if she avoided her usual routine to steer clear of him, Josh would know he'd gotten to her. He'd only seen her mad, not bawling her eyes out in the dorm or with the team. If she could keep up the facade, he wouldn't have to know he'd ripped her heart out. As she approached the block where the coffeeshop was located, she decided she was going in to study for her Twain midterm that afternoon. Josh would be there — he was always in there studying Monday and Wednesday mornings before class — but she didn't have to talk to him. She could sit in another section and just focus on her books. Studying had gotten her through a murder investigation; it could get her through this.

As she walked in and her eyes adjusted from the sun-bright outside light to the dimmer indoors, she saw Josh studying at the table next to the counter where the drinks were served. Great. Just great. There was no way he wasn't going to see her. She looked in the opposite direction and found a free chair in the area where the team had been sitting the night they met Damon. Walking over, she dropped her backpack on the seat to reserve it, then grabbed her wallet from the front pouch and went to order.

There was no line — it was too late for the people headed to work and too early for the lunch crowd — so she chatted with Tyler, the cashier, for a few minutes. The less time she had to spend at the counter waiting for her cappuccino, the better. If she could drag it out long enough, Karen would just hand her the coffee once she'd finished making it, not make her walk all the way down to the counter. But then a businessman came in and Sarah found herself having to wait just a couple of feet away from Josh.
He had his head down, focused on his book, and she thought for a second she might be able to get away without him noticing her. Except that Karen didn't just slide the coffee across the counter, she stopped to chat for a second. Even with her back to Josh, Sarah could tell that once Karen said her name, he had looked up. She took her coffee and headed back to her seat, not looking his direction. Unfortunately, that meant when she sat down, she wasn't expecting to see him standing right there.

"I'm not talking to you," she said.

"Sarah, sweetheart, please. Let me explain." He crouched down in front of her and looked straight into her eyes.

"There's nothing to explain," she said, trying to channel Gibbs at his coldest. "You screwed up; I found out. End of story." She could feel her stomach start to churn, but managed to swallow back the bile that threatened to rise.

"It wasn't like that," he said. "I was stupid. I-"

"Stupid's one word for it." She dug deep to find the sarcasm she always used when she was afraid. He couldn't know what this was costing her.

"Sweetheart-" He put his hand on her arm, and she raised her eyebrows.

"I'm not your sweetheart," she said. "I'm pretty sure I never was. Just chalk this up to the failure column, Josh, and go back to studying. I'm sure you can find some other woman who'll buy your sweet, loving act."

"I wasn't an act." His hand tightened on her arm, and for the first time Sarah felt a bit of fear among the anger and revulsion.

"Let go of me." She made a conscious effort to keep her voice even and stared at him until he removed his hand.

"This isn't over," he said, rising. "You'll realize your mistake."

As he walked away, Sarah muttered to herself. "Oh, no, I already did."

She swallowed again, willing her stomach to settle. She forced herself to open her book and look like she was reading, even as she had to fight to keep from crying. She started to reach for her coffee, but as she started to lift the mug, she realized her hand was too shaky to hold it steady. She put it back down and tried to read, the words blurring as her eyes swam with tears. She turned pages periodically, not wanting anybody to wonder.

Sarah didn't know how much time had passed before she felt two nights of little sleep catching up with her, but she realized she needed the caffeine in her mug to get through her exam. As she picked it up, hand steadier this time, she could still feel the churning in her belly. She sipped the coffee, cooled to lukewarm, and realized too late that she shouldn't have tried. She swallowed hard, as she put the mug down and headed for the restroom, making it to a stall just before the little she'd had to eat that day came back up.

When she was sure everything else would stay put, she rose. Cupping her hand to collect water to rinse her mouth, she looked in the mirror and winced. Her skin was almost as pale as Tim's except for the dark shadows under her eyes. She hadn't done anything with her hair except comb it that morning, so it hung in waves around her head. She splashed some cold water on her face to bring back a bit of color. She was pretty sure she had a hair elastic in her bag she could use to put her hair up, and possibly some lip gloss. Sure, Josh had ripped her heart out, but if she walked around
looking like this, everybody would know something was up and she'd have to explain what an idiot she'd been.

She went back to her seat, but wasn't dumb enough to try the coffee again. Before picking up her book, Sarah checked the time, then cursed. Her Twain exam started in 20 minutes and the lecture hall was a 15-minute walk. She scooped up her stuff, tossed her barely touched coffee, and headed out. She tried not to think about how she'd meant to study all yesterday and this morning and hadn't. She liked the class; she'd read most of the books. She'd be fine.

But when the professor handed out the exam and she started reading the questions, the first one was on the part of Connecticut Yankee she hadn't gotten to. Damn Josh. She could feel her eyes filling with tears and angrily swiped them away and moved on to the next question. It was on Tom Sawyer, the first book they'd read that semester and one she'd meant to review yesterday. She tried to come up with an answer, but knew she was missing pieces because it was just too short. She cursed Josh again before moving on to the third question. Another one she had trouble coming with an answer for. With each successive question, she cursed Josh more and had a harder time keeping tears from falling on the paper.

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Tony settled in at his desk, glad Gibbs was out on a coffee run. One look and the team leader would know something was up. Tony didn't want to confess to Gibbs how he'd screwed things up, not at work. Not out of work either, but at least then Gibbs could yell at him where nobody else could hear. Oh, hell. Sean and Eileen would hear. For the first time, Tony wondered if it was going to be a bad thing having both sets of parents living next door. He'd heard stories about his Nonna and Papa living in a triple-decker owned by his great-grandparents when his father and Carmine were children, three generations in the same house. It was his Nonna's parents, and he vaguely remembered a story she had told his mother when Tony was a small child, about how Nonna and Papa had been fighting, and Nonna threw a shoe at Papa and stormed out. She said Papa had been afraid Nonna's parents were going to come upstairs and grill him about what he had done to make her so mad.

Tony had never quite understood the story before, because it didn't fit with the way his parents were around Grandfather, but he was finally starting to get it. When Sean and Eileen found out he had hurt Tim, hurt Sarah — and they would once Gibbs got going — they were going to yell at him in a way Gibbs couldn't.

He forced himself off that train of thought and decided to call his bank and see if he could get the money thing straightened out before Gibbs came back.

Five minutes later, he was ready to sic Gibbs on the idiot on the other end of the telephone.

"For the last time, my name is Anthony DiNozzo Jr. My father is Anthony DiNozzo Sr. I live in Washington, D.C. He lives in New York. Is that so complicated? Junior. Senior. Can you follow that?" He gritted his teeth, glad Tim was hiding in the conference room trying to meet Vance's new deadline for a late morning progress report so this didn't turn into something else his husband would McWorry over.

When Ziva walked in, he was ready to send her after the bank idiot.

"What is going on?" She put her gear down and turned to Dwayne.
"From what I can tell, Tony is trying to check on one of his accounts with a bank in New York. Sounds they've confused his account with one of his father's, and he can't get the money."

Dwayne's voice only dimly registered as Tony wondered what level of telephone hell this counted as. They could use this guy in interrogation; dirtbags would tell everything just out of screaming frustration. At the 15th request to spell his name, Tony finally lost it. "Let me get this straight. You want me to spell my name again? It's big 'D,' as in 'dimwit.' Little 'I,' as in 'idiot.' Big 'N,' as in 'nimrod' Little 'O,' as in 'obtuse...""

"DiNozzo, get off the phone. Got a dead foreign national at Pax River. Let's go," Gibbs walked in, coffee in hand.

Tony smacked the phone down, taking at least a little relief in the sound, and grabbed his gear.

"Pax River?" Dwayne said. "Weren't we just there?"

"Not that many bases in the area," Tony said. "Sometimes we're going to get repeats. Boss, Tim's in the conference room." He followed Gibbs to the elevator, Ziva and Dwayne on his heels. "Vance needs his progress report by 1100, so he's on a McDeadline."

Gibbs just nodded. "Can't do anything until we get more information anyway."

It was 1130 by the time they got back to the office from the bombing site, so Tony wasn't surprised Tim was nowhere to be seen. He dropped his gear and followed Gibbs to MTAC. As Gibbs and Vance talked with the State Department rep, he tried to contain his impatience.

"So he's only our problem for two more days, then?" Tony asked when he had an opening.

The State woman nodded. "His father, Prince Omar, is a major player in the royal family. We need to be kept in the loop."

"Yes, ma'am," Vance said, ending the transmission. He turned to Tony and Gibbs. "Let's call the embassy from my office. McGee's already there; he was briefing me when State called."

Tony followed Gibbs and Vance, only to find Dwayne waiting at the back.

Gibbs paused. "Need me?"

"Uh, no, Boss. Just gotta tell Tony here something."

Tony looked at the junior agent. "What?"

Dwayne waited until Vance and Gibbs had left MTAC before smiling at Tony. "You have a visitor."

"Who?" Tony couldn't figure out who was important enough for Dwayne to pull him out of a conference with Vance.

"You'll see." And he wouldn't say anything else.

"What's the matter with you?" Tony felt like delivering a head slap. Today was not the day for Dwayne to be messing with him.

He followed Dwayne out of MTAC and looked down to the bullpen. When he saw the visitor at Ziva's desk, he dropped down behind the wires that took the place of a wall. He knew it was crazy — it wasn't like the three strands of wire would hide him, but it was a habit too ingrained after
years of abuse from his family. When he saw the familiar face, he stared.

"Junior mentioned you, but he never told me what you look like. You are stunning, Ziva. Do you ever think of wearing your hair down?" Tony blinked as his father looked up to the catwalk. "Junior."

Great. Because today wasn't already in his top three for worst day of the year, right behind the day Tim got shot and yesterday's Josh fiasco. He tried to keep his tone even. "Dad. What are you doing here?"
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Obviously large portions of this chapter and the next few involve Flesh and Blood. The dialogue in the scenes from the episode is not mine. Thoughts of characters that surround the dialogue is. And all scenes and parts of scenes not in the show are mine. :)

Ziva had just finished entering queries for background information on the prince's bodyguard when an agent walked up, escorting an older man who looked oddly familiar.

"Agent David?" The young agent — Ziva could not think of his name — looked around. "Is Agent DiNozzo here?"

She shook her head. "He and Gibbs are in a conference with the director."

"What about Agent McGee?"

She shook her head again, wondering what was up. "Also with the director." At the agent's lost look, she said, "Perhaps I can be of some help."

"Agent DiNozzo's father is here," he said, gesturing toward the older man.

Ziva kept a small smile on her face, but inside she was cursing. Based on what she knew of Tony's childhood, he was certainly an unwelcome visitor. "Mr. DiNozzo," she said, standing and holding out a hand. "Agent Ziva David. How nice to meet you."

The other agent took off, leaving Tony's father standing there, smiling.

"Believe me, the pleasure is all mine," he said, his voice smooth and ingratiating. "And please, call me Tony." Ziva fought to hide her revulsion. Instead, she turned to Dwayne, who had walked over from his desk.

"Would you go get Tony when he finishes with the director?" she said. "Tell him his father is here."

Dwayne nodded and headed upstairs.

"So, Agent David. You work with Junior?"

She nodded and sat back down at her desk. "Please excuse me, I was just in the middle of something. As soon as I finish, you will have my full attention. Tony might be a few minutes." She quickly sent Abby a message to both her e-mail and cell phone. Tony's dad here. SOS.

She hadn't seen Tim follow Vance into MTAC, which meant he must still be in Vance's office. And from what Abby had told her earlier, Jimmy seemed to be the only one who knew what was going on between Tim and Tony — beyond Tim's comment about Tony's daddy issues — and with the father in question standing in front of her, they needed to find out quickly.
"So, what brings you to town? Tony did not mention you were coming."

"Oh, Junior doesn't know," he said. "I was in the area, thought I'd stop by and surprise him. It's been quite a while since I've seen him."

"Yes," Ziva said. "I imagine your work keeps you quite busy. I think the team has seen my father more recently, despite his distance."

"Yes, your lovely accent," DiNozzo Senior said. "Israeli?"

Ziva nodded, wondering what was taking Tony so long. "Yes. Tony met my father last year when we were there."

"Oh, really. Tony didn't tell me he was seeing such a lovely young woman." DiNozzo smiled. "If I'd known things were so serious, I would have made a point to visit sooner." She felt a prickle up her spine as he flirted with her but determined to play along for the time being.

Ziva kept up the mask and the flirtatious small talk as she cataloged what she knew. Tony's father obviously did not know Tony and Tim were together, much less married, but she could not tell if that was because they were not close or because Tony was concerned that his father would not react well to Tony marrying a man.

Mr. DiNozzo was just complimenting her hair when she saw Tony walk out of MTAC and drop to a crouch on the catwalk. She looked up, able to read the shock on his face.

"Dad? What are you doing here?"

As Tony came downstairs and hauled his father off to the break room, ostensibly for coffee, Ziva made a decision.

"Dwayne, if Gibbs comes down, let him know Tony's father is here, but not if McGee is with him. I will be back soon."

"Why not?"

"Because Mr. DiNozzo assumed Tony was dating me, and I do not want things to turn ugly," she said. "Just do it. Do not question."

She hurried down to the lab, but Abby wasn't there. Thinking where else her friend might be, she tried the morgue next and found Abby, Jimmy, and Ducky standing around a table.

"Ziva!" Abby ran over and dragged her to the rest of the group. "What is going on? Tony's dad is here? Why now?"

"Abby, I do not know," she said. "He tried to make it seem casual, as if he was in the area and just stopping by. But he assumed Tony and I are dating, so he obviously is not in the rope."

"In the loop," Jimmy said.

"Whatever. The point is he is here, and he does not know Tony is married to Tim."

"Does Tony know he's here?"

Ziva nodded. "They went to get coffee. Dwayne knows, but he does not know that this is not a good thing that Tony's father is here."
Ducky spoke up. "Do Jethro or Timothy know?"

Ziva shook her head. "They are in Vance's office. I was not sure I should tell McGee, because I know they are having issues though all McGee would tell me this morning was that Tony's father has something to do with it."

Abby turned to Jimmy. "You're the one who spent half the day over there. What's going on?"

Jimmy flushed. "I don't know anything about Tony's dad," he said. "They were fighting about Josh."

"What does Joshua have to do with this?" Ducky said.

Ziva's words tangled with Abby and Jimmy's as all three tried to explain at once until Ducky held up his hand.

"Perhaps I should merely go and check on Tony, then see how Jethro and Timothy are doing," he said. "Mr. Palmer, later you will fill me in on the events I appear to have missed this weekend."

"Yes, doctor," Jimmy said.

Once Ducky had left Autopsy, Ziva turned back to Jimmy. "McGee told me this morning that Josh's cheating had stirred up some of Tony's issues with his father, but Tony didn't want him to tell me any more."

"Tony's blaming himself for Josh cheating on Sarah," Abby said. "Which is so totally Tony to take the blame — it's not like he told Josh to cheat on Sarah or knew it was happening — but it sounds like it was more than just that." She turned to her boyfriend, who opened his mouth, then closed it again.

Finally, he said, "Tony's beating himself up, and Tim is frustrated at Tony going all self-loathing when Tim's trying to deal with Sarah and Vance has him on a deadline for this training program. Tim asked me to keep an eye on Tony for a couple of days, keep him from going off the rails."

"I believe it is too late," Ziva said. "He was distracted enough before his father showed up, and I cannot believe it is a coincidence."

"You know what Gibbs says about coincidences," Abby said. "So now what?"

Jimmy frowned. "Abs, you'd better get down to the evidence garage. Tim doesn't want Gibbs knowing about Sarah, which means we need to keep things as normal as possible. Ziva, you'd better go do whatever you're supposed to be doing. Dr. Mallard's checking on Tony, and as soon as he gets back, we'll figure out what to do next."

Abby wanted to be doing more, but she knew Jimmy was right — they had to keep Gibbs from catching wind of this. He was already going to be a bear when he found out Tony's father was in town.

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Ducky tried to piece together what had happened over the weekend from the fragments he had been able to get from Abigail, Jimmy, and Ziva as the elevator whisked him upward to the squad room. Dwayne was the only person in the bullpen when he arrived.
"Ducky, what do I do?" Dwayne asked, getting to his feet. "The agents at the hotel called to say the place is clear and we can take the prince over. The agent with him in the conference room called to say he's making noises about leaving, but Ziva told me to stay here to tell Gibbs that Tony's dad showed up."

Ducky held out a hand. "I will handle Jethro," he said. "Has Anthony come back?"

Dwayne shook his head. "And Ziva said not to tell Tim that Tony's dad is here." He frowned. "Ducky, something's been off all day, even before Tony's dad showed up. And I don't understand why everybody's tiptoeing around him."

Ducky shook his head. "That is a tale that would take far too long to tell now, even if I knew it in its entirety," he said. "Run along, lad, and do what you need to do. Allow me the privilege of worrying about the rest of it."

"Are you sure?" Dwayne stood by his desk, his dark eyes oddly hesitant. "I want to help."

"And you will do that best right now by doing what Jethro expects you to do," Ducky said.

The young agent finally left, and Ducky breathed a sigh of relief. It was short-lived though, as Anthony and an older man who must be his father came around the corner. Ducky quickly sat at Dwayne's desk where he could hear, but not be seen unless he chose to reveal himself.

As he heard the elder DiNozzo reveal he knew the prince and young Anthony mention far more about the case than he knew Jethro would like, his worry only deepened. He was tempted to intervene, but Anthony and his father left before he could. Still, their conversation had been revealing, and Ducky moved into the bullpen proper to begin to fit pieces together. He still was unclear on the exact details of the weekend, but he had an idea of the situation when he saw Jethro coming down the stairs. Perhaps between the two of them, they could figure out how to handle this latest issue.

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Sarah finally gave up with 10 minutes still to go in the exam. She didn't know any more answers, and she knew the ones she had given were pathetic at best, but the strain of not breaking down in the middle of class was too much. She dropped her paper on the professor's desk at the front of the lecture hall and quickly made her way outside.

She wanted to just sink down on the steps, but Josh had a class in this building in 20 minutes, and she didn't want to run into him. Instead, she forced herself to keep it together for the 10 minutes it took her to make her way to her dorm room. Thankfully, Katherine was still at class. She dropped her backpack at the foot of her bed and threw herself down, finally giving in to the emotions she'd been stuffing away all morning.

At first, she couldn't even make a sound, her face stuck in some sort of spasm, grief choking her throat. After a minute, the dam broke and she sobbed, curling into herself and letting go the way she hadn't earlier felt able to do. All the anger, the betrayal she felt at Josh's cheating, all the shock at realizing she hadn't found the person right for her the way Tim and Tony, Abby and Jimmy had. Even Ziva and Damon, though they seemed to be moving slowly. Everything squeezed her heart, constricting her chest. Her throat clogged with tears, her face contorting in pain. She hugged her knees to her chest, not caring that she was soaking her shirt.
She was just starting to let everything settle, starting to think she was cried out for the day, when she thought of her midterm. She couldn't concentrate during it; she knew she'd failed it, and the midterm was a quarter of her grade for the semester. Even if she aced both the major papers, she'd be lucky to get a C in the class. And since she'd gotten a B-plus on the first paper, even that C was looking impossible. And she had two more midterms tomorrow, including the pre-calculus one she'd been dreading. Sarah made herself sit up and take stock. She'd put off her math and science classes until this semester because she didn't want to take them, and she had to pass both classes. She wasn't looking for an A, not like in her lit classes. She wasn't Tim with the MIT brain, or Abby or Jimmy with the science. She'd be happy with a C in those, but she had been struggling all semester anyway. She'd been meaning to ask Tim for help, but he'd been on vacation, and then Brad got kidnapped and Tim got shot, and she'd been busy with everything else and now she was out of time. Biology wasn't until Friday, but pre-calculus was in less than 24 hours, and she didn't think she could find a single equation in her brain if her life depended on it. She cursed and threw her pillow at the wall, just missing her coffee mug, then dropped down on the bed again. This time the tears were quiet, the product of desperation. First Josh screwed around on her, now he was messing up her life. She had to pass her classes or she couldn't graduate on time, and she didn't want to have to admit that to her parents. Just one more way she'd never be as good as Tim at something. He graduated early from high school, finished college in three years, got a master's degree, ended up working on the top team at NCIS, and was a best-selling author. She loved her brother, really she did, but there were times she hated him, too.

She lay there and let the tears flow, let everything wash away in salt water.

"Sarah? What's wrong?"

She just lay there, still crying, until she felt Katherine's hand on her shoulder. She couldn't muster the energy to roll over, so she just turned her head.

"Sarah?" Her roommate crouched down so she was looking right at her, her blue eyes filled with worry. "Is it Tim? Or your dad? Did something happen?"

She shook her head. "Josh. I walked in on him having sex with somebody else." The words ripped the barely formed scab off her heart, and she started crying again.

"Come on, sit up."

At Katherine's words, Sarah tried to push herself up, but a wave of dizziness washed over her and she moaned, feeling her stomach roll, and slumped down again.

"Sarah?"

She shook her head and lay there. She heard Katherine's light footsteps leave and come back with the heavier tread of Joanna, the RA.

Joanna knelt down in front of her, her red hair contrasting with Katherine's blond as the two looked at her.

"Sarah?" Joanna frowned. "Can you sit up?"

Sarah tried, but her arms felt like rubber. At least this time she didn't feel like she was going to lose her lunch. Not that she'd had one. Or breakfast for that matter. Now that she thought about it, she realized she hadn't had anything since the Chinese food Abby had ordered the night before. She forced herself to push up to sitting, but clutched her head as dizziness swamped her.
"Whoa," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "Head rush."

"What happened?" Katherine said.

Sarah started to slowly tell the story, pausing when Katherine pulled a bottle of orange juice from the small dorm refrigerator to take a sip. Her stomach still was churning, but it stayed down.

As she explained, Katherine pulled her into a hug, her long arms wrapped around Sarah. She was almost as tall as Abby, and as fair as her honorary sisters were dark. "Oh sweetie," she said. "He's a jerk."

"I know." Sarah took another sip and felt her voice become a bit stronger. "And I shouldn't let him screw with me any more than he has, but I ran into him this morning and he was trying to convince me not to dump his sorry ass and I was so upset I tanked my midterm and I haven't studied for tomorrow's at all." She sighed. "And I feel horrible."

Joanna sat on the bed next to her. "Sarah, is there any chance you could be pregnant?"

Sarah shook her head. "Abby tested me yesterday, a blood test, not just one from the drugstore. She tested for everything, and they all came back negative. She said there's a couple more STD tests, including HIV, that still need to come back, but she didn't think any of them were very likely."

Katherine chimed in, "Abby's a scientist who's friends with her brother."

Joanna nodded. "When was the last time you ate?"

"Last night." Sarah pressed her hand to her belly. "I was too busy this morning, then too upset to keep anything down."

Joanna frowned. "Hold on a minute, let me get some fruit from my room, see if you at least can handle that." She left the room.

"I've got some peanut butter in my backpack I can eat with it," Sarah said.

Katherine released her from the hug and picked up the backpack, rifling through it. By the time Joanna was back, Katherine had scooped some peanut butter into a paper cup and torn the top half of the cup away so it would be easy to dip.

Sarah pulled her legs up so she was cross-legged on the bed and forced herself to eat the apple and banana, dipping pieces in peanut butter. Even one of her favorite foods didn't console her, but at least it was staying down. Katherine and Joanna let her eat in silence, and Sarah was grateful. By the time she'd finished the food, she was feeling better.

"OK, evil pre-calculus," she said.

Katherine smiled. "I'd offer to help, but I barely passed algebra last year."

Sarah shook her head. "I'll call Tim, see if he has time. If not, I'll muddle through. I shouldn't have waited until the last minute to plan to ask him for help anyway."

Joanna just nodded and left, and Katherine flopped down on her own bed and pulled out her art history text. Sarah dialed Tim's number, but it went to voicemail. "Rats." She sighed and dug her math book from the stack on her desk.

"How about I make a Ben and Jerry's run?" Katherine asked. "If you feel up to it, that is."
Sarah nodded. "If I can't pass this exam, I can at least make failing less miserable." She let her lips twist in a parody of a smile. "Chunky Monkey for me."

Tony was stunned to see his father in the squad room below. Not just because he was here, but because he was flirting with Ziva, and she appeared to be flirting back. But then he caught a moment of worry in her eyes, and he knew she was just playing up to his father. Knowing her, she'd figured out what he was doing here.

Tony headed downstairs, frantically sorting through options. He ran his thumb over his ring and, for just a second, thought about slipping it into his pocket so his father wouldn't be able to ask about it. But too many people at the Navy Yard would notice and wonder where it was. Even Dwayne might. His smile when he had told Tony he had a visitor made it clear he didn't realize the unexpected visit was not a good thing. It was so far from not being a good thing that Tony wasn't even sure how to describe it. Unspeakably bad? God knows Gibbs had to have a rule in the 40s that applied to this situation somehow. "Clean up your own messes," if nothing else. Good old Rule 45, a concept with which his father had never been familiar.

Hopefully the director would keep Tim and Gibbs tied up in his office long enough for Tony to figure out what the hell his father was doing here and get him to leave before he had to explain anything to either his husband or his surrogate dad. Tony didn't trust either one not to try and kill his father, and while the idea had a certain grim appeal, he didn't want either one of them sucked into his father's web.

As he met his father at Ziva's desk, he pasted a smile on his face. "Dad. This is a surprise. Come with me while I get some coffee." He steered his father toward the break room and away from Ziva and Dwayne, all the while losing hope that he would wake up to find the past few days were just a nightmare.

"So, just stopping by?" he asked.

"I got your message and I was in the area, so I thought it was easier to discuss your financial issues in person," his father said.

"No issues," Tony said. "Just a bank mix-up between the trust fund Nonna left me and one of your accounts. I was hoping you could call the bank to straighten it out, but you certainly didn't have to come all the way to D.C."

"Oh, it was no trouble," his father said. "It's been too long, Junior."

"Would you like some coffee?"

"Yes. Jamaican Blue Mountain would be great."

Tony turned to the coffee machine and rolled his eyes. Leave it to his father to expect a coffee known more for its expense than its taste from a government vending machine. "Sorry. Our options are pretty much regular or decaf."

"Really? Regular then."

Tony fed money into the machine and tried to ignore the tightness in his chest as his mind conjured up the unspoken disdain coming from the other man.
So he was surprised when his dad did speak. "I must say, Junior, your co-workers seem quite nice. Especially Ziva."

"I like working here, Dad," he replied. "They're good people. Good friends. We've got each other's back." He handed over the first cup and waited for the disparaging comment while he punched the buttons for his own drink.

"And that agent who brought me up. Nice young fellow. When you weren't here, he asked Ziva if an Agent McGee was here. Is that your boss?"

Tony wondered what exactly the agent had said about Tim. Did he say anything about the two of them together? He surreptitiously brushed his thumb over the ring on his left hand as he retrieved his cup and poured sugar into his coffee. "No, Agent Gibbs is the team leader. I know I've mentioned him before. McGee is another agent on the team. He's on desk duty right now, recovering after being injured on the job last month."

"That's right. That's right. Then he must have figured this McGee would know where to find you, if he's just sitting behind a desk," his father replied.

Tony felt some of the tightness in his chest ease at his father's words. One bullet dodged. He'd almost rather take a real bullet than deal with explaining his relationship with Tim and their plans to buy a house and adopt kids in a year or two. Not that those kids were ever going to call him "Grandpa" — that title was reserved for men who deserved it, like Gibbs and Sean. And he realized that he even hated the idea of calling his father "Dad" the way he called Sean "Dad" — the two men were as far apart from each other as Eli David and Gibbs. Only, that thought reminded him about how he'd let Sean down by not helping Sarah out. Was there a limit on how much he could beat himself up in one day?

He forced himself to switch gears. "You really didn't have to come all the way to D.C. for this. A phone call would have been fine."

"I was in the area, so I thought it was easier to discuss it in person," his father said.

"While I appreciate that, this isn't a good time. We're in the middle of a case." He led the way back to the squad room. "Besides, I just want this mix-up at the bank straightened out, all right? I mean, why is your name still on the account as a trustee?"

"Not to worry. I'll- I'll take care of it."

The slight hesitance in his dad's voice set off an alarm, but he ignored it in favor of trying to rush his dad out of the office before Gibbs or Tim returned to their desks. "All right, well, you know, you could have just done it with a phone call."

"Sure. And I will. It's, uh... just that we haven't seen each other in a long time."

Tony couldn't completely mask his skepticism at the sentiment, which coming from any other person would have seemed sincere. "And you thought you'd just fly down and surprise me?"

"Well, I took the train. It's not that far," Senior said. And the idea that Anthony DiNozzo Sr. had foregone the luxury and pampering he had always enjoyed in first-class accomodations halted the mental recitation of why this was the worst possible time for a visit from his estranged father. Because it was one thing to fantasize about Tim or Gibbs avenging past abuses, but something different entirely when faced with real mortality.

"You all right?"
"Never felt better." The small smirk that flashed across his father's face reminded Tony that he was standing in front of a master of manipulation.

Nevertheless, he had to ask. "I mean, nothing's wrong?"

"We'll have dinner, catch up." And all of a sudden Tony was transported back through the decades to the boy waiting for his father to grace him with his attention. He walked the paper in his hand across the bullpen and left it on Ziva's desk in order to give himself a breather and reinforce his defenses. As much as he loved Tim – the last two days not withstanding – he'd always been vulnerable to the subtle offense at which his father was a master.

"So, um, tell me about Ziva."

More in control now, Tony was careful to keep his answer succinct. "Ziva is Ziva. Nothing to tell."

"Tony! Hotel suite's been cleared. We're headed over," Dwayne said, calling to him from across the floor as he and Ziva led Sayif to the elevator.

"Be right there." Salvation. It was time to go back to work. Hopefully, this case would require long hours, and Senior would eventually grow impatient and head back to New York.

He wasn't expecting his dad's question. "Isn't that Prince Sayif Ibn Alwaan?"

"Yes, it is." Okay, so ten points for recognizing the Saudi Arabian prince who had been making the tabloid covers with his wild partying since his arrival in the States. And now to pack his dad off. "Where you staying?"

"My God. He has grown up."

Morbid curiosity overtook him. "Dad. How do you know him?"

"His father, Prince Omar, and I have been in business together. We met years ago in Monte Carlo. What's Sayif doing here?"

Tony ignored the "Danger, Will Robinson" warning that popped into his brain. He glanced around. Surely if his dad knew the potential danger, he would beat feet out of D.C. immediately. "Well, he was the target of an assassination attempt this morning."

"Hey, should I continue holding the door?" Dwayne asked.

"I'm coming! I'll meet you in the garage! Take it easy!"

"What happened?" Senior asked.

Tony stared at his father. Oh right, this was the man who had never taken enough interest in his son's chosen career to realize that he was required to keep information confidential for security purposes. He laughed at his earlier concern over the self-serving bastard. "I can't talk about it."

And then came the look. Once more the years rolled back, and against his better judgment and sense, the words escaped. "Car bomb." Immediately he knew Gibbs wouldn't be satisfied with slapping his head but would take it clean off for letting that information slip – especially to his father.

"Has his father been told?"

Tony didn't even stop to think. He just had to get Senior out of the bullpen and concentrate on
doing his job. "Yes. He's, uh, flying in from Riyadh. Look, I have to get Sayif to the Adams House Hotel. I'll take you downstairs, get you a cab." He grabbed his backpack and coat. "Are you sure, uh, you don't want to tell me something?" he asked, hoping his dad would cut to the chase and spare him the added devastation likely to occur if his visit lasted any longer.

"You're- You're busy. It can wait."

All hope died. He was not getting out of this week with his marriage and his career intact. His father would see to that.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

AN: For anybody who hasn't realized it, this section has been tracking with Flesh & Blood in S7. Several scenes are drawn from the episode and that dialogue, obviously, is not mine. The rest of it is. :)

Tony herded his father toward the elevator, but had to wait for it. He would have taken the stairs, but despite his father's insistence that he wasn't sick, his choice of the train rather than a plane worried Tony. Hell if he knew why — his father had never worried much about him. There wasn't any logical reason why he should worry about his father.

But inside the federal agent who quoted movies and mercilessly teased his partner was still the 8-year-old boy who didn't understand why his mom wasn't coming back. She wasn't the best mom, not like some of his friends had. She drank his sea monkeys, dressed him in sailor suits, and decorated his room like it housed a 40-year-old woman, not a little boy. But she loved him, and they had fun together. And even though his father was more apt to sit him in front of a TV or ship him off to boarding school and summer camp, ignoring the signs that something was wrong, he was still his father. He couldn't trust him, not like he trusted Gibbs or Sean. But faced with the idea his father might die, he suddenly realized he didn't want that either.

"Are you coming, Junior?" His father looked out at him from the elevator.

"Oh, right, Dad." Tony stepped inside. "Ground floor."

His father pressed the button, and Tony tried to get his head back in the game. He'd been off enough earlier in the day; if he didn't get his act together, Gibbs was going to know something was up.

Downstairs, his father waved him off. "I can find a cab on my own, Junior. I'll call you later, see if you're free for dinner."

"Dad, I'm probably working," he said. "You can call, but I can't promise anything."

"We'll work it out." He stepped toward the doors. "Find some time to catch up."

As he headed for the garage to meet the others, he placed a quick call to Jimmy.

"Hey, Black Lung. Got an assignment for you."

"What's up? Ziva told me about your dad being in town. She and Abby want to help."

"He's gone now. Just make sure somebody who knows the score tells Tim. I don't want him hearing from Dwayne or Gibbs. He's pissed enough at me."

"He's not mad at you." But Tony wasn't reassured by Jimmy's words that all was right on the homefront just yet. "Is that it?"

"No, I need you to put on your doctor's hat for a moment. My father took a train, not a plane. What
medical conditions might keep him from flying?"

"I'd have to look that up. Is he sick? Is that why he's here?"

"Jimmy, if I knew why he was here I'd be a lot happier. He says nothing's wrong, but a train isn't
his style. The sooner I figure out what's going on, the sooner I can get him out of here."

"On it, Boss."

Despite everything, Tony had to laugh at that. Jimmy had helped him dozens of time when he was
acting team leader during Gibbs' abortive retirement a few years ago; he'd be a good asset here,
especially since Tony didn't want to involve Tim in whatever his father was up to.

He put his phone away as he joined Ziva, Dwayne, and the prince. Noting how the prince's gaze
strayed toward Ziva, he made the assignments for the car. "Agent David, you're driving. Agent
Wilson, take the front seat, watch for tails. I'll cover things in the back with the prince."

The other two nodded, and Dwayne passed the keys to Ziva. As they got in the car, Tony forced
his agent mask into place. He couldn't afford to let that one slip, not today. Not while protecting
the prince.

Once at the hotel, Tony sent Ziva and Dwayne to escort the prince upstairs while he arranged the
details among the other NCIS agents and the royal guard. As he walked through the lobby, he saw
an older man facing the check-in desk and thought it was his father. But then the man turned and
he saw it was somebody else. He gave himself a mental headslap. "Get your head in the game,
DiNozzo," he muttered.

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Gibbs forced himself to stay focused on the call with the embassy. But the combination of Dwayne
waiting to tell Tony something and the sight of a stranger down in the bullpen with Ziva had set off
all his internal alarms. Tony and Tim were both off today, and Ziva had been watching Tony
carefully all morning. Dwayne was the only one who seemed unaffected, though Gibbs had caught
him watching the others, trying to puzzle out what was going on.

When Vance finally disconnected the call, Gibbs rose to leave.

"Agent McGee, I'd like to finish this now," Vance said. "Gibbs, can you spare him for another
hour?"

Gibbs nodded. "Nothing we need to do that the others can't handle," he said. "Once Abby and
Ducky start sifting through the evidence, we're gonna need him back."

"You'll have him." Vance looked away, and Gibbs knew he'd been dismissed.

"McGee, if I'm not in when you're done, call me," Gibbs said.

"Right, Boss."

Before Gibbs even made it out the door, the director and McGee were talking about things he didn't
even understand, ports and packets and words he only knew when they weren't computer-related.

When he made it to the bullpen, only Ducky was there.
"You got something for me, Duck?" he asked.

Ducky shook his head. "On the case, no. But I do believe we have a problem, Jethro."

Gibbs just raised an eyebrow.

"Anthony just left, his father in tow. He showed up a short while ago, most unexpectedly, from what I've gathered." Ducky leaned against McGee's desk. "Agent Wilson has picked up on the undercurrents, but has not determined their cause. The others, with the exception of Timothy, seem to know bits and pieces. I left Jimmy, Abigail, and Ziva in the morgue formulating a plan of attack whilst I came up here to ascertain Anthony's state of mind."

"And?" Gibbs wasn't sure what was going on, but this sounded like more than just DiNozzo's sorry excuse for a father reappearing.

Ducky shook his head. "Ziva, Anthony, and Agent Wilson have taken the prince to the hotel. Anthony was finding a cab for his father."


Ducky nodded. "I do not understand it, but it appears that something this weekend triggered some of Anthony's issues and it had caused a bit of a rift between him and Timothy."

"Aw, hell, Duck." Gibbs turned away to look at Tony's desk, thinking before returning his eyes to Ducky's face. "Those two have kept their personal feelings out of work for months now, but today it was like walking on eggshells around here."

"Jimmy, Abigail, and Ziva each appear to know a piece, but none of them know the entire story. Oddly, Jimmy had the most information about the discord between the two men. From what I gathered, Ziva spent last night at Abigail's, and Jimmy spent the night elsewhere. Unfortunately, I was not able to determine if the two are connected to what is going on with Timothy and Anthony." Ducky frowned, and Gibbs felt his gut churn.

"Tell me I wasn't wrong about letting them all break Rule 12," Gibbs said. "I've got a dead foreign national, an assassination attempt on a member of the Saudi royal family who refuses to cooperate in his own protection, and a man who deserves to be shot showing up at just the wrong time. I do not have time to deal with domestic disputes among my agents." He glared, knowing he was trying that tactic on the one person who was immune to it.

"Jethro, do not start doubting your gut now." Ducky stood and approached. "You know as well as I do that both couples are far better off together than apart, even if one or both of them are having difficulties now. Abigail and Jimmy appear to be on good terms, if worried about their friends."

"It just better not get in the way of this case." Gibbs stalked off, headed for the evidence garage. Yes, he was letting his second "B" out, but with Vance and State both breathing down his neck, Papa Bear was going to have to wait his turn. The sooner they wrapped up this case, the sooner Gibbs could figure out what the heck was going on with his kids.

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As Gibbs left, Tim and Vance got deep into the details of the skills Tim would be teaching the agents starting next Monday. After the turmoil of the weekend, it felt good to dig into something
more academic than anything else. He could let his brain focus on what to teach and how to teach it without dwelling on anything else.

"Good work, McGee," Vance said finally. "Now, we need to decide which agents will be in this first class."

Tim raised an eyebrow. "We?" He paused. "I thought you were choosing."

Vance held his gaze. "I will make the final decision, but I want your input. The first request for agent nominations netted twice as many names as we have spaces for in the three classes. I will select the agents from the satellite offices, but I wanted your input on the ones at the Navy Yard, plus a few whom you served with at Norfolk."

Tim nodded. "Who's on the list?"

As Vance passed over a sheet of paper and Tim scanned the names, he frowned.

"Problem, McGee?"

Tim considered whether he should mention it to the director.

"McGee?"

"Agent Krone."

"What about him?"

Tim mentally arranged his words before opening his mouth. "He's made it clear to Abby, Ducky, and Jimmy that he wants a spot on Gibbs' team. He made a comment last week to me about Gibbs being glad I was back so he wouldn't be stuck with 'two probies' anymore, and before that he was sniffing around to figure out if I was even coming back."

Vance frowned. "Does Gibbs know?"

Tim shook his head. "Tony said I should have told him just to see Krone get head-slapped, but we both agreed it wouldn't accomplish much except causing trouble."

"I don't want to make training decisions based on that." Vance paused. "Most agents aspire to be on the MCRT at some point in their careers."

"Yeah, the ones who haven't heard about what it's like to work with Gibbs." As soon as he said it, Tim flushed, but Vance cracked a smile.

"DiNozzo's rubbing off on you," he said. "Let's consider the other agents and see how many we have after the first pass. Are there any on this list you definitely want to see in the training?"

"Andretti." Tim didn't even have to think. "Balboa's team uses me more than anybody else, and he's the best computer person they have. He's got decent skills and good instincts; he just needs training."

Vance nodded, and they continued down the list. By the time they had finished, they had 10 more agents than available slots.

"I want to use the second training session exclusively for agents from outside the immediate area," Vance said. "Since they'll have to stay here for the two weeks, I can schedule some additional training in other areas for them. We'll keep the first and third for Capitol-region agents." He made
notes on his pad. "I'm going to add a second round of requirements for the DC agents who want to
participate, see if we can winnow this list down. The ones who don't make the cut can take the
fourth round if we have time for it."

Tim nodded. "Are we done, Director? Because Gibbs probably has something for me to do on the
car bombing by now."

Vance just nodded, and Tim slipped out. As he headed down to the bullpen, he wondered where
everybody was. He checked his e-mail for messages, finding one from Ziva with videos from the
garage where the prince's car had been serviced two days earlier. He pulled out his headphones and
settled down to watch for evidence of tampering.

He still hadn't gotten to the prince's car when Gibbs joined him in the bullpen, getting in his line of
sight and motioning for Tim to remove the headphones. He stopped the video and took them off.

"Did he call this weekend, McGee? Is that why DiNozzo's been off all day?"

At Gibbs' words, Tim dropped the headphones. "Did who call?"

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After his conversation with Ducky, Gibbs headed to the evidence garage. Abby should be there
working on the car, and she was the one most likely to give him information he could use to figure
out what was going on with his agents. Her face was an open book most of the time, and she
probably knew more about Tony's past than either Jimmy or Ziva.

He walked into the garage, but the only part of Abby visible was a pair of legs sticking out from
under the car. One sock was rainbow stripes and the other was black, and neither shoe matched.

"Abby. What are you doing?"

"Don't say it, Gibbs. I know. My shoes and socks. It's Mismatch Monday." Gibbs was sent back in
time to one day when Kelly was six and trying to convince him she was supposed to wear socks
that didn't match to school. Shannon was visiting her parents for a week while her father recovered
from surgery, and Gibbs had new appreciation for what it took to juggle Kelly and the house. He
squashed down the memory. Too much past showing up today to let him make that trip back 20
years, even briefly.

He looked down at Abby where she lay on the trolley. "For who?"

"For me."

"How about it's Make My Day Monday for me?" He reached down and pulled her up to standing.
As she explained about the bomb, he tried to figure out what to ask her. Fortunately, she brought
the subject up herself.

"I heard Tony's father's in town." Her face held open worry, and Gibbs knew whatever was going
on had to be worse than he'd imagined.

"Yeah, he is. What triggered it?" He asked, trying to keep them focused on the case, at least long
enough to get the information he needed. The questions about DiNozzo Senior could wait.

"I found remnants of a timer. I'm hoping to find more. What does he look like?"
"Who?" Gibbs knew, but he needed to see what she knew.

"Tony's father!" She was indignant, as if he should have known who she meant.

"I haven't seen him. Anything else?"

"Yeah. I'm wondering..." She paused and chewed her lower lip. "Has Tim seen him yet?"

Gibbs shook his head. "You're keeping things from me, Abs."

She shook her head.

"Abs." He stared at her. "Why is Tony's dad here?"

"I don't know, Gibbs. That's what has me worried."

Before he could respond, his phone rang.

"Yeah? I'll check it out." He snapped the phone shut. "Thanks, Abs." He headed upstairs.

Hopefully Ziva was right and McGee had found something on the videos she had sent him. The sooner they wrapped this case, the better.

When he walked into the bullpen, McGee had his headphones on and was focused on the screen.

Gibbs walked over to stand in front of him. When McGee looked up, he asked the question he'd been wondering since he'd talked to Ducky.

"Did he call this weekend, McGee? Is that why DiNozzo's been off all day?"

Tim dropped the headphones. "Did who call?"

Gibbs just stared. "Tony's father. Who did you think I was talking about?"

"Why would you think Tony's father called?" Tim frowned.

Gibbs stared at him. "Because he showed up at the Navy Yard. That's why Tony wasn't in the meeting with the embassy."

Tim just stared at him, then muttered a curse.

"McGee." Gibbs barked it, but his agent didn't even respond. Gibbs changed tactics, softening his tone. "Tim. What's going on? And how come I'm the last to know?"

"Dwayne and Ducky don't know."

"Duck knows some of it," he said. "After DiNozzo Senior showed up, Jimmy, Abby, and Ziva had a conference in Autopsy."

Tim sighed. "Tony's been beating himself up since Sarah woke us up yesterday morning." He explained what had happened, and Gibbs felt his anger at Tony's family grow. Every time he thought Tony was finally moving past what had happened to him as a child, something like this stirred up old memories.

"So do you think DiNozzo showing up has anything to do with Josh?"

Tim rubbed the back of his neck. "Honestly? I don't know. And I don't really care. I just want his
dad gone before Tony completely self-destructs."

Gibbs nodded. But before he could say anything else, Vance texted him, summoning them both to MTAC.

Once there, faced with the news that somebody was actually at the prince's hotel sending e-mails about the assassination attempt, Gibbs ran out of the Navy Yard, leaving Tim to call the others. All thoughts of dealing with Tony's father disappeared from his mind. Until he got the call halfway to the hotel that Tony's father was the sender of the e-mail. He pounded the steering wheel as he whipped the car around, heading back to the Navy Yard.

"Bring him in, David," he said. "And then get Tony out of the building, get him out of his headspace. McGee filled me in on what happened yesterday."

At her affirmative, he hung up. He was looking forward to this interrogation, but not the fallout. He couldn't decide if he wanted Tony's father to be involved or not.

All the way back to the Navy Yard, Tony focused on driving, letting Ziva distract his father. Hearing them flirt sent chills skittering along his spine, but he knew she was just playing along to help Tony out. He wondered what this was costing her, to flirt with a man she'd offered to kill if he ever needed her to. He could chalk up the destruction of yet another person's peace of mind in the running tally he'd been keeping since yesterday morning. Sarah, Tim, Ziva... At least Jimmy and Abby were fine, if worried about them.

Once his father was delivered to the interrogation room and Dwayne was called down from the bullpen to guard the room, Ziva dragged him out for coffee.

"I don't need any more caffeine," Tony said. "If I get wound any tighter, I'm going to break like one of those toys that can't unwind."

"Tea then, or hot chocolate," she said. "You need to get out of here for a moment, Tony. And it is Gibbs' orders."

Tony dropped his head back and looked up to the sky. "He knows?"

"He knows. McGee told him."

Tony cursed. "Great. I was hoping to keep Tim out of this. My past has screwed up enough things for him and Sarah this week, and it's only Monday."

"Tony." She stopped walking. He kept going, but when she didn't follow, he turned to face her. "You can't blame your past on Josh. You did not introduce them, and it seems likely he was cheating on her well before any of us met him. She will be fine."

"She had her heart broken, and I could have said something before that," Tony said, glaring at her. "Some big brother I turned out to be."

"Tony. You cannot take all the blame yourself." Ziva frowned. "We all thought something was off about Josh. Jimmy, Abby, myself. Even Damon noticed it. I would not be surprised if Dwayne and Maggie and Brad noticed as well. We all trusted Sarah to make the right decisions. It is what we do to other adults. I know she will always be McGee's little sister, but even little sisters grow up
As she paused, Tony knew she was thinking of the time she'd had to grow up, to do something nobody should have to do to her big brother. "Zee, I didn't..." He wasn't sure how to say it.

She shook her head. "No, it is all right. It has been a day for looking back. Perhaps you should remember what Abby and I told Sarah yesterday, when we spoke of dating mistakes we have made. Abby survived Mikel, thanks to all of us. I survived Michael, mostly because of you. McGee survived Amanda, even if he had to rely on an assassin to do so. Sarah will survive this, and we will help her." Her small hand reached out to rub his shoulder, and Tony couldn't figure out why such a delicate thing felt so reassuring, but it did.

"And my father?"

"We will help you get through that as well," she said. "No matter what he has done, now or in the past, we will be there. You are family, Tony. You have defended each of us in the past. You have saved us, more than anyone except Gibbs, and perhaps even more than Gibbs. Allow us to do the same for you."

Tony nodded. He felt the weight on his shoulders lighten just a bit. "Come on," he said. "Let's get this coffee and head back before Gibbs starts looking for us."

Ziva nodded, and they began walking again.

When they returned to the Navy Yard, Tony headed to the hallway outside Interrogation. He didn't want to watch his father and Gibbs going toe-to-toe, but he knew he needed to be there when they finished.

He wondered if his father was involved, if after all those years of neglect, he would finally notice his son because Tony was snapping handcuffs onto him.

He leaned against the wall and hoped nobody had to pass through. He couldn't handle polite chit-chat right now.

Finally, the door opened, and Gibbs walked out. Tony raised his eyes from the floor and looked at him.

"You keep your father clear of the Ibn Alwaan family."

"Right, boss." Tony felt a sinking sensation inside. Like he'd ever been able to get his father to do anything. Senior was a force of nature.

"Make sure he gets the message." Gibbs stared at him, and Tony could tell there was worry mixed in there, that Boss hadn't succeeded in banishing Papa Bear completely.

"Got it." His father was not going to screw up this part of his life. Not with Gibbs, not with Tim, and definitely not with the rest of the team.

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the assassin would get them. He and Tony had been through too much for it to end this way, both still hurting.

Dwayne was at his desk, and Tim decided to put him to work.

"Dwayne."

The young agent looked up. "Tony sent me back here for now. What can I do to help?"

"Surveillance video or backgrounding the employees at the mechanic's." Tim hoped Dwayne would recoil from the video assignment. It was tedious work, but it would let Tim lose himself in the assignment.

Dwayne frowned. "I know you usually do the backgrounding, but could I do that? I've learned a lot on the past few cases from you, Gibbs, and the director, but I haven't had a chance to try it on my own."

As bad as the day was, Tim couldn't help but smile at that. "In that case, definitely," he said. He paused. "You're really enjoying this, aren't you? Not the case, but being on the team."

Dwayne nodded. "I wasn't sure at first. Everything I'd heard was the downsides — the hours, the types of cases."

"Working for Gibbs."

"Yeah, that too." Dwayne smiled. "You guys are good at making sure people know the negatives. You manage to keep the upside pretty closely hidden. Not just making a difference — sometimes I think Cold Cases has even more of that because the families have been waiting so long for answers. But it's not just a group of really talented coworkers. You're family, in every way that counts." He paused. "And I'm going to take advantage of that and pry, because I'm worried. What's going on with Tony's dad?"

Tim scrubbed his face with his hands. "You knew he was here, too?"

Dwayne nodded. "Ziva told me to get Tony out of MTAC when he arrived. I didn't realize it was a bad thing until I saw Tony's reaction. I should have — I mean, if Tony and his dad were on good terms, he would have been at your wedding — but I didn't." He hesitated. "If it's none of my business, that's fine, but if I can help, I want to."

Tim sighed. "If I knew how to help, we'd all be better off." He picked his words carefully. "Tony's family wasn't good to him. His father never abused him, but he never stopped the ones who were. He never did much of anything for Tony, as far as I can tell. That's why him showing up —" He broke off as his phone rang. Gibbs.

"McGee."

"Tony and Ziva caught the e-mail sender."

"Is he the assassin?"

"It was Tony's father."

Tim cursed. "Did he-?"

"Don't know. They're bringing him in. Send Dwayne to the hotel to pick up protection detail and
get Jarvis to send another agent with him. Vance will OK it."

"Is-"

"I don't know, McGee. Tim, Ziva's getting him out of the building once they get back."

Before Tim could reply, Gibbs hung up.

Tim relayed his instructions but cut Dwayne off when he started to ask questions. "I don't know. Just do what we need to do."

He nodded and went to get another agent to accompany him. Tim sank down at his desk, his mind whirling. Of all the reasons he'd considered for Mr. DiNozzo to show up here, the case hadn't even crossed his mind. He'd figured it was connected to Josh, that somehow his sister's ex had mentioned Tony to his family and word had gotten to Tony's father.

Tim realized he couldn't do anything else now and put his headphones on to immerse himself in video. Gibbs was right, Ziva probably was the best one to help Tony now. She knew what it was like to have family involved in the wrong side of cases, in a way Tim didn't. Sure, Sarah had briefly been a suspect in that one case, but she had been innocent and Tim had known it, even if he had needed Abby to prove it. This wasn't at all the same thing. Whatever else Tony's father might be, innocent was one word that Tim would never use to describe him.

He was still there when Gibbs stormed back in and headed to interrogation. And he was still combing through hours of video when Ziva returned from getting coffee with Tony, bringing a cup for him.

Tim stopped the video. "Is he OK?" he asked.

Ziva did not say anything for a long minute. "He is, as you would expect, blaming himself." She crouched down next to him, looking up. "You do not need to be the only one to help him, McGee. We are a family, and when one of us is in trouble, we all help. We are all there for Sarah, and we are all here for Tony. Please, let us help."

Tim nodded. "I know. I just..."

"Tony calls you McWorry for a reason, yes?" Ziva smiled at him. "I invited Sarah to stay with me for a few days if she wants to get off campus, and I am trying to distract Tony. Abby and I, we can distract Mr. DiNozzo if needed. Much like Tony, he enjoys flirting, especially with pretty girls." Her mouth widened into a wicked grin. "Senior, as he calls himself, thought Tony and I were together. When Tony corrected him, he started turning on even more charm. I will use that, do whatever it takes to keep his attention away from Tony and from you."

Tim reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. "Not whatever it takes, Ziva," he said. "You haven't talked about the summer, and we haven't pushed you. We're here if you need us, and you know that. But please, don't do anything you're not comfortable with. That would hurt Tony more than anything his father could possibly do."

She nodded. "I would not, McGee, but I appreciate your concern." She stood, a graceful movement. "I need to get back to the hotel for the protection detail. If you talk to Sarah, please let her know that I will be home late, if at all, but my offer still stands; she is welcome to stay with me."

He nodded, but she left too quickly to see it. Thinking of Sarah, he decided to give her a call, only to find he'd missed one from her. He checked his voicemail, but she hadn't left one. Frowning, he called her, only to have it go to voicemail after four rings. He figured she must be at work or in
class and left her a message repeating Ziva's offer and letting her know to call when she had a chance. But she hadn't left a message, so it couldn't be anything too serious.

As Jethro left observation, Ducky frowned. Abigail was right, Tony and his father were practically clones. And watching the elder DiNozzo verbally spar with Jethro showed Ducky just how much of his personality young Anthony had inherited from his father. For both those reasons, Ducky was glad Anthony's father was not involved in the assassination attempt. With everything he knew about the past few days and the years of Anthony's childhood, he would not want that particular straw to be added to the pile right now, as he rather feared it might do what nothing else had and break Anthony.

He headed back to Autopsy to find Mr. Palmer pouring over his medical textbooks, rather than working on the Saudi's autopsy.

"Mr. Palmer, have you finished already?" He looked at his assistant, allowing his skepticism to show in his gaze.

Jimmy shook his head. "No, Dr. Mallard. I was trying to help Tony."

Ducky stayed quiet, allowing his assistant to explain.

"Tony's dad took the train, not a plane," he said. "He told Tony nothing was wrong, but since he just showed up, Tony asked me what medical conditions might have prevented his father from flying."

"Any number could have, depending on their severity," Ducky said. "Does he have any other reason for thinking his father is ill?"

Jimmy shrugged. "He showed up, didn't he? And at a really bad time, too." He sighed and pushed up his glasses, which had slid down his nose. "Dr. Mallard, Tim asked me to look after Tony, and Tony's got me checking into his dad."

"You are feeling a bit overwhelmed?" Ducky pulled up a chair and settled into it, his bones enjoying the respite. "Understandable. Neither task is easy at the best of times, and these are hardly those." He looked at the clock, then at the body on the table. "I believe we have a little time before we must return to the body. Perhaps a spot of tea?"

Jimmy nodded, smiling. "Thanks, Dr. Mallard. I just- There's a lot going on."

"Shall we see if Abigail is available?" He wasn't prepared for Jimmy's cheeks to go pale. "Jimmy?" He reached over and put a hand on his assistant's shoulder, feeling the strong muscles there quiver. "Is everything all right?"

When Jimmy didn't say anything, Ducky had his answer. "Give me just a minute to get the water boiling," he said. As he filled the beaker that he used to heat water for his daily cuppa, he wondered what was going on between Jimmy and Abigail. Nothing had seemed amiss when they were working with Ziva earlier to deal with Anthony Senior's arrival.

As he put the water on the hotplate, he took a seat across from Jimmy. "Now, lad, what seems to be the problem?"
As Jimmy detailed what had happened the day before, for the first time Ducky realized just how deep the cracks in their family had spread with the news about Joshua.

"It's not that anything is wrong between me and Abby," he said. "But..." He sighed. "Tim and Tony have both said they know they're going to work this out, and part of the reason they're sure is because they're married. Tim especially, because he said he knows Tony's not going to try and run from this. And Abby..."

"Abigail isn't interested in marriage?" Ducky wasn't too surprised by this. It fit the young scientist's personality quite well.

Jimmy nodded. "She's got good reasons, and she made it clear to Gibbs when he was asking that she doesn't have anything against marrying me, just marriage in general. And with everything else going on, this seems like the wrong time to bring it up. I just..." He sighed. "I don't know how to talk to her about it, and that worries me more than anything. We jumped into this really quickly, and we've been trying to have kids. We talked about a lot of things, and I don't think this is a mistake. But if I can't figure out how to say this to her, what happens when we have kids? Or when my mother finds out about us and starts causing problems? If we can't talk about this, how can we talk about how we're going to juggle two jobs and kids?" He sighed.

Ducky busied himself with pouring the now-boiling water into the teapot to allow the tea to brew. The few minutes gave him a chance to find the words Jimmy needed to hear.

"There are some discussions that always are difficult," he said. "The sign of maturity is for couples to be able to have them, no matter how difficult." He thought back over the dissolution of each of Jethro's marriages as well as the end of his relationship with the former director while they were in Europe. "My only advice would be to have the discussion away from the Navy Yard, and to start it, somehow. If Abigail will not talk, I would worry then. And if you are unable to begin the discussion, I would be concerned. But it does not sound as though at this point that either you have tried or she has failed to listen."

Jimmy shook his head. "We haven't had a chance. I thought we might be able to today, but it's not looking likely."

"Give it a chance," Ducky said. He had his own thoughts on how the discussion was likely to go, but knew he ought not assume. "Just do not allow this to linger for too long."

"No, doctor," Jimmy said. He sipped his tea. "Should I go tell Tony what the possibilities are for his dad?"

Ducky shook his head. "I rather think Anthony has other concerns right now," he said. "An e-mail might be preferable."

Jimmy nodded and took his tea over to the computer in the corner.

As Ducky sipped his tea, he wondered what could possibly come next. Only Ziva and Dwayne seemed likely to escape this situation unscathed, and he worried that the fallout could even draw them into the maelstrom.

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Tony got the drinks at the bar and walked over to his father's table in the lounge. He needed to figure out what his father's game was, and if it involved Josh at all.
He set his father's scotch down on the table. "Macallan 18, three fingers, one ice cube."

"You remembered." His father looked surprised.

"Well, what would cocktail hour be without a single-malt scotch and a lecture from Senior?" He forced those memories away. The only purpose they served was to remind him never to do that to his own kids.

"And now you're going to lecture me?" His father's look said more than words ever could.

Tony sipped his beer and reminded himself that his father was the one who needed absolution, not him. He hadn't done anything wrong. As he set his drink down, he brushed his thumb along the cool metal of his wedding ring.

"What are you drinking?" Senior looked over at him.

"Non-alcoholic beer."

His father nodded. "The downside to law enforcement. Are there any upsides?"

And his father asking that just showed how far apart they were. Rather than give the real answer, the one that would expose a side of him he didn't trust his father with, he went for the easy joke.

"Well, I get to carry a gun." He'd said almost the same thing the first time he'd met Dwayne. It fit his image. He'd dropped the part about the babes, though. Tim would understand the line, but it still felt disloyal. "You've always been disappointed I became a cop."

"No."

No elaboration, no nothing. Tony couldn't resist pushing the issue. "Felt that way to me."

"I always, uh, was supportive. I never said anything."

Well that explained his parenting style. Sure, he didn't use words or fists against Tony, not like his father-in-law and brother. But his father never understood it wasn't enough to not tear down. Even Gibbs, who doled out praise like he had to pay for it by the letter — after he'd finished paying out his alimony for the month, even he knew when to offer praise or a sign of appreciation.

But he couldn't say all that. He settled for the simple response.

"Exactly."

"What did you want me to say?" His father's question shouldn't have been unexpected, but it was. And Tony finally decided to let his father know, for once in his life, what he really thought.

"Well, I don't know. Maybe like, 'Hey, Junior, I'm glad you found a career you're passionate about. I'm proud of you and what you're doing.' Something like that."

"How do you know I don't feel that way?" His father sounded genuinely puzzled, and Tony didn't know where to start.

"How would I? We never talked." He sat back in his seat and thought of the realization he'd come to sometime during the long hours he'd sat with Tim in Bethesda with nothing to do but think. "I mean... I get it. It must have been tough. Your wife dies, and you're left with an 8-year-old kid. But your solution, Dad, was to warehouse me in boarding schools and summer camps. And half the time, I never knew where you were or what you were doing. I needed a closer relationship." He
had. And then he'd found Gibbs and the team, he'd fallen in love with Tim and married him. He didn't need his father anymore, or so he'd thought. But faced with the man in question, he couldn't help regressing back to that scared 8-year-old who just wanted somebody to love him, somebody to protect him from Grandfather and Uncle Carmine.

"You forget. We took some great vacations together."

Tony remembered the last great vacation with his father, a fishing trip before his mom died. It was the last time he'd felt like he had a dad, not just a father. But he wasn't going to bring that up, sure his father wouldn't remember it. He went on the offensive instead, the way his basketball coach always said. Attack the basket, make them stop you. "Like the trip to Maui where you left me in a hotel room for two days, and I was 12 years old?"

"Oh, come on, Junior. I explained that to you. I had to go back to the mainland to close a deal."

And that summed it up. A deal would always come before his only son. Tony knew where he ranked on Senior's priority list. Especially with that deal.

"With a rich divorcée. Who was very attractive, as I recall."

"A deal is a deal." His grin made Tony wish he had mastered Gibbs' glare, wanting to squelch his father for once in his life.

"How is my current stepmother?" As he said it, he hoped Senior would continue to be oblivious to the ring on his left hand.

"Ex-stepmother." But his glance at Tony's hand showed he'd noticed.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. I actually liked Karen." Not that he'd seen her in years, not since joining NCIS.

"Phoebe. You missed one."

"Were you going to tell me about that?" Of course, if his father ever turned that back around on him, Tony would have to admit he hadn't even thought of inviting him to his own wedding a few weeks earlier.

"I don't like to advertise my failures." And his father looked at him again before looking away.

Tony thought that perhaps explained why Senior never called. Tony was certainly one of his failures as far as he was concerned. Still, he settled for the polite response. "Well, my condolences. My congratulations. And my condolences."

"And were you going to share your own news?" Senior asked, his gaze straying to Tony's ring finger.

Tony took a settling breath, wanting his lungs to stay clear. Still, he could feel a steel band start to wrap around his chest. "I shared it with the people I knew would celebrate with me."

"You didn't think I would want to meet your wife, Junior?" His father raised an eyebrow at him, so like McEyebrow that Tony had to laugh, a pained chuckle.

"I don't have one," he said. "And yes, I was pretty sure you wouldn't want to meet my husband." Tony's phone beeped. "I have to relieve Ziva." He stood. "Now, listen... you stay away from the Ibn Alwaans. Please. I'll call you."
And he left before his father could react to the bombshell Tony had just dropped.
When Tony met Ziva outside the penthouse suite, she was fuming.

"Prince Saayif is a chauvinistic, royal pain in the tush!"

"Did he try anything on you?" Tony put his hand on her shoulder, hoping the prince had more sense than that.

"No, he did not," she said. "He said many things, and if his eyes were capable of removing clothing I would have had to shoot him, but he did not lay a hand on me."

"Good. I'd hate to explain to Vance why we had to kill him." Tony set his shoulders. "You headed back to the Yard?"

She nodded. "I will see you in the morning."

As she left, Tony opened the door to the suite to find the prince dressed in clubbing clothes.

"You're going out like that?" He raised an eyebrow. "They will not let you into the club, guess you'll have to stay here."

"No club." Tony wanted to shake the entitled SOB. Somebody tried to kill him earlier, and he wanted to party.

"The girls are meeting me here in 15 minutes," he said. "We are going out."

Tony stood his ground. He'd screwed up enough stuff today with his father's appearance; he was not going to screw up this assignment. "No, you're staying here where we can keep an eye on you."

"I don't think so. I told your Agent Gibbs that I would agree to protection only on my terms." The prince turned to the mirror to inspect his reflection, and Tony realized he had to think quickly or cause an international incident.

"If the girls are coming here, why not club here?" He started talking, eager to convince the prince so he didn't have to lock him in the suite. "Just think of all your options here. Room service, the whirlpool... You could have a much more satisfying night here than out at a club."

The prince nodded at him. "I like the way you think," he said. "We could indeed have much pleasure here." The way he said pleasure made Tony glad he had pulled this shift, not Ziva. Much as he wanted to be home with Tim, wanted to apologize for this fiasco of a day, he didn't trust the prince not to try something on Ziva in that situation. She could and would handle herself, but she shouldn't have to. Sending her to sacrifice herself for a mission was Eli's approach, not Gibbs'.

"Good choice," was all Tony said.

"You will enjoy it," the prince said. "The woman coming for you is quite nice."

Tony held up his left hand. "I'm married."

"Your point?" The prince seemed completely innocent of any reason that would stop Tony from participating in the pleasures he had planned for the evening, and Tony remembered that in his
culture, marriage probably wasn't much of a hindrance.

"What do you have planned?"

As the prince talked about the attributes of the women coming, Tony wished more than ever that he was home with Tim. And once the women arrived, he realized that getting out of this one with his virtue intact was going to be difficult at best. The little dark-haired one was all over him, until he finally handcuffed her to the settee leg, persuading her to recline there by feeding her fruit dipped in chocolate while he kept an eye on the prince. When Saayif disappeared into the bedroom, two girls in tow, Tony worried that he was going to end up in even more trouble. But the champagne and fruit seemed to have relaxed the one girl as she dozed on the floor. Tony settled for shucking his suit jacket and stationing himself at the entrance to the bedroom. By the noises within, he could tell the prince was enjoying himself thoroughly. Once again he wished he was home with Tim. Or maybe he didn't. He wasn't quite sure how to tell his husband he'd outed them to his father, or even if he should. Oh, he hadn't said Tim's name. But his father wasn't likely to react well to the news that Tony had married a man, and it wouldn't take long for him to find out who it was if he really wanted to.

Tony snorted. Like his father ever really wanted to find out anything about his only son. If that's what he was worried about, he could stop now.

It was a long night, broken only by Saayif's repeated orders to room service for decadent food and champagne. The prince emerged clothed in one of the hotel's white robes, while the women wore colorful silk and satin robes. Tony felt overdressed in his shirt and slacks, not to mention the shoulder holster. Then the prince planted a cowboy hat on his head, and Tony had to force himself not to roll his eyes.

The sun was just coming up, and there was a knock on the door. Tony checked with the Royal Guards on the com link and discovered it was the prince's regular morning yoga instructor. But when she entered, the prince was too busy with one woman on his lap and the other standing nearby to have time for yoga. Tony allowed the woman to give him lessons, but found them lacking. She had obviously come prepared for some flirt and tickle with the prince, not an actual yoga session, and Tony didn't feel like going into all his medical stuff the way Abby's yoga teacher had made him do before class. When she set him up in Three-Legged Dog without warming him up first, Tony just rolled his eyes. He'd participate in this farce just enough to keep things calm, then get things back in order before Gibbs showed up in an hour.

Except Gibbs walked in the door just then, and from the look on his face, Tony knew any explanation he gave wouldn't be enough. He found himself trying anyway, without getting into too much detail, and winced as Gibbs slapped him upside the head with the damn cowboy hat. He certainly deserved it. He was just glad Tim was on desk duty and nobody else had heard their argument Sunday, at least not that part of it. If Tim had seen him with the yoga instructor's hands all over him and his handcuffs on what was very likely a high-priced escort, the number of things Tony would have to apologize for would have doubled at the least. Normally Tim would never doubt him — he'd seen Tony flirt too many times since they'd been together when a case required it. But normally Tony hadn't told Tim 48 hours earlier that he'd cheated on past partners, that it was a way of life in his family to marry one person and have affairs with others. He'd be able to make Tim listen eventually, he hoped, but he didn't want to test that out, especially not this week.

When he and Gibbs walked out into the hall, he couldn't even disagree when Gibbs told him he'd been distracted. But when Gibbs threatened to bench him, it was like a dash of cold water. Tony gritted his teeth, determined to make sure his father didn't screw anything else up.
He found his father in the lobby and invited him back to the Navy Yard. It wasn't difficult, and his father was quiet for the first part of the ride.

"So, Junior, do I get to meet my son-in-law?"

Tony couldn't tell what that tone meant. He was usually the best on the team at reading people, but his father was such an opportunist, he never knew what the man was thinking. "Not sure I'm even going to get home before you leave town," he said. "When are you leaving, again?" He could feel his father looking at him, but he focused on the road.

"Junior, we've hardly gotten a chance to talk." His father paused. "I do have some pressing business in New York and probably should leave this evening."

Tony nodded. "Then no, I won't be able to introduce you to him."

That seemed to squelch any further discussion, and Tony breathed an internal sigh of relief. When they got to the Navy Yard and Tim wasn't at his desk, he felt a little more weight lift of his shoulders. No Tim, no introduction, which meant he wasn't actually lying to his father. Not that he should care about that; his father had never cared about it before. But all the years of working with Tim and Gibbs had instilled in him the type of integrity he'd never seen growing up, the kind he'd thought only superheroes in movies had. Sure, Gibbs was Superman in a lot of ways, but the integrity, the core of honor that drove him came from Jack and the Corps. In Tim, it came from Sean and Eileen. Tony hadn't had that kind of role model in his parents, and he'd never joined the Marines, but he had this team. He wasn't about to let them down.

His father settled down at his desk, so Tony pulled out Tim's chair. He sent him a text and got one in return. He was glad Tim was down in the lab with Abby. Maybe they could crack this case before the prince drove one of them to kill him.

Tony was soon bored. He didn't dare mess with Tim's computer — he was sure to have some McGeeking thing running that Tony would mess up — and he had to keep his father in view.

When his father refused to let him see the screen, Tony felt a gnawing in his belly. He didn't need Gibbs' gut to know this was bad. Not just regular bad, but bad like when the Israelis got involved. The first time, Kate died. Last time, it was Michael, and almost Tony, then almost Ziva. Tony knew his father wasn't a trained assassin, but there were other forms of destruction. Death was probably the least painful of the options.

"Come on, Dad, I got a lot of work to do."

"Almost done, Junior. You'll be happy to know that, among other things, I've straightened out that mix-up with your bank account. The funds will be available."

"Oh, that's great." Tony knew that wasn't what his father was hiding from him.

"Do you have to stick your nose in everyone's business?" The irritation in his voice made Tony want to laugh, though there would be no humor in it.

"Makes me a good investigator."

As his desk phone rang, Tony reached for it, only to have his father get there first.

"DiNozzo."

Tony leaned over. "Give me that."
"It's for me."

As he listened to his father make what sounded suspiciously like arrangements with an escort service, Tony began to worry about just what his father had been doing on his computer.

When his father hung up, he challenged him. "You gave a call girl this number?"

"Junior, that was the hotel spa. I'm a little tense. I need a massage."

Before Tony could respond, the elevator dinged, and Gibbs and Ziva walked out.

"Oh, Gibbs, Ziva," said his father. "Sayif behaving?"

"He is fine." Ziva stowed her gear.

"Who's watching Prince Charming?" He hoped Dwayne hadn't gotten stuck with the self-centered egomaniac.

"He's in the air. His check ride. He cannot get in trouble for the next three hours." She sounded amused.

"Unless his instructor ejects him at 20,000 feet." Tony wouldn't be at all surprised. Sayif seemed to have a knack for irritating everybody he came into contact with.

"Well, you're busy, and I'm in the way here," his father said. "I'm going to go back to the hotel."

Tony panicked, not wanting to let his father know Gibbs had him under house arrest. Remembering Ziva's offer the previous day, Tony said the first thing he could think of. "You know what? I am going to make you an offer you can't refuse. Very Special Probationary Agent Ziva David is going to give you a personal, special tour of NCIS headquarters. Come on."

"Well, that is a lovely offer, but I'm sure Ziva must be busy." His charm was thick enough to ice skate across, but Tony knew something must be up — his father had been more than willing to spend time with Ziva before.

"Yeah, she is." Gibbs walked over. "I'll show you around."

"Boss..." Oh, this wasn't good. Gibbs and his father, alone?

"We'll start with the armory." He took Senior's coat and hat and led him away. "Back to work." But instead of working, Tony panicked.

"I'm flashing back. Boarding school. Headmaster wants to talk to my dad." He grabbed for the phone and dialed Tim's cell.

-Sarah grabbed her phone when it rang, sure it was Tim. But Josh's name showed on the Caller ID, so she hit the ignore button. She went back to her math book but had only worked through one more problem when the phone rang again. Josh again, not Tim. She punched the ignore button a little harder.

After the fifth time, she put her phone on silent. Tim would have called back by now if he had time, so they must have a hot case. She could muddle through things on her own. But as the hours stretched into the night, Sarah realized she wasn't going to get through everything she needed to review in time for the exam. She rubbed her eyes, gritty with lack of sleep. She flipped open the
phone, ignoring the 13 missed calls message, and saw the sun was coming up soon. She got up
from the chair where she'd parked herself in the lounge and headed back to her room, gathering her
shower gear quietly so as to not wake Katherine. She didn't have time to sleep before her exam, so
she'd settle for a hot shower and a decent breakfast, or at least as close to one as the dining hall
could provide.

Once in the shower, she let the hot water soak her long hair and wash away the fatigue. She still felt
like crap, but since she hadn't actually eaten much of anything yesterday, that was hardly
surprising. They'd ordered a pizza last night after polishing off the ice cream, but that was about it.
So, OK, she'd had a lot of calories, but pretty much everything she'd eaten was junk. The citrus
scent of her shower gel woke her up a little bit. She took her time, since it was rare to not have
anybody waiting for a shower. Nobody else was crazy enough to be up at dawn.

By the time she'd dressed and headed out to the dining hall, Sarah actually felt hungry. She'd say
she normally didn't in the morning, but it was more she usually got up with just enough time to run
straight to class.

At the dining hall, she went for eggs, bacon, and waffles, wanting to get a decent breakfast. Her
mom had made breakfast for dinner sometimes when her dad was home from a tour. It was always
a special kind of thing, because he was home or it was somebody's birthday. Sarah always loved
the breakfast foods — just not enough to actually get up before class to eat them. This was a nice
treat, even if it was for a rotten reason.

She thought about cracking open her math book again but decided if she didn't know it at this
point, she wasn't going to learn it in the hour before the exam. Better to eat, relax, and possibly get
to the classroom early to review. The dining hall was pretty empty at this time of morning, and
Sarah was able to just relax. She'd have to give Abby a call later in the afternoon, see if she could
help Sarah study for her bio exam, even if it meant Sarah had to head over to the Navy Yard.
Except that would mean Gibbs would see her, which means he'd probably find out what was going
on. Maybe they could convince him not to mention anything to her parents. Even with the tests
coming back OK — well, except for the ones Abby said would be back tomorrow — she still
didn't want to tell them, not until she got through exams and had a sense of how much bad news
she had to break. Her other two lit classes didn't have exams, just papers due next week, and she
wasn't worried about those. It was the evil math and science exams. Why couldn't she have gotten
some of Tim's left-brained geeky mind?

Sighing, she finished her breakfast and took her tray to the dish line, then headed for the exam.
Since it was the first class of the day, the room wasn't unlocked, so she sat on the floor outside the
door and pulled out her textbook. When the professor showed up, she jerked at his quiet voice,
smacking her head against the cinder-block wall. "Ow!"

"Are you ready for the exam, Sarah?" He opened the door and gestured for her to enter.

She stood up and grabbed her backpack, walking into the room. "Um, I guess?"

"You don't sound too certain."

She shook her head. "Math's not exactly my best subject, and I was going to get some extra help
from my brother, who's a genius, but things got a little crazy the past couple of weeks between his
work and some other stuff."

He nodded, his bald head shining under the fluorescent lights. As he carefully unpacked an
accordion file from his messenger bag, Sarah slid into a chair near the window. She tucked her bag
under her desk, leaving out just what she needed for the exam. The rest of the class filtered in, and
Sarah allowed herself to be distracted chatting with classmates while she waited for Professor Orzinski to start the exam.

As she scanned the problems, she found some she was able to solve, but more that just baffled her. She did her best and was able to eliminate some of the multiple-choice answers before guessing which of the remaining ones might be correct. Still she was pretty sure she was in danger of failing this exam as well. The breakfast she had eaten was sitting heavily in her stomach as she started to worry more and more about how badly she would do. She was beginning to regret having eaten so much, or at least having gone for the hearty breakfast instead of some cereal and fruit.

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"I'm flashing back. Boarding school. Headmaster wants to talk to my dad." Tony grabbed for the phone and dialed Tim's cell.

"Yeah, Tony."

"Where are you?"

"Autopsy."

"Emergency. Boss really needs you up here right now. Get your skinny butt on the move, pronto! Run!" When Tony hung up the phone on Tim, he was nauseous. There were too many things that could be bad, and his resolution to keep Tim far, far away from this mess had crumbled in the face of them.

"What do you want McGee to do?" Ziva looked at him, frowning.

"Use his computer magic. I need to find out what my father's been doing on this thing. 'Cause he's up to something. I can smell it."

When Tim hurried into the bullpen a minute later, out of breath from taking the stairs, he looked around.

"Gibbs isn't even here. What gives, Tony?"

"My father's been messing around on my computer, wouldn't let me see what he was up to. Can you work your McGeek magic and figure out what he was doing?"

Tim nodded. "Where is your father?"

Ziva spoke up. "Gibbs took him on a tour," she said. "He said they were starting in the armory."

"But NCIS doesn't have-" Tim broke off. "Do we need to get Abby to hide the forensic evidence after Gibbs kills him?"

Tony couldn't help laughing, though there was nothing funny about the morning. "I think he's more likely to just scare him."

Tim grinned. "That works, too."

As his husband's smile, Tony felt the band that had tightened around his chest the previous night begin to loosen. "Hey, Probie, come with me a minute."
As Tim followed him, Tony led the way to the men's room and locked the door.

Tim raised an eyebrow. "Do I even want to know?"

Tony just pulled him in for a hug. "Just needed some McHugs," he said. "Missed you."

Tim held him close, resting his head against Tony's. "Missed you too," he said. He pulled back, and Tony could see worry in his big eyes. "Are you OK?"

Tony thought about it, then shrugged. "I will be," he said. "I mean, if it turns out my father's a dirtbag, it's not like that's going to shatter my perception of him." He cupped Tim's face in his hands. "I should be asking you that. You've had a lot of shit thrown at you the last couple of days, and most of it's mine. You said your shoulder's OK — how about the rest of you?"

Tim shrugged. "Sarah called yesterday, but didn't leave a message so it couldn't have been too important. You don't sound like you're ready to jump off the nearest cliff anymore. Abby and I think we might have figured out who planted the bomb, though we need Ducky to confirm it. Ziva hasn't killed the prince for being a misogynistic SOB. All things considered, I'm doing OK."

And Tony just pulled him in for another long hug, thinking how like Tim it was to describe his well-being in terms of how everybody else was doing. He'd always thought people like that were just caricatures in movies, but Tim, Abby, and Ducky had taught him differently. Three people with almost nothing in common except curiosity, and all wanted nothing more than for their adopted family to be happy. Jimmy was like that- "Jimmy!"

Tim pulled back. "Huh?"

Tony slapped himself in the forehead. "Jimmy was looking into some stuff for me, and I never got back to him."

"He probably e-mailed it," Tim said. "It's not like you were around much to tell yesterday."

"Good point." And Tony dropped a quick kiss on Tim's lips before unlocking the door and heading back to the bullpen, McGiGenius on his heels.

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Gibbs knew Tony was probably panicking downstairs, wondering what Gibbs might do to his father. Just as he knew Tony was more worried Gibbs would get in trouble than over any consequences his biological father might suffer. Still, this was something he had to do. Gibbs opened the door to the conference room and ushered Senior inside.

"This doesn't look like an armory to me." Senior looked at Gibbs, as though he had been waiting for the agent to drop the charade.

"Sit," was all Gibbs trusted himself to say.

"When you offered to take me on the tour, I suspected you had an ulterior motive. What's on your mind?"

"Your son." It pained him to use that term, but Senior was Tony's father. Just as what he was about to do felt vaguely disloyal to Tony. Still, he needed to do it for his own conscience.

"What has Junior done now?" Senior sounded resigned, like this was just the latest in a string of similar discussions with authority figures in his son's life. It probably was. Tony was better at
acting out to get attention than anybody he'd met, and before he'd had Gibbs to headslap him, he'd probably gotten in trouble dozens of times just trying to get somebody to notice him. He'd admitted as much.

"Tony likes to hide behind the face of a clown. But he's the best young agent I've ever worked with." It was an assessment he'd only ever shared with NCIS directors before, though he would feel no shame telling it to anybody. McGee and Ziva were good, as Kate had been, but Tony was truly in a class of his own. He didn't think he'd have to spell it out for McGee or Ziva, though. They knew. As much as they kidded Tony and gave him a hard time — the boys could go all day if they felt like it — they deferred to him when they needed help.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that." Senior sounded puzzled, as though he couldn't imagine why Gibbs was talking to him if Tony wasn't in trouble.

Gibbs paused. He didn't want to say this, but he knew he had to. "When was the last time you talked to him? I mean, really — talked to him?"

"Well, we keep in touch." Senior didn't seem to know where Gibbs was going with this.

"Four years ago, your son came very close to dying from pneumonic plague. And I expected to see you. You didn't show then. Why are you here now?" Gibbs tried to shut out memories of those days, days when they didn't know if Tony would live or die, if the pneumonia would succeed where the plague failed. He thought of all the problems Tony had encountered since they returned from Somalia, all the challenges he would face in the years ahead.

"He never told me he was sick." Gibbs was glad to hear Senior sounded a bit defensive.

"Oh, so you don't keep in touch." Gibbs knew he sounded a little self-satisfied there, but he couldn't help it. He had managed to box Senior into a corner and now the old reprobate needed to find a way out.

"What's your point?"

"Tony inherited his personality from you. But I get the feeling there's a lot about your life you don't share."

"I should tell you to piss off." The older man glowered at Gibbs. "But I do know that Junior thinks the world of you. So I'll keep this civil. If this is about Junior's husband, yes, I do know about him. I wish Junior had told me about him before the wedding, but I know he thinks I'm disappointed in him for becoming a cop and disappointed in him for marrying a man."

"You're not?" Gibbs couldn't keep the question from his voice, and he didn't really try.

"You have children, Gibbs?"

Gibbs knew Senior couldn't know how complicated a question that was for him. Kelly, yes. But also Tony, Abby, and Ziva. Abby's father was dead, so he would never have to face this point with him. Ziva's father was sure to come back at some point, and Gibbs was ready to tell him off then, assuming the rest of the team didn't beat him to it. But Tony was different. That had been clear from the moment Senior showed up. As much as Tony had spoken badly of his father over the years, Gibbs still could see the little 8-year-old Tony had once been still hoping that his father would want to spend time with him, would protect him from the rest of his family. And so even though he knew he might be handing Senior the opportunity to take over the Grandpa role he'd hoped to have in the lives of Tony's kids, he couldn't not do this.
He swallowed. "Had. A daughter. But unfortunately... I didn't get the chance to know her as an adult." He kept his eyes on Senior, not giving in to his raw feelings about Kelly. "You have that opportunity to get to know Tony. Do it." They were the two hardest words he'd ever had to say.

"Are we finished?" Senior got up to leave, and Gibbs felt torn. He wanted for Tony's sake for the two men to find peace, but he also was glad it looked like Senior was going to let Gibbs keep his place in Tony's life, even if Senior didn't know he was doing that. Hell, if he did, he'd probably start talking to Tony just to shut Gibbs out. He forced his anger down and started showing Senior through the rest of that part of the building.
Chapter 22

Tuesday, March 23, 2010

Finally, with five minutes to go, Sarah finished the exam. All the questions had answers, though she knew most of them were wrong. Still she might have gotten lucky on the ones where she had to guess. As she gathered up her things and left the classroom, she mentally cursed Josh, even though she knew some of this exam was her fault for not talking to Tim weeks ago. The Twain exam, though, was all him. She thought of how he'd tried to get her to take him back yesterday morning and made a face.

"Something wrong, sweetheart?"

She looked up to see Josh standing in front of her, a worried look on his face.

"I'm not your sweetheart." She hissed the words, not wanting to attract attention.

"Sarah, I said I was sorry." He put his hand on her shoulder. "I made a mistake."

"Yeah, thinking I'd fall for your apologetic act." She started to move, but he shifted enough to block her. Not for the first time she wished she'd gotten some of the family height that Tim had.

"Josh, I'm not taking you back." Her stomach, already unsteady from her heavy breakfast and exam panic, began churning.

He looked surprised. "Sarah, I told you-"

She cut him off. "And I told you, it's over." She forced herself to hold her ground, swallowing the bile that threatened to rise. When Josh started to open his mouth, she stared at him. He closed his mouth, and she walked around him. She expected him to try and stop her, but he didn't, maybe because the hallways were starting to fill.

Sarah made it outside, though she felt like Tim did every time he got near a boat. She had hoped the fresh air would help, but realized too late it wouldn't. She dropped her bag on the steps and leaned over the railing to puke in the bushes. She heaved until she'd emptied her stomach, then rested her arms on the railing, hoping her knees would stop wobbling. Despite all the people rushing by, nobody stopped to see if she was OK. Sarah was kind of glad — she was mortified that Josh could have this much impact on her twice in two days. By the time she felt steady enough to let go of the railing, the next block of classes had started and there weren't many people walking around. She looked down at her sweatshirt and frowned at the stains on it.

A quick trip back to the dorm, and she had changed and the sweatshirt had been rinsed and was hanging on the back of her desk chair to dry. Katherine was at class, so she decided to throw her work clothes in her backpack and head to the coffee shop. Josh had back-to-back classes, including a science lab, so he wouldn't be free for a few hours, which meant the coffee shop was safe. She had to work at 2 anyway. She could study for biology there, figure out what she needed help on, then e-mail Abby and see if she had time for a study session tomorrow before Thursday's exam.

When she walked in, the coffee shop was half-empty, so she had no trouble finding a quiet chair in the corner by the window. She dropped her stuff and took her wallet up to the register, where Karen was setting up a display of new tea varieties the shop had ordered.

"Hey, Sarah," she said. "Studying before work?"
She nodded. "Did they get all the new varieties programmed into the register?"

"So they say," Karen said. She finished one row and started putting the green teas in a line. "Are you getting lunch?"

Sarah shook her head. "Not now." She paused, then admitted. "My exam this morning didn't go so well, and I'm worried about Thursday's. I'm afraid I'd be sick if I tried to eat anything."

Karen ran her finger along the row of boxes before pulling one out. "Try this," she said, handing it to Sarah. "I know you like your lattes, but this is supposed to be good for settling your stomach."

"Ginger lemongrass?" She wrinkled her nose. "Are you sure?"

Karen reached over and turned the box in her hands, pointing to the description. Sarah started reading. 

"...supports digestion, eases minor stomach upset, and provides a refreshing herbal pick-me-up." She looked up. "Well, it can't hurt."

She handed Karen back the box and went to the counter, where one of the morning people she didn't know by name was working. She ordered a large tea, deciding she didn't trust the claim on the tea's label enough to chance food. She could always come back.

The tea rang up without a hitch, and she breathed a sigh of relief. One less potential headache to deal with tonight on her shift.

She carried it back to her chair and settled in, textbook and workbook in her lap. As the tea cooled, she began sipping, pleased to find it actually did make her feel better. She kept a running list of the ideas that confused her, and by the time she needed to stop and change, she was feeling a little more confident. She pulled out her phone and e-mailed Abby to try and set up study time, then packed up her books and went to the restroom to change into slacks and a collared shirt. Then she stopped at the register to buy a box of the tea, figuring it would come in handy this week.

After, Sarah stowed her bag in the back and clocked in. She was listed on the schedule to be barista for the evening, and she knew with midterms in full swing, it would be a busy shift. Sure enough, within minutes she was making espresso as fast as the machine could press it and steaming jug after jug of milk. She didn't have time to stop and catch her breath until late afternoon. When she did, she wished she hadn't. Josh was just walking into the shop. Sarah felt her stomach begin to churn again and reached for one of the tea bags she'd stuck in her pants pocket before her shift. At the time she'd scolded herself for over-reacting, but now she was glad she had. She quickly popped it into a cup and filled it most of the way with hot water from the dispenser. She added some cold water from the tap so it was drinkable and quickly swallowed some. It was weak — she'd barely given it any time to steep — but she felt it helping. As she mentally prepared to make Josh's drink, she was glad her stomach was only a little queasy. Of course, who knew how long Josh would stick around.

When the cashier called the order over, Sarah focused on the coffee and the milk, determined to keep a low profile. That hope was ruined as soon as she put the drink on the pickup counter.

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As Tony was checking his e-mail for information from Jimmy, Tim's cell rang. He listened to the excited babbling on the other end before agreeing to meet Abby downstairs.

"Gotta go — Abs has something. We might have cracked this case," he said.

Tony waved him away. "Go. Let's end this damned case before His Royal Smugness lands."
Tim snorted as he walked out, and he could hear Ziva listing all the reasons that was desirable as he headed to the elevator. Between Senior and the prince, this case could not end soon enough. The fact he might be able to crack it while still on desk duty just made him even more excited.

He walked into the lab, still grinning at the thought. "Abby!"

She turned to face him. "You were right! The trace evidence that Ducky swabbed from Walid's hands, it was unexploded particles of nitromethane." She grinned and handed him the results sheet.

"The same explosive in the bomb. Walid planted the bomb under Sayif's car." He grinned back. NCIS 1, Dirtbags 0." After the stress of the past three days, it felt good to just enjoy the natural high from cracking a case, especially since he hadn't left the Navy Yard to do it. This was the type of thing Vance would want from the cyber liaison agents — the skills to handle GPS and other technology, plus the investigative skills to make the logical deductions like testing for residue. Tim let everything else recede to the background and high-fived Abby.

"Nice work!" Her big smile worked the same magic it always did, assuring him everything would be fine.

"You, too!"

"So, Walid unintentionally blew himself up when the vibrations from the jet triggered the explosion."

Tim nodded. "And the victim was his own killer."

"Hinky." And that one word brought him back to reality.

"Speaking of hinky, Gibbs volunteered to give Senior a tour of NCIS." Tim made a face.

"Gibbs? Did he take his SIG?" Abby's eyes widened, her eyebrows showing all the surprise Tim had felt when Tony told him the news.

Tim shook his head. "No, but he said they were going to start in the armory."

Abby frowned. "OK, Gibbs doesn't know enough forensics to kill him without leaving a trace. He really should have had me give the tour."

Tim grinned. Abby always knew the right thing to say. "I've got to tell Ziva and Dwayne about this, get them out to the airfield to talk to the prince when he lands. Then Tony wants me to find out what his father was doing on his computer."

Abby nodded. "What can Jimmy and I do to help?"

"Jimmy was already doing something for Tony," Tim said. "Can you see if you can get a hold of Sarah? We've been playing phone tag since yesterday."

"Done," Abby said. "She e-mailed me earlier and asked if I had time tomorrow to help her study for her bio midterm Thursday. She sounded a little freaked out about it when I called to confirm. Want me to have her come here? Then you guys can see her."

Tim nodded. "Math and science aren't her strong points, so I'm not surprised she's worried. She always focuses on studying when things go wrong anyway — it's what she did when she was suspected of murder, remember. I'm glad she asked you for help, though."
Abby nodded. "I told her if we didn't have a case, Jimmy might be able to help, too. We'll keep an eye on her."

Tim hugged her. "Thanks, Abs." He pulled away and sighed. "OK, off to see what Senior's up to. I hope it's nothing major; I don't want to have to tell Tony."

Abby just pulled him in for another hug. "He'll understand, Tim."

But as Tim headed upstairs, he still couldn't help but worry. When he got there, Tony was sitting at his desk, pouring over the e-mail from Jimmy. Ziva and Dwayne were at her desk working through intel Ziva had gathered from her Interpol contacts.

"Anything helpful?" Tim asked as he leaned over Tony's shoulder.

Tony shook his head. "Too little information. The list is about three pages, and Jimmy said that wasn't even counting rare possibilities."

Tim wanted to ask what Tony had asked Jimmy to research for him, but before he could speak, Gibbs walked in.

"Boss?" Tony looked around, and Tim wondered where Senior had gotten to.

"Abby's finishing the tour," Gibbs said.

"She should take him to see Agent Grady," Tim said, remembering his run-in with the polygraph operator several months earlier.

Tony perked up and started typing. A few seconds later, the tell-tale ding of an e-mail came from his computer.

"Tony, I was kidding," Tim said.

"I'm not," Tony said. "I think it's a great idea. She can use her powers for good for once."

"Hey, it's not like she knew we were dating then," Tim said. He was about to say more, but he caught Gibbs glaring at him. "Right. Sorry, Boss."

"McGee, tell me you have more for me than clueless polygraph operators."

Tim nodded and started filling them all in on what he'd found.

"What was Walid's motive for planting the bomb?" Ziva looked puzzled.

"Well, as Sayif's aide, he had plenty of opportunities to kill the prince while they were alone," Dwayne said. The young agent frowned.

"Maybe he was a suicide bomber and supposed to be in the car with Sayif. Would look like a terrorist act," Ziva said.

"Okay," Gibbs said. "We've been treating Walid like the victim. Let's start looking at him as the murderer. Background him."

Tim nodded and headed for his computer. As he did, he said, "Well, Sayif's the one that spent the most time with him and was the targeted victim."

"He lands in 45 minutes." Ziva looked at Dwayne.
"Go," Gibbs said, pointing at the two younger agents. "Both of you, go talk to him."

As Gibbs settled in behind his desk, Tim started running a search on Walid, then motioned for Tony to move so he could start working on backtracking Senior's footsteps.

"DiNozzo, with me." Gibbs stood and headed for the elevator. Tony followed, and Tim had a feeling the elevator was going to be out of commission for a while.

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Sarah slid Josh's drink across the counter and called it out, then turned back to the espresso maker hoping he wouldn't bother her. But she should have known better.

"Sarah, my favorite barista," he said.

She could practically hear the smarmy smile on his face as she focused on cleaning the milk steamer. It had been a busy shift so far, but now that she wanted a dozen orders to come in and give her a diversion, there was a complete lull. She reached for her tea and sipped. It was still borderline scalding, but it did make her feel a bit better. Another sip, then she just inhaled the steam coming from the small opening in the lid. The spicy, moist air filled her nose and mouth, allowing her to relax just a bit.

"Sarah."

She looked over, finally. "Go away, Josh. You're not getting a second chance. And if you keep bothering me, I'll talk to Tim. You remember, the federal agent? And the rest of the team. You know Ziva used to be Mossad, right? And Gibbs, the team leader? The one you haven't met? He's a former sniper. Four federal agents, three former Marines? And my dad, the Navy commander? Give it up. Because if I have to tell them you're bothering me, it will not be pretty." She could feel her knees quiver, but pressed them into the cabinet below the counter and hoped Josh wouldn't notice.

He stared at her for a minute. "Fine," he said. "It's your loss, anyway. You realize you're turning down a Pritchard? In a year, I'll make more than all your federal agent friends put together."

Now Sarah was glad she had never revealed Tim's other career. If Josh feeling smug was what it took to get him to shut up, she would take it. "I realize exactly what I'm turning down," she said. "Now go drink your coffee. Study... whatever. Just leave me alone from now on."

As Josh walked away, she braced her hands on the counter and leaned over, letting her knees wobble. She didn't want him to notice anything was wrong, so she forced herself to take long, slow breaths even though she felt as limp as warm lettuce. She knew it was just the adrenaline rush leaving, but she still fought it.

"Sarah?" Chris, the night manager, came over. "Are you OK?" He kept his voice low.

She nodded. "Yeah, I will be. Just a run-in with a recent ex- who's not happy I walked out when I discovered he was cheating. He won't be bothering me again." She fought to stay steady on her feet.

"Go in the back, take your 15," he said. "I'll handle this."

She nodded and reached for her tea, but she could feel her hand shaking as she picked it up.

"I've got it," Chris said. "Go on, I'll bring it back in a minute, so he doesn't notice."
She smiled and made herself walk into the back room, where she promptly dropped into the chair by the shift manager's desk. She leaned forward, her head dropping between her knees as she waited for her body to balance itself.

Chris walked in a minute later, dropping down on his heels to look at her. "Here, eat this." He handed her some chocolate-covered raisins.

She nodded and took a handful, chasing them down with the tea. Ginger and chocolate was an odd combination, not to mention the lemon and raisins, but the sugar helped. Sarah sat back up. "Thanks," she said. "I'm sorry about this."

Chris pushed back up, wincing as his knees cracked.

Sarah couldn't help but giggle. "That's what Tony's sounded like before Abby dragged him to yoga."

"Your brother-in-law?" Chris asked as he stood and stretched.

Sarah nodded. "He's about your age, maybe a couple of years younger. Abby, too, but she looks like she's closer to my brother's age." She sipped more tea, enjoying the flavor. "You should go back out there," she said. "I've already caused enough of a problem today."

He shook his head. "Sarah, I've been working here since we opened the store 10 years ago. This isn't the first time something like this has happened, and it won't be the last. If it keeps up, file a report with the police. I'll tell them what I saw as well."

She smiled. "Thanks, but I've got lots of law enforcement in my family, and Josh knows that. I don't think he'll be bothering me again."

At least, she hoped not.

Tim settled in at Tony's computer, tracing all Senior's activities. When he realized Tony's father had been accessing his bank records, Tim figured it had something to do with Tony's trust fund. But the deeper he looked, the odder things became. Senior hadn't gone near the trust fund account, but he had accessed dozens of his own.

The number wasn't too surprising. After he'd gotten his Gemcity money, Tim's own financial advisor had recommended he split it up into several accounts so it wouldn't exceed the FDIC insurance limits, at least for the money he hadn't invested. He hadn't needed to do that with the Deep Six money — he'd spent some and invested the rest. With Rock Hollow, he'd learned from his crashed hedge fund and gone for more conservative investments and banked a lot of it. It was more money than he'd use, especially since his NCIS salary was enough to be comfortable, so he didn't see the point of investing aggressively to try to double or triple his money.

What surprised Tim was the state of the accounts. Most were empty or nearly empty. He frowned and started digging deeper, looking for property records and corporate filings. With each new record, he had another piece to add to what was looking like a particularly damning puzzle. He was beginning to think they all had been wrong — Senior wasn't here because of either Josh or the case. He was here because he thought Tony would discover that his father was broke, or next to it. Foreclosures, liens, frozen credit cards — all signs of a man with no money.

Tim kept digging, wanting to give Tony a complete report. He couldn't decide if this was good news or not. Knowing Senior wasn't trying to assassinate the prince was good, but they'd pretty
much determined that yesterday. Knowing he probably had no idea about Josh was also good — if those two messes got tangled up together, no telling what would happen.

When he'd exhausted every avenue he could think of to investigate Senior, Tim turned to Tony's trust fund. He'd been putting that off, afraid he would find that Senior had used his status as a trustee to raid it. He wasn't worried about the money itself — with his new book coming out, plus the money he had stashed from *Rock Hollow*, they could buy a house and still have money left to cover adoption fees next year. But he worried that on top of everything else, the emotional fallout would push Tony over the edge.

As he hacked his way into the bank records, Tim found himself tapping his crossed fingers on the desktop as he waited to get in. He glanced down and let out a humorless laugh. The last time he'd done that, he was waiting for Metro to arrest him for killing one of their best undercover cops.

Tony had been there for him the night before, had distracted him, and had told a few stories about his rookie days to make Tim feel better. But he hadn't stayed all night, hadn't been there as Tim tossed and turned in a vain attempt to fall sleep before giving up and coming into the office to try to save himself from jail.

Tim felt like their places were reversed. He was there for Tony when he could be, but he hadn't been there for him at the hotel when they'd found his father sending the e-mail. He wasn't the one Gibbs sent out with Tony to get his head on straight afterward. Tim knew on some level that Ziva was right, they didn't have to go through this alone. The rest of the team was there for them, even Dwayne who seemed to be tiptoeing around, uncertain of the undercurrents nobody had taken the time to explain. Still, he wanted to be the one there for Tony, the one to help him through this.

As he opened the account records, Tim just stopped and stared. The account held almost half a million dollars, even more than Tony had expected. He pulled up the transaction history, looking for discrepancies. The recent mob case was too fresh in his mind not to think of money laundering — something almost routine when they crossed paths with Fornell on a RICO case. But as far as he could tell, it was just a case of a large sum of money invested in fairly safe vehicles growing from compounded interest. The main trustee, a banker, appeared to have moved most of the money into bonds and other conservative investments a year or so before the economy ran off a cliff. He must have been one of the few to realize the crash was inevitable.

Tim made notes on everything he needed to tell Tony and pulled out of the system, careful to leave no footprints. Still, his thoughts of Fornell and RICO had him considering the possibility Senior could be mixed up in something bad. He ran the name through the databases, and while he waited for the results, called Abby.

"Abby's Labby!"

"Abs, I need a favor."

"Anything, Timmy. How can I help my favorite geek?"

He explained what he wanted. "Can you help?"

"Sure. We got them when we brought him in. But you can run this on your computer."

"And if I do and somebody sees, I'm going to have a lot of explaining to do," he said. "Nobody's going to go down there except Gibbs or Jimmy."

"I'll let you know what I find."
As Abby hung up, Tim let out a sigh of relief. He figured it was a long shot, but better to check and know than to have another surprise crop up.

Gibbs waited until he and Tony were outside the building before speaking. "You told him about Tim?"

Tony turned to look at him, sunglasses hiding his eyes. "He told you that?"

"Told me he knew you were married to a man, that you hadn't said anything before the wedding because you thought he'd be disappointed in you." Gibbs was just afraid Tony was going to be disappointed in him when he heard what Gibbs had done.

"I didn't tell him I thought he'd be disappointed," Tony said. "That's what I said about his opinion of me as a cop. He must have figured the same applied to Tim."

"But you did tell him about the wedding."

Tony nodded. "Last night. I didn't say it was Tim, but since he saw the ring on my finger, he might notice Tim's and put two and two together. I just corrected him when he asked if he was going to get to meet my wife."

"He said he wished he'd known before the wedding," Gibbs said, keeping his tone even.

"What exactly did you two talk about?" Tony took his sunglasses off, and Gibbs could see his eyes were shuttered, no sign of his feelings was visible.

Gibbs picked his words carefully. "I wanted to know what he was doing here now. Man didn't even show when you had the plague."

"I didn't tell him," Tony said.

"Just like you didn't tell him you were getting married?"

Tony nodded. "If he doesn't know, I can't expect him to come." His bleak tone said better than any words that even a headslap, Gibbs' usual form of rough affection, wouldn't be welcomed now.

Gibbs just nodded, one of his suspicions confirmed. "And if he did know, maybe he would come."

"Gibbs, what did you do?"

Gibbs sighed. "I told him about Kelly."

Tony stopped dead. Slowly, he turned to face Gibbs. "You don't tell anyone about Kelly, or Shannon. Why tell my bastard of a father?"

"I needed him to know what he's missing." Gibbs swallowed. "Tony, you know I think of you like a son. But I also know I'm not your father. Your dad, yes." He took a deep breath. "My dad and I didn't talk for a long time, and looking back, I regret it. I know Jack does, too. I don't want your father to hurt you, and I don't want you to feel like you have to do anything you don't want to." He paused. "I've got the best son in the world, though Sean might disagree." He smiled. "I don't want to let him near you, don't want to lose being part of your family. But I can tell part of you still wants your dad. I had to let him know that."

Tony looked at him for long minutes, then turned away.
"Tony?"

"Go on, get your coffee," he said. "I'm headed back to the Yard."

And as he watched Tony walk away, Gibbs wondered if he'd just made one of the biggest mistakes of his life.
Chapter 23

Tuesday, March 23, 2010

Tim was still trying to figure out how to tell Tony the truth about his father's finances when his husband returned to the squad room without Gibbs. He got off the elevator, but instead of coming over to his desk where Tim sat, he stood in front of the window looking out over the Potomac.

Tim could see tension radiating from his shoulders, but didn't know what to do. A second men's room conversation in the same day probably wasn't a good idea, but he was really worried.

Before he could decide, Jimmy walked into the bullpen from the other direction. He stopped in front of Tony's desk and tipped his head toward Tony. Tim pointed in the other direction and then followed Jimmy past Dwayne's desk and out of sight around the back of the stairs.

"What's going on?" Jimmy's voice was quiet, but insistent.

Tim shook his head. "Gibbs gave Senior a tour, Gibbs passed him off to Abby, Gibbs came back and took Tony out with him, Tony came back alone."

Jimmy's eyes widened. "Wait, Abby's alone with Tony's... No, that can wait. What do you mean Tony came back alone?"

"Do you see Gibbs anywhere around?" Tim knew he sounded cranky, but he couldn't help it. He'd had enough drama in the past three days to last three years. Was a quiet day really too much to ask for?

"No, but... What were you doing at Tony's desk?"

Tim sighed. Maybe he could use Jimmy as a dry run, figure out how to tell what he'd learned to somebody. "Senior was using Tony's computer and wouldn't let him see. Tony asked me to dig into it, and I did." Now for the tough part. "Tony's father is broke."

Jimmy's stunned expression made him laugh, just a bit. "Yeah, I know. An adjective I never thought I'd use to describe him. And now I have to figure out how to tell Tony, except there's obviously something else wrong, and I don't know what it is."

Jimmy frowned. "Man, Tony never does things the easy way, does he?"

"You're just figuring that out? The plague, the Jeanne debacle, falling off a parking garage — none of those were a clue?"

"Hey, don't take it out on me." Jimmy held out his hands.

"Sorry, Jimmy. I'm just..."

"Yeah, I know." He nodded. "Look, let's go back. Maybe I can get him talking, find something out. You deserve somebody else to catch at least a little of the crap for a while."

"Are you sure?" Tim frowned. "You've been doing a lot of that the past three days."

"I'd rather do that than imagine what Abby's having to do to distract Tony's father." Jimmy's face was grim. "She and Ziva planned to flirt with him to distract him." He started to turn away.
Tim reached out and grabbed Jimmy's arm, turning him back. "Jimmy, you know Abby wouldn't do anything but flirt, right? She won't mean anything by it, just like Tony never does when he's trying to get information out of a suspect by flirting."

Jimmy nodded. "I know. I just..."

"Spit it out, Jimmy." Tim stared at him, his own version of the Gibbs glare.

"Abby's... I'm... It's not..." Jimmy huffed out a breath. "Look, it's complicated."

"Because none of us are able to do anything the simple way, apparently." Now it was Tim's turn to sigh. "Look, let's go figure out what's wrong with Tony so I can tell him this before either Gibbs or Senior show up. But we're talking after that."


As Tim followed his friend back into the bullpen, he wondered what else could go wrong this week.

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Abby had to admit meeting Tony's father explained a lot about Tony. She could see where his charm came from. And if half of what she'd picked up over the years was correct, he'd probably developed it trying to win his father's attention. No wonder he could win over everybody from a hard-ass Leroy Jethro Gibbs who wanted nothing more than to process his crime scene without interference from the local LEOs in Baltimore to a quiet, but snarky, McGee who just wanted Tony to stop treating him like the rookie. Even Vance had eventually succumbed, admitting that Tony was about the only person who could have cracked Eli David in interrogation.

Still, she worried that Senior's charm could cause more problems for Tony. None of the team was taken in — they were all too familiar with Tony to fall for the act and had too little respect for Senior after hearing all the stories and comments from Tony over the years.

But nobody had figured out what had brought Senior to Washington yet, and that worried Abby. As they entered the lab, she decided to take the direct approach.

"So, Tony." She managed to use the name she would never think of as Senior's. "What brings you to Washington?"

"Oh, business, my dear," he said, smiling. "Nothing a scientist like yourself would enjoy hearing about." He pointed to Major Mass Spec. "Now, what does that machine do?"

"Major Mass Spec is the king of the lab," she said, going into her usual spiel about the spectrometer's capabilities. "He's one of the best tools we have to help solve cases."

"I'm sure the skill is as much in the hands of the operator as in the machine." He took her arm. "If somebody not as bright as you was handling things, I doubt your Major Mass Spec would work half as well."

"It does take skill," Abby said. Before she could say anything else, her AFIS computer beeped. She managed not to jump, remembering what Timmy had asked her to run before.

"Does that need attention?" Senior asked.
"Oh, no, it's a result on a cold case," she said. Still, she escorted him over to the big plasma. "Now, stand here for a minute, and I'll bring something up." She walked over to the station in the middle of the lab. She sent the ballistics details on a cold case Jarvis’ team was working to the plasma, while she checked the AFIS results on Senior’s fingerprints on the other computer at her station.

"Now, the bullet on the left is from a 10-year-old cold case," she said. "It's actually the last case Gibbs' team caught before Tony joined the agency. The one on the right is from a different case four years ago that the Norfolk team worked." As she went on to show how the two matched, she was scanning the AFIS results. No warrants out for Senior from any of the databases, including Interpol. There were a couple of European countries that had flagged him as a possible con artist, but the details sounded more like sketchy business deals than true cons.

She finished the highly technical explanation even as she internally sighed in relief. She was glad she wouldn’t have to tell Tony his father was a crook, at least not the lawbreaking kind. He still seemed more crooked than straight.

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Tony was still standing at the window when Jimmy and Tim walked back into the bullpen. Tim sat down at his own desk as Jimmy approached Tony. He couldn't hear what Jimmy said, but they both walked over to join Tim, standing in front of the plasma between the desks.

"OK, McHacker, what did you find?" Tony kept his tone light, but Tim could see the creases in his forehead.

He decided the Band-Aid approach was called for. "Your dad's broke. Banks accounts overdrawn or down to a few dollars, properties foreclosed upon, accounts frozen."

Tony visibly drooped. "My trust fund?"

Tim shook his head. "He didn't touch it, and the trustees pulled out of the market before it crashed, put most of it in conservative investments. You've got about twice what you said the maximum might be."

That brought a little more life to Tony’s features. "Really?"

Tim nodded. "Looks like he was just using your computer to shuffle things around, keep the smoke and mirrors going a while longer."

Tony nodded. "I can't believe he's broke."

"I'm sorry, Tony."

"No, nothing to be sorry for." He stepped closer and dropped a hand to Tim's shoulder. "I'm just trying to get used to it. I mean, this is something that never occurred to me."

Tim smiled and nodded. "Maybe that's why he came. He found out you'd been talking to the bank and figured he should tell you before somebody else did."

Tony shrugged. "I doubt it," he said. "Like he said last night, he doesn't like to advertise his failures." His smile didn't reach his eyes, and Tim rested his own hand on top of Tony's, which was still on his shoulder.
"So what did Gibbs have to tell you?" Jimmy asked.

Tony pulled his hand away and rubbed it over his face. "He... Sorry, Jimmy, but I'm still trying to wrap my mind around it. He talked to my father, trying to get him to be, well, a dad. I think I need to process it more before I can make any sense of it."

Jimmy bit his lower lip. "Look, you guys need to talk. I'm going back downstairs." But he didn't leave, and Tim waited to see what was delaying him. Finally, Jimmy said, "Tony, if you ever want to talk to somebody, I mean somebody that's not one of us, I can give you a number. He's good with parent issues."

Tim wanted to smile, but knew Jimmy would take it the wrong way. It sounded like Jimmy really did have the best gauge of what might help Tony, and Tony might actually accept it from him in a way he wouldn't from anybody else. Tim knew this was one area where he really was handicapped — he couldn't imagine not having a good relationship with his parents, even though he knew he was about the only one on the team who could say that. He really needed to tell his parents that one of these days.

Tony finally spoke. "Thanks, Jimmy. Can you e-mail it to me?"

Jimmy nodded and headed out.

Once he left, Tim looked around. Satisfied nobody was in earshot, he asked the question that had been on his mind since he found out about Senior. "So how is he paying for his hotel room?"

Tony shook his head. "I don't know, but I know that's how I'm going to bust him."

"It ends here, Tim," Tony said. "I've had enough of the charades. I'll make sure I'm there when he checks out, see him get busted."

Tim raised an eyebrow. "You're going to call him on it?"

"OK." Tim rubbed his thumb over his own ring. "If you need anything, you'll call?"

Tony nodded. "And if I'm going to be late, I'll call. Not making you McWorry any more this week."

Gibbs walked into the squad room to see Tony and Tim at Tim's desk. Tony's stance was relaxed, and the two men seemed at ease, which reduced his worry a bit.

"Hey, Boss," Tim said.

Gibbs brought over the coffee, putting all three cups down before taking his own back.
"Thanks, Boss." Tony got his and went back to his desk.

"Heard from Dwayne or Ziva yet?" Gibbs asked, looking at Tim.

The junior agent shook his head.

Gibbs stifled a curse. "State's coming online in MTAC in five, and I want to tell them more than just who the bomber is."

"Sorry, Boss." Tim frowned. "I've had searches running on Walid, but since he's part of the embassy staff, a lot of his files are pretty cryptic."

Gibbs started getting details from Tim, and after reading the fifth vaguely worded assignment in the files, was forced to agree. The lack of comment from Tony worried him.

"Hey, DiNozzo, you with us?"

"Yeah, Boss."

But before Gibbs could bring Tony back on task, Abby and Senior walked into the bullpen.

"Whoever hires the women around here deserves a bonus," Senior said. "They're not only beautiful, but they're bright."

"Oh, stop it." Abby's playful tone brought a smile to McGee's face, so Gibbs knew this had to be an act.

"This the end of the tour?" Senior looked around.

"I think I've showed him everything." Abby looked to Gibbs, who was trying to think of something else to occupy Senior since he needed Tony in MTAC.

"Well, not everything." Senior's tone was so smarmy, Gibbs was glad Jimmy was nowhere in sight. He wasn't sure the ME's assistant had that much self-control. Even Gibbs was fighting his urge to wipe the smirk off Senior's face.

"Dad!" Tony sounded scandalized, a tone Gibbs didn't think Tony knew how to do. Usually he was the one provoking that reaction. "Agent Grady is waiting for you in Polygraph. She would like to give you a demonstration."

"Oh, no one's wiring me up. But I would like to ask Abby a few more questions."

"Well, come on, then." Abby led him away.

Gibbs breathed a sigh of relief before turning to Tony. "DiNozzo, get away from that computer. We've got to brief State."

His normally chatty senior field agent didn't say a word until they were sitting in MTAC, waiting as State kept them on hold because "something came up."

Finally, Tony spoke. "Have to break one of your rules, boss. Number six: 'Never say you're sorry.' I let things get out of control in the hotel room."

That wasn't where he figured Tony would start, but OK. "Yeah. It's covered. Rule 18."

"Oh, yeah. 'It's better to seek forgiveness than ask permission.' Am I forgiven?"
“No.” He wanted to point out Tony really needed Tim’s forgiveness for his antics, but the two men seemed to be back on better footing, so maybe they’d dealt with it. “You've been distracted by your father.”

“It's that obvious?”

When Gibbs just looked at him, Tony sighed. “He's not the man I thought he was.”

There were so many possible comments there, Gibbs didn’t know where to start. He decided on the simplest. “I don't know my father.”

“No, Boss, my father's always been a mystery to me. Just a wealthy one.” Tony paused and Gibbs wondered what he meant. “It turns out he's broke. He has been for years. His bank accounts are overdrawn, credit cards are frozen, property's foreclosed. The guy's tapped out.”

Gibbs couldn’t help but be surprised. “How'd you find that out?”

“McGee got me into his records.”

Gibbs should have guessed. Was there anything McGee couldn’t crack? He tuned back in as Tony continued.

“But it turns out Senior's been living high on the low for quite some time. I wonder if he was ever as rich as he appeared. I think the reason he came to town to see me was to confess the charade. But when he figured out that Prince Omar was coming to town, I think he...” Tony paused. “He saw the chance for one last score. His whole life's one big con.”

This wasn’t the time to point out that Tony had inherited those skills from his father, except that he used them for good, to go undercover and to investigate. Sometimes for protection, to keep people from getting too close. He settled for the practical question. “What are you going to do about it?”

“End the game.” No hesitation. After a couple of days when his senior agent seemed more like a probie, Tony was back on his game.

“When?”

“Time to do it's when he checks out of the hotel.” Tony stared straight ahead. “He's staying in a $1,000-a-night suite. He can't afford it. He's running up a huge tab. I'll get him when he tries to pay the bill.”

But before Gibbs could say anything, State came online, and they had to refocus on the case. Between the information from State and what Sayif told Dwayne and Ziva, the last puzzle pieces were simple to assemble. Once they’d talked to Prince Omar at the hotel, Gibbs told Tony to take the rest of the day off.

“I’ll catch a ride back with one of the agents we had on the detail,” he said. “Keep the car, deal with your dad. Take the rest of the day. I’ll tell McGee.”

“You sure, Boss?”

Gibbs just nodded. As he left the hotel, he hoped Tony would make the right choice when it came time to confront his father.
That evening, Sean was looking through the bookshelves for a naval history book he'd been meaning to read when the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it." As he stood, he could hear Eileen upstairs and knew she'd heard him.

He opened the door to find Tim standing there, his shoulders slumped and face exhausted.

"Tim?" He motioned his son in and wondered where Tony was. A quick glance outside as he shut the door showed Gibbs' car was in the driveway, so Tony couldn't be out on a case, and if something bad had happened, they would all be at Bethesda.

He turned to face Tim, who had slumped down on the sofa, he leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. Sean took the chair opposite so he could watch Tim's face. One advantage when dealing with Tim was that he couldn't lie, not without it being obvious. Sarah was another story. She could spin a tale if she wanted to, and had often tried in an effort to keep herself out of trouble. But Tim's face was an open book.

"What's wrong?" Sean wondered if Tim was going to make him drag things out, but his son's next words shattered that thought.

"Tony's father left town this afternoon." Tim rubbed the back of his neck and dropped back against the sofa, sinking into it. "He was a suspect in the last case, and I had to be the one to tell Tony that his father's broke. Tony was going to catch him in the lie this afternoon when he went to check out of the hotel, and I haven't heard from him since then."

Sean tried to assimilate that information with what he knew about Tony's father, but it wasn't much. Just that Tony's family caused him nightmares and Tony considered Gibbs his dad. "Tim, why aren't you talking to Tony about this? Did you try calling him?"

Tim shook his head.

"Why not?"

Tim was silent for long minutes, his gaze directed at the floor, and Sean just waited. He saw Eileen step into the front hall and shook his head. She stepped back, but he didn't hear her head back upstairs, so she must have decided to listen from the steps.

Finally Tim lifted his head, his eyes haunted. "We... We had a fight Sunday." He paused. "Josh is from the area where Tony grew up, knows his family. Tony dated one of Josh's stepsisters when he was in high school and she was in college. It stirred up a lot of old stuff with his family, and he went off. It ticked me off that he was beating himself up and I just reacted, and before I knew it, I had stormed off to write and he had slammed out to go for a walk." Tim squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them. "It sounds really dumb when I explain it." He sighed.

"You aren't the first couple to fight over something that sounds dumb to others," Sean said. "A couple of the fights your mother and I've had through the years started over something really dumb that just snowballed out of control."

"Did you ever say something you really didn't mean, something that hurt Mom?"

Sean nodded, thinking back. "A few times. You know Mom, she's got the same type of temper as Sarah."
Tim nodded, cracking a smile. "That one time I fell asleep in school because I'd been staying up reading MAD Magazine under the covers with a flashlight, I really wished you were at home then, not at sea. She yelled at me, then burned the magazines. But she was fine the next day."

Sean nodded. "She doesn't have the red hair, but she definitely has the Irish temper. I'm the opposite. I don't get mad all that much."

"No, but when you do, it's scarier then when Gibbs gets mad," Tim said. "That was the one thing I never wanted to do as a kid, do something to make you mad."

Sean nodded. "You didn't often, either of you. But when your mother and I first got married, there were a few times where she would do something to set me off, and I would get really mad and say things I didn't mean. She wasn't used to that, and it hurt her a lot more than her saying the same thing to me would have."

"Because you knew she was just blowing off steam, but she realized she'd done something, even if she didn't know what?" Tim nodded slowly. "How did you fix it?"

Sean stifled his grin. Tim wouldn't understand now why he was amused; only experience could teach him what Sean was about to explain.

"It's not a question of fixing it," he said. "There are some things that will always be there. It's like when I'm helping Gibbs on his projects. If his chisel slips and gouges a big mark in the wood, there's only so much you can do to sand it down. There will probably always be that faint reminder of the slip." He thought back to some of those long-ago arguments. "Even though it's been 30 years and your mother and I made it through every one of those fights with our marriage stronger than it was going in, I could tell you every major fight we've had and she could, too. We didn't ever make it back to where we were before the fight, not with any of them. But most of the time, whatever the fight brought out was something we needed to work on anyway. The fight just forced us face it." He smiled. "Once we'd burned off enough steam to actually talk, that is."

Tim nodded. "I was fine once I'd burned off some anger and frustration with my typewriter, but Tony was still beating himself up." He sighed. "I thought we had started to work through it Monday morning, but we didn't have much time before work. And then we hadn't been at work half a day before his father showed up and landed right in the middle of our case. Tony even pulled a gun on him, thinking he was an assassin."

Sean wasn't sure what to say to that.

"Yeah, I know, Dad. Pretty crazy." Tim sat up straight. "He wasn't involved in the case. Just a con man looking for an opportunity. If there hadn't been all this other crap going on, it would have been OK."

"But there was."

Tim nodded. "And I'm worried that I haven't heard from him. He used to run. NCIS is the first place he's stayed more than two years. I'm the first person he's dated, except for one disastrous undercover op, for more than a few months. I'm afraid he's acting, not thinking, and he's going to run when things don't go well with his father."

Sean moved over to the sofa, putting a hand on Tim's shoulder. "You're that sure things are going to go badly?"

Tim nodded. "They've never gone well before, and Tony's not in a good place this week anyway."
Why would things actually go well with his father just because I want them to?"

Sean thought about that one for a minute. He thought Tim was wrong — couldn't see Tony running away from everything he had — but he knew his logical son would need a reason, not just a gut feeling. "So if things go badly, you really think Tony will run?"

"He always has before."

Sean nodded. "Before he dedicated over a decade in this job? Before he got married? Before he started planning a family?"

Tim just looked at him, and slowly the confusion and hurt on his face begin to clear. "Tony's not going to run because he'd actually be leaving people behind this time. Every other time, it's been him against the world." Sean could see the tension leave his shoulders. "You really think he won't run?"

Sean nodded. "I'd bet on it. I've seen the way he looks at you, Tim. Seen the way he acts around Gibbs, you, and the team. I know from what I've picked up in comments that you guys went halfway around the world to rescue Ziva. Do you really think he's going to run from that?"

Tim shook his head. "Why didn't I figure that out?"

Sean smiled. "Tony's not a code, Tim."

Tim raised an eyebrow. "Oh, he is. Smiles, comments, they all mean things with him. Gibbs hides his stuff by not saying a word; Tony just says so much you lose sight of the original question."

"Not what I meant, Tim." Sean crossed his arms and looked at his son.

"Yeah, I know." Tim sighed. "Thanks, Dad." He stood up. "I'm going to head home and see if he's there."

Sean stood too, mindful that Eileen was probably still in the front hall. "Before you go, Mom made cookies earlier. Why don't we pack some up for you boys?"

Tim smiled. "You know I'm not going to turn down some of Mom's cookies."

Eileen heard the door and started downstairs. Tim's voice floated up, but she didn't hear Tony's. It wasn't as though the boys were joined at the hip, but it was odd enough for Tim to come by on a weeknight and odder still for him to come without Tony.

She headed downstairs and heard a car outside. Glancing through the oval glass in the doorway, she saw Tony's car pull up next door and her son-in-law walk into Gibbs' house. It didn't bode well that both boys needed dad talks on the same night.

She started to enter the living room, but Sean's head shake stopped her. Still, she was curious about what was going on, so she perched on the stairs and listened. Neither Sean nor Tim was overly loud, but she heard enough to get the gist of what was going on. Eileen nodded, realizing why Tony was next door. The next question was how to get the two boys talking again.

Eileen didn't like to think of herself as meddling in her kids' lives — Tim and Sarah were adults,
She thought for a second, then reached into the pocket of her jeans for her cell phone. Sean had showed Gibbs the other day how to set the default text size for his text messages to something large enough he could read without his glasses. Really, Tim or Abby should have done it a long time ago. She could only guess that since neither needed glasses, they didn't realize it was an option.

She sent a text to Gibbs: “Tim’s here. I'll text before he heads out. They need to talk.”

She didn't get a response, but she didn't really expect to. Just because Gibbs could read the messages didn't make him any better at responding. Changing her phone to silent mode, she listened for more information.

When Sean and Tim finally headed back into the kitchen, Eileen jogged halfway up the stairs, then back down, before walking back to the kitchen.

"OK, Cookie Monsters," she said. "You're busted." She shot them a mock glare, only to have Tim start laughing.

"Sorry, Mom, but you've got to take lessons from Gibbs." His shoulders shook as he tried to stifle his laughs. "Even Jimmy can do better than that."

She smiled and reached out to hug him. "If you've got a few minutes, I think I can find some cold milk to go with those." She hoped he'd say yes; Gibbs hadn't had enough time with Tony to straighten him out.

Tim thought for a second. "Sure. Just a small glass, though. And I still need to bring some cookies home, or Tony will never let me hear the end of it."

Eileen smiled. "It's a deal."

She managed to buy Gibbs another 20 minutes, then texted him as Sean was packing up the cookies.

As Tim was about to leave, he turned to face her and Sean.

“I know I don’t say this often enough, but thank you,” he said. “I’ve always taken you for granted, that everybody has great parents like you guys and they don’t. Sarah and I are really lucky to have you.”

Eileen swallowed, then reached out, and pulled her son in for a hug, Sean wrapping his arms around both of them.

“Go fix this, Tim,” Sean said.

As Gibbs clinked his beer bottle against Tony’s, he felt his cell vibrate in his pocket. When Tony got up a minute later to hit the head, he pulled it out and saw a text message from Eileen. He held the phone out to where he could read it, even with the bigger type Sean had set for the display,
then smiled. The boys would fix this tonight, he’d make sure of it.

When Tony dropped back onto the couch a minute later, Gibbs went back to Tony’s last comment.

“You know, it’s not always best to keep what you know to yourself,” he said.

“Tim said to do what I had to,” Tony said, answering the question Gibbs hadn’t even asked. “And I just wanted to get him out of here.” He paused. “I didn’t think I would be able to bust him in public, not when it came down to it. I mean, you were right earlier. He is my father. I’ve never been able to say no to him, not when it counted.”

Gibbs wasn’t sure what to say to that. Tony had always chosen to run before, and he’d stayed. But now it sounded like he was still running, just doing it without leaving.

“If I’d busted him, he would have asked me for the money. And if he’d done that and I’d caved, he’d think he could come back again. I don’t want that. I want him out of my life, far away from Tim and the rest of you.” Tony slumped back against the couch. “All those years when all I wanted was his attention... Now all I want is for him to leave me alone.”

Gibbs nodded. “And if you knew he wanted to see you, not just get something out of the deal?”

Tony rubbed the back of his neck. “He told me he loved me.” His voice was barely audible. “That’s the first time he’s ever said that to me. Why now?”

“Maybe he realizes what he’s missed.” Gibbs kept his tone even. “He wouldn’t be the first person to realize he’d missed out by pushing his family away.”

“You’re not like him, Boss,” Tony said. “I don’t care how many years you didn’t talk to Jack, you could never be like my father.”

“You said yourself that he’s a mystery to you.” Gibbs sighed. “Look, Tony, I’m not saying he’s a good guy. I don’t have any reason to think that. But until you can deal with him, he’s still got power over you.”

Tony nodded. “I know. I need to fix this, for Tim if nothing else.”

“No, Tony. For you.” Gibbs turned to face him, waited for Tony to do the same. “You need to talk to Tim about this, but you also need to deal with it. No hiding, no deflecting, no running.”

Tony nodded again. “Jimmy gave me the name of somebody,” he said. “I’m going to call, make an appointment. And I know you say for me, but fixing it for me hasn’t ever seemed that important. Fixing it for Tim does.”

And Gibbs realized that was the best he could hope for that night.

Before he could say anything else, his cell went off again. This time he pulled it out and smiled at the message.

“Tim’s just leaving next door. Go on, talk to him. Work this out.”

Tony looked at Gibbs, then the phone. “Sean?”

He shook his head. “Eileen.”

Tony smiled. “It’s nice to have a mom again.”
As he slipped on his jacket and headed out the front door, Gibbs stood in the hall watching from the window. Tony was leaning on the hood of McGee’s car when his husband finally walked outside. As he watched, Tim stopped a few feet from Tony. Gibbs stepped away from the window, sure the guys would work it out.
Chapter 24

Tuesday, March 23, 2010

Tony leaned against Tim’s car, watching from the darkened road as his husband said goodbye to Sean and Eileen. When Tim made it to the curb, he pulled up short and looked at Tony.

“You didn’t run.”

Tony could hear disbelief and certainty mixed in Tim’s voice and had to fight the utterly inappropriate urge to laugh. “I didn’t run.” He sighed. “At least not from you.”

“Tony?” He sounded so like the uncertain probie from Norfolk that Tony realized he had to talk fast.

“I didn’t run, Tim. Didn’t even think about it. But I didn’t bust my father either, and Gibbs is right, that was kind of running away from him. It’s just... I don’t want him to touch you; I want him out of our lives. And if I busted him, I thought he might actually ask me for money, and I wasn’t sure I wouldn’t give it to him.” He trailed off, not sure how to say the next part and scuffed his foot on the ground.

“So what did you do?” Tim didn’t sound anything but curious, so Tony risked a look at his face. Sure enough, there was the McEyebrow, and the utter normality of it reassured Tony more than anything Tim could have said.

“I paid the bill ahead of time, bought an open-ended ticket to Monte Carlo, and left him a note at the desk making it look like Prince Omar had done it as an apology for running out on their planned meeting.” Tony rolled his shoulders awkwardly. “He never suspected. And he won’t think I can bail him out in the future, because he doesn’t know I know he’s broke.”

Tim smiled and put his hand on Tony’s shoulder. “Is that why you didn’t call, because you thought I’d be mad that you paid his bill?”

Tony reached over and laid his hand on Tim’s. “Yes. No.” He paused. “Tim, he said he loved me and he wanted to talk more often.” He felt, rather than saw, Tim start. “No, I don’t know if I believe him either. I just... There was a time when hearing that would have made all the difference in the world. Why did he wait to say it until I’d found a life and a family of my own, a partner I love, and a place to call home? Why didn’t he say it when it would have done some good?” Tony slumped down, as if he could sink into the car if he tried hard enough.

“Are you going to talk to him?”

“Do you think I should?”

Tim frowned, his big brain considering all the angles. “I think that’s your call,” he said at last. “My experience... it’s so far away from yours that I can’t even wrap my mind around it. I can’t imagine not having a relationship with my parents, and yet I completely understand why Ziva wants nothing to do with Eli.”

“Yeah, for everything my father did or didn’t do over the years, I never actually almost died because of him.” Tony rubbed the back of his neck. “Jimmy gave me that name earlier; I’m going to call tomorrow and get an appointment.”
Tim smiled and stepped between his legs so Tony’s face was just inches from his chest. “Now that I definitely agree with,” he said. “Whether you ever talk to your father again or not, I think I speak for everyone when I say we don’t want to spend another couple of days like we just did trying to figure out if he was going to leave before you self-destructed.”

Tony snorted. “Yeah, I guess I have been a little high-maintenance this week, haven’t I?” He patted the Porsche. “This baby should be the only high-maintenance thing in our family.”

Tim snickered and pulled him in for a hug, squishing Tony’s nose into his chest. “You are a complete and utter goof, and I love you for that. Now come on, let’s go home before one of the adults comes out and checks on us.”

“Are you saying we’re not adults, McGoooff?” Tony pulled away and stood up, bumping his body along Tim’s. “Because this sure feels like an adult body against me.” He slid his hands around to pull Tim close.

“OK, definitely time to get you home before one of them comes out and catches us. I am so past those teenage moments.” But Tim kissed him after saying it, long and slow and sweet, and the empty place Tony had been carrying around since Sarah woke them up Sunday seemed to fill itself in.

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Wednesday, March 24, 2010

When Sarah walked into her Twain class Wednesday, she was half-hoping the professor had the exams graded so she could find out just how deep a hole she was in and half-hoping he hadn’t because if she didn’t know, she wasn’t really keeping anything a secret. She knew Abby too well to think she wasn’t going to get grilled during today’s study session, and if she was failing a class in her major, she didn’t want to admit that. Math was one thing - she was lucky to get a C even on a good day, but she always aced her lit classes.

She made herself pay attention to the lecture by scribbling copious notes as the professor discussed parallels in several of Twain's short stories. When he dismissed the class without mentioning exams, she let out a sigh of relief.

"Ms. McGee, a moment please." His voice roused the dread in the pit of her stomach.

"Yes, Professor Rollins?" She made her way against the tide of exiting students to the front of the lecture hall.

"Is everything all right?" He leaned against the lectern, his arms folded in front of him. In a button-down shirt and sweater vest, he shouldn't terrify her more than Gibbs had that one time in interrogation, but she hadn't thought she had done anything a secret. She knew Abby too well to think she wasn’t going to get grilled during today’s study session, and if she was failing a class in her major, she didn’t want to admit that. Math was one thing - she was lucky to get a C even on a good day, but she always aced her lit classes.

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"Why do you ask?"

"Your exam was the first one I graded because you finished early, yet it was not at all what I expected based on your papers and class participation." One hand reached up to stroke his chin. "If I didn't know better, I would say the person who turned in that exam hadn't read any of the books." He paused. "If all I had to work off of was that and your papers, I would wonder if you had plagiarized your papers or hired somebody to do the work."
"What?" Sarah stood up and glared at Rollins. "No, I would never do something like that. I love this class, and I'm not a cheater."

"No, I don't think you are," he said. "Your class participation has made it abundantly clear to me that you have not only been doing the reading, but also seeing many of the themes that lesser students miss in his work." He stood away from the lectern and walked a few steps, then turned back to face her. "When a good student has a problem like this, I have to wonder what else is going on."

Sarah sighed. It was hard enough telling Tim and Tony about this, much less the team. But to have to confess her idiocy to a professor in her major? But he'd boxed her into a corner of sorts.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Something personal happened this weekend that really shook me, involving my now-ex-boyfriend. And then right before the exam, he and I had a run-in, and I just couldn't focus." She frowned. "It sounds really lame when I say it that way, but I don't think I could handle going through the whole explanation again."

Rollins looked at her for what seemed like an eternity before nodding. "Here's what I'll do. I'll give you a chance to write an extra paper: 20 pages, topic approved by me in advance. You'll have to give me the topic by Friday's class. If you get at least a B on the final exam, I'll replace your midterm grade with the paper grade."

Sarah nodded. "I can do that," she said. "Failing my pre-calc exam yesterday was bad enough, but I'm lucky to get a C in that class anyway. Failing this class is completely different."

He smiled at her. "Spoken like a true English major. Now, make the paper topic a good one. I'm giving you a second chance, but you have to work for it."

"Oh, believe me, I will," she said.

As she left the lecture hall, she felt just a tiny bit better about the week.

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Tim finished his shower and poked his head back in the bedroom. "Tony, get up," he said. "Or I'll make Jethro get you up."

The grunt from the lump under the bedcovers made him grin. He toweled his hair dry, as he walked across the bedroom clad only in another towel. He opened the bedroom door and called the dog, who came thumping up the stairs. At the noise, Tony sat up.

"I'm awake, I'm awake."

"Sorry, boy," Tim said to the panting pooch as he finished awkwardly rubbing his head with the towel in his right hand. "False alarm."

"Yeah, because your dad's cruel and evil, Jethro," Tony said, throwing a pillow at Tim, who fielded it with his free left hand and threw it back, smacking Tony in the face.

Jethro started barking, and Tim had to shut the door in his face before the dog thought one of them was attacking the other. He'd done one round of that and wasn't risking Jethro getting flashbacks to the first time they met, thank you very much.
Tony was still sitting on the bed, a bemused look on his face.

"What?" Tim said. "You're not close enough to headslap, but if we don't get a move on, Gibbs will take care of that as soon as we walk in."

"Yeah, and this hasn't been the best week for me anyway." Tony rolled his eyes. "The last time he threatened to bench me like he did yesterday — god, was that just yesterday? Feels like a month ago — was back before you discovered who Ari was."

"OK, let's not spend this whole week in the past," Tim said. "So why aren't you moving?"

"Huh?" Tony blinked. "Oh. You pack quite a punch with that pillow, McBullseye. That arm's coming back."

Tim grinned. "I told you it was fine the other day."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm up." He wagged his eyebrows, and Tim forced a stern expression on his face.

"I'm not telling Gibbs we're late because you're insatiable," he said. "Go. Shower. I'll have the coffee ready to go when you're done, and we can get breakfast on the way."

"OK, McTimekeeper," his husband replied. But he grabbed the damp towel from Tim's hand on his way to the bathroom and snapped it against him, a sharp sting.

"Oh, you're so paying for that tonight," Tim said. His words were snarky, but it was such a normal morning that he couldn't help but grin.

When they were in Tony's car, travel mugs in the holders and traffic slowing things to a crawl, Tim figured he'd see if Tony was ready to talk.

"You said you're calling the doctor Jimmy recommended today?"

Tony nodded, his eyes on the gridlock. "Once it gets late enough for the office to open," he said. "I'm glad he suggested the guy. That's one thing I realized last night."

"What?"

"I function pretty well in most of my life, but when it comes to my dad, I don't have any good way of handling things." Tony sighed. "And whether he ever becomes part of my life again or not, I want to fix this — need to fix this — especially if we're talking about kids. I do not want our kids having this kind of discussion in 30 years."

"You're not going to neglect our kids the way your father did you," Tim said. "My dad's not going to abuse them; neither is Sarah. And if they did, I'd cut them out of my life, not turn a blind eye to it the way your father did."

Tony snorted. "I'm not sure which part of that statement is the most ridiculous," he said. "I wasn't trying to say you or your family could be anything like mine. But parents screw kids up all the time. Just look at the team. Everybody's got daddy issues except Jimmy, who apparently has mother issues. Well, I don't know that Ducky does, but then again, we've met his mother. That's a whole different type of mother issue."

"Oh, you mean you don't like being a gigolo furniture mover?" Tim ducked out of head-slapping range. "But you're right." His voice sobered. "I have a tough time not seeing a good family as the default because that's what I'm used to, but since out of the seven of us, I'm the only one who can
say that, I'm obviously the outlier in this data set."

"Yes, McStatistics." Tony reached over and ruffled his hair.

"Hey!"

"Oh, you love it," Tony said.

"Yeah, I love walking in looking like you've been doing stuff we shouldn't be doing in the car on
the way to work." Tim rolled his eyes. "So, you're going to give this guy a call?"

Tony nodded. "It's not going to be pretty; you know me and my opinion on all doctors without an
animal nickname."

Tim couldn't help snort at that one. "Since when did Black Lung become an animal?"

"He's not a doctor yet- Oh, you know what I mean. Ducky and the Wolverine are the only ones I
trust."

"But?"

"But I think Jimmy has a pretty good idea of what I need, and if he thinks this guy will help, I'll
give him a try."

Tim reached over to wrap his arm around Tony, but it wouldn't cooperate so he settled for resting
his hand on his husband's shoulder. "Thank you," he said. "You deserve this."

"So do you," Tony said. "You put up with a lot from me, and I know you knew that going in, but
it's still not fair of me not to try fixing it." As he pulled into the lot at the Navy Yard, he looked at
the dashboard clock. "Speaking of fixing it, we're going to need fixing if we don't get to our desks
in the next three minutes. Here, I'll drop you off at the door. Tell Gibbs I had to hit the head on the
way up or something."

"Oh yeah, like he won't see through that one a mile away," Tim said. "But I'll give it a try."

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That afternoon, Abby was just putting the last of the samples into Major Mass Spec for analysis
when the main gate called to say Sarah was there and somebody would bring her down. Abby went
to clear off the table in her office and was there when Jimmy walked in, Sarah in tow.

"Hey, Jimmy!" She looked up to see her boyfriend standing there in his suit. "I figured when they
said Sarah was getting an escort, it would be one of the agents."

He shook his head. "I was just coming in, so I said I'd bring her down." He looked at the two of
them. "So what's going on? Not an issue with the test results?"

"What? No!" Sarah looked at Abby. "At least not that I know of."

Abby shook her head. "No, the last of the tests came back about an hour ago. All negative. I was
just going to wait and tell you when you got here. Jimmy, we're doing a study session before
Sarah's bio exam tomorrow."

"Yeah, to keep me from failing another class."
"Failing?" Abby put her hands on her hips. "You didn't say anything about failing, just that you needed some help."

"I'm not failing," Sarah said. "I just... Look, Josh threw me for a loop and I didn't get through all the reading for my lit exam and the professor told me today I failed that but he's going to let me do a paper to make it up after I told him what happened. And I completely failed my pre-calc exam. I haven't gotten it back, but I know it. I couldn't focus and Josh got me so worked up I made myself sick and..." She sighed. "I'm just a mess this week."

"Join the club," muttered Jimmy. Abby shot him a glare, but then turned her attention back to Sarah.

"OK, let's get you back on track," she said. "I'm guessing you don't want Tim to know about this."

Sarah nodded. "He's going to have to, because I'm going to need help in math to not tank the rest of the semester, but I don't want to tell him yet."

"Good idea," Jimmy said.

"Jimmy, isn't Ducky going to be looking for you?" Abby glared at him again. Sarah did not need to hear about Tim and Tony's fight and Tony's dad.

"Yeah, I'll go clean some pipettes." But instead of the usual tone meaning he'd give them space to talk, his words were laced with sarcasm. Abby briefly wondered what was going on, but focused on Sarah.

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Jimmy left the lab, muttering under his breath. He needed to talk to Abby, but not with Sarah there. And if Abby was going to keep shooting death glares at him, not any time soon.

Dr. Mallard's words came back to him, and he reminded himself that she hadn't refused to listen when he talked. So far, this was still on him. He hadn't tried to talk to Abby about his concerns. There just hadn't been a right time. And he still hadn't gone back to their apartment. That was another issue. He had a week left before he had to tell his landlord he was moving out when his lease was up, and he was beginning to think maybe he shouldn't.

If he and Abby really were ready to move in together, he'd be able to talk to her. Sure, things had been crazy. Tim, Tony, Senior, the case, Sarah... All of them were enough to throw things off-kilter. All of them in the same three-day stretch was enough to derail anything. But Tim and Tony had found time to talk, and they were in the middle of the maelstrom. Although as Dr. Mallard had once pointed out, the word Poe had brought into the English language from its Scandinavian roots wasn't quite accurate in this case, because even though Poe and Jules Verne described the maelstrom as a vortex stretching to the bottom of the ocean floor, it really was just currents and cross-currents. Which, come to think of it, was actually a pretty good description of this entire mess. Currents and cross-currents. And Jimmy felt like he was the one who could see more of them than anybody else. Maybe that explained it. He could see just how far the devastation was spreading, so that was why he was hesitating about starting the conversation with Abby.

Still, as he pulled his scrubs shirt over his head, he thought maybe he really was just rationalizing things away. After all, if he really was ready to make a life with Abby, and if she really was ready to make one with him, this shouldn't be that difficult.
Jimmy sighed and filed his dilemma away as he headed into Autopsy to help with whatever bodies the teams had sent to the morgue.

As Tim walked into the bullpen, Gibbs was nowhere to be found, but Dwayne was at his desk.

"Where's Ziva?" he asked as he stowed his gear behind his desk.

"She's gone with Gibbs to get coffee, or tea in her case," Dwayne said. "Where's Tony?"

"Parking the car," he said. "We figured at least one of us should be on time, so he dropped me at the door." Tim walked over to Dwayne's desk.

"Oh, good. I mean, I know things have been a little weird with his dad."

"It's OK, Dwayne," Tim said. "They have. And we owe you an apology. You've been out of the loop the last couple of days and we weren't trying to do it intentionally; things just unraveled really fast."

"Ziva gave me a little information, just enough for me to figure out Tony and his father aren't on good terms," Dwayne said. "That's why he was so tense the day Josh came to game night, right? Because Josh knows his dad."

"God, I'd forgotten about that," Tim said. "Yes, that's why. Was that really just last weekend?"

"Yeah, why? What happened this weekend? You guys were acting odd even before his dad showed up," Dwayne looked worried. "Is everything OK?"

Tim rolled his eyes. "I could use lots of words to describe this week, but OK is not one of them."

"Yeah, McDictionary, you have a bigger vocabulary than that."

Tim turned to see Tony walking into the bullpen. "Hey. I was just about to fill Dwayne in on the rat bastard, to use Sarah's term."

"That's a good way to refer to him," Tony said. "Describes him to a T."

"Who?"

"Josh." Tim wasn't surprised to hear Tony echoing him. They seemed to finally be back on the same page.

"McSis walked in on him in bed with somebody else Saturday after game night," Tony said. "He tried — and failed — to talk his way out of it, and things kind of went off the rails after that."

Tim snorted. "Yeah, that's one way to describe it. Anyway, Dwayne, we weren't trying to leave you out of the loop. Things just started happening kind of quickly with the case and everything."

Dwayne nodded. "I get it," he said. "So, who got the job of killing Josh?"

Tim looked at Tony, who looked back at him. "Yeah, he's one of us," Tim said. "Good call."

Dwayne looked at them. "Did I miss something?"
"Tony said you were the one the director needed to TAD to us until I got back because he said you'd fit right in. He was right." Tim smirked at his husband. "Not that we're going to tell that to either Vance or Gibbs."

"No need to tell me what I already know, Elflord," Gibbs said walking into the bullpen, Ziva at his heels. "Gear up, dead gunny at Quantico."
Friday, March 26, 2010

Tony was glad for the Quantico case and the one after it and the one after that. They'd had enough dirtbags to keep them busy all week, but they were all fairly routine cases, nothing to bring in Vance or other agencies or anybody outside the team.

He'd been able to get out on time Wednesday night to make his first appointment with the shrink Jimmy had suggested, and if the first session was mostly to make sure Tony was comfortable with the guy, that was fine with him. He was pretty sure next week's session would make up for it in intensity.

Dr. Palletini had given him homework before the next session, so tonight he sat at the kitchen table working on that while Tim perched on the sofa with his laptop fine-tuning the training course that was starting Monday.

Tony hated sitting down and making himself think back through the list of memories the shrink had asked him to recall: first memory of his mother, first one of his father.

First time he said he loved somebody. That was easy, if painful. After Paula died, he remembered going to Jeanne's apartment and telling her, hugging her close to shut out the pain of losing a friend in the line of duty, and not able to tell Jeanne that's why he was crying, that's why he had dust all over his black suit.

First time he knew he loved somebody. He'd never really known, not with Jeanne. He thought he did, but even when he'd thought that, he knew it was built on lies and he was just deceiving himself. He remembered the second time he'd said he loved somebody, back when Tim had saved him from death by splat in the parking garage. He hadn't know it until then, but seeing McQueasy pull him up from a seven-story drop the day after he'd frozen on the third rung of a ladder — granted one that was 10 stories up — he'd realized that he'd been hiding his feelings about Tim for a while, that if Jeanne was what he thought love should be, Tim was love in reality: cranky probies and goofy nicknames and teamwork and the knowledge that he would do anything for Tim — and Tim would do the same for him.

First time he knew somebody loved him. He remembered when he was six and he'd fallen off the wall that ran around the estate, skinning his knee and banging his head. His mother had hugged him when he limped in the house and cleaned him up, sitting him on her lap while she read to him. It was a warm spring day, but Tony still felt like he'd been wrapped in a warm, fuzzy blanket as she cuddled him close and stroked her hand across his hair.

First time he felt safe. A case not long after he'd started at NCIS. He'd had to go undercover alone with minimal backup. Gibbs was keeping an eye on him, and when it all started going down, Gibbs was the one who rode in to the rescue. Gibbs was the one to drive him back to the Yard, to make him go see Ducky. Ducky patched him up, made him drink some strong, sugared tea and told a story. And then Gibbs drove him to his own house, the first time Tony had been there, and packed him off to the guest room to sleep it off. When he woke in the middle of the night from a nightmare, Gibbs was there with water and a fresh T-shirt. He didn't ask questions, the way Tim later would. He didn't worry out loud, the way Abby would do with future nightmares. He just gave Tony what he needed, sat with him until he fell asleep and never mentioned it again — except to make sure Tony was never alone the night after an undercover assignment ended again. If Tony had told Gibbs about Jeanne, that whole year might have gone better.
A dozen questions. Tony's stack of notes and pages was getting almost as tall as Tim's pile of freewriting. He was just finishing off the last one when there was a knocking at the front door, and Jethro headed there, tail wagging.

Tony put his pen down and headed into the living room as Tim let Sarah in.

"You could have just come in," Tim said. "The door isn't locked when we're home."

"It's Friday night, Tim," Sarah said. "For all I knew, you and Tony were doing things I don't want to see."

Tony grinned. "Now there's an idea. Hey Tim, once I finish my homework..."

Tim rolled his eyes. "Oh, like you've ever needed encouragement to go there."

"So what's up, McSis?" Tony asked. "Not that we don't love seeing you or anything..."

"Yeah, I know." Sarah sighed and dropped down on the couch. "I need to talk to Mom and Dad, and I'm hoping you'll come with me."

"Now?" Tony looked at the clock. "It's 2300."

"No, tomorrow," Sarah said. "I need to tell them about Josh and about my exams."

"What about your exams?" Tim crossed his arms. "Does this have anything to do with the study session you had with Abby on Wednesday?"

"I passed that one," Sarah said. "At least I'm pretty sure I did. I felt like I did."

"So which ones didn't you pass?" Tony sat down at the other end of the sofa.

"Math and my Mark Twain class," Sarah sighed. "My Twain professor is letting me make it up because I was doing really well before that, but my math professor said since I was only getting a C beforehand he can't justify anything special to help me make it up. If I don't get an A on the final, I won't get a high enough grade for it to count for my math requirement and I won't be able to graduate."

Tony looked at Tim. "Sounds like some McTutoring's in order," he said.

Tim nodded. "I can do that." He turned to Sarah. "Why did you save a required class you struggle with for your last semester?"

"Because I'd sooner be staked to an anthill than take a math class," she retorted. "And believe me, I've spent all week telling myself I'm an idiot. You don't need to start."

Tim sighed. "I'm not. It's just been a long week."

Sarah nodded. "And I'm making it longer. I'll head out now. Can you guys pick me up tomorrow or should I take the Metro over here?"

"We can pick you up," Tony said. "Need a ride to the Metro station?"

Sarah shook her head, but Tim nodded.

"Sarah, it's dark out. Let one of us give you a ride." Tim raised an eyebrow at her.
"Come on, Sarah. I need a break anyway," Tony said. "Tim, I'll be back in 20."

He went to the mudroom for his jacket and sneakers, and Sarah followed him out the side door.

"Tony, is everything OK?" Sarah looked up at him. "Tim sounded... beyond tired."

Tony huffed out a breath. "He's fine, but he is tired. It's just..." He decided Sarah should know what was going on before they had to talk to Sean and Eileen. "I was beating myself up about Josh Sunday after you left because I felt like I should have said something when I knew what kind of background he came from. And Tim got fed up with me and we both got mad and said some stuff we didn't mean. And then Jimmy walked into the middle of it and he was helping both of us out and I'm not sure what happened after that, but he and Abby are having issues. He's talked to Tim about it, but I'm still not clear on it."

Sarah nodded as they navigated the streets of Silver Spring. "I picked up on some of that when I was at NCIS Wednesday to get study help from Abby, but I wasn't sure what was going on. It seemed like Jimmy was annoyed with Abby and Abby didn't seem to realize why, and she was ticked off at him because he was kind of snarky. You know, like Tim gets when he's ticked off."

"Oh, believe me, I know," Tony said. "He was doing plenty of snarking on Sunday." He sighed. "I don't know what's up with Jimmy and Abby, but if they haven't worked it out by Monday, we can lock them in an interrogation room until they get it out of their system."

"That's how you guys solve things? Maybe I should get Josh into one of them," Sarah said. "Seeing you guys all interrogate him would be a lot of fun. We were talking about it Sunday. Abby suggested Tony getting him to blab everything, then Gibbs scaring the heck out of him. Then she wanted to edit it into a video showing what a rat bastard he is without mentioning me or any of us and post it on YouTube."

"As much as that appeals to me - we could make him into the man no woman would ever date - we don't have a leg to stand on. If he shows up near a case, we'll take him in with pleasure," Tony said. "But unless we do, he'd just yell for a lawyer and claim harassment and with his family's high-priced lawyers, he'd either win or drain us all of money trying."

"Oh, like he can talk about harassment," Sarah said. "He's the one who's been asking me to take him back."

Tony whipped his head around to look at her as he pulled into the Kiss-n-Ride entrance of the Metro station. "He's been stalking you?"

Sarah shook her head. "No, just when he's seen me around he's been trying to convince me it was all a mistake, a one-time thing, and he's sorry and he wants me back. I think this last time I convinced him hell would freeze over first."

Tony nodded. "If he does anything else, let us know. You might be able to report him for stalking if he keeps pursuing you even after you've said no."

"Thanks, Tony." Sarah reached over and hugged him. "I think he knows when he's beaten, but if not, I'll let you and Tim know so you can go all big-brother on him."

Tony had to be satisfied with that, but he made a note to mention Josh's antics to the others so if any of them heard Sarah say something, they could report him. He'd already had one sister stalked — with Abby's crazy ex — it wasn't happening to another.

When he got home, Tim had put his laptop away and was just making some Irish coffee with what
was left in the coffeepot.

"Mmmm." Tony said. "You are a genius."

"So you always say," Tim said. "Sarah get to the Metro OK?"

Tony nodded. "I filled her in on everything she missed this week, figured she should know before we went to tell Mom and Dad."

"Thanks." Tim used his free arm to pull Tony in and dropped a kiss on his temple. "You know, I was thinking while you were gone."

"You're always thinking," Tony said. "So what were you thinking about?"

"You know how Sarah said she thought she might be interrupting something?"

Tony nodded.

"Well, it seems like between work and everything else in our lives, we get some time for us, but not much in the way of dates. Not that I want to stop the game nights or anything — I think they're a lot of fun, even if we did decide to bag this week's so everybody could get some sleep. But I was thinking we should set aside a time every week just for us."

"I'd say Friday night, but we get stuck at the office more weeks than not," Tony said.

"I was thinking about Sunday mornings," Tim said. "We almost never get called in then, and your pick-up basketball and football games with the guys aren't until afternoon."

"So brunch, or maybe breakfast in bed? Just something special with the two of us?" Tony thought about it. "I like the sound of that, Tim. And why don't we make it a surprise? One of us will plan one week, the other one the next."

Tim grinned. "That works. I'll take this week, because I already have something in mind. Good thing I didn't tell you what it was."

"Hmmm... Should I be worried?" Tony winked at his husband, then took him by his free hand. "Come on, up to bed."

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Saturday, March 28, 2010

Eileen laced up her sneakers and grabbed her basketball from the bin in the front hall. She figured she'd shed her ancient MIT Mom sweatshirt once she got going, but for now the air was still chilly.

Sean was upstairs walking on the treadmill they had purchased so he could keep up his exercise regimen despite his challenged lungs. As she started dribbling on the driveway, just getting warmed up, finding her rhythm, Eileen thought about how much things had changed in the past few months. She was glad he had suggested moving after retiring. If they had stayed in Annapolis, she would be worrying about how he would adjust to his forced retirement. But by moving to D.C., they both had made so many changes in their routines that the retirement-related ones had gotten lost in the shuffle.

She still hadn't found a new basketball team, but Alexandria's parks and rec leagues would be starting up soon for the spring. Sean had taken to stopping by Gibbs' basement at night to hang out
while he was working on projects. They hadn't spent huge amounts of time with the kids, but all three had been busy. Eileen made a mental note to find a day for a family dinner once Sarah was done with midterms.

She moved around the driveway, just taking shots from set spots, loosening her shoulders, feeling the muscle memory kick in. The pavement was uneven in places, and she made another note to look into getting it repaved once it got late enough in the year.

Eileen moved on to layups, dribbling her way to the hoop and shooting, then retrieving the ball after it swished through the net.

"Nice shot."

She looked over to see Gibbs standing on his front porch, wearing a paint-stained sweatshirt and faded jeans. He held a paint scraper in one hand and one of the ever-present surgical masks in the other.

"You guys finally got enough down time for you to do some work at home?" She grinned at him.

"House needs paint," he said. "Figured I'd start doing the hard part since the weather's decent."

She nodded. "It's the first decent weekend in a while, figured I'd shoot around a bit. I was hoping the boys would have time to stop by — Tony's always a challenge to play against — but we haven't heard from them since Tim came by Tuesday." She tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear. She never asked Gibbs about the boys — that felt like it was stepping over the line — but after seeing how miserable Tim was, she had to ask. "Are they doing better?"

Gibbs frowned. "Seem to be," he said, finally. "They were still a little off Wednesday, but by Friday they seemed back to what passes for normal."

"McNicknames from Tony and eyerolls from Tim?" Eileen tried not to laugh at Gibbs' expression of surprise. "Give me credit for knowing what the kids are like, Jethro."

He let out one of his rare smiles. "They are pretty predictable. I always know when I come back from my morning coffee run, they're all going to be giving each other a hard time and Tony's going to say something that requires a head-slap."

Eileen tossed the ball a couple of times. "I know Tony plays, and Tim doesn't even when his shoulder is fine. How about you?"

"You challenging me to a game?" He put the paint scraper and mask down on the porch. "Tony says you're pretty good."

Eileen grinned. "How about this: One-on-one to 25 points. Loser pairs with Tony the next time we can talk him and one of the other kids into playing, just to even up the teams."

Gibbs thought for a second, then nodded. "Unless Sarah takes after you, none of the others are huge basketball players — Jimmy maybe. Seems fair." He grinned. "And Tony's going to love getting the chance to beat me."

"Oh, you like trash-talking?" Eileen dribbled the ball while Gibbs walked around the fence to join her in the driveway. "We'll just see who's talking trash at the end."

Gibbs reached out to steal the ball, but Eileen blocked him as she pivoted toward the basket, quickly putting up two points. Gibbs snagged the rebound and dribbled out farther. She shuffled
sideways to guard, stretching to block before realizing he was faking, shuffling back to block his path to the basket. He worked his way back, his eyes alert. Eileen spotted an opening and went to steal the ball, only to have him hang onto it and sneak around the other side to shoot.

They battled back and forth, matching each other basket for basket. Eileen knew Gibbs would have a height advantage, even if it was only a few inches. But he wasn't a basketball player, not like Tony, so she hadn't expected the game to be this close. She'd forgotten all the stories about his stealthiness, which had let him sneak a few baskets by her. That and sheer determination were keeping it close. She was up by three, 20-17, when she heard Sean cheering and risked a look over to see him sitting on the porch. Gibbs took advantage to drive past her to the basket, but he winced as he dropped down from the layup. Eileen grabbed the rebound, then held the ball.

"You OK?"

Gibbs nodded, flexing his knee gingerly. "Just jarred it," he said. "I can still take you."

She raised one eyebrow and started dribbling, changing direction a few times to see just how much his knee was affecting him. He was a step slower, his moves not quite as quick, but when she drove it in, he held his ground. She got the shot off, but bounced off of him.

"Charge!"

Eileen and Gibbs both looked over to see Tony, Tim, and Sarah getting out of Tony's car. Tony was grinning, and Eileen knew who had yelled.

"You going to referee or play?" she called back.

"You're just trying to get out of playing with him next time," Gibbs said.

"Oh, just let him take the two shots, Mom," Tony said.

Gibbs sank both baskets, and Eileen grabbed the ball as it swished through the second time, dribbling out to the end of the driveway to go for three. She sank it, then raced to the basket to try and get a hand on Gibbs' next shot. It went in, but she only needed one to win. A quick dribble and she was able to sneak around Gibbs, who wasn't moving as smoothly as he had been, sinking the winning basket.

"Nice moves, Boss," Tony said. "We're definitely roping you in next time."

Eileen used her sweatshirt sleeve to wipe her forehead. "What brings you kids out here?"

Sarah looked at Tim, then Tony, from her perch on the front steps.

Gibbs tossed the basketball to Tony. "Thanks for the game, Eileen," he said. "I've got to get to work, though." But she noticed when he crossed back to his own yard, he headed inside.

Eileen leaned against the side of the house and looked at the kids, all on the steps, then Sean, who had heard the noise and come to stand in the front doorway. "Somebody start talking." She looked at Tim, since he had always been easier to read than Sarah.

"Don't look at me," he said. "I'm just the moral support."

"Yeah, great job there, McDeflecter," Tony said.

But Eileen noticed both boys put a hand on Sarah's shoulders and her daughter had slumped down
"OK, now you kids are starting to scare me," she said. "What's wrong?" She started running through the options in her head. Nobody looked hurt, but something definitely wasn't right.

"I screwed up," Sarah said.

"You didn't screw up," Tony retorted.

"Maybe not with Josh, but afterward," she shot back.

"And you're fixing it," Tim said.

"Does somebody want to tell me what's going on?" Eileen said. She looked over their heads to Sean, who had crossed his arms.

When none of the kids spoke, Sean did.

"Sarah. Report." It was his naval commander voice, the one he'd only ever used when there was an emergency or one of the kids was in real trouble.

"Josh cheated on me, I caught him and dumped him, then failed all my midterms because I let him mess with my head." She spit it all out, childhood habits still strong, then pulled further into herself. The boys each wrapped an arm around her, their heads touching above Sarah's. It would have been cute if Eileen wasn't still trying to wrap her mind around what Sarah had just said. "And then I made Tim and Tony and Jimmy and Abby fight."

"You did not make us fight," Tony said. "How many times do we have to tell you that?"

"And we made Jimmy and Abby fight, not that it's fighting because Abby still doesn't understand why Jimmy's upset, and that's only because of something they already had issues with," Tim said.

"OK, everybody inside." Sean turned and walked into the house, and Eileen just motioned for the kids to follow him.

Once inside, they settled around the dining room table.

"Can somebody start at the beginning?" Eileen looked around, but neither Tim nor Sarah was talking.

"Two writers in the group and I have to be the storyteller?" Tony rolled his eyes. "OK." He put a hand on Sarah's shoulder. "Sarah walked in on Josh last Saturday to find he was cheating on her. Game night broke up early because of McSleepy, so evil Josh thought he was safe. Sarah came over Sunday morning, and we got Abby and Jimmy to take her to the lab and run tests for STDs and stuff, all of which came back negative. Meanwhile, I was being an idiot and blaming myself for not warning Sarah that Josh comes from a background where morals and ethics are more for show than anything else, so Tim and I fought and I slammed out. While we were dealing with my crap — sorry, Mom — the next few days, Sarah kept running into Josh, who wanted her to take him back. He had her so rattled she blew two of her midterms. She can do makeup work for her lit one, and she got Abby and Jimmy to help her study for the science one. Her math professor made her a deal that if she can get at least a A on the final, he won't fail her, so Tim's tutoring her the rest of the semester." He wound down, finally.

Eileen just looked at Sarah, who appeared miserable. "Sarah? Why didn't you come talk to us?"
Sarah shook her head. "I wanted to find out the test results first." Her fingers toyed with the end of her sleeve. "I only wanted to go through it once, and I didn't want to tell you about it, then have to come back in a couple of days and say he'd knocked me up or given me HIV or something."

"And you're sure he didn't?" Sean leaned forward. "Abby ran tests?"

Sarah nodded. "Yes, Dad."

"What kind of tests?"

Sarah rolled her eyes, which Eileen actually was glad to see. It was a small island of normalcy in this craziness.

"Dad, she said she ran the standard STD battery, whatever that is."

Tony jumped in. "Herpes, chlamydia, gonorrrhea, pretty much everything that might show up."

Sarah nodded. "She also ran an HPV test, which was negative. She said that was probably because I got the vaccine. She did an HIV test - also negative - which she said has to be repeated in June and September just to be safe."

"Pregnancy?" Eileen had to ask. "Testing for STDs is good, but that's the one I'd be a lot more worried about."

"She did that too, Mom. Not even one of the home tests, either - she drew blood. She said that was more accurate, and if I had been, she could have done a second test to tell how far along. But it was negative, so she only had to do the one."

Eileen breathed a sigh of relief. She and Sean wanted grandkids, but not this way. "So, everything's negative. You had to wait all week to find that out?"

Sarah shook her head. "I was afraid that I wasn't going to be able to graduate because of the exams, so I wanted to see how those went." She swiped at her eyes. "And I felt like an idiot."

"You're not an idiot," Tim said, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. "Josh was trying to get to you, and he did. That's what good manipulators do. But you didn't fall for his line, and you didn't take him back, which is what he wanted."

Eileen smiled, proud of both her kids at that moment.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

I have to admit, I stole a McName in this section from Torakowalski's amazing AU T2 fic Still Time for You because it fit perfectly. If you haven't read her story because you don't like AUs or you don't like high school AUs, stop. Go. Read it. Life will be here when you come back. It might possibly be my favorite big T2 fic out there and I HATE AUs. If you've read it, you'll recognize the McName when you read it. :) And on another note, got back from vacation to find an NCIS Special Agent T-shirt from FLETC on my chair at work! From a former NCIS agent who — per an NCIS insider who should know — is not who Gibbs was based off of as he says. But it's still cool. Co-worker did a column on the guy when he spoke to a local school; he sent her the shirt, she passed it on to me.

Sunday, March 28, 2010

Tim blinked awake and smiled as Tony's snores vibrated against his chest. The sun was just coming up, pink light filtering into the room between the curtains. He would have been happy to stay there all morning, but it wasn't long before Jethro came in and whimpered, a sure sign he needed to go outside in the next few minutes if they didn't want to clean up puddles.

Tim reluctantly untangled himself from Tony's arms and pulled on sweats, shoving his feet into the rubber-soled leather slippers he'd bought the first week he owned Jethro for just this reason. He stumbled downstairs and let the dog out, then poured himself a cup of coffee.

Tim knew they had plenty of time before they could head out for his plans for date morning, so he crawled back into bed once Jethro was happily occupied with a new rawhide chew. Tony was still snoring away, but he'd shifted to wrap his arms around Tim's pillow. Tim smiled and filed the image away to remember the next time Tony was driving him crazy with McNames and smart-ass comments at work.

He eased the pillow from Tony's arms, grinning as Tony whined and hung on tighter. Tim decided to distract him a different way and slid his hands around Tony, pulling him close. His husband's sleep-warm body molded to his, and after a few minutes of kissing, Tony was fully awake.

"Mmmm... Like waking up like this." Tony stroked his hands along Tim's body. "Morning, Timmy."

When Tim could speak again, he made a mock-mad face. "What is it with people and calling me Timmy?"

"Can't help it," Tony said. "It's those big puppy-dog eyes. Not to mention if I hadn't seen your mug shot earlier this year, I'd think you were borderline McJailbait. How do you get younger-looking every year I know you? Did Ducky give you his secret?"

Tim snorted. "I think Ducky's been around too much formaldehyde over the years. We really should warn Jimmy. He looks even younger than me."
"Yeah, how did I get to be the old man in the group?" Tony frowned.

Tim kissed him until Tony wasn't thinking about age anymore. With no place to be, they spent a lazy morning in bed, catching up after a couple of weeks where the only thing they had energy for once they got to bed was sleeping.

As they lay sated and dozing, Tim happened to catch sight of the time. "If you want our morning date, we need to get moving," he said.

Tony groaned and rolled off of him. "We probably need to get cleaned up anyway." He smirked. "Joint shower?"

Tim never could resist that grin. "Joint shower."

When they finally emerged after the hot water started to run out, Tony turned to him. "So you know the plans — what should I wear?"

"Casual's fine," Tim said. "I'm wearing jeans and a sweater."

Tony nodded and found a hoodie sweater he occasionally wore to work to pair with his dark jeans. It had been a few weeks since Tim had seen him in anything but suits or the faded jeans Tony usually wore around the house, and he admired the view. He'd thought of suggesting Tony wear the more casual outfits to work more often, but he figured the distraction Tony posed might have Gibbs nixing that idea. Even Ziva and Abby weren't immune when Tony went for the casual look at the office.

"Tim, stop ogling me and get dressed," Tony said. "Otherwise I'm not going to be responsible for us missing whatever McDate you've planned."

Tim rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah." He pulled on his clothes, and they went down to let Jethro out once more so he'd be set while they were gone.

"So where are we going?" Tony looked at Tim as he backed out of the driveway. "I mean, I'm hoping someplace where we can get food since you didn't let me make toast."

"Brunch, Tony," Tim said. "I figured we could try that place we saw a few weeks ago, the Irish pub. They do brunch, and they're supposed to have music this morning."

Tony grinned. "Eggs, potatoes — and that's one thing the Irish do know how to cook is potatoes. Works for me."

But when they got in and looked at the menu, Tony was torn.

"It's breakfast, not a case, Tony," Tim said. "Just pick something."

"I can't help it — the French toast with strawberries and walnuts sounds too good."

Tim grinned. "That's what I was going to get. Why don't you get your eggs? I'll get the French toast, and we can share."

Tony grinned. "Now why didn't I put that in the vows? Sickness, health, French toast, eggs..."

Tim snorted. "You are the biggest goofball I've ever met, you know that?"

"And that's why you love me." Tony grinned at him, the big smile that never failed to warm Tim's heart.
"Yeah, that's why I love you," Tim said. "You're the only one I know who can make hazing and nicknames part of your seduction plan."

"Hey, it wasn't like I could flirt with you in front of Gibbs," Tony said. "Not to mention Abby and Ziva."

"Yeah, after trying to convince them to tongue kiss after Gibbs was blown up, you would have never heard the end of it if you'd been obvious." Tim frowned. "Of course, neither would I, and I didn't do anything."

"You smirked," Tony said. "And you would have enjoyed it just as much as I would have if they had."

"True." Tim actually did smirk, but he also reached across the table for Tony's hand. "You know, as much as I love living with you — even when you're grumbling about my sneakers piled in the mudroom — I've missed our dates. I'm glad we're back to them."

Tony turned his hand up, so they were palm to palm, and interlaced their fingers. "Me, too. This was a good idea, Tim." He waggled his eyebrows. "Score another one for McBrain!"

Tim snorted and nudged his knee against Tony's under the table. "This definitely calls for a celebration," he said. "We made it through our first fight, through me meeting the in-laws, and through you dealing with my family's angst."

"Oh. I thought that's what we did this morning," Tony said. "Celebrate." He looked at Tim, the picture of innocence, but Tim could see the corners of his lips twitching.

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Jimmy woke up in his bed and blinked, confused. It wasn't until he'd fumbled for his glasses that he realized he was actually in his bed, at his apartment. Not the one he shared with Abby. He lay back and sighed, looking at the cracks in the ceiling. He hadn't been back to Abby's apartment all week. First he left for girls' night, then he just hadn't gone back. Abby hadn't asked him what was going on either, which was bothering him. But he remembered what Ducky had said earlier in the week and knew it was at least partially on him for not bringing it up to her. He'd planned to a couple of times, but first Sarah was there studying, then they'd been busy with case after case.

Frowning, he sat up. He definitely needed to talk to somebody. He thought through the options as he showered, dressed, and ate the last of the box of cereal he'd picked up Monday when he'd realized he was going to be here for more than one night.

The biggest thing was to make a decision about moving out. He had to let his landlord know one way or the other by Wednesday, and right now he really didn't know which option was right. If going to a month-to-month option would work, that would have been his choice, but his landlord wouldn't do anything less than a year lease because of the colleges in the area. He said otherwise he got stuck with nobody in the apartment for three months out of the year. And Jimmy couldn't really argue otherwise, since he himself was still a student.

He sighed as he munched on his cereal. Ducky was probably the best person to talk to. But before he headed all the way out to Reston, he figured he should call. When Ducky's phone went to the answering machine, he frowned and considered his other options. He really didn't want to bother Tim and Tony, even though he thought Tim would probably have the best insights into Abby's quirky brain. But they'd had a long, crazy week, and Jimmy figured they were probably enjoying a chance to just relax. He wasn't about to add to their drama.
He thought briefly about Dwayne, but the newest member of the team really didn't know him or Abby well enough to be much help. If he wasn't going to ask Tim, Gibbs was probably the person who understood Abby the best. He gulped. Could he really ask Gibbs? The team leader wasn't the most approachable, and he was very protective of Abby, more so than anybody else. But he was also the other person who had pushed for them to marry, not just live together, and his track record showed he thought marriage was important. He would probably understand where Jimmy was coming from, even though Abby could rarely do anything wrong in Gibbs' eyes.

His mind made up, Jimmy headed to Alexandria. But when he got to Gibbs' house, the man didn't answer his door. His truck and car both were there, and Jimmy wondered if he was just in the basement and didn't hear. He wasn't sure he was feeling brave enough to just walk in, though he knew Gibbs was used to everybody doing just that. While he stood there debating, he heard somebody call his name and looked over to see Sean leaning on the fence between the yards.

"He's not home," Sean said. "He and Eileen are out running."

"Oh." Jimmy frowned. Now what?

"If you want to wait for him, come on over," Sean said. "I've got the kettle on, and there's still coffee in the pot."

"Thanks," Jimmy headed over, circling around until he could follow Sean into the McGees' house.

"So, what's got you looking so worried?" Sean asked. "This have anything to do with Abby?"

Jimmy looked at him. "Have you been taking mind-reading lessons from Gibbs?"

Sean chuckled as he poured himself some tea and put cookies on a plate. "No, when the boys and Sarah came over yesterday to tell us about Josh and all the other fallout, they mentioned something about you and Abby getting caught up in it." He pulled another mug from the cabinet. "Tea? Coffee?"

Jimmy thought for a second. "Tea, I think. At least, that's what Ducky always makes when we have one of these discussions."

Sean grinned, and Jimmy could see his resemblance to Tim. "Tea's always good for talking," he said. "Of course, I still think tea's better than coffee, so I might be a little biased." He handed Jimmy a mug and carried his own tea and the plate of cookies to the table. "So, what's going on with you and Abby? The kids didn't seem to really know what the problem was, just that there was one."

Jimmy sighed. "Yeah, well, Abby doesn't seem to realize what the problem is either, which is most of my problem." He blew across the surface of his mug to cool the tea as he thought about how to explain it. "You know everything that happened this week?"

Sean nodded. "Well, I know the basics. Josh should be shot, Tony blamed himself, he and Tim fought about it, Tony's dad showed up, and Josh has been trying to get Sarah to take him back, which she's shot down, but rattled her so much she failed a couple of exams and had to get Abby's help on the third one to pass."

Jimmy nodded. "Even Gibbs doesn't sum things up that succinctly, but basically, yeah." He sipped his tea. "I kind of ended up in the middle of Tim and Tony's fight, which wasn't really a fight. More mutual frustration. But it was kind of a wake-up call for me because even though they both were really mad, they were sure they were going to work it out."
Sean raised an eyebrow. "This was before Tony's dad got to town, right?"

Jimmy nodded. "Yeah. They both told me they knew they would work it out because the other one wasn't going to walk away from their marriage. Well, Tony also said Tim wouldn't let him walk away, but that was just Tony being Tony. And Abby refuses to get married."

Sean slowly sipped his tea and handed a cookie to Jimmy, who waited for Sean to gather his thoughts.

"Abby refuses to marry you, or anyone?"

"Oh, anyone," Jimmy said. "That's what she said when Gibbs started to give me a hard time about not making an honest woman out of her. For as much as he grumbles about marriage and divorce and alimony and tells all of us never to get married, he's pretty old-fashioned about it. He didn't like that Abby didn't want to go there. Not that he minded that Tim and Tony didn't, at least not right away. I mean, they couldn't anyway, but they're also both guys. Well, yeah, which is why they couldn't but it's also why Gibbs didn't... I mean-"

"I get it Jimmy," Sean said. "And I have to admit, I'm probably just as much a dinosaur as Gibbs. Tim and Tony moving in together was fine. But if Sarah had wanted to move in with Josh, I wouldn't have been very happy."

Jimmy frowned. "At first I didn't really care one way or the other if we got married. I mean, Abby was pretty clear that she was serious about us. But then this happened, and I spent Sunday night at my apartment because Abby had Sarah and Ziva over for a guy-bashing night."

"No, wouldn't be good to be around for that one." Sean chuckled. "I think I would have decided a strategic retreat was in order as well."

Jimmy grinned. "Yeah. So I went back to my place, which has basically been gathering dust, because even though my lease doesn't end until next month, I've pretty much been living with Abby for weeks now."

"Makes sense." Sean sipped his tea.

"Except I haven't spent the night at our place since then," Jimmy said. "And Abby hasn't really asked why, which bothers me. I mean, it's been a busy week with all the cases, but still."

"Have you tried talking to Abby?" Sean looked over the mug at him before sipping.

Jimmy nodded, then shook his head.

"It can't be both answers."

"I haven't. I mean, I started to a couple of times, but it was busy and I knew it wasn't the right time to get into a big discussion, so I haven't. But I also haven't gone to our place to find a right time." Jimmy slumped down. "Ducky told me I should only be worried if Abby wouldn't talk when I tried or if I wasn't able to start the discussion. And I think this is me not able to start it, which is bad. But then I think about everything that was going on and how she was helping Sarah study, and I wonder if it's less that I haven't been able to start it and more that there hasn't been the right time."

Sean put his mug down, and Jimmy hoped his friend's dad would have some advice. These were the times he really wished he had a dad of his own. Not that he hadn't, but Jimmy didn't remember him, not really. He had died when Jimmy was so small that all he really remembered were little bits and pieces, snapshots. And he knew his dad probably had issues, just based on his mom's
problems over the years. He'd gotten that much out of all the therapy he'd done. And that led him to voice the thing he'd been worrying over all week. "How do I know if this is the right move? Not just two people with complementary issues finding somebody who lets them avoid dealing with their own?"

Sean's eyebrow went up at that, and Jimmy again was reminded of Tim. "Is that how you think of Tim and Tony?"

"No. Well, yes. I mean, kind of." Jimmy stammered. "I mean, Tim's really good at helping Tony deal with his issues, but I think they both realized this week that Tony needs to get more help so it isn't all on Tim when things get crazy." He sipped his tea, then said, voice quiet, "I gave Tony the name of the guy I talk to."

"Do you think they should have waited to get married?" Sean's tone made it impossible for Jimmy to guess what he thought the right answer was, so he forced himself to think it out.

"No," he said finally. "I mean, yeah, Tony's still got enough baggage for an entire modeling troupe, but he's way better since he and Tim got together. I don't think he ever would have made it this far if it wasn't for Tim. If his dad had shown up last year, it might have actually broken Tony." He frowned at the thought. "Huh."

Sean smiled. "We've all got issues, Jimmy. Eileen and I have been married for getting on 40 years now, and we definitely have areas where one of us deals better than the other. And we definitely have what you called complementary issues. We've just learned over the years which things we have to deal with and which we don't." He smiled. "We're still learning. After everything that happened at the beginning of the year, she keeps a lot closer eye on my health. I try not to be in denial about things, but it's hard. She keeps me honest."

Jimmy nodded. "I get it, I think. I mean, Abby and I fit together pretty well." He thought back. "Tim said something when we first started dating, or right before it." He tried to remember exactly how his friend had put it. "Something about the areas he and I were similar were the ones where he and Abby had worked as a couple, and the areas where he and Abby hadn't worked were the ones where he and I were different. He didn't really explain, but he seemed to think that was a good thing."

Sean nodded. "That makes some sense, even just from what I know of you, Abby, and Tony. Well, and Tim, but that's different. I've always understood what makes him tick. Learning about the rest of you has taken some time."

Jimmy set his tea down and looked Sean in the eye. "So with what you know, what do you think? I mean about me and Abby?"

Sean cupped his mug in his hands and quirked his lips as he thought. Finally he said, "I think Tim's probably right in his assessment. People skills aren't usually his strong point — he's more at home with computers — but he understands what makes all of you tick pretty well." He sighed. "Take the rest of today. Give yourself a chance to think about what you really want and what you're willing to risk. But I think you should go back to Abby's apartment tonight. Whether you two reach a decision or not today, you at least need to start talking." He looked at Jimmy, who couldn't help but look back. "You two are young. I've heard enough comments to get the sense you're talking about having kids. Wait on those until you're sure about this, but don't think you have to have this settled today, or even this week or this month. If this is right, it'll be right in a week or a month or a year."

Jimmy nodded. He thought about mentioning Abby's ticking biological clock, but decided against
it. That was probably sharing a little too much. "Thanks, Commander McGee," he said instead.

"It's Sean, Jimmy. You kids are all adults, no need for the titles."

Jimmy stood up and picked up his mug to carry it to the kitchen. "Sean, then. Thanks. I really appreciate it."

"Anytime, Jimmy. Especially since I know Gibbs thinks of Abby like a daughter. If you ever need somebody to talk to who isn't your future father-in-law, I'll be here." He stood and clapped Jimmy on the shoulder.

As Jimmy helped Sean clean up, he realized just how lucky Tim was, and Tony too. He needed to tell them that sometime.

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Abby waited until almost noon, then called Sarah.

"What's up, Abby?"

"Everything OK? Just wanted to make sure Josh the Jerk was leaving you alone." She sat on the bed, frowning at the unrumpled side.

"He hasn't said anything to me lately."

But Abby could tell Sarah was holding something back. She'd done it herself too many times not to recognize it. "You doing anything today? We could hang out."

"I was going to try and do some writing today, but I can do that later if you want to meet up."

"Sure!" Abby smiled. "How about I meet you at the coffee shop." She looked at her phone. "In an hour?"

"Um, sure."

Now Abby knew Sarah was keeping something to herself, but she decided it could wait until they met up to find out what it was. "Great! See you in an hour."

Abby had thought Jimmy might finally come home, but by the time she headed out, he hadn't. She wasn't sure what was up with him this week. She'd thought at first he was just giving her space in case Sarah wanted to stay with her for a few days, but then he'd been really snarky in the lab when he brought Sarah up. Almost McGee-level snarky. Like when Tim got ticked about something and wasn't willing to talk about it. She hadn't felt like dealing with a snark attack, so she'd just let it go, but he still hadn't come home. If he didn't show up soon, she was going to go over to his apartment and drag the answers out of him.

She pushed that thought to the back of her mind as she got to the coffee shop. One problem at a time. Sure she loved having lots of evidence going at once, but she couldn't exactly run Sarah or Jimmy through Major Mass Spec and get a result. When she walked in, Sarah was sitting in the corner by the fireplace. Abby ordered her tea and then joined her friend. She raised an eyebrow at the tea bag in Sarah's mug. "Weren't you the one who was giving me a hard time about going to herbal tea a week ago?"

Sarah looked sheepish. "Yeah, well, that was before Josh decided not to leave me alone."
Abby's eyes widened, and she reached out and grabbed Sarah's hands. "Wait, what's he been doing? Why didn't you tell Timmy? Or did you tell him, and he didn't tell me? What's Josh been doing? Do I have to kill him?"

Sarah smiled. "Relax, Abby. It's not what he's doing. Well, it is." She sighed. "He came up to me a few times at the beginning of the week, tried to get me to take him back."

"Yeah, and that has about as much chance of happening as Gibbs taking up tap-dancing." Abby snorted.

Sarah giggled. "Now that I want to see a picture of." She sobered. "No, I know better. He manipulated me once; I'm not letting it happen again. But now he's taken to coming around and hanging out here during my shifts, sitting right where I can't miss seeing him." She wrinkled her nose. "I've already used up most of my tea because of those two."

"Again with the tea," Abby said. "I'm lost."

"The beginning of the week, he had me so upset, I made myself sick," Sarah said. "One of the women who works here suggested I try this new ginger-lemon tea we're carrying, said it would help. And it did. So now I keep a cup handy all during my shift and carry a travel mug around campus. He still makes me feel sick when I have to watch him flirt and everything right in front of my face, but I haven't actually gotten sick in a few days — I just drink some tea, and it quiets things down."

"That's good. Or not." Abby frowned. "I mean, the efficacy of herbal teas is really well-documented to help with certain things. But there's got to be something we can do about Josh. Trust me, you do not want a stalker." She shuddered at the memory. "And if he does go that route, don't drink and use Gibbs' hand tools. I almost killed his boat that way."

Sarah looked up at her. "You said something about a stalker last weekend. The one that broke into Tim's place?"

Abby nodded. "The worst mistake I made was not telling anybody about him." She frowned. "I didn't want the guys to kill him, especially Gibbs, and I told myself I could handle him. But he was nuts. I mean really nuts, like a straitjacket was just the first step nuts. And he almost did kill me. Or at least the hit man who was trying to kill me was able to use him for camouflage, which pretty much came to the same thing. I spent an entire day in the elevator at NCIS, huddled in a corner with pepper spray, brass knuckles, and a taser."

"The elevator?"

Abby grinned. "Trust me, it made sense at the time. After he'd broken into Timmy's, I figured that was the safest place to be. That was before he came aboard the Yard and was standing outside my lab windows watching me. That's when I went home with Gibbs. I mean, who would attack me with Gibbs around?"

Sarah grinned. "Good point." She frowned. "Of course, Josh knows you guys are all federal agents, and he's still playing his games."

Abby moved around the table to stand behind Sarah and hug her, the way she'd hugged Tim a million times. "We'll stop him." She felt Sarah relax into the hug.

"OK, Tim's right. There is something special about Abby-hugs," she finally said.

Abby grinned and released Sarah, moving back to her own chair. "Well of course there is." She
sipped her own tea. "So, let's figure out what to do about Josh."

"I don't think we can," Sarah said. "I mean, he's not saying anything to me. And it's not like he
doesn't come here all the time anyway. That's how we met in the first place. If I went to the cops
with this, they'd think I was just a drama queen."

Abby frowned. "I'd like to disagree with you, but I've met too many Metro cops." She thought for a
second. "I know! The rest of us can help." She pulled out her phone and dialed Ziva's number.

"Do we have a case, Abby?"

"Yeah, the case of the creepy ex," Abby said. "Sarah and I are at the coffee shop trying to figure
out how to deal with Josh. Can you meet us?"

"I will be there in 15 minutes." Ziva hung up, and Abby had to smile. "Gibbs is rubbing off on her
the longer she's at NCIS," she said. "She'll be here in a few minutes."

"Thanks, Abby." Sarah smiled. "I mean, you guys have gone above and beyond for me this week."

"You're family," Abby said. "This is what family does; we help each other."

They were sitting there, sipping their tea, when Ziva arrived, her hair down and windblown. As she
settled down, her own tea in hand, she tried to tame her hair back into a ponytail. "So, what is the
game plan?"

Abby explained what was going on, assisted by Sarah, and she could see the anger in Ziva's eyes.

"This is unacceptable," Ziva said. "And if we do not stop him before Gibbs and Tony and McGee
find out, they are liable to get themselves in trouble dealing with him."

Sarah laughed. "Tony's already told Tim that they can't do anything because the director can't
cover for them on a Metro case."

"That has never stopped Gibbs before," Ziva said. "Nor would Tim and Tony stop if they could
figure out a way to deal with him that wouldn't get any of us in trouble."

"So what do we do?" Abby asked. "I mean, we can't go to Sarah's classes with her."

"He's not giving me too much trouble on campus," Sarah said. "I mean, I see him, but it's just in
passing. It's the hanging out here that's really getting to me."

"We could do what we're doing now," Ziva said.

"OK," Abby said. "Wait, what are we doing now?" She looked around.

"Being here," Ziva said. "I do not think that if Josh walked into the coffee shop now, he would try
anything up back."

"Up front," Abby corrected. "But you're right."

Sarah nodded. "That's how I got him to back off in the first place, by reminding him about you
guys. So seeing you would scare him."

"I think I will be enjoying a relaxing cup of tea here in the evenings," Ziva said. She turned to
Sarah. "That is when you mostly work, correct?"
She nodded. "Every night but Saturday and Wednesday," she said. "When I graduate and they make me a manager, I'll be working in the mornings to open, but he'll be off on his summer internship by then. I just have to make it through..." She counted on her fingers. "About six more weeks, then he'll be gone."

Abby grinned and looked at Ziva. "We can do that. I'm sure Jimmy will help. Would Damon?"

"I believe he would," she said, nodding. "After all, he is a Marine. Semper Fi, yes?"

Abby nodded. "Yes. So, who takes the first shift?"

"I will stay," Ziva said. "You have been busy this week, and I imagine Jimmy wants to spend some time with you before tomorrow starts and we have a case to solve."

Jimmy hadn't been gone long when Eileen came in, her clothes damp with sweat from her run.

"Gibbs give you a challenge?" Sean looked up from the chair where he was reading the book he'd started last night.

"I know he says he has a bad knee, but he doesn't run like it." Eileen pushed back the strands that had come loose from her ponytail. "I'm going to shower."

Sean nodded. "I'm headed over to see Gibbs, but not until he's had a chance to clean up."

When he did head over half an hour later, he found Gibbs in the basement. Sean put on the respirator mask Gibbs had started keeping there for his and Tony's visits as he walked down the stairs.

"Hear you out-ran my wife," he said to Gibbs.

"Really? Felt like she outran me." He stretched out one leg, then the other. "Haven't had that good a challenge in a while, now that Tony's had to cut back. Tim's got stamina, but not the speed."

"No, he definitely takes after me in that area," Sean said. "You had a visitor while you were gone."

Gibbs turned to look at him. "One of the boys?"

"No. And yes." Sean pulled out a sawhorse and sat down. "Jimmy came by, looking for advice on Abby. He was willing to take me as a pinch-hitter, though."

Gibbs rubbed a hand across his forehead. "I'd forgotten about those two with everything else going on. Ducky said something about them, but they kind of got lost in the shuffle." He cursed. "I don't even know what's going on."

Sean explained what Jimmy had told him. "I don't know Abby all that well. Is he right?"

Gibbs leaned back against the workbench. "Aw, hell. I don't know." He frowned. "I think she should marry him if he's serious, but you're right, I'm a dinosaur. I'm always telling the team not to get married, just leads to alimony checks, but when it comes right down to it, I think if the girls are serious about somebody, they should marry him."

Sean chuckled. "Somehow, I don't think any of them would like it if you put it that way."

Gibbs shook his head. "No, they'd let me have it." He reached for his coffee mug and sipped. "I
haven't seen Abby this content with anybody else, even Tim. Jimmy's good for her. Guess the question is whether she's good for Jimmy." He sipped more. "Not sure I know the answer to that."

"I told him he should really get this sorted out before they think about having kids, since even I've picked up on those comments," Sean said. He raised his eyebrows as Gibbs cursed. "Gibbs?"

"Just better hope it isn't too late," he said. "They passed the thinking stage..."

"Almost a month ago."

Sean shook his head. "I don't want to know how you know that."

"Abs gave up caffeine," Gibbs said.

"She's not...?" Sean hesitated against saying it out loud.

Gibbs shook his head. "She said it was because they were trying, not because they had succeeded. That's the night I was pushing them about getting married. Figured if they were going to have kids, they should, but she talked me around. She always has a way of making me change my mind about things."

"Daughters can do that," Sean said, smiling. "Eileen's always tougher on Sarah than I am, and I'm tougher on Tim than she is."

"Yeah." Gibbs sipped more coffee.

"So if Abby is pregnant and she and Jimmy can't work it out?" Sean couldn't imagine how something like that would affect the close-knit team.

"Hell if I know," Gibbs said. "I had Rule 12 for a reason. I'm starting to remember why."

When Abby walked in the apartment, she could see Jimmy's head over the back of the couch.

"Hey," she said. "I was wondering if I'd see you today." She dropped her bag and hung up her cape, unzipping her boots and padding over to see him. "I've missed you this week." She leaned in to kiss him.

"I've missed you too, Abs." He put his textbook down.

She curled up on the couch next to him. "I was just out with Sarah and Ziva." She made a face. "We've got a plan, to deal with Josh. It was Ziva's idea, but we don't want to tell Tony and Timmy, or Gibbs. They've got enough going on."

"Yeah, Abs, about that." He pulled away and turned so he was facing her. "You know how Tony and Tim were fighting?"

She nodded. "I'm glad they worked things out," she said. "Tony's dad coming to town was really bad timing." She made a face at the thought of Tony's father.

"This whole week was bad timing," Jimmy said. "Well, most of it. It got me thinking, though."

"Yeah, me too," Abby said. She thought about everything Sarah had said. "Josh has been hanging around the coffee shop getting in Sarah's way. We're trying to find a way to stop him before he gets stalker-like."
"He's not actually doing anything, though, is he?" Jimmy frowned.

Abby shook her head, her pigtails smacking her face. "Making Sarah sick with worrying about what he might do, which is totally not cool. She said she'd told Tony about it, but he said Metro couldn't do anything about it."

"Yeah, about Tony." Jimmy frowned. "Abs, you know how he and Tim were fighting last week?"

"What? They're not fighting again, are they? Because Josh has enough to answer for with all the stuff he's doing to Sarah and her failing her exams and getting sick and feeling like she can't be at work without him there is bad enough, but if he's got them fighting again after they finally got back on track, I might have to tell Gibbs about him so Gibbs can scare him because Gibbs can scare anybody and Josh hasn't met him yet, so Gibbs will be twice as scary." She stopped to take a breath.

"Abs, no, they're not fighting again. But-"

"Oh, good, because this was a bad week for them, and now that Tony's dad's gone and Sarah's still having Josh issues, they can't be fighting too because that's just too much going on and something's got to give and it can't be Tim and Tony, not after everything else, and-

"Abby! Would you stop talking for a minute and listen to me?" Jimmy got up and shoved his hands in his pockets, pacing around the room. "I've been trying to talk to you all week, and you're not listening."

Abby stared at him. Jimmy, mad? Jimmy didn't get mad, not ever. "Jimmy?"

"Look, I know you're worried about Tony and Tim and Sarah and everybody else, but for once could you worry about us?" He stopped pacing and stood there, arms crossed. "Abby, I love your big heart and how you try and take care of everybody, but if you can't find time to listen to me, maybe I should just tell my landlord I'm renewing my lease."

Abby just stared. Where had this... "Jimmy, what are you talking about? You haven't been home all week, and now you're talking about not moving in. If you want to break up, just say it."

Jimmy cursed. "No, I don't want to break up. I'm just trying to get you to listen to me."

"So what, this is shock tactics? You've been watching Gibbs in interrogation? Whatever you have to say, I'm listening." She pulled her knees to her chest and hugged them close. How had she missed what was going on?

Jimmy sank down on the arm of the couch and ran a hand through his hair, making the curls on top stick out. "I'm not even sure I know where to start." He sighed. "It's not a something, really. It's more a not-something."

"Jimmy, I know Gibbs has ESP, but I don't. Whatever it is, you're going to have to explain it." She hugged her legs tighter, feeling an ache in her heart like it would just fall out and shatter into pieces so small even McGee and all his experience rebuilding tiny circuit boards wouldn't be able to fix.

"When Tim and Tony were fighting, they both knew they were going to work it out because they each knew the other one wasn't going to give up on their marriage." He sighed. "And I wondered if we could say the same if we started fighting. And I wanted to ask, but I couldn't and then you were busy and you didn't seem to care that I wasn't staying here." He pushed his glasses up and rubbed his eyes. "Abby, I don't want to break up with you, but I do need to know that you're not going to walk away if things get rough, and I just... We haven't been together long enough. We can't know
that yet."

Abby felt tears fill her eyes, and she struggled to keep them from spilling. She didn't want to guilt Jimmy into saying things were OK when they really weren't, and she knew if she started crying, he might say what she wanted to hear just to get her to stop. She swallowed, hard. When she thought she could speak without her voice shaking, she said, "Jimmy, I'm not going to leave. And I don't want you to leave." She swallowed. "But I don't want you to feel stuck either." She forced the words out of her mouth. "If you don't want to move in yet, I understand." She wrapped her arms as tight as they would go, hoping he would say yes, he wanted to move in, but knowing she couldn't ask that.

He stood and walked across the room, looking out the window. She wanted to go over, but wasn't sure she trusted herself to stand up. Finally he spoke. "I don't know, Abs. I really don't."

That night, as he lay sleeping next to her, his bleak tone replayed in her head, a loop that had her praying to all the saints she could think of that she hadn't just ruined the best thing that had happened to her in a long time.
Chapter 27

Monday, March 29, 2010

The next morning, Jimmy had already left for class when Abby's alarm woke her from what felt like only 15 minutes of sleep. She'd spent the whole night realizing that she'd missed something big.

She dragged herself through her morning routine, wishing for the pick-me-up of a Caf-Pow. After what Jimmy said last night, there was no reason she couldn't have one. They probably shouldn't be thinking about kids yet, not with this mess hanging over them. But she couldn't bring herself to do it. Somehow, it felt like doing that would be admitting that this wasn't going to work. Yeah, it was dumb. But if just wedding rings and vows were enough to make Tim and Tony sure Tony wasn't going to run and Tim wasn't going to walk away, then maybe symbolic stuff really did mean something.

Abby frowned at herself in the mirror. Her makeup couldn't hide the dark circles under her eyes from lack of sleep, and she could see she wasn't her usual chipper self. Even her pigtails were drooping. A look at the clock got her moving though — Gibbs wasn't technically her boss, but if he came looking and she wasn't there, he'd know something was up, and she didn't want to set his gut going. Especially since she was pretty sure he'd agree with Jimmy, especially after he'd pushed her on getting married at her birthday dinner.

Before she could get to the Navy Yard, though, Gibbs called her.

"String of robberies at Norfolk, Abs. Small arms, C4, grenades. Ziva's bringing the evidence back to the Navy Yard as we speak, then working from there. We need whatever you can dig up as quickly as possible. Get McGee once he's done with his class this morning."

Gibbs being Gibbs, he'd hung up before she could say anything.

When she got to the Yard, Ziva wasn't there, and her cell GPS showed she was still at least 45 minutes away, so Abby headed to Autopsy. Some tea and wisdom could only help this morning.

"Ahh, Abigail. How are you this fine Monday morning?" Ducky was just loosening the loop of his tie so he could slip it over his head, untying the Windsor knot and draping it on the coat rack.

"Not as chipper as you, Duckman." She smiled, a ghost of her usual grin. "Good weekend?"

"I had quite a nice respite from work, yes," he said. "Now, what can I do for you this morning? Young Mr. Palmer is at class, as I'm sure you're aware."

Abby nodded. "I actually came to see you," she said. She linked and unlinked her fingers, trying to figure out what to say.

Ducky motioned her to a chair. "So does this mean he spoke to you this weekend?"

"Kid's a nice person, Duckman," she said. "I mean, you knew he was mad at me?"

Ducky shook his head. "No, my dear. Quite the opposite, in fact. He was concerned about how best to resolve an impasse between you, though he mentioned you didn't realize you were at one."

"Yeah, that's the understatement of the year. Ducky, he just blew up at me. I mean, I know now
that he was trying to say something and I just didn't realize it because every time he mentioned Tony and Tim fighting it got me off on another tangent, but I didn't know he could get that mad. And now he's talking about not moving in and this is really serious and I don't know how we got to this point, but I have to fix it because I screwed up. I mean, like screwed up more than the time I let my crazy stalker get into NCIS." Abby felt a sob catch in her breath and swallowed it, but she couldn't stop the tear that leaked out. "Ducky, what do I do?"

Ducky reached over and hugged her. "Oh, Abigail. First, I believe some tea is in order." He pulled back. "Would you like some of my Earl Grey?"

Abby thought, then shook her head. "I have a tea bag of mine, better stick to that." She giggled at Ducky's expression. "I know, I know, you don't believe in tea bags, but that's how they sell it, and it's the only thing I've found that tastes like Caf-Pow without the caffeine."

Ducky nodded and opened his mouth as though he was going to say something, but didn't. Abby wanted to ask, but she wasn't sure she could handle it — Ducky must have stopped himself for a reason.

As the water came to a boil, Ducky looked at her. "Do you understand what Jimmy was trying to say to you?"

Abby nodded. "I think I do. I mean, now I really get it, because one of the things he said was that it was too easy for him to just move back to his own apartment last week, which is totally my fault because I thought he was staying away because he thought Sarah was crashing with me but I never asked and I never talked to him and that's how we got in this place." She chewed her lower lip. "Ducky, you know me and traditions and everything, and I always said I'd never get married. But whether he was trying to or not, Jimmy showed me why he was worried because even though he stayed at our place last night, I'm not sure he'll be there tonight and I always thought marriage was like a trap, something that you'd be stuck in even if you didn't want to be, but now I get what Jimmy was saying about Tim and Tony and how they knew they would work it out because neither one of them was going to walk away from their marriage and I'm afraid Jimmy's going to walk because I was an idiot and made him think I cared more about everybody else than I care about him."

Ducky reached over to put a hand on her shoulder, and somehow that helped her calm down, just a bit. "Abby, I do not believe either one of you wants the other to walk away. I do think you both need to talk to each other. If Jimmy is not at your shared apartment tonight, there is nothing to prevent you from going to his, is there?"

Abby shook her head.

"Then my suggestion would be to allow the day to play itself out, but if needed, go and have the conversation with him if he chooses his own apartment this evening." He poured the boiling water first into her cup, then into his tea pot. "It is not that couples never fight. All do at some point. It is, as you have seen with Timothy and Anthony in recent days, that the ones with healthy relationships have figured out how to talk when the conversations are difficult at best."

She sniffed and wrapped her hands around the mug to warm them. "Thanks, Ducky," she said. As she sipped her tea, she thought about what Jimmy had said, really thought about it. Ducky, thankfully, allowed her to let her thoughts roam as he enjoyed his tea and then slipped off to change into his scrubs. When her cell beeped to let her know Ziva was turning into the Yard and would have the evidence to the garage in a few minutes, she headed out, feeling marginally better.
Tony had gotten the call from Gibbs about the robberies at 0230, so Tim knew what he would be doing as soon as he finished his first training session.

When he walked into the lab at lunchtime, Abby was just picking at her food as she worked.

"What do you need help with, Abs?"

"Anything. Everything. Life." She sighed. "I've got video footage from the cameras on and near the base that I haven't touched yet."

She sounded so down and un-Abby-like that Tim decided a bit of role reversal was in order and wrapped his arms around her from behind, resting his chin on her shoulder. "OK, Abs, spill."

He felt her tense, so he squeezed tighter, the way she always did to him, and slowly she relaxed. As he hugged, she explained everything that had happened, ending with, "Tim, I don't know what to do to fix it."

He pulled away and turned her chair so she was facing him. "Abby, you need to talk to him." He thought back to the fall. "Look, Tony and I hit problems like this when we were dating, too. That's one of the reasons I resisted moving in with him when all of you guys were pressuring me."

"But you worked it out." Abby looked up at him, her green eyes watery. "How do I know Jimmy and I can work this out?"

He smiled. "Abs, you make it sound like it was a sure thing that Tony and I would work it out. It wasn't. Gibbs had to step in to help Tony deal with the issue that was causing our problems, even though we didn't know he knew we were together." He paused. "Actually, I'm not sure he knew we were together then."

Abby frowned. "But that means Tony had an issue that wasn't related to you two; it was just causing problems for you. But Jimmy and I don't have that kind of problem. I mean, we're our problem."

Tim shook his head. "Sounds to me like you're each part of the problem. You were so caught up in everything else going on you weren't listening to Jimmy, which, face it Abs, is something you do a lot when you get wound up. And Jimmy didn't talk to you until he was so frustrated he got really mad. For all I know, that might be something he does a lot, too — I've never seen him get mad, but he also doesn't usually try to tell us if he's got issues with something, so that doesn't mean he doesn't do that a lot." He reached over and put his hands on her shoulders. "I'm not going to say you two should get married or shouldn't. Tony and I were fine without it until I got shot and he almost got shut out. We'd made our own vows before that. But it does feel like something changed by going through with the ceremony. I can't explain it, but it did help last week." He huffed out a breath. "It's not a cure-all, though. I still went to my dad one night last week because I was afraid Tony had decided to walk away after all the crap with his dad. Getting married won't magically solve your problems, and not getting married doesn't mean you're going to definitely have them."

A half-hour later, after Abby's third yawn, he chased her into her office for a nap. Once she was asleep, he called Tony and gave him a quick run-down.

"What's your point, McChatty?"

"Sounds like Jimmy's feeling pressured because he has to make a decision on his apartment right now. I thought we might offer to take some of the pressure off."

"You suggesting we get a housemate?"
"Not quite. Figured we could make him an offer that if he moves in with Abby and then decides it's not working, he can crash with us until he finds a new place to live."

"Good thinking, Tim. Sure, let him know. But you're telling Jethro he might end up with a roommate."

"Yeah, Tony, I'll tell him." Tim rolled his eyes as he hung up.

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When Gibbs made it back from Norfolk that afternoon, leaving Dwayne and Tony behind to continue questioning potential suspects, he headed straight for the lab, No-Caf-Pow in hand.

McGee was hard at work at the station in the middle of the main lab, but Abby was nowhere in sight.

"Abs?" he said.

McGee pointed toward Abby's office. "She's asleep," he said. "She can't do anything I can't do until the tests finish running, and she was exhausted, so I made her go lie down."

Gibbs felt his gut clench and walked quietly into the middle room. Abby was curled up around Bert on the floor, her skin even paler than usual, highlighting the dark circles under her eyes. Even asleep she looked tired, and he bent down to rub a hand over her shoulder. She didn't even stir. Standing, wincing as his knees cracked, Gibbs walked back to the main lab and looked at McGee.

"Boss?"

"What's wrong with Abby?"

"I'm not sure-"

"McGee, you know something or you wouldn't have made her take a nap."

His agent's hands tightened almost imperceptibly on the keyboard. "I know what's wrong. I was starting to say I'm not sure she'd want me to tell you."

"Aw, hell." Now he had a pretty good idea what was going on. "McGee, you'd better have something for me when I get back from talking to Ducky."

"I have something now."

"Yeah? What?"

He made notes as McGee outlined the details he'd pulled from the security cameras and traffic cameras around the base, giving them a fairly good timeframe of the crime.

"That's good work, McGee," he said. "Call DiNozzo. He and Wilson can use that to check alibis."

With that, he headed out of the lab, where Jimmy and Ducky were just finishing with a body for a different team's case.

"Got a minute, Duck?"

His old friend nodded. "Mr. Palmer, why don't you go get some more supplies from the closet?"
"Yes, doctor." As soon as Palmer had left the room, Gibbs asked the question that had been on his mind. "Duck, is Abby pregnant?"

When Gibbs walked in and Dr. Mallard chased him out on an errand, Jimmy was pretty sure he knew what the topic of conversation was. So for once, he didn't run off and do the errand the medical examiner had made up. Instead, he hovered outside the door between Autopsy and Supply and listened. Until he heard Gibbs' question.

Jimmy walked away, not waiting for Ducky's answer. That was one thing he hadn't even considered. Well, yes, he had considered it. He and Abby had talked about it at length and done more than talk about it in bed. But even with Ducky's warning a few weeks ago, he hadn't really thought about the chance it might happen anytime soon, and especially now, when he wasn't sure which end was up.

He wasn't sure what that would mean if Abby really was pregnant. He still wasn't sure about moving in with her, but that had to change if they had a baby coming, didn't it?

Jimmy leaned back against the wall and let himself slide down until he hit the floor. He dropped his head back against the wall and looked up, as though he would find guidance written on the ceiling tiles.

That evening, Damon found himself sitting at the coffee shop where Sarah worked, poring over reports about program resources as he tried to get up to speed on all the different possibilities out there for the Wounded Warriors to access as they rehabilitated.

When Ziva had called him last night and asked him to help with Josh-Watch, he was happy to join in. The team had done a lot for him, and he was glad that they trusted him enough, even after everything, to consider him part of the family. Besides, men like Josh bothered him. The entitlement in his attitude grated on his nerves.

As soon as he'd finished work, he'd headed to the shop. Ziva had offered to stop by if she didn't have to stay late for a case; Damon figured it was a good bet he'd have a quiet night to himself. The number of nights she didn't have to stay late was pretty small.

When he'd gotten to the shop, he could see Sarah working the fancy coffee machine, so he'd settled at a table by the pick-up counter. He hadn't been there an hour when he Josh walked in. Damon noticed him right away; he'd only been reading with half his attention. The other half had been focused on what was going on, the way he'd been when on patrol in Iraq.

Damon set down the folder he'd been reading and picked up his mug, sipping while keeping an eye on Josh. Josh headed right for that side of the coffee shop. As he walked over, Damon made sure to catch his eye, their gazes locked on each other for a long minute before Josh changed course and went to the other side of the room, as far from Sarah and the pick-up counter as possible.

Once he ordered, he waited away from the counter, then picked the drinks up without saying anything to Sarah. As Josh walked away, Sarah looked across the counter and mouthed "Thank you" to Damon. He settled in, prepared to stay until after Josh left.

When Sarah got her break, she brought her paper cup of tea over to sit with Damon.

"You know how I said you guys really didn't have to do this?" she said. "I'm glad you did."
Damon smiled at her. "I don't like bullies, and that's what he is. I almost wish he'd say something, just so I'd have an excuse to tell him what I think of him."

She giggled. "But then you'd have the rest of the guys upset because you got to do it, not them."

"True." He looked at Sarah. "Something about his eyes, I don't trust him. If anything happens when we're all at work and not here, you write it down and send it to all of us, OK? I know Ziva said we can't bring Metro into this yet, but I have a feeling we will before this is done."

When she shivered, he mentally cursed. "Sorry, Sarah. I wasn't trying to scare you."

She shook her head. "No, it's OK. I think I needed to hear that. I've just been thinking about him as annoying, even after hearing Abby's story about her stalker, but he could be a lot worse."

"Just be careful," he said. "What time do you get off tonight?"

"2200," she said. "Since I start mid-afternoon, I don't have to close."

"I always forget your whole family is military," Damon said. "Well, I'm going to stick around for the next couple of hours, then walk you home."

"Tim's worrying is rubbing off on you," she said. "You know Tony calls him McWorry for a reason."

"Sarah, humor me," he said.

"OK, OK." She looked at her watch. "Oops, got to get back to work."

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When she'd finally finished all the tests at the lab, Abby put her babies to bed and headed home. Her heart sank when she saw the lights were off when she walked in, but she checked every room, just to make sure. It was late enough that if Jimmy was coming, he would be there.

She thought about all the advice she'd gotten from Ducky and Tim, of the conclusions she'd reached during a long day running tests. And after throwing a change of clothes into her backpack, she headed to Jimmy's. He might not want her to stay; he might come back to their place with her. But she wanted to be prepared for all possibilities.

As she drove over, she thought about what she wanted to say, then realized this wasn't about that. She needed to listen, to hear whatever Jimmy had to say. She wouldn't know what her answers were until she heard his questions; couldn't refute his arguments until she knew what they were.

When she got to his building, she could see lights on in the windows. Sucking in a deep breath, she forced herself to buzz his apartment. She could have used her key, but she wanted to give him the choice to let her up.

"Hello?"

"Jimmy, it's me. Can I come up?" She crossed her fingers as she waited for his response.

Except all she got was the buzzer releasing the door. She didn't know if that was a good sign or not.

When she knocked on his apartment door, he answered right away. He was dressed for bed in pajama pants and a long-sleeved T-shirt, his hair rumpled and standing up the way it got when he
ran his hands through it.

"What's up, Abby?" He stood in the doorway.

"Can I come in?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah." He stepped back, and she followed him into the apartment. His textbooks were scattered on the coffee table they had planned to donate to Goodwill since she already had one, and they had both agreed they liked hers better.

He motioned to the chair, and she sat down, drawing her legs up under her. He sat on the edge of the couch, legs wide, elbows resting on his legs.

"So what's going on, Abby?" He looked at her through his glasses, his face hesitant, and she realized this was as tough for him as it was for her.

"I'm sorry, Jimmy," she said. "You're right, I wasn't listening. I should have been, and I wasn't. I did notice you weren't home at night, though. I just... I thought you thought Sarah was crashing with me and were giving her space. I assumed and I shouldn't and if I hadn't, I would have asked before we got to yelling at each other." Even as she said it, she knew she was forgetting her vow in the car. "Wait, wait. That wasn't what I meant to say. I mean, it was because that's how I felt, but I wasn't going to say it and..." She linked and twisted her fingers. "Jimmy, tell me what's wrong. Tell me what I wouldn't listen to before." She rested her elbows on her knees, fingers still interlaced, and rested her chin on them, looking right at him.

He looked over at her, his face serious, and Abby bit her tongue to keep from saying anything. She had to get this right, before it was too broken to fix.

"It's not..." He started again. "I just..." He rubbed the back of his neck. "When it first started, I just wanted to talk to you about marriage. I know you didn't plan on it, and it's not because of me — you told Gibbs you wouldn't marry anybody. But then I heard Tim and Tony each say he knew the other one wasn't leaving because he wouldn't walk away from their marriage, and it made me think about whether I could say that about you, or you say that about me." Abby wanted to look away, wanted to stop Jimmy, tell him he had it all wrong, but she knew if she did that, she might as well leave now, because they wouldn't be able to fix this.

He sat up and looked straight into her eyes. "I didn't mean to stay away all week. I just wasn't sure what to say Monday night, so it seemed easier to come here. And you didn't seem to notice, so then I started thinking that maybe it was that easy for you, that you hadn't noticed I wasn't at home."

Abby opened her mouth to protest, then shut it again. You're listening, she reminded herself. And as she replayed Jimmy's words, she realized he'd called their apartment home, not this one. Maybe, just maybe, they could fix this.

"Abs? Whatever you have to say, say it."

"Are you sure?" Abby said. "I mean, this started because I wasn't listening. I was just talking, and when I get going I'm tough to stop, I mean except for Gibbs, and he's like the only one who can get Tony to shut up, so he's got special babble-stopping powers, and."

Jimmy started laughing, and she stopped. "Abs, I'm sure. It's not just that you weren't listening. It's that we were talking over each other. Past each other, maybe. But not with each other." He motioned for her to come over to the couch. "Come on, out with it."

"I noticed, Jimmy," she said. "Don't ever think I wouldn't notice you weren't there. I just..." She
sighed. "I assumed. And yes, I know what they say about assuming, and I think I just proved the point. I figured you were giving me space so Sarah could stay there, and I didn't even talk to you about it." She walked over and sat down next to him, turning so she could face the man she hoped she could still call her boyfriend when the night ended. "Was it that easy for you? To come back here?"

He leaned back against the couch cushions and laced his fingers on top of his head. "No. And yes. But no."

She giggled. "You want to try that again in English?"

He flashed a grin at her. "Sorry. I mean, it was weird, like the past couple of months never happened. I woke up a few nights wondering if I'd just dreamed it all. And then I'd reach for something and remember it was at our place, and I'd realize I wasn't dreaming. I was stuck in this really bad version of reality, and I didn't know how to find my way out. Ducky said I needed to talk to you, but I couldn't figure out how. Every time I thought I might have time, something else came up, and the longer it went on, the harder it was to figure out what to say."

She swallowed at the thought of Jimmy here at night thinking he'd imagined them together. "You weren't dreaming," she whispered. As she replayed what he said, she realized he'd done it again. "You're still calling it 'our place',' she said. "It is, you know. It felt empty without you."

He smiled at her, and she reached over to kiss his cheek, just to let him know she wasn't mad, even if she had yelled at him yesterday. She started to pull back, but he wrapped one arm around her shoulders, drawing her close. She shifted over and snuggled close, feeling a tension she hadn't even realized was knotted in her belly disappear. As they sat there in silence, she thought about what Jimmy had said and about what he meant.

"You know I'm not leaving, right?" she said. "No matter how much we fight, or why we fight, I'm not walking away, and I'm not letting you walk away." She looked up at him, then thought for a second. "And wow, that came out way more stalkerish that I meant it to. I mean, I'm here for you no matter what happens. That is, if you still feel the same."

He nodded. "Abs, I've got one more question for you."

"Anything."

Jimmy pulled away so he was looking straight at her. "Today, Gibbs came down to see Ducky after he stopped by the lab. He asked if you were pregnant. Are you?"

Abby just stared at him, then blinked a few times. "OK, what brought that on?" She frowned. "That must have been while I was taking a nap. I didn't sleep last night because I was so worried I'd screwed everything up, so McGee made me go lie down. But still that's a really random question for Gibbs to ask."

"So you're not?"

Abby thought about it for a second. "I'm not even to the point where I'd be late if I was," she said. "It would be at least another week before I could take a test and have it be accurate. I mean, I know Gibbs has scary psychic powers, but even I don't think he could know I was pregnant before I do."

"Is it possible?"

Abby shrugged. "Well, we haven't been doing anything to stop it. But I don't feel any different, other than tired because I didn't sleep and I was afraid if I drank a Caf-Pow to get me going, you'd
see the cup and think I had given up on us and then it really wouldn't be fixable." She frowned. "I could call him and ask why he asked Ducky."

"And then they would know I'd been eavesdropping," Jimmy said.

"Good point." She thought. "Maybe McGee knows, if he was talking to him right before he went down to see Ducky?"

Jimmy looked at his watch. "Abs, it's almost 2300. We can't call him now."

"Another good point." She sighed. "Look, I'll talk to them tomorrow."

"And you're sure you're not?" Jimmy frowned. "Because I don't know about you, but I think that's more news than I can handle this week."

Abby couldn't help nodding. "Me, too. I promise, if I'm not right on time, I'll get you to draw some blood for a test. The HGC levels would be high enough for a blood test by then, even if it would take another day or two for the home tests to register."

He didn't answer, just pulled her close. As she lay against his chest, Abby really, really hoped Gibbs wasn't psychic.
Tuesday, March 30, 2010

Tony was glad they hadn't caught a rough case Tuesday. Gibbs had them investigating possible financial fraud, but since there weren't any dead bodies to clutter things up, they got to leave at 1700, just in time for Tony to head to his second appointment with the therapist.

The homework Palletini had made him do should have prepared him for tonight, but it hadn't. Reliving his time with Jeanne, and trying to tie that into his mother's death, his father's neglect, it wasn't easy. Scratch that. It was easier to figure out the connection than it was to see a Zivaism coming, and he usually saw those a mile away. This was textbook stuff, the things he would have learned in that psych class he'd taken in college if he hadn't been so busy trying to memorize the playbook so he could keep his scholarship. Mom gets yanked away by death, father steps away from neglect. Junior DiNozzo learns that it's easier to do the stepping first, easier to not to get too close. Tony the Big Man on Campus goes the playboy route, cultivating an image of somebody who never sticks with any one girl for too long — or one guy, for those quiet escapades he never talked about. Officer DiNozzo learns to move on when the roots start sinking into the ground.

"So, why didn't Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo leave?" Palletini asked.

Question after question, forcing Tony to look inside those junk drawers you never want to clean out because who knows what you'll find. It's been a while, you've crammed lots of stuff in there. Once the elastics tangle with the corkscrew, you've got a lethal weapon. Add a couple of loose buttons and you could take an eye out. He sighed.

Why didn't he leave? Who wouldn't let him leave? Why was proving himself to Gibbs so important? Why did he decide to stay to train Probie? Why didn't he leave when Gibbs came back? What was different with Jeanne? Why did he stay? Why did he pick NCIS over Jeanne? Was he running then? Was he running away from Jeanne? Or was he running to Gibbs and the team?

As he headed home after the appointment, he focused on every detail of the road in front of him. He'd learned that skill early on. Focus on the elaborate detail in the Persian rug, not the pain from Uncle Carmine's fists. Memorize every book title on the wall of the library so Grandfather's tirades get lost in the piles of information flooding his brain.

It was almost 2000 when he pulled in the driveway. He trudged up the walkway, forgetting to be prepared for the 85 pounds of exuberance waiting inside the door. As he tossed his coat on the washing machine, too weary to think about hanging it up, he toed off his shoes, kicking them into the corner instead of placing them on the shoe rack inside the door.
There was a note on the table pointing to the refrigerator and a plate of leftover chicken, rice and broccoli inside for him to heat up. Tony put it in the microwave and headed upstairs to change into sweats. He heard the click-clacking in McWriter's study and decided against disturbing him. Tim would either hear Tony on the stairs, or he was so far into good old L.J.'s adventures that he wouldn't notice if an entire gun battle took place in the living room.

When he got back, his food was hot. He looked in the fridge and almost grabbed a bottle of beer, but decided on water instead. Beer was probably a bad idea tonight.

He tried to turn his thoughts off, to focus on the taste and texture of the food. Tim had done something different with the chicken, and he turned that over to his mind as a puzzle to occupy it.

Before he knew it, the plate was empty. He cleaned up mechanically, focusing on the steps. Scrape, rinse, wash, rinse, dry. In the same automatic mindset, he found himself sitting at the piano, lifting the lid from the keys. As he started out slowly, limbering up with scales and a few riffs, he let loose everything he'd been penning in all evening. Before long, he'd abandoned exercises for music. He closed his eyes, just letting everything flow out through his hands.

He only stopped when he could feel his fingers starting to cramp, stretching them and arching his back to work out the kinks.

"You coming up?" Tim sat on the floor beside the piano, his back against the wall, Jethro's head in his lap.

Tony cracked his neck. "How long have you been sitting there?"

"About an hour." Tim shrugged. "I like listening to you play, you know that." He looked at his watch. "It's almost 0100."

Tony made a face. "Go to bed, Tim." When his husband started shaking his head, Tony glared at him.

"Tony, you're not Gibbs. You can't stare me into submission." Tim grinned.

"Yeah, well he's going to do more than that if we both show up half-asleep tomorrow," Tony said. "Well, later today. Look, I'm already going to be running late because it's a Brad morning, and you've got class first thing. I'll be up later, but you go."

"You promise you're coming up?" Tim pulled out the McEyebrow, and Tony laughed.

"Yes, I'm coming up," he said. "I'll even try not to wake you up when I get into bed. I'm just... There's a lot of stuff running around in here."

"You mean you haven't tired out the hamster yet?" Tim's smirk had Tony snorting.

"OK, bedtime for you, McSnarky."

Tim got up, prompting a whine from Jethro, who obviously wanted his pillow back. He wrapped his arms around Tony, who reached a hand up to hold the pair clasped across his chest. "Thanks." He didn't know how else to say it, but McGenius understood.

"I love you, too, Tony."

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Wednesday, March 31, 2010

Sarah had made a point to get to bed early the night before, but she still felt groggy when her alarm went off. She slapped it off quickly so it wouldn't wake Katherine, but resisted getting out of bed. Her arms and legs felt like they were made of lead. When she finally forced herself up, she did it quickly, then put a steadying hand down. Head rush. She decided maybe skipping dinner the night before hadn't been such a great idea. Just because her one night not working had been invaded by Chrissy, who was hanging out in the lounge outside her dorm room, chattering away about this wonderful guy she was seeing with girls from the other end of the hall. Sarah hadn't wanted to step outside the room and walk the gauntlet of the lounge just to get to dinner, and by the time they'd left to go someplace else, the dining halls were closed and the whole experience had her stomach so tied in knots, she'd thought for a while even the tea wouldn't be enough.

As she let the hot water wash the fatigue from her body, Sarah wondered if she would have been better off to take the really harsh two-minute walk past that skank and her friends to get out of the building and actually eat something that wasn't ice cream, pizza, or peanut butter. Sure, she probably wouldn't have felt like eating right after, but she could have taken her tea and gone for a walk until it settled her stomach. That had to be better than three hours of knowing Chrissy was right there and feeling her stomach churn from the constant stress. Her tea water was just boiling when she made it back to the room, and she turned it off before it could whistle and wake Katherine, then poured it into her travel mug to steep while she dressed. She realized she probably should get something before class, but it took her so long to get moving that she knew she'd have to run just to make it to class. Not for the first time, she vowed to get some granola bars or something to keep in the room. That would have helped last night and this morning.

After math, she headed to the coffee shop to start studying. The library was more likely to be Josh-free, but she knew she needed to eat. Her knees were feeling wobbly, and if her mom found out she hadn't eaten real food since yesterday afternoon, she'd read her the riot act. She settled into a table by the window where she could look out and see the crocuses and daffodils finally starting to peek out from the ground, long after they normally bloomed. This year's snow had messed with everything. She got a big bowl of soup and a sandwich, plus a large mug of tea, and challenged herself to eat it before Josh showed up and ruined her appetite. The team had been doing a great job of hanging out at the coffee shop in the evenings to keep Josh away, but they couldn't do anything about the daytime, and he had taken to coming in during the first half of her shifts, leaving not long after Damon or Ziva or one of the others arrived.

Sarah opened her textbook and started back at the beginning, working through the first problems and stopping to study each time she got stuck. About half of it had stayed in her brain, but she found a lot that just hadn't stuck the first time.

She didn't know how long she'd been immersed when she realized she needed a bathroom break. Her tea was almost gone, so she stuck her wallet in her pocket so she could get a refill on the way back.

As she stood, she realized she hadn't seen Josh yet today. That was odd. Usually he crossed paths with her when she left math class. And this was the first afternoon he hadn't been in here all week. She walked back to the bathroom, wondering if he'd decided to change the game on her. Sure, he might have given up. And Tim might take up skydiving. She snorted. He was up to something. She was sure of it.

When she walked back to her chair, tea in hand, Josh and another girl were sitting at the next table. The girl looked familiar, but she couldn't place her. She tried to tune out their conversation, but as she focused on the numbers in front of her, lines Josh used to feed her kept catching her ear. After a
few minutes, she pulled out her iPod and turned the volume up high enough to drown them out. He was not going to screw things up for her any more than he already had.

Jimmy frowned as he puzzled over the pieces of shrapnel embedded in the back of the dead lance corporal. Ducky had let him handle the autopsy on this body while he worked on the sergeant who had died in the same explosion.

Even as one part of his brain catalogued the evidence and tried to make sense of it, the other part was stuck on the same thing it had been puzzling over for the past week — how to work things out with Abby.

He'd gone ahead and told his landlord he was moving out, and they'd set a date with the rest of the team to move the furniture in once he and Abby returned from visiting her family in Louisiana. They were leaving in a week and a half, and Jimmy was a little nervous about it. Part of him was nervous because Abby still couldn't take the pregnancy test yet, though she'd said she felt fine. And he had to admit, even watching her carefully, he hadn't noticed any symptoms. Still, the thought had him worried enough that he hadn't wanted to have sex. He knew they needed to talk about birth control now that they'd decided to wait, but he was still trying to figure out how to bring it up. Maybe it was time to schedule an appointment with Dr. Palletini, just to talk some of this out. He wanted to make sure—

If he hadn't had a scalpel in his hand at the time, Jimmy would have smacked himself in the back of the head. Wasn't that what had gotten them into this mess, him wanting to make sure the time was perfect before bringing something up? And what had Dr. Palletini spent two years helping him sort through? With his mother, conversations were best handled gently, or they turned into guilt trips and tears and all sorts of emotional minefields. They were never simple, but Jimmy had gotten into the habit of picking his moments, looking for the time that was least likely to trigger an emotional meltdown.

"Sure, fall back in the old ruts. Idiot." He didn't realize he'd spoken out loud until he heard Tony.

"You learn mind-reading from Gibbs?"

Jimmy jerked up, seeing the senior agent standing across the table from him. Dr. Mallard was nowhere in sight.

"Tony?"

"No, Black Lung. I'm Ziva. Yes, I'm Tony." He reached over and Jimmy stepped back, out of head-slapping range.

"Sorry, Tony. I was lost in my head."

"Yeah, spent a lot of time there myself the last day or so." Tony frowned, wrinkling his forehead. "Feels like somebody gave me a head-slap, except instead of scrambling things it unscrambled things. You ever feel like that?"

Jimmy nodded. "All the time." He sighed. "Just had one of those myself."

"About habits, bad ones?"

Jimmy nodded. "Just realized I'm doing some of the same things with Abby I've done with my mother."
"That's pretty hinky, Jimmy. Abs and your mother? They're a little-" Tony stopped and snapped the rubber band around his wrist. "There I go again."

"Being inappropriate?" Jimmy snorted. "You're always inappropriate."

"No, making jokes and comments when things start getting serious. I'm like Robin Williams in Good Will Hunting." Tony paced. "It's this really heavy movie, and I should be thinking, oh, I'm going to give this the weight and the seriousness it deserves, but I can't keep the comedy genie stuffed down in the lamp and he sneaks out every time I start to spend too much time in serious territory, yanking me back into my comedy comfort zone."

Jimmy smiled. "And you're trying to stop yourself from always playing the clown?"

"Yeah. Sounds crazy, doesn't it?" He hoisted himself up on the empty table next to the one where Jimmy was working. "I mean, I'm me. Very Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo, the one who has McNames and tweaks Ziva about her complete inability to master American idioms and says enough inappropriate stuff to get a dozen headslaps a week. What would I be if I was completely serious?"

"Well, you wouldn't be Tony." Jimmy rubbed the back of his wrist across an itch on his nose. "But nobody's saying you have to always be serious, are they?"

Tony shook his head. "No, just me. I mean, sure, I probably shouldn't be, but it feels like if I let myself be a goof at all, then I just automatically go there when I'm uncomfortable, even when I know I'm making myself look and sound like an idiot." He started fiddling with the rubber band. "The only thing I can really think of is to not let myself go there at all until I learn how to stay in the serious place."

Jimmy nodded. "I get it. I don't think it's going to work, but I get what you're saying."

"You think I can't be serious?"

Jimmy shook his head, trying to find the right words. Finally he said, "I think a lot of times you're playing a clown because we need it in this job. Gibbs, Ziva, they have intense down to an art form. Tim's good at bantering when somebody starts him off, but he gets stuck in his geek mode sometimes. You and Abby are the ones who keep things from getting tense. Well, and me too, but that's usually because I'm not thinking, not because I'm trying to be funny." He wrinkled his nose. "Yeah, because we need our Autopsy Gremlin to make my humor look tasteful." But Tony grinned, so Jimmy knew he wasn't serious.

"Hey, at least I don't get headslapped."

"That's it!" Tony pumped his fist in the air. "Jimmy, you're a genius."

"I am?" Jimmy frowned. "I mean, I am." He paused. "Why am I a genius, again?"

"The headslaps." Tony gave himself one. "When I'm getting too out of control, Gibbs smacks me and I know I need to rein it in. I just need something like that, something that's not a headslap, that you guys can say when I start using comedy as a buffer. I mean, it's not something I can use forever, but if you guys call me on it, I should be able to start stopping myself before I get too out-of-control, right?"

Jimmy grinned as he realized what Tony meant. "So if I'm trying to have a serious discussion with you and you start going goofball, I say something like..."
"Kurosawa!"

"Huh?" Jimmy knew he'd missed something.

"Akira Kurosawa, the famous Japanese director. It's not something that would ever come up in casual conversation, much less an argument, because let's face it, none of you could appreciate that the man is a film god, much less know enough about him to argue me on anything related to him."

Jimmy snorted. "You sound like you're picking a safeword."

Tony raised one eyebrow. "Really? So it's like that with our Mistress of the Dark?"

"Tony."

"OK, OK, right. Deflecting. But you have to say the word and see if I realize it. Because it can't just be my name — Tim says it like that a dozen times a day when I'm being just a normal goofball, not my 'allergic to all serious discussion' craziness."

"So, what? We need to have a serious discussion?"

"Exactly." Tony thumped his fist on the steel table for emphasis. "Now, come on, what's the most serious discussion topic you can come up with?"

Jimmy didn't even think before he said what had been on his mind since yesterday. "Abby and I think we should wait to have kids until we get some of our own issues sorted out, but Gibbs seems to think she's pregnant and I know we're not ready for it even though we thought we were."

Tony's eyes widened. "OK, yeah, that's serious." He frowned. "Does Abby think she's pregnant? Because I know Gibbs knows everything, but I don't think he's that good."

Jimmy held up his hands. "She says not — she was as surprised as I was at the idea, but I heard Gibbs ask Ducky on Monday if Abby was pregnant."

"Well I know the man's gut is legendary, but he can't be that good," Tony said. "I mean, you'd know if she had morning sickness or any of those things women are supposed to get when they're pregnant, right? Pretty hard to miss your woman racing out of a nice warm bed with you to puke her guts out every morning, especially with no alcohol involved." He grinned. "When alcohol's involved, that's something completely different. Spring Break, hot chicks-"

Jimmy knew it wouldn't be that easy. "Kurosawa."

"What? Oh, man, I didn't even last two minutes." He head-slapped himself. "OK, DiNozzo, focus." He looked at Jimmy. "So when did you two go from wanting bat-gremlins to being worried that you might have actually succeeded?"

Jimmy sighed. "That's even longer than one of Ducky's stories. Let's just say Abby and I realized we need to work on communication before we try anything as complicated as adding kids to the mix."

"Ah, the reason Tim issued the invite from us to stay at our place if you feel like you need to move out." Tony nodded. "Say no more." He hopped up on the autopsy table. "OK, staying with the serious me for a minute, what happens if she is pregnant?"

Jimmy thought about it for a second, considering all the options. "I guess we just make the best of it," he said, finally. "I mean, it's not like she and I are talking about waiting years, or even all that
many months. We just realized we need to spend a little more time working on just us before adding rugrats to the mix. A year from now, you guys are going to be ready to smack us because we'll be grumbling about the days when we thought Abby getting pregnant was the problem, not the opposite."

Tony smirked. "Yeah, that's definitely one thing Tim and I don't have to worry about. Finding somebody who will let us adopt is our big concern, and even that shouldn't be too bad, just time-consuming. It's not like we're going to wake up one morning and have a letter telling us 'Hey, you're getting this baby to adopt whether you're ready or not, and he's due in two weeks.' I can work out all my demons first." He looked at Jimmy. "You know whether Abby is or isn't, Tim and I are here for you guys, whatever you need."

Jimmy nodded, his friend's support melting away some of the tension in his shoulders. "I know, Tony. Thanks."

-I still don't believe Ducky let you out early," Abby said as she dropped into the chair across from Jimmy that evening. "Gibbs just let us go half an hour ago."

"Well, we were basically done with the bodies, and he was as concerned about Sarah as the rest of us when I told him what was going on," Jimmy said. "He said he wouldn't think Josh was any real danger, but he still thought we were right to be concerned."

"Ducky would know," Abby said. "He is the psychology expert."

"Yeah, I'm kind of wishing we had gotten to introduce them before Sarah caught Josh," Jimmy said. "Ducky would have know right away whether we should worry or not."

"We could still bring him in," Aby said. "Get him to come down here some night that we don't have a case, have some tea with us. Maybe bring a chess game or cards, settle in for a bit. Then we'll blend in if Josh comes in; he might get to observe how Josh acts without Josh noticing us."

"Oh, he'll notice us," Jimmy said. "Remember, he's met all of us."

"Well who hasn't he met?"

"Gibbs."

"We could get Gibbs and Ducky to do it," Abby said. "You know Gibbs has been wanting to kill Josh since he first heard about this, and this wouldn't be as satisfying, but he'd at least feel like he was doing something."

"Yeah, but that means we'd have to tell Tony and Tim what's going on, and Sarah didn't want that."

"Sarah might not have a choice," Abby pointed out. "I mean come on, this is Tim we're talking about. He worries about everything. And Tony's ready to kill Josh already. If he finds out Josh is harassing her..."

"I thought you said he knew," Jimmy said. "Didn't he say we couldn't do anything or Josh would sue us for harassment?"

"I didn't say that," Abby said. "Must have been Sarah."

"I still think bringing Gibbs in is a bad idea," Jimmy said. "I mean, does he really look like he fits
"Well, it is a coffee shop, Abby said. "How out of place can he be?"

"Yeah, a coffee shop that specializes in the type of drinks Gibbs mocks when the rest of us get them."

"But Ducky fits in," Abby said. "I mean come on, this place totally has the university feel from being next to campus. Ducky would totally fit in. Josh would think he was a professor. And Gibbs is good undercover. We can get him to look like he's a friend of Ducky's, they can play chess..."

"Does Gibbs play chess?" Jimmy pointed out.

"Well, OK, poker then. Gibbs has a total poker face. I'll bet he and Ducky would have a good game."

"Two-handed poker?"

"Jimmy, I'm trying to be creative here," Abby said.

"No, you're right. They are the best bet," Jimmy said. "And I think we'd all feel better if we had Ducky's expert opinion."

"We could even wire him up, get some video," Abby said. "Or better yet, wire Sarah up. Then we could see what Josh does when we're not here."

"There's no way the director would OK that," Jimmy said. "He's not real fond of using NCIS resources for personal things, you know that."

She slumped down. "Yeah, I know," she said. "Still, it's a nice idea."

"Let's table Josh for now," Jimmy said. "I'm still trying to figure out us. Where do we go from here?"

Abby shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "I mean, I still think Gibbs is actually wrong for once. I don't feel pregnant. And if that's the case, that I'm not, do we really have anything to figure out?"

Jimmy just raised one eyebrow. "Abby, we're not in the right place for this. I mean, we're in the right place for a discussion, but not the right place for a bat-gremlin and all the stuff that goes along with it. At least not yet."

She nodded. "I know. And I've been thinking about what you said. I kind of get what you're saying, about wanting that symbol, that something that says we're both in this for the long haul. I just don't, oh, I don't know. I don't want to say I'm allergic to marriage, but the idea does make me itch. It's just..." She sighed. "A lot of them don't work. And a lot of people use it to beat each other over the head. And look at all the people who are protesting over things like Timmy and Tony getting married. I know they did and they could in DC, but I still think it seems wrong to just go ahead and do it when so many people still don't have the right. And I want to find another way to say the same thing to you, maybe vows like the guys said they exchanged at Christmas when they exchanged rings. I mean, that was the same thing, and that's all they were going to do until Timmy got shot and everything. I'm not sure why that can't be enough. It's not like anybody would ever not believe we were married."

"Abby, have you looked at us? We're probably the oddest possible couple out there. I'm the dork
and you're the Goth, and we're totally not what anybody would picture as the other half of our pair." Jimmy held out his hands. "I mean, I get what you're saying about it being marriage itself, not marriage to me.

"But you still need that commitment somehow." Abby said it like a statement, and Jimmy was relieved to see she finally was getting it.

"Yeah, I do." He opened his mouth, then closed it again.

"Speak, Jimmy. Not talking is how we ended up sleeping in different places all last week."

He reached across to capture her hands in his. "There's a part of me that wants to say I'll take you without it, that I still stand by what I said a couple of weeks ago, that this is crazy and right and all those other things."

She lifted one eyebrow. "I know there's a but in there someplace."

He nodded, searching for the words. "I want you, Abs. I want us, together with the coffin and however many bat-gremlins we have and all the craziness we can handle. But this is so new, and so crazy, I know that without that commitment, that symbol, I'm going to start thinking these same types of thoughts the next time we get our wires crossed." He squeezed her hands. "Remember how I found out about my henna allergy?"

"Yeah, when you and your last girlfriend got those matching tats," she said, grinning. "I have to say, I'd never figured you for a Maori design all over your shoulders."

"If I'd known about the allergy, I would have gone for something much smaller, believe me."

Jimmy rolled his shoulders at the memory. "Even hearing the word henna makes me itch now."

"So what's your point? Other than that if I ever get the mad urge to use henna instead of ink to keep it far away from you?" She grinned, and he couldn't resist tugging one of her pigtails.

"You cause the rash, you have to rub the ointment on." He grinned back at her, then sobered. "No, Tony was giving me a hard time then because we'd gotten henna tats because I didn't want to commit to the real thing."

"Good thought," Abby said. "I made a rule a long time ago — never get a tattoo connected with a person who wasn't going to be part of my life forever. Otherwise you end up with ink you hate because of who it's associated with."

Jimmy puzzled over that for a minute. "But didn't McGee get a tattoo with you?"

She shook her head. "Nope. He got it before our first date because Tony told him I wouldn't be interested in him otherwise. But the tattoo doesn't have anything to do with me, and we never got any together. All my science ones were either before or after, and even if they were during, they wouldn't be Timmy tattoos. I mean, sure, he's going to always be part of my life — we're best friends — but not the way he was then. Obviously, because you and Tony totally wouldn't go for that."

Jimmy just rolled his eyes. "Yeah, we had that conversation the time we found you two snuggled up together."

"You did? What-" She stopped. "I'm getting sidetracked." She pointed a finger at herself. "Focus, Abby." As he snickered, she looked at him. "Don't laugh - you guys talk to bodies. If you can talk to them, I can lecture myself."
"Abs, digressing again." He figured he should bring it back to her point. "So you don't do tattoos for guys. I get that. But that's my point."

She just looked at him, brow wrinkled.

"Guess I'm not making any sense." He paused and tried to organize his thoughts. "I didn't want to take that step with Breena because I think I knew somewhere that she wasn't it for me. And I don't feel that way about you — I know you're the one for me. I wouldn't go for henna this time around, even if I wasn't allergic."

"But you need to see something from me." Abby chewed her lower lip. "I get that. I just... I don't feel any hesitation about you, or us. I just still get that prickly feeling from the idea of a wedding and all the stuff that goes along with it."

He tried not to sigh, but was only partially successful. "So what do we do?"

Abby shook her head. "I don't know."

"I don't know." She ran her hands up his forearms and back down, interlacing their fingers. "It's a lot to think about." She hesitated.

"Spit it out, Abs."

She looked up at him, her green eyes uncertain. "Do you mind staying until Sarah's done? I mean, alone? So I can go do some thinking?"

He nodded. "Do you want me to go to my place, or sleep at home tonight?"

"No, definitely at home," she said. "I don't like it when we sleep apart. I mean, unless it's because one of us is stuck at work, or we're both there because if the director ever caught us sleeping together at work... Well, no, he was OK with Tony and Tim on my futon that one time. Except they never slept there because Timmy got shot, and we were all at the hospital, and—"

Jimmy put one finger to her lips, silencing her. "I get it, Abs. Go on, go think. If you're still thinking when I get home, I'll study. I've got exams next week anyway."

About half an hour after Abby left, Sarah walked over, tea in hand. She set it down and slipped into the chair across from Jimmy. He looked up from his textbooks. "Hey, Sarah. Josh been leaving you alone?"

She nodded, but didn't meet his eyes. Alarm bells went off, but he decided to get her talking first, then try and get the information out of her.

"How's the studying going? Your brain as ready to fall out as mine?" He grinned at her, and was glad to see she smiled back.

"Professor Rollins still has to approve my paper topic tomorrow, but I think he's going to sign off on it," she said. "I'm going to look at how Twain's work changed over his career as he tried to make more general statements about human nature rather than just tell a story involving specific characters."

Jimmy just blinked. "You lost me, but if you're still thinking when I get home, I'll study. I've got exams next week anyway."

She nodded, but didn't meet his eyes. Alarm bells went off, but he decided to get her talking first, then try and get the information out of her.

"He definitely will." She nodded, and he could see a little of the usual sparkle return to her eyes. "He mentioned it in lecture a few weeks ago from a book by one of the best Twain scholars in the country, but said he didn't have time to really give it as much attention as he wanted. I made notes then because it seemed really interesting. I want to write, and I took the class because Twain did
such a good job in *Huck Finn* of telling a story and getting at these big issues of race and gender and the things that have people still reading the book 150 years later. But what Professor Rollins said made sense, too, that if you focus too much on that, you lose the feel for the characters and what makes them real, not just stock types." She grimaced. "Don't tell Tim I said this — well, you could, because I've said it to him — but one of the things I don't like about his books is that the characters are kind of stock types. Which doesn't make any sense, because they're you guys and you guys aren't anything like stock characters. You're the quirkiest bunch of people I've ever met. But I want to tell different kinds of stories. They won't be huge best-sellers, probably. I'd love it if they were, but that's not my goal. I just want to write good, complex stories."

As she kept going and the tide of words washed over Jimmy, he decided he was telling Tim at least one thing — this was Sarah the way she was two weeks ago. She was excited and not focused on all the Josh drama.

"... so I've got a lot to do, but I think it's going to be really good because it will help me get a better sense of how to tell a good story and get the bigger meaning in there without having that take over the story." She looked at him. "Oops. I just completely bored you to tears, didn't I?"

Jimmy shook his head. "No. I mean, I didn't really understand it because I'm more the science than anything. But it's nice seeing you excited about something again."

She smiled, but looked down at her mug.

"Sarah?" He reached over and put a hand on her arm. "Did something happen earlier?"

She kept her eyes down, and Jimmy felt his gut twist. "Sarah, talk to me. We want to help."

She looked up, and her eyes were shiny with unshed tears. "I don't..." Her voice, barely above a whisper to start, trailed off to nothing. She lifted her mug and took a giant sip, then another one.

"Josh was in today. With another girl."

Jimmy felt his eyes widen. "The one you..."

She shook her head. "No, somebody else. She looked familiar but I couldn't place her. I think she works someplace around campus and I've seen her, but don't know her."

"Did he say anything to you?" He decided first thing tomorrow he needed to talk to Ducky about their plan for him to observe Josh.

She shook her head. "Just sat down at the table next to me. Hearing him being all sweet and loving, even saying some of the same things to her he said to me..." She made a face.

Jimmy winced. "Did you do anything?"

"No." She sighed. "I wanted to tell her to watch out, but I couldn't with him there, and I didn't want him to go off on me." She made a face. "So much for all his 'Oh, I'm so sorry, I made a horrible mistake' lines. He was just trying to play me again."

The excited glow from her writing monologue had faded and her dark eyes and hair just emphasized how pale she had gotten. As she reached for the mug to drink more tea, her hand shook and Jimmy started kicking himself for asking. He should have waited until he was driving her home; she still had the rest of the shift to get through. Now he had to try and extricate his size 12 foot from his mouth; you'd think he'd have mastered that by now as many times as he'd stuck it there over the years. "Sarah, you didn't... Look, I shouldn't have brought it up. Don't think about him for now; we can talk when I give you a ride home. Abby and I came up with an idea."
She nodded, then looked at her watch. "Yikes. Break's over." She pushed back her chair and stood up in one move, grabbing her mug and hurrying back behind the counter.

Jimmy knew he should go back to his studying, but he couldn't help covertly observing Sarah as she got back to work behind the counter. She seemed to be OK, but he vowed to keep a closer eye on her, and to mention this to the others.

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Abby made her way down the stairs, watching as Gibbs sawed through a length of pine stretched across two sawhorses.

She stood at the bottom of the stairs, not sure where to start.

"What's on your mind, Abs?" He didn't look up, just moved the board to a new spot and started cutting again.

"What are you making?" Well, that was what she was thinking right then, even if it wasn't why she had come over. She'd driven around for almost an hour, trying to sort through everything, before deciding it was time to get some advice.

He looked at her, raising an eyebrow, but didn't call her on it. Instead, he handed her some folded pieces of paper.

"A dresser?" She looked at the plans. "What's with the stuff on the top of it? Why not just make it with a flat top?"

"Not just a dresser." He took the plans back. "The molding is so you can use it as a changing table, then it can become a dresser for the kid when they're older."

"I can use it?" Abby raised an eyebrow. "So you do think I'm pregnant." She shook her head. "Trust me, Gibbs, I'm not. Yeah, I've been wired for the last week or so, but that's how I get right before my period when I'm not on the pill. You just could never tell before because with the Caf-Pow I was wired all the time."

He put the saw down and looked over at her. "Too much information, Abby. And you weren't wired the other day. McGee sent you to take a nap, and you looked pale, even for you."

Abby just stared at him. "Wait, you thought I was pregnant because I was tired? Gibbs, I didn't get any sleep the night before because Jimmy and I were fighting." At his raised eyebrows, she realized she was in danger of a Rule 12 lecture. "It wasn't the first time I've worked on no sleep, but it's the first time you've seen me do it without caffeine. I thought about it, but I knew if Jimmy saw it would make things worse because, well..." She sighed. "Gibbs, how do you feel about marriage?"

"Leads to alimony payments. That's why I gave it up." He picked up another board and started sawing. "That what you two are fighting over?"

"Kinda." She frowned. "If you don't believe in marriage, why did you give Jimmy a hard time when you thought he wouldn't marry us when we all went to dinner for my birthday?" She walked over to the workbench and leaned against it.

"Didn't say I don't believe in it." Gibbs finished sawing one piece off, then measured the next section. "If I had the choice, Shan and I would still be married. Can't happen. I never did find that again, probably never will. But I'd think I had and get married and then it would end and I'd be left
poorer. I'd say wiser, but then I wouldn't have married Diane.”

"Fornell's ex-wife?" Abby was pretty sure, but his nod confirmed it. "Did you push Tim and Tony to get married?"

Gibbs shook his head. "Abs, I still listen to eight-tracks. Glad as I am that they could get married, it's still not something I think of as an option."

"So this is because I'm a girl? Because Gibbs, you know better than that. Would you push Ziva to get married?" She knew she was poking the grizzly bear, but she needed to wrap her mind around this.

"Ziva hasn't even dated since Somalia," Gibbs said. "Not thinking she's going to be thinking marriage anytime soon, even if Werth is back in town."

"Gibbs!" Abby stomped her foot. "You've deliberately missing the point."

He looked up at her. "You want me to say it, Abs? I'll say it. Yes, I think you and Jimmy should get married if you really intend on being together forever and starting a family. Maybe that does make me old-fashioned, maybe it makes me a chauvinist for thinking you need Jimmy as a husband, not just a boyfriend. But I think he needs you for a wife, too."

Abby crossed her arms. "You can't picture a long-term relationship that doesn't include the state issuing a piece of paper that says 'here, these two people love each other'? You think it has to be marriage?"

"What do you want me to say?" He put the saw down and turned to face her. "Look, Jimmy wants marriage. You want Jimmy and you want everything that goes along with marriage, but you've got this thing about an actual wedding. Why'd you come to me? You knew I wasn't going to say I thought not being married was as good as being married, did you?"

Abby started pacing around the basement. OK, so he had her there. She knew he was going to be a dinosaur about this. Finally she stopped and looked at him. "Do you really think I would love Jimmy any more if I had a piece of paper telling the world I loved him?"

Gibbs sighed, and rubbed the back of his neck. "Look, I'm not the person who should be giving relationship advice. That's like consulting with Duck on giving a short speech." He walked over and put his hands on Abby's arms. "Just think about this, Abs. Really think about it. I failed at my marriages because I could never love anybody the way I loved Shannon, and I never should have tried to tell myself otherwise."

Abby opened her mouth, but he put a finger to her lips, and she flashed back to right before he left for Mexico. She felt tears beginning to build.

"Shannon and I, what we had was something special. Something I'll never feel again for any woman." He paused, and Abby wanted to wipe the anguish from his eyes. "If that's what you and Jimmy have, Abs, do you really want to risk losing it because you're too stubborn about this?" He took his finger away and went back to the project.

She stood there and watched him for a while. She wanted to argue with him, but couldn't bring herself to make a case, not with his words about Shannon circling through her head.

When she finally left half an hour later, his last question was still echoing in her mind. She got home and found Jimmy studying in the living room. After changing into her pajamas and popping a couple of painkillers, she went to join him.
"Hey." He put his book down and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "How's it going?"

She smiled at him. "Well, I've got the answer to one question."

He raised an eyebrow.

"No bat-gremlins this month." She smiled. "And that's probably part of how we got so out of control last week."

"You lost me."

"I get really wound up and all over the place that last week," she said. "Like an Abbi-fied PMS. You aren't used to it because it's not so bad when I'm on the Pill, and I was always so caffeinated, I'm not sure you could ever tell anyway."

He kissed her forehead. "So when it happened to caffeine-free Abby, it seemed weird."

She nodded. "I wasn't trying to ignore you last week, and that's not an excuse. I've just got to watch that if I'm staying off the Pill."

"Are you?" Jimmy pulled back a little, and she looked up into his eyes. "I mean, we decided earlier we weren't ready."

She nodded. "We're not. You were right. About everything, I mean. I'm still trying to wrap my mind around marriage, but I think I'm going to get there. I'm just not yet."

"So...?"

She chewed her bottom lip. She hadn't really thought this part through. "Well, I want to think I'm going to get my mind around this soon, and I don't really want to go on tonight just to go off again in a month or two. That's just asking for me to go all Jekyll and Hyde, and I think the rest of the team would kill me."

"Condoms, then?"

"You're OK with that?"

He smiled. "Abs, I'm OK with it. Are you? I mean, you're the one who would be pregnant if we slip up."

She thought about it, then nodded. "I am." She wasn't quite as sure as she made herself sound, but she reminded herself that if they were only talking a month or two delay, a slip-up wouldn't be that big a deal. They still would have time before the baby arrived to get to where they needed to be.

"Then I'm OK with it, too." He pulled her close. "You'll let me know when you get your mind around it?"

She nodded, her cheek rubbing against his sweatshirt as she snuggled against him.
Tony was sitting at his desk when he got an e-mail from Jimmy. He read it and frowned, then printed it and walked over to stand by Tim's desk. His partner was frowning at the screen as he wrote, deleted, and started writing again.

"Hey, Tim. Do you know why Jimmy and Abby want us to have a campfire after work?" he asked.

"He wants to what?" Tim looked up. "What are you talking about?"

Tony held out Jimmy's e-mail. "See. We're all supposed to meet at the bar down the street - he asked me to tell you and round up Ziva, Dwayne, and Gibbs. He's getting Damon and Ducky.

"OK, that's definitely weird." Tim frowned. Before he could say anything else, Ziva walked in carrying an evidence box from a cold case.

"What is weird?" She dropped the box on her desk with a thump. "Dwayne is coming from the evidence garage with another box, but we have three more to carry up," she said. "Tony, can you help?"

Tony nodded. "Tim, you tell Gibbs. I'll fill them in." As he followed Ziva back to the elevator on their way to the evidence garage, they passed Dwayne.

"We will wait for you," Ziva said as their paths crossed. "Tony has something to tell us."

When Dwayne joined them, Tony waited for the elevator to begin its descent, then hit the emergency switch. "OK, do either of you guys know why Jimmy and Abby are calling a team meeting?" he asked. "Autopsy Gremlin just e-mailed me to round everybody up and meet at the pub down the street after work."

Dwayne looked at him. "Bat-gremlins?"

"At a pub?" Tony shook his head. "Besides, that would be celebrating, not calling a campfire. And we'd have heard by now. Abby can't keep quiet that long." Still, he remembered what Jimmy had said yesterday. "No, I don't think so." He pushed that thought aside. "So, what else would they want to talk about?"

Ziva frowned. "It was their turn last night..."

"Their turn for what?"

Ziva flushed slightly. "We have been taking turns going to the coffee shop at night," she said. "The one where Sarah works. We found out that Josh was stopping by and bothering her, and we decided a small deterrent was in order. So Jimmy, Abby, Damon, and myself have been taking turns going there at night, depending on our schedules. I believe Jimmy and Abby were taking last night."

Tony flipped the switch back on. "Great," he said. "Just what we need, more Josh issues." He grimaced. "Tim's not going to like this.

"Why would Josh be bugging her?" Dwayne sounded confused. "I mean, he was cheating on her. Why would he care that she's not interested in him."
"Because he wasn't cheating because he wanted out of his relationship with Sarah," Tony said. "He was trying to have both. The nice girl you bring home and can show off and be proud of as his wife or future wife, and the adventurous sidepiece that you have as a mistress."

At Dwayne's look of disgust, Tony gave a humorless chuckle. "Yeah, I know. Lovely people I come from, aren't they? It's crazy by most people's standards, but then the Pritchards aren't most people."

"So why is he still bothering Sarah?" Dwayne asked. "I mean if he's not going to give up his affair, why try and stay with the woman who's found out about you and the other woman? Not that I can believe people even think like that, but then again, some of the stories from some of the guys in my unit, well... Let's just say I'm glad Maggie hasn't heard them."

Tony shrugged, not sure how to explain it. "You've got me," he said. "I'd guess his pride is dented, but I don't know." As the doors, opened, they walked into the evidence garage. "Come on, let's get cracking on this. Maybe Tim can get Abby to spill the beans. He understands how her mind works; he might be able to get her to spill."

When they walked back into the bullpen, Tim wasn't there. Tony found an e-mail from his husband.

"Do we know what is going on?" Ziva asked.

"Tony shook his head. "Tim told Gibbs, who grumbled but agreed to come. But Gibbs didn't know what was going on, and Tim had to get to class."

Just then Gibbs walked in. "Chill, DiNozzo," he said. "They'll tell us when they're ready."

"Bat-gremlins, Boss?"

At Gibbs' glare, Tony looked away. "Right, not my business. Gotcha, Boss." He dug into the evidence box and started pulling out the index to figure out what evidence was there. "Ziva, why this case again?"

"New lead," Gibbs said. "Petty officer says he saw the missing major on base this weekend."

Tony frowned. "He disappeared four years ago."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Gibbs said. "Wilson, you and DiNozzo go interview the petty officer who thinks he saw the major. David, start sorting through the evidence." He headed out of the bullpen toward the rear elevator.

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When Gibbs got to the lab, Abby was sitting with Jimmy at her desk, the pair sharing lunch. He was going to leave and come back later, but Abby spotted him and waved.

"We got a new case, Bossman?" she asked as he walked into her office.

Gibbs shook his head. "Campfire?"

Abby and Jimmy looked at each other, then Jimmy spoke.

"Josh has been coming by the coffee shop to get at Sarah, and now he's started bringing another girl around. He's not moving on, which has us a little worried. We figured it was time we all put our
heads together, but it's not really NCIS business since he's not a sailor and Sean's retired, so Sarah probably doesn't count as a dependent anymore.

Gibbs tipped his head to one side, then the other. "Could. Might not stand up in court."

Abby shook her head. "We can't risk that," she said. "Tony mentioned that Josh's family is rich and has lots of money for lots of lawyers, and this is definitely a Rule 13 situation."

Gibbs nodded. "You got a plan in mind?"

Jimmy and Abby looked at each other, and he waited.

"We do, Bossman." Abby was the one who spoke first.

"But we want to have everybody there when we outline it," Jimmy said. "It will make more sense when we explain everything, and it's easier to do that once instead of having everybody coming down here or down to Autopsy all day and asking."

"Plus, Damon can't join us until after work anyway, so we're going to have to go through it then."

Abby smiled at him. "You are coming, right?"

He nodded. "Don't be surprised if the others come down." He left the lab without waiting for a response and was surprised to find Abby right behind him as he waited for the elevator. "Abs?"

"I don't want to know why you asked Ducky if I was pregnant, but I'm definitely not." She smiled. "Probably not for a while yet, either, so you've got plenty of time to finish that changing table."

A knot he hadn't realized had settled into his shoulders released. "Good to know, Abs. Wedding bells?"

She shook her head. "Still wrestling, Gibbs. Don't worry, we'll get there."

"I know, Abs. Just as long as you two know it, too." He leaned over to kiss her forehead just as the elevator opened, then got on, leaving her standing there, smiling.

Upstairs, Ziva was poring over files from a box of evidence.

"Any luck?"

She shook her head without looking up. "No, Gibbs. I am reviewing the statements of the major's friends and family from four years ago, but I have not found anything that might give us a lead on where he could have been hiding."

"Any of them own a second home? Someplace Major Crumper could have lived?"

Gibbs moved one of the boxes to his own desk and pulled out the index file.

"Most of them seemed disgusted when they learned what he was accused of, and they believed his running was an indication that he was guilty." Ziva looked over at him and frowned. "Gibbs, that does not make sense. Most often, family and friends believe a suspect is innocent even when we have a great deal of evidence to show he is not. Why would this be different?"

Gibbs walked around to lean against his desk, facing the young agent. "A few reasons. They didn't like him and wanted an excuse to believe the worst. Somebody was better off with him gone, maybe even the real dirtbag. He was abusive or cruel to people, and they knew he wasn't a good guy."
Ziva nodded slowly. "And perhaps if I interviewed them again, I might pick up differences between now and then that might provide a new lead?"

Gibbs nodded. "Still don't know that he's reappeared. Could have died back then."

"If he was innocent, he could have been set up." Ziva followed Gibbs' thoughts to the logical conclusion. "In that case, he has perhaps been dead all this time, and NCIS has focused its investigation and any followups on a man who was not the criminal."

Gibbs pulled the original case file from the box to look at the investigative agents. "Cassidy's team did the original investigation."

"And we cannot ask any of them," Ziva said, lowering her eyes.

Gibbs shook his head, remembering the case that had killed Paula Cassidy and the men on her team. "When McGee gets back, he can look over Nelson's notes. They were friends, went to FLETC together. He might see something we miss."

Ziva nodded. "I will ask Tony to look over Paula's notes. They had worked together before, yes?"

Gibbs frowned. "We both did. If he balks, don't push."

Ziva looked at him, her dark eyes unreadable. After a minute, she said, "That is right. I forgot they had dated a few times. I will start with Paula's, and Tony can look at Rick Hall's file. If he wants to review Paula's, he will ask."

Gibbs just grunted and returned to his seat, pulling out the evidence logs and sorting through Abby's reports.

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When Tim finished the class for the day, he headed to the bull pen to find the team knee-deep in files from the Crumper case.

"Any luck?" he asked.

"Nothing," Dwayne said.

"Less than nothing," Tony corrected him. "We aren't even sure the petty officer actually saw Crumper."

"So what did he do?" Tim said. "I had to head to class before anybody explained, and I don't remember this case."

"Serial rapist," Tony said, making a face. "Suspected in a dozen rapes reported on Pentagon grounds and in the surrounding area."

"DNA evidence?" Tim started sifting through the possibilities.

"None that Paula's team could pull from the ones on Pentagon grounds, and Metro didn't admit to having any on the ones in their jurisdiction," his husband replied. "No fingerprints, either, at least none that matched any serviceman."

"And the women all reported that it was a man in a Marine uniform who attacked them," Ziva said. "Two of the witnesses mentioned the gold oak leaves on his uniform, so Cassidy and her team focused on majors stationed at the Pentagon or who visited the Pentagon regularly as part of their
"They narrowed it down to Crumper pretty quickly," Dwayne said. "And when he disappeared right after they interviewed him, that seemed to make it pretty clear."

Tim nodded, filtering through everything. "And once he disappeared, the rapes stopped?"

Gibbs nodded. "It got shuffled to cold cases when they rebuilt the team after the Abdul Wahid case."

Tim swallowed at the memory of the deaths of Jim, Paula, and Rick. "So if he's turned up, we need to figure out where he's been hiding for four years so we can catch him and bring him to trial for the rapes."

"And desertion." Gibbs' blue eyes were stormy. "Rapist or not, man abandoned his commission."

"I have been talking to his friends and family all afternoon," Ziva said. "They could not tell me anything."

"We're still not sure this is him, either," Tony said. "We found a couple of people who said they saw somebody fitting his description in the same area and time as the petty officer saw him, but none of them knew Crumper before so it's not a solid ID."

Dwayne walked across the bullpen. "I've been trying to trace his old bank records using some of the tricks you taught me, but I haven't turned anything up yet."

Tim frowned. "What about other rapes?"

Tony slapped his desk. "McGenius!"

"Huh?" Dwayne looked from one to the other.

"Most rapists won't stop," Tim said.

Ziva nodded. "It is a psychological need to exert that power over women." As she talked, Tim could see her closing down, her eyes taking on the blank look they had after Somalia. "Even if he had left the area, it is unlikely he could stop seeking out women to satisfy his need to dominate them."

"So if we can find the common elements in the rapes, we can look for similar cases." Dwayne grinned, then stopped. "Wait, that's going to be like the time Tony and I had to hunt through all the old burglary cases from the FBI, isn't it?"

Tim shook his head. "No. We can use the computer to search for cases with common elements." He grinned. "We won't even have to do that part."

He was rewarded as the entire team looked at him with mystified expressions.

"Explain." Gibbs stared at him. "In English."

"Yes, Boss." Tim managed not to laugh. "I can get my class to work on it tomorrow morning. I can parcel out the different agencies and LEO searches among them. Then you guys can focus on other possible leads, and the agents can see how this applies in a real case instead of the scenarios I've been running for them."

Gibbs nodded. "Not bad, McGee."
Before he could say any more, Abby, Jimmy, and Ducky walked into the bullpen. Well, the men walked, and Abby bounced. "Come on, come on," she said. "Time to go."

"We're coming, Abs," Tony said.

The waitress led them to the big, round booth at Jimmy's request, and Tim knew something was up. If this was just a celebration, they'd be at the bar, the way they usually were. Drink orders placed — root beer for Abby and beer for everybody but Ducky, who had his usual McCallum neat — while they waited for Damon. He showed up just as the drinks did, asking the waitress to bring him a Sam Adams.

"OK, we're all here," Tony said. "Somebody want to tell us what's going on?"

Abby nodded. "Jimmy and I have some information, and a plan, so this is our version of a campfire."

"Campfire?" Dwayne and Damon spoke in unison.

"When Boss was in Mexico a few years ago and I was running the team, that's what I called it when we would huddle and brainstorm," Tony said.

"So why are we campfiring?" Ziva asked.

"Josh." Jimmy made a face. "Sarah said he's been coming by the coffee shop when she's working, sitting where she can't help but see him."

Tim's hands tightened into fists as he imagined all the things he'd like to do to his sister's ex-boyfriend. Hadn't he caused enough trouble?

"He doing anything?" Trust Gibbs to get to the heart of the matter.

"Nothing we could use to get him to stop," Jimmy said. "Sarah said after she told him to stop asking her to take him back or she'd sic all of us on him, he stopped. But he's getting to her."

Tim muttered a curse. "She's had enough trouble thanks to him," he said. "She doesn't need this on top of everything."

"So what's this plan?" Tony asked. "And what's this Ziva tells me that the four of you have been on Josh patrol? You weren't going to tell me or Tim?"

Abby and Jimmy looked at each other, and Jimmy's ears turned red.

"Tony, we did not want to worry you," Ziva said. "And you and McGee, between physical therapy and yoga and appointments with Brad and walking Jethro, have more than enough to keep you busy in the evenings. It was something we could do to help."

Tim thought about it, then nodded. "We appreciate it," he said. "And I'm sure Sarah appreciates it."

"The plan?" Gibbs sounded like he was losing his patience.

"Oh, right." Jimmy flushed. "Abby and I were talking last night. Josh started out asking Sarah to take him back, but once she shut that down, he's just taken to being there where she can't help but miss him. We were trying to figure out if he was dangerous, and I said it was too bad Dr. Mallard had never met him because he would have the best read on him."
Abby nodded, her pigtails bobbing so much they smacked Jimmy and Ziva in the head. "So we thought, Ducky, that you and Gibbs could go to the coffee shop sometime we were sure he'd be there and observe. He's never met you, and the team photos Tim and Tony have are in the study, so he didn't see them the one time he came to game night."

"Covert ops?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow, and Tim wondered just when this had all gotten so complicated.

"A coffee shop, my dear?" Ducky shook his head. "If this is frequented by young people, I'm afraid Jethro and I would stand out and render the point moot."

Jimmy shook his head. "It's near campus, so a lot of professors are there, too."

"You would make a convincing professor," Tony said. "Gibbs not so much, but he can just be a friend meeting you there."

Tim thought about the idea, and the more he did, the more he liked it. "I'd feel a lot better getting your take on him, Ducky. I still don't get why he hasn't moved on."

"Tony does." Ziva motioned to him.

"It's his pride," Tony said. "He's used to being the best of the best. He figured Sarah wouldn't give up the chance to be with him — he is a Pritchard after all — just because he screwed up. But he didn't figure on McSis having morals and ethics and all those things that aren't really a big deal in that circle. She's the one who dumped him, and that's got to sting — he's used to it being the other way around. It's How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days with our own lovely Sarah instead of Kate Hudson. And no betting. Damn, I hope there's no betting involved."

"Kurosawa," Jimmy whispered

"What about the other girl?" Dwayne asked. "You said it was a different type of girl, but I still don't get that."

"Let me see if I have it," Tim said, needing to work this out in his own mind. "Tony, you said the mindset was that there are girls you sleep with and girls you marry, and men in that culture think it's their right to have both."

"Not all of them, but yes, basically," Tony said.

"So Sarah was the serious one, the one he planned to bring home," Tim said. "Chrissy was the sidepiece."

"Not a gun, McGee."

"Boss, you know what I mean."

This time it was Ducky's turn to chime in. "So by your estimation, Anthony, Joshua doesn't see this other young woman as a replacement for Sarah. He still needs the proper woman that he thinks is a suitable future wife. And Sarah, quite rightly, is refusing to fulfill that role."

"Sarah said he's found somebody else to take her place," Jimmy said.

Tim looked over at him and noticed everybody else was as surprised as he was, even Abby. "Spill, Jimmy."
"Sarah said he came in yesterday afternoon with a girl she recognized and sat down the next table over," Jimmy said. "She couldn't place her at the time because I think the whole thing had her too unsettled, but by the time I drove her home, she recognized her as one of the work-study students at the library."

"That's not good," Tim said. "If Josh is haunting the coffee shop and Sarah's replacement is at the library, the only place she can study without running into them is the dorm."

Now it was Ziva's turn to shake her head. "Sarah said Chrissy is friends with many of the girls on her floor, and they often are hanging out in the lounge. That is how she knows Josh still is seeing Chrissy."

Jimmy nodded. "That's one of the things that Sarah was worried about. She knows Chrissy and Josh are still sleeping together, and she heard Josh feeding this new girl all the lines he used to feed her, so she wants to warn the girl. I told her not to do anything like that until we all could talk."

Tim made a face. "Ducky, I think Jimmy's right — we need your professional opinion of Josh so we can figure out what to do."

"And Sarah definitely shouldn't say anything to Library Girl," Tony said. "Josh's pride is already hurt — he's not going to tolerate another blow, which is what he'd see this as. He'd probably threaten to sue for defamation and slander."

"He wouldn't win," Ziva said. "Truth is an absolute defense against libel and slander according to the documents I have been studying for my citizenship test."

"No, but he could drag this out a lot longer," Tony said. "He'd have good lawyers."

"No such thing," Gibbs glared. "Rule 13."

"Never, ever involve lawyers." The team chorused, and Tim could see Ducky smother a laugh as Damon just looked mystified.

"That was the first one of Gibbs' rules I learned," Dwayne said.

"First one you broke, too," Tony said.

"So we're going to do this, right?" Abby said. "Gibbs, you and Ducky will go undercover?"

"To do what, Abs?" Gibbs looked at her.

"Observe and report," Tony said. "What we need is a better read on this guy than I can give. I just know general traits; we need specifics."

"We need Josh to leave Sarah alone," Tim said. He drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "Is the Josh Patrol working?"

"It is," Ziva said. "When Josh sees us, he sits on the other side of the coffee shop, not where Sarah can see him."

"But now he's been coming in before we get off work," Jimmy said. "I don't know how we deal with that."

"What time does Sarah's shift start?" Damon asked.

"1430," Abby said. "She studies there some days before her shift or between classes, so she's in
there earlier, but I don't know how early."

"I can't get there that early," Damon said.

"Maggie could," Dwayne said. "The girls have Scouts after school on Mondays and Clubs Day on Thursdays, so she doesn't pick them up until almost 5. She and Kevin could go over there. Josh met us, so he'd recognize her. And if he doesn't, she could say something to him, pretend she doesn't know Sarah dumped him."

"I don't know," Abby said. "Do we want to bring Kevin in on this? What if something bad happens?"

"Abby, if you think something bad might happen to Kevin, Metro probably needs a call," Tony said. "What has Josh done that you haven't told us?"

Tim was worried until he saw the surprise in Abby's green eyes. "Nothing, Tony. There's just something hinky about him."

"But he won't do anything in public, Abs," Jimmy said. "That's the whole reason us being there works."

She frowned. "Still."

"Is Sarah working tonight?" Ducky said.

"Every day but Wednesday and Saturday," Tim said. "But if Josh really is dating Library Girl, I'll bet he's out with her tonight, not at the coffee shop." He scowled.

"I suggest that you let Sarah know what we are planning," Ducky said. "Jethro, can I interest you in a game of cards Sunday afternoon?"

Gibbs nodded. "Sounds like a plan."

"We'll talk to Sarah at game night Saturday," Tim said. "And you'll let us know what you find out?"

Gibbs nodded. "Got another option for daytime."

"We do?" It was Tony's turn to ask. "Who?"

"Sean and Eileen."

Tim shook his head. "No way. They don't know about this, and if we tell them, they'll worry."

"The rest of us know," Ziva said. "It is only a matter of time before your parents find out, McGee."

But he didn't want to budge. "Look, you guys all invited yourself into helping with this, and that's great. Well, except Gibbs and Ducky, because Abby and Jimmy dragged you in. Sarah didn't want to tell Mom and Dad in the first place — she's really not going to go for this."

"McGee." Gibbs stopped him with a word. "If Duck thinks somebody should be there during the day, we tell them. If something happens and we hadn't told them, something they could have helped with... There's no worse feeling as a parent to think you could have done something to protect your child and didn't because you didn't know."

Tim didn't know what to say to that. He knew Gibbs was referring to Kelly, knew the team leader
hadn't know about the drug dealer who was after Shannon and Kelly until it was too late. Still... "If Josh is that dangerous, there has to be something we can tell Metro, get a restraining order or something."

"He's not doing anything," Tony said, reaching over to wrap a hand around Tim's. Tim interlaced his fingers with Tony's and squeezed. "I think the man should rot in hell as much as anybody, maybe more, but we don't have anything right now to give Metro, and they don't have the best record on domestic stuff even when there is evidence."

The word "domestic" lodged in Tim's chest. In the rest of the world, it meant homey and comforting. Not in law enforcement. Anytime something had "domestic" before it, the situation immediately became a lot more volatile and less likely to have a good outcome. Any time they got a call for a case that was classified as domestic, whether assault, abuse, or homicide, it became a long week no matter how quickly they wrapped up the case.

"There has to be something we can do," he said.

"There is. We are." Gibbs slid out of the booth. "Go home, all of you. Get some rest. We've got to track down Crumper tomorrow. Let Duck and me handle this part."

It didn't take long for the team to disperse, though Tim wasn't sure exactly what happened. The next thing he knew, he and Tony were pulling into their driveway. Once inside, Tony grabbed the leash and clipped it on Jethro's collar. "I'll be back in 30," he said.

Tim nodded absently and headed to the study. He settled down at his desk and lost himself in the click-clack of the keys.

Friday, April 2, 2010

The next morning, Tony headed out early to meet Brad for a checkup. When he got to Bethesda, Brad was in his office, hard at work.

"What's new?" Tony asked as he walked in and dropped into the chair.

"Paperwork is eating me alive." Brad grimaced. "NIH approved the renewal of the study for Sean's group, and they managed to block FDA approval of that new drug regimen for six months. But that means another report in June with a lot more detail about the outcomes and progress, so the amount of paperwork for this thing just tripled."

Tony winced. "Ouch. That doesn't sound fun."

"No." Brad shook his head. "But it means this is working, and they think we can replicate it outside the Navy, so that's good. I just won't have much of a life these next few months."

"That mean you're not coming tomorrow?"

"To game night?" Brad shook his head. "I'd like to, but it depends on if I can clear enough of this backlog in the morning. I'll try, but if I don't show, that's why."

Tony nodded. "As long as it's not because some nutcase has kidnapped you, we're good. Everybody will understand." He made a face. "Tomorrow might be a little weird anyway."

"Do I even want to know?" Brad put his pen down.
"Josh is causing trouble." Tony realized Brad hadn't heard about all the drama and filled him in.

"Let me know if there's anything I can do to help," Brad said. "I've been trying to keep my Tuesdays clear of appointments, so I can work on all this stuff someplace else without interruption. If you guys do think somebody should be at the coffeeshop during the day, I can take Tuesdays."

Tony shook his head. "You're swamped enough," he said. "We can handle it."

"Tony, let me help," he said. "If I didn't and something happened, I couldn't look you or Sean in the eye again, much less Tim and Eileen."

"We appreciate it, man," Tony said. "We don't think he's that dangerous — Abby has a flair for the dramatic."

"That's the understatement of the year," Brad said.

Tony snorted and started laughing, stopping only when it switched to coughing. He dropped his head between his legs and sucked in a few breaths, letting his lungs relax. It only took three or four before his breathing was back to normal.

"That's good," Brad said.

"Laughing myself into a coughing fit is a good thing?" He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, tell me another one."

"No, really," Brad said. "You stopped it without your inhaler, you knew exactly what to do, and you stopped it quickly. Those all are good signs."

"I guess when you put it that way." Tony frowned. "Does this mean I can cut back to even fewer appointments?"

Brad shook his head. "You're down to once a month as it is," he said. "If your readings stay normal through this time next year, I'll cut you back to every other month, but I want to make sure things are going well. You're at the point now where I don't see any reason you couldn't finish your career in the field at 55, but you know me — I'd rather play it safe."

"Not going to stay in the field that long," Tony said. "Tim and I talked, and I'm going to transfer to Cold Cases when the team leader retires beginning of next year. Then Tim will get promoted to senior field agent, which he'll need to move into a team leader position. We're thinking of adopting next year, and once they hit school age, I'll probably retire to be able to do all the school stuff my dad never did with me."

Brad just looked at him. "You've got it all figured out," he said. "So you're only looking to stay in the field another 5 or 6 years, not 15."

Tony nodded. "I'm even seeing a therapist, trying to finally get my head on straight so I don't warp our kids for life."

"You're not going to warp your kids, at least not like that," Brad said. "I'm not going to say anybody on Team Gibbs will have normal kids — if such a things exists — because you guys are the most unconventional family I've met. But that's a whole different kind of warping."

"Yes, Uncle Brad." Tony smirked. "Just for that, we're making you godfather of one of them."

"One? How many do you plan on having?"
"We don't know, but Tim's always wanted kids, plural, and having grown up an only child, I don't recommend it. So at least two. Jimmy and Abby get the honor for the first baby, but you and Sarah are probably next in line."

"So Baby No. 1 will be an honorary bat-gremlin? Yeah, these kids are going to be warped." Brad stood up. "Come on, let's get this exam over with so Gibbs doesn't kill me."
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

AN: Let me know in reviews if you guessed who the unidentified person in the first scene is before Tim does. :)

Friday, April 2, 2010

When Tim walked into the training room that morning 10 minutes before the start of class, most of the agents were already there, coffee cups in hand. He didn't recognize the man leaning against the table at the front of the room.

"Agent McGee?" The blond man was about his height and maybe two or three years older than Tony. "The Seahawk just put into Norfolk for repairs, and Director Vance said to report to your class for the next two weeks while she's in port. He didn't seem to think it would be a problem if I dropped in midway through and picked up what you've already covered during the first half of your next session."

Tim set his gear down. "If Vance thinks you can handle it, I'm fine with it. You must have taken over as agent afloat after Tony was reassigned to the team here last year."

"Tony DiNozzo? Yeah. I even had the chance to meet him once about five or six years ago when his team came out to help me on a case," he said. "I'll have to stop by and see him and the Boss at lunch."

"Boss? You worked with Gibbs, too?"

He nodded. "Five years with Gibbs, and I had the ulcer to prove it."

Tim suddenly realized who he was talking to. "You're Stan Burley."

Burley nodded and smiled. "Sorry, should have introduced myself." He held out his hand. "You've heard of me?"

Tim grinned and shook the outstretched hand. "You're in select company: the only one, besides Tony and me, to last more than five years with Gibbs. Although Ziva's getting close. Between Tony and Abs, I've heard a few dozen stories."

Burley looked him over. "You're on Gibbs' team? And he let you off to do this?"

Tim shook his head. "Desk duty. Got shot back in February. Vance decided to have me do half days training others and half days with the team since another agent has been assigned TAD until I can get back in the field in another couple of months. Hey, are you free for lunch? We can surprise Abby and Tony." He pulled out his phone. "You didn't tell Abby you were in town, did you?"

"Lunch sounds great," Burley said. "I haven't spoken to either of them. This was a last-minute schedule change, and I don't have Abby's cell phone number. Tony's either."

Tim fired off a text message to Abby. "Wouldn't matter — he was in such a rush this morning, he
left it on the nightstand. I'll give it to him when he gets done with Brad."

Burley narrowed his eyes, focusing on the ring on Tim's left hand, then up again. "OK, sounds like I have a lot to catch up on at lunch," he said. "I seem to recall Abby mentioning your name in a letter not long after Boss came out to the ship — said she'd started dating an agent from Norfolk."

Tim grinned. "Yeah, you definitely have missed a lot." He caught sight of the clock on the wall. "Find a free computer; we need to get started. We'll talk at lunch."

He leaned against the desk at the front of the room as Burley found an empty place. "Change of plans today," he announced to the class, waiting for everybody to quiet down before continuing. "Today, you guys get to take what we've been learning and help the MCRT on a cold case that just heated up."

"Wait, we're helping Gibbs' team?" Agent Rosaria from Mechanicsburg groaned. "I've heard stories about him."

"Oh, they're all true," Burley said.

"Well, most of them," Tim said, smiling. "Don't worry, you're all out of head-slapping range." He got serious. "Here's the situation: a major suspected in a string of rapes at and around the Pentagon four years ago disappeared during the initial investigation. A petty officer who served under him six years ago, prior to his Pentagon assignment, claims to have seen him at Little Creek a few days ago. The MCRT needs to figure out where he's hiding and track him down. We're going to help by searching for rape cases similar to those at and around the Pentagon that have occurred in other jurisdictions since that time."

He pulled out the list he'd compiled the day before and assigned each agent a list of law enforcement agencies to check. "Agent Burley, since you're just joining us, work with Rosaria to check the state police reports across the country." He passed out copies of the case files with a summary of the distinctive characteristics of the rapes clipped to the front of the top folder. "The MCRT is tracking down other leads — financials, family property records, and possible contacts — so if they are able to narrow down the search, we'll adjust assignments then. And if we find anything, we'll feed them the information and see what else we can do to help locate the major."

As they settled into their searches using the new skills they'd learned earlier in the week, Tim checked his phone to find a text message from a mystified Abby. He looked at his watch, but it would be at least another 30 minutes before Tony saw the note Tim had left on his desk and showed up to retrieve his phone.

Tim looked around the training room as the agents worked through the challenge, occasionally answering a question as someone hit a roadblock. Even though he was only halfway through this first training session, he had already put together a list of ideas for improving the second round. He'd never considered himself much of a teacher before, but after watching Dwayne use the skills he'd taught him when he was developing the course had shown him this was another way he could contribute to the team. And now, watching the agents working to give his team some real help on this case had him excited about Vance's master plan for more than just how it would benefit he and Tony personally.

"McGee, I've got something!" Agent Dawes from Boston grinned. "There have been a whole string of rapes in the Shenandoah Valley, spread from Harrisonburg to Roanoke. They cross the jurisdictions of about a dozen different police departments and sheriff's offices, so most of them haven't been linked together. But they all lack forensic evidence and have a similar pattern of bruising on the women's necks and torsos."
Tim grinned back. "Good work, Dawes." He walked over to check the agent's findings, nodding as he saw the similarities. "This covers the two most recent years, but nothing before that." He frowned, then stood up. "OK, so we have a lead on where Crumper might have been before the petty officer saw him. Now what?"

Burley looked up from the computer he shared with Rosaria. "Call Boss and tell him."

"Tell him what?" Even though Tim was confident Burley would know based on his personal experience on Gibbs' team, he wanted to evaluate the others' investigative skills. "O'Donnell?" He called on the young agent from the LeJune office who had good computer skills, but was a green investigator, much like he himself had been while stationed at Norfolk.

She hesitated, then said, "Well, you said they're tracking other leads. So now that we have an area, they can focus their search for people and properties in that region to speed up their search."

Tim nodded. "What else?"

"We need to keep looking," Rosaria said. "Burley and I should focus on Virginia and West Virginia state police reports."

Burley chimed in. "While we're doing that, everybody else can focus the local LEO searches on cities and counties in those two states. Crumper might not have been in the Valley all four years, but he probably wasn't that far away." The agent afloat walked over to the map on the wall, pointing to places as he talked. "Maybe another part of the state, or West Virginia. West Virginia's a good bet. He'd have been less likely to run into sailors there who might know him. If he was down Hampton Roads way, there are hundreds of sailors and Marines who probably served with him at some point."

Tim nodded. "I'll call Gibbs now. Dawes and Sadler, divide up the rest of the Virginia and West Virginia LEOs for everybody. Burley and Rosaria."

"Search the state police records. On it, Boss." Burley smirked at him.


Tim pulled it from his pocket and handed it to his husband. "Good timing," he said. "Agent Dawes has something for you guys."

Tony took the phone and slid it in the inside pocket of his jacket before stopping at Dawes' desk for a briefing. He got the information quickly, then came up to Tim.

"You didn't mention Burley was in the class," he said quietly.

Tim shook his head. "Today's his first day. Seahawk's in Norfolk for a couple of weeks, so Vance pulled him up for this. If Boss lets you take lunch, we're planning on meeting Abby — Jimmy, too, for all I know. You in?"

Tony nodded. "Gibbs know he's here?"

Tim shook his head. "Not unless Vance told him. And Stan wants to surprise Abby, so don't mention it."

Tony mimed zipping his lips shut, and Tim rolled his eyes. "Yeah, like that ever works." He checked, but everybody was still engrossed in their assignments. "Anything new with Brad?"
Tony nodded. "Fill you in at lunch, but it's all good news." He smiled, the genuine one that only Tim saw on a regular basis. "Really good news."

Tim put his hand on Tony's shoulder, the only thing he felt comfortable doing with everybody around, though he really wanted to hug him. "That's great, Tony. Really great." He squeezed Tony's shoulder, then reluctantly pulled his hand away. "Now as much as I love having you sit in and as much as I know you need this training, go help them hunt down Crumper so you can join us for lunch."

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Abby spent the morning checking the clock, wondering what Tim had planned for lunch. He hadn't seemed worried in his text message, so it probably wasn't about Sarah. When she wasn't wondering about that, she was trying to wrap her mind around everything with Jimmy.

She knew without a doubt that she wanted him forever, the way Tim had Tony and Eileen had Sean and Gibbs had had Shannon. Well, OK, so she was hoping neither one of them got killed by a drug dealer, but other than that, like Gibbs had Shannon. The forever wasn't what was making her twitchy. But every time she pictured a wedding and a marriage license, she felt like she'd just chugged a Caf-Pow.

Frowning, she tried thinking about a nontraditional wedding, eloping to Vegas, or something small like Tony and Tim had. But every time she tried, she'd hear "Who gives this woman..." or "If anyone objects..." and she'd start twitching again.

"My dear Abigail, whatever is wrong?" Ducky stood next to her, and she realized she must have been deep in her thoughts to not have noticed the medical examiner's approach.

"Nothing's wrong, Duckman," she said. "I'm just... thinking."

He nodded, as though he knew everything she hadn't said. And for all she knew, he did. "If I might offer some advice?"

She nodded. "Offer away. I can use all the help I can get."

"Too often we get caught up in what we think we should do," he said. "A true solution is one that resolves the situation. You know, the word solution comes from the Latin 'solvere,' meaning to loosen, untie, or dissolve. I find that often when we hit seemingly insoluble roadblocks, it is because our brains tie things together that do not necessarily have to be so joined. Perhaps you might consider untying the individual elements of your dilemma from each other and see if you can find an option for one of them that appeals to you. It might well take care of the entire situation."

She looked into his eyes and knew he had figured out at least part of what was going on. Or perhaps Jimmy had told him. She'd pretty much figured he would tell Ducky, in the same way she had told Gibbs.

"Thanks, Ducky." She reached to hug him. "I don't know if it will help, but it makes sense."

He nodded, but before he could say anything, Gibbs and Tony walked in.

"Abs, Duck, need some help." Gibbs outlined what the cyber training team had found. "They're running down more leads, but McGee's getting us copies of the case files for each rape."

"You want us to look them over for clues that might tie them together or to Crumper." Abby nodded as she said it, checking her e-mail for the information from McGee. "We'll get through it, Bossman."
Ducky stepped around her to turn on the video link to Autopsy. "Mr. Palmer, we require your assistance in the lab."

"Yes, Dr. Mallard." Jimmy nodded and disappeared from the screen.

"Oh, Tony. What's up with Timmy and lunch? Nothing's wrong with Sarah, is it?"

Tony shook his head. "No. And he swore me to secrecy, but you'll enjoy it." He paused. "Ducky, you want to join us? And Gibbs? You two will appreciate the surprise as well."

Abby looked at the grin on her friend's face and tried to figure out what news it could be that he'd want Gibbs and Ducky there. "You and Timmy are adopting!"

"What?" Tony's jaw dropped. "No, Abs. Nothing like that. We're not even thinking about that for at least another year. McGimpy wants to get his bum wing healed up." He smiled. "But you have to tell him that's what you thought it was — I want to see his face."

"We don't find Crumper, none of you are going to lunch," Gibbs said. He turned and walked out, Tony right behind him. They almost ran into Jimmy in the doorway, but he stepped aside, stammering out an apology.

"What's the emergency?" Jimmy asked as he finally entered the lab.

"Rape cases," Abby said. "Lots of them." She started printing out the DNA and other medical evidence for Ducky and Jimmy to study, while she looked at the rest of the forensics. They were still hard at work when Abby heard a noise at the door of the lab and looked up to see Tim and—

"Stan!" She jumped up and rushed over to hug the agent. "What are you doing here?" She pulled back and reached over to punch McGee on his good shoulder. "Timmy, why didn't you say Stan was in town?"

McGee grinned. "I didn't know until Vance sent him to class this morning. It's not like we'd met before."

"Ah, Stanley, welcome back to DC," Ducky said. "It has been too long."

Stan reached over to shake the medical examiner's hand. "That it has Ducky. Not long enough for me to figure out cricket, but still a long time."

Abby smiled, then noticed Jimmy was looking lost. "Oh! Jimmy, this is Stan Burley. He was on Gibbs' team for five years, the only other person who's lasted as long as Tim and Tony. He's- Stan, what are you doing here?"

"Seahawk's in Norfolk for a couple of weeks, so Vance dragged me up here for McGee's training course," Stan said. "Didn't realize I'd be working on one of the boss' cases first thing."

Abby grinned. "Did you pack enough Tums, or should I mix some up for you?" She turned back to Jimmy. "Stan, this is Jimmy Palmer, Ducky's assistant and my—" She paused, trying to figure out what was most accurate. "More than boyfriend. Fiance, I guess? Not that we've done the whole ring thing." She looked over to see Jimmy's ears turning pink.

Stan stepped back. "Wait, Abby Scuito is getting married? And you're actually settling down? Gibbs must be getting soft, at least on Rule 12. I have been afloat too long."

Abby looked at Tim, who was grinning. "No wonder Tony almost fell over at my guess for what
"Do I even want to know?" Tim raised an eyebrow.

She shook her head. "Well, yes, but I promised him I'd tell you when he can see your face."

"Oh boy." McGee shuddered. "Now that's frightening." He lifted the plastic bag he was holding in his right hand. "We brought lunch — Tony said you guys were studying the cases and Gibbs had nixed lunch."

Abby nodded. "Thanks, Timmy!" She reached over and hugged him. "If I don't see Tony later today, give him a hug from me."

"I'll deliver it, Abs," Tim said, reaching into the bag. "Stan, here's your sandwich." He handed it to the agent, then pulled out a sandwich that he handed over to Ducky. Abby reached in to find her favorite and Jimmy's usual. She pulled his out and passed it over, then took her own. She walked over to the refrigerator to get out a pitcher of iced tea. "Anybody else want some?"

Stan shook his head. "Abby, how you can live off Caf-Pow without vibrating to death is something I'll never figure out."

She giggled. "No, it's herbal iced tea," she said. "I've gone decaf."

He pulled over a lab stool to sit down, making a big deal out of flopping onto the seat. "Who are you and what have you done with Abby?"

At that they all laughed. Abby looked over at Jimmy, who gave a slight nod. "I gave up caffeine when Jimmy and I decided to have kids," she said. "We were afraid if I didn't, even a few weeks of exposure to my normal Caf-Pow consumption would make our kid as hyper as Tony."

"Hey!" Tim reached over and tugged a pigtail. "No picking on Tony when he isn't here to defend himself."

Abby smirked. "Oh, like you aren't glad your kids won't have his hyper genes."

Tim sat back down. "OK, OK. Even Tony's glad about that. He's just upset they don't have a chance at my McGeeky brains." He shook his head.

Stan looked back and forth. "So how did you get from dating Abby to convincing Gibbs to let you break Rule 12 with another agent?"

Abby looked at Tim, then Jimmy. Both were grinning. She figured she'd explain. "Oh, Timmy and I stopped dating a long time ago. And he and Tony didn't tell Gibbs until they were living together."

"Actually, we never did tell Gibbs," he said. "He figured it out. And he knew before we moved in together. I think he's the only one who did when you all were trying to get us to be roommates."

"Hey, leave me out of that," Jimmy said. "I wasn't one of the ones trying to get you two to live together."

Ducky nodded. "Mr. Palmer does have a point. And I believe Ziva suspected it before you moved in, though after you made plans to, as did I."

Stan shook his head. "I leave DC for 10 years and come back, and it's like a parallel universe. Let
me guess, Boss doesn't even head slap anybody any more."

They all broke up laughing at that. When Abby caught her breath again, she said, "No, he still
does. I think Tony gets at least one a day."

"That's because he deserves them," Tim said. "He gets three times as many as Ziva and I
combined."

Stan was still sitting there looking confused. Abby grinned. "Come on, let's eat and see if we can
find some evidence for Bossman before he decides we're pulling an all-nighter."

Jimmy turned to her. "Does that mean I should let Damon know he's got Josh Watch tonight?"

Before Abby could reply, Tim's phone rang. "Yeah, Boss?"

Abby couldn't hear the rest of Tim's conversation, but he was grinning as he hung up.

"Tony found records of some family property on Crumper's mother's side in a little town called
McGaheysville, and Dwayne managed to find a bank account at the local bank that looks like his," he said. "They're headed down there to track him down, so Gibbs said once we pull all the
information we can from the files, we're done until they get back, which might be tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Jimmy asked.

Tim nodded. "It's more than two hours down, and they don't know how long it will take to find
him. The area's pretty rural."

"Is that two hours with you driving, or Gibbs?" Abby smirked as Tim turned red.

"Me. OK, so they'll probably get down there in half that time, but they still need to find him." Tim
shrugged. "I can take Josh Watch tonight — you guys have done a lot."

"Josh Watch?" Stan looked confused.

Abby left it to Tim and Ducky to explain, while she pulled Jimmy into her office.

"What's up, Abs?" He leaned back against the wall, shoving his hands in the pockets of his scrubs.
"Fiance? Did I miss something?"

She smiled at him. "No. Well, yes." She shrugged. "You are more than my boyfriend. I mean, I'm
still working on wrapping my mind around how we're going to make this work, but I know I want
us forever, and I think you want the same." She chewed on her lower lip. "Ducky gave me some
advice before Gibbs came in with the case files, and I kind of want to bounce that and some other
stuff off of Tim. Do you mind if I join him on Josh Watch tonight, at least for part of the night?"

Jimmy shook his head, smiling. "Tim's a good person for you to talk to," he said. "I've got to finish
unpacking the last of my stuff from my place and figure out what I'm packing for our trip next
week anyway."

Abby grinned. "Just don't forget the condoms," she said. "My mom doesn't live all that near any
stores, and I'd hate for us to run out."

"Um, Abs? Isn't it a little weird, having sex with your mom down the hall?"

She shook her head. "It's not like she can hear us," she said. "My first time was with her down the
hall. I used to sneak boys in all the time when I was a senior and in college."
Jimmy wrinkled his nose. "OK, too much information. But I'll pack extra."

She grinned and kissed him, lightly so she wouldn't leave lipstick all over his lips. "And that is one of the reasons I love you, because you're always prepared for anything."

Jimmy grinned back. "Come on, we'd better get back in there, or Tim's going to be smirking at us."

"He's been with Tony too long," she said, rolling her eyes. "His mind never used to go straight to the gutter."

Jimmy laughed and reached for her hand, tugging her after him back into the main lab.

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Tim stopped by Abby's lab at the end of the day. She'd asked to ride over with him because she'd ridden in to work that day with Jimmy. He'd offered to come pick Abby up if she was ready to leave before Sarah's shift was over, so Tim could give his sister a ride to the dorms.

"Ready to go?" Tim stood in the doorway, his backpack slung over one shoulder.

"Just finished shutting down my babies," she said. "Come on, let's go scare Josh."

When they got to the coffee shop, Tim scanned the crowd, but didn't see Josh.

"We usually sit over there," Abby said, pointing toward the wall by the pick-up counter. "Unless Sarah's on the register, but it looks like she's barista today."

"Why don't you go grab a table? You want your tea, right?"

She nodded. "The one in the purple bag," she said. "Sarah will know. Large."

Tim ordered that for her and a small latte for himself.

"Hey, Tim!" Sarah waved from her spot behind the counter. "Abby texted me, said you two were coming by tonight."

"All quiet so far?" He tried to keep his tone light, but he could tell from the way Sarah's smile disappeared that he hadn't succeeded.

"So far," she said.

He let it go and moved down to the pick-up window. As Sarah made his drink, he watched her, looking for signs of stress. She was pale, closer to his pastiness than her own normal coloring, and he had to force himself not to frown. Once the espresso was flowing from the machine, she took a large sip from a lidded cup off to the side, then started steaming the milk.

As she put the steel pitcher down, her hand shook, and Tim lowered his eyes. He didn't want to make her feel like was watching her. She put both hands on the counter, knuckles whitening. He wanted to look up to see her face, but didn't dare. Instead, he stepped away and dropped his coat over the chair across from Abby, setting her tea down in front of her.

When he returned, Sarah was just pouring the milk into the mug, then layering on the foam. She had a little more color, and Tim made a mental note to keep his future observations discreet enough so she wouldn't notice. He didn't want to add to her stress.

He carried the mug over and sat down across from Abby.
"So what's up, Abs?" He sipped and caught her looking away. "I could have done this myself, and you could have had a free night with Jimmy. You two aren't still fighting, are you?"

She shook her head, pigtails flipping around her face. "No, we're basically good," she said. "I did want to talk to you though, and Jimmy agreed it made sense."

"Sarah?" He set the mug down. "You guys didn't 'forget' to tell us something else, did you?"

"No!" Abby glared at him, indignant. "I wouldn't do that, McGee."

"So what's going on?"

She bit her lower lip. "Can I ask you a really personal question?"

He couldn't help laughing. "Abby, the first thing you ever said to me was 'Hey, McGee, how's your SIG hanging'? Even Tony's more subtle when dishing out sexual innuendo. You've never asked permission before." He frowned as he said it, realizing the contradiction. "What's wrong?"

She wrapped her hands around the mug. "You didn't like the idea of moving in with Tony when we all ganged up on you. How'd you come to terms with it?"

Tim stared, then blew out a breath. He wasn't so much surprised at the question as he was that Abby was asking. After his discussion with Jimmy last week, he'd figured Jimmy would be the one asking those sorts of questions, and asking before he'd actually moved in with Abby. Still, this was Abby, and even on good days he was never 100 percent sure how her mind worked. He settled for answering as best he could.

"I didn't, exactly." He thought back. "You guys were all pressing us to move in together, and we didn't want to tell you that what you were suggesting meant something different to us. Then Tony suggested we do exactly what you, Gibbs, and Ducky were suggesting — move in together as housemates." He took another sip as he thought some more. "By the time moving day finally came around, Tony and I had gotten past my sticking point."

"Which was?" Abby pressed her lips together, and her uncharacteristic quiet had him answering as honestly as he could.

"Tony was having nightmares, and he wouldn't talk about them. He wouldn't let me comfort him afterward either and always pulled away from me when I tried. He told me later that when I tried to hold him, he felt trapped." Tim rubbed the back of his neck. "He was the one who solved it, actually, or started to. He had one really bad one; I forget what triggered it. When he woke up, I said I was just glad he hadn't woken up coughing the way he often did. He told me that only happened with the Somalia dream. It was the first time he'd said anything about his nightmares, and as soon as he'd said it, I could tell he wanted to take it back."

"He didn't want you to know?" Abby reached over to wrap her hand around his. "He does know you have to know every little detail before your mind is satisfied, right?"

Tim smiled. "He does." He thought carefully before continuing, "He has a tough time talking about some things. He always has."

"So how did he solve things?" Abby said.

"When we lay back down, I tried to hold him, but he pulled away again. I was kicking myself until he turned around and held me. He couldn't handle being hugged, but he could give one. It didn't solve everything, but it was progress." He thought about how to explain it. "Knowing he was
trying, even if he couldn't give me everything I wanted, made a difference." He pulled his hand away and wrapped his long fingers around his mug, lifting it for a sip. "After a while, I realized that I wasn't going to get what I needed in the way I thought I wanted it. I had to think about what I really needed from Tony, which in its most basic form was trust. I didn't need Tony to actually tell me details. I just needed him to trust me to be there, to help him." He sipped, thinking about the words before he spoke. "I don't know the details about what's going on with you and Jimmy, but I would recommend figuring out what the underlying issue is - not just the situation that's stirred it up."

Abby nodded. "Jimmy... He wants to get married, because it gives him the assurance that neither one of us is going to give up when things get difficult; that something like what happened with you and Tony last week won't tear us apart." She sighed. "And I still get twitchy at the idea of marriage, the legal construct."

Tim could see that, could understand where both Jimmy and Abby were coming from. As he thought about his two friends, what he knew about them, he had a thought.

"Abby, does it have to be marriage?" He raised an eyebrow. "It sounds like Jimmy needs a symbol of commitment,. And marriage is the most common one, but it's not the only one. Tony and I were committed to each other before we got married last month. In my mind, we've been married ever since we exchanged our rings at Christmas." He shrugged. "It just didn't meet the state's requirements. And OK, it does make a bit of a difference now — I think more for Tony because he went through that whole time where the doctor wasn't going to let him in to see me. But if it had been an option in the fall, I think we still would have gone the way we did, because neither one of us was really into the whole idea of a wedding the way most people think of it."

Abby nodded and sipped her drink. Tim stayed quiet, letting her think things through. Finally, she spoke.

"You know, Ducky suggested something similar," she said. "I've been thinking about this as being specifically about marriage, which is a problem for me. Not spending my life with Jimmy, not anything we would promise in the vows. Well, except the whole bit where I'm supposed to promise to obey him but he doesn't have the same promise."

Tim snorted. "Name me one person on the team who would promise that to a spouse," he said. "That's archaic by anybody's standard. Even Gibbs wouldn't argue if a future Mrs. Gibbs wanted to take that out."

"I think he's finally realized trying to replace Shannon is doomed to failure. I don't think there's going to be another Mrs. Gibbs."

She tapped her fingers on the table, and Tim just let her work through things. Instead he looked around the coffee shop, checking for any sign of Josh. Seeing nothing, he cast his eyes over to the counter to see what Sarah was up to. There was a line as the place started to fill up with people hanging out before it was late enough to go clubbing, and she was busy making drinks. He didn't like the dark shadows under her eyes or the slump of her shoulders, but his sister had been through a lot this week. He was sure by tomorrow night, she'd be fine. If not, he and Tony could probably get Ziva to take her home, make her sleep in, and convince her to rest on Sunday before work. He also made a mental note to find out when Sarah would need help moving all her stuff over to Ziva's apartment when the semester was over.

He sipped his drink and moved his focus to the door, watching for Josh. He half-hoped the scum would come in so he'd have a chance to tell him off, but if the man really was seeing somebody else, they probably were out on a date.
Abby was still sitting there, drinking her tea and tracing patterns on the table. Tim figured she was probably rearranging her thoughts, if a bit more discreetly than the one time in the lab. He hoped she would find a solution that worked for her and Jimmy and made another mental note — this one to repeat some of what he'd said to Jimmy. It had taken him several days to come around to the realization that Tony could give him what he needed without giving him what he wanted, and if he could nudge Jimmy toward that realization, it might help both his friends work things out.

His latte was down to lukewarm dregs before Abby pulled out of her reverie.

"Figure anything out?"

She nodded. "I think so. Not exactly what to do, but I have some ideas for something I can do as a bridge between now and when I can finally wrap my mind around marriage." She smiled. "Thanks, Timmy."

"Anytime."

She got up and wrapped her arms around him for an Abby-hug before letting go and pulling on her jacket. "Jimmy's going to be here in a few minutes," she said. "We're flying out to visit my family Sunday, but let us know what happens with Gibbs and Ducky, please."

"I will, Abs," Tim said. "But don't worry about us — you two enjoy your trip."

"We will," she said. "Although I don't know how we're both going to stand two weeks away. I haven't taken a vacation that long since I started at NCIS."

"You'll manage," Tim said.

After she left, he checked his watch. Just another hour until Sarah's shift was over, and then he could take her home. As his phone buzzed, he found a text message from Tony. They'd found Crumper and were halfway back. By the time Tim got home, Tony should be there. Tim felt a little tension relax out of his shoulders.
Chapter 31

Sunday, April 4, 2010

After breakfast, Sean headed upstairs to walk on the treadmill while Eileen and Gibbs went for their weekly long run. Usually they went before lunch, but Gibbs said he and Ducky had plans that afternoon, so the McGees had rearranged their schedule.

He made a mental note to call the kids and see if they could plan a family dinner next Sunday. Tim had mentioned in an e-mail that he and Sarah had a math tutoring session scheduled for this afternoon before Sarah went to work, but Sean figured if he asked now, they could make time next weekend, assuming the team didn't catch a big case.

He programmed the treadmill for his usual workout and started walking. Slow at first to warm up, then picking up the pace. He let himself zone out, just focusing on the exercise. As he started to feel the familiar strain on his lungs that always hit toward the end of the workout, he reached for his water bottle. As he did, he registered the information on the display for the first time and blinked. That couldn't be right. He checked his watch, but it gave him the same information. He should only have five minutes left, but instead he had nearly 20. He frowned and focused on some of the breathing techniques he'd learned in the therapy at Bethesda, but his chest stayed tight.

Reluctantly, he changed the speed on the treadmill, slowing down a bit. When another five minutes went by and it hadn't gotten any better — he firmly told himself it was not getting worse — he slowed it down again. He had to repeat the process twice more before he finally gave up. He wasn't walking for fitness anymore, he was ambling. And he still couldn't take a full breath. He used the inhaler Brad had prescribed for him in situations like this and waited for it to work. After a few minutes, he was able to take a deep breath, then another.

When he was feeling normal again, he headed for the shower and let the steam loosen his chest as he cleaned up. By the time he was redressed in jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt, he was feeling fine. He headed downstairs and settled in to read another chapter in his book before Eileen returned.

He was just about to start the next one when she walked in, her T-shirt soaked in sweat.

"Good run?" he asked.

"Tough one," she said. "Jethro picked a hilly route, felt like my legs were on fire halfway through." She dropped her water bottle on the table inside the doorway. "How was your walk?"

"Good," Sean said. "Nothing as exciting as yours, though, just the same program I always do."

As his wife headed upstairs, Sean told himself that today was just a one-time thing, a bad day. If it happened again, he'd tell Eileen. There was no sense in worrying her over nothing.

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Abby bounced around their apartment as Jimmy finished packing his suitcase. With everything that was going on, he was glad they were getting out of town for a while, even if it was so he could meet her family. Jimmy still hadn't figured out how to tell his mother about Abby. He'd mailed her a note with his new address but had let her know he'd be out of town on vacation for a couple of weeks and would call when he got back.
He knew it was just postponing things, but he wanted to make sure he and Abby had sorted things out first before he mentioned anything to his mother. As it was, he was sure she would try and call when she got the note, but he wouldn't answer.

That was something else he'd have to explain to Abby. She knew the basics about his mother, but he hadn't really explained the phone call arrangement they had. Well, the one he and Dr. P had come up with so Jimmy could deal with his mother on his terms, not hers. It had worked, mostly, but when he'd called Dr. P the other day for advice on his current situation, the therapist had reminded him that the next few weeks would be challenging if he didn't want to slip back into old habits.

Jimmy hoped it wouldn't be necessary, since his mother had finally started to make some friends at the local community center where he'd bought her a membership for her birthday. She could take any of the programs the township rec department offered at a discount plus use the community center's gym and other facilities for free. Since the senior center was in the same building, he hoped this would make it easier for her to start using their services in a few years since she would be used to going to the building already. Dr. P had made both suggestions as ways Jimmy could help her develop some outside interests so she wasn't as focused on him, and they seemed to be working. She'd taken some classes and gone on some bus trips, and the last couple of times they had talked, she'd actually spent a little time talking about what she had been doing, rather than focusing on him the entire time.

He took one last look in his bag before zipping it shut. He was pretty sure he had everything, including a few things Abby hadn't asked him to bring, but he thought might come in handy.

"Ready to go, Abs?" he asked, grabbing his bag and walking into the living room.

"Ziva will be here in 10 minutes to drive us to the airport," she said.

Jimmy gulped. "Why did we agree to let her give us a ride, again?"

"Because the guys live in the other direction," Abby said, grinning. "She did promise she'd drive slowly."

"So she's only going to drive like Gibbs, not like herself? Yeah, real comforting, Abs."

Abby giggled and wrapped him in a hug. "Awww, poor Jimmy. I'll make it up to you tonight." She leaned in to kiss him, when his cell phone rang.

He could tell from the ring it was his mother — one of his first coping strategies had been to give her a unique one — so he hit the ignore button and leaned in the rest of the way to kiss Abby.

When they pulled apart, she grinned as she wiped lipstick from his face. "Now you can check your message," she said, her tone impish.

Jimmy sighed. He'd known this conversation was coming sooner or later. "It's my mom. I'll listen, but I know what she's going to say, and she's just going to have to wait until we get back from vacation."

When Abby opened her mouth — probably to protest — Jimmy put a finger to her lips. "Abs, it's a long story, and Ziva will be here any minute. We can talk while we're waiting at the airport, OK?"

She nodded, mute, but kissed his finger before he pulled it away. Before either of them could say anything else, Ziva was ringing the bell downstairs.
By mutual agreement, they kept the conversation light all the way to the airport. Jimmy was actually glad for Ziva's breakneck speed behind the wheel, as it kept him from over-thinking what he needed to say to Abby, especially after he listened to his mother's message.

When they'd made it through security and settled down at the gate looking out the window at the activity on the tarmac, he wrapped his arm around Abby. "Do you want to ask questions, or do you want me to tell you the story, then let you ask?"

She reached across his body to take his other hand in both of hers. "I can't promise I won't ask questions if I have them, but you tell it your way." She smiled. "Besides, that way I can practice my listening skills."

He pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "Thanks, Abs." He looked outside and tried to figure out where to start. "I said my mother had some issues, right?" He felt, rather than saw, her nod. "When I started seeing Dr. P, one of the things he helped me realize was that my mom has no sense of boundaries and not much interest in anything outside of me. It used to be if I didn't check in with her every day, she'd keep calling and eventually call the police to get them to do a welfare check on me." He sighed. "She trained me to answer when she called, to check in more times than a grown man should, because that was easier than having my cell phone go off every few minutes or explaining to the police that I'm fine; she's just a little weird."

"Jimmy, I'm a little weird," Abby said.

He looked at her, surprised at the uncertain expression on her face. "No, you're quirky," he said. "She has major emotional issues and refuses to see that." He squeezed her shoulders and was glad to feel her relax next to him.

"So how come your phone isn't ringing?"

"That's where Dr. P came in," he said. "I went to him trying to figure out how to help her. He showed me that I can't change her, I can only change how I react to her. So over time, I got her re-trained to where I call her every two weeks. If she calls in between and it's not something important such as a family emergency like Aunt Elizabeth is in the hospital, that takes the place of my call and then she has to wait longer for the next one."

Abby let go of his hand and wrapped her arms around his waist, hugging him as best she could. "Did it work?"

"Mostly," Jimmy said. "I sent her a letter earlier this week with our address and told her I was going away on vacation for two weeks and I'd call her when I got back. She was out of town on a trip and got back today, saw the letter, and called."

"Does she not like that you're moving in with me?" Abby's lips quirked.

Jimmy shook his head. "I haven't told her that part," he said. "I wanted to tell her the moving part and that I was taking vacation time that didn't involve a trip to see her, let that sink in." He sighed. "I needed to see her reaction, too. I've never been this serious about anybody before, so she's never really known about women I've dated since I moved out. Dr. P and I decided the vacation was a good trial balloon so we could figure out how to deal with her when I tell her about you."

Abby squeezed him in one of her super-hugs. "Just tell me what I need to do," she said. "I've heard too many horror stories about mothers-in-law to want to set your mom off." She paused. "Well, as long as I don't have to pretend I'm somebody I'm not. I think I'd rather take the mother-in-law issues than wear pink and flowers and feel like I have to go to court."
Jimmy couldn't help laughing as she wrinkled up her nose. "No worries, Abs," he said. "Whenever I do introduce you, I want her to meet you, not somebody she thinks would be right for me." He frowned. "Especially since I'm not sure she thinks anybody is good enough for her baby. That's why I'm meeting with Dr. P again when we get back." He thought for a second, then decided to mention the one part of her comment that had him wondering. "You told Burley I was your fiancé, now you're saying my mom is your mother-in-law. Did I somehow forget the moment where I proposed and you accepted?" He dropped another kiss on her head so she would know he wasn't trying to pick a fight.

Abby shook her head, pigtails tickling his neck when they moved. "No." She paused. "Maybe... think of it as working up to being OK with a wedding." She leaned back so she could look up at him. "I talked to Ducky and to Timmy, and they both had some good advice that was kind of the same and kind of different."

"What was the advice, or is that classified?"

She shrugged. "Mostly to stop thinking about this as one big thing and break it up, find the pieces I am comfortable with, see if I can use that to get to a place where we're both OK with it." She grinned. "I think I might even have the final solution, but give me a few days."

Jimmy raised an eyebrow. "Does this mean I'm getting a proposal at some point?" The role reversal would be completely Abby — the bedroom wasn't the only place she liked the take charge — and if that's what it took, he was fine with that.

She smirked. "You're just going to have to wait and see..."

And that was all she'd say on the subject.

-Gibbs pulled up near the coffee shop, but didn't see Ducky's Morgan anywhere. He checked his watch, but he was right on time. He walked inside the coffee shop, where he saw Ducky just placing his overcoat across the back of an armchair against the wall. It was part of a grouping with a sofa and second armchair, and he had to admire the medical examiner's choice. The area was in the middle of the room, since tables with outlets lined the walls. They would have a good view of the entire coffee shop between the two of them. No, three. When Ducky found out Burley was in town, he'd invited Stan to join them, saying it would give better cover in case Josh somehow had seen a picture of either of them.

Gibbs had briefed his former agent, whose only comment was "Sounds like you're better off with this family than another wife, Boss." He'd grinned when Gibbs head-slapped him, though.

"Hey, Duck," he said, approaching his friend.

"Ah, Jethro. Punctual as always, I see." Ducky straightened up and looked around. "This is a pleasant place, I must say. Quite a relaxing atmosphere, despite the large quantities of caffeine."

Gibbs grinned. "Let's see if they can make my coffee strong enough before we pass judgement." He scanned the shop, then lowered his voice. "I don't see Josh anywhere, do you?"

Ducky shook his head. "No, but I did see Sarah come on duty a few minutes ago. They just did the shift change, and I took the opportunity to take my time observing the shop and choosing an appropriate location."

Gibbs nodded. "Let's get drinks, get comfortable. Burley won't be here for another 15, 20 minutes."
I wanted us to get settled first."

They stepped up to the counter to order. Sarah was that fancy name for a coffee maker that Gibbs could never remember, and when he placed his order for a large dark coffee, strong as they could make it, she leaned over.

"Would you like us to add a couple of shots of espresso?" He could see her lips twitching at the edges and wondered which of the others had put her up to that.

"Yeah, that'd be good," he said. He didn't hold with that fancy coffee DiNozzo and the others were drinking, but even he knew espresso was strong.

"And a small Earl Grey tea for me," Ducky said.

Gibbs moved down to the pick-up counter, where he half-listened to Ducky chattering with the counter woman, talking about how he'd moved to the area not long ago to take a job at the university and he was so pleased to find this coffee shop, the perfect place to catch up with an old friend who was only in town for the weekend. It was probably more detail than they needed, but then Gibbs saw a man who looked like Josh walk in and get in line behind Ducky, and he was glad the medical examiner was off on his usual tangent.

Sarah handed him his coffee, and Gibbs tipped his head slightly toward the man standing behind Ducky. When she went pale and nodded, he inclined his head slightly and went back to the seats Ducky had staked out.

Gibbs picked the sofa, figuring Burley could take the other chair, which had its back to the area they thought Josh was most likely to sit based on the intel from the Gibblets. He sipped his coffee, and his eyebrows went up. Now this was coffee, plenty strong.

Ducky stepped aside to let Josh order, and Gibbs took the chance to catch his eye, knowing Duck would understand the slight movement of his head. Sure enough, his friend didn't move all the way down the counter, staying just close enough to hear Josh and the cashier interacting. When he did walk down, Sarah had his tea waiting for him, but he took a moment to talk to her as well, only moving once Josh had come down to get his coffee. The man settled into a table close to the pick-up counter, just a few tables away from the back of Burley's chair.

When Ducky walked over and placed his drink on the table between his chair and the couch, Gibbs said quietly "Want to switch seats, Duck?"

Ducky shook his head. "No, but I rather think I will join you on the couch, where I will be a bit closer to Joshua." He moved his coat and tea cup, then settled down. "Jethro, I have found nothing so far to disprove Anthony's hypothesis. He is indeed a proud man, one convinced he is superior to those around him. He has learned to wrap it in charm, so that he does not come across as arrogant, but it is there."

Gibbs sipped his coffee and nodded. "Did he say anything to her?"

"He said hello, and she nodded but didn't reply." Ducky frowned. "Jethro, I am rather worried about her. She seems rather pale compared to what I remember."

"You noticed that, too." He paused, took another sip. "She lost a few shades of color when Josh walked in." He suppressed a growl. "Don't like bullies, Duck. She's a feisty one, went toe-to-toe with me that one time she was mixed up in a case. We need to figure out what this guy is up to." Before he could say more, he saw Burley walk in. The agent caught his eye, then went to order.
When he walked over a few minutes later, carrying a mug with a tea bag hanging out, Gibbs raised an eyebrow. "No coffee?"

"Boss, I come close enough to burning a hole in my stomach around you," he said. "If I stick to green tea, we'll all appreciate it, even though Mc-"

Gibbs glared at him. They did not need Josh overhearing and making the connection between them and Sarah.

"Mc- My trainer isn't as much of a bastard as you are." Burley leaned closer. "OK, you guys must be watching the blond guy two tables behind me. Nobody else is close enough to overhear."

Gibbs let his lips quirk up. "You're wasted afloat, Stan. You could head up a team around here."

Burley shook his head. "Not me. I like what I'm doing." He sipped his tea. "So, how have you been, now that you've given up on ex-wives?"

As the three men caught up with each other, Gibbs and Burley provided most of the conversation, letting Ducky listen. They couldn't talk about NCIS, and Gibbs couldn't even say too much about the team members. Wasn't like there were that many Zivas around. Abby was safe, it was a common enough name, and they could mostly use "she" instead of Abby or Abs. He told a few Tony stories as well, another common name.

While Ducky was focusing on Josh, Gibbs observed Sarah. She seemed to be working OK at first, though when a short, red-headed girl joined Josh, getting a kiss as she sat down, he thought she looked a little wobbly. Sarah excused herself shortly after, and he figured as she headed to the back that she needed a few minutes to get herself together. He caught the name of Josh's new girlfriend, Serena, and filed it away to pass to McGee. Between that and knowing she worked at the library, McGee could find out who she was if they needed that information.

Gibbs encouraged Burley to tell them stories of his nephew, who sounded like a baby Tim, all curiosity. Burley spent 20 minutes telling them how three-year-old Brian had taken apart his father's baseball glove, unlacing the entire thing to figure out how it was put together. Gibbs laughed, remembering how Kelly had once tried to take apart Shannon's bike to figure out how it worked, and Shannon had redirected her to her tricycle, knowing they had a new bike hidden in the basement to give her for her fourth birthday the following week. He didn't normally share those memories, but with NCIS and the Gibblets off limits, they didn't have as much to talk about. And ever since his run-in with his former mother-in-law earlier this year, he'd found himself remembering more and more of the times with his family.

He knew he should let Duck handle the heavy lifting on Josh observation, but as he saw Sarah take a few more breaks, he wished he could focus on Josh and Serena, figure out what they were doing to upset Sarah.

After more than an hour, Ducky joined into the conversation with a tale from his youth, one of his typical never-ending stories. Once Ducky finished, Gibbs leaned in a bit.

"You got what you need, Duck?"

Ducky nodded. "Yes, more than enough," he said. "I suggest we stay here as long as they are still sitting nearby. After they leave, we can talk."

Gibbs nodded and let Ducky take the conversational reins, something his old friend had no problem doing. When he and Burley fell into the familiar cricket debate, Gibbs tuned out and
watched Josh and Serena, plus Sarah.

Josh was physically affectionate, fingers grazing Serena's arm. The couple appeared to be hanging out rather than studying or doing anything specific. A few times, Josh said something to bring a pink tinge to Serena's face, but since she also smiled, he figured it was sweet rather than embarrassing. Whatever he was saying, he had angled his body toward the coffee bar so Gibbs couldn't catch it. As he looked over to Sarah, the grim expression on her face told him she could probably either hear him or catch enough to guess what her ex-boyfriend was saying.

After a while, Josh moved his chair around the table so his back was to the men and he faced Sarah's workstation. This also let him put an arm around Serena's shoulders, forcing Gibbs to stifle a growl. Josh was definitely doing this to screw with Sarah's head, and judging by her increasingly pale face, it was working. He was about to go up there and order a refill just to give Sarah something else to focus on, maybe block her view for a few minutes so she could pull it together, when she abruptly walked into the back office.

"Jethro, is everything all right?" Ducky kept his voice low.

"Don't think so, Duck. Wish I could hear what that bastard's saying. Better yet, wish he'd leave. Sarah's not holding up too well."

"No, and I'm beginning to understand the children's concerns," Ducky said. "If I'm correct in my analysis, this will continue to get worse."

Burley cocked an eyebrow. "Children? Ducky, they're my age."

"My dear boy, when you get to be my age, anybody much younger than Jethro appears to be a child. It is a side effect of the creaky joints that I am saddled with." He tipped his head. "Jethro, now that she's back, perhaps refills all around would be in order."

Gibbs shook his head. "Separately. Gives us a chance to distract her longer." He got up, mug in hand. At the register, he placed his order, catching Sarah's eye. "Those shots you added were perfect," he said. "This time, I'd like to add three." He winced a bit at the cost, but reminded himself that the coffee was good enough to be worth it.

"Venti drip, three shots, coming up," Sarah said. She was still pale, but her hands were steady.

Gibbs paid, then moved down, angling his body so Sarah couldn't see Josh or Serena.

As she waited for the espresso to brew, she stood near him, sipping from a to-go cup.

"You must drink a lot of coffee working here," he said.

Sarah shook her head. "I used to," she said. "Switched to a new tea we started carrying a few weeks ago. It's good, but I might have to switch back to coffee — pulling all-nighters to study are almost impossible on no caffeine."

Gibbs nodded. "I pull those at work pretty regularly, couldn't get through them without caffeine. One of my teammates only drinks tea, don't see how she does it."

"Neither do I," Sarah said. "I might have to switch to coffee to get through this shift — feels like I'm falling asleep on my feet."

"Late night last night?" Gibbs grinned, enjoying the chance to be a nosy parent without getting an eye roll.
"Not too late," she said. "My brothers have everybody over for game night on Saturdays, but now that they've got kids coming, it doesn't last too late. Good thing. I fried my brain studying for math before everybody else showed up."

"Math's tough," Gibbs said. "Never was one of my favorite subjects. Geometry at least made some sense, had some practical use, figuring arcs and angles. The rest of it, not so much."

She handed him his coffee, and Gibbs was glad to see she wasn't quite as pale as when he'd come over. As he headed back to his seat, he was glad to see Josh and Serena seemed to be packing up to leave.

By the time Ducky had finished the story he was telling as Gibbs returned — something about a koala and a roadrunner he'd encountered on a trip to Australia — Josh and his new girlfriend had left.

"OK, Duck, what's your diagnosis?"

Ducky frowned, and Gibbs forced himself not to growl.

"First, Jethro, I must commend Anthony for his preliminary profile," Ducky said. "The more I listened to Joshua, the more accurate it seemed. Still, it was rather general, and I do have some specifics to add." He paused to sip some tea, and Gibbs glared at him. "Jethro, patience is not your strong suit. Now, as I said, Anthony is mostly correct. Pride is a significant component of Joshua's personality, as well as an almost overwhelming belief that he is better than most around him. His fraternity sweatshirt and designer jeans tell me he wants to be among the elite, and he fancies himself quite the catch. I would wager Serena is from a middle-class family, intelligent but not particularly popular. She is not an outcast, nor is she out of step with the latest fashions, but she has her own style. Josh appeals to her by being the Big Man On Campus, as it were. Rather as I imagine Anthony was at his age."

"If he's that full of himself, why not go for the head cheerleader or somebody like that?" Burley asked. "Why somebody like Serena, who I'm guessing is the same profile as McGee's sister?"

"An excellent question," Ducky said. "While he believes he is better than those around him, I suspect there is a piece of him — most likely subconscious — that recognizes that there are many out there who are smarter or better-looking than he is. We see a bit of this in Anthony, who in earlier years was intimidated by Timothy's intelligence and would scoff at that while playing up his own street smarts and experience at work, and his looks and athleticism when talk turned personal. In Joshua's case, he does not have Anthony's looks or physique to fall back on, which leaves just charm and wealth. Those are common among that social strata, as we have seen with Mr. DiNozzo, as well as Anthony."

Gibbs frowned. Before he could ask a question, Burley said, "So you're saying he goes for girls who are enough 'below him,' as he sees it, on the social scale that those traits will impress them."

"Precisely." Ducky looked at Burley. "You know, Stanley, you might consider some additional study in this area, as you rather have a talent for it."

"Thanks, Ducky, but my brain's going to be full enough with all the computer stuff McGee's got planned for this week. I didn't even understand half the terms on the handout."

Gibbs cleared his throat.

"Yes, Jethro," Ducky said, shaking his head. "We digress. As I was saying, Joshua picks women
who are likely to be impressed by what he brings to the table. I suspect had he known exactly who Sarah's family was early on, he would not have gotten as serious. Between Timothy's novels and Anthony's family background, not to mention the intelligence and good looks each man offers, she has had ample exposure to those characteristics, and as the little sister, is unimpressed by any of it. That, plus her natural feistiness, made it inevitable that when she discovered Josh's deception, she would react as she did and cut him off. He tries to find women who will excuse away any evidence they find until they are too far into the relationship to want to break it off."

Gibbs sank back in the seat. "So is he a threat?"

Ducky frowned. "His pride is hurt, certainly," he said. "His coming around is a way of rubbing it in, as he sees it. He is trying to show Sarah what she gave up."

"And when she keeps ignoring him?" Burley leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "What then?"

"Well, that is the tricky part," Ducky said. "Right now, she seems to be having just enough reaction to his presence that he can see a reward to his efforts. If she had never reacted, he might have stopped. However, since she has been affected, if she were to be able to shut him out now, that might just incite him to up the stakes as it were and become a more intrusive presence."

Gibbs growled. "That's just great." He cast a quick look over to Sarah, who seemed to be more herself, smiling and chatting with coworkers, though she still seemed pale and tired. "So she has to let him see he's getting to her in order to keep him from doing anything more?"

Ducky sighed. "If it were for an extended period of time, Jethro, I might rethink things. But my understanding is the semester ends in a month and he will be leaving town for the summer. My suggestion would be for Sarah to allow Joshua to see that he is getting to her, not worry so much about hiding it, and then use the summer to regroup. It is also possible that as the semester nears its close, he will get weary of the game and stop, but I would not want to guarantee such an outcome."

"Great." Gibbs sucked down a few mouthfuls of coffee. "McGee's going to love hearing that. Sarah, too." He thought. "Looks like they'd better keep Josh-Watch going. That will keep him away from her as much as possible, but also show that he's still getting to her."

Ducky nodded. "You might speak with her and the others, suggest she not try to hide her reactions quite as much. It is possible, though unlikely, that if he sees an increasing reaction, it might satisfy his need for payback enough to lose interest."

Gibbs nodded. "Thanks, Duck." He thought for a second. "Might be time for another campfire, figure out a plan." He called Tony's cell, making arrangements for them to meet at the guys' house in an hour to talk about Ducky's analysis and what it meant.

"Jethro, I fear I must ask you to present my analysis to the others. I, unfortunately, have some prior commitments this evening." Ducky frowned. "I rather wish I could reschedule them, but I have canceled three times already because of cases that have come up."

"No worries, Duck. I can handle it." Gibbs sipped more of his coffee.

"Mind if I join you?" Burley said. "Since Vance pulled me up here for the next couple of weeks, I've got afternoons and evenings free, and I don't really feel like looking up my old Capitol Hill friends, the ones whose bosses haven't been booted out."

Gibbs quirked an eyebrow.
"Too fake for me, Boss," Burley said. "Besides, sounds like you guys need all the help you can get."

"Stanley does have a point, Jethro," Ducky said. "I know Director Vance is planning on keeping your team primarily on financial investigations while Abigail and Mr. Palmer are gone so you do not frighten away Abigail's substitute, but those will still require you to work many hours, and while I do not currently see any signs that Joshua will escalate his behavior, I am rather worried that Sarah is suffering from his mind games."

"I hear my name?"

They looked up to see Sarah standing there. Without waiting for a response, she dropped heavily into the free chair.

"Sarah, my dear. It has been too long, though I wish we were not seeing each other under these circumstances." Ducky got up, coat in hand, and walked over to hug the young woman. "Unfortunately, I must take my leave, but Jethro and Stanley, whom you've not met, can explain."

As Ducky walked off, Gibbs observed Sarah. She slumped in the chair, looking thoroughly exhausted. She had left the apron she had been wearing behind the counter, but there were damp spots on her shirt at the waist. She wasn't carrying a mug or cup, and Gibbs thought her earlier assessment that she needed some caffeine was on target.

"Sarah? I'm Stan Burley, used to work with the Boss, Abby, and Ducky way back. The director has me in your brother's training class while my ship's in dock, and I kind of invited myself along to this rodeo."

Sarah nodded. "Nice to meet you. So you've heard about my screwed-up excuse for an ex?"

Stan nodded, and Gibbs decided to move things forward, before Sarah's break ended.

"Ducky gave a pretty good idea of what Josh is up to, but you're not going to like it."

Sarah snorted, so like her brother for a moment that Gibbs couldn't help but smile.

"That's funny?" She glared.

He shook his head. "You remind me of McGee sometimes. Not often; you're too different. It's always a surprise when you do."

Sarah cracked a smile at that. "So, what am I not going to like."

Gibbs didn't like the resignation in her tone. He began to think the bigger worry was not if Josh would do something, but if Sarah would hold up under the strain until the semester ended and he left town. "Ducky thinks that since you dented that bastard's pride, he needs to feel like he's getting to you."

"Mission accomplished." Sarah's flat tone added another worry to Gibbs' lengthy list. "I need to hide it better, I guess."

Gibbs reached over to put a hand on her shoulder, knowing she wasn't going to like what he had to say. "No, he said that's probably going to cause Josh to escalate, trying to get you to react."

Sarah rolled her eyes. "Great. So what am I supposed to do?"
Gibbs sighed. "Ducky suggested you let yourself react, not try to hide it so much. Since Josh has somebody new, just seeing that he's gotten what he sees as a victory over you might cause him to back off."

"And if he doesn't?"

Gibbs moved so he was crouching on the ground by Sarah's chair, looking her in the eyes. "Semester ends in a month. Duck thinks you might have to wait it out; I don't like that idea." He rubbed her shoulder. "Think you can handle another month of this?"

Sarah frowned. "It's been two weeks, and I feel like shit. It used to just be when he'd do something; now I always think something's going to happen. I can't leave my dorm room without hearing the skank he cheated on me with talk about her 'sexy guy.' I can't study at the library, because my replacement works there. He comes in here while I'm working and hangs out just to mess with my mind, and I can't do anything about it because he's been hanging out here as long as he's gone to Waverley so the cops couldn't do anything. No, I don't think I can handle another month of this." She burst into tears, and Gibbs pushed himself up, wincing as his knees creaked, and sat on the arm of the chair, hugging her and letting her cry.

Stan raised an eyebrow. Gibbs just shook his head. He was reminded of when Kelly was little and would skin a knee and need daddy hugs. Abby hugged all the time, but rarely cried at work. And Ziva still wouldn't allow herself to be this vulnerable around anybody, even him or Ducky. Gibbs knew Sarah had a great dad, but since Sean wasn't around right now, he was happy to fill in.

Soon Sarah's tears stopped, and she pulled away, swiping at her eyes. "Oh, hell," she said. "I'm a mess, and my break's almost over." She stood up, wobbling a little.

"You OK?"

She nodded. "Just need to eat. I couldn't before, with Josh and that girl here."

Gibbs looked at her, making sure she was telling the truth. She met his gaze. "I'm not Tim," she said. "You're going to have to actually glare for me to tell you what you want to know. That or ask the question."

He chuckled. "Good girl. Go eat. We're meeting at the guys' house to figure out next steps." He checked his watch. "Need to leave actually, if you're OK?"

She nodded. "I will be. Have somebody send me an e-mail to fill me in; I know you won't use it."

"She's got you pegged, Boss." Stan stood and offered Sarah his hand. "Sarah it was nice to meet you, even under these circumstances. Hope you don't mind, but I've offered to help while I'm in town, at least while your brother isn't torturing me with computer training."

That got a genuine smile from her. "If he's driving you too crazy, tell him I'll jam his typewriter keys."

Gibbs snorted. "Come on, Burley. You'll need to follow me."

Still he watched as Sarah made a beeline for the restroom.

"You're worried."

"Ya think, Stan? Aren't you?"
Burley nodded, his face sober. "I have a feeling this is going to get worse before it gets better."
Sunday, April 4, 2010

After the crazy, snowy winter, the weather had improved a lot. Since it was in the low 70s — which felt balmy after weeks of snow and ice — Tony packed a picnic for their second Sunday lunch date but refused to tell Tim where they were going, insisting it was a surprise.

As Tony piloted the car, Tim gradually realized they were heading to the park where they'd had their very first date last June and was touched that Tony remembered. It was also a startling reminder that the first anniversary of that date was still a couple of months away — which was crazy, if he let himself think about it. A year ago, he was just getting wind of the case that would send him to LA with Gibbs to work with OSP, the case that led to Tony killing Rivken and Ziva staying in Israel. The case that started the cascade of dominoes that had brought him and Tony together as more than friends, more than partners. If anybody had told him a year ago that he'd be married to anybody, let alone Tony, he would have figured it was a set-up for an elaborate practical joke.

It was nice to lie on the blanket with Tony, just lying there, side-by-side, watching the clouds and relaxing. The park was fairly quiet, as always, since the families with kids were at the parks with playing fields now that softball, baseball, and soccer were in full swing.

He said as much. "Of course, that will probably be us in a few years," he added. "You'll be coaching the team, and Mom, Dad, and I will be watching from the sidelines, cheering our son on, whether he's the star of the team or blowing the fluff off dandelions in right field."

He could feel Tony's body shake as he laughed. "Oh, no, you'll be on the sidelines too, keeping the stats book," Tony said. "And helping the outfielders at practice sometimes, giving them tips on snagging those fly balls."

"Just as long as I'm not supposed to help with pitching practice," Tim said. "There's a reason I was a center fielder." He grinned at the thought. "Watch, we'll get the kid who'd rather play soccer or swim."

"Hey, phys ed major here," Tony said. "I think I know the rules to pretty much every sport there is — even cricket, though I'm keeping that a secret from Ducky. When he asked Kate to give that cricket ball to Burley years ago, I realized I should keep that tidbit to myself."

"My lips are sealed," Tim said, miming zipping them shut. "And actually, I don't care if he plays every sport out there or hates sports." He paused. "You're still set on adopting a boy?"

Tony nodded. "Since we've got a choice, I'd rather stick with what we know." He sighed. "Assuming we get to pick."

"Well, yeah, we are adopting," Tim said.

"It's not that." Tony sighed. "That nightmare, the one that wasn't the Somalia one?"

Tim nodded, remembering the night he'd told Abby about just the other day. "That was the first time you let me in."
"But I never told you what it was about." Tony paused. "I dreamed I was at DSS, getting interviewed by a case worker for our adoption petition, and she was throwing my past back in my face, all the reasons I'd be a horrible parent. And then my father and uncle and grandfather showed up, like a Greek chorus saying what a screw-up I was. And she said Maryland might allow same-sex couples to adopt, but she didn't think it was an appropriate home environment for children."

Tim interlaced their fingers, squeezing Tony's hand. "First, you're going to Dr. P, and he can always testify on your behalf that you've dealt with those scars. Second, you know my parents, Gibbs, and everyone on the team would be character references. And third, we've got three options for adopting — we can make sure we're living here, D.C., or Virginia, whichever one we think makes the most sense. Also, we don't have to adopt through DSS. We can go through a private agency and pick one that's friendly to same-sex couples." He chuckled. "Abby's already been researching on our behalf, ever since she realized we were thinking about this."

Tony laughed, which eased tension from Tim's body. "Is that why I haven't been getting alternative remedy printouts from her lately?"

"Probably," Tim said. "She keeps e-mailing me links. I told her we were planning to wait because you wanted to work things out with Dr. P first, but you know Abby. She just sends them to me instead of both of us."

Tony laughed and rolled on his side to face Tim. "We'd better hope she and Jimmy have those bat-gremlins, or she's going to spoil Baby McGee rotten."

"Baby McGee?" Tim used his good arm to lever himself up. "Not DiNozzo?"

Tony shook his head. "Told you before," he said. "I don't want to pass on to our kids all the bad stuff that comes with the name."

"Even though you're working with Dr. P to take care of that?"

"Even though," Tony said. "So, get anything good out of what Abby sent?"

Tim thought about all the information their friend had inundated him with. "The biggest thing is that we probably want to move to DC, or at least wait to buy a house near Mom and Dad until after we've adopted. Virginia will only recognize us both as parents if we adopt someplace else. Maryland will let one of us adopt, or if one of us is the biological father, will let the other one adopt. But there's no clear case law on whether the state will let us jointly adopt."

"See, I was right to have nightmares about DSS." Tony stuck out his tongue. "Let me guess, D.C. has no issues with us both adopting, since it has no problems with us getting married."

"You've got it." Tim nodded. "I'd say we should just find a place there, but to find one in a safe neighborhood and with a yard big enough for kids and Jethro will probably be more expensive than we want, even with your trust fund and my book money."

"Not to mention we'd have to send them to private school," Tony said. "D.C. schools are lousy, even the good ones."

"True," Tim said. "The cost of putting two kids through private schools alone would eat up your trust fund, nevermind being able to buy a house or pay the adoption fees that would make it necessary."

Tony nodded and rolled to sit up. "Don't forget college tuition. Just because we both got scholarships doesn't mean our kids will. And if I'm going to stay home once they hit school, we're
only going to have your NCIS paycheck, plus whatever I get in retirement."

Tim looked up at him. "So that rules out D.C." He thought for a second, flipping through the information he'd absorbed from Abby's e-mails. "We could stay here in Maryland, go the surrogate route," he said. "Then one of us would be the biological parent, and the other one could adopt. We'd have to pick the right court to file the petition through, but that's possible."

Tony's instinctive face made his opinion pretty clear. "OK, not that," Tim said. He thought for a second. "We could move twice."

"Huh?" Tony reached down to put a hand to his forehead. "You feeling OK? Because you're not making sense."

Tim swatted Tony's hand away. "I'm fine, you goof. No, I'm saying we move to D.C. in December when our lease is up, stay there until we get to the point of adopting, adopt our kid or kids, and then move to Alexandria."

Tony thought about it. "So do we adopt all the kids at once? Because even though they might not start school right away, it's going to be a logistical nightmare to drive down to Mom and Dad's from the city, drop off Baby McGee, then head back to the Navy Yard, only to repeat it at the end of the day. Crossing the Potomac takes enough time as it is during rush hour — doing it twice each rush hour, even if we're going against traffic for one of them, is going to add probably two hours to commuting each day."

"No, that seems dumb," Tim said. "See, this is why jet packs would be useful."

"McJetson."

At the warning tone in Tony's voice, Tim subsided. "OK, OK. No jet packs. But you're right, that doesn't make sense." He thought about it. "I guess adopting all the kids we want to have at once makes some sense. We might even be able to find a couple of brothers or sisters, then they could stay together."

Tony smiled. "I like the sound of that," he said. "But if we're going to do the 0 to 60 thing on a family, we definitely need to wait a little while."

Tim nodded, feeling the blanket scrunch under his hair. "I'm good with that," he said. "There's a lot of different pieces for us to put together before we can do this; might as well take the time and make sure we do it right."

"Dr. P will be glad to hear that, too," Tony said. "He was a little concerned I was putting a timeline on working things out, said that was too much pressure. If we put this off, say three years, figuring it will take another year after that to get all the legal stuff done, I've got plenty of time."

Tim just reached up and wrapped his hand around Tony's. "Now that we have that settled, come lie back down," he said. "Let's enjoy the rest of our date before we go home and have to deal with Jethro moping because his dads left him."

So Tony stretched out next to him, interlacing their fingers, watching the clouds scud across the sky.

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Three hours later, Tony wished he could recapture that relaxed feeling. As Gibbs ended their call, Tony fought the urge to punch something. Having Gibbs move up the Josh-Watch discussion from
tomorrow after work to this afternoon did not sound good.

Tony was glad Tim was writing away in the study — he could hear the typewriter and shredder going, so he must have finally started on his next book. Moving to the kitchen, as far away from the study as he could get without going upstairs, he called Ziva, Damon, and Dwayne. Since Brad hadn't made it to game night yesterday, Tony didn't bother calling him; an e-mail once they knew what was going on would be enough.

Ziva and Damon both promised to come, but Dwayne had a different plan.

"Actually, Tony, Maggie and I were talking, and she's coming. One of us needs to stay with the kids, and she probably has more helpful information than I do."

"What do you mean, helpful?" Tony asked. "She's only met Josh once."

"She was a social worker before choosing to stay home with the kids, and she's got a lot of experience and training with this kind of thing. She's not trying to say Ducky doesn't know what he's doing, but-"

Tony cut him off. "Ducky won't even be here; Boss said he had another appointment he couldn't reschedule. So if Maggie has some insight, we'd really appreciate her coming. We weren't supposed to get together to talk about this until tomorrow after work, and I'm worried that they think we need to talk today."

"What does Tim think?"

"He was already writing when Gibbs called, so I figured I'd round up the troops first, then fill in McWorry." Tony massaged his forehead with his free hand. "Whatever's going on, he's not going to like it."

He wrapped up the call with Dwayne, then took a couple of deep breaths, trying to mentally prepare for this conversation. When that didn't work, he reminded himself that this was one of the things he was working on with Dr. P, to be able to have the difficult discussions, especially when he didn't want to.

When he opened the study door, Tim was just stretching in his chair, his spine popping. The shredder was overflowing, but there was a stack of finished pages as well, so Tony figured McWriter had to be in a decent mood.

"You almost done?" he asked.

"Huh?" Tim turned around. "Yeah, just about. Why?"

"Gibbs called." Tony decided the band-aid principle was best. "He should be here in-" He checked his watch. "About 20 minutes. The rest of the team is coming, too, at least the ones who aren't busy or out of town."

Tim got up. "Tony?"

"I don't know what he's coming to tell us, just that we needed to have a Josh discussion today." Tony reached out and put a hand on Tim's shoulder. "Dwayne is sending Maggie; she was a social worker, and he said she has lots of training in this area."

"Great." Tim's shoulders slumped. "We need somebody with lots of training in handling stalkers because one's after my baby sister." He paused. "Are my parents coming?"
Tony stopped and thought. "No, Gibbs didn't say anything about calling them, and I didn't tell them," he said. "If this is really serious, then I think Gibbs is right and we need to tell them. I'll even volunteer to be the one to break it to Sarah. But right now, I think it's just those of us who know."

"Ducky?"

"Had someplace to be he couldn't reschedule. He briefed Gibbs though." Tony walked behind Tim and started rubbing his shoulders, feeling the tension knotting them. "Come on, let's throw on some coffee, and the kettle for Ziva. I think we're going to need it."

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Tim was just getting mugs down from the cabinet when he heard Ziva calling from the living room.

"We're back here."

She and Damon walked into the kitchen a moment later. She wore jeans, while he had shorts on like Tim and Tony.

"Ziva, we've got the kettle ready to go," he said, reaching over to flip on the burner. "Damon, coffee?"

"It's not Gibbs'-strength, is it?" He looked at Tim, and despite the serious situation, Tim couldn't help laughing.

"No, it's the way we usually make it. Gibbs can just grumble when he gets here," Tim said. "I'm betting Sarah slipped some extra espresso in his coffee anyway."

"Is Sarah going to be here?" Ziva asked, taking a seat at the kitchen table. "And where is Tony?"

"I'm right here." Tony opened the mudroom door, leash in hand. "I put Jethro out back, figured that was easier." He hung the leash on the hook and walked into the kitchen. Tim handed his husband a mug.

"Damon, room for cream and sugar?" Tim said.

The former Marine shook his head. "Got out of the habit on my last tour. Just black."

Tim filled Damon's mug, then passed the pot to Tony. He opened the cabinet to see what they had for tea. "Irish Breakfast, Earl Grey, or that herbal stuff Abby drinks?"

"Earl Grey, I think," Ziva said. "It is what Ducky keeps on hand for these sorts of discussions, no?"

Tim dropped the tea bag in the mug and set it by the stovetop, waiting for the water to boil. He took the mug Tony handed him, sipping it to find Tony had added the right amount of milk and sugar.

"So where's the Boss?" Tony said.

"Right here, DiNozzo." Gibbs walked into the kitchen, Burley in tow.

"Hey, Burley," Tim said. "How'd you get roped into our mess?" He passed two more mugs to Tony.
"Invited myself along," the agent said. "Boss used me for cover at the coffee shop, three old friends catching up, and I offered to help while I'm in town, since I've got some spare time."

"Boss?" Damon said.

Tim realized introductions were in order. "Damon Werth, Stan Burley. Burley used to be on Gibbs' team. Damon's a former Marine we met on a case."

He held back a smirk as Tony rubbed his nose without thinking, but was glad Damon either hadn't noticed or didn't care.

"Wilson?" Gibbs asked, as Tony handed coffee to the two men, who grabbed seats around the table.

"He's not coming, but Maggie is," Tony said. "She used to be a social worker, so they thought she'd be more useful. He's staying home with the kids."

"What about Abby and what's-his-name?" Burley said.

Tim checked his watch. "They're in Louisiana by now," he said. "Abby's taking Jimmy down to visit her family for a couple of weeks. We'll have to call or e-mail them later."

Before they could say anything else, Maggie walked in, Kevin in her arms. "Sorry I'm late," she said. "He woke up just before I left, and I'm going to need to feed him in about half an hour, so it was easier to bring him."

Tony lifted the boy from her arms as Tim got out another mug. "Herbal tea, right?"

Maggie nodded as she settled in a chair. "If you have it. Otherwise water's fine."

Tim nodded. "Abby left a box of the stuff she drinks here," he said, pouring water into the mug. He handed it to her and took a seat at the table, while Tony stayed standing so he could walk Kevin around.

"OK, Boss, what's going on?" Tim asked. He wrapped his fingers around his mug, anchoring himself.

Gibbs didn't speak right away. Tim made himself be patient.

"Duck's worried," he said.

"Yeah, aren't we all," Tony muttered.

"DiNozzo."

"Yes, Boss." Tony kept pacing. Tim knew the baby was just an excuse; Tony hated sitting still.

"Duck agreed with DiNozzo's analysis, but he had more details. Basically, he said Sarah needs to let that dirtbag see he's getting to her, thinks that might satisfy him."

Gibbs pressed his lips together before continuing. "He said Josh is getting satisfaction from seeing Sarah react to him, makes him think she really does miss him and wants him back, she just won't admit it. If she manages to shut him down completely, doesn't react at all, he'll just escalate."

Tim clenched his hand into a fist, cursing. He heard Tony doing the same and looked to see his husband had pressed the side of Kevin's head against his chest, covering the other ear with his hand.
"So we cannot do anything?" Ziva said. "We must just watch him?"

"No way," Damon said. "Why don't we just go scare him, tell him to knock it off?"

Tim nodded, but saw Maggie shaking her head.

"Why not?" he said. "We're not talking about beating on him, just telling him to leave Sarah alone."

"He won't see it that way," Maggie said. She sighed. "You have to understand, this is something that happens a lot. Women who pursue a man are seen as crazy, but guys get all these messages from movies and other things that if they just ask enough times, women will fall for them. It's shown as persistence, not stalking."

"The Graduate," Tony said. "Dustin Hoffman, Katherine Ross. He asks and asks, follows her, interrupts the wedding — too late, of course."

"Tony," Tim said.

"Oops, right." Tony shifted Kevin to his other hip. "So why can't we tell him to buzz off?"

"He won't see it the way you mean it," Maggie said. "Most of the time, when a guy — brother, father, new boyfriend, whoever — tells the pursuer to back off, he sees it as a sign that she does still have feelings for him. If she didn't, he figures, she'd tell him herself."

"She did," Gibbs said.

"Yeah, and that's when he started bringing around the newer model," Tony said.

"He's trying to make her jealous," Maggie said.

Tim rubbed the back of his neck. "So let me get this straight. If she ignores him, he's going to try something else to get a reaction. If one of us tries to tell him off, he's going to take that as a sign she still wants him, even though she's already told him off."

Maggie nodded. "And from what you've said, he hasn't done anything where she can bring in the police."

Ziva began cursing in Hebrew, a muttered string that Tim knew was worse than what he and Tony had just said. "Balagan," she finished.

"Got that right," Gibbs said.

"So wait, we're actually hurting her by standing watch?" Damon said. "That's crazy."

"No, he's crazy," Tim said. "Boss, there has to be something we can do."

"Get Metro to talk to him." Gibbs thought for a second. "DiNozzo, anybody in SVU owe us a favor?"

"Don't do it, Gibbs," Maggie said.

"Why not?" Tim said. "There has to be something we can do to protect Sarah. She's my baby sister." He got up and started pacing. Tony stopped him with a hand on his shoulder and passed Kevin over. Tim snuggled the child against his chest, breathing in his sweet baby smell. "Thanks." He leaned back against the counter. "Look, I know she's an adult, but she's still my baby sister, and I don't want anything to happen to her."
Maggie nodded, turning her chair to face him. "I know, Tim, and I don't either." She ran a hand through her curls. "Look, this is why I came instead of Dwayne, because this is one of those things where pretty much everything that sounds like it makes sense makes things worse. The best thing she could do would be cut off all contact with him, but she can't stop him from coming in the coffee shop without a restraining order, and right now, we don't have enough to get one on him."

"There has to be something we can do." Burley pushed his chair back and joined Tim and Tony standing. "Look, I never met Sarah until today, but she looked like she was about to break when we talked to her. She can't take another month of this. And Boss can't handle her crying again."

Tim tightened his arms around Kevin. "Sarah cried? She never cries."

"We caught her once, in the library," Ziva said. "She said her eyes were just watering because she was tired."

"Yeah, that's Sarah," Tim said. "I can count on one hand the number of times I've seen her cry since she got past the skinned-knee stage."

"Not her knee that's skinned this time," Gibbs said. "Cried like Kelly always did. Burley's right, she can't take another month of this."

"We have to be able to do something."

"You're the one who said he'd sue," Tim said.

"It's not even that," Maggie said. "All they can do right now is talk to him. So what happens? The cops talk to him, and he sees that Sarah's used the worst weapon she has against him and he didn't get in trouble. At that point, there's nothing to stop him from escalating more."

As the room erupted in curses, Kevin started crying. Tim rubbed his back and paced, but still he screamed.

"Look, give me Kevin," Damon said. "We'll go out back, see the dog. Just tell me what I need to do." He took the baby from Tim's arms, a bit awkwardly, and carried him out back.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Tony really let loose.

"DiNozzo."

Tony shook his head after the slap. "Yes, Boss. Sorry, Boss."

"There has to be something we can do," Tim said. "We can't just tell Sarah, 'Hey, you've got to tough it out for another four weeks.' Not if she's barely hanging on now."

"I cannot help with Josh," Ziva said. "But one of Sarah's problems is that girl is often in her dorm, correct?"

"Chrissy, yeah," Tony said. "The bitch Josh was sleeping with."

"Sarah is moving in with me next month anyway," Ziva said. "She is welcome to move in now. That will give her a place where she does not have to deal with this. My building is secure, and there is enough room for her to study so she does not have to go to the library or the coffee shop for that."
Tim nodded. "Can't hurt," he said. "And I'm sure Sarah wouldn't mind being out of the dorms."

"That still doesn't solve the Josh problem," Tony said.

"Unfortunately, there's not a lot we can do," Maggie said. "Ducky's right that he'll probably escalate if she shuts him out completely."

"That would give us enough to go to Metro," Burley said.

"Yeah, but we don't know what he'd do when he escalates," Tony said. "If it's just verbal harassment and it's enough for a restraining order, that's great. But what if he tries to hurt her?"

"He'd better not hurt her." Tim clenched his hands into fists.

"This just sucks," Tony said.

Pretty much everybody agreed with that, but Tim knew that didn't get them anywhere.

"What if we bait a trap?" Burley said.

"Sarah is NOT bait," Tim said.

"Not like that," Burley said. "Look, I'm free pretty much every day. I should be on leave while the ship's in dock, but Vance pulled me up here for the training. Josh doesn't know me, doesn't have any reason to think I know you guys. Why don't I hang out at the coffee shop? Sarah can shut him down, and I'll be there to keep an eye on things. If he escalates, I can stop it before it gets out of hand and bring Metro in if it gets that far."

Tim frowned. "I don't like it," he said.

"Neither do I," Tony said. "But I don't know that we have a better option."

Gibbs tapped a finger on the table. "Go home," he said. "Sleep on it. Ziva, check on Sarah after she gets off, make sure she got home OK. Suggest she move."

"Yes, Gibbs," she said.

Maggie nodded. "I'll talk to some of my contacts in the area," she said. "The Women's Center out in Fairfax might have some suggestions."

"Thanks, Maggie." Tim forced a smile. "We really appreciate it. Sounds like we would have made things a lot worse without you here."

"That's the problem with these things," she replied. "There are a lot of things that sound reasonable but just make things worse." Before she could say anything more, Damon came in, Jethro at his heels and Kevin crying.

"He won't stop." The former Marine couldn't hand the baby over fast enough.

"He's hungry," Maggie said. "Tim, Tony, mind if I stay a while longer to feed him?"

Tim shook his head. "You can use the study if you want some privacy or the armchair in the living room if you'd rather be comfortable."

Maggie nodded and left the room. The rest of the team started cleaning up. Tim just walked into the mudroom and looked out the window into the backyard. There had to be something he could
Sarah rolled her shoulders, wishing she could just lie down and take a nap. Why did emotions have to be so much more exhausting than anything else? And now that things had slowed down, as they always did on Sunday nights, she had nothing else to think about except her aching feet and back. She normally didn't complain too much, not like Karen with her bad knee, but today it was all she could think of.

Well, no, that wasn't true. She could think of what Gibbs had said earlier, of Ducky's analysis that she needed to stop trying to hide her reactions from Josh. The idea sparked something in her, the anger she'd wanted to find all week. How unfair was it that Josh was the one who cheated, the one who was going out of his way to get in her way, but she was the one dealing with it?

And she was, really. She remembered all the information the dorms posted about stalkers over the years — tell them you want no contact, don't answer the phone, don't talk to them, don't give them what they want. But she wasn't about to quit her job because of him, not when they were giving her a full-time job after graduation. So she had done her best to just work and ignore him when he came in, and now Ducky thought she hadn't done it well enough. Betrayed by her own body, which didn't seem to get the message about not reacting. OK, so she hadn't helped things along by not eating those couple of times. She wasn't the athlete Tony had been, but even she knew her body couldn't run without enough fuel. She was pretty sure Ben & Jerry's didn't count either, even if the peanut butter on her pizza gave her some protein.

Sarah leaned back against the counter, willing the hands of the clock to move faster. She wanted to get home and just put this wreck of a day behind her. Not that Gibbs and Ducky weren't family, but she didn't like anybody to see her cry, and she'd bawled all over Gibbs earlier. Sarah knew she had strong emotions, always had. Tim would simmer away before he finally got to the point of showing what he felt, whether it was anger or frustration or sadness. Anything negative, really. He never could hide his embarrassment — his ears always gave him away — or his happiness. She was different, always had been. She used sarcasm as a shield when she needed to, but she was more apt to just express what she was feeling, what her parents referred to as the Irish in her. Hiding things the way she'd been doing since she told Josh off last week wasn't her style. Maybe she needed to ask Tony for lessons. She'd learned enough from watching the team and reading Tim's books to realize his class clown act was just that. Sarah didn't want to be a clown, but maybe if she could hide behind the carefree mask, it would be enough.

She pushed aside the thought that Ducky had recommended just the opposite. That settled it. She was going to act like Josh was just another customer, be friendly and helpful. Sarah turned, put her hands on the counter and stepped back until she was stretched out, hands to hips parallel to the floor. She let her position and gravity stretch out her aching back, the way one of the managers had taught her the first couple of weeks on the job. She couldn't do anything about her feet, but when she stood up, she felt better. She twisted, one side then the other, releasing all the tension that had built up. She rolled her head, feeling her neck crack.

As she straightened up, she heard the shop door open and hoped the customer wanted a complicated drink, something that would take her a few minutes to make. Anything to break up the boredom.

She turned to the register and saw Josh — alone this time — step up to the counter. Sarah put a smile on her face and vowed to keep the carefree mask on.

"Large caramel mocha, with whipped cream and an extra shot," Josh said.
"Coming right up," Sarah said, as the cashier rang Josh up. She smiled at him, then moved to start preparing the drink. He moved down to the pick-up counter, closer to where she was mixing the chocolate and caramel.

"Awfully empty in here tonight," he said.

"Sundays are always quiet," she said. She focused her attention on the espresso coming out of the machine so the part of her brain that wasn't occupied could pretend he was just another customer. The cashier sent down a second order, and she set up another two shots of espresso.

"I figured you'd at least have one of your watchdogs in here," he said. "They leave you alone for a day, trust you not to break down and ask me back if I showed up?"

Sarah snorted. "That's never been their worry," she said. She figured a little white lie wouldn't hurt. "They were more concerned about what I'd do to you. My last serious boyfriend ended up dead, and I was accused of his murder."

"Is that a threat?" Josh leaned across the counter. "Because it sure sounded like one to me."

"Yeah, Josh, I'm threatening you." Sarah made herself roll her eyes. "You've got a good foot on me in height and outweigh me by at least 50 pounds. Big threat."

Josh opened his mouth as if he was going to say more, but then Dylan, one of Sarah's co-workers, moved across the back wall, preparing a sandwich. She poured the espresso into the cup and steamed the milk, adding it and stirring the drink so everything mixed. As she added the whipped cream and drizzled caramel on top, resisting the urge to write an F and U with the sweet syrup, she handed him the cup, then turned back to the machine.

"I'm working, Josh. Go spend time with your new vic- I mean, girlfriend." She couldn't resist needleling him. "You missed your chance with me; you're not getting it back."

"I've heard that before," Josh said. "You'll change your mind when you realize what you gave up; they always do. Too bad I won't be available. Serena's much better suited for me."

Sarah poured the espresso into the cup and willed herself to keep the mask on until Josh walked away and she could finish this cappuccino for the next customer. She was not going to give him the satisfaction of seeing he had gotten to her, no matter what Ducky said. She placed the second cup on the pickup counter just as Dylan slid the plate with the egg salad sandwich across the counter. She swallowed hard and walked away, forcing herself to act normal. She passed the cashier and said she was taking a break, then ducked in back. She let the tears she'd been holding back run down her cheeks and willed her traitorous stomach to settle down. She'd meant what she told Gibbs earlier, she was sick of feeling like shit because of Josh. She pressed a hand to her stomach and took a couple of deep breaths. As that seemed to help, she headed for the employee bathroom to rinse her face. She hadn't looked to see if Josh had stayed or headed out, but she didn't want him to see her with red eyes.

As she opened the door, she gagged, wishing for the millionth time that they would put some air freshener in there — some of her coworkers obviously had GI issues. As she tried to breathe through her mouth, she felt her stomach begin to heave again and barely made it to her knees in time. When she'd finished retching, she shakily pushed herself to her feet, checking to make sure she hadn't gotten any on her shirt or apron this time. Damn it, she was getting sick of Josh having this effect in her. Literally. She hadn't mentioned it to anybody, but she wasn't kidding earlier when she told Gibbs she really didn't think she could handle another month of this.
Sarah cleaned up and rinsed her face with icy water until her eyes weren't pink and her cheeks were. OK, so maybe Ducky was right. Maybe she shouldn't have acted like he wasn't getting to her. How did Tony manage to hide things all the time without completely losing it when he was alone?

As she walked back to work, she wondered how exactly she was going to tell everybody she'd ignored Ducky and pissed off Josh again.

Chapter End Notes

For anybody curious about the advice from Ducky and Maggie, pick up "The Gift of Fear" by Gavin de Becker. I've seen it recommended many times over the years for helping people deal with situations like Sarah's, and it proved to be as helpful as I'd always heard at explaining the how and why of the psychology of guys like Josh, as well as how to handle them.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

AN: This chapter is short, mostly for story reasons, but there's a fair amount packed in. Huge thanks, as always, to Kyrie for her stellar editing, especially on the first scene. It took me a few drafts to get it right.

Sunday, April 4, 2010

Damon watched Ziva as they walked outside and was worried to see how quiet she was. "Ziva?"
She shook her head, but when he looked, he could see her eyes shining. He wanted to reach out and reassure her, but he wasn't sure that would be a good idea. Instead, he looked at his watch.

"Do you want to get some coffee?" he said. "I know Gibbs said Josh had left, but we could see Sarah, talk to her in person if we stay long enough for her to finish her shift."

Ziva kept walking until she was standing by her car, just a few spaces up from his. "I am... not sure I would be good company tonight," she said. "This is... difficult for me."

Damon stood so she could see his face, but didn't reach out the way he wanted to. "I know," he said. "I don't know why, and I'm not going to make you tell me if you don't want to. But I'm right here, Ziva. If you don't want to lean on the team, and you can't lean on Sarah, lean on me." He remembered how she'd taken him down when he'd gone crazy, steadied him on the case they'd worked. "You gave me a chance when we first met, and you helped me again when I came to you guys a few months ago. Let me do the same for you."

She said nothing, but nodded. "I will meet you there." She walked around to the driver's side and got in the car, and Damon knew from experience that he'd better get a move on, too. She'd still beat him there — he didn't have a death wish — but she'd have less time alone to brood.

When he walked into the coffee shop a half hour later, Ziva was sitting at a table against the wall, her eyes scanning the room. She stopped briefly to acknowledge him, but then was back at it. As he ordered his coffee, noting with concern that Sarah looked as wrung out as Gibbs and Burley had said, he knew he would have to tread carefully with Ziva.

He'd always been fascinated by her, even when he was so hopped up on steroids nothing in his brain was working correctly. He hadn't believed it when a woman half his size had taken him down back then. A beautiful woman, at that. Now he knew there was a lot more to her than her looks and fighting skills, but those had hooked him in the first place.

When he sat down at the table, Ziva was still scanning, and he could feel the tension radiating out from her. Her hands were gripping the mug and he wondered why the heat wasn't bothering her, or if she was just so lost in her head she didn't notice it.

"Gibbs is right," Damon finally said. "Sarah doesn't look like she can take much more of this."

Ziva focused on him, and Damon was glad he'd gotten her to at least do that. "No, she does not," she said. "But we can take much more than we think we are capable of when we have to."
"Yeah, you don't get out of boot camp without learning that," he said. "Doesn't mean some people don't break along the way."

"Sarah will not break," Ziva said. "She, like McGee, can take much more than most people would imagine."

"There's surviving, and there's being OK," Damon said. He reached his hands across the table, making sure she could see them the entire time, and covered hers, thumbs gently stroking. "I survived Iraq, but you've seen me when the memories come back. Driving a big rig in the States wasn't driving a Humvee in a war zone, but that doesn't mean my mind and body knew that." He paused. "I don't know what you've all gone through, but I know Tony has scars from his past. He's survived, but would you ask him to go through it again?"

"I do not know what Tony's past holds," she said, her lips tightening. "He does not speak of it, and only Gibbs and McGee seem to know more. But it is possible that without his past, he would not be here now. Would you wish that on him, to not be here, to not have McGee in his life? Or Gibbs?"

Damon kept his breath even, but he thought they might be getting close to the issue, knowing what Tim had told him about Ziva's father and what had happened over the summer.

"No, but he almost broke a few weeks ago," Damon said. "You never know what will push somebody over the edge. I don't want Sarah to break, and I know you don't either."

Ziva shook her head, but didn't say anything. She looked over at him, and he was surprised to see her eyes fill with tears. Ziva's lower lip quivered, almost imperceptibly. Damon had never seen this Ziva before, and it worried him. He reached across the table and turned his hands palm up, in front of her. "Ziva, tell me what you need." He waited for her to respond, and felt his shoulders begin to relax as she placed her hands lightly on his.

"I do not..." She paused, and Damon forced himself to be patient. "Damon, if I tell you everything, you will not think about me the same way. I am... I am not like you." She looked down at the table. "There are things in my past, things I would not ask anybody to accept."

"But you're not asking, Ziva," Damon waited until she looked up before continuing. "I'm offering. McGee told me about your brother and about your father. I've been around long enough to have a sense of what happened last summer, and I know when you tell me what they did to you, I'll be glad Gibbs and the team killed those guys, because otherwise I'd go hunt them down for hurting you."

"You-?"

"Ziva, I served in the Middle East. I know-" He broke off, remembering. "I know what they do to women in the terrorist camps, what they think of them. I don't know exactly what they did to you, but I can guess."

She looked down, her entire body still. "And the others?"

Damon wished he had talked to Ducky or Maggie before this, tried to figure out how to handle this now that it was coming up. Maggie's earlier words about the commonsense things making matters worse were too close to shut out. Finally, he said, "They worry about you, Ziva. I think they'd worry less if they knew you had talked to somebody or were talking to somebody about it."

She swallowed and looked up. "Ducky... When Mossad came, he tried to get me to talk."

Damon nodded, but waited for her to continue. "He asked me to let him be a friend, to talk to him."
"Did you?"

She shook her head. "I could not," she said. She paused, and Damon made himself stay quiet. "To come back to NCIS, I could not afford to talk. If I did, I was afraid I could not put the pieces back together. Physically... I was barely holding on. My body had been badly abused, and it took me many weeks to heal. It took me two months to become an agent, but I would not have been cleared for the field before that." She closed her eyes and pressed her lips together. "I still..." Her voice trailed off, and she looked up at him. "I would have had to trust the agency psychologist to understand that I needed to come back to NCIS to finish healing. But as I told Tony after I returned, I had trusted Ari, my father, and Michael, and each betrayed me. I..." Her voice trailed off.

"So now you don't trust anybody," Damon said, finally realizing she wasn't going to finish the thought.

Ziva pulled her hands away, then wrapped them around his, though they were half the size. "I trust Gibbs, Tony, McGee, because they came after me, even after everything. Ducky, Abby, Jimmy, the rest of the team, the McGees — even you. You, they, are mishpoeheh, family. More family than anybody I share blood ties with. All of you, I trust, but-

"But?"

"But I still cannot talk about what happened. It was... too much. And especially now, with everything else."

"Sarah, and Josh. What Josh is doing."

Ziva nodded. "It is not only physical damage that men can inflict upon women, but other damage as well. Sarah will never deal with what I had to physically, none of it." Her eyes blazed, and Damon knew if Josh ever tried to hurt Sarah, Ziva wanted to be first in line to make him pay. "But-" She broke off, and dropped her eyes. Her hands loosened from where she had wrapped them around Damon's and fell away.

"We're going to find a way to stop him, Ziva," he said. "And when you're ready to talk..." He searched for the words. "I will be here. No matter what you say, no matter what happened." He waited until she looked up at him. "We've got Sarah's back. We've got yours, too."

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Once everybody had left, Tim found himself pacing the living room. Maggie was still in his study nursing Kevin, and he was too wound up to sit still.

"You're going to wear a hole in the floor." Tony stood in the kitchen doorway.

"Well, yeah, Tony. What do you expect?" Tim stopped in front of him. "Josh is basically stalking Sarah, and I can't do anything about it. I want to threaten him, want to lock his sorry ass up, want to do something. And if I do any of that, it's just going to make it worse for Sarah, because he's got this crazy idea that he's so much better than her that she should be willing to put up with him cheating on her." He balled up his fists and without thinking started to take a swing at the wall.

"Hey!" Tony grabbed his arm. "No breaking your knuckles on the walls."

"Not like you've never done it before." Tim pulled his arm away.

"Yeah, and that's why I don't recommend it," Tony said.
Tim cursed and started pacing again. "Well it's not like I can go to the range and practice, imagine Josh is the target," he said. "I couldn't even make it through a clip."

Tony stared at him for a second, then broke into a grin. "Stay here." He turned to walk away, then looked back. "No hitting anything that can't hit back."

"Yeah, Tony." Tim stuffed his hands into pockets of his shorts to resist temptation and resumed pacing. After his third or fourth circuit, he turned to find Tony standing there, holding-

"Nerf guns?" Tim stared, then started laughing. "Wait, those are the ones Sarah and Abby gave us for Christmas."

"They were in the closet," Tony said, grinning. He held up his other hand, which had a drawing he'd made of a face with Xs for eyes and Josh's name underneath. "And a target. You can practice head shots."

Tim dropped his head to his chest, still laughing. "You're a complete and utter goofball, you know that," he said.

"Well, yeah," Tony said. "That's why you love me." He taped the target to the wall at the right height and handed Tim one of the Nerf guns and an extra clip of foam darts. "Have at it."

Tim loaded the clip of darts into the toy gun and started firing. With the toy gun, he didn't need two hands to fire it, but he used his standard grip anyway, his stronger right arm supporting the left one. It took him a few minutes to get used to the feel of the toy, but soon he had a rhythm, firing and trying to pick his spots on the target.

He was lost in his head when laughter penetrated. He looked up to see Maggie standing in the doorway, patting Kevin gently on the back.

"Now that's creative," she said.

Tim smiled, sheepish. "It was Tony's idea," he said. "I was just going to pound on a wall."

"I probably should say that's not a healthy way of venting, but it works for me," Maggie said. She was interrupted by a loud burp from Kevin that had all three of them laughing.

"Is he done?" Tony said.

Maggie nodded. "I don't think he's got any more gas left in there to burp," she said.

Tony reached out his arms, and she handed him over. Tim put the gun down and sat on the arm of the couch, watching as Tony lifted the baby overhead and then brought him back down, blowing raspberries on his belly.

"Where's the camera when I need it?" Tim said. "I could post these all over the Navy Yard, and nobody would ever believe me."

Tony snuggled Kevin against his chest and stuck his tongue out. "Hey, I need to practice," he said. "Between this and babysitting for the bat-gremlin, I might actually be ready by the time we're ready to adopt." He made a face at Kevin and was rewarded by the little boy's claps and giant smile.

"Yeah, Tony, I don't think Jimmy and Abby are going that way anytime soon," Tim said.
"But they will before we do," Tony said. "They might wait four months; they're not going to wait four years."

"True." Tim walked over and took Kevin from Tony. As he let the now-sleepy baby snuggle into his shoulder, he tilted his head and breathed in baby scent, feeling himself start to relax. "Next time Abby starts talking about aromatherapy, I'm going to ask her to figure out how to bottle this." He rubbed his cheek against Kevin's blond curls, a softer version of his mother's.

"It's nature's way of making sure we don't kill them during the teething and colic stages," Maggie said, grinning. "I can always tell when you guys have a rough case because Dwayne can't put Kevin down when he gets home."

Tim smiled. "Now there's a solution."

"Hey, that might help Boss!" Tony bounced on the balls of his feet. "Next time he starts going all Captain Ahab on us, we'll get you to stop by with the kids and hand Kevin to him."

Tim remembered how terrifying Gibbs was when he was hunting down Ari back before they had a name for him. "As long as he doesn't scare Kevin. Gibbs is frightening when he's on a tear."

"Well, yeah," Tony said. "How else would he scare the dirtbags into confessing?"

Tim looked down to see Kevin had fallen asleep and was starting to drool on him.

"Time for us to leave," Maggie said. "He'll be done with his milk coma and be ready to play by the time we get home." She came over and expertly transferred her son to her own arms without waking him. "If things get too crazy before you guys manage to chase Josh off — figuratively speaking, of course — you're welcome to come over, get a little kid time."

"Thanks, Maggie." They spoke together, something Tim noticed they'd been doing more lately.

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When Maggie got home, Kevin was just waking up, stretching as best he could in his car seat. "Come on, little man," she said. "Let's go see Daddy and the girls."

Dwayne was sitting on the sofa watching TV when they walked in the house.

"The girls are down playing with Carmel and Morgan at their house," he said, reaching for Kevin. "So what's the news?"

"Not good." Maggie dropped into the seat next to him and relaxed back. "Tim was using a Nerf gun for target practice, with a drawing of Josh's head the target, when I left."

Dwayne frowned. "So what's going on?"

As she filled him in, she could see her husband growing more and more worried, even as he let Kevin take one of his fingers to gnaw on.

"Great," he said. "And no Abby around to hug everybody out of their bad moods. Even if Josh doesn't do anything, this is going to be an ugly week."

Maggie nodded. "I forgot to tell Tim and Tony, but I am going to take Kevin over to the coffee shop on the days the girls stay late at school. We're not in any danger, as far as I can tell, and me
being there won't make Josh escalate. He won't see me as a threat because I'm a woman."

Dwayne snorted. "Shows what he knows," he said. "I'd pit you, Abby, or Ziva against anybody if somebody on the team was threatened. Gibbs might be the only one who scares me more, and he was a sniper."

Maggie laughed, remembering some of the stories the team members had told at various game nights. "Good thing Josh never met Gibbs," she said. "And good thing we didn't tell him any of those crazy Ziva stories they're always telling. Any of the four of us can be there without him getting threatened."

"I almost wish he would try something with Ziva there," Dwyane said. "She'd have him cuffed and under arrest before he knew what was going on."

"He's not going to step over that line, not unless we push him," Maggie said. "As much as I want him to leave Sarah alone, pushing him is a bad idea."

Dwayne nodded, switching hands so Kevin could chew on a different knuckle. "If there is anything you see, use your cell phone to take a picture of it," he said. "If we can document enough stuff, she might be able to get a restraining order." He frowned. "Why am I telling you this? You know this."

"Because you're worried." She was going to say more, but the front door burst open and Michelle and Kerry ran in, their clothes smudged with dirt and a leaf stuck in Kerry's hair.

"Mommy, Daddy, we climbed the huge tree in Carmel and Morgan's yard," Michelle said.

Maggie reached over to brush a smudge of dirt from her older daughter's face. "I can tell," she said. "Come on, upstairs. Baths before dinner tonight."

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Tony left Tim to his target practice and headed upstairs to e-mail Sarah and call Abby and Jimmy. After he'd sent the e-mail, including three reminders for her to call them right away if she ever felt threatened or had a question, he headed for the bedroom to call Louisiana. He flopped down on the bed and hit speed dial for Abby's cell.

"Mistress of the Dark," she said.

Tony snorted. "Oh, is that what Jimmy calls you?"

"Tony!" Abby sounded excited, then sobered. "Wait, is this about Sarah? What happened? Does Ducky know how to make Josh go away?"

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose. "Yes. And no." He sighed. "Is Jimmy there? Can you put the phone on speaker so I only have to say this once?"

"I'm here," Jimmy said. "And no, that's not what I call Abby."

"Oh, reeeally-"

"Kurosawa."

The reminder was enough. "Thanks, man," Tony said. "OK, so here's the deal." He explained everything that Ducky, Gibbs, and Maggie had said. "What has us worried is that neither Gibbs nor Burley thinks Sarah can last until the semester ends. Moving in with Ziva might help, but still..."
"Not good," Abby said. "This is so not good it's not even funny."

"We know, Abby." Tony rubbed the back of his neck. "Look, you guys enjoy your vacation. Burley's helping while he's in town, and since he's only doing McProf's class, we've actually got more coverage on Josh Watch than we would if you both were here."

"You're sure?" This time it was Jimmy asking.

"You're not getting out of two weeks with the in-laws that easily," Tony said. "We're sure. And if something does happen, we'll call you."

"Tony, don't take this the wrong way, but I hope we don't talk to you or Timmy until we're back in D.C.," Abby said.

"Me too." Tony lay back on the bed. "I wish he'd either give up and leave McSis alone or step far enough over the line that we can have Metro throw his sorry ass in jail."

"Sounds good to me."

Tony looked over to see Tim standing in the doorway, trying to massage his healing shoulder with the other hand.

"Abs, Jimmy, gotta go. McSniper spent too much time shooting foam darts at a paper Josh." He was rewarded with laughter on the other end of the line before he hung up. Tony tossed the phone on the nightstand and shifted to sit up, back against the headboard. "Come here, let the expert work his magic."

Tim slipped his T-shirt off and sat between Tony's legs. Tony started to work his hands into his husband's shoulders, but they were full of steel knots.

"You're probably wound tighter than Gibbs right now," Tony said, trying to dig his thumbs in. He had a little luck on the right side, but Tim's left shoulder was like trying to massage a rock. He checked his watch. "You're taking one of those muscle relaxers the doc gave you."

"Tony, I don't need-"

"Yeah, try another one, McStressed," he said. "Look, all that tension can't be good for your shoulder. Take one. I'll give you a massage once it's kicked in, and it will have worn off by morning."

"Tony-"

"McGee." Tony added a headslap for good measure. "Look, you're always, always there when I need you, Tim. Especially when I say I don't, you still stick around and make me lean on you. Let me do the same thing for you." He rubbed his hands gently over Tim's shoulders and back.

"Well, when you put it like that..." Tim tipped his head back. "Where are the pills?"

"I'll get them," Tony said. "And the massage oil, and towels to protect the sheets. You just strip down, get comfortable."

As he headed for the bathroom, Tony knew what he was doing wasn't nearly enough. He just hoped it would keep Tim from tipping over the edge. And he was never, ever going to call him McWorry again when Tim started fretting over Tony. It wasn't nearly as funny now that he knew how Tim felt every time he'd McWorried about Tony.
Monday, April 5, 2010

Gibbs stowed his gun and badge, then headed upstairs. Vance's secretary wasn't at her desk yet, but the director's door was open, so he walked in.

"You never knock." Vance looked up from his desk, where he was poring over paperwork, his sleeves rolled up. "Door's not there for decoration."

"It was open," Gibbs said. He stood in front of Vance's desk. "Burley."

"In town taking McGee's training class," Vance said, "but you knew that."

Gibbs nodded. "You got any other plans for him?"

Vance raised an eyebrow. "Don't see how that's any of your business."

"Need his help."

"Gibbs, the one thing the man asked of me the last time I talked to him about potential assignments was to not put him on your team." Vance stood and walked over to the wet bar, pouring himself a glass of water. "You can't have him."

Gibbs shook his head. "He volunteered." He frowned, considered how much to tell Vance. The man was a father, had met Sarah. He'd understand. "It's about McGee's sister."

"Sarah."

Gibbs nodded. "Her ex-boyfriend's been bothering her. Not stalking. It's not anything we can take to Metro, so the team's been keeping an eye on him. They brought me and the guys in the loop last week, because they wanted Ducky's opinion of him."

"Smart move."

"Palmer's idea," Gibbs said. "He and Abby planned it out."

"And?"

Gibbs outlined everything for Vance.

"So you want me to keep Burley free to watch out for this bully."

Gibbs nodded. "Josh doesn't know him, won't see him as a threat."

"McGee's parents know about this?"

Gibbs shook his head. "Sarah doesn't want them told, and McGee was standing by her. I haven't brought it up again since last week."

"If it were my child, I'd want to know," Vance said.

Gibbs just nodded. If he could have prevented what had happened to Kelly, if he could go back in time... But he couldn't let himself think about that now.
"She's still a dependent, Gibbs," Vance said. "NCIS would still have jurisdiction, even if your team wouldn't be allowed to handle it."

Gibbs shook his head. "Nothing we can take to court," he said. "If we could, DiNozzo would be on the phone to Metro already."

Vance nodded. "Burley's free to help."

Gibbs nodded and turned to leave.

"Gibbs."

The team leader looked back at the director.

"If there's anything Jackie or I can do, let us know."

Gibbs nodded and left.

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Tuesday, April 6, 2010

Stan Burley left the Navy Yard, study materials for his training class in hand. He'd never met McGee before this week, but the agent obviously knew his stuff. He wouldn't have as much use for the computer-based investigating while afloat as land-based agents, but it would definitely speed some things up.

He took the now-familiar route to the coffee shop. After Sarah had agreed to move in with Ziva right away, he'd driven her to the dorm after work to pick up some things she'd packed, then over to her new home. He'd promised to do the same today to help her out. Now that she had a place to study safe from Josh and his harem, he figured he would beat Sarah to the coffee shop this afternoon.

When he arrived, the last of the lunch rush was clearing out, so it was easy for Stan to snag a table. He chose one by the pick-up counter, which was mostly empty. Only one other table was occupied, by a dark-haired man about his age.

Stan dropped his notes and laptop on the table and went to order. Once he had his lunch and was settled at his table, he fell into long habit and scanned the room, assessing for possible threats. A group of college students crowded the sofa and chairs over by the fireplace on the other side of the shop, laughing and chattering away. Stan was glad they were sitting far away, where the noise wouldn't bother him. After more than 10 years afloat, he'd learned to tune out jets taking off and landing, but this was another type of noise all together.

Other than the group by the fireplace, there were a few other adults, who might be professors, grading papers while sipping periodically from their mugs. The man sitting at the next table typed away on a laptop, pausing frequently to refer to papers in a thick folder. In his jeans and Michigan sweatshirt, he looked more casual than the professors. Grad student, maybe? Doing research for a thesis?

Stan shrugged and opened his laptop to work through the parts of McGee's training class that he'd missed last week. He couldn't access the NCIS servers through an open wifi connection, but there were some exercises he could do.

His years of surveillance experience allowed him to keep one eye on what was going on elsewhere
in the coffee shop as he worked. So when Sarah arrived an hour later for her shift, he knew the moment she walked through the door. He kept working, waiting to see what she would do, but he hadn't expected her to walk over to the guy at the next table and hug him.

"Brad!" she said. "Don't tell me they roped you in, too."

"No roping involved," he said. "I volunteered. Needed to get out of the office on Tuesdays anyway to get through all this paperwork."

Stan looked over. "Sarah?"

She was confused for a second, then her face cleared. "Stan? You're here, too?"

He nodded. "The only thing I'm doing for the next two weeks is taking your brother's class, so since Josh doesn't know me, I volunteered to help. He held out a hand to the other man. "Stan Burley. Used to work with Gibbs before I decided I'd rather be seasick than have ulcers."

The man snorted. "Dr. Brad Pitt. Yes, that's my real name, and no, I don't know Angelina Jolie."

He shook Stan's hand, his grip firm. "First time I met Gibbs, I was telling him he couldn't visit Tony because he had the plague. Can't imagine working for the man."

"The plague?" Stan raised an eyebrow. "Only DiNozzo. Did you actually manage to keep Gibbs away?"

Brad shook his head. "He'd come to tell me the bug had a suicide gene and was already dead, so I let him in. I've been one of Tony's doctors ever since then, and somehow they adopted me into the family."

Stan shook his head. "I saw Ohio State gear at their house yesterday, and I know McGee's an MIT grad. And you and Tony are friends?" He gestured at Brad's sweatshirt.

"Played football against each other in college," Brad said. "We kissed our sisters senior year, 13-13 tie. And I broke Tony's leg, ended his chances for a pro career, so he ended up a cop. We watch football together in the fall while McGee mocks us."

"So what's the plan?" Stan asked. "Brad, Josh know you by sight?"

He nodded. "Tony e-mailed me, filled me in on what was going on." He turned to look at Sarah. "We decided — and Ducky agreed — that me being here wasn't likely to aggravate Josh, and it was another set of eyes if he did try anything."

"He didn't yesterday," Sarah said. "He came in while Stan and Maggie were both here, but he didn't seem to notice them because he sat over here by the counter. He didn't do anything, though, and Serena wasn't with him."

"How was it staying with Ziva last night?" Stan asked.

Sarah nodded. "Better. I slept better than I have been, and I took another nap after class. A few more days and I might finally relax enough to catch up on my sleep."

Brad looked at her. "Sleep would be good," he said. "You've lost weight, too, and you didn't have any to lose."

Sarah rolled her eyes. "I'll be fine," she said. "I just haven't felt much like eating." She made a face. "That's what I hate most, that he's got me so stressed it's making me sick."
"You're sure it's just stress?" Brad asked, and Stan couldn't help wondering the same thing.

Sarah nodded. "Abby tested me for everything the morning after I caught the SOB cheating on me. Pregnancy, STDs, everything."

"Good," Brad said. "Do you use a doctor on campus or Bethesda?"

"Campus usually," Sarah said. "I used to go to a doctor on base at Annapolis, but it's easier to use the student health center." She paused. "I don't even know if I can see a Navy doctor now that Dad's retired."

"He's still on terminal leave," Brad said. "He won't officially retire until the end of the year because he has so much accrued leave. And as long as he's still on the books and you count as a dependent, you can use Bethesda or any other Navy facilities."

"I keep forgetting you're his doctor," Sarah said.

Brad nodded. "I told McGee I need to start offering you all a family discount." He smiled. "If you still aren't feeling well in a few weeks, let me know. I'll get you an appointment with one of our internists. Too much stress for too long can really do a number on your body."

Stan couldn't help nodding. "Chest pains, headaches, all sorts of fun stuff."

Brad turned to look at him. "You've had stress issues before?"

"Worked for Gibbs for five years," Stan said. He grinned. "Don't know how DiNozzo and McGee do it and stay sane — I moved on before Boss gave me a heart attack."

"Did you really just call Tim sane?" Sarah said. "He's never been sane." She grinned. "OK, I've got to drop my stuff and clock in. Thanks, both of you, for helping out."

As they waved her off, Stan turned to Brad. "I volunteered because Josh doesn't know me, so if you could pretend that whole conversation didn't happen..."

"Done," Brad said. "Now let's hope he gives her a break and stays away today." He frowned. "She looks worse than McGee did his first few days out of the hospital."

Stan nodded. "I believe it," he said. "I almost wish Josh would pull something bad enough that we could get Metro to arrest him — she's not going to last until the end of the semester. Still four weeks."

With that Stan turned back to his laptop and refocused on his homework and surveillance. As the hours ticked by and Josh didn't show, he wasn't sure whether to be worried or relieved.

-Wednesday, April 7, 2010-

Abby had dragged Jimmy out to the porch to sit on the swing her daddy had built when she was little after the rest of the house was in bed. The Louisiana air lacked the full sultriness of mid-summer, but it felt good compared to D.C. Abby stretched across the seat in her tank top and shorts, her long legs hanging over the arm of the swing. Her head rested in Jimmy's lap, and she looked up at him as he relaxed in the gently swinging seat.

"You don't mind I dragged you down here?" she asked. "I mean, I know you said you wanted to
come, but it's really hard being surrounded by deaf people when you're hearing and don't know much sign language, and I wasn't thinking about that but two weeks is a really long time to visit anybody even when you do speak the language and -"

His finger on her lips stopped her. "I'm having fun, Abs," he said. "And I'm picking up more sign language every day. Your family's great."

She smiled up at him and kissed his fingertip. "You're not just saying that?" Her voice was muffled a little because his finger was still pressed against her lips.

He shook his head and started to undo her pigtails. As his fingers began running through her hair, tracing gentle patterns over her scalp, she relaxed and closed her eyes. She listened to the outside noises that were either drowned out or nonexistent in D.C. She wouldn't trade living in the city with its clubs and funky shops for anything. Sure, they'd probably end up out by Gibbs or Ducky when they had kids, just for space reasons. Maybe Old Town in Alexandria, which still had the quirky urban vibe she loved. She'd never want to live in the country again, but it was nice to visit, hear the sounds of her childhood, not to mention the silence that was part of being a hearing child of deaf parents.

That was something she hadn't tried to explain to Jimmy yet, how different her life had been as a child. Gibbs understood a little, McGee a bit more. He'd learned the first time they'd spent Christmas together when a case kept him from spending it with his family. After watching her and her mother video chat in the lab, he'd asked a few questions. Knowing McGee, he'd probably researched CODAs as well, because after that he'd never asked her to turn down her music while they worked.

"I can practically hear you thinking," Jimmy said. His fingers brushed across her forehead before starting a gentle massage. "Are you worrying about Sarah?"

"Mmmm-umm," she said, too relaxed to want to form words. But for his sake, she tried. "Us. You're handling my family a lot better than I thought. We're... not like a lot of other families."

"Which makes you different from the rest of us how?" He laughed, and she could feel him move beneath her as he did. "Abs, I'm not saying some of this isn't odd to me, and not just because I want your mom and brother to approve of me. But I knew about it going in, and I did some reading."

"What is it with you and McGee and research?" Abby said. "The first time he saw me and my mom video chat, he did the same thing."

"Says the woman who's been researching alternative lung therapies for Tony since the fall and adoption information for he and McGee the past two weeks." Jimmy moved one hand back to her hair and slid the other one down to trace designs on her stomach.

"OK, OK. Point taken." She let her lips form into a smile. As she enjoyed his gentle touch, she thought about her plans for next week, the ones she was keeping secret for a bit longer. "You still want to go into New Orleans on Monday, right?"

"Definitely," Jimmy said. "What about this weekend? Do you have a favorite club, someplace you've missed going?"

Abby thought for a minute, then shook her head, feeling it brush against his legs. "My favorite club got flooded out in Katrina, and the owners didn't rebuild," she said. "I could look and see what's out there if you want to go."
"Why not?" Jimmy said. "It'll be fun and something we haven't had a chance to do together yet because we keep catching cases."

She looked up at him speculatively. "You do know the type of clubs I like to go to, right, Jimmy?"

He laughed. "Abs, you have more collars than Jethro, and you've gotten me and McGee to sleep in your coffin, among other things," he said. "I've got a pretty good idea."

She smirked. "You ready for that?"

He just slid his hand further up under her shirt. "I trust you," he said. "You won't drag me into anything you don't think I can handle." His fingers slowed, even as her pulse was speeding up. "I've been wondering what a night out at one of your clubs would be like."

Abby tried to keep her mind on his words. "You'll like it," she finally said. "We both will." She turned to face him, her head still in his lap. "I might have something else for us to do in New Orleans, that day or Monday, but I'm still working out the details." She started to sit up, and he pulled her up into his lap. "I'll tell you about it before we go, because you might say no."

He wrapped his arms around her. "If you're talking about proposing, you know my answer's yes."

She nodded as she slid her arms around him. "I know. I just don't know if you want my version of a ring."

He paused for a second. "This doesn't involve anything I'd be wearing to the club, does it?"

She frowned at him, then replayed her comment in her head and burst out laughing. "No, nothing like that," she said. "Don't worry, I'm pretty sure you'll like it." She leaned in to kiss him. Eventually she pulled away and stood up. "Come on, time for bed."

He grinned and pushed his glasses back in place. "As long as it's not time for sleep."

She shook her head as she grabbed his hand and pulled him into the house.

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Thursday, April 8, 2010

When Tim walked into the bullpen after class, Tony was griping.

"Abby is not allowed to go on vacation again until she finds a backup that Gibbs won't chase off," he said. "I hate investigating fraud and embezzlement. McBanker's the only one who can sort through these numbers without going insane, and he's only available half the time. Not to mention we usually get one, maybe two of these every month or so. This is the fourth case this week. Two weeks straight of this is going to send my brain dribbling out my ears."

Tim couldn't resist. "What brain?" He sat down at his desk and smirked when Tony glared at him.

"OK, McGoo, get your magic fingers warmed up and see if you can figure out where the $2 million earmarked for weapons appropriations went." Tony held out a folder. "Every time we close one case, Vance hands us another one, and they're all financial. We've found enough missing money this week to buy a fleet of Humvees."

"You would rather a sailor or marine died?" Ziva looked up from her desk, and McGee could tell from the twitch at the corner of her lips that she was just winding Tony up.
"No, but they're managing to get killed anyway," Tony said. "It's just that other teams are investigating them this week. Is it too much to ask for a case that doesn't involved money?"

"How about aggravated assault?" Gibbs walked into the bullpen, coffee in hand. "Director's office, now." He kept walking, and Tim and the others scrambled to follow.

"Why is the director briefing us?" Tim asked as they walked upstairs.

"And why are we investigating an assault case?" Ziva asked.

"Guys, it's not a money case. Don't argue." Tim had to laugh at the plea in Tony's voice.

They walked into Vance's office to find him sitting at the conference table.

"Gibbs, I've got an unusual case for you and your team."

"Not another koala on a sub." Tony scrunched up his face.

"Nothing like that, Agent DiNozzo." Vance gestured for them to sit. "No, SecNav brought this one to me. Lt. Michael Justice was badly beaten on the USS Bainbridge two days ago. Witnesses all identified Lt. Richard Sanderson, one of the lieutenant's rack mates, as the attacker. Sanderson is in the brig until they dock tomorrow in Norfolk."

"Director, what are we investigating?" McGee said. "Isn't this a case for the MPs?"

"An excellent question, Agent McGee, and the same one I asked SecNav when he called."

"And?" It was Tony's turn to prompt the director to continue.

"The captain of the Bainbridge called him personally to ask that NCIS do a full investigation into the assault, not the MPs. Sanderson is detained but has not been formally charged."

"But why would the captain do that?" Ziva asked.

"Another question I asked SecNav, and one he couldn't answer." Vance paused. "He said the captain refused to explain because he didn't want to influence the outcome of the investigation, but he assured SecNav that he was bringing NCIS into the case because he wanted justice to prevail."

"Justice for Justice?" Tony said. "I'm not sure what we're supposed to investigate if they know Sanderson beat up Justice. But it doesn't involve fraud or embezzlement, so I'm all for it."

Tim wasn't surprised when Gibbs reached over and head-slapped Tony.

"Yes, Boss. Shouldn't have said it, Boss."

"Ya think, DiNozzo?" Gibbs turned to Vance. "Forensics?"

"None," Vance said. "The assault was two days ago, and you won't have access to the crew until they dock tonight. I'm not flying you out for a case that isn't our responsibility without a damn good reason, and I haven't heard one as yet."

They all nodded. When Gibbs stood, Tim and the others followed.

"Gibbs, it might not be our responsibility, but SecNav assigned it to us," Vance said. "Investigate this as thoroughly as you would any other case. If there wasn't anything there, the captain wouldn't have called or SecNav would have turned him down."
"We always investigate thoroughly," Gibbs said.

Vance nodded. "That's why you're getting the case. And the minute you run across any reason why this case is so important, you let me know. If this is going to make headlines, I want to make sure SecNav has our back since he got us into this."

Tim wasn't surprised when Gibbs just nodded and led them out.

Back in the bullpen, Gibbs turned to him. "McGee, when does the Bainbridge dock?"

Tim pulled up the information on his computer. "She's scheduled to get into Norfolk at 0400," he said.

Gibbs nodded. "Go home, all of you, get some sleep. Meet me here at 0200. McGee, while we're driving down, find everything you can on the two men, along with the captain. The more background we have going in, the better chance we have to figure this out."

Tim just nodded and grabbed his gear, falling into step with Tony. He squashed down the bits of jealousy that the rest of the team got to go out on the case and he'd be stuck aboard the Yard working behind a desk. It was the first case since he'd come back where the whole team was headed out of town and he had to ride a desk. He'd rather be seasick and working a case than stuck in the office alone.
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

AN: This is a short one, for case-related reasons. And if you're curious about the hinkiness of the case, there are two clues in this chapter that combined will let you figure out what's going on - if you can find them. ;)

Friday, April 9, 2010

As Gibbs raced down I-95, Tony was glad traffic was light at 0200. Trying not to be terrified of Gibbs' driving kept him from dwelling on the look on Tim's face when they'd headed out. Tony knew his husband didn't like this reminder that he still wasn't cleared for the field, but he hadn't known what to say to him to make Tim feel better.

When they got to Norfolk, the sky had just begun to lighten. The base guards sent them through, while Tony called Tim to find out what he knew.

"What've you got for us, McProfiler?"

"I've sent the basics through to your phones. Justice is on his third tour with the Bainbridge, starting in 2002. Sanderson was stationed there when he graduated from the Academy in 2005. Both have moved up the ranks in the usual amount of time. Sanderson was promoted from JG six months ago, which is when he was assigned to the rack with Sanderson. Sanderson is coming up for his promotion to lieutenant commander in three months — he wasn't recommended for early promotion last year — and I can't find anything in his jacket to indicate he won't get it. I hacked the ship's system to figure out who else was in that rack, and I've sent those names to your phone, too."

"Thanks, Tim," Tony said. "Any idea why the captain wants NCIS involvement in this case?"

"Not yet. When it gets late enough, I'm going to call my dad, see if he remembers Sanderson. He must have had him in class at least once, and if he was borderline in any way, Dad would know."

"Good thinking," Tony said. "We'll let you know if we get any others names we need you to investigate. This has to be more than a simple beating."

He hung up just as Gibbs pulled into a parking space and killed the engine.

"Report," Gibbs said.

Tony proceeded to fill them in, and was glad to see everybody else looked as puzzled as he felt.

"DiNozzo, David, you two are interviewing Justice," Gibbs said. "Wilson, you're with me. Let's see what the captain has to say about this case."

Tony nodded, and as they headed to the ship, fell into step behind Gibbs. Once on board, they were taken to the captain's mess, where he and the XO were just finishing breakfast.

"Capt. Bradley?" Gibbs said. "Special Agent Gibbs, NCIS."
Bradley stood. Tony noticed he was on the young side for a captain, probably no older than McGee. "Agent Gibbs," he said. "I appreciate you and your team coming out to investigate. This is our XO, Cmdr. John Wallace."

Gibbs nodded. "Agents DiNozzo, David and Wilson," he said, gesturing to each in turn. "Agents DiNozzo and David will need to talk to Justice, then Sanderson. When you finish, Agent Wilson and I would like to get some more information from you about what happened."

Bradley nodded. "Wallace had just finished and was leaving."

The XO put his fork down into his half-eaten eggs and nodded. "Right," he said. "Morning rounds to do." He pushed back from the table, saluted the captain and nodded to the agents. "Good to meet you sirs, ma'am," he said. "Should I take the agents to Justice's rack?"

The captain nodded. "Thank you, Wallace." Tony looked at Gibbs, got an almost-imperceptible nod, and followed the XO, Ziva on his heels.

"Horrible thing," Wallace said. "I don't know what possessed Sanderson to do that."

"Did you know him well?" Tony asked.

"He was a quiet kid, kept to himself," Wallace replied as he threaded through through the maze of passages. "I know the troublemakers, and I know the ones who are active in the off-hours groups, but he wasn't either. Just did his job, kept his nose clean. Well, until now."

"How long have you been XO on the Bainbridge?" Tony asked.

"Eight years," Wallace said. "Started the same tour as Justice did, got promoted to XO the following year."

"So you knew Justice?" Ziva asked.

"Good guy," Wallace said. "In the gym pretty regularly, sparred with him a few times. He likes his movies, one of the regulars at Friday film nights unless he's on duty."

"What are his responsibilities?" Ziva asked.

"He's in the communications crew," Wallace said. "He oversees the radio room."

Tony nodded as Wallace stopped in front of a room in quarters. "Thanks, Commander," he said. "We appreciate it."

"You need any help finding your way around, you let mw know," Wallace said.

Tony shook his head. "Did a stint afloat on the Reagan and the Seahawk," he said. "Compared to that, a destroyer's easy to navigate."

"That it is," Wallace said. "That it is." He walked off down the corridor.

Tony rapped his knuckles on the doorframe.

"Justice," he said. "NCIS, here to take your statement."

"Yeah, I'm up." The sailor in the far bottom bunk rolled into a seated position, careful not to hit his head. "Hang on." He pulled on his sweats and a Navy T-shirt and slid his feet into sneakers. "OK, lead the way."
Tony found an empty supply office down the hall and motioned the others in ahead of him.

As Justice eased himself into the chair, wincing, Tony catalogued his injuries. Bruises on his face, a cut above one eye, and a couple on his cheek. Cuts and bruises on his own hands and arms as well. He was moving stiffly, and Tony was betting Justice had banged up his ribs.

"You're NCIS?" He looked at them. "You going to throw the book at Sanderson?"

"We're going to figure out what happened," Tony said. "JAG will take it from there." He pulled out his notebook. "So, walk us through what happened."

"I was in my rack, just shooting the breeze with Mark, when Sanderson walked in."

"Mark?" Ziva asked from her spot in the corner of the room.

"Lt. Mark Andrews," Justice said. "He and Rippon, from the air wing, have the other set of berths."

"So you and Sanderson share a rack; Andrews and Rippon share the other?" Tony sketched the layout in his notebook.

Justice nodded. "Rippon and Sanderson have the upper bunks. Rippon didn't get assigned until we shipped out, so he took what was left."

"You don't like flying high?" Tony asked.

Justice shook his head. "Haven't taken an upper bunk since I had enough seniority to pick a lower one."

"So what happened when Sanderson walked in?"

"He just went nuts, started pummeling me," Justice said. "One minute I'm lying in my rack, next thing he's pounding on me, and I've got nowhere to go. Andrews had to pull him off." Justice rolled one shoulder cautiously. "The kid's in good shape, got in some solid punches. Wouldn't have if I'd been able to get a swing in."

"What were you and Lt. Andrews talking about?" Ziva asked.

Justice shrugged. "Nothing, really. Mark and I were just talking about our plans for after we docked. One of his buddies from boot is over at Oceana, mentioned this hot new club in Newport News. We were going to go check it out tonight, see if we could score."

"So you and Lt. Andrews are friends?" Tony was trying to figure out what was really going on. Something didn't add up.

"Since he got assigned here back in '03," Justice said. "We both had overnight shifts, kept running into each other in the mess, got to be buddies. He did his next tour on shore, Pax River, then ended up back here the same time as Sanderson. XO knew we were buddies, bunked him in here."

Tony wanted to check what Wallace had told him. "You know the XO well?"

"He's a good XO," Justice said. "Good at keeping up morale. Knows most of the men, makes a point of it. Scores good movies for us."

"Good movies?" Ziva asked.

"He always gets us the latest stuff," Justice said. "Guys before him was always finding these old
ones. Jaws, sure, or the Godfather. Even James Bond is OK. But there were dumb ones too, like this guy whose town won't help him when the bad guy comes after him, tells him he's arriving on the train."

"High Noon?" Tony said. "Gary Cooper, Grace Kelly?"

Justice shrugged. "Wouldn't know," he said. "Don't know either of them."

Tony held his tongue. Teasing Tim about not knowing Coop was one thing, but it would be lost on this guy. "So you like movie nights?"

Justice nodded. "Yeah, the XO always has some little video skit he's worked out with a few of us before and taped, something funny. Even the guys who don't like movies are there to see what he's come up with. I volunteered for a couple, helped him out. Mark, too. That's how he knew we were buddies."

"Were any of your other buddies going out with you two?" Tony asked.

Justice shook his head. "They were planning to hit the same club as the women, you know, get a little on-shore fraternization going, if you know what I mean."

"Oh, yeah, I know," Tony said. "You two weren't going to join in? Seems like a good offer."

"Yeah, until we found out they were going to the Wave," Justice said. "It didn't surprise me, but why waste time if we're just going to be disappointed."

"So you decided to check out the new place." Tony was starting to fit puzzle pieces together.

"Well, yeah. Sure to be plenty of hot girls there," he said.

Tony nodded and turned to Ziva. "Agent David, can you finish this interview while I check in with Agent Gibbs?"

Ziva nodded.

As Tony left, he tried to figure out how to explain this to the man who never, ever went clubbing.

-Gibbs sat across from the captain, while Wilson leaned against the nearby wall, notebook in hand."

"You got Wallace out of here pretty fast," Gibbs said. "Any reason?" He waited for a response.

"Discretion," Bradley said. "Same reason I asked NCIS to get involved."

Gibbs lifted an eyebrow. "You called SecNav to pull strings on a simple assault, and you think that's discreet?"

"I think this is beyond the scope of what the MPs can handle, and if the Navy doesn't handle this right, it's going to be in newspapers across the country," Bradley said. He didn't explain, didn't so much as open his mouth and close it again.

"You want to tell us what's going on?" Gibbs asked when it became clear Bradley didn't have any intention of adding to his claim.

The ship's captain frowned, as if considering it, before shaking his head. "I've heard of you, Gibbs,
and your team. You're supposed to be the best. Bill Danforth and I served together, stayed friends. He told me about your investigation when Billy died, about your strong sense of justice. I trust that you'll handle this case with the same sense of justice."

Gibbs nodded, knowing he wouldn't get more. He hadn't thought about the Danforth case in years, but he'd never forgotten it either. This couldn't be exactly the same setup, but just the fact that the captain had brought it up sent his gut into overdrive.

"Thanks, Captain," Gibbs said. "Give Agent Wilson all the reports you have on the incident, and any other times you had reason to note interaction between Sanderson and any of his rack mates."

Bradley nodded, and Gibbs turned to Dwayne. "Meet me on top when you have all that," he said. He walked out, pulling his cell out to call Tony only to find his senior field agent coming around the corner.

"Topside, DiNozzo," he said.

Neither one spoke until they were on the deck, far away from any listening ears.

"What ya got?" Gibbs asked.

As Tony filled him in, Gibbs started to put pieces together. "OK, here's the plan," he said when Tony finished. "You and Wilson stay here, do interviews. Ziva and I are going to bring both of these guys back, see if we can shake loose some answers."

"On it, Boss," Tony said.

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Abby blinked her eyes as she woke up, then snuggled against Jimmy. He was still asleep, but his arms held her close. She traced a line around his arm, then placed a trail of kisses along the same path. He murmured, and she looked up just in time to see him opening his eyes.

"Abbs?" He looked around the room, the rosy wash of the sunrise coloring the walls. "What are you doing?"

She bit her lower lip, then decided she wouldn't find a better time. "You know how I said I thought I might have an idea that would satisfy both of us?"

He eased himself up on one elbow. "I've been wondering when you were going to let me in on that."

Abby reached over, tracing the same line on his arm. "I was thinking about what we had talked about, and..." Her voice trailed off as she tried to figure out what to say. "You know I want to be with you forever, permanently, right? And you want the same, at least I think you do. I really want that, but I'm still not sure about a wedding, but I thought maybe a more permanent engagement ring would be an intermediate step, the commitment you want until I can wrap my mind around a wedding."

He blinked a few times, then reached over to the nightstand and fumbled for his glasses. After putting them on, he looked at her, and she worried her lower lip with her teeth waiting for his reaction.

"What kind of permanent engagement ring?"
She traced the band around his arm again. "I thought we could get matching tattoos," she said. "I found this Celtic knot design for an armband, and we could both get them on our left arm, matching ones. Yours would be high enough so it wouldn't show when you have your scrubs on, so you don't have to worry about looking unprofessional," she said. "And nobody will blink if I get another one — I already have them all over my arms, and if I'm testifying, my court suit will hide it. So, Jimmy Palmer, will you marry me?"

She waited for his reaction, remembering how he hadn't wanted a permanent tattoo with Breena. She didn't have to wait long as his lips stretched into a wide smile.

"Absolutely, Abby Scuito," he said, and rolled her over, covering her body with his and kissing her until she couldn't think of anything else. As the light in the room changed from pink to orange to full sunlight, they moved together, loving each other. After, Abby curled up against him, drowsy and sated.

Only when her bladder threatened to rebel did she get up, pull on a bathrobe, and shuffle next door to the bathroom. As she cleaned up, something niggled at the back of her brain, but she couldn't think what it was. Still sleepy, she finished up and headed back to the bedroom, ditching the bathrobe and crawling back under the covers to snuggle against Jimmy, who was already sleeping. She was almost asleep herself when the pieces clicked into place.

"Forget something, Abs?" she whispered to herself, looking over at the unopened condom packets on the nightstand. She pushed it aside. It was just one time. Closing her eyes again, she slid her arm across Jimmy's chest and let her hand rest on the spot where his tattoo was going tomorrow when they went into New Orleans.
Friday, April 9, 2010

Tim worked steadily on digging into the two men's backgrounds until 0730 when he figured he could call his father without having to wake him up.

"Hey, Mom," he said when Eileen answered. "Is Dad there?"

"Right here." Sean's voice came over the line. "Eileen, I've got it."

"Tim, I'm headed out for a run," she said. "I'll talk to you later."

"Bye, Mom," he said, and waited for her to hang up.

"What's going on?" his dad asked. "You don't usually call during the week unless something's wrong, and certainly not before work."

"No, I'm at work," Tim said. "Been here since 0200. Gibbs and the rest of them are in Norfolk on a case, and I've been working from the office. Got a question for you about a former midshipman."

"Who?"

"Lt. Richard Sanderson," Tim said. "Academy grad. Did you have him in class?"

"I did," Sean said. "Good man. He wasn't a natural leader, but he worked hard at it, improved a lot by the time he graduated."

"He have a temper?" Tim asked.

"No, far from it," Sean said. "I had him as a plebe when a lot of them still are trying to rein in a temper or rebelling against all the restrictions. He was at the other end, quiet, maybe a little unsure."

"So you wouldn't expect him to beat up his rackmate?" Tim said.

"Sanderson?" Sean sounded shocked. "That doesn't sound like him. He didn't kill him, did he?"

"No, nothing like that." Tim hurried to reassure his dad. "It's a weird case, not something we would normally handle. But the captain of the Bainbridge asked SecNav to have NCIS investigate."

"The Bainbridge?" Sean's tone of voice changed.

"Yeah, why?"

Sean sighed. "Do you know who started the fight?"

Tim shook his head, then realized his dad couldn't see him. "I don't," he said. "The others probably do by now."

"Tim, I'm telling you this in confidence," he said. "If it doesn't turn out to have any bearing on the
"OK, Dad." Tim wondered what was going on.

"This isn't something I know," Sean said. "But..."

"Dad, whatever it is, just say it."

"You spend enough years in the Navy, you start to pick out people who are a little too quiet about their private lives," he said. "Most Academy classes, there would be a half-dozen or more midshipmen who I expected to leave the Navy or Marines after a tour or two." He paused. "When they would decide Don't Ask, Don't Tell was too much to live with. Or somebody would find out, and they would be told to leave."

Tim realized what his dad was saying. "And Sanderson was one of those midshipmen."

"Yes."

But Tim knew that wasn't the whole story. "How does the Bainbridge factor into this?"

He heard his dad sigh again. "Five or six years ago, they called all the leadership faculty in for a meeting," he said. "An XO on a ship had been making videos to entertain the crew, but they crossed a line: dirty jokes, disrespectful comments about women, that sort of thing."

"And?"

"And homophobic comments," Sean said.

"Why were you told about this?" Tim asked.

"The captain of the ship didn't put anything in writing," he said. "The videos were popular with most of the crew, and at the time, the climate in the country was fairly hostile because the Massachusetts gay marriage law had stirred up a lot of anti-gay sentiment. The captain thought if he filed a formal reprimand, some of the crew members would take it public, make a stink."

Tim swallowed. "So how did you get involved?"

"The captain talked to the commandant, and he briefed us. We increased the amount of time we spent in training making sure the midshipmen knew the importance of quashing anything that might constitute a hostile environment, especially aboard ship in close quarters." Sean paused. "I didn't like the idea of letting the XO get away with it, but the commandant assured us that the videos had been stopped. So I focused on trying to teach every sailor in my classes the right way to lead and how to make the tough decisions."

Tim put his pen down and flexed his fingers, sore from taking notes throughout his dad's explanation. "Do you know who the XO was?"

"I don't," Sean said. "Even if it's not the same one, if the sailors think the top officers will look the other way, they might be more willing to say things they shouldn't." He paused. "Tim, if that's what's going on, you and Tony be careful."

"We will, Dad." After assuring his dad they'd be fine and taking a moment to check in on how he was doing, Tim ended the call. When Gibbs walked in the squad room, Tim was still sitting at his desk, staring at his notes.
It was only a little after 0800 when Gibbs pulled the sedan into the NCIS parking garage. Justice was in the front seat next to him, while Ziva sat in the back with Sanderson. Neither man had spoken during the trip, and Gibbs was his usual silent self. Ziva did not know exactly what Tony and Gibbs had talked about before they left the ship, but something had obviously changed in the case; why else would they bring back both Justice and Sanderson?

"David, escort Sanderson to lockup," Gibbs said.

"Yes, Gibbs." She grabbed one arm of the handcuffed sailor to pull him out of the car, then toward the elevator. Gibbs, not surprisingly, was waiting for the next elevator.

Only when they were in the elevator did Sanderson speak. "What happens now?"

"Now you wait," Ziva said. "If we need more information from you, an agent will escort you to Interrogation, where one of us will question you."

"Great," Sanderson said. "Look, I did it. I hit Justice. Let the MPs do their thing, let Bradley have me up at captain's mast. There's no reason for NCIS to get involved."

Ziva considered what he said. She still was not sure what the hippopotamus in the room was, but there was something nobody was talking about. In the end, she fell back on the one thing she knew Sanderson would understand. "You take orders, yes? When Capt. Bradley or Commander Wallace tell you to do something, you obey."

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

"We, too, have our orders," she said. "You are right. This is not a typical NCIS case, but SecNav asked us to investigate at your captain's request. We are doing just that."

"Capt. Bradley asked you to investigate?" Sanderson frowned. "Did he say why?"

"If he had, I could not tell you," Ziva said. "Unless you already know?"

Sanderson shook his head. "He's pretty by-the-book," the sailor said. "I should be up on charges right now."

Ziva opened the door to the lockup. "Right now, you will wait here. She motioned to the agent standing guard. "Agent Patel, this is Lt. Sanderson."

"I'll book him, Agent David," the security guard said.

Ziva headed back to the squad room, where Gibbs was standing by McGee's desk. Justice was nowhere to be found.

"Report McGee," he said.

"The background information I pulled on Justice and Sanderson didn't reveal anything unexpected, but Dad had some scuttlebutt," he said. "But he asked that I only share it if it was relevant to the investigation, and I understand why."

"Don't Ask, Don't Tell," Gibbs said.
"Maybe it is relevant," McGee said. "What's going on?"

Gibbs outlined what they had, aided by the occasional comment from Ziva.

McGee started nodding. "It's relevant," he said. "My dad's pretty sure Sanderson is gay."

"So it sounds like he was angry at whatever Justice said." Ziva frowned. "Could it have been that bad?"

"How does the XO figure into this?" Gibbs said.

As McGee outlined what Sean knew about the videos, Gibbs frowned.

"Justice mentioned the videos," Ziva said. "He told Tony and myself that he had been in one of them, he and Andrews."

"He approved of them?" Gibbs said.

"He certainly seemed to," Ziva said. She crossed her arms. "For Sanderson to share quarters with those two must have been difficult."

McGee nodded. "Especially if Wallace was the XO who made the videos. My dad never had a name, didn't know if it was the same XO or not. But if it was, then even if the videos stopped, the attitude probably didn't."

"So after all this, maybe Sanderson finally snapped." Gibbs frowned. "We'd better brief Vance. Sounds like the captain wants us to take the heat for uncovering this. Director's better at handling the politics."

"Boss, since Abby's not here, I'll say it. Jethro is better at handling the politics than you are, and he's a dog." McGee didn't even try to duck the headslap, but at least Gibbs had a ghost of a smile on his face before he headed upstairs, motioning for them to follow.

Vance was pouring himself a glass of water when Gibbs barged in.

"You know, Gibbs, I'd say one of these days you'll learn to knock, but it'll probably be the day hell freezes over and you decide to retire." Vance walked to the conference room table and set his glass down. "Water?"

Gibbs shook his head, but Ziva nodded, then took the glass Vance poured for her and the seat he motioned her to. McGee leaned against the wall, watching.

"Wilson and DiNozzo?"

"Still aboard, interviewing crew," Gibbs said. He remained standing, as did Vance.

"And the suspect?"

"Suspect and victim are here. Sanderson's in lockup, Justice is in the conference room with an agent on guard."

"You figure out what's going on?"

"Some of it," Gibbs said.

"Want to enlighten me?" Vance pulled out a chair and motioned Gibbs to sit before seating himself
at the head of the table.

Gibbs paused a moment, then sat. "I think Capt. Bradley requested our involvement in this case, because sometimes the rules and justice aren't the same thing."

"And he has reason to believe NCIS can make the distinction?" Vance pointed his toothpick in Gibbs' direction.

"We had a case a few years back that involved a buddy of his."

Vance grimaced. "And this was a case where following the rules wouldn't lead to justice?"

Gibbs just looked at him.

"You going to at least tell me which rule?"

"Justice told Tony and Ziva that Sanderson walked in as he and Andrews, another rackmate, were discussing plans to go clubbing."

"I was confused at that part," Ziva said. "Justice said something about not going with the others because he didn't want to be disappointed."

One side of Gibbs' mouth quirked up. "The other sailors were going to Wave. DiNozzo recognized the name. It's a Hampton Roads dance club that's considered gay-friendly."

"That would explain why Justice did not want to be seen there," Ziva said. "Rumors might start." She paused. "But if that is the case, why would the others go?"

"Is it a gay bar?" Vance said.

"Not exactly," McGee said. "It's a dance club that bills itself as gay-friendly. Women like it because there are enough gay men there that they can get in some serious dancing without worrying about getting hit on." He shrugged. "Abby and I went there a few times while we were dating when I was still stationed there since there weren't any of her type of clubs down there. That's how she found out I was bi. She dragged Tony down there a few times, too."

"So if your father is right and Sanderson is gay, it is likely Justice said something to make him angry when he walked in," Ziva said.

"If the ship has a hostile climate, because everybody knew the XO wouldn't care if they harassed closeted sailors, he was probably pretty close to the edge anyway," McGee said. "Sharing a berth with at least one, possibly two, guys who are fine with Don't Ask, Don't Tell had to be pretty stressful."

"Now we know why SecNav got us involved," Vance said. "With all the discussion on Capitol Hill about repealing Don't Ask, Don't Tell, an incident like this could be a nightmare if the wrong person is charged."

Gibbs nodded. "You handle the politics, Leon. We'll get the evidence to back it up."

Jimmy finally woke again to find Abby snuggled across his chest. He looked down at her face, relaxed in sleep, and ran his hand along the cross tattoo that covered her spine. He would have been happy to stay here all morning, but Abby's mother would be wondering where they were. He
eased himself out from under her, sliding his pillow into her arms, and slid on his pajama pants before grabbing clothes and heading to the bathroom.

As the hot water beat down on his skin, he thought about Abby's proposal and was surprised at how right it felt. He'd heard her on the subject of tattoos related to people before and knew she wouldn't take this step unless she thought of them as being as permanent as the tattoo. Somehow, a wedding didn't seem as important any more. Yes, he still wanted one, though he was pretty sure Abby wasn't going to go for the traditional option in any way. But he felt a lot more secure about everything than he had two weeks ago.

As he was drying off, he started to think about the plans they had put on hold. They should probably still wait a bit on bat-gremlins, especially with everything so unsettled now. Not that he thought Josh was going to try anything or that Abby would get hurt. But it still made sense to wait. If Josh did try to hurt Sarah or the people around her, Abby would be one of the most vulnerable — she was Tim's best friend and ex-girlfriend, plus she wasn't a trained field agent. And if Josh knew she was pregnant, it could be as easy as "accidentally" knocking her over. Jimmy found himself clenching his fists at the idea that anybody might go after Abby and forced himself to relax. Josh wouldn't do that. He hadn't shown any signs of being physically dangerous. They just had to worry about keeping him away from Sarah.

He dressed in shorts and a T-shirt and headed back to their room. Abby's mother was in the hall and he signed "Good morning" to her. He had to ask her to repeat her next question and stand closer, since he had left his glasses on the nightstand, but finally understood. "Abby's asleep," he signed, using her name sign.

Mrs. Scuito nodded, and Jimmy went into their room to find Abby curled up in the middle of the bed, her arms still around his pillow.

Jimmy sat on the end of the bed to put his socks and sneakers on. Then he reached for his glasses. As the room came into focus, he found his cell phone and slipped it into his shorts pocket. He let Abby sleep and headed to the kitchen. As he was eating cereal and trying to carry on a conversation with Abby's mother, he suddenly realized what had been lying on the nightstand next to his cell phone. He fumbled the next sign, but Mrs. Scuito must have put it down to his inexperience. Jimmy was glad; he really didn't want to explain what he was thinking to his fiancee's mother. Time enough to deal with that if it turned out forgetting the condom this one time actually had repercussions.

For the same reason, he decided not to say anything to Abby unless she brought it up. Why worry her about something that had such a tiny chance of happening?

Chapter End Notes

I still haven't seen Recruited - I'm about to watch as soon as it downloads - but the parallel topic is a coincidence. I was inspired by the news story about the videos on the Enterprise and did some what-if-ing...
Tony stuck his phone back in his pocket, then rejoined Dwayne where the young agent was talking to one of the sailors on Sanderson's team.

"Thanks, Petty Officer Bashiri," Dwayne said. "We appreciate your willingness to talk."

"Yes, sir." The petty officer left, and Dwayne turned to face Tony. "What's going on?" he asked.

"Boss wants us back," Tony said. "That was Ziva. McGee had the piece we were missing, got it from his dad."

"I think Bashiri gave me some of it, too," Dwayne said. "It's not pretty."

Tony nodded. "Wait until we're in the car."

They talked about Dwayne's kids until they made their way off base, the agent entertaining Tony with Kevin's latest escapades now that he was crawling.

"I'll bet Kerry won't leave her dolls on the floor anymore," Tony said.

Dwayne shook his head. "Not after that."

Once they were outside base, Tony changed the subject. "We're pretty sure — at least Sean is — that Sanderson is gay." He sighed. "And the XO on the Bainbridge isn't the sort to encourage an open-minded environment."

"That fits with what the petty officer said." Dwayne's voice was grim. "He'd seen Sanderson moving stiffly several times. One of those afternoons, he saw Sanderson on the treadmill at the gym and sweat had soaked his shirt. He could see bruises underneath."

"Beatings he couldn't report," Tony said.

"That happened to a guy in my unit when I first joined up," Dwayne said. "The gunny wasn't a real tolerant person, thought DADT was the military caving to political correctness. At first he'd just single Simmons out for extra 'training' because he said he wasn't meeting standards. So Simmons turned himself into a super-Marine, determined that the gunny couldn't find fault."

"Then what happened?" Tony had a feeling he knew; had seen the same thing in Peoria and Philly — especially Philly — but he had to ask.

"I was coming back from a 24 one day, had gone to see Maggie back when we still were dating," Dwayne said. "Outside the base, Simmons was lying in the bushes. His face and lower arms were fine, but somebody had pinned him down at the shoulders and pummeled any place it wouldn't show." He sighed. "I got him in the gate, took him to the infirmary. He said he'd gotten in a fight in town."

"A civilian beat a trained Marine that badly?" Tony snorted. "Yeah. And my partner in Philly ended up on the streets without backup while I was undercover because the other unit got tied up with a
"Were they punishing you or him?" Dwayne asked.

"Him," Tony said. "I was always careful to keep that side of my life hidden." He paused. "Well, up until Tim."

"I can't even imagine," Dwayne said.

"Don't," Tony said. He forced a grin on his face. "Besides, you'll get to see it in action. Gibbs is bringing us back to have me and McGee tag-team Sanderson, see if we can get him to tell us about those incidents and give us names so we can nail them to the wall. If there's one thing Gibbs hates, it's seeing a victim — any victim — not get justice."

Sarah finished classes for the morning and headed back to Ziva's apartment. Their apartment, she corrected herself. She'd stopped by to see her math professor between classes that morning, and she'd been thrilled to find out she had gotten an A on the quiz the previous day. Between Tim's help on weekends and the tutoring sessions at the campus help center, she was feeling a bit more confident about passing the class.

She let herself in and dropped her books on the desk, which was in one corner of the living room. It was Ziva's, but she had told Sarah to use it, at least until they could get Sarah's from her parents' house. Sarah still needed to call and tell them she wanted to come pick it up. Ziva said Gibbs would be happy to bring it over in his truck, but Sarah knew she also needed to tell her parents why she was moving in with Ziva early.

She looked through the kitchen, debating what to have for lunch. There was leftover ravioli with vegetables in the fridge from dinner last night, but Sarah decided she didn't feel like all the garlic. It hadn't agreed with her last night, and she didn't think that would change today. Instead, she grabbed a pre-made pizza shell from a package in the pantry and pulled out the makings of her favorite snack. The others all thought she was crazy, but to her pickles, peanut butter, and hot sauce sounded perfect.

She assembled the pizza and flopped down on the couch. Just being out of the dorms the past few days had been great — she was sleeping a lot better, though she hadn't caught up on all her rest yet. Sarah pulled out her cell and set her alarm so if she fell asleep, she wouldn't be late for work.

Tim decided to channel Gibbs during training that morning and took the agents through the material quickly, then set a Gibbsian deadline for them to complete the final practical assignment of the two-week training.

"McGee, you've been working for the Boss too long," Burley said. "This is going to take twice that long."

"And if you tried that on Gibbs?" Tim smiled, so Burley would know he was just giving him a hard time.

"Yeah, yeah, he'd cut the time even more," Burley said. "It's a good thing none of you guys are going anywhere, because nobody could take your spot on the team and stay sane."

"Wait, McGee's sane?" Agent Rosaria kept his straight face for less than 10 seconds before
snickering at his own comment.

"I'm not the one wasting time complaining about the deadline instead of trying to meet it," Tim retorted. "Learn the speed now while it's just practice, before somebody's life depends on how quickly you can trace these records." With that, everybody settled down, and the only noises were clicking keys and muttered curses.

The class ended a full hour early. Tim checked his watch and knew Tony would be back by now.

"What's going on, McGee?" Burley hung back after everybody else left. "Is everything OK with Sarah?"

Tim nodded. "Unless something's happened that nobody's told me about."

Burley shook his head. "I drove her home last night, and she was fine then. Josh came in for a while with his new girlfriend, but Sarah seemed to handle it OK. She was pretty tired though. She's working almost full time at the coffee shop, plus classes, plus this. Something's gotta give."

Tim sighed. "Plus the extra tutoring to make sure she passes math so she can graduate on time." He frowned as he finished packing up his stuff. "She can't drop any classes, but I wish she would cut back her hours at the coffee shop, just until graduation. If she doesn't pass that class, she'll have to wait until August to walk, and I'm more worried about how that will affect her than anything else."

Burley nodded. "From some of the stories Brad was telling me the other day, once we were sure Josh wasn't coming in, it sounds like she's a firecracker, but I haven't seen it."

"She is, and she hasn't been. You're not the only one who's worried." He thought for a second. "Stan, can you float the idea by her of cutting her hours at work, just until she graduates? Tony and I could help her out if she needs the money, especially now that she's living with Ziva and not in the dorms. But if one of us were to suggest it, I'm not sure she'd even consider it."

Burley nodded. "Sure. She can get mad at me; I'll be gone in another week anyway."

"Thanks." Tim clapped him on the shoulder. "Now, I've got to get back to the bullpen so Tony and I can tag-team this guy."

"Dirtbag?"

"Victim." Tim pressed his lips together. "At least we think so. He's not telling — insists he beat his rack mate and we should just turn him over to the MPs."

"Good luck," Burley said. "I'll let you know how things go with Sarah."

"Thanks," Tim said.

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Tony headed directly the bullpen when they arrived at the Navy Yard, Dwayne right behind him.

"McProf done with his class yet?" Tony asked Gibbs, who was working at his desk.

The team leader shook his head. "Last day. He had to give them their final test. Thought he'd be done early, but it'll probably be another 30 minutes or so."

Dwayne sank into his chair. "Sanderson isn't going to get in trouble, is he? From what we learned, he got beaten at least as bad as he beat Justice, and more than once." Tony watched as Dwayne's
fingers unconsciously reached out to trace the framed family photo on his desk. "Doesn't sound like anybody had his back."

"Too dangerous," Tony said. "In an environment like that? Anybody who tried to stand up for him would have been tagged the same way." He felt his shoulders sag and knew it wasn't just because he'd been up since 0100. "Boss, we are going to take these guys down, right? I mean, yeah, Sanderson might have to take some heat; he did beat up Justice. But Justice and Andrews and anybody else who was involved, even the XO — they need to face the consequences of what they did, too."

Gibbs nodded, and Tony noticed it was one of the few times he'd ever seen the boss appear, well, old. Or maybe "weary" was a better description. The energy that usually made them forget he was past 50 was gone at the moment.

"Boss? Everything OK?"

"We've got two guys, and the one who looks like the victim now seems like he's at least as guilty as the other one. I'm sending you and McGee in to get a man to break a Navy reg and tell us he's gay so we can stop his shipmates from beating on him, and somehow I have to get Vance to take on the political nightmare of making sure the Navy deals with the idiot XO who thought condoning harassment was a source of entertainment." Gibbs never raised his voice, never looked up from the paper in front of him. "I hate making Sanderson tell, I hate that we have to investigate this because some officer somewhere was too afraid of bad publicity to make the tough choices he should have made, and most of all I hate asking you and McGee to use your relationship to encourage Sanderson into giving us the information we need to get justice." He stopped, and only then did he look up at Tony. "No, everything is not OK."

Tony held up his hand as Dwayne started to speak then moved over to stand in front of Gibbs' desk. Crouching down, he looked up at Gibbs from across the desktop. "Boss, you're not making Tim or me do anything we aren't willing to do. Believe me when I say that anything I can do on this case is only half as much as I should have done in Philly."

He waited for Gibbs to demand details, but either the boss had already known or he'd decided not to push. "Tim and I never worried about people finding out about us — once we knew you weren't going to kick one of us off the team for breaking Rule 12 — because we knew you were on our six. Not just you either — Ziva, Abby, Ducky, Jimmy, and now Dwayne. Even Vance. Sanderson doesn't have anybody on his six. And if the only thing I get done today is persuading him that he's now got us on his six, it's a good day."

Suddenly uncomfortable with how much he'd said, Tony scrambled in his brain to find a joke, something to lighten the mood. A film reference that wasn't Brokeback Mountain. Before he could open his mouth, he heard a voice next to him.

"This is why you're the right team for this case," Vance said.

Tony looked up to see the director standing in front of Ziva's desk. Ziva was standing behind him carrying a tray of drinks from the coffee shop.

"Not because of DiNozzo, not because of McGee," Vance said. "But because none of you will stop until you get justice. It's why you're the best team at NCIS, even if you do pull enough stunts that SecNav has a regular time on his schedule for me to brief him on your... unorthodox... methods of solving that week's cases."

Tony straightened up, wincing as both his knees and his back cracked. "Wow, thanks Director," he
"Yes, thank you, Director Vance," Ziva said, her voice quiet.

"You come down for a reason, Leon? Or are you just trying to inflate their egos?" Gibbs' words were harsh, but his tone wasn't. Tony knew that, for Gibbs, Vance's praise was just another commendation he didn't expect and didn't need - just something to get stuffed in the lockbox at the bottom of Tony's desk drawer.

"SecNav is ready to start a full investigation of the Bainbridge, including all the officers who served back when the videos were first being aired," he said. "I called Commander McGee, and he gave me enough information about who to talk to at the Academy that we were able to confirm that part of the story. Don't Ask, Don't Tell might still be the law, but harassment of any kind is out of bounds." Vance's face was grim. "Get as many details as you can — names, dates, times — anything. And SecNav has authorized a new posting for Sanderson if he doesn't want to return to the Bainbridge — if he cooperates."

"We'll get everything we can." McGee spoke from behind Vance, and they all turned to face him. "Director, I'll have my assessments of the agents from the class on your desk by Monday."

Vance nodded and walked away. Ziva handed a coffee to McGee before joining the others by Gibbs' desk to hand out drinks. "Gibbs, do you want us in Observation with you or working on our reports?"

"Reports," Gibbs said. "Wilson, you heard Vance. Any times, dates, or other details you and DiNozzo gathered, put them down."

Dwayne nodded and headed back to his desk.

"Guess that means we're up," Tony said. "Come on, McGood Cop."

He was rewarded with a snort from Tim and a little life in Gibbs' eyes, so he grinned and led the way to the elevator.

-Gibbs watched from Observation as McGee ushered Sanderson into the interrogation room. Tony was already there, leaning against the wall in the corner.

"Hey, Sanderson," Tony said. "You've met Tim, I see. Agent McGee, I mean."

The lieutenant nodded. "Why am I here?" He sat down, folded his hands on the tabletop and stared down at them. "It's like I told the other agent... I did it. I'm pleading guilty."

"It's not that easy," Tim said, his voice quiet. "This isn't just about one fight."

"Yes, it is." Sanderson straightened up and stared at Tim, who had sat down across from him. "I was mad, and I took it out on Justice. I don't even need JAG to plead guilty."

"It's not that easy," Tim said, his voice quiet. "This isn't just about one fight."

"We know why you were mad," Tony said. "We know what was happening."

"No, you don't," Sanderson said. He compulsively squeezed and released his folded hands.

"When you were at the Academy, you had Commander McGee for leadership classes, right?" Tony asked.
Sanderson's brow furrowed, and he looked over at Tony, confusion evident on his face. "Yeah. What does that have to do with any-" He paused and looked at McGee. "Wait, McGee?"

He nodded. "He's my father. And he's very observant."

"I don't know what you mean." Sanderson looked away.

Gibbs didn't catch whatever signal McGee sent, but DiNozzo walked over, pulling out the other chair and flipping it around so he faced the door as he sat at the table. "If you couldn't tell from the haircuts, we're not Navy here," he said. "Tim here can't even get near a boat without getting seasick."

"Thanks, Tony," Tim said. He stretched his left hand out on the table, the light reflecting on the band on his ring finger. "Tony's right, though," he said. "We're not."

"Good thing, too," Tony said, placing his left hand on the table next to McGee's. "Law enforcement can be tough enough without being harassed, and we're not even under DADT."

Sanderson looked down at the table, and Gibbs hoped he was registering the meaning of the identical wedding bands on the men's hands, the two-toned double helix inset in the metal were too unique to be considered coincidental by anyone.

"Like I said, my dad's observant," Tim said. "He sees a lot more than he tells."

Sanderson looked up at Tim, then turned and looked at Tony, before looking back at Tim. "He didn't say anything?"

Tim shook his head. "It doesn't matter to him. All he cares about is turning midshipmen into good officers. He said he's had students in every class he was pretty sure weren't telling, and he's never thought any less of any of them. But he didn't have much good to say about the officer who thought those videos were a good idea, or the higher-ups who let him get away with it."

"Some of your shipmates told us you didn't dish out anything worse than you'd received over the past few years," Tony said. "We want to help, but you have to let us."

Sanderson shook his head.

Tony got up and walked away, then came back to the table. "Look, I know what you're feeling."

"Do you?" Sanderson looked up at him. "Your boss sent you in here for a reason. Doesn't seem like it's an issue here."

"Not here."

"But this is my fourth department. Before I came to NCIS, I was a cop. Started in Peoria, made detective in Philly, then I went to Baltimore. Know why?"

When Sanderson didn't say anything, Tim spoke. "I don't even know why."

"They didn't know," Tony said. "When you're an equal-opportunity dater like I was, it's easy for people to see only what you want them to see." He straddled the chair again. "My partner in Philly wasn't so lucky. He was smart and tough. The best investigator I ever worked with, before Agent Gibbs."

When he didn't continue, Sanderson spoke. "What happened?"

"I was undercover," Tony said. "He was my liaison, but since it was a deep cover, we didn't contact
each other more than once a week unless I had new information to pass along. He had a lot of time on his hands, so our lieutenant put him to work on other cases. I didn't know it at the time, but they sent him out alone, without any backup."

"OK?" Sanderson looked at him.

"That's a cardinal sin in law enforcement," Tim said. "Unless you're undercover and it's not possible, you always, always have somebody on your six. If you go all lone wolf, all it's likely to get you is dead."

"Even Batman needed Robin," Tony said, glancing back at the two-way mirror. Gibbs winced a bit as the comment hit home.

"So what happened?" Sanderson asked.

"He was investigating, ran across something," Tony said. "Mike called for backup, and dispatch assured him it was on the way — there were a couple of black-and-whites just three blocks away."

"And?" Sanderson prompted him.

When Tony spoke, his voice was thick, and he looked down at his hands. "The dirtbags caught him 15 minutes later, while his 'backup' was still sitting three blocks away. The whole department showed up for his funeral, but not one of them had backed him up when he needed it."

Tony looked up at Sanderson. "I knew he'd gotten grief from others in the department before. I didn't say anything, didn't stand up for him, because the only thing I would have accomplished is putting myself in the same boat. Even Mike didn't know about my personal life, though sometimes I think he suspected." Tony pushed away from the table and stood up. "It was easier for me to hide, to only date women, because I didn't want to risk dealing with the fallout. I wonder sometimes if I'd had more courage back then, would saying something have saved Mike?"

"Or would it have just gotten you killed?" Sanderson looked at him. "Look, I know what you're saying, but that's a risk I don't want to take."

"And if you don't take it?" It was Tim's turn to speak. "It's not going to stop just because you keep silent. It never does. Bullies are never satisfied. They'll keep taking things out on you and anybody else until someone stands up to them. So far it's just been beatings, but how do you know they won't go too far someday? With you or somebody else?"

"SecNav has promised our director that if you want a different posting, it's yours. You just have to give us names of the sailors doing this, as well as the times and places where you've been attacked," Tony said. "I don't know what happens with your assault charge, but it doesn't sound like he's planning on throwing the book at you."

Sanderson looked up at him. "SecNav?"

"He's the one who brought us in to investigate, at your captain's request," Tim said. "In this case, he seems to be more concerned about addressing the climate of harassment on board the Bainbridge than the letter of the law." He paused. "I'd take him up on his offer."

Gibbs watched as the guys gently nudged Sanderson toward giving them the information they needed. It took another hour of coaxing, but before too long they had it all. Gibbs had called information up to Ziva for follow-up throughout the discussion when Tony finally nodded that he was satisfied.

"Thanks," he said. "We'll get an agent to take you back to holding, but I don't think you'll have to
stay here too much longer."

"And Justice?" Sanderson sounded apprehensive.

"Don't know," Tony said. "Your captain's going to have to investigate first. But I don't think you'll have to worry about it."

Sanderson nodded. "Thanks."

"No, thank you," Tim said. "You didn't have to cooperate, and you did."

Sanderson shook his head. "I did," he said. "I don't want to find out Justice or any of the others takes it too far someday and really hurts somebody because I wasn't brave enough to speak up."

Gibbs smiled and left observation. As he headed downstairs, he called Vance. "We've got everything on tape, Director," he said. "It's your mess now." It felt good to hang up on the man. He stopped down to see Ducky, brief him, then returned to the bullpen.

"Now what, Boss?" McGee asked. "More financial cases?"

"Anything but that," Tony whined, sinking into his chair.

"Go home," Gibbs said. "You started early; you're ending early." He bit back a smile as Tony cheered. "Back on financial cases Monday, DiNozzo."

Gibbs thought he might rupture something from holding back a laugh at the way Tony's face went from cheerful to depressed in two seconds.

He wasn't far behind them and thought he might stop over and see Sean and Eileen when he got home.

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Sean changed into sweatpants and a T-shirt, then headed out for a walk. Eileen had gone down to the rec center to see if there was a spring basketball league she could join, so he took the inhaler Brad had prescribed him and started off slowly. The first few blocks were comfortable, and Sean picked up the pace a bit. He'd been taking it easy since the other day, and it was bothering him.

It was a nice day, sunny with just the edge of chill in the air that marked early spring days. Some of the neighbors had cherry trees, and the pink blossoms were blown out, most of them fallen to the ground, or about to fall. Lawns were starting to turn green, and early flowers bloomed around the edges.

As he increased his pace to a powerwalk, he could feel the dreaded tightness start in his lungs. He tried to hold the pace, before finally admitting defeat and slowing down. When the tightness didn't ease, he pulled out his inhaler and used it, letting the medication coat his lungs.

He slowed down again, and then slowed some more. He tried to ignore the fact that his pace was closer to that of an elderly man than somebody well below retirement age. The inhaler hadn't loosened his chest at all, and he tried to focus on slow, simple breaths. Gradually he was able to increase the amount of air he could take into his lungs, but he still couldn't manage a deep breath.

As Sean turned and slowly walked home, he reminded himself that with all the pollen in the air, he should have walked inside. He knew better than that. Eileen would read him the riot act for walking outside at this time of year. He was better off not telling her. He'd just have to remember
to walk inside tomorrow, no matter how nice the weather outside was.

Tim grabbed his gear and headed for the elevator, Tony at his heels.

"How ready are you to go home?" his husband asked as they took the elevator down.

"What did you have in mind?" Tim asked.

"Mind detouring by Judiciary Square on the way home?"

Tim shook his head. "You going to tell me why?"

Tony didn't respond, and Tim glanced over to see Tony was lost in thought. He let it drop as they put their gear in the backseat of the car and Tim pulled out of the parking lot. He hadn't been to Judiciary Square in a while — not since the last time he'd had to testify in court — but it wasn't that far out of their way.

He navigated his way to the area, then found a parking space on the street near the Armed Forces Court of Appeals. After parking and setting the alarm, he followed Tony, who was headed for the square itself, not one of the courthouses.

The sides of the square were lined with stone walls, just a few feet high. He'd been here when Kate's name was memorialized along with other law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty. But even after Paula Cassidy, Rick Hall, and Jim Nelson died, he hadn't visited the memorial again, preferring to remember his friends and coworkers in other ways.

But Tony had obviously been here several times. The panels each looked alike, the names boldly engraved in all capital letters. But Tony didn't hesitate as he went to pay his respect at each name. Caitlin Marie Todd was four or five lines from the bottom, on a panel about halfway down the side of the memorial, and Tony made the sign of the cross and murmured a prayer as he stood there. Tim closed his eyes and thought about Kate, how she would offer him advice one minute, then gang up on him with Tony the next.

Down near the end, across the street from the National Building Museum, Tony knelt to run his fingers across the three names engraved there. Tim swallowed hard, remembering that weekend. First Rick and Jim — Jim had been his first friend at NCIS — then Paula the next day, Tony pounding on the brick wall after it slammed shut behind her and the bomb went off. Their names were just a couple of lines up, their deaths more recent than Kate's.

When Tony went to stand, his knees cracked, and Tim reached out a hand to pull him to his feet. His husband still didn't say anything, though. He just turned and walked across the square to the other side of the memorial. He crouched down to find another name, then let his fingertips rest on the stone under a name that had been there long enough to show some softening around the edges from years of weather.

"Michael James O'Hanlon," Tim said. "Your partner in Philly?"

Tony only nodded, and Tim dropped to the ground next to him, putting an arm around Tony's shoulders. "You couldn't have been there that night," he said.

"No, but I could have stood up for him before that," Tony said. "If I had, he might be alive."

"Or you might be dead," Tim replied. "Or you'd still be in Philly, and I'd be down in Norfolk, and
Gibbs would be running off new agents every few weeks."

"It wasn't right," Tony said. "It's isn't right."

"No, it's not." Tim pulled him closer and tipped his head so it rested against Tony's. "You did something about it today." He paused. "We can't save the world, Tony. Not even Gibbs can do that. We just have to go out there every day and take care of our part of it. And then go back the next day, even when we want to run off to Mexico and margaritas instead of coming back to blood and bad guys."

"It's not enough," he said. "There's not anything I can do that would be enough to make up for letting Mike down."

Tim didn't know what to say, but he knew he needed to say something, knew Tony needed words.

"You did what you could today," he finally said. "You do what you can every day, and it might not be as much as you think you need to do, but if it's everything you can do, it's enough."

Chapter End Notes

AN: Yes, the memorial does exist, and it's quite moving. If you're ever in D.C., it's worth visiting, even if you don't have a name to look up. They do have a directory at one end to help you find people's names — most of us aren't like Tony and have the locations memorized.
Ziva wasted no time leaving the Navy Yard and headed straight home. When she walked into the apartment she now shared with Sarah, she found her roommate was curled up on the sofa asleep.

The remains of a pizza were on the end table, and Ziva wrinkled her nose at the peanut butter-smeared pickle on the empty plate. She would never understand how Sarah could enjoy such a combination. Setting her backpack on its hook by the door, Ziva slipped off her shoes before sneaking past Sarah to take the plate to the kitchen.

She set it quietly in the sink, then opened the refrigerator to pull out some of the leftovers from last night to reheat. Lunch, followed by a nap, would be perfect. Then she would go to the gym. Her Krav Maga could use some work, and if she could get to the gym before the evening classes started, she would have the kickboxing room to herself.

Ziva took the plate from the microwave when it was done and settled herself at the table to eat it. She was conscious of being quiet so as not to disturb Sarah, but her roommate never stirred. Ziva frowned, wondering what sleeping had to do with cooking. She had a feeling she never would understand the complexities of the English language. How McGee and Sarah could use it to create stories never failed to amaze her. Sarah said she wanted the semester to end so she could start working on her novel. Ziva, too, wanted the semester to end. However, she wanted to see Josh out of her roommate's life before things got to be too much for her.

After Ziva finished her lunch and cleaned up, washing both her own dishes and Sarah's, she headed for her bedroom. She paused to look at Sarah, noticing how pale the young woman was. Only the shadows under her eyes and a few red blotches from breakouts added color to her face. Ziva nodded and retraced her steps to the front door, removing her laptop from its padded sleeve within her backpack.

Once inside her room, she e-mailed McGee and Tony, suggesting they skip the game night just for this week so Sarah could rest without feeling like she was missing something.

That done, Ziva changed into a tank top and shorts and crawled into bed.

Gibbs turned off Route 1 into his neighborhood and slowed down. It was too early for kids to be out of school, but there were always the smaller ones who weren't old enough for school yet. They didn't seem to play in the streets as much these days as they had when Kelly was little — everything was clubs and organized sports and lessons now — but he was still cautious. Not that his team would believe him — they only saw him drive through the neighborhood after dark, when kids were in bed and Gibbs didn't have to worry so much.

As he turned down his street, he saw Sean walking from the other direction. He was dressed for a workout, but moving at the pace of a stroll. Gibbs watched as his neighbor pounded his fist to his chest a couple of times then dropped his hand as he looked up. After a momentary hesitation, Sean waved.

Gibbs waved back, lifting his hand from the muscle car's steering wheel. It was too far for Sean to have recognized him, but the car was unmistakable. He pulled into his driveway and parked, then
headed to the walkway in front of Sean and Eileen's house to wait for Sean. Eileen's car was gone, and Gibbs had seen Tony pound his chest too many times to just head inside without checking on Sean.

"You're home early," Sean said as he walked up. His breathing was rough, a little louder than normal.

"Started earlier than normal," Gibbs said. "Once Tony and Tim cracked this one, I sent them all home — been going since 0200."

Sean nodded and motioned for Gibbs to follow him up the path. "I know a little bit. I spoke to Tim this morning, then Vance called me looking for details."

"We appreciate your help," Gibbs said, following Sean into the kitchen.

Sean pulled a bottle of water from the refrigerator and two mugs from the cabinet. "No cream, no sugar, right?"

Gibbs just nodded and took the mug a minute later, leaning back against the counter as he sipped. "SecNav's finally doing what should have happened way back."

Sean sipped his water. "Good." He filled the kettle and turned on a burner, then dropped a tea bag into the second mug. "Sanderson was a good sailor. I'm glad things worked out."

"Yup." Gibbs sipped his coffee and listened. Sean's breathing sounded normal, but then he started coughing. When it didn't stop, Gibbs looked around the kitchen before finding an inhaler similar to the one Tony carried on the windowsill. He grabbed it and handed it to Sean, guiding him to a chair.

Sean sucked in the medicine and bent over, elbows resting on his legs. When he finally looked up, Gibbs made his face expressionless.

"Thanks," he said. "Just got a little tickle, couldn't stop once I started."

"That explain why you were trying to loosen things up when I first saw you outside?" Gibbs kept any accusation from his voice.

"Jethro-"

"Sean, Tony's been dealing with this for the past five years. I've heard every excuse and deflection in the book." Gibbs set down his mug. "Have you told Brad?"

Sean shook his head.

"Eileen?"

He shook his head again. "I didn't want to worry her."

Gibbs reached out for the head slap before he realized this wasn't one of his agents, then dropped his hand back by his side. "If you end up in Bethesda again, she won't be the only one worried about you," he said. "Call Brad."

Sean glared at him, but Gibbs stared back until Sean finally looked away. "I'll call him."

"Now."
"Jethro."

"Sean, call him now, or I'll call him," Gibbs said. He thought about everything McGee and Sarah were dealing with because of Josh. "You didn't see Tim's face the last time he found out you were sick. You end up back in Bethesda again because you didn't go see Brad soon enough, and it's not going to be good."

"Gibbs, I'm fine." Sean got up and walked away, then turned back. "It's probably nothing."

Gibbs just pulled out his phone and searched through the contacts list for Brad's number.

"OK, I'll call him." Sean frowned. "But you have to promise me something."

"What?"

"Don't tell Tim. Sarah either, if you see her. I don't want either of them worrying about nothing, and I'm sure Brad's just going to tell me it's the pollen or something dumb like that." Sean looked at him, and Gibbs nodded, putting away his phone.

"You are telling Eileen, though?"

"Telling me what?"

Gibbs looked over to see Eileen standing in the doorway, then back to see the tips of Sean's ears turning red, so like his son that Gibbs had to bite back a chuckle.

"I've been having some trouble breathing when I walk," Sean said. "It's only been this week, but I promised Gibbs I'd call Brad."

"This week?" Gibbs was starting to feel the way he did with Tony.

"When were you planning on mentioning this, Sean Michael McGee?" Eileen glared at him, and Gibbs decided it was time for him to leave. Eileen stalked into the kitchen, and Gibbs was able to slip out the now-empty doorway into the dining room.

He didn't breathe freely until he was in his own house. He made a mental note to talk to Ducky on Monday. The medical examiner could get away with a discreet call to Brad better than he could to make sure Sean had actually called. Gibbs hoped Sean was right, and it was just pollen. McGee and Sarah were dealing with enough crap these days; they didn't need their dad getting more sick on top of it.

Brad finished his rounds and headed for the sunroom where his regular patients often gathered, just to see how they were doing. He liked to encourage the meetings, knowing the support the former sailors got from talking to one another was important to them.

But when he looked in, nobody was there. Checking his watch, he realized it was later than he thought. Another day almost gone. Sighing, Brad returned to his office. It seemed like he never had enough time these days with all the extra paperwork from the study. He was also getting more former sailors, as word of his treatment approach spread through the Navy. Several West Coast doctors had started referring patients to him, and the VA hospitals throughout the region were asking him to train their doctors on the protocol since they saw many more patients who were retired military than the Navy hospitals saw active duty sailors. Brad knew that shift would continue, since most of the sailors who served when there was asbestos on ships were now retired.
Sean was one of the few who had still been serving.

He had also started getting some inquiries about applying the treatments to non-asbestos-related lung issues, from doctors who were seeing sailors coming back from the Middle East with breathing problems. His CO had mentioned having him move into a position of overseeing and developing treatments rather than seeing patients, but Brad wasn't crazy about the idea. The patients were the reason he became a doctor, and even the idea of being able to help more sailors didn't offset his reluctance to stop seeing patients. So far, it hadn't been an order, and Brad was hoping he could continue to get enough work done, while keeping up with his caseload, to prevent his CO from taking it to that level.

He set his clipboard and folders down on his desk and settled into his chair, ready for another few hours of paperwork. Before he could start, his phone rang.

When he picked up and heard Sean's voice on the other end, he frowned. After getting more details about his recent issues, Brad was even less happy. He looked at his watch and realized it was too late to get the tests he needed.

"Sean, I want you here first thing Monday, with a bag packed so you can spend a few days," Brad said. "I want to admit you to run some tests."

"Brad, I'm fine, really," Sean said. "Jethro and Eileen made me call, but-"

"Sean, what you've described doesn't sound fine to me, and last time I checked, I was the one with the medical degree." He rubbed his forehead. "If you're going to fight this as much as Tony does, I'm sure they'd be happy to sic Tim and Ducky on you."

"OK, OK." Sean sighed. "Just... don't tell the kids. I know you see them most weekends. And I know I've said you can tell them about my treatment, but if this is nothing, I don't want them to worry."

Brad agreed. "Your call on telling them," he said. "But that means you need to tell me any time you're having issues in the future."

"I've already had to promise that," Sean said. "I'll see you Monday."

When Brad got off the phone, he shook his head. For everybody's sake, he hoped this wasn't anything serious with Sean.

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Saturday, April 10, 2010

Tim worked his way out of Tony's arms, then stumbled out of bed, trying not to trip over Jethro as he pulled on shorts. The dog had finally stopped licking his hand, but pranced around, and Tim hurried downstairs, rubbing sleep from his eyes, to let the dog out.

The kitchen smelled of the French vanilla coffee Tony had picked up last week, and Tim poured two mugs. He looked out back to see Jethro was happily rolling around in the grass, so he let the dog outside.

Tim headed upstairs. Tony was still asleep, so he set both mugs down on his own nightstand and slipped back into bed. He sat up, leaning against the headboard, and sipped his coffee. He knew it wouldn't be long before the smell of the coffee woke Tony, and sure enough... Less than five minutes, his husband started stirring.
"Mmphf." Tony curled closer to Tim before finally rolling over. His nose twitched as he sniffed. "Coffee?" He hadn't even opened his eyes yet.

Tim couldn't help laughing. "As soon as you sit up," he said. "I love the smell, but not enough to have the mattress soaked in it if you spill."

Tony groaned and reluctantly pushed himself up. "It's a good thing you're cute, because you're also mean." He made a face as Tim handed over the coffee.

"That's not what you said last night." Tim smirked and was rewarded with his favorite Tony smile, the one where he ducked his eyes and let his cheeks flush.

"OK, OK." Tony wrapped an arm around him, and Tim leaned into him. "So what's the plan for today?"

"Gym?" Tim said. "I need to put in some serious time with the weights today, because I skipped it Thursday with that crazy case."

Tony nodded. "There's bound to be some pick-up games going on. I need to get back in practice before your mom challenges me to another game."

They didn't rush, though, taking advantage of a rare free day to relax. It was close to noon by the time they arrived at the gym. Tony headed for the courts, while Tim went the other direction into the weight room. At noon on a nice Saturday, it was pretty much empty. The leg exercises — well, they weren't easy. That would defeat the point. But as Tim pushed his way through squats, lunges, and hamstring curls, he was using as much weight as he ever had as an adult. When he switched to upper body, he had to drop the weights down — he was still only lifting about two-thirds of what he'd been before getting shot — but as he watched his form in the mirror, he could tell everything was moving correctly. He switched to hand weights for the shoulder work and hesitated. He'd been using a lighter weight on the left side, but that just drove home that he wasn't 100 percent. Tim picked up two weights the same size and started with flys. His shoulder ached, but it was the soreness of muscles pushed to their limit, not the pain of injured tissue. When he switched to overhead presses, he could feel his left shoulder lagging a bit, not moving through as great a range of motion. Gritting his teeth, Tim focused his attention on the muscles and pushed through, even though it felt like flames were licking at the edges. He had to stop at two sets, putting the weight down and rolling his shoulder to loosen the muscles. Sighing, he put the weight back and picked up the lighter one he'd been using, finishing the final set with that. As he wiped the weights down and chugged his water, Tim grimaced. Yeah, whether he'd been able to do three sets with the heavier weight wasn't an issue for Ducky to clear him. His first couple of years on the team, he couldn't do the workout he'd just done with the lighter weights on either arm. Tim was just sick of not being 100 percent. He wanted to be back in the field, back as a full part of the team.

Tim used his towel to wipe the sweat from his face as he headed for the courts. When he got there, Tony was in the middle of a game with a bunch of teenagers, directing the action. Tim settled in the bleachers and watched. These weren't the stars of the local varsity; Tim had seen enough basketball over the years between his mom and Tony to know that. More likely, these were the JV players, the ones who wanted to step up their game to make varsity. Tony was helping them, too. They'd play a few baskets, then break into groups and do some skills work. Tim wished he had a camera — this was one of those things Tony would never own up to, but just made Tim love him all the more.

After a while, Tony split them into two teams and let them have at it, which they did. He walked over and settled on the bleachers next to Tim. "Where do they get all that energy?" Sweat dripped from his face and arms, and Tim passed over his towel. Tony rubbed his face and neck, then
stripped off his soaked T-shirt.

"Don't hand it to me," Tim said. "I don't want it."

Tony snorted and stuck his tongue out, then slung the shirt over the bleachers. "You ready to head out? They'll play all afternoon."

Tim nodded. "I've had enough for one day." He rolled out his shoulder. "I'm not going to be able to move tomorrow."

"You will after I give you a massage tonight," Tony said.

Tim smirked. "Really?"

"Hey, that's my line," Tony said.

"Come on, let's get out of here," Tim said. "I want to go home and shower."

Tony waggled his eyebrows at him. "Together?"

Tim swatted him on the back of the head. "You're incorrigible. You might not have a teenager's energy, but there are times I think you've got their hormones."

Sean walked out front to see if Eileen was ready for lunch only to find her shooting hoops, her face focused as she'd take the ball almost to the street, then drive it back to the hoop, dribbling around imaginary defenders. He could practically feel the frustration pouring off of her, and he retreated to the house.

Inside, he remembered the last time he was in Bethesda, when Tim read him the riot act. His son usually didn't get like that; Sarah was the one most likely to rip somebody a new one. Sean wanted to put it down to Gibbs and Tony rubbing off on Tim, but knew that wasn't accurate. Tim had always been willing to get in the face of somebody who needed telling off; Sean just wasn't used to that person being him.

But seeing Eileen outside, he realized Tim had been right all those weeks ago. He couldn't just not deal with this. This was the second time in less than three months he was going into Bethesda, and he'd already had to step down from his career. It wasn't like that was completely unexpected. He'd known he wasn't going to make admiral, and even captain had been unlikely at this point. Still, he'd spent his entire adult life in the Navy. Not being a sailor was a foreign concept to him. He didn't feel ready to retire, and there wasn't any point to starting over with a new career at his age.

Grandkids, when the boys decided to adopt, would help fill the days. But the longer he and Eileen lived in Virginia, the more he realized the hurdles Tim and Tony faced. It seemed like every other week the state attorney general was in the news railing against some social issue. Sean knew the boys wanted to settle here; and he and Eileen certainly liked the idea. The neighborhood was friendly, and he'd seen several gay couples around town while running errands. They wouldn't run into any problems here; unless the state wouldn't let them adopt, which seemed likely.

Sean shook his head. He had one child who wanted kids and was going to have to jump through a million hoops to get them, and one child who, he'd known since she was in high school, would never choose to have children. Of course, at the rate he was going, even if Sarah did change her mind in 10 or 15 years, he either wouldn't be around or would be tied to an oxygen tank. He'd end up sounding like Darth Vader and frightening the grandkids. Sean sometimes wondered how life
could work out so well in one way — the NCIS team coming together to make the perfect family each of them needed — and be so uncooperative in other ways. At least Tony seemed to have gotten things under control; Gibbs had mentioned the other day that he was down to one visit a month with Brad.

Sean was glad for his son-in-law. Tony had worked hard with therapy and training to be able to stay in the field. He'd followed Brad's instructions. Sean groaned. OK, point made. Tony had listened to Brad, had sucked it up, and lived by all the restrictions and rules. And he was doing well. Sean had ignored them, wanting to pretend everything was normal. And he was on his way back to Bethesda. No wonder Eileen was playing like she was Larry Bird, and Magic Johnson was trying to stop her from scoring.

He walked back outside to find his wife stretching on the front porch.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She looked up. "For what?" Her tone made it clear that she was testing to see if he knew what he should be sorry for rather than questioning his sincerity.

"I've been trying to pretend things are normal, and they're not." Sean leaned against the railing. "I think Tony head-slapped me psychically or something; I just realized I've been doing absolutely the worst thing I can, which is avoiding things."

"Are you going to stop?" Eileen leaned to one side to stretch.

Sean nodded. "I need to; I don't want to spend years sucking oxygen from a tank and dragging it around. I want our retirement to be normal, which means I need to do all the stuff that makes it not normal so the rest of the time I don't have to think about this."

She smiled at him. "I've been waiting for you to figure that out," she said.

"Tony makes it look easy," Sean admitted. "It never seems like he's doing anything special, and I thought I could do that. Then I realized he does a lot of stuff, and he and Tim have changed a lot of things in their lives to allow Tony to do what he needs to so they can keep everything else normal."

As Eileen nodded, Sean realized he'd finally figured out what Tim had been trying to tell him all those weeks ago.

Abby drove down the dark dirt road, one hand rubbing small circles on Jimmy's back as her fiance leaned against her. He wasn't down as far as he had been at the club, but she could tell he was still floaty. She checked the clock on the dashboard of the truck, glad to see her family would be in bed by the time they arrived. She really didn't want to explain this to her mother, especially since she'd have to finger-spell half the words. She knew the signs, but she was pretty sure her mother didn't.

When she parked the truck, she turned to him and talked until he came most of the way back up.

"Come on," she said, leading the way inside. Once inside her old bedroom, she stripped off her short skirt and corset, then motioned for Jimmy to take off his clothes, too. He didn't look all that out-of-character; just a tight T-shirt that showed off the muscles usually hiding under his scrubs or loose-fittings Ts and a pair of dark jeans that did the same for his legs.

In just a few minutes, they were sitting on the bed, naked except for the matching bandages on their left arms. Abby pulled the tube of ointment from her purse, then peeled off the bandages to
reveal the matching Celtic knot bands.

"They look good," Jimmy said, his voice still quiet.

Abby nodded, then moved so she could apply the ointment to his skin, softly rubbing it in, careful not to hurt him. He took the tube from her and did the same to her arm, his long fingers encircling her arm. As she watched him, Abby realized that as much as she didn't want to worry Jimmy, she couldn't keep what happened a secret either.

"Jimmy?"

"What is it, Abs?" He looked over at her.

"You remember the other night, when I suggested these?"

Jimmy nodded. "I still think it was a great solution," he said.

It was Abby's turn to nod. "Except, we thought it was such a great solution, we got a little carried away and forgot something important." She chewed on her lower lip, trying to figure out how to tell him.

"I know, Abs." He pulled her into his lap. "I realized it the next morning."

"You did?" She reached to slug him, then changed direction so she didn't hit his newly tattooed arm. "Wait, so we've both been worrying?"

She felt rather than saw Jimmy's shrug. "I figured it was just one time, and we'd tried a couple dozen times with no luck. There wasn't any point in worrying that this was going to suddenly be the one time that worked, at least not until we had reason to think so." He rubbed his cheek against her hair, and she relaxed into him.

"That's pretty much what I figured, too," she admitted. "I mean, I probably should take a test just to be sure, but I can't yet." She worked out the math in her head. "It's going to be the end of the month before a test would even be accurate."

"We're not spending the next two and a half weeks worrying about this," Jimmy said. "We talked about it before, and it was something we wanted. Just because we decided to wait doesn't mean if it happens now, we're going to change our minds. At least I'm not."

"You're not?" Abby pulled back and looked at him. "You're sure? Because you were the one hesitating."

Jimmy put a hand on her arm right below the band. "I was hesitating for a lot of reasons, but we've dealt with them." He snickered. "Although we'd better watch out when we get back. After all the fuss you made about Tim and Tony's rings at Christmas, they're going to have something to say the first time they see ours."

Abby smirked. "Oh, you love it. I can see you, rolling up your scrubs sleeves just enough so it shows and waiting to see who notices first."

He kissed her forehead. "Hey, I'm glad we're together, and I want everybody to know that. Nothing wrong with that."

"No, there isn't." Abby moved to straddle him, then reached over to flick off the lights and grab a condom. "But since it's just you and me right now-" Jimmy cut her off by pulling her down for a
kiss.
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

AN: Still giddy from last night's NCIS Twitter McRush over the Jesse Stern fan T-shirt Sandbar17 and I created. :) Fortunately, Jesse seems to be flattered, not frightened. Between that and the discussion the night CBS renewed the show for Season 9 (Woohoo!) and re-signed Mark Harmon for two more years (Yay!), if you're on Twitter and not following the NCIS tweeps, you really should. It's fun. :) As always, huge thanks to Kyrie for editing and to everybody for your reviews!

Friday, April 16, 2010

The second training group did a little better than the first — exposure to the MCRT and help from McGee over the years gave several of them a head start over the agents from outside the DC region who had made up the first group. Vance wasn't surprised to see most of them finish the final exercise and head back to their teams early. He headed back to his office, figuring McGee would finish the evaluations that afternoon. Vance had put the third session on hold for now since McGee was close to requalifying for the field. The agents in the final session were the weakest of the applicants anyway, so Vance didn't mind postponing the last group.

Dr. Mallard had said McGee was cleared medically, but he still hadn't passed all the recertifying tests yet. With Gibbs and the others in Texas working a string of murders of sailors along the Gulf Coast, McGee had been spending his afternoons in the gym or the shooting range. Vance had already blocked out time on Monday for McGee to take his firearms recertification. With the drug task force starting work, he needed McGee to get back in the field. Gibbs was going to be furious when he found out who the DOJ had sent over to represent the task force at NCIS. So Vance was going to need DiNozzo to keep Gibbs from killing anybody, which meant having McGee there to keep DiNozzo on an even keel.

When an hour passed and the evaluations hadn't shown up, Vance decided to find McGee. He wasn't in the bullpen, so the director went to the range. Only Balboa's team was there, so Vance headed for the gym, where he found McGee sparring with one of the bags hanging along the wall. McGee would never have the pure muscle that DiNozzo did, or himself for that matter. He was leaner, built more like a marathoner than a scrapper. But watching the man pounding the bag, padded gloves absorbing some of the blows, he realized McGee could hold his own.

When McGee finally stopped, rolling his left shoulder a few times and stretching, Vance stepped into his line of sight.

"Not bad, Agent McGee." Vance glanced at the bag, then back to McGee's face. "If you'd had those kind of moves in Chicago last year, I would have challenged you to a fight instead of David."

McGee smiled. "I've seen you in the ring, Director. I don't fight like that. I can fight well enough for what this job needs, but I'm no boxer."

"Don't need a boxer," Vance said. "That shoulder seems to be in good shape, moving well."
McGee nodded. "With the team gone, there hasn't been much else to do." He frowned. "I'm hoping to be back in the field as soon as the next training session ends."

Vance kept his face expressionless. He'd known McGee wanted back. "Firearms test Monday. Fitness eval Thursday. Pass those, and I'll send Wilson back to cold cases a week from Monday. Already notified the agents in the next group that training is postponed indefinitely."

McGee's eyebrows shot up. "That soon?"

"You want back, and Gibbs wants you back. You're an agent, not a trainer. The training can wait for now; cases can't."

McGee grinned. "Thanks, Director," he said. "I'll finish up the evaluations on the last group of agents this afternoon and have them on your desk before I leave."

Vance nodded. "I'll look for them." He turned and left the gym.

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That night as Tim heated up leftovers from the previous night, he wondered what Tony was up to. It seemed weird not to have him around for this long. Even before they started dating, they saw each other at work pretty much every day, and often outside of work for pizza, movies, and beer. But Vance had sent the team to Corpus Christi for this case on Monday, and it was taking longer to unravel than they wanted. He'd helped some from the Navy Yard, but there wasn't much he could do — this was mostly stakeouts and tailing people. Tony was in his element with the stakeout — Tim only hoped he wasn't driving Dwayne insane.

That left just Ducky at the Navy Yard with Tim. Abby and Jimmy weren't due back from Louisiana until tomorrow, and Burley had left last Sunday to rejoin the Seahawk. Tim had thought he might get a chance to spend more time with Sarah and his parents while everybody was gone, but it hadn't happened. Sarah had managed to cut back her hours at the coffee shop, at least, but the one time he'd talked to her, she was spending the extra time working with a tutor on campus to prepare for her math final. She sounded more confident about passing, which was one less worry for Tim.

Of course, trust his dad to give him another one. Tim thought back to his call to his mother on Tuesday.

"Tim? Is something wrong?"

"No, just bored," he said, explaining about the case. "I thought I'd see if you and Dad wanted to come over for dinner. Jethro misses his grandparents."

He'd expected them to accept right away — or suggest another night that week. So when his mother stalled, he knew something was up.

"Mom? Should I be asking you if something's wrong?"

He could hear her sigh through the phone. "Nothing's really wrong."

"But?" Worry settled in his stomach like a lead weight.

"Your dad's at Bethesda. It's just for some tests."
“What kind of tests? And what do you mean ‘at’?” Tim paced the floor.

“Tim, I don’t know,” his mom said. “This stuff might mean something to you and Tony, but I don’t understand most of it. When we made your dad call Brad last week, he just said tests and had him go in yesterday with enough stuff for a couple of days.”

Tim rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand. “We who? Sarah knew and didn’t tell me? When did I get to be the last to know?”

“Not Sarah,” his mom said. “Your dad asked us not to tell any of you kids and asked Brad not to mention it either. He didn’t want you to worry if it was nothing.”

“Yeah, well, I’m worried.” Tim frowned as he leaned back against the wall. “Wait, if it isn’t Sarah and it isn’t Brad?”

“Gibbs.” His mother paused. “He ran into your dad Friday while I was out and noticed that your dad was having trouble breathing. Gibbs was ordering him to call Brad when I got home.”

Tim let his head drop back against the wall with a thump. “I don’t know if I should be mad at Gibbs for not mentioning it or just be glad he made Dad call.” He frowned. “So how worried did Brad seem?”

“I don’t know,” Eileen said. “He had already left for the day when I went to see your father yesterday, and I haven’t gone over yet today. Because of the tests, Brad suggested I wait and visit in the evenings.”

“Want company tonight?”

“I’d like that.” His mom paused. “Tim, we weren’t trying to keep secrets. We just didn’t want you kids to worry unless there was something to worry about. Your dad is just figuring out that this isn’t something that will go away, and he’s realizing that means he needs to handle things differently.”

“I know.” Tim sighed. “Believe me, I know. And it’s not easy when you get that and he doesn’t.”

“No, it’s not.” It was one of the first times Tim could remember his mother sounding uncertain. She was one of the strongest women he’d ever known, someone who was as independent as Abby and Ziva back when it was a lot tougher to go that route. But he also knew what she was going through, had been through some of the same things with Tony, and it wasn’t easy. It wouldn’t get any easier, either. He knew his mother could handle it, but he also wanted her to know she wasn’t alone. “How about this? We get some dinner, bring it to Dad, and visit with him. Then you and I can get some coffee and catch up.”

“I’d like that. You kids have been so busy, we’ve barely talked to any of you. You can at least catch me up on how you and Tony are doing, and the rest of the team.”

“Sarah, too,” he said. “I just talked to her yesterday to see if she needed any help with math, but she seems set.”

“That’s good,” his mother said. “We did get an e-mail from her that she was moving in with Ziva last week, something about it being easier to study there than at the dorm.”

Tim was glad they were on the phone — he’d forgotten how out of the loop his parents were about Sarah’s problems with Josh, and he probably wouldn’t have been able to get away with deflecting if his mother had asked that in person. “Ziva suggested it, actually. I think she likes having
somebody else around. Now that she's the only single person on the team, except for Gibbs, I think she feels like a third wheel if she comes out with the rest of us. And then there are the times when Tony and I have plans, or Jimmy and Abby do."

"Can't Damon..."

"Mom, they're not dating," Tim said. "They both seem to like it that way." That was as much as he felt comfortable saying; Ziva's issues from Somalia weren't his to share.

"OK, OK. So, what time should I pick you up?"

Tim had been glad to see his dad seemed mostly fine, though Brad had him on some extra therapy sessions and was running tests. He'd only been in one more night, though Brad had him scheduled to come in twice a week for the next few weeks for extra treatments. Tim had called him the next day to get the information, and Brad had reassured him it wasn't anything unexpected.

"I'm not going to lie and say Sean isn't getting worse," Brad said. "But that's because of where he is in the progression. He needed to realize that this wasn't something that was going away before he was ready to do the intensive therapy that he needs to do. This isn't just something he can pop a pill for. Tony had to hit that same point, too."

"Brad, I hate to ask this, but what's your best guess on how much longer he'll be, well, reasonably OK? How long is he going to be around?" Tim hated asking the questions and wasn't sure he wanted to know the answers, but he knew he was better off asking now.

"I don't know," Brad said. "This isn't an exact science by any means. If I had to put something in writing, I'd say it'll probably be another three to five years before it becomes incapacitating, and maybe another three to five years beyond that. But as you and Tony know, there's a lot of wiggle room there. If Sean does everything he needs to, and if he can avoid more bouts of pneumonia or bronchitis, he could have 8 or even 10 good years left, and you guys could start planning his 75th birthday party, maybe even more."

"Thanks, Brad." Tim paused. "I just... Tony and I decided to wait on kids for a few years, until we're ready to adopt all of them at once. I don't want to cheat our kids or Dad out of time together, but we also decided there were a lot of good reasons to wait a few years."

"Tough call, Tim," Brad said. "Not one I'd want to make, as either a doctor or a son. I can't promise that if you guys wait five years that Sean will be there. But Tony mentioned all the reasons you two planned to wait, and it's clear you've thought it through and are doing it for good reasons."

"I can't blame you for not wanting to get in the middle of this one," Tim said. "I didn't mean to put you on the spot. I just..."

"I know," Brad chuckled. "As Gibbs put it one time, you need data to run through your computer of a brain."

"Yeah." Tim smiled. "That's it exactly. And you've given me some good data points."

"Anytime," Brad said.
That night, he'd filled Tony in on his dad's condition, and they'd touched on the topic of kids a bit, but Gibbs was in the room and Tim didn't want to put Tony on the spot. Still from the way their discussion the next night had gone, Tim suspected Tony had used Gibbs as a sounding board after their phone call. Tim kind of wished he could do the same. Actually, he wanted to give Jack a call, get his thoughts from a grandfather's perspective. Tony still seemed inclined to wait a few years after talking with Gibbs, and Tim was, too, but a small piece of him wasn't quite sure.

He pushed the thought aside. It could wait until Tony got home. Right now, he just wanted him back in town, or at least on the other end of the phone. He couldn't wait to tell his husband he was getting closer to being on his six again.

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When they finally got back to the hotel, Tony was glad Gibbs headed to the small fitness room to run on the treadmill. Not that he was planning on saying anything to Tim that he minded Gibbs hearing, but it had been a long week away from him and just the idea of having a little while to talk where he could pretend he was alone was nice. He stretched out on the bed, comfortable in jeans and a T-shirt.

Tim picked up on the first ring. "Hey," he said.

"Hey," Tony said. "How's Jethro? Does he miss his dad?"

"We both do," Tim said. "You realize this the the longest we haven't seen each other since you were agent afloat?"

"Believe me, I know." Tony grumbled. "We've still got at least two more days of this, too, at the rate we're going. I'm hoping we'll wrap this up Monday, but no promises."

"I've got my firearms recert Monday," Tim said.

Tony sat up in bed. "Really? Vance is letting you go for it already?"

"He's the one who scheduled it," Tim said. "With you guys gone, I've spent half the week at the range or in the gym. I've got my fitness eval Thursday, and if I pass that, Dwayne's headed back to Cold Cases a week from Monday."

Tony cheered and couldn't resist a few bounces on the bed. "Not that I don't like him, because I do. But it's not the same."

"You just miss being able to pass off all the geeky stuff to me." But Tony could practically hear the smile his husband was sporting.

"Well, yeah. Why else would I want you around?" Tony knew he had a huge grin on his face, but he couldn't help himself. "Seriously, though. I'm glad you're going to be back. Just don't get shot again."

"Once, Tony. Once in more than five years. Does this mean I can tell you not to get another concussion?" Tim's teasing filled a place in Tony's heart he hadn't known needed it.

"Hey, I have to keep my record intact."

"Having the record for the most concussions in NCIS history isn't a good record to have," Tim said. "Ducky's going to make you start wearing a helmet if you get too many more."
"Yeah, yeah. So, how are Mom and Dad?" Tony changed the subject and happily discussed the everyday and boring, feeling more settled with each minute. When Gibbs finally returned and he had to hang up, he still wanted to head home, but he thought he'd actually be able to sleep that night.

Saturday, April 17, 2010

Tim checked his watch and headed out. He'd promised to meet Sarah at the apartment she shared with Ziva to pick up Jimmy and Abby's coats, which the couple had left in Ziva's car before heading to Louisiana two weeks earlier. They wouldn't need them today, but the temperatures were supposed to drop tomorrow when a storm rolled through.

It would give him a chance to see how Sarah was doing, too. She'd cut back her hours at the coffee shop until she went full time after graduation, but with finals starting next week, she'd just put the extra hours into studying. Before the team had left on their latest case, Ziva had mentioned that more than once she'd found Sarah asleep over her books in the morning before Ziva left for work.

When she didn't answer his knock at the door, Tim wondered if she'd fallen asleep or if she had just gone out and forgotten he was stopping by. He knocked one more time and was about to pull out his phone to call her when she opened the door.

"Sarah?" She wore a ragged T-shirt and shorts, and her hair was pulled back in a messy ponytail. That wasn't what worried him, though. Her face had a distinctly green cast. "Are you OK?"

She shrugged. "I was too busy to shop, so I had some leftover Chinese food for dinner. It must have been in there too long, though." She pressed a hand to her stomach, and her face turned a shade paler.

Tim took her arm and steered her into the apartment. "Sofa or bathroom?"

She didn't answer, just headed for the bathroom.

He looked around and saw the jackets by the front door. A bottle of water on an end table and blankets on the sofa showed where Sarah had been before he answered the door. Tim headed for the kitchen and looked in the trash can, where he saw a box of half-empty Chinese food near the top. It reeked, and Tim changed out the bag so he could take the foul-smelling one outside before whatever bugs were lurking in the leftovers could spread. He opened the refrigerator to see a few other boxes of leftovers. Not wanting to take a chance, he dumped those as well.

He could hear Sarah running water in the bathroom as he walked out, so he called, "I'm taking the trash out. Back in a minute."

When he returned, she was lying on the couch again. He walked over and sat on the edge, feeling her forehead.

"Tim, you're not mom," she said, her voice sleepy. "It's just a little food poisoning. I'll sleep it off, and I'll be fine. I don't know that I'll eat Chinese food any time soon, but I'll be fine."

He couldn't help worry, but her forehead wasn't warm. "I should call Ducky."

She opened her eyes. "Tim, I'm fine. He's going to tell me some long story about food poisoning that will probably make me want to puke again and tell me to drink lots of fluids and go to the doctor if it doesn't get better. I know to drink water and juice, and I'll go to the doctor if it doesn't
clear up. And I don't need one of his stories."

He stifled a smile at her expression, which wasn't that much different than when she was six and wanted to get her way. "You promise?"

She nodded. "I was feeling better before, even hungry, so I made some of my pizza. That was a little too much, but I've learned my lesson. Next time I'll start with dry toast."

"Instead of peanut butter, pickles, and hot sauce? Sounds like a good idea." Tim shook his head. "I tossed all the leftovers in the refrigerator, just to make sure." He checked his watch. "I need to go get Jimmy and Abby, but I'll run out afterward and get some food — bread, bananas, ginger ale, all the stuff Mom used to give us when we got sick."

Sarah smiled. "Thanks." She pointed to the doorway. "The spare key's on the hook. I'm going to try to take a nap since I'm supposed to work tomorrow. Just let yourself in."

He nodded. "You promise to call Ducky if you aren't feeling better?"

She held out her hand. "Pinky swear."

He laughed, but hooked fingers. "You've spent too much time around Abby."

"Go on. Get her and Jimmy - see if he survived the visit with the in-laws." Sarah pulled the blanket up. "I'm taking a nap."

Tim nodded and let himself out. He'd wait until he saw how Sarah looked later today before deciding if he should call Ducky.

Tim headed to the airport, arriving about the same time the plane was scheduled to land, so he parked and headed in to meet them at baggage claim. It didn't take him long to spot Abby's pigtails, and he crossed the cavernous room to meet them. When he got closer, he did a double-take.

"Matching tattoos?" He noted the identical designs. "Let me guess, you eloped so you didn't have to worry about what Tony would say during a wedding toast?" He smiled as Abby wrapped him in a giant hug.

"No wedding," Jimmy said, grinning. "Abby just has different ideas about engagement rings."

Tim extricated himself from her arms. "You proposed?"

She nodded, pigtail ends flipping around. "And Jimmy said yes!" She wrapped her arms around him. "We don't have a date yet, but we're definitely getting married. Jimmy's letting me have a little more time to get used to the wedding idea."

Tim snorted. "So you're going to be engaged for what, five years?"

"I figure closer to 10," Jimmy said. "We'll get around to it before any bat-gremlins start school."

He rolled his eyes.

"Hey!" Abby put her hands on her hips. Tim took advantage of the moment to snap a picture with his cell and send it to Tony with a note. "I need a little time, not forever."

Tim reached over and tweaked a pigtail. "I'm kidding, Abs. I don't care if you guys are engaged forever without getting married, as long as you're happy."

"We're happy," Jimmy said. "Right, Abby?"
She nodded, but before she could say anything, Tim's phone beeped. He looked at the text message and snorted. "Tony said Ziva and Dwayne cheered when he showed them the picture, and Gibbs actually didn't headslap any of them. He might have muttered a death threat, though."

Jimmy grinned. "Yeah, we've had that discussion. I think Ducky probably has one ready for Abby, too."

"I'm not sure who I'd be more scared of," Tim said. "Gibbs is frightening, but at least he'd kill quickly. I think Ducky would come up with something much more painful."

"You guys!" Abby grabbed both their arms. "Come on, there are our bags. Let's get them and get out of here. I want to go home."
Chapter 40

Thursday, April 22, 2010

When Gibbs finally let them loose, Tony headed to the lab to grab the cooler of food they had stashed in Abby's refrigerator, then met Tim at the car.

"Ziva already left," Tim said. "She said she would see us back at her place."

Tony laughed as he stashed the cooler in the trunk. "It's not like we would have followed her. I don't have a death wish."

"True," Tim said. "So what are you two making for dinner?"

"I promised to teach her a couple of Nonna's recipes since Sarah was raving about them: the minestrone soup your mom loves and spaghetti carbonara."

"Mmmm," Tim said. "We'll eat well tonight."

"And the girls will eat well for a few more days," Tony said. "Even if Ziva catches a case. No more food poisoning from old takeout for Sarah."

"After that bout last week, I don't think she's going to be eating old leftovers anytime soon," Tim said. "She's never had a refrigerator big enough to keep leftovers long enough to go bad. I think Abby gave her a crash course on how long to keep things, complete with pictures of the bugs that get into them."

"Ew." Tony made a face as he pulled out of the Navy Yard. "Glad I missed that one."

"Me, too," Tim said. "Jimmy said he made Abby stop when it looked like Sarah was turning green again, but it sounded like he might have been getting a little queasy as well."

"That says a lot, coming from the Autopsy Gremlin," Tony said. "You'd hurl if you had his job."

"You're never going to let me forget that, are you?" Tim said. "It was my first autopsy."

"Hey, Director Shepard had the same reaction, and she ended up director of NCIS," Tony said. "She ended up dead in an abandoned diner because she was too soft-hearted to finish a job in Paris," Tim retorted. "Not somebody I want to emulate, even if I ignore her misguided Frog hunt."

"Hey, if it weren't for her, we wouldn't have Vance," Tony said. "Can you imagine her reaction to everything that's gone on this year? Hell, I think the only reason I made it out of Israel alive is because Eli David wasn't going to make an enemy of Vance over me."

"OK, stop the trip down memory lane," Tim said. "What's done is over, and the past stays in the past. Let's just focus on the future."

"Busy couple of weeks coming up," Tony said. "Sarah's graduation is next weekend, and Gibbs mentioned that Jack's coming down."

"That's good," Tim said. "My grandparents couldn't make the trip, and Kevin's got state playoffs for baseball."
"She doesn't mind?" Tony had trouble imagining that. He would have loved a big family blowout when he graduated.

Tim shook his head. "She said she's only walking because she Mom and Dad want her to. She didn't see any reason for Uncle Aiden to miss Kevin's big game."

"If she's sure." Tony thought about it for a second. "I didn't have anybody at my graduation. Dad was off somewhere, some kind of deal." When Tim rubbed his shoulder, he looked over. "Sorry. Wasn't trying to be gloomy."

"I know." Tim smiled at him. "I think Sarah's just glad to be done so she can get on with things, especially the way this semester's gone. Uncle Aiden and his family usually come down after school gets out for a week or two, so she'll see them then. We will too — they're staying with Mom and Dad, and I'm sure Mom will plan a cookout for everybody so they can get to know our crazy family."

"Crazy is right," Tony said. "She's going to invite Dwayne and Maggie and the kids, too, right?"

"I'll make sure she does," Tim said. "They're still coming to game nights or will be if we don't catch a case Saturday. Damon, too. I think Sarah's the only one who can't make it, and that's because she's working all the Saturdays and Sundays until graduation in exchange for shorter hours so she can study. Plus she needs next Saturday off for the commencement ceremony."

Tony pulled into a space in front of Ziva and Sarah's building. "Gibbs already told Vance we all needed Saturday off. I know it's just the four of us for the ceremony itself, but I think everybody's planning to be there for the party afterward. Gibbs said Jack already had a list of things he was going to make."

Tim grabbed their backpacks from the back seat as Tony lifted the cooler from the trunk. "Gibbs should just take down the section of fence between the two backyards," he said. "I think any cookout either he or my parents have from now on is going to end up being a joint one."

"Probably true," Tony said, waiting for Tim to hold the door for him. "Your parents might manage to keep Gibbs from becoming a total hermit after he retires."

Tim stopped, and Tony almost slammed into him. "Call your stops, McWreck."

"Did Gibbs talk to you about retiring soon?" he said.

"No," Tony said. "It came up when we were talking about kids and Sean's health last week while we were in Texas, but it sounds like he's planning on staying until he turns 55. I think he might go earlier if Jimmy and Abby have kids before then, but they've stopped talking bat-gremlins, so who knows what's up with that."

Tim started walking again. "Don't ask me," he said. "There are some things I don't want to know, and baby-making plans by any of the team is pretty high on that list."

"Too McShy?" Tony asked.

"Not all of us want to know everything about our friends' sex lives," Tim said. "I swear part of your brain is permanently 14."

Tony made a note to deliver a headslap when his hands were free. "Hey, you weren't complaining in bed last night."
Tim opened his mouth to respond, then stopped in front of Ziva's door. "We will finish this conversation later when Sarah's not around to complain that she doesn't want to know anything about my sex life." He knocked.

Tony smiled, nudging his shoulder with his own. "Love you too, Tim."

Ziva opened the door, already changed into jeans and a T-shirt. "Come in," she said. "McGee, Sarah is in the living room."

Tony followed Ziva into the kitchen, smiling at the sight of Sarah bent over her books, headphones in her ears.

"So, you are sharing some of your family recipes?" Ziva said as he put the cooler down. "I will have to give you some of my own in return."

Tony grinned. "Always happy to add more to the collection," he said. "Tim's cooking repertoire is limited. Although he, at least, can cook."

"Yes, Sarah has managed to demonstrate that she is truthful when she says she cannot boil water without burning the pot," Ziva said. "But she is quite willing to wash the dishes after I have cooked, so we find the arrangement most satisfactory."

Tony laid out the vegetables he'd brought and handed the pancetta and chicken to Ziva. "Soup first, so it can simmer," he said.

As they chopped vegetables, Tony found himself telling Ziva about watching his Nonna in the kitchen when he was little, getting to taste-test as she cooked.

"My Aunt Nettie also would let me help," Ziva said, a small smile on her face. "She would tie an apron on me, with the strings wrapped around twice and tied back in front, and use a piece of fabric to tie my hair back so it would not get in the food."

Tony tried to picture a small Ziva all wrapped up and found it all too easy. "And you loved the attention," he said. "Your father was too busy for you, but this was a chance to hear stories of him as a child, stories he should be telling you."

Ziva nodded and looked over at him. "Yes," she said. "Stories of when he was small and laughed and played like a child, a person you can't possibly imagine when you see him now, all big and important and busy with business."

Tony washed the onion off his hands, then dried them, and reached over to hug Ziva. "The Baby Gibblets won't have to say that about any of us," he said. "They'll have more parents and aunts and uncles than they know what to do with, even if some of their grandfathers are missing and their grandmothers are gone."

Ziva pulled away. "I know," she said. "And they will hear stories of the ones they never knew, their Grandmother Shannon and aunts Kate and Kelly. They will learn to make recipes by your Nonna and my Aunt Nettie, by Jack and Eileen and Ducky."

"They will," Tony said. "And Sean will take pictures of all of them, enough to remember every moment."

"Especially the embarrassing ones."

Tony looked over to see Tim and Sarah standing in the doorway. "Speaking from personal
"Oh yeah," Tim said. He walked in and wrapped an arm around Tony, his other arm pulling Ziva close. "Come on, Sarah."

"Group hug!" She walked over and joined in, and Tony couldn't help feeling protective of both his little sisters, the one who'd been hurt so badly she almost died last summer and the one hurting now.

"It's a good thing Dad isn't here with his camera now," Tony said. "Abby would never let us live this down."

"You mean Abby would ask us to do group hugs more often," Ziva said. "I am not certain Director Vance would approve."

"Only if he could get photos of Gibbs in a group hug for blackmail," Tony said, then winced as Tim slapped the back of his head. "OK, OK. If you two are done studying, want to help us?"

Sarah backed away, holding up her hands. "Not me," she said. "I actually want an edible dinner tonight."

"You are hungry?" Ziva asked.

"After the news I got today? I'm starving!" Sarah grinned. "Exam schedule is out, and Josh's last exam is Wednesday. In less than a week, he'll be out of my hair all summer."

Tony cheered, while Tim grinned and hugged Sarah again.

"That is wonderful news," Ziva said. "I believe this calls for a celebration." She walked over to the freezer and rummaged around, pulling out a frozen apple pie. "It is not as good as Jack's, but I believe it will do."

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Friday, April 23, 2010

Abby groaned when the phone rang. Light was just beginning to filter around the edges of the window shades, but she felt like staying in bed all day.

"Abs, I've got to go." Jimmy kissed her cheek. "The team caught a triple murder. Gibbs said they won't have anything for you until later, so you don't have to bother coming in early. Just me."

Abby just nodded and fell back asleep.

When she woke later, the sun was up. She still didn't feel like getting up, but her bladder felt like it was going to explode. Once she took care of that, she sleepwalked through a shower and getting dressed. She opened the cupboard to get out some cereal, but the idea didn't sit very well, so instead she pulled out a couple of the saltines they kept for soup and munched on those. Part of her brain was starting to analyze the data, but she reminded herself she still had another six days before she could say she was late. This was probably just the El Churro's spicy burrito from last night not sitting well. McGee had the same problem every time one of the team talked him into trying something more adventurous than his regular choice when they ordered Mexican food.

She drove to the Navy Yard, getting stuck in traffic on the way. Abby listened to the radio and reminded herself that Gibbs had said not to come in early. Even though it was a triple murder, it
must not be too much of a mystery. He probably needed the forensics more for the JAG file than for the investigation.

By the time she reached the Navy Yard, it was almost 0900. The first thing Abby did was hit the head, then head for her lab to wake up her babies. She tried not to assign too much significance to her second bathroom trip in — she checked her watch — two hours, but part of her couldn't help but think she and Jimmy might have brought back more from Louisiana than matching tattoos. She thought about telling Jimmy what she suspected, but then she remembered when they'd talked about the possibility. "You'll tell me when you're sure?" he'd said. She wasn't sure, and wouldn't be for another week. So she'd wait, especially since she wasn't exactly sure how he would feel or even how she felt about the idea.

When Sean left Bethesda that afternoon, he decided to swing by Sarah's coffee shop to see his daughter and to have some tea. The shop wasn't too busy when he walked in, though he had a feeling that would change as it got into the evening.

Still, he had to wait for her to finish two fancy coffee orders before she could make his tea. He walked down to the pick-up counter to wait and to talk.

"How are finals going?" he asked.

"Not bad." She held a pitcher of milk under a nozzle and waited until she was done rather than trying to speak over the noise. "I had math today, which was the tough one, but I think I got the grade I needed to. The professor promised to grade mine first and let me know by e-mail, so I should find out when I get home."

"I'm sure you'll do fine," Sean said. "Tim said you had almost everything down when he went over to help you study the other day."

Sarah nodded, intent on mixing the drink, and Sean couldn't help but shake his head at how she could handle a machine that looked as complicated as some on Navy ships, yet couldn't manage a simple pot of pasta without setting off the smoke detector.

He was about to ask her when commencement was scheduled to start, just to confirm, when he noticed she paused and paled. He looked up to see a blond man, who was about Tim and Tony's height, placing an order at the register for himself and the red-headed young woman at his side.

"Is that Josh?" he asked quietly. When his daughter didn't respond, he called her. "Sarah."

She jerked and looked at him. "Huh? What?"

"Is that Josh?" He kept his voice low.

"Dad, don't say anything to him," Sarah muttered.

Sean raised an eyebrow, but didn't reply. He wasn't boxing himself in by agreeing, not when he didn't know what this SOB would do. As Josh and the girl moved closer, Sean decided he could get his point across without talking to Josh at all. He waited until they were within earshot.

"Sarah, your mom's trying to plan the graduation party for next weekend, so please give her a call. Jack wants to come down, but he needs to know which days so he can get somebody to watch the store."
"Yes, Dad." Sarah rolled her eyes, but Sean could see a hint of a smile on her lips.

"Mr. McGee?" Josh said.

"Commander McGee, actually," Sean said. "Sarah, is this a friend of yours?"

"Dad, this is Josh, the guy I was dating earlier this year. Josh, this is my dad."

"Nice to meet you, sir." He held out his hand, so Sean shook it, waiting to see if he was going to keep playing nice. "And this is Serena." Sean shook the girl's hand as well.

"Sarah, I haven't seen you around the library much lately," Serena said. "Usually you live there during finals week."

Sarah smiled. "Oh, I moved off campus a few weeks ago. I'm going to start full-time here after graduation. My older sister lives a couple of blocks away, so she and I were already planning to be roommates. Since her place is quieter than the dorms, we didn't see any need to wait." She handed Sean his tea. "Here you go, Dad."

"Sister?" Josh said. "I thought it was just you and your brother."

"Oh, Ziva's like a sister to me," Sarah said. "Abby too. Just like Tony, Damon, and Jimmy are like my brothers."

Sean was glad to see Josh was the one who lost color at that statement. "Yes, somehow Sarah's mom and I have picked up a few extra kids along the way. It makes family parties a lot more interesting."

Sarah handed Josh and Serena their drinks.

"Well, we need to be going," Josh said. "Nice to meet you, sir. Sarah, if I don't see you before I leave town Wednesday, congratulations on graduating."

"Thanks, Josh," she said. "Have a good summer."

As Josh beat a hasty retreat, Serena following after him asking questions, Sean looked over to Sarah, who was smiling.

"Nice work, Dad," she said. "Now are you done scaring off creepy guys?"

"Yes, as long as he stays gone," Sean said. "If he shows up again and you kids keep it a secret like you did this time, I will not be amused."

"Yes, Dad." Before she could say anything else, another order came in. "Tell Mom I said hi. Wait, does she really need me to call?"

Sean shook his head. "No, party's set for Saturday afternoon, and Jack's already bought the tickets for his flight. He's coming in Friday morning, heading back Tuesday."

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While the team was off investigating the triple murder, Tim started filling out all the paperwork the director would need to put him back on active duty. Gibbs had told him to wrap it up before they got back, since this case was shaping up to be the work of an idiot dirtbag that didn't need much investigation. The last one they had solved this quickly was the case that led to Ducky getting stabbed last year, when they'd had the murderer in custody before Ducky and Jimmy had
even finished with the crime scene.

He was just about done when he looked up to see Vance standing next to his desk.

"Yes, Director?" he asked.

"Agent McGee," Vance said. "Is that the paperwork for your return to active duty?"

Tim nodded. "I'll be done with it in about five minutes."

"Good." Vance paused. "You saw the memo on the multi-jurisdictional drug task force NCIS is participating in, correct?"

Tim thought about what he'd read. "That's the one where several U.S. agencies are working with the Mexican government to take down the drug cartels."

"It is." Vance looked at him. "As Agent Gibbs will find out when he returns, the Justice Department has assigned a lawyer to be the liaison between NCIS and the task force."

"Rule 13," Tim said automatically. "Gibbs hates lawyers."

"He has a particular distaste for this one," Vance said. "Ms. Hart will be given temporary NCIS employee status for the duration of this task force."

Tim dropped his pen. "Wait, M. Allison Hart is the liaison?" He thought back to his first encounter with her, during the jetpack case. "Does this mean-? What does this mean?"

"It means she will be around the Navy Yard quite a bit during the next several weeks," Vance said. "In particular, I have picked up on some things she has said that might require a special assignment in a few weeks, one for which you are best suited."

"Me?" Now Tim was really confused. "Why me?"

"That will become clear when the time comes," Vance said. "For now, I need your team at the top of its game. That means DiNozzo needs to keep Agent Gibbs in line."

"Which means you need me to keep Tony in line?" Tim snorted. "Yes, Director."

"Good." Vance let the corners of his mouth shift into what might be a smile. "This will only be a for a few weeks, Agent McGee. Then things will get back to normal."
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

Huge thanks to Kyrie for making me rewrite this - it ended much better the second time through. Be warned, there are mentions of child abuse in here, but nothing worse than has been in earlier chapters.

Monday, April 26, 2010

When they got to the scene, Tim knew right away that this wasn't going to be a pretty case. Ducky and Jimmy were kneeling by the body beneath the swingset, and Ducky had lifted the small boy's T-shirt to reveal bruises along his ribs. No wonder the base paramedics had called NCIS after they were unable to revive the boy. Kids were always tough cases, but the signs of abuse meant this would be one of the worst kind. He instinctively looked over to Tony to see that the senior agent was just staring at the body. A puddle of blood beneath his head — though it was clear paramedics had tried to staunch the bleeding — made the cause of death all too evident.

"Mr. Palmer, what would you say is the cause of death?" Ducky asked.

"Well, doctor, the head trauma caused massive loss of blood, but the amount here and leading to the spot where he fell seems too small for him to have bled out. Judging by the way this side of the rib cage is shaped, I would guess that a broken rib pierced either the lung or the pericardium, which could also have caused his death," Jimmy said. "Since he shows no signs of cyanosis, that suggests a pericardial rupture and subsequent cardiac herniation. The bruises were probably not inflicted this morning, though. I believe when we get him back to Autopsy, we will find that whatever inflicted these bruises caused the broken rib and related injuries."

"Very good, Mr. Palmer." Ducky held up a finger. "One slight correction, however. These bruises were not caused by a what, but by a whom."

"He's been beaten more than once," Gibbs said. "Some of those bruises are a couple of weeks old, and some are more recent."

"Precisely, Jethro," Ducky said. "Once we get him back, we'll be able to establish a timeline of the abuse based on his injuries."

"Better check the base hospital and other area hospitals for his medical records," Tony said. "If it was one of his parents, they would have taken him to several different places so they didn't run the risk of being reported to social services."

Tim winced at Tony's matter-of-fact tone and wondered if this was something he knew from experience.

"DiNozzo, interview the family," Gibbs said. "David, go talk to the neighbors. McGee, sketch and shoot."

Tim nodded and started sketching the positions of everything, taking measurements as he went. He knew the boy's body had probably been moved more than once — the family would have done it
when he was found, and the paramedics had moved him while trying to revive him. But since the signs of abuse meant they couldn't assume this was just a routine fall, noting the positions of everything would be needed as they tried to reconstruct the crime. He swallowed. For all they knew, the story about a fall could be made up, something the abuser created to explain a death by beating. Once done, he pulled out the camera and started shooting. He forced himself not to focus on the subject, just the angles. He stepped closer to the swingset, snapping pictures of the blood trail. He could see one spot where it had pooled, probably where the boy had laid before the grandfather moved him. He started shooting the swingset itself. It was one of the fancy wooden ones, with a small fort on top, reachable by a ladder. Reaching a hand up to judge height, Tim estimated it was about seven feet off the ground. The grass at the base of the ladder was matted with more blood, and Tim snapped shots. Abby would be able to tell if it came from a fall from above or if that was just an illusion created to hide the fact somebody had beaten this boy to death. He tried to refocus his mind from that horrible thought and look on this as an exercise. Documenting the scene in the level of detail they needed was enough to ruin anybody's day. As he loaded the photos onto his laptop to send to Abby, he included a warning in the e-mail so she wouldn't be surprised by the content. Despite all the death art in her lab, this was a different kind of horrible.

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Abby walked back into her lab after her fourth trip to the bathroom since arriving at work at 0700. It wasn't even noon. She knew what it meant. Last week, she wasn't sure, thought she might be imagining things. Now she was sure. She wished Sunday would get here so she could do the test and have proof. She could test sooner, as early as Thursday, but there was always the chance it wouldn't be accurate. She wanted to know for sure before she said something to Jimmy. She didn't need convincing. The morning queasiness was starting to feel normal, and she was beginning to wish there was a bathroom in the lab as many trips as she needed to make. And even with as busy as the team had been lately, she knew that wasn't the reason she felt like she needed a nap just to get through the day.

She still hadn't said the words to herself, though. Once she said them to herself, she couldn't imagine keeping them a secret from Jimmy, and she didn't want to tell him until she had proof. She'd caught him looking at her once, when she dashed to the bathroom after dinner two nights ago, but he hadn't asked. If he did, she'd tell him her suspicions. But until he did or until she could take a test and know it was accurate, she wasn't going to say anything.

As she opened the e-mail from McGee with photos from the crime scene, she felt her stomach turn. Child victims were always bad, but she'd already known that from the initial call. This... This was horrible. The poor boy's body was battered and broken, his pale skin covered in bruises of all shades, indicating the abuse was ongoing. Abby pressed a hand to her stomach and fought back the nausea as she continued clicking through the photos. She had seen countless crime scene photos over the years, every kind of brutality man could inflict, but this was among the worst. Child cases always were. Gibbs would be thinking of Kelly and wondering how anybody could do this to their own child. Tony would be reliving his own childhood, which meant both he and Tim would have sleepless nights. Ziva would start squashing down her feelings, trying to pull back behind the emotionless mask she wore when she first started with NCIS — her Mossad shell. And Abby was having a hard time imagining anybody doing this to a child. She couldn't fathom what it took to inflict this kind of damage on somebody so small.

She forced herself to stop looking at the photos and returned to McGee's e-mail with the facts of the case. If nothing else, this had made her decision for her. She wasn't going to say anything to Jimmy while he was in the middle of a case that required him to help autopsy a child. He and Ducky would be having a difficult enough time doing their jobs. Jimmy had mentioned there were
certain cases where even Ducky had little to say while they worked, and she was sure this would be one of them.

She started pulling the best photos for blood spatter analysis, needing to figure out if this was a fall or the fall was a cover-up. If she occasionally pressed a hand to her belly as she worked to reassure herself, Bert was the only one who saw. And she knew the stuffed hippo would never tell.

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Once he finished getting information from the paramedics, Gibbs walked over to talk to McGee.

"Boss, I've sent the photos to Abby," he said. "The blood by the ladder looks like it's in the right spot for him to have fallen, but she can recreate it and see."

"What do you think?"

McGee sighed. "I think this is going to be ugly no matter how it turns out. What's the grandfather's story?"

Gibbs shook his head. "DiNozzo's talking to the family now. Paramedics said the grandfather was talking like he wasn't out here when the kid fell."

"You don't agree?"

Gibbs scanned the yard. "Fenced yard, quiet neighborhood," he said. "Possible he wouldn't have been out here the whole time."

"Boss, what I don't get is how." McGee pointed to the blood trails. "Say this is what it looks like. The kid fell from the ladder, hit his head. Then the grandfather comes out and finds him, moves him to try and stop the bleeding. He realizes it's not working, so he calls the paramedics, who move him to an open space to work on him. They can't save him, but they see the signs of abuse and call us."

"That's what somebody wants us to think."

"Right, I know," McGee said. "But then why is the first set of bloodstains right at the base of the ladder? If he fell, wouldn't he have fallen backward and away, so the bloodstains would be here?"
He pointed to a spot a couple feet away from the ladder.

Gibbs closed his eyes and tried to picture Kelly climbing up to work on the boat one time. She'd slipped and fallen, but McGee was right, she'd fallen away from the boat, almost hitting her head on the leg of the workbench. He pictured the distance in his head. "Good catch, Tim," he said. "Get with Abby when we get back, work with her to reconstruct what happened."

McGee nodded. "Boss?"

Gibbs just lifted an eyebrow.

"If we're right and this wasn't an accidental fall, and the grandfather was telling the truth when he said he was the only one home..."

Gibbs nodded. "Keep an eye on him." He paused. "I had Tony interview the family because he knows what to look for."

"Like reasons that somebody was able to get away with this with two other adults around?" McGee
winkled his nose. "Boss, how do parents overlook this?"

"Not everybody who has a child deserves to be called a parent," Gibbs said. He pressed his lips together. "And sometimes people don't want to see." He fought back his rising anger. "Get the evidence and get it back to Abby."

He nodded and stepped away. Gibbs didn't say it, but he needed to get Tony out of here soon, too. This case was going to push all of his buttons, especially if it turned out the grandfather was involved. The cane the older man used could have inflicted a lot of damage easily.

Tony stepped away from the rest of the team and headed for the house where the boy's father and grandfather were waiting.

Both men sat in silence, slumped on the couch in the living room.

"Mr. Owen?" Tony said.

The younger man, about Tim's age, nodded.

"Agent Anthony DiNozzo," he said. "I know it's difficult, but I need to ask you and your father-in-law some questions."

Owen nodded. "Mitch and I will tell you anything that will help."

The older man stuck out his hand, but didn't rise. "Mitchell Rollins. This is all my fault."

"No, it's not, Mitch." Owen rubbed the back of his neck. "You couldn't have known. Chris is up and down the ladder all the time, and he's never fallen."

"I should have been out there," Rollins said. "I might have caught him." His hand shook, and he gripped the sofa arm, forcing himself to still.

Tony interrupted. "Why don't we start at the beginning? When was the last time each of you saw Chris?" He pulled out his pad to make notes.

Owen spoke first. "I had back-to-back showings this morning - still trying to get business back to where it used to be after the market crash - so I saw Chris at breakfast. Sandy was still packing the last of her things for her mission, so I made him waffles. It's a tradition when she's going to be gone for more than a few days."

Rollins nodded. "After you left, Sandy took Chris out back to play before she had to leave. I was working on the crossword puzzle." He gestured to his leg. "It's tough for me to keep up with him. So when Sandy came back in, she said he was still out there playing and just to check on him if he didn't come in soon." He reached up and swiped at his eyes. "It couldn't have been more than five or 10 minutes he was out there alone."

"So you didn't see him fall?"

Rollins shook his head. "I stepped outside and saw him lying there. I checked on him, pulled him away from the ladder to see if he was OK, but his head was bleeding. I had to run back inside to call 911 - I don't carry a cell phone - and I grabbed a dishtowel to try and stop the bleeding." He paused and swallowed. "It was so much blood."
Tony gave him a minute to regroup and turned to the father. "When I was a kid, I always liked challenges, trying to do crazy things like skip every other monkey bar when I went across them. Could Chris have been doing something like that?" He wanted to see if either one would take the bait he'd dropped, the chance to explain how Chris was always getting in accidents, always hurting himself.

Owen shook his head. "He wasn't like that," he said. "He would have asked Mitch first. The parents of his friends are always saying how well-behaved he is... was, how he would always ask first before doing something." He held up his hands. "I never knew what to tell them when they would ask how we did it. He's always been like that, since he was old enough to talk."

Rollins didn't say anything, just nodded, and Tony made a note. He had a bad feeling about this one.

"Did Chris have any trouble with the other kids in the neighborhood?" Tony wanted to make sure he'd ruled out all the possible excuses the family could use to explain away the beatings Chris had suffered. He was not letting them get away with this; it was the least he could do for Chris.

"What? No, why? You don't think one of them pushed him off the ladder, do you?" Owen shook his head. "None of his friends can reach the latch on the fence." He took a deep breath. "Sandy would have said if anybody was out there." He flinched. "Sandy? Has anybody called her? Oh god, this will kill her."

Tony shook his head. "I don't know, Mr. Owen. You said she left on a mission today?"

He nodded. "They were testing some project she had been working on, and she wasn't supposed to get back until the weekend." He raked a hand through his hair. "I hope they can get her back sooner. When her mother died, she was on a mission, and they couldn't contact her for three days." He swallowed. "We'd thought it would be sooner, and she almost missed the funeral." He looked up at Tony. "That can't happen again. The Navy needs to get her back."

Tony nodded, making a note to ask Gibbs about that as well. He excused himself and headed back outside. The rest of the team was still processing the scene, and when the door shut behind him, Tim looked up and caught Tony's eye. Tony gave a little nod, getting one in return, and then Tim returned to his work.

"DiNozzo?" Gibbs walked over to him. "You get anything useful?"

Tony headed for the back corner of the yard, well away from the house, and the boss followed him. "We need to pull the captain's fitness reports," he said. "According to the grandfather, she was the last one to see the boy."

"Rollins could be throwing up a smokescreen to cover his tracks," Gibbs said. "We only have his word for that happening."

"He seems convinced it was an accident," Tony said. "If he's the abuser, he's either really good at lying, or he's managed to deceive himself."

"The father?"

"He seemed clueless," Tony said. He could feel a throbbing begin behind his left eye. "But he talked about how well-behaved Chris was."

"A 4-year-old boy?" Gibbs lifted an eyebrow. "That's not typical."
"It is if he learned that acting out would just get him beaten," Tony said. "You do everything you can, try and live life between the lines and hope you know where the lines are, hope nobody's changed them on you. You think if you're just good enough, maybe it will stop."

Gibbs reached out and put a hand on Tony's shoulder. He could feel the weight, but only just. Everything was kind of numb.

"Come on, let's get you back to the Navy Yard," Gibbs said.

Tony just nodded and felt Gibbs guide him back to the crime scene. He stood there until Tim walked over, placing a hand on the back of his neck and leaning close to whisper in his ear. "Come on, Tony," he said. "I know it's tough, but push it aside. Let's get Chris justice."

Gradually Tony realized Tim's thumb was rubbing circles on the back of his neck, and he looked over at his husband. "We're going to nail this dirtbag," he said.

Tim nodded. "We are."

Tony straightened away from Tim, who dropped his hand. "Now what, Boss?"

Gibbs let a half smile cross his face, accompanied by a short nod. "You and McGee head back with the truck," he said. "McGee, after the reconstruction, help Abby with the rest of the evidence and track down Capt. Owen. DiNozzo, check with area hospitals to see if there are records of ER visits and who took him in. Get Palmer to help sort through the files when you get them." He paused. "Ziva's still working the neighborhood; we'll meet you back at the Navy Yard when we're done."

Tony nodded and followed McGee back to the truck. "You're driving," he said. "Just don't let me get too far into my head."

Tim just pushed him toward the passenger side. Once inside, he said, "I don't envy Gibbs and Ziva. Talking to people about cases like this is the worst."

Tony nodded. "Gibbs knows that," he said. "That's why he's sending us back. That and I'm probably the best qualified to hunt down the medical reports." He snorted. "God, I'm a mess."

Tim took his right hand off the wheel for a moment and squeezed Tony's. "If you weren't having trouble with this one, I'd be more worried," he said. "Why don't you call Dr. P? See if he can fit you in for an extra session this week."

Tony nodded. "As soon as we get back to the Yard, which would be half an hour sooner if anybody else was driving, McSlow."

As they slipped into their usual snarkiness, Tony was able to push things away for a while. He allowed the Very Special Agent mask to slip into place and hoped it would be enough to get him through the day.

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Ziva followed Gibbs back into the bullpen that evening to find McGee at his desk, but Tony nowhere to be found.

"McGee." Gibbs stowed his gun and badge.

"It's ugly, Boss," McGee said. As files started flashing up on the plasma screen, Ziva walked over to stand by Gibbs. McGee joined them a moment later.
"It has to be the mother," he said. "She's the one who brought Chris into every hospital Tony could find. Also, her fitness reports show she's the classic Type A: hates things out of order or deviating from plan. Her CO wrote her up three years ago for losing her temper and damaging some equipment. He even recommended anger management sessions, but didn't mandate them. Since then, she's kept it under tight rein on the job, but there's no evidence anywhere that she got any kind of professional help, either from the Navy or from an outside agency or doctor."

"Chris was about nine months old then," Ziva said after checking the dates on the screen.

"Tough age," Gibbs said. "They still need you all the time, and it's been months since you got enough sleep. If you can make it a few more months, it gets a better. But I don't think Shannon felt rested again until Kelly was at least a year old."

McGee nodded. "The first medical reports Tony found were logged about three weeks after she was written up."

"She started taking it out on Chris." Ziva tried to be dispassionate, but she could not imagine a mother doing that to her own child. Even her father was not capable of something like that.

"That's what we figure," McGee said. He used the clicker to bring more pages up on screen. "I started digging deeper, and it looks like the captain might have been treated the same way by her own mother. Social Services in her hometown in New Jersey was called in a few times by the school, but no charges ever were filed."

"So the grandfather is used to overlooking this," Gibbs said. "And the father?"

"Tony said he's been working long hours trying to keep his business afloat," McGee said. "The housing market imploded around the same time, and real estate went from being a golden ticket to an impossible job. That's probably one of the reasons the grandfather lives with them to help look after Chris."

Ziva cursed under her breath, slipping into the Hebrew she was most familiar with.

"DiNozzo?" Gibbs asked.

"In the gym," McGee said. "Probably pounding a punching bag."

Gibbs nodded. "And Capt. Owen? When can we talk to her?"

McGee shook his head. "Her CO said she's unreachable. Even if they could contact her, they can't pull her without scrubbing the mission. It's not project testing like she told her husband; it's a covert op that's been months in the planning."

It was Gibbs turn to curse. "McGee, go check on DiNozzo. David, go get dinner for everybody. I'm going to talk to Ducky."

-Friday, April 30, 2010-

Tim stretched and rolled his shoulders. It was almost 2300 and for all the hours they'd put in this week, they weren't much further along. Ducky, Jimmy, and Abby had proven that Chris fell when he passed out from lack of oxygen because of the punctured lung. Tony realized the tree house on
the swingset might have more information, and they found a little nest where Chris would sit and draw. The drawings often were pictures of what his mother had done to him, and Tim had scanned them into the system so Gibbs could blow them up on the plasma in the interrogation room when he finally got her in there. They had more than enough evidence to arrest and charge Capt. Owen with killing her son, but since they couldn't get to her, they were stuck. Tony had spent every night that week at the piano, and Tim was ready to go hunt down the captain on her covert mission himself, so they could arrest and book her and call an end to this case before Tony tied himself up in any more knots. Vance's arrival in the bullpen pulled him out of his thoughts.

"You people have done an excellent job this week," the director said. "There's nothing more you can do on this case until Capt. Owen returns on Sunday, and I know you all have something to celebrate tomorrow. So go home. Take the day and celebrate Sarah's graduation. You all need it after this week."

"Are you coming, Director Vance?" Ziva asked.

"I'll be there." Vance turned to face Tim. "Jackie plans on bringing fruit salad and cookies. Could you tell your parents?"

Tim turned to Gibbs. "Boss, since Jack and Mom are handling the menu, you want to pass that along?"

Gibbs nodded, and Vance left.

"Pack up, people," Gibbs said. "McGee, DiNozzo, we'll see you after the ceremony tomorrow."

"Gibbs, I told Jack I would help with the food," Ziva said. "Do you know what time I should be over to help?"

Gibbs shook his head. "Call you when I get home."

Tim shut down his computer and grabbed his gear. "Come on, Tony," he said. "Let's go."

As they walked into the elevator, leaving the squad room behind, Tim felt the weight of the case fall from his shoulders. Tony, however, still looked tense. "When we get home, I'm breaking out the massage oil," he said. "We've got enough on Owen to put her away for life; Josh is finally out of Sarah's hair; and she's graduating tomorrow."

Tony nodded and tipped his head, cracking his neck. "I know," he said. "Just keep reminding me of that."

"Always," Tim said. He put a hand to the back of Tony's neck and felt him start to relax. "We're going to make it through," he said. "Dr. P's been helping you, and he's going to keep doing that. Josh is finally out of our hair, so we can stop worrying about Sarah. And you've done everything you can do to make sure Owen gets put away. If you hadn't thought of the treehouse, we wouldn't have Chris' pictures."

Tony nodded. "There had to be a reason," he said. "He was hurt, in pain. The only reason he would try to climb a seven-foot ladder was because he was trying to get to the place where he felt safe."

"What was your place?" Tim kept his voice soft.

"Didn't have one." Tony sighed. "The basketball court, sort of. School, once my dad sent me away. Gibbs' house, once I joined the team. I thought they made me feel safe."
"You thought?"

Tony flipped the emergency switch. "I never knew what safe really was until that night you let me hug you after my nightmares. I thought I did. But now I know."

Tim pulled him in close, wrapping his long arms around Tony. "Always," he said. "We keep each other safe. We always will."
Chapter 42

Saturday, May 1, 2010

Abby blinked her eyes as she woke up. She was alone in bed, and there was a note on her nightstand. She couldn't read it from where she lay, but she didn't think moving until her stomach had settled a bit was a good idea. Except her bladder felt like it was going to pop — who knew the-

She stopped, still not ready to think the words. It wasn't that she wasn't ready — she was. And she was sure Jimmy was ready after the discussion they'd had while still in Louisiana. But this case was so awful, and none of them did well with child cases. She wanted the moment she and Jimmy found out to be happy, the moment they told the rest of the team to be a celebration. And she wanted Sarah to have today be her celebration. After everything she'd been through the past six or seven weeks, she deserved her chance to celebrate. She could wait until tomorrow to find out for sure. She couldn't wait any longer to pee, though.

Her stomach churned when she sat up. For a minute, she wondered if that was going to take precedence, but she made it to the bathroom OK. After taking care of that issue, she wet a washcloth and pressed it to the back of her neck until she was feeling better. She stood and went back to the bedroom, where she was finally able to read the note Jimmy left.

Abs, I'm going to the gym. I haven't had time this week, and I need to work some of this out so I can put the case aside and have fun today. Joint shower when I get back? We haven't had time this week for anything fun. I love you. — J.

She smiled and decided some tea and dry toast was in order while she waited. After both, she felt better. In fact, she was getting impatient for Jimmy to get back. He was right: they hadn't had time for anything fun.

Sarah stood in front of the living room mirror adjusting her cap, trying to pin it in place. She'd slipped the gown on just long enough for Ziva to take a few pictures of her, since she knew her dad would take a million at the ceremony. She thought it was a waste of time, just a herd of people waiting for the 30 seconds when your name is called and you walked across the stage. But she knew her dad would have hated to miss the occasion, so she was doing it.

"I think I've got it," she said, turning to face Ziva. "Is it on straight?"

Ziva nodded. "Congratulations," she said. "This is a big day, yes?"

Sarah shrugged. "I guess," she said. "I mean, I'm glad to be done — really glad after the last couple of months. And I'm excited to be done with classes and able to just work and write without worrying about exams." She shrugged. "But the ceremony itself? I'd rather we just do the party afterward."

Ziva smiled. "We will have the party," she said. "I think we all need a party at this point."

"Damon's coming, right?"

Ziva nodded, a small smile on her face.

"I'm glad you have him," Sarah said. "As a friend."
"He is patient," Ziva said. "He knows — he understands — that I am not yet ready for more. I will be, but I am not yet." Sarah had seen her roommate's scars a few times since they had started living together, including some she was sure Tim and the rest of the team hadn't seen. There was a long one on one thigh and marks around both ankles. Sarah wasn't sure what had caused them, but she knew they happened while she was in Somalia. Ziva had told her that much.

"He knows Tony and Tim will kick his ass if he tries anything before you are." Sarah snickered. "For an only child, Tony does a good job with the over-protective big brother bit."

Ziva reached over and hugged her, and Sarah had to move her head to keep her mortarboard from being shifted out of place.

"We are lucky to have them," Ziva said. She pulled back and kissed Sarah on each cheek. "Now, let me drop you at campus, then I will go to help Jack and Gibbs with the food." She looked at Sarah's tank top and shorts. "You are certain you do not want to wear a dress?"

Sarah shook her head, stopping only because she worried the hat would slide. "All anybody's going to see are my legs and feet, and I've got nice sandals," she said. "But it's hot and muggy today, and I'm wearing cheap black polyester. I want to be cool."

She turned to look at herself in the mirror. The top was one she'd picked up a few days ago, looking for something that would keep her mother from worrying about how many pints of Ben and Jerry's she'd gone through during the Josh fiasco. It was fitted at the top, then flowed out, skimming down until it hit her hips. The dark green flattered her skin, and it would hide any grass stains at the cookout if somebody broke out the backyard games set. She'd gone for slightly longer shorts than usual, not wanting to burn the back of her legs on the metal folding chairs that were sitting out in the sun.

Ziva stood behind her, resting her hands on her shoulders. "Come, you will be late."

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Tim sat on the end of the row, his long legs stretched into the aisle to give Tony some extra room. The graduation for the College of Arts and Sciences was one of the biggest in the university, so he was glad it wasn't raining. Cramming this many people inside would turn whatever space it was into a sauna.

At least they were fairly close to the front — his dad would be able to get a good picture when Sarah got her diploma. Tim was with Sarah — he'd rather just head back to Alexandria for the party. Still, sitting here with Tony's arm around his shoulders wasn't exactly a hardship. And as much stuff as Sarah had been through, someday she'd look back on these pictures and be glad to have the memories they captured of her triumph over the hell Josh had put her through. As crazy as the case had kept them this week, Tim and Ziva had taken the time to verify Josh had left the area. Ziva had checked the contact list in Sarah's phone for his cell number, and Tim had traced it. Sure enough, Josh was in New York where he was supposed to be, far away from here.

He didn't realize he'd zoned out until Tony removed his arm, using two fingers to let out an ear-piercing whistle. Tim looked up on stage to see Sarah crossing and then glanced over to where his dad was taking picture after picture.

When the ceremony finally ended, they gathered at the entrance to the quad, where Sean insisted on taking more photos.

"Just a couple, Dad," Sarah said. "These gowns are unbearable. They were passing out water, and a
bunch of us still felt lightheaded."

"Dad, let me take one of the four of you," Tony said. "Then we can do the others back at the house, after Sarah's had time to cool off."

Tim grinned as his sister's nod made it clear what she thought of the idea. They gathered in a group, his dad standing behind his mother and he behind Sarah. Tim rested his hands on her shoulders and smiled as Tony snapped a few pictures.

"OK," Tony said.

"It's about time!" Sarah unzipped the gown and shrugged it off. "Come on, let's go."

-Gibbs stood on the patio flipping burgers while the team played volleyball.

"DiNozzo, if you serve that into the grill, you're going to run out to get more food," he growled, mostly for effect.

Abby was playing with Kevin in the grass, while Dwayne's girls and Vance's kids played hide-and-seek with Eileen and Maggie. Jack was refereeing the volleyball game, and Gibbs winced as Jimmy hit the ball too hard and just missed hitting Jack in the face.

"Watch it, Autopsy Gremlin!" Tony's voice floated over as he head-slapped Jimmy. The two of them and Ziva faced off against McGee, Damon, and Dwayne, while Sean, Vance, Ducky, and Sarah cheered and heckled from the sidelines.

"This is quite a team you've got, Gibbs," Jackie said as she set down a plate of rolls on the stone wall behind the grill. "Leon always kept work and family separate before this, but you and the team changed that."

"McGee gets the credit," he said. "He and his family, they just welcome everybody in." He started putting cheese on the patties that needed it. "This crew, we need that."

While the cheese melted, he watched as Ziva spiked the ball and McGee dived to hit it, missing and rolling over.

"You OK?" Tony asked.

"Yeah, fine," McGee said. "Ziva, this means war." He passed the ball to Damon, who served it like a rocket over the net. By the time Tony finally missed both the ball and a collision with the fence, Gibbs was dishing out burgers.

"Game called for food," he called, watching as the kids immediately headed for the picnic table where he placed the platters of burgers.

The next few hours passed quickly as everybody devoured the food Jack, Eileen, and Jackie had made. People were just starting to make noises about heading out when Vance's phone rang. He stepped away, then came back, a serious expression on his face.

"Gibbs, that was dispatch. The captain you've been investigating?"

"She's back?" he asked. "Wasn't supposed to get back until tomorrow."

Vance shook his head. "Dead. I hate to break things up, but your team needs to take this case."
Gibbs nodded. "We're on it." He turned to Sarah. "Don't mean to steal your party, Sarah, but-"
"I know, the case comes first." She nodded and yawned. "I'm ready to crash anyway."
"I'll drive you home," Abby said. "I can't do anything until they bring back evidence for me to examine, and Jimmy can ride with Ducky."

Within five minutes, the team had cleared out, leaving Damon, the Wilsons, the Vances, and the McGees with Jack.

Torin looked at the crime scene in frustration. Rollins had found his daughter in bed, wheezing and barely able to move. By the time the paramedics had arrived, she had no longer been responsive, and they hadn't been able to revive her. Unfortunately, their attempts had contaminated what was now the crime scene. They still didn't have an explanation for how she had gotten in a day early without NCIS being notified, and Tony could see the vein in Gibbs' forehead pulsing.

"This can't be natural causes," he said to Gibbs. "Could we have been wrong about her abusing Chris?"

Gibbs shook his head. "Good motive to kill her."

"True." He sighed and cracked his neck. "I'd better go talk to the family; they know me better than anybody else."

"Take Ziva with you," he said. "McGee and I will finish here, take everything back to Abby. There might be traces of whatever killed her on the sheets or something."

"On it, Boss." He took the keys to the sedan from Gibbs and led the way outside.

Fortunately, it didn't take long to find the building on base where the MPs had taken the two men until NCIS could pick them up. It was a little unusual, but what about this case wasn't. Tony was still waiting to see what happened to the CO who sent the captain home without telling NCIS they were back from the mission. It wasn't as though the admiral didn't know NCIS was investigating; Tony had interviewed the man himself and informed him they were regarding Chris' death as suspicious. Gibbs had tried to avoid releasing that information, but by Wednesday Owen and Rollins both had been agitated because Ducky hadn't released the body. Rollins had even pulled some strings to put heat on NCIS, which had triggered another glare-off between Gibbs and Vance. Tony sighed.

"If one of them killed her, I'm not sure I'd blame them," he said to Ziva. "I just wish it hadn't ruined Sarah's party. She deserves a day to celebrate."

"She was tired," Ziva said. "She has been lighting the candle at both ends for a long time."

"Burning, Zee," Tony said, smiling at her mistake. "She's OK now, though. She's graduated, and Josh the Jerk is gone."

"Yes, he is." Ziva paused, and Tony looked over.

"Zee?" He frowned. "She is OK, right?"

Another pause. "She is," Ziva said. "She was very excited this morning to start working full-time and begin writing her novel. She has not had time lately."
"If it works for her the way it does for McWriter, that will help more than anything," Tony said.

"I believe she will have quite a lot to write about, once she begins," Ziva said. "Now, how do you suggest we handle this? I did not talk to either Mr. Owen or Mr. Rollins before."

And so Tony turned his mind away from Josh the Jerk and back to the case.

-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-

Abby was just warming up her machines when Ducky called her from the video cam.

"Abigail, Mr. Palmer will be up to see you in a minute with some stomach contents to analyze."

"Thanks, Duckman," she said. "Any ideas what I should test for?"

"I'm afraid not, my dear," he said. "This reminds me of that first case with Caitlin, when she was still Secret Service: a death that looks to be natural except for its suddenness and timing."

Abby made a face. "So that means running it against every exotic poison I can think of in Major Mass Spec unless we're lucky enough to hit on the same one that killed Major Kerry."

"I'm afraid so," Ducky said. "Mr. Palmer and I will do everything we can to isolate more evidence from the captain's body to speed up your search."

"Thanks, Ducky." Abby flipped the camera off and wrinkled her nose.

"Abs, Dr. Mallard sent me up-"

"I know, stomach contents," Abby said. She felt the now-familiar queasiness return as she looked at the liquid in the jar and was suddenly glad it was late. Analyzing it in the morning might not have set very well with her stomach. "It sounds like Major Mass Spec and I are going to be pretty busy trying to isolate what she may have ingested."

Jimmy nodded as he set the jar down and handed her the evidence log. Abby signed and set it down. "Thanks, Jimmy," she said, giving into an impulse and hugging him. "I'll let you guys know as soon as I figure anything out, but it might not be tonight."

Jimmy nodded. "We had a feeling."

"I'll do the basic tox screen first, just to make sure we're not overlooking something," Abby said. "Even if Duckman's right and this is something crazy, I still need to rule out the obvious first."

Jimmy nodded, kissed her on the nose, and headed out. Abby smiled, but that disappeared as soon as she opened the jar. The smell wasn't anything unusual — well, unusual for what was in there — but she still clapped a hand to her mouth, willing her stomach to settle. If she got sick, she'd have to tell Jimmy why, and right now she just wanted to help them solve this case. After the case, they could deal with the cause of her queasiness.

She managed to get enough of the sample into a vial to start the tox screen running, then put the rest in the refrigerator and went to her desk, putting her head down until she felt better.

A few minutes later, she cautiously sat up. When that felt OK, she stood up and went to her electric kettle to boil some water for tea. That, plus the saltines she'd stashed in her drawer the other day, would get her back on her game.

Once she did that, she went back to the main room of the lab and e-mailed the team asking what
symptoms the captain had before her father found her. With that information, she might be able to narrow down the list of poisons to test for and cut down on the number of dead ends.

-ZCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-ZCIS-

Ziva sat back and let Tony take the lead. They knew him, and this way she could observe their reactions.

"Rick, Mitch, I'm very sorry for your loss," Tony said after introducing Ziva. "I know this is a difficult time, but if you could help us with some information, we'll hopefully be able to resolve this matter."

The father-in-law nodded and shifted in his chair, a pained wince crossing his face. But Owen glared. "You still haven't 'resolved' what happened to Chris," he said. "Why should we trust NCIS to investigate this? You've been dragging your heels all week."

Ziva watched Tony carefully, but he didn't snark — at the man.

"Mr. Owen, our investigation in your son's death could not be completed until your wife returned," Ziva said. "She was the last person to see him, and we would not have been able to close our case without talking with her first." She paused, but Owen didn't say anything. "Why did you not call us when your wife arrived home?"

"Do you have children, Agent David?" Owen stared at her.

Ziva hesitated. "No, I do not," she said, finally.

"If you did, you wouldn't have to ask." Owen clenched his fists. "Sandy just came back to find out that Chris is dead, and she wasn't here because the Navy sent her away. The Navy didn't bring her back. And the Navy isn't doing a very good job finding justice for my son. So no, calling the Navy to tell you something you should have learned from your own people wasn't high on my list."

"Your wife arrived at your house when?" Tony asked.

Owen made a face, but finally said, "About noon. She hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast, so I made her some vegetable soup. Then she went upstairs to take a nap. I let her go." He swallowed. "She wasn't going to sleep, I knew that. But she's... She's always needed to deal with things alone. That's just how she is... Was."

"And the next time you saw her?" Tony's tone was gentle, though Ziva could see the tension in the set of his shoulders.

"I went up to check on her a few hours later," Rollins said. "Rick was trying to work out details of Chris' service with the funeral home over the phone, and I thought she might want to be part of the discussion." He paused. "You people didn't let us have Chris back until yesterday, and we wanted to do this one last thing for him." He rubbed the back of one hand against his eyes. "She was lying in bed, wheezing, but she was barely moving."

"Did she have allergies or asthma?" Tony asked.

"No," Owen said, "nothing like that."

"Not even as a child," Rollins said.

"Could she have picked up something aboard ship?" Tony asked. "Lots of people, close quarters
"She seemed fine when she came home," Owen said. "As fine as you can be when something like this happens."

Tony continued to question them, but did not discover much else helpful. When they excused themselves, Ziva did not know how much use they had been.

"We have an e-mail from Abby," she said after checking her phone. "She is asking for information about Capt. Owen's symptoms to help her identify what killed her."

"Sounds like Ducky's determined it wasn't natural. Like that's a surprise," Tony said. "Even the MPs figured that out."

"Gibbs does say there is no such thing as a coincidence," Ziva replied. "I will send Abby the information Mr. Owen told us."

Tony nodded. "Good, because you're not driving back. I want to live through today."

By the time Ziva had sent the information, they were on the highway headed back to the Navy Yard.

"It doesn't make sense," Tony said. "Why kill her now?"

"She was abusing her own son," Ziva said. "Could you stand by if you knew that was happening?"

"I'm married to McBoyScout," Tony retorted. "Hell would freeze over before McGee hurt our kids."

"Tony, you are missing my point," Ziva said, though she smiled at his defense of McGee.

"They've both been overlooking it for years, Zee," Tony said. "Why go from ignoring it to killing her?" He sounded weary, and when Ziva looked over, his shoulders were slumped. "If you don't care enough to catch that, why would you care enough to kill?"

"Did they both know?" Ziva said. "You did not sound so sure the other day."

She stood between Tony and McGee as the three studied the plasma, looking for information Gibbs would demand when he returned.

"Rollins definitely knew his daughter was being abused when she was younger," McGee said. "These social services records have him signing off on her return to the home and agreeing to the department's terms." He clicked through more than a dozen files. "He had to have some sort of clout, too, for them not to yank her out of the home after this many incidents."

"In New Jersey?" Tony snorted. "With enough money, you can buy any politician in the state. There's more graft and corruption there than you can imagine. When I was with Philly, we hated dealing with cops from the New Jersey suburbs, never knew which of them you could trust and which ones had been bought."

"The Rollins were not particularly wealthy," Ziva said. "Not enough to spend much money bribing people."

Tony shook his head. "For an underpaid stooge working in Social Services? Wouldn't have taken much. We're not talking about the governor. Just a manager in an overlooked, overworked
department who has more cases than they can handle anyway." He sighed. "It shouldn't happen, but it does."

"And the father?" McGee said. "How could he overlook what was going on under his own--" He stopped, and his ears turned pink as Tony's face went pale.

Ziva put a hand on Tony's shoulder. "We did not mean--" She tried again. "Tony, perhaps he did not know."

"My father? Or Chris' father?" His tone was bitter. "Owen's not a functional alcoholic like Senior. He doesn't have a staff he can foist Chris on when he wasn't up to taking care of him. He doesn't have an excuse for not having noticed. He didn't go weeks without seeing him for more than a few minutes at a time."

"No, but he does have a father-in-law," McGee said, turning to face Tony and Ziva. "A father-in-law who's overlooked this in the past with his own daughter and a failing business that he's been trying to keep afloat."

"So he and my father have one thing in common." Tony made a face.

"Maybe the father didn't know until we announced it wasn't an accidental death, even if we didn't say it was child abuse," Tony said. "You could be right. But he wouldn't poison her. I mean, come on. She's a sailor who's in great shape. She was going to be put away for beating her own son to death. You want to kill her, you use a knife or something. Stage it to look like self-defense. Then you get the satisfaction of doing to her what she did to your son." He rolled his shoulders. "Poison's the way women kill."

Ziva turned to stare at him. "I have killed many people and never once used poison," she said.

"Most women aren't trained to kill with office supplies," Tony retorted. "And you're not weak. Most poisoners are either weaker than their opponent or can't face killing somebody."

Ziva thought for a second. "The grandfather is weaker," she said. "With his bad leg, he would not stand a chance against Capt. Owen."

"That still brings us back to 'why now?' If it was the grandfather, why stop covering for the abuse?" Tony thumped the steering wheel with his hand. "It doesn't make any sense."

"Nobody died before," Ziva said. "Perhaps he was able to write it down as tough discipline before."

"Off," Tony said. "Write it off, not down." He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "Sure, maybe. He's old school, could have grown up with that whole spare the rod crap."

"If he blamed himself for not stopping it, would he have decided to kill her?" Ziva tried to fit the puzzle pieces together.

-Gibbs pulled the truck into the garage. "I'll take this, McGee," he said. "Go see if Tony and Ziva are back yet. I expect a report by the time I'm done with Abby."

McGee nodded. "On it, Boss." He stayed to help Gibbs load the evidence boxes onto a cart, then headed upstairs. Gibbs waited for the elevator to return, then went down to the lab. Abby was
sitting at the station in the middle of the room tapping her fingers on the table.

"Whatcha got Abs?" He asked as he started unloading the evidence.

"Nothing." She frowned. "I'm not a miracle worker, Gibbs, and this isn't anything normal. Like I told Ducky, I'm going to have to run these possibilities one at a time until I come up with the right one. Do you know how many there are, Gibbs? At least three dozen. Do you know how long it takes Major Mass Spec to talk to me? I'm not going to have answers for you today, so don't even ask. And I mean today as in Sunday, because it's almost midnight. If I get lucky, you might have something by Monday morning." She crossed her arms and turned back to the computer.

Gibbs opened his mouth, then decided there wasn't anything he could say when Abby was in this kind of mood. He'd figured that out after the second marriage. He made a note to ask Jimmy if he knew what was bugging her and headed off for the break room to find a snack and a No-Caf-Pow for her.

He stared at the drink machine and wondered if he should just get her a regular Caf-Pow. Even one of the small ones she usually scoffed at might be good — Abby didn't handle all-nighters well without caffeine. He'd learned that since she'd given it up a couple of months ago.

In the end, he settled on a big No-Caf-Pow and a Mini-Pow and brought them both back, along with some chips and a candy bar. But when he got back to the lab, she was asleep at the computer. They were the only ones in the dim squad room, and the small desk lights cast shadows around the bullpen.

"McGee, go to the lab," Gibbs said. "We're going to be working around the clock until we break this, so alternate naps. Abby fell asleep, and you can run Major Mass Spec."

"Um, Boss, the last time I had to do lab work, we ended up cleaning the lab on our knees," McGee said.

"It's you or Palmer, and he and Ducky are trying to figure out what killed the captain. Until we know that, we're stuck. Run the analysis, help DiNozzo and Ziva by computer."

McGee just nodded and headed downstairs.

Gibbs turned back to the other two agents. "What do we know?"

"Not much," DiNozzo said. "Other than that Owen hates NCIS and thinks we're incompetent. The captain was in the bedroom alone for a few hours before her father found her. If she was poisoned after she arrived home, it was probably in the soup she ate."

"Mr. Owen prepared it, but Rollins was there when she ate," Ziva said. "We cannot rule either of them out on opportunity."

Gibbs bit back a curse. "No soup in the refrigerator. No dirty dishes in the sink or dishwasher."

"Whichever of them did it, he was careful," DiNozzo said. "Neither of them noticed anything wrong before she went upstairs, but it could mean it was a slow-acting poison. Or they could be lying."

"Why poison?" Ziva said. "Why not just let us arrest her?"

"When it's your child, sometimes you're not willing to trust the justice system," Gibbs said.
"Especially if he already thought we were jerking him around on this."

"Right now we're not even sure what poison it was," DiNozzo said. "Unless Ducky and Jimmy have something."

"Ziva, pull details on Owen's CO," Gibbs said. "Find out if there's a reason he let her go without calling us first. DiNozzo, with me." He headed for the elevator to take them down to Autopsy.

He looked over at Tony once they were in the elevator, but the senior field agent was all business. Gibbs wasn't sure how this latest wrinkle in the case was going to affect his senior agent, but he knew Tony too well to think it wouldn't have any effects.

"Whatcha got, Duck?" he asked as they walked into Autopsy.

"Ah, Jethro. Excellent timing," Ducky said. "We are still trying to isolate what might have caused the captain to expire."

"Duck."

"I did not say we did not have anything for you," Ducky said. He pointed to the captain's hands. "These injuries are consistent with inflicting the beating poor Christopher received the morning he died. The bruising has faded considerably, but there are enough small blood vessels in the hands that the coloring lingers." He pointed to her left hand, and Gibbs leaned closer to look.

"A ring?"

"Yes, her wedding ring, to be precise," Ducky said. "It's consistent with marks we found on Christopher's abdomen."

"You figure his shirt had ridden up during the beating," Tony said, his voice too quiet. "It would have kept her from marking him with the ring in other places, but where it slid up, it would have cut into his skin." He rubbed absently at a place just above his hip, and Gibbs felt his fists clench, knowing Tony was remembering something from his own childhood.

"Precisely, Anthony." Ducky looked up, and Gibbs caught the worry in his old friend's eyes. "We have confirmation that the captain killed Christopher."

"We knew that, Duck." Gibbs glared. "Tell me something we didn't know."

The medical examiner drew himself up. "We did not know that Captain's Owen's hands were marked badly enough to still be visible five days later," he said. "I would surmise she had an explanation ready for any of her shipmates who asked about the injuries."

Gibbs nodded. "DiNozzo, figure out who might have noticed the injuries and heard about Chris' death before she went home."

"Boss, it's not one of them." Tony crossed his arms. "It's either Owen or Rollins."

"Rule 8," Gibbs said. "Abby won't have anything for at least 36 hours. If she comes to us Monday and tells us Owen was poisoned before she got home, then we've wasted that time. Work this angle, too, see if we can close it off."

Tony nodded. "And if we eliminate that option, the killer has less room to try to confuse the issue — assuming we can figure out whether it was her husband or her father that poisoned her." He frowned. "Right now, I don't care who did it, I just want this damn case over with."
"Anthony, I believe we will be able to fulfill that request sooner rather than later," Ducky said. "Abigail and I have a few shortcuts in mind to cut down the time it will take to identify the poison."

"Good work, Duck." Gibbs turned to leave, then stopped. "Palmer, Abby's asleep, and McGee's working in the lab."

Palmer nodded. "I don't think she slept well last night," he said. "She got up a couple of times, but I fell right back to sleep each time and don't know how long she was awake. She seemed OK this morning, but that was more than 14 hours ago."

"Day's not getting shorter," Gibbs said. "We need to close this one quickly, before it turns into a circus. Both of you, take naps as you need 'em. Palmer, if you two finish before we crack this, go help Abby so McGee can come back upstairs."

"Rest assured, Jethro, we will find Captain Owen's killer," Ducky said. "And should any of you feel the desire for some tea during the next several hours, I am happy to make some."

Gibbs tipped his head in a faint nod, knowing Ducky always dispensed wisdom with his tea. "Keep it in mind, Duck." He headed out, Tony on his heels.

When they returned to the bullpen, Ziva was just sending documents to the plasma.

"Gibbs, I have not figured out why the admiral did not call us," she said. "But I have pulled his records all the way back to his Academy days to see if we can find something." She paused. "It is a lot of documentation."

"Then you two better get working on it," he said.

"I'll start backgrounding, find out what the Navy doesn't know about him," Tony said. "See what I can find out before morning."

Gibbs looked at the clock, then nodded. "Split it up," he said. "Get McGee working on it, too, while he's running the tests for Abby."

"Gibbs, McGee and I can handle this," Ziva said. "Tony should take a nap now, while we have time. Then he can take over for me, and I will nap."


Tony opened his mouth to protest.

"Or I'll call McGee and have him drag you down there."

"You don't play fair, Boss." Tony grabbed his gear and headed for the elevator.

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Tim arrived in the lab to find Abby sound asleep at the table.

"Abs." He shook her shoulder. "Abby."

"Huh? What?" She turned to look at him. "McGee?" She sat upright, and Tim stepped back to avoid getting smacked. "Oh no, how much time did I lose?" She looked to the computer screen to see that Major Mass Spec was still running. "Oh, good."
"Abs, relax," Tim said. "Boss sent me down here to run samples while you sleep. He's got us alternating naps so we can keep going all night." He put his hands on her shoulders. "Go on, pull out the futon and take a nap."

She nodded, her eyes still heavy with sleep. "Here." She paused to yawn. "Ducky had some ideas what the poison might be, from a old case before you started working with the team. If nothing pops in the basic tox screen, start running these." She pointed to the sample vials on the table. "You remember how to do this, right?"

Tim nodded. "I can't do all the stuff you do down here, but even Tony can run something through Major Mass Spec if you talk him through it."

"No mess," she warned through another yawn.

"Abs, go lie down," he said.

She nodded and headed back to her office.

Tim set up his laptop and started pulling information on the admiral for Ziva. He was just getting started when Tony walked in.

"Boss sent me down to sleep," he said. "You have anything yet?"

Before Tim could reply, the computer beeped. He slid the chair over to take a look, then sighed. "That's a no?" Tony slid his hands onto Tim's shoulders and started rubbing.

"Abby was pretty sure the basic tox screen wouldn't turn anything up," Tim said. "She left me this list of things to test for." He got up and started prepping the next sample. "I'm just going to have to run them one at a time until we get a match — if we get a match."

"Blue-ringed octopus?" Tony sounded skeptical. When Tim looked over at him, he was staring at the list. "This rings a bell, but I don't know why."

"Abby said Ducky gave her the idea, from a case before my time." Tim shrugged and slipped the vial in the machine, then programmed it and stripped off his gloves. "Come on, go to bed." He walked over and kissed Tony. "Abby won't mind you snuggling with her."

Tony nodded. "Wake me whenever Ziva's ready for a break," he said.

Tim settled back behind the computer to dig for information on the admiral's financial records while he waited for the samples to run. An hour later, he still didn't have a match.

"Hey, McGee," Jimmy said. "Abby still asleep?"

He nodded. "Tony, too. Gibbs sent him down." He looked over. "Did Ducky send you up for a nap, or are you just checking on Abby?"

"A nap," he said. "We're waiting for some tests to run, so we both get a break. He thought I'd be more comfortable on Abby's futon than a table in Autopsy."

"Wake Tony up," Tim said. "He can sleep in his desk chair, has before."

"No, that's OK," Jimmy said. "If you want a break, I can handle the Major for a while. You and Tony can sleep for a bit, and I'm not that tired."
Tim shook his head. "That futon's not big enough for three."

"No, and I don't want to make Tony move," Jimmy said. "We should have planned this better."

Tim snorted. "Yeah, like Gibbs would have gone for that."

"Look, I'll go sleep in Autopsy," Jimmy said. "If you need a break before Abby wakes up, come get me, and I'll take over. She hasn't been sleeping well, so if she's out, I'd rather she stay that way."

Tim nodded and turned back to his computer.

Abby snuggled against the body next to her, but she realized it wasn't Jimmy. Stockier, with a different scent. Opening her eyes, she realized it was Tony, his arm thrown around her waist. She still felt exhausted, but she figured she'd better get up before people started wondering. Besides, she needed to pee.

She worked her way out from Tony's grasp and immediately headed for the bathroom. She saw McGee hard at work in the main lab as she ran through, but he either didn't notice or knew better than to get in her way. When he still didn't say anything after she returned, she knew he was too deep in his work to notice.

Abby checked on Major Mass Spec, but he was still cranking away on a sample. Abby walked over to see how far McGee had gotten on her list and was dismayed to see he was only on the second of the dozen possibilities she and Ducky had come up with as a starting place. She looked at the clock — almost 0400. Time to get McGee either out of her lab or safely asleep before she started turning green. He and Gibbs were the two most likely, besides Jimmy, to notice something. Timmy just knew her too well, and knew what she was like at all hours. And Gibbs had been through this with Shannon and Kelly. Not that she was saying what "this" was. Because she hadn't tested, and she wasn't going to say anything until she was sure. Unless Jimmy guessed and asked her, which he probably would if they actually got to wake up together anytime soon.

"Abs?"

She shook herself out of her head.

"Oh, hey, McGee," she said. "No luck?"

He shook his head. "I've got nothing for Gibbs on the digging I've been doing." A yawn punctuated his words. "And nothing on the poison either."

"I'll handle the poison," Abby said. "You go lay down — Tony could use some company."

McGee snorted. "As tempting as that sounds, Ziva's probably ready for a nap, and Jimmy was still up last I checked." He stretched his arms away. "I'm going to wake Sleeping Beauty, see if he'll go check on Jimmy once he relieves Ziva."

Abby reached around to hug him from behind. "You're so sweet, Timmy," she said. "Now, shoo, let me work my magic."

He went into her office, and Tony came out a few minutes later, his hair and clothes rumpled.

"Thanks for the place to crash, Abs," he said. "Anything for me to give Gibbs?"
She shook her head. "Nothing yet."

Tony left, and McGee was sleeping. She put another sample in to run and thought about whether she should take this chance to do her own test. She could still wait to share until this case was over. But then she'd be keeping a secret from Jimmy and she didn't want to do that. Before she could argue with herself anymore, Ziva came in, looking for a spot on her futon. Then Ducky came in to tell her Jimmy was sleeping in Autopsy and to see if she had any results. She was beginning to wish he wouldn't ramble, because she was feeling decidedly queasy, and Ducky would notice. By the time he had finished telling her a story of the time he'd fallen asleep in Autopsy and gotten shut into a drawer, Gibbs had come down to bring her breakfast. She managed to stay on her feet and away from the food until he left. She checked the office to make sure McGee and Ziva were sound asleep before walking close enough to the food to throw it out. But one whiff of the egg sandwich was too much, and she ran to the bathroom, making it just in time.

Fortunately, she was the only woman who worked on this floor, and it was too early for anybody else to be in and see her hurrying down the hallway. Abby knelt on the floor of the bathroom and slumped back against the porcelain tile. The conductivity of the ceramic made it cool to the touch, and it felt good.

After a few minutes, Abby felt steady enough to stand. She cleaned up and rinsed the foul taste from her mouth, then headed back to her lab.

"There you are, Abs," McGee said.

"Geez, McGee, can't a girl go to the bathroom?" She was irritated that he was up; a few minutes earlier and he would have caught her. "Go on, you can find nothing for Gibbs upstairs as well as here. Let me and my babies work in peace."

"Um, OK, Abs." He stood there for a second, then left.

Abby breathed a sigh of relief, but then Balboa came in with evidence from a new case. By the end of the day, she was ready to scream. Gibbs was surly as a bear over the Owen case, and it was going to be another all-nighter. She really needed to talk to Vance about getting an assistant, one she could trust. She couldn't keep — a yawn interrupted her — couldn't keep doing this.

In between the tests she was running for Balboa, she kept running various poison possibilities. Finally, about 0600 Monday, she found a match. A little more searching, and she was pretty sure she had the killer, too.

"Watchya got, Abs," Gibbs said when he walked in a few minutes later, bagel and cream cheese in hand.

Abby breathed a sigh of relief that this breakfast didn't smell as much as yesterday's, then started reporting. "Capt. Owen was poisoned with TTX, which used to be known as zombie powder because it was wrongly thought to be the cause of real zombies." She grinned. "Actually, it paralyzes the body by affecting the way the nerves work. It can be injected or taken orally, and 25 milligrams is enough to kill a 170-pound person, so it would have taken even less to kill that bitch."

"The soup?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

"Probably, Bossman, but no way to prove that," she said. "If I actually had the soup, I could test it."

"Where does this TTX come from?" Gibbs said. "You can't just walk into the drugstore and buy it, can you?"
Abby shook her head. "It's found in animals, mostly sea life," she said. "This particular strain is common to the rough-skinned newt, though."

He stared at her. "We have to figure out who owns a newt?"

She couldn't resist laughing. "A British pharmaceutical company," she said. "They isolated the TTX from the newt and used it to create a non-opioid painkiller designed to treat pain in terminal cancer patients. It's less addictive, which wouldn't seem to be a problem when you're talking about people close to dying, but hey, who knows." She sent some information over to the plasma. "Now that's the FDA-approved use, but since it's both powerful and nonaddictive, some doctors will prescribe it for other conditions, what's known as off-label use. Since it's also heavily regulated, I can access who has a prescription for it." She grinned and popped up record she had found. "Mitch Rollins has been taking it for about a year for pain from his bad leg. He takes 5 milligram pills, but it wouldn't take much to crush up three or four of them and mix them into a bowl of soup."

"That's good work, Abs," he said, kissing her on the cheek.

She smiled, but as soon as he left, she sank into her chair. She really needed to get some sleep. At least nobody was using the futon. She set as many tests to run while she slept as possible, then went to take a nap. Now if only they could wrap up this case, then she could run the darn test and tell Jimmy the good news.
AN: This is a short one, but it was either really short or really long. I decided to go the calm before the storm route. Also, one timeline note. If you break down S7's Borderland, they lost a night someplace. McGee and Abby fly to Mexico the night of Day 1, but the hotel room scene isn't until the night of Day 2. And Mexico isn't an overnight flight. So since there's a glitch there anyway, I had the end of Obsession and the beginning of Borderland overlap some. Minus, of course, the whole "Tony's obsessed with a woman he's never met" bit because Tim would not appreciate that. ;) If you missed the clues that we were about to run into the Mexico arc, well, hang on. It's going to be a wild ride through the next three episodes — we're down to less than 10 chapters to go in this if I've figured it right.

**Monday, May 3, 2010**

Gibbs walked into the bullpen just as Tony bounced a paper ball off a sleeping McGee's head.

"Huh?" McGee lifted his head from his desk, then picked up the paper ball and tossed it in the trash. "I will get you back for that," he told Tony, then yawned.

"Just beating the boss to the punch, McSleepy." Tony grinned, almost like his normal self.

"DiNozzo, McGee. Go pick up Owen and Rollins, bring them in." He turned to the third desk. "David."

She lifted her head from her arms. "Yes, Gibbs?"

"Get arrest warrants for them and a search warrant for the Owen house." He listed off what they needed, ignoring the startled glances the agents exchanged. "Now, people."

DiNozzo and McGee headed for the elevator, while Ziva picked up the phone. Gibbs headed upstairs to brief the director.

By the time he had done that and talked to Ducky, the boys were back with the two men and Rollins' pill bottle.

Gibbs sent McGee to the lab with the evidence bag to have Abby run fingerprints.

His cell rang less than 10 minutes later, just as McGee joined them in observation.

"Wiped clean, Bossman," Abby said. "Not a single print."

Gibbs grinned. "That's good work, Abs," he said. He hung up and told the others.

"Why would Rollins wipe his own prints off the bottle?" Ziva asked.

"He wouldn't," Tony said. "But Owen would. No reason for his prints to be on there since Rollins has a separate bathroom."
"It makes sense," McGee said. "If he figured it out, he knew it had to be his wife, either aided by her father or with her father overlooking the abuse. Kill her and frame him for her murder."

"Guess he should have had more respect for NCIS," Tony said. "We would have thrown their sorry asses in jail for murder and negligent homicide."

"You three upstairs," Gibbs said. "Finish your reports while I break these sorry SOBs."

Vance kept an eye on the bullpen using the security cameras until he saw Gibbs walk into the space. Motioning for his visitors to stay put, he walked to the catwalk outside MTAC and caught the MCRT leader's eye, indicating with a nod the man should follow him.

This wasn't the ideal time for this discussion, but it was the first chance he'd had, and Gibbs needed to know what was going on before he ran into either of the visitors in the building.

Vance could tell when the other man noticed who else was in his office: if the man had hackles, they'd be up. He introduced their Mexican visitor first.

"The State Department has appointed Ms. Hart to be Alejandro's legal counsel for the task force." Vance continued, waiting for the inevitable explosion. He should have remembered Gibbs had been a sniper and had the patience of one when he needed it. The man didn't bat an eye until he saw the ID card clipped to Hart's dress.

"Oh, I'll be spending a lot of time on the project. Director Vance kindly extended me temporary employee status," Hart said.

Gibbs kept his face expressionless, but the look he shot Vance as he left made it clear the discussion was far from over.

Vance turned back to Allison Hart and Alejandro Rivera.

"So that is Agent Gibbs," Rivera said. "He seems to be a stern man."

"Gibbs has high standards," Vance said. "He holds his agents and himself to them. It's one of the reasons they're the most successful team this agency has."

Rivera nodded. "I understand their forensic scientist is also well-regarded."

"Miss Scuito works with all the teams, and she is a large part of their success," Vance said. "She is one of the best at her job in this country."

"I would very much like to meet her," Rivera said. "That is one area where I believe my country can learn much from your agency."

"I can escort you down to the lab," Hart said.

Vance nodded. "Miss Scuito might be a bit backed up," he said. "She was here most of the weekend working on a case; I don't think she's been home since Saturday morning."

"We won't disturb her in that case," Hart said. "But we'll check, just to see."

Vance nodded.

"I am looking forward to meeting Miss Scuito," Rivera said. "I think she will be most helpful."
Tony answered his phone. "Yeah, Mulvaney. Why didn't you call Gibbs?" He listened, then hung up. "The man has a cell phone for a reason," he muttered.

"Problem, DiNozzo?" Gibbs walked down the stairs.

"Got another dead body," Tony said.

It was greeted by groans from Tim and Ziva.

"Another one?" Tim stood up slowly. "Once, while at MIT, I calculated how long the human body can go without sleep, but I never actually wanted to test out the theory."

"McGee."

"Grabbing my gear, Boss." Tim fell in behind the others. Tony took the crime scene truck so Tim could sleep in the passenger seat, while Ziva went with Gibbs in the sedan.

At the scene, Ducky examined the car wreck victim in the hospital parking lot but was unable to find even a probable cause of death.

Tony almost thumped his head against the side of the truck. "What's with the run on untraceable poisons this week?" he said. "Does somebody not want us to get any sleep?"

The headslap from Gibbs wasn't a surprise. "Right, Boss. On it, Boss."

Abby was awake and trying to clear the backlog of tests for other teams when Jimmy called to brief her on the new dead body.

"Another mysterious cause of death?" She sighed. "I was hoping to sleep in an actual bed tonight."

"That makes two of us," Jimmy said. "Look, maybe Dr. Mallard will find something when we get him back and open him up."

"I hope so," Abby said.

She started running more tests then headed to the bathroom. She'd stopped trying to keep track of her bathroom breaks. At least today she hadn't gotten sick, just felt like she would.

Jimmy stopped up for a minute, but with work piling up, she shooed him away, cranking the music up to keep everybody else away. She just wanted to get lost in the routine of testing, find that island of normalcy that had been so elusive the past few days.

"Abby?"

She started and turned down the music before turning around. "Oh. Ms. Hart." She forced a smile on her face.

As the obnoxious lawyer introduced Alejandro, Abby took a deep breath and decided to play nice.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you, Miss Scuito," he said. "You are a legend in the field of forensic science."
"Aw, shucks." Just like that, she stopped being angry. It wasn't Rivera's fault she was backlogged and overtired.

"I was wondering if you could give Mr. Rivera a quick tour of your lab."

"I would love to, but I am just way too busy." She really did feel bad about turning him down; most people were bored by what she did or didn't understand it. Well, most people outside the team.

But when Ms. Obnoxious pushed her, Abby snapped back. "Well maybe next time."

Rivera smiled at her, and his compliment made her go all warm and fuzzy inside.

When she finally got them out of the lab, Abby cranked the music back up. Loud music meant no conversations, which meant nobody else would be able to tell she was having enough mood swings to fill a playground.

She shook off the thought and returned to her babies. They started spitting out results, and by the time those were done, the team was back. Abby resigned herself to waiting another day to taking the darn test.

When she finally got home that night, she shook her head when Jimmy suggested dinner. She knew she should, but she was feeling queasy and exhausted and just generally blah. She grabbed a banana from the counter. "I'll eat this," she said. "It's going to go bad if I don't anyway. Then I'm going to bed."

Jimmy looked at her, then nodded. "I'll be in as soon as I eat," he said. "But if I don't eat something, my blood sugar's going to crash overnight."

She nodded. Jimmy's diabetes was basically under control, but they both knew weeks like this meant he had to pay even closer attention to how he ate to keep it that way. Abby dropped the banana peel in the bowl. "Night," she said, kissing him.

He wrapped his arms around her, nuzzling her neck. "I love you, Abs."

"I love you, too," she said.

She headed to bed, falling asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

When she woke up the next morning, the other side of the bed was rumpled, but empty. She lay there, waiting to see how they-, no, how she was going to feel. At least now she could... Abby slapped her forehead. No, she couldn't. She hadn't picked up a home test, figuring she could run one in her lab. She checked the time and realized she wasn't going to have time to pick one up and come back before work.

She started what was becoming her new morning routine, complete with a cold, damp washcloth to the back of her neck. She read the note Jimmy had left on the bedside table and wondered what he had come up with that Ducky hadn't to figure out a cause of death. However, she didn't really have time to think about it if she was going to be at work on time.

Abby pulled clothes from the closet, rejecting three T-shirts before pulling out one she rarely wore. The skulls on it were great, but it was long, past her hips, and looser than her normal shirts. Still that felt like a good idea today. Not that there was anything for anybody to see — she couldn't even tell anything — but it still felt comforting. Especially since she had to try on four bras before finding one that didn't make her feel like she was spilling out the top. Yeah, the test was definitely a formality at this point. She counted on her fingers. Not quite five weeks, if she was counting
right. She flipped through her skirts before finding one that was a little looser through the waist. Not that she really needed it, but again, it felt more comfortable. And if that lawyer lady was going to be hanging around, she needed all the armor she could get.
Chapter Notes

Thanks to Kyrie for her usual editing magic, as well as Sandbar17 for looking at the scene that was toughest to write. Also, thanks to Jesse Stern for his master class in layered writing in Semper Fi — that both challenged me and gave me the inspiration for one scene in this chapter.

Tuesday, May 4, 2010

Tim walked back into the bullpen that afternoon still irritated with Abby.

"What's wrong?" Tony walked over and leaned a hip on his desk.

"That Mexican guy, the one Hart's been showing around," Tim said. "He was flirting with Abby, and she got mad when I said something about it."

"Was she flirting back?" Tony said.

Tim thought about it. "Not really," he said. "I mean, she's Abby. She's like you, there's a little bit of flirting all the time. But not like he was." He rubbed his eyes. "He invited her to speak at a symposium in Mexico."


"Let's just say I don't trust Mr. Alejandro Rivera," Tim said. "I like that Abby and Jimmy got the tattoos when they got engaged, but I really wish she was willing to wear a ring. Alejandro might back off, then."

"Tim, I think you're worrying over nothing," Tony said. "Abby's not going to encourage him, and she's good at shutting down guys trying to make a move on her."

Tim sighed. "I guess," he said. "She just..." He trailed off. "She doesn't seem like Abby the past few days."

Tony just looked at him.

"OK, OK, so we're all a little cranky from lack of sleep," Tim admitted. "But she's being very un-Abby, and it worries me."

"Did you ask Jimmy about it?" Tony said.

"Ask me what?" Jimmy walked over in his scrubs. "We found a cause of death and a partial fingerprint. Dr. Mallard just called Gibbs, who said he'd take care of it."

"He and Ziva are out interviewing suspects," Tony said. "They must be going to pick up the killer."

"At least this was a quick one," Tim said.

Jimmy nodded and yawned. "You'd think living together, Abby and I would have woken up
together at some point in the past two weeks, but either we've had to crash here or one of us has come in early. I'm ready for another vacation."

"Maybe that's your answer," Tony said.

Tim shrugged. "Maybe."

"Answer?" Jimmy crossed his arms. "What's the question?"

"Do you know why Abby's been un-Abby the past day or two?" Tim raised an eyebrow.

Jimmy shook his head. "She hasn't said anything to me, and she's been OK, if sleepy, when I've seen her." He shrugged. "She's a little moody, but I know to expect that at this point. She'll be fine by next week."

Tony snorted. "Moody, huh? If you need a place to crash if she goes all crazy on you, tell her we're having a guys night out. Or in, since we'll just end up at the house while you and McSniper kill CGI bad guys."

Tim rolled his eyes. "You played longer than I did last time we had a chance to sit down in front of the computer," he reminded his husband.

"Yeah, yeah." Tony smiled at him. "At least I don't get moody on you."

Tim opened his mouth, then shut it again. "There's no answer to that without running the risk of Abby figuring out I said something and killing me."

Jimmy grinned. "Wise move."

Before he could say anything else, McGee's phone rang.

After he hung up, he turned to Tony. "Do you know why the director wants to see me right away?"

Tony shook his head. "The cyber classes?"

"I guess I'll find out." He headed upstairs, only to find Abby already standing outside the director's door chatting with his secretary.

"The Director wanted to see me?" he asked.

Tony had just finished his paperwork when Tim came back downstairs and sat on the edge of his desk.

"Not the classes?" he asked, noting Tim's furrowed brow.

Tim shook his head. "Mexico."

"Mexico?" Tony had a bad feeling.

"Because of all the problems with the drug cartels, Vance doesn't want Abby going alone to Mexico. Since I have the computer forensics background, he figures he can get away with sending me as her assistant. He doesn't want to cause an international incident by making it obvious she has a protection detail." Tim rubbed the back of his neck. "We leave first thing in the morning, because there's some reception we have to attend."

"Does Abby know?" Tony said.
"Oh, Abby knows." Tim grimaced. "She's not happy about it either."

"Why not?" Tony frowned. "You're one of her best friends. I would think she'd be happy to have you along."

"Yeah, well, she's not."

Tony stood and motioned for Tim to sit in his chair, then he started rubbing the tension from his shoulders. "Look, it's just for a couple of days," he said. "You heard Jimmy: she's just being moody. She'll be fine once she gets into teaching the geeky science stuff you two love."

He repeated the words later that night from his spot stretched out on the bed as Tim packed his bag.

"I don't know, Tony," Tim said. "Something's hinky about this whole thing." He folded a pair of slacks and put them in his suitcase. "Vance warned me when he scheduled my requalifying tests that something was coming, but I didn't expect M. Allison Hart to show up or for him to give her temporary employee status. Now she's got free run of NCIS, and the Mexicans want Abby to come teach a class just when the violence down there is getting worse." He grabbed a pair of socks from the dresser drawer and threw them in with enough force that they bounced a bit. "You're asking me to believe this is all a coincidence?"

Tony shook his head. "After 10 years working for Gibbs?" He sat up, crossing his legs and resting his hands on his knees. "Something's definitely up. I just don't know what getting the NCIS forensics lab bat to Mexico accomplishes. Abby wasn't even on Col. Bell's radar. If anything, Damon should be worried. He's the one who helped us put Col. Bell away." He watched Tim's face work through a whole range of expressions, starting with worried and ending at puzzled.

"I don't get it," he finally said. "There's something we're missing."

"Considering neither of us has had eight straight in a week, there's probably lots of stuff we're missing." Tony groaned and dropped back on the bed. "Tim, it's been one of the worst weeks in a long time, and you're about to head off to Mexico for two days. Finish packing so we can get some us time."

Tim looked at him, his hands still folding the tan blazer he'd taken from the closet. "How did your appointment with Dr. P go tonight?"

Tony pulled one of the pillows over his head, then realized Tim deserved an answer. He tossed the pillow aside and rolled over to face Tim. "Sorry. Just... it seems like one more thing to deal with."

"You don't have to tell me, Tony," his husband said. "I just want to make sure you're OK before I head off on this stupid trip."

"It's not stupid if you're protecting Abby," Tony said. "Jimmy would be flipping out if she was going there alone."

Tim snorted. "What do you mean 'would be'? I had to reassure him three or four times I'd keep Abby out of trouble."

"Is that possible?" Tony thought about it. "I mean, this is Abby. Trouble is practically her middle name."

"I keep you out of trouble," Tim said, shooting him a smirk. "Compared to that, Abby's a piece of cake."
Tony reached for the pillow he'd tossed aside and hurled it at Tim, who ducked out of the way, then grabbed it from the floor and threw it back. Tony hurled that one, then another, then the third. Tim snagged one and started thwacking him with it, moving his suitcase to the floor between hits. Tony ducked under Tim's arm to grab one from the floor and started hitting back. Tim climbed on the bed, and Tony grabbed the pillow behind him so he could wield one in each hand.

Before long, they had ditched the pillows and were wrestling on the bed, which quickly turned into a completely different kind of wrestling. Tony stripped Tim and pinned him, but his husband pulled one of his sneaky wrestling moves and flipped him over, pressing Tony's wrists into the bed above his head.

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Tim yawned and looked at the clock by the bed. "I really need to finish packing," he said a while later. Tony mumbled something into his chest and snuggled closer.

"Tony." Tim worked his way out of his husband's arms then grabbed his boxers from where they'd fallen to the floor. "One of us has to let Jethro out anyway."

Tony groaned and rolled onto his back. "I'll go let McMutt out." He didn't move for a minute, and Tim rolled his eyes and put the suitcase on the chair by the dresser to finish packing his clothes. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Tony get up and head downstairs.

By the time Jethro bounded up the stairs and into his own room, Tony following more slowly, Tim was done packing and sitting up in bed.

Tony shucked off his sweats and climbed into bed next to him. "I'm OK," he said.

Tim tried to pick up Tony's thought process, then it dawned on him. "You're sure? This was a rough one for you."

Tony nodded. "I'm not gonna lie. Today's session with Dr. P was rough — all of them have been since we caught this case — but I'll be fine."

"You're fine." Tim frowned, thinking how Tony tended to use that word to hide his real emotions.

"Sorry, bad choice of words." Tony winced. "I didn't mean that the way I usually do. I just... Dr. P helped." He paused. "I talked to him about our plans."

"Which ones?" Tim slid a hand across Tony's shoulder to rest at the base of his neck, grounding him.

"Kids. Multiple kids. And waiting." Tony leaned into Tim's hand. "He thought it made sense. Not just for the logistical reasons we talked about, but because he knows I'm still worried I'm not ready to handle kids yet."

Tim rubbed his thumb in small circles. "I think you can do it," he said, "but you need to know it, too."

Tony nodded. "Yeah, that's pretty much what Dr. P said." He wrapped his arms around himself, and Tim slid his hand down Tony's back.

"Come on, let's lay down." He shifted down and waited for Tony to pick his position. When Tony stayed facing him, Tim rolled over, letting Tony pull him back until they were spooning. He wasn't surprised. Ever since that first time after one of Tony's nightmares, his husband always preferred to
hold Tim when he was uncomfortable.

Tony's breath was warm against his neck. "Most of the time, I think I can. But times like this..." A warm gust of a sigh washed over the back of Tim's neck. "Capt. Owen snapped and took out her issues on Chris, because she didn't want to risk them spilling over at work." He sighed again. "I don't want to hurt our kids, but when we get cases like this, all I want to do is pound on something..." Tim tightened his arms over Tony's.

"You won't," he said. "You might volunteer to spar with Ziva or go over to Gibbs' house to sand wood or pull out the Nerf gun and fire darts until Jethro's given up on chasing them, but you wouldn't take it out on our kids."

"Just keep telling me that." Tony's voice was so quiet he could barely hear it. "If you and Dr. P tell me enough times, I might start to believe it."

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Wednesday, May 5, 2010

Abby looked around the outdoor reception as Alejandro greeted them. Having McGee along meant this wasn't the break she had hoped for. Jimmy had freaked a bit that she was going to Mexico because of all the news about the drug wars spilling over into the streets. Thankfully, the fact that McGee was coming along had calmed him down. Jimmy was already worried enough. If he'd found out McGee was protecting two lab bats instead of one, Jimmy wouldn't sleep in the entire time she was gone.

The plane flight had been just late enough that she had felt semi-normal during it, probably even less queasy than McGee, who zonked out on Dramamine during the flight. Who knew she'd ever be glad he had horrible motion sickness?

Suddenly she realized what Alejandro was saying.

"One room?" Abby's belly did a different sort of flip-flop. McGee knew what she was like in the morning, and he was going realize something was going on. If he figured out, he'd be even more overprotective of her. Not to mention he'd read her the riot act for not telling him. And he'd tell Gibbs when they got back, who would have to get his lecture out of the way before he'd let himself enjoy her news.

But she didn't have time to worry about their room arrangements right away, because the class she had come to teach started almost immediately. Nonetheless Abby started snarking at McGee about his yogurt. She figured if they bickered, he'd be too busy thinking about strangling her to wonder about anything else.

It wasn't until later, when the pickup with the members of the drug cartel pulled up, that Abby suddenly realized Jimmy wasn't just being overprotective. She clutched the clipboard to her, suddenly afraid. Her fear changed when McGee stepped forward and she got a flash of having to explain to Tony why his husband didn't come back from Mexico. Tony had already almost lost Timmy once this year; it couldn't happen again. Then again, even if McGee would somehow let her get taken in his place... Gibbs would never rest until they got her back or found her body, and the idea of Ducky doing her autopsy and having to tell Jimmy he'd lost two lab bats, not one... She shivered.

When the woman flipped the bullet toward her, Abby reached out and grabbed it by instinct. She figured she could rely on that same instinct to get her through the rest of the trip. She just had to
get back safely, and everything would be OK.

Except it wasn't. She'd investigated that damn cold case Alejandro had left for her, and she couldn't unsee what she'd found. Abby sat on the plane as they flew home, unable to sleep, trying to figure out what to do next. She only hoped the body and bullet were back at NCIS, she and Ducky would find another alternative to the awful options that kept running through her mind.

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Thursday, May 6, 2010

Ziva was glad to finally get home Thursday night. Both Tony and Jimmy had been on edge during the two days McGee and Abby had been in Mexico. And their behavior had driven Gibbs and Ducky so crazy, the team leader and medical examiner were no fun to be around either.

She walked in to find Sarah sitting on the couch writing away in a notebook.

"Hey, Ziva." Sarah smiled but didn't get up. "Is Tim back yet?"

"Tony was picking him up at the airport." Ziva smiled. "Is the writing going well?"

Sarah shrugged. "I'm just fiddling around right now, trying to play with the characters some." She yawned. "This whole getting up at 4:30 every morning to open the coffeehouse is still wiping me out."

Ziva nodded and headed to the kitchen to make herself some dinner. "Did you eat already?"

"Had something a little while ago," Sarah said. "More than ice cream?"

"Yes, Mom," Sarah said, rolling her eyes so like her brother that Ziva had to fight back a smile. "I made a peanut butter and banana sandwich."

Ziva nodded and decided a sandwich sounded pretty good. Hers, however, would be grilled ham and cheese. Not for the first time, she was glad she had never bothered to keep Kosher. It was impossible when undercover with Mossad, and she enjoyed the food, which would have been prohibited from her diet, too much to give it up now.

Sarah kept working, and Ziva did not try to talk to her. Instead, she finished her sandwich and went to change into workout gear. She had a small kickboxing bag she had moved from what was now Sarah's bedroom to the living room when her friend had moved in. As Sarah worked, Ziva warmed up and started her workout, kicking and punching. After the frustration of spending the day with co-workers who were either worried or irritated, it felt good to let off some smoke. She frowned as she thought about the phrase. It wasn't right, but she did not know what was wrong about it. She dismissed it and started on a cross-jab combination, attacking the bag until her shoulders were ready for a break.

"Ziva?"

She looked up to see Sarah standing there in an oversized nightshirt.

"I am sorry," Ziva said. "I am done, so I will not keep you awake."

Sarah shook her head. "No, it's not that." She frowned. "Josh... That bastard had me so turned
upside down, I was eating all sorts of junk, just drowning my sorrows in food. Now half my clothes
don't fit me," She paused. "I don't know if I want to do kickboxing, but could you help me figure
out what I can do to lose this weight?" She spread her arms out and turned around in a circle. "I feel
fat and tired and just really blah, and I'm sick of feeling like that. Josh is gone, but every time I pull
on another shirt that doesn't fit right, it feels like he's still hanging around."

Ziva wanted to pull Sarah into a hug, but she was covered in sweat. "Of course I will help you," she
said. "Tomorrow if I get out of work at a reasonable time. If not, we will figure out something on
Saturday."

"Thanks, Ziva." Sarah grinned. "Now I'm going to bed — 4:30 comes way too early in the
morning."

"Good night, Sarah," Ziva said.

As she showered and changed into her own nightclothes, Ziva thought about what Sarah had said
and what she could do to help.

-Friday, May 7, 2010-

Gibbs worked silently in his basement. He'd been on edge ever since he realized what case Abby
had brought back from Mexico. He knew in his gut that someone had deliberately assigned this
case to her, but he couldn't figure out who or why. Col. Bell couldn't know about that part of his
past unless somebody had tipped him off, and while Ms. Hart seemed to know a great deal about
him, it was only stuff found on record. This had been buried as deep as possible — there were no
records anywhere unless she'd somehow found Macy's report exonerating him.

When Abby showed up, it was clear she had figured out the secret he had hoped to protect her from
ever knowing. He kept working, needing to keep his hands busy. When the bullet had left his rifle,
he'd been certain he'd be caught. As the years went by, he figured some cosmic justice had
intervened.

"I mean, I know what he did, Gibbs," Abby said. "He killed your wife and your daughter."

He didn't know what to say to that. Abby looked heartbroken, and he hated knowing he'd caused
her to feel the way she did. He wanted to lie to her, to tell her she was wrong... but he couldn't.
What he'd done was just, and he'd never lost a moment's sleep over it. But he also wouldn't risk
Abby, or any of the team, to save himself. Still, when she asked him to tell her she was wrong, he
hesitated, wishing there was some way to ease her pain.

"No. No, I can't say that." He kept working, because watching her face now would kill him. The
last time she'd looked this agonized was when she thought her work would be responsible for
putting Tony in jail for murder.

"Then, tell me how much I've been like a daughter to you and how much you love me."

Gibbs hesitated again, wanting to offer her that reassurance. It had been almost 20 years since he'd
killed the bastard who took Shannon and Kelly from him. He'd made peace with what he'd done,
but he wasn't going to let anybody else take on the blame for what he'd done. "Will that help?" he
finally asked.

"No." Her voice shook, and he could see the unshed tears in her eyes. "What I really need to know,
Gibbs, is if you're going to love me, no matter what."
He would. He couldn't not love her, but he also knew saying the words would make her job harder, not easier. So he didn't say anything. Finally, she wrapped her arms around herself and walked up the stairs. He watched her go, wanting to call her back, but knowing there was nothing he could say or do that wouldn't make it worse. He couldn't do that to his girl.

In the basement, Abby waited for Gibbs to answer her, but he just looked at her while he worked on that chair. She couldn't... This was Gibbs! Gibbs always did the right thing; he didn't go around killing people. Even... the man who killed Shannon and Kelly. The man who killed Gibbs' family. And somebody wanted Abby to be the one to put him behind bars for that. Pedro Hernandez had taken away Gibbs' first family. Now Abby was being forced into a position of taking him away from his second family... from her and Tony and Ziva, from McGee and his family, from Ducky and Jimmy. From...

She swallowed and admitted what she hadn't wanted to before... From his first grandchild. She should be down here telling him that she was pretty sure he was going to get to be a grandfather. That instead of another boat, he could build nursery furniture.

There had to be a way out of this. He had to help her find a way to keep him from going to prison. She couldn't let her findings put him behind bars, not Gibbs. If she did... Gibbs was the anchor of their crazy family, of the team.

He still wasn't answering her, and Abby knew he wasn't going to. She turned and walked back up the stairs. She didn't want to go home right away, even as exhausted as she was. What would she tell Jimmy? She didn't want to keep secrets from him, but if she told him... If she told anybody, she couldn't un-say the words.

She got in her car and headed back toward Georgetown, trying to think of a reason to stall her trip home.

Damon made it to the coffee shop before Ziva Friday night, but he wasn't surprised. She'd mentioned that McGee and Abby had been out of town for a training seminar, so that meant the rest of the team was covering for them.

He ordered his coffee and paid for Ziva's tea as well, but got the barista to agree to wait until Ziva arrived to make it. He didn't know which kind she would like — he'd seen her drink three or four different flavors.

He settled down near the fireplace and picked up one of the magazines on the table, getting lost in an article. He was just about done when Ziva slid into the seat across the table from him, tea in hand.

"Thank you," she said. "You did not have to do this."

Damon smiled. "I wanted to." He studied her, saw the faint lines of tension around her eyes. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Ziva opened her mouth, then shut it again. He waited, and finally she spoke.

"It is not..." She pressed her lips together. "I do not know what to say." Her fingers rubbed the mug as she wrapped her hands around it. "It is difficult." She paused. "Something happens, and we do not say anything. We notice, but we do not speak." She sipped her tea, the mug trembling as she
Damon wondered if he was finally going to learn what happened to her in Somalia. He reached a hand across the table, brushing his fingers across her knuckles. She looked over at him and smiled, the small, gentle smile he'd rarely seen.

"I wish I could tell you," she said. "It is..." She paused. "I do not know the English word for this. The situation is... complicated. And I do not know anything. I have my suspicions, but I cannot talk to anybody about it, not anybody who knows." She hesitated. "If I say something, it changes everything. And I will not be able to unwind my words."

Damon puzzled over her last comment. "Rewind your words?"

"Yes. Rewind. That is what I meant." Ziva reached a hand across the table. "I know you are here for me. You have been here for me."

Damon nodded. "I will always be here for you, Ziva," he said. He wanted her to know, wanted her to feel comfortable telling him what was going on. He didn't know what case had stirred up her memories of Somalia, but he wanted her to be able to talk about it. "Whatever you need."

Ziva nodded. "Thank you," she said. "I do not know..." Her voice trailed off. "The person does not know that I know. I want to help, but I do not want to cause more difficulties." She paused. "I do not think we can get through this, not without reopening old wounds. And we cannot avoid this."

"This...?" When she didn't say anything, Damon replayed her words, searching for a clue. "Ziva, I don't know what is bothering you, but whatever I can do to help, I will."

"I know." She hesitated, and her lower lip quivered. Damon realized he could see tears shining in her eyes, and that said more than anything else could have. He reached across the table, covering both her hands with his. He didn't know what to say, but when Ziva squeezed his hands, he realized he didn't need to speak. He just needed to be here.

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Jimmy wasn't surprised to find the apartment empty when he got home after work. Abby had been preoccupied ever since her return from Mexico the day before, and he suspected it had something to do with that cold case. Dr. Mallard seemed to be suffering similar concerns over their guest in Autopsy. And after Gibbs' reaction to the bullet discussion earlier, Jimmy had a pretty good guess of his own.

Pedro Hernandez had been shot by a sniper almost 20 years ago. Gibbs had been serving as a sniper in Desert Storm back then. The possibility that the two facts were related was hard to dismiss.

Jimmy had almost asked Dr. Mallard, but when he opened his mouth, the medical examiner looked at him in that way he had. Jimmy stopped and realized that if he said the words, they couldn't be unsaid. Which explained the apprehension he was feeling from Abby. She knew Gibbs far better than he did, and if he had figured it out, she must know who had shot Pedro Hernandez. Even he didn't believe that the Mexican government had given her the case to solve by coincidence.

He sat cross-legged on their bed, elbows on his knees as he tried to figure out what to do. He couldn't talk to anybody — if anybody found out about this, Gibbs would end up charged with murder in a Mexican court. Considering they released Col. Bell earlier this year, Jimmy didn't trust them to recognize Gibbs' brand of justice for what it was. He didn't even know if he could talk to Abby about it. If she thought she was the only one who knew, that was one thing. If she thought
others knew, she would feel compelled to give the Mexican government the evidence it needed to convict Gibbs.

Jimmy raked a hand through his hair, not caring that the curls were springing out all over the place. He couldn't talk to Abby, and he couldn't talk to Gibbs. He might be able to not talk to Dr. Mallard — they were getting better about communicating without words the longer they worked together.

His other option would be to slip into his Black Lung persona and cross-check his theory against information he could dig up on his own. He could look up the old case files: the murders of Gibbs' first wife and daughter were still considered open.

He thought back to his conversation with Dr. Mallard when they all had first learned about the team leader's family. "Mr. Palmer, the case is closed. I have no doubt that Gibbs would have gone to hell and back pursuing the man who killed his wife and daughter, and I have told Director Shepard that same thing."

Director Shepard was gone now, and Jimmy didn't know if Ducky had ever shared that comment with anybody else. He'd forgotten it himself until that morning in Autopsy. Jimmy frowned and decided the only thing he could do right now was be there for Abby.

-One of the things Ducky enjoyed about his new brownstone was the ability to run errands without having to take his Morgan out on the roads. Stores were less plentiful than in the Virginia suburbs he'd left, but the basics were available within walking distance.

As he walked into the store, intent on making a few small purchases, he saw a familiar back walking down the aisle ahead of him. It was hardly a surprise; after all, she did not live far from here. He intended to follow her, just to say hello, but the sign at the end of the aisle indicating what supplies were stocked there made him pause. Ducky glanced toward her to see his young friend standing before a selection of pregnancy tests, and he decided to keep walking and hope she did not notice him. He continued until he was safely in another section of the store, and only then did he let himself consider what he had just seen. He assumed she was purchasing the test for herself and that concerned him. Given the current circumstances, he was not certain — in fact, he was far from certain — that a positive test result would be greeted with the celebration such results deserved.

Ducky decided that, for now, discretion was the best option.
Huge thanks to Kyrie for editing, to Kesterpan for giving it a final read from the perspective of somebody who didn't know what was coming and to Jesse Stern for showing me how to do this kind of plot thread weaving in Enemies Domestic. One warning: If you're one of the readers who's been skipping over the scenes that don't involve the guys, you might want to go back and re-read. As I said back around Chapter 7 or 8, the other plot threads are here for a reason. ;)

Saturday, May 7, 2010

Tony watched Tim spread cream cheese on his bagel then head for his study. Almost right away, he could hear the clatter of keys that meant Tim was free writing. Tony sat at the kitchen table and stared at Jethro, who was lying on the tile floor, head on his front paws.

"Do you know what's bugging your dad?" he asked the dog and wasn't exactly surprised to be greeted with silence. "Yeah, me neither." Tony hadn't worried last night when Tim shut himself in the study late into the night, but this was the first time he'd ever headed back there the next day. It was also the first time Tim hadn't told Tony what was bothering him, and that worried him even more. Some things were absolutes in this world, and Tim keeping Tony in the loop was one of them.

He fidgeted a bit then pushed back from the table. He'd go for a run — it was nice enough that he might even manage four miles — and if Tim was still writing when he got back, he'd deal with it then.

It only took a few minutes to change, lace up his running shoes, and grab Jethro's leash. The dog hadn't had a good run in a couple of days, and he was overdue. Tony headed out, starting slow until he was warmed up.

As he ran through the familiar streets, Tony couldn't help thinking about what might be bothering Tim. It definitely had to do with Mexico, and it wasn't his temperamental digestive system, even if that was the excuse he'd used for being out of sorts. Tony knew him too well to buy that, even if everybody else did.

He considered Abby. Tim had been worried about her before they left. But even if she'd had the biggest PMS fit in the universe — and he imagined rampaging Visigoths had nothing on a hormonal Abby — that wouldn't explain Tim being this worried and this tight-lipped about it.

Unless... Tony's stride slowed until Jethro barked at him. "Sorry, boy," he said, picking up the pace. Tim had been worried about Alejandro's flirting with Abby. Could she have-? Tony shook his head. "No way," he said. "She would never." No matter what was going on with Abby, there was no way she'd cheat on Jimmy with Alejandro. Abby was lots of things, and she'd certainly kept her options open in the past, but she was loyal to a fault. So loyal Tony sometimes worried that a dirtbag would exploit her someday to harm the team. If Ari could figure out hurting Abby was one way to attack Gibbs, so could somebody else.
But except for Tim's queasiness, nobody had gotten hurt on the trip. Abby even came back with a cold case to investigate. The idea of being able to find a killer almost 20 years later was preposterous — cases that cold stayed cold — but trust Abs to think she could do it.

It wasn't even some upstanding citizen, somebody whose death caused great harm. From what he'd heard, it was some drug dealer who was killed. The Mexican authorities obviously hadn't wasted much energy on the case 20 years ago — why was Abby digging into it so deeply now?

Tony couldn't imagine cracking a case that cold. Two decades ago, he was still playing for OSU and dreaming of a pro career. McWriter hadn't even hit puberty yet — and he was not going down that road. It didn't matter where he and his husband were back then, not when they were right for each other now. Ducky was god only knows where. His Afghanistan days, working in the refugee camps, were over. Tony wasn't sure if he'd started at NCIS by then or not. He'd never looked in the medical examiner's file, just Gibbs'. He'd still been a Marine 20 years ago, serving in Desert Storm. Still married... Tony let that thought die. But as he finished the last mile of his run, the second half of the thought wouldn't leave his brain. Almost 20 years ago, Gibbs was still married to Shannon, until a Mexican drug dealer took her and Kelly out.

After Gibbs ran off to Mexico, Tony had read his file looking for details — anything — to explain why his boss had walked off the job with just "You'll do" and "Semper Fi." Jenny had added Shannon and Kelly's details to Gibbs' file, and Tony had read the entire case file on their deaths.

And then things clicked into place. He hadn't heard the name of the two-decade-old corpse currently residing down in Ducky's domain, but he was pretty sure he knew it. And now he knew why Tim was locked in his study.

For as much as Tim had seen over the years, he still retained some of his wide-eyed naiveté. Gibbs was Superman to him, even though he'd seen the man's flaws every day for seven years. But those were habits: coffee addiction, the gruff personality, his technophobia. They weren't the character traits that everybody used to describe Gibbs. Those were much more superhero-like: truth, justice, and the American way. Tony wasn't surprised to find out Gibbs had gone for his own version of justice all those years ago, but Tim still equated law and justice in a way Tony had realized was unrealistic years ago, long before he started at NCIS. Tim had always known Tony wasn't perfect — that was pretty tough to miss — but he still thought Gibbs was pretty damn close, even after his margarita safari a few years ago. Now he was faced with Ms. M. Allison Hart, the Mexican government, and a drug dealer killed by Gibbs for revenge. He almost wished they were still investigating the child abuse case.

Tim finally stopped typing when he couldn't ignore the ache in his left shoulder anymore. He stopped and tried to roll it out, but the joint remained stiff. He checked his watch and saw he'd been at it for three hours, which explained how he had accumulated such a big stack of pages next to the typewriter.

Not that he thought any of them would be usable. He probably needed to burn most of them. Shredding wouldn't be good enough — shredded pieces could be reassembled. The typewriter ribbon needed to be shredded, though, so nobody could pull a Landon on him. Except he wouldn't be the focus this time; Gibbs would be. He clenched his hand in a fist. Abby hadn't said anything to him about the cold case she'd brought back from Mexico, but she didn't have to. That 20-year-old bullet was LaPua. .308 moly coated brass. This wasn't a coincidence. He was beginning to understand why Vance had rushed to bring them back. Somebody was gunning for Gibbs, and whoever it was had clout if they could manipulate the Mexican and American governments.
He thought back to the article he'd found the day they'd closed the jet pack case. Col. Bell was the logical suspect — especially with Ms. Hart sniffing around. But if he'd had that much clout with the Mexican government, he should have been able to skate on the charges, even with Damon's testimony, and he'd never have been locked up to start with.

Tim rubbed the back of his neck. If it was Col. Bell, he needed to warn Damon. Abby wouldn't think of it — he was pretty sure she wasn't thinking beyond the case and its implications. Ducky might have figured it out, but he probably wouldn't think to say anything to Damon either. If Jimmy knew, he probably had his hands full with Abby. This had the potential to make or break things for the couple, depending on how they handled it. He didn't envy Abby. Tim knew he really needed to tell Tony, but that would put Tony in a tough spot. Tony couldn't be compelled to testify against Tim, but Gibbs wouldn't have that protection. Tim stood and started pacing.

Gibbs. That was who this came back to, no matter how many times Tim thought it through. The man had more integrity than anybody in NCIS, yet he'd killed a man in cold blood. Sought him out, waited on a ridge, and shot him while he was driving home from the cantina.

Tim stopped and looked at the framed pictures on the bookshelves. The one of him and Sarah reminded him of the first time she'd met the team. Just a few hours before, Gibbs had punished him for hiding Sarah's involvement in the case of a dead sailor by making him wait for his dressing down in the elevator.

"She's my sister." In three years on the team, he'd never defied Gibbs before, but this was for Sarah. For her, he would do anything, even though he knew it was wrong.

Tim sighed. Sarah hadn't been guilty, just framed and scared. How much worse would it have been to find out she was dead, killed for standing up to do the right thing? How would he handle it if Tony was killed while he was headed to the grocery store? Line of duty was one thing. Tim didn't like to think about it, but the odds that it would happen to one of them were reasonable, if you could apply such a word to the situation. The team wore black bands on their badges too often each year to forget the risk their jobs entailed. But outside of that? He couldn't imagine it. He tried to picture Tony and their future kids being killed on the way to basketball practice. If NCIS couldn't bring the killer to justice, could he say he wouldn't do exactly what Gibbs had 20 years ago?

Tim nodded and started feeding pages through the shredder. Normally he'd look through them, see if there was anything worth saving. But he wanted to destroy these, to destroy any chance they could be used to bring Gibbs down. He finished and walked into the kitchen, where Tony was feeding Jethro.

His husband was all sweaty, and Tim knew the two had been out running. Tim looked at the clock. "Want me to make lunch?" he asked.

Tony looked up, and Tim saw something in his expression that hadn't been there before. "You know," he said.

Tony nodded. "I guessed."

Tim frowned. "We can't talk about it."

"I know." Tony put the bag of dog food down and walked over to him. "We'll take care of them, Tim. He's not going to go down for this, and she's not going to be forced to do it."

Tim reached out and pulled him in for a hug, not minding that Tony was sweaty and stinky. "No, he's not. She's not." But as he rested his head against Tony, he couldn't help adding, "I hope."
Gibbs woke up in the living room, his muscles stiff and complaining from sleeping on the too-short sofa. Times like this, he wished he still had a boat to sleep under. That was more like sleeping on the ground and reminded him of back when he was in the Corps. But last night, he hadn't been able to go upstairs, to walk past Kelly's door or the door of the room he and Shannon used to share.

He wondered how much longer he'd even be living here in this house that held so many memories of them. He hadn't told Abby what to do, but he expected her to do the only thing she could do: her job. And that meant he'd probably be headed for a Mexican prison before too long. His past had finally caught up with him, and he wasn't going to run from it. If he could go back to that day in 1991, he'd do the same thing all over again. His only regret was that Abby had been hurt and would feel guilty about discovering the evidence to put him there. He needed to find a way to assure her it was not her fault.

But until someone actually showed up to take him into custody, he wasn't going to hide away and bemoan what might happen. Groaning as his stiff muscles and joints complained, Gibbs sat up and pushed himself to standing. First a shower, then some coffee and breakfast. The yard needed some work; he'd do that.

When he walked outside half an hour later, the sound of Eileen's basketball thudding on the driveway next door reminded him that Abby wasn't the only one who would be affected. Ziva wouldn't blink an eye when she learned what he had done; she'd made harder choices when necessary. Tony understood that law and justice weren't always the same; six years as a cop before joining NCIS ensured that. Ducky probably already knew, would have figured it out when he learned about Shannon and Kelly. Gibbs headed for the backyard and pulled out the hedge trimmers, starting to clip as he considered all the repercussions.

Tim and Jimmy were the ones, beside Abby, Gibbs most worried about, and not only for their opinions about his choice while crouched on a ridge in Mexico 20 years ago. Jimmy was going to be more upset about the position this placed Abby in, while McGee would hate the whole situation, especially its impact on Abby and Tony. While his senior field agent might understand why Gibbs had done it, it wouldn't make it any easier for him to adjust to the fact Gibbs would spend the rest of his life in a Mexican jail. He and Tony had talked about the younger man taking over the team when Gibbs left NCIS. It was part of Vance's master plan, but this wasn't the way it was supposed to happen. Gibbs was supposed to retire, settle in to watch little McGee-DiNozzos and Palmers during the day, trading off with Sean and Eileen so all the grandparents had time with the Baby Gibblets.

Oh, hell. Sean and Eileen. He was going to have to tell them, too. He cursed.

"Bush fighting back?"

Gibbs looked up to see Sean standing on the other side of the fence. "Morning," he said, continuing to trim.

"Need a hand?"

Gibbs frowned. "I'm not good company today, Sean," he said. "Been a bad week."

"Kids all OK?"

Gibbs nodded. "Tired. Probably all sleeping in today."
"Hopefully you guys will catch a break soon." Sean shrugged. "Eileen and I were talking about having everybody over one Sunday, but we haven't been able to find one where the boys and Sarah are all free, much less the rest of you,"

Gibbs swallowed. "Might be a few weeks," he said. "My gut says things are going to be bad for a while yet."

Sean nodded. "If there's anything we can do, let us know," he said. "Even if it's just some leftovers in the refrigerator so you don't have to cook."

"Thanks." Gibbs didn't know what else to say.

"You're family, Jethro," Sean said. "There isn't anything more important than family."

Sarah caught herself humming as she cleaned the milk pitchers at the sink behind the counter. She was done with college, and things finally seemed to be getting back to normal. Ziva was a great roommate, fun to be with when she wanted company, yet more than happy to give Sarah space when she needed it. She loved the apartment her honorary older sister had opened to her. It was just a few blocks from work, close enough that she felt safe walking even when she was headed in to open for the day. And unlike her roommate in the dorms this last year, who thought it was weird she visited Tim regularly, Ziva saw nothing unusual in it.

Her brother's quirky adopted family always made her smile. Tony was a great older brother, always ready to create some mischief with her, but at the same time, always ready to protect her. Abby and Ziva were the sisters she'd always wanted: both great friends despite being so different. Abby was fun and crazy enough to make anything Sarah did seem positively normal — unlike Tim, who was so straight-laced as a teen that he'd failed in his big-brother job of breaking their parents in so her choices would seem sane in comparison. He'd obviously loosened up at some point, considering he used to date Abby. She tried not to think about that, though, in case she permanently scarred her brain. Any sentence with her brother and coffin in it just made her wish for a brain brillo.

Just as Abby and Tony were the crazy ones, Ziva was calm like Tim. She had been there as Sarah tried to find a way past the Josh's betrayal. Abby had handled the practical thing: testing her to make sure he hadn't given her anything. Tony had suggested she go to Abby, and she suspected there had been some intense discussions between her brother and brother-in-law that night.

But Ziva had been a shoulder to lean on. When her emotions were all over the place, Ziva had taken to suggesting evening tea, sharing a quiet moment between friends. Ziva didn't talk much about her past, but what little she said made it clear that she had been through things Sarah couldn't even imagine. In a weird way, it helped Sarah put things in perspective. She had known about the rescue mission to Somalia from Tim and Tony, but only from Ziva had she learned how her friend had ended up there. Ziva still didn't talk much about what had happened while she was there, and Sarah didn't push. She hadn't been through the same sort of thing — there was no comparison between a cheating, stalker-y ex and torture by terrorists — but she understood why Ziva didn't want to talk. Sarah had been trying to push everything with Josh out of her mind from the beginning.

At least she had the team to stand by her, friends better than any she'd made in college. She sometimes wondered how she'd ended up hanging out with a group where almost everybody was 10 to 20 years older than her, but most of the time she didn't notice too much. When Ziva had mentioned that Sarah was about the same age Ziva's sister Tali would have been, Sarah had been glad she could let Ziva be an older sister again. Sarah needed an older sister, somebody who could
She rinsed the last pitcher and dried it off before heading back to the storeroom to take inventory. As she checked the boxes of tea that had arrived that morning against the invoice, she remembered that she'd promised to buy a couple of boxes of the ginger-lemongrass tea with her discount for Ziva. She'd brought it home not long after moving in to see if it would keep her from eating the peanut butter, tabasco and pickle pizza that Ziva said made her gag, since the two sets of flavors just didn't go together. It hadn't, but Ziva had fallen in love with the spicy brew, and Sarah had taken to eating her pizza right after work so the evidence was long gone by the time Ziva got home.

She finished checking off items and dropped the invoice in the right file, then headed to the desk in back to work on the schedule for next week. An hour later, she stood and stretched, then bent over to touch her toes and stretch out her aching back. Her feet might hurt when she was standing all shift, but that was better than sitting down and then having to get back up. She twisted to one side, then the other, before tying her apron back on and heading out to post the schedule and start helping with lunch orders.

It was still quiet when she started slicing bread for sandwiches, but within 20 minutes, the orders were flying fast and furious. She was deep in the middle of assembling sandwiches when she could hear a customer getting angry at Michaela, the quiet girl who was working the register. Michaela had just finished her sophomore year at Waverley, and Will had hired her to fill Sarah's spot when she moved into the manager position. She was nice, but quiet. Sarah figured after a couple of months on the register, she'd get over that, but it hadn't happened yet.

She finished the sandwich that she was working on and nodded to Dylan to take over for her.

"Excuse me, is there a problem here?" She kept her tone professional, even though the glossy, suit-wearing man haranguing Michaela set off all her alarm bells.

"She can't tell me if there is any sunflower oil in the foccacia of the roasted vegetable panini," he said. "I'm highly allergic, and I absolutely can't have it if there is; I'll end up in the hospital."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I don't have an ingredient list to look at," Michaela said. "I know that sandwich lists milk and wheat as allergens on the reference sheet I have here, but I don't know if it normally lists sunflower oil." She twisted her fingers together. "Sarah, is there someplace to look that up?"

"There should be." The jerk cut in before Sarah could respond. "It's a serious allergy. I could die if there's even a bit of sunflower oil in that sandwich."

Well, that would certainly make life easier. She pushed the thought aside and summoned every bit of niceness she could muster.

"If you could hold on a second, sir, I'll get a copy of the complete ingredients list for that sandwich," she said. "I don't know offhand if it has any sunflower oil, as nobody's ever asked me that before, but it will only take a minute to find out." She motioned for him to step over to the unused register. "Michaela, I'll help him. You can help the next person in line."

Not giving jerk time to object, she stepped away and dug out the binder with the ingredients list for every item on the menu from its place in a drawer under the food prep counter. She flipped through and had it open to the vegetable sandwich by the time she stepped back up to the counter. "I don't see any sunflower oil listed," she said. "But you're welcome to check yourself."

"When was the last time this was updated?" He jerked it out of her hands. "It's not at all unusual for companies to start or stop using it suddenly because of cost."
Sarah took a deep breath before replying. "We just received the latest menu updates yesterday," she said. "They sent over anything that had changed, so either this list is new as of yesterday or it hasn't changed since it was issued."

"You don't know which?" He sneered at her, and Sarah reminded herself that imagining ways Ziva could kill him might be fun, but not particularly productive. Besides, Gibbs would be just as effective glaring him into submission.

"The mail came after my shift yesterday, so I wasn't the manager who updated the binder," she said.

"Then how do you know it was done?" He dropped the thick book onto the counter.

"The manager who worked yesterday afternoon initialed that he had done it," she said. "I assure you that the list is up-to-date as of yesterday."

"So you say," he said. "I don't know that I trust you. What are you, 17? I think I'll find another place to eat." He turned and walked out. Sarah turned away from the counter so customers couldn't see when she rolled her eyes. She looked over and realized Michaela was barely holding it together.

She stepped over to the girl and said quietly, "Finish helping this customer and then go take my spot in the line. I'll work the register for a bit."

She stepped back to tell Dylan and reminded him Michaela would probably have a lot of questions.

"We'll make it work," he said. "That SOB didn't need any more coffee anyway — he was majorly wired."

Sarah thanked him and stepped back up to take Michaela's spot. The lunch rush was in full swing, and she was busy for the next half hour just trying to keep up. Finally they hit a lull, just as one of the regulars walked in.

"Sarah, you look wonderful," she said as she placed her order.

"Thanks, Wanda." Sarah rang her up. "Being done with school helps."

"That guy who always used to make you turn white finally out of your hair?"

She nodded. "Off at a summer internship. Now that I don't have to worry about him walking in and having to be civil to him, I'm hoping to finally get over the jerk before fall semester rolls around." She smiled. "It feels good having him out of state so I don't have to deal with him."

"I can tell," she said. "I didn't say anything before, but you were looking pale and tired for several weeks."

"It wasn't any fun, that's for sure," she said. "But everything's back to normal now."

The rest of her shift ended without incident, and she headed home. Ziva was in the living room working with her kickboxing bag. Sarah greeted her as she headed to her bedroom to put away her shoes. She didn't bother changing out of her polo and black slacks.

She could hear the shower running when she padded barefoot to the kitchen. Sarah opened the refrigerator, surprised to find it fairly full. Ziva must have gone shopping last night. She hadn't looked this morning, because she hadn't been hungry.
She sorted through the food before deciding on some grapes and a bottle of water. She really should eat more — the bagel and banana she'd eaten at work was hours ago — but after a full shift making sandwiches and coffee, the idea of making another sandwich was just exhausting.

Sarah settled on the couch, swinging her legs up next to her to give her feet a break. She'd only taken a few weeks of reduced hours at work, but the switch from 12 hours last week to 40 this week was killing her feet and lower back. She ate a few grapes, then settled back, closing her eyes.

She must have fallen asleep, because when she opened them, Ziva was in the kitchen and she could smell food cooking. Sarah finished the last of the grapes, then took the stems and the empty water bottle to the kitchen. As she dropped them in the trash and recycling, she peeked over Ziva's shoulder.

"Chicken?" The meat sizzled on the Foreman grill.

"Some," Ziva said. "I am making an Asian salad I saw a recipe for the other day. The chicken will go on top."

Sarah nodded. "Enough for two?"

Ziva nodded. "More than that," she said. "I made enough for four, to see if it would work as leftovers. Some salads do not."

Sarah wrinkled her nose. "Yeah, those are the one thing we have to toss if they aren't eaten the day we make them at the shop. The lettuce gets all soggy from the dressing."

"I am making the dressing on the side," Ziva said. "We will see."

Sarah took plates down from the counter and set the small table for two. After a quick pit stop, she grabbed a hair elastic from her room to get her hair off the back of her neck.

When she returned, Ziva had put the salad bowl in the middle of the table and was pouring two glasses of milk.

"Milk?" Sarah made a face. "Ziva, I'm not a big milk drinker."

"You said the other day that you wanted my help to deal with the physical effects of Josh, and that is what I am trying to do." She straightened up, milk bottle in hand. "Salad and milk might not be as appealing as pizza and ice cream, but they are more suitable fuel for you right now."

Sarah rolled her eyes, but smiled. "Thanks, Ziva. I guess I have to stop eating like a teenager sometime if I want to lose this weight, right?"

Ziva nodded and went back to the kitchen. When she returned, Sarah was just dishing up salad for both of them.

"I wasn't sure how much chicken you wanted," she said. "I forgot this was supposed to be enough for four, not two."

"I am fine," she said. "I would not worry about how much you eat just yet. First you must start eating the right things. Your body will tell you what you need if you listen to it." Ziva pulled out a chair and sat.

"So how was your date with Damon?" Sarah asked.
Ziva shook her head. "It was not a date," she said. "He is a good friend. He is always there when I need him."

"That is a good friend." Sarah smiled. "I was just thinking earlier that you've been like that for me the last few weeks. Although I was thinking more big sister. Don't get me wrong, I love Tim, but it's nice to have a woman's perspective sometimes."

Ziva nodded and ate a bite of salad.

"Did Tim and Abby get back OK?" Sarah was surprised at how much she liked the crunchy salad and forked up some more spinach. "I mean, you would have said if anything happened, or Tony would have called, but-"

"They were both at work yesterday," Ziva said. "Tony was calling your brother McQueasy because he was having some... issues after eating the food in Mexico. Abby was in her lab all day, so I did not see her, but I assume she did not have the same problems as your brother."

Sarah nodded. "Yeah, Dad figured out pretty early he would be the last sailor in our family. Between Tim's seasickness and my refusal to follow the rules, neither one of us was Navy material."

"I have heard stories from Jack about Gibbs as a child," Ziva said. "He does not sound like he followed the rules either. Even now that he makes his own, he does not always follow them."

"Rules?" Sarah looked over. "Like what?"

Ziva opened her mouth, then shut it again. She pressed her lips together, before finally saying, "He lets McGee and Tony break Rule 12, the one about never dating a coworker. And we all have broken rules at one time or another. I am guilty of breaking his Rule 8 — never assume; always verify. That was the first one I broke, before I had even joined the team. When Gibbs made me verify my assumptions, I learned how wrong I was." She paused again. "I-"

Sarah waited for her to finish the sentence, but Ziva just ate her salad.

"It's pretty easy to assume," Sarah finally said. "I got mad at Tim that time I was suspected of murder, because he tried to figure out if I had killed my ex. I didn't understand why he wouldn't just trust me." She sipped her milk. "I guess I understand better now."

"Yes, sometimes we need to look beyond the surface." Ziva cut a strip of chicken into smaller pieces. "It is easy to reach a wrong conclusion when we do not think about the whole picture."

Ziva didn't say any more, but Sarah got the impression that the other woman was holding back, and not for the first time since they had sat down to eat. This was another way she differed from her brother: she didn't like puzzles and trying to figure out hidden meanings. She was much too straightforward for that, and it was something she had always appreciated about her roommate — even when Tim and Tony would sometimes cringe when she came across as being too blunt.

Finally Sarah let her frustration spill out. "Ziva, I know there are times when you can't talk about things related to your work or don't want to talk about things that are too personal, but this... This isn't one of those times, is it?"

Ziva looked up from her salad and, after she finding whatever it was she was looking for in Sarah's expression, she nodded and set her fork down next to her plate. "You are right. I am avoiding a difficult discussion, and it is not good to postpone it any longer. Since we have been living together, I have been noticing small things, and I have become very worried about you."
"Worried about me?" Sarah asked.

"Yes. For several weeks now, I have been seeing signs you are... no, you have... " She hesitated. "I know you talked with Tim and Tony about this right after you broke up with Josh, and Abby, she is not usually mistaken. Not in her lab, not when it is important."

"Ziva, what are you trying to say?" Sarah set down her own fork, her stomach too tied up in knots to eat any more of the salad.

"I think..." She hesitated again, then seemed to come to a decision. "Come, with me," she said, walking into her bedroom. Once inside, she picked up a bag lying on the dresser and handed it to Sarah.

Sarah looked inside the bag and froze. She shook her head, but even as she tried to deny the implications, the events over the past few months flashed through her mind re-evaluated in light of what Ziva was suggesting.

"You need to face this," Ziva said quietly.

"No," Sarah said. "No. I can't-"

Ziva looked at her. Not a glare like Gibbs had or the eye-roll Tim had mastered, but the directness that had been missing earlier and that clued Sarah in that something was wrong.

She swallowed and straightened her shoulders. "Can I?" She nodded to the bathroom off Ziva's bedroom.

"Of course, I will be here for you when you are done."

Sarah stepped into the bathroom and shut the door before opening the box with trembling fingers. Despite the show of confidence she'd made in front of her big sister before coming in here, she had a queasy feeling in her gut that Ziva was right.
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

And now the fallout begins. :) Thanks again to Kyrie for editing! Also thanks to everybody who voted for my stories in the NFA Hinky Awards. Steal My Breath Away won for Slash Pairing (FR7-FR15), Ignoring the Evidence was tied for second for Other Het Pairing (FR7-FR15) and honorable mention for Jimmy Palmer Characterization and Breathe was third for Outstanding Series. :) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saturday, May 7, 2010

Jimmy lay on his side, watching Abby sleep in their bed. It was late morning, but he wasn't surprised she still was asleep. It had been almost midnight before she got home the night before, and then they had stayed up late talking.

"Jimmy?" Abby stopped by the couch, her arms wrapped around her body. "I didn't think you'd still be up."

He nodded and put down the book he'd been reading. "Abs..." He chewed his lower lip. "Come here." He motioned her over and patted the cushion next to him. She hesitated, then curled up against him, burying her head in his neck. Jimmy wrapped his arms around her, rubbing one hand up and down her back. "I know, Abs." He placed a kiss on her head.

She pulled away and looked up at him. "You know?" She bit her lip. "What do you know?"

He hesitated, wanting to pick his words. "I was helping Dr. Mallard with some research on your cold case this afternoon."

Her eyes widened. "Oh. You know that." She pulled back and started wringing her hands, the fingers twisting around each other. "I-"

He put a finger to her lips. "Don't say it, Abs," he cautioned. "If we say it..."

She nodded. "I know." She bit her lip. "I've already said it. To Gibbs. That's where I was, because I needed him to tell me I was wrong, that I'd screwed up the forensics or the ballistics or something. He said he couldn't do that, and now I don't know what to do, because I can't- He's Gibbs."

Jimmy pulled her onto his lap and wrapped his arms around her. "I know, Abs, I know." He pressed his lips to her forehead. "We'll figure it out." He pulled her tighter as he felt her body start to shake, her tears wetting his shirt.

They'd stayed that way for a while, as he let her cry everything out. She'd fallen asleep in his arms, and he'd finally carried her to bed. She hadn't stirred the entire time, even when he undressed her and took out her pigtails, combing his fingers through her hair. She'd just snuggled into his side when he lay down beside her.

Now, he watched and wondered if there was any way out of this that wouldn't end up tearing her apart. Gibbs knew what was going on, but Jimmy wasn't sure that helped much. Gibbs would go to
any lengths to save a member of the team, but if he was going to save himself, something should be happening by now.

As the sun rose higher in the sky, Abby continued to sleep. Finally Jimmy got up to make himself some breakfast before his rumbling stomach woke her. Before long, he realized the shower had started, and he poured another bowl of cereal, leaving the milk in a glass next to it so Abby could add it herself.

She joined him a little while later, her face paler than usual. She hadn't bothered with a collar or cuffs, and her "I heart Nerds" T-shirt and jeans weren't her usual black on black. Her damp hair hung loose around her face.

"I need to go into the Navy Yard," she said, her voice quiet. "I need... I have to run the test results again, see if there's anything I'm missing."

Jimmy nodded. "If you need some help, I hear there's this agent wanna-be called Black Lung who's always willing to help."

That got her to smile. "Thanks, Jimmy." She reached across and hugged him. "I think I need some time alone, though. If we're there, we'll talk, and I don't want to talk any place M. Allison Hart might be able to hear."

Jimmy swallowed. "I forgot about her." He frowned. "You don't think she..."

"Somebody is, and she's been right in the middle of this," Abby said. "Somebody had to convince the Mexican government to invite me and give me that case. She had Alejandro's ear, and she's working for Col. Bell."

Jimmy nodded. "That's not a coincidence."

"Gibbs doesn't believe in coincidences," Abby said. "Neither do I."

"Is there anything I can do?"

Abby hesitated.

"Abs?"

"Timmy... He was there. He knows about the bullet. I don't know if he's figured it out, but..." She hesitated. "He was in the lab yesterday when Gibbs came in for information. I wanted to ask Gibbs about it then, but I couldn't with Tim there. But he was looking at us, you know how he gets when the McGears are turning and he's putting puzzle pieces together and figuring things out. And he might have figured this out. But if he did, he didn't say anything, and I don't know if he knows. But if he does know, that might help because I can't save Gibbs myself, and I don't want to tell anybody who doesn't know. Because if the director finds out about this, it could be bad... really bad. Because he doesn't like it when we bend the rules, and this is way past bending the rules, this is breaking some of them, and-"

Jimmy put a finger to her lips. "I'll talk to him, Abs."

A few minutes later, Sarah came out, holding the stick in her hand. "I can't look," she said. "I just... I can't."
Ziva patted the spot beside her on the bed, and Sarah joined her. "Do you want me to look?"

Sarah nodded and handed over the pregnancy test. Ziva took a deep breath and uncovered the results window.

"Ziva?" Sarah felt her voice shake.

Ziva wrapped an arm around Sarah's shoulders. "I wish I had been wrong." Sarah started crying and was glad to feel Ziva pull her close for a hug.

After a few minutes, Sarah pulled away. "What am I going to do, Ziva?" she said. "I'm not ready to be a mom. And even if I was, Josh is not who I would want to be the father of my baby." She put a hand to her stomach. "I have a baby in here, and I didn't even realize it. How dumb does that make me?"

Ziva rubbed her back. "It makes you human," she said. "You had taken a test and thought that ruled it out. If you hadn't, you might have figured it out before."

"I guess," Sarah said. She tried to imagine herself as a mother and failed. She could picture Tim as a dad, but he was so much older than she was. She'd just graduated from college. This wasn't supposed to be happening. "What am I supposed to do?"

"I cannot answer that for you," Ziva said.

Sarah swallowed hard. She tried to imagine telling her parents, telling Tim and Tony, telling the others. Telling Josh. "How... I can't do this."

"That is your decision," Ziva said. "You do not have to do it."

"But..." Sarah sighed. "What would you do if you were pregnant and wanted nothing to do with the baby's father?"

Ziva squeezed her eyes shut. After a long minute, she said, her voice thick, "The decision I would make would be colored by my experiences." She drew in a deep breath. "We come from two very different worlds, Sarah. The decision I would make in a similar situation would have so many other things to factor into it that your decision does not, and vice-versa."

"Ziva, help," she said. She felt her voice quiver and hated herself for it. "I don't want to tell my parents, and if I tell Tim, he and Tony are going to hunt Josh down and kill him."

"I do not blame them," Ziva said. "I would go with them."

"Ziva." Sarah couldn't figure out what else to say, but apparently that was enough.

"Would you like me to call Abby?" Ziva said. "Maybe the three of us can figure out what to do next."

Sarah just nodded, a lump in her throat making it impossible to swallow.

"Why don't you go change into something more comfortable, while I call Abby," Ziva said.

Sarah nodded and headed to her own room. Once there, she stripped off her work clothes, breathing a sigh of relief as she unbuttoned her pants. Yeah, that should have been a clue right there. Before she changed, she looked in the mirror on the back of her door, the one she'd been avoiding. From the front, she just looked like she'd put on weight, the same thing she'd been grumbling about for
weeks. But now she turned to the side and realized Ziva had been right. She wasn't fat, she just had a small belly. Looking at her body from the side, seeing her belly sticking out, she wondered how she had ever missed that she was pregnant.

"You're an idiot," she muttered. Smoothing a hand over her bumped-out belly, she tried to imagine a baby in there. Even as she did, she knew she shouldn't. She didn't want a reminder of Josh around, and if she wasn't going to keep the baby, she shouldn't get attached. If she started thinking of it as a baby, that would just make her decision harder.

Sighing, she stepped away from the mirror and rummaged in her closet. She pulled out a pair of shorts with an elastic waist, but decided she didn't just want to throw on a baggy T-shirt. Instead, she pulled out the shirt she'd worn for graduation last weekend. Just because she felt like everything was falling apart around her didn't mean she had to look like a wreck when Abby showed up. She put the shirt on and looked in the mirror.

"Wow," she said. "I really am an idiot." Now even from the front she looked pregnant. Or was it she was just seeing herself differently? Sighing, she went to the kitchen. She needed some tea and was glad to see Ziva was heating water.

"I thought you might want some," she said.

"Thanks, Ziva." She hugged the older woman. "And thanks for telling me. I feel like such an idiot." She motioned at herself. "How did I not notice?"

Ziva smiled. "We are able to avoid noticing many things if we want to," she said. "The mind can easily be deceived."

"What did Abby say? Did you tell her?" Sarah sat at the counter.

"She is on her way," Ziva said. "She was just leaving the Navy Yard after finishing a report, so she will be here soon." Ziva lifted the kettle off the burner and poured hot water into both cups, added a tea bag to each. "Here." She passed Sarah her mug.

Sarah took it and walked into the living room, settling on the sofa, tucking her legs up under her. She sipped the tea and tried to think about what she needed to do, but it was too much. Instead, she let her mind drift, knowing Ziva and Abby would drag her back to practical things soon enough.

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Abby signed into the NCIS building and headed for her lab. There weren't many people around because it was a Saturday, and she was glad. She had to re-run the tests. Gibbs said she hadn't made a mistake, but there had to be something she could do, some loophole she could find. Contamination or broken chain of evidence or something.

Two hours later, she still hadn't come up with anything, and she was beginning to think she wouldn't be able to. If she didn't come up with something, she'd have to... No. She wasn't turning Gibbs in. She couldn't compromise her science, but she had to find a way out of this.

When her cell phone beeped and she saw Ziva's name on the ID, she almost didn't answer. But Ziva didn't know about this, and she would wonder if she couldn't get Abby.

"Hey, Ziva," she said.

"Abby, we need your help."
"Who's we?" She frowned.

"Sarah. She... She is pregnant by Josh. I had her take a test. She does not want to have a baby, especially Josh's. She does not know what she should do, and I do not have... My background is too different. Can you come over?"

Abby pressed a free hand to her belly. "I'm at work, finishing up a report. I'll be there as soon as I can." She hung up and sank into a chair. Could the day get any worse?

Considering Sarah's feelings about being pregnant, now was not a good time to tell her or Ziva she suspected she was pregnant, too. Not to mention the feeling that Gibbs' freedom relied on her finding a loophole to save him and the vain hope that if nobody said the words, then it wouldn't be true. No, all she could do was find her happy Abby mask and put it firmly in place to hide her own worries and focus on Sarah.

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Sarah woke up when she heard voices talking and realized she must have fallen asleep. She sat up on the sofa, then stood up just in time to get wrapped up in an Abby hug.

"Oh, sweetie, how are you doing?" Abby pulled her close, and Sarah drew comfort from her friend.

"I don't know." Sarah swallowed at the break in her voice. "It's... too much. I don't know what to do." She sat back on the sofa, and Abby joined her.

"We will help," Ziva said, sitting on the floor next to her, so the three of them were together. "It is what older sisters do, yes?"

"Yes," Abby said. "Sarah, do you know how far along you are?"

Sarah shook her head. "No, but Josh has to be the father, and we haven't had sex since the night before I caught him in bed with that skank."

Abby stood up. "Come on, there are websites that will let us figure this out. Once we know that, we can figure out what comes next."

Abby grabbed her laptop bag from where she'd left it inside the door and set it on the coffee table. She booted it up, then pulled up a website, and started asking questions. Sarah answered as best she knew the answers.

"It looks like you're about nine weeks, maybe 10," Abby said. She pulled up a calendar program and flipped back to March. "That explains why my test on you was negative. It was too early." She paused. "I should have thought of that and had you take another one, like we're doing next month with the HIV test. I know there's some time in there before you can actually get a positive test."

"You couldn't have known," Sarah said. "I should have figured it out when I was all nauseous. Josh was evil, but if I didn't get sick when I was accused of murder, he shouldn't have been able to cause it." She paused and tried to think about what Abby said. "Wait, that's almost three months," Sarah said. "But... You mean I'm having a baby in a little more than six months?"

Ziva nodded, moving to sit on Sarah's other side and rubbing a hand soothingly over the younger woman's back.

Abby tilted the laptop to show her the calendar. "Middle of December, it looks like. It would be a Christmas baby." She paused. "If you decided to have it. You don't have to, you know." Abby
paused. "There's nothing that says you have to have the baby."

Sarah nodded. "I know. But is it too late?"

Abby shook her head. "Not if it's the first trimester, no matter where you are. I'd have to look up D.C., but they probably allow them past that if you need more than two weeks to make a decision."

"You have time to decide," Ziva said. "You do not have to figure everything out tonight."

Sarah nodded, afraid her voice would shake if she tried to talk.

"You could also give the baby up for adoption," Abby said. "There are lots of agencies that will help you with that." She pulled up a list of bookmarks. "I found a bunch for Tim and Tony — you could arrange with one of them to give it up."

Sarah groaned. "Oh, god, Tim and Tony are going to kill me."

"No, they are more likely to kill Josh," Ziva said. "They are very protective."

Sarah buried her head in her hands. "Great. Then they'll be in jail for killing Josh, and I'll be knocked up. This sucks."

"You don't have to tell them anything," Abby said. "If you don't have the baby, it's your decision. You don't have to tell anybody if you don't want to."

Sarah thought about it, but shook her head. "And they're not going to be able to tell from seeing me?" She snorted. "Besides, not telling Mom and Dad is one thing. Tim and I have each kept secrets from them before, or at least waited to tell them until it was far enough in the past that they wouldn't get too mad. But I can't keep a secret like this from Tim."

"You would not be able to keep it from Tony, either," Ziva said. "If he suspects something is wrong, he will keep talking until you tell him. He is too good at that."

"Good point," Abby said. "You know, that's the problem with having a bunch of trained investigators in the family. There's no way to keep a secret." She sighed. "Sarah, don't make a quick decision. The baby hormones have you all over the place emotionally. Take some time and let yourself figure out what you want." She paused. "Do you want me to tell Tim?"

Sarah opened her mouth, then closed it again, giving herself time to think.

"No," she said. "I'll tell him. Not today. But I can't ask you to do that."

Abby nodded and wrapped an arm round her. "Anything you need, let me know."

"Can you..." Sarah paused. "Do you have to tell Jimmy? I mean, right away?" She inhaled, still feeling shaky. "I don't want to ask you guys to keep secrets, but I don't want Tim to be the last one to find out, and I don't want to tell him until I have a chance to think about what I want to do."

Abby rubbed a hand along her arm. "I won't tell him," she said.

"And I will not tell Damon," Ziva said. "He will understand when he finds out."

Sarah tried to smile. "Thanks," she said. "I'm... I'm going to go lie down."

She had to wait through another bone-crushing hug from Abby, of course, but finally she was able to curl up on her bed and think about what had happened. She lay on one side and allowed her arm
to curl around her belly. She didn't have a huge bump yet, but it was definitely there. She couldn't
decide if she should think of it as a baby or not. Not just a baby, but her baby. And Josh's baby. She
made a face at the idea. She didn't want kids, never had. She definitely didn't want them right now.
And to have to spend more than six months with Josh's spawn growing inside her, plus 18 years of
raising it, dealing with him... There might be worse hells around, but Sarah thought this one seemed
pretty miserable.

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Jimmy pulled up outside the guys' house and was glad to see both cars were there. As he walked up
the driveway, he could hear Jethro barking in the backyard, so he wasn't surprised to see Tony
come to the fence.

"Jimmy. What's going on?" Tony turned and tossed something, and Jethro went tearing after it.

"Black Lung, actually," Jimmy said. "McGee around?"

Tony nodded. "Inside. Mudroom door should be open — I'll meet you inside."

Jimmy let himself in and took his shoes off.

"Hey," Tim said as he looked up from where he was standing in the kitchen. "What's up?"

"Came to talk to you two," Jimmy said, just as Tony walked in the back door.

"OK, Black Lung," Tony said. "Sit rep."

"Mexico. Cold case. 20 years cold." Jimmy noticed the guys exchanged looks but didn't seem
surprised. "You know, too."

"We figured," Tony said. "We didn't know for sure."

"It's for sure," Jimmy said. "Abby went back into the Navy Yard to run more tests, but the evidence
is pretty conclusive."

"Does Gibbs know?" Tony asked. "I mean, yeah, he knows. But does he know we know? Does he
know Abby knows?"

Jimmy nodded. "Abby went over there last night, hoping he would tell her she'd messed up."

"And?" Tim asked.

"He said he couldn't do that." Jimmy folded his arms across his chest. "Guys, we've got to do
something."

"Yeah, but what?" Tony said. "Somebody's got a master plan, and until we figure out what that is,
anything we do might make things worse."

"So we figure out what the plan is," McGee said. "I'll do some digging. It won't exactly be legal,
but if Ms. Hart's as involved in this as we think she is, she can't file a complaint."

"You sure about that, McHacker?" Tony said.

"There has to be something criminal about all of this," McGee retorted. "Otherwise they could
have just taken this to Vance or SecNav or the Mexican government. The law's on their side.
They're not using the law, so they must have something illegal in mind."
"It's a good theory," Jimmy said. "The question is, what are they planning?"

Chapter End Notes

    Just seven chapters to go - and lots of plot threads still waiting to unravel...
Chapter Notes

Really important author's notes on this chapter.

First, this one comes with a hankie warning. Kyrie's read the penultimate and antepenultimate scenes at least a dozen times and still cries during them. Wanted to give you fair warning. If you messaged me earlier concerned about a particular storyline and where it might go — you know who you are — this is the chapter you might want to skip.

Also, because of the storylines, characters are considering paths you might or might not agree with. I've tried to keep the thoughts as authentic to the characters as possible. If you disagree with a character's thoughts, please pause and consider whether you think it's something that character in that situation might think, say or do before blasting me. If you still think it's OOC or poorly written, fire away.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saturday, May 7, 2010

Abby left Ziva and Sarah's, but she couldn't drive home right away. She sat in her car for a few minutes, just trying to let herself process everything. First Gibbs, now Sarah, and it was like somebody had decided this was the week of secrets and she was the keeper of them. Ziva didn't seem to have figured out what was going on with the cold case, probably because she was distracted by Sarah, and the guys obviously hadn't figured out what was going on with Sarah. She wondered if they knew about Gibbs or if she and Jimmy and Ducky were alone with that particular problem. Like she and Ziva were alone with Sarah's problem because Sarah made them promise not to tell anybody, so Abby was the only one who knew about both things and she didn't know how she could keep Gibbs' past a secret from Ziva and Vance and keep the baby secret from Jimmy and Timmy and Tony and Gibbs. Both babies, because this was one bit of news Sarah didn't need to hear right now. At least Baby Lab Bat was cooperating — she felt fine today. She wondered when Ziva first called how Sarah could have not realized she was pregnant, but feeling the way she did now, Abby could understand it.

She started the car and pulled away from the curb, navigating her way the few blocks home. She checked her reflection in the rear-view mirror to make sure Jimmy wouldn't be able to tell she had teared up a little talking with Ziva after Sarah went to bed. When she got upstairs, Jimmy was in the kitchen cooking.

"Hey, Abs," he said. "Bandit and Spider Mike were already on the case."

"Bandit-?" She frowned at him, then remembered the "war game" to trap Michelle Lee. "So what did you guys decide?" She leaned against the doorway.

"Spider Mike is going to some digging his usual way, see if he can find anything that will link the players, tell us what the game plan is." Jimmy gave the pot on the stove another stir and set the spoon down, turning to face her. "Bandit's handling the 'observe and report' part of things, and Black Lung will check with Rubber Ducky to see if there's anything in the evidence that might cast
Abby shook her head. "I tested everything I could think of," she said. "I either have to fake the science or turn him in." She squeezed her eyes shut, fighting back tears. Next thing she knew, Jimmy's arms were around her, holding her close.

"Abs, we'll find another solution," she said. "There has to be something."

She shook her head. "What if there's not?"

Jimmy pulled away, and she looked up to see a serious expression on his face. "We'll figure something out," he said. "Look, talk to Gibbs. You're the only one who can get away with that without giving the forces of darkness any more ammunition."

She couldn't help a shaky giggle. "The forces of darkness? Usually I'm a fan of darkness." Abby wrapped her arms around Jimmy's waist and squeezed.

"You might be a fan of black, Abs, but you're definitely on the side of the forces of light." His hand rubbed up and down her back, starting to ease away the tension that was building there.

"Mmmmm," she said. "OK, you guys do what you can." His hand slowed. "Don't stop."

"After dinner, let me give you a back rub," Jimmy said. "Your back's probably a bunch of knots."

Abby nodded, cheek brushing against his T-shirt. "It is. It's been tight and aching all day."

So after she did the dishes, she headed to their bedroom to find Jimmy had spread towels out on the bed. She stripped off her clothes and lay face down, head resting on a pillow. His hands smoothed over her skin, digging in and working out the knots. She felt her shoulders start to soften and melt under Jimmy's touch. He kept going, down to her lower back, softening his touch when she winced.

"Everything OK, Abs?"

She nodded. "Just tense," she said. "My feet aren't used to my Chucks instead of boots."

He snickered. "You're the only person I know who's less comfortable in sneakers than heels," he said. He kept his touch gentle, and she started to relax more.

Abby felt herself drifting toward sleep, so she was glad that Jimmy turned the lights off and got into bed next to her. She snuggled close.

"Last night, when I went to see Gibbs, I asked him to tell me I was like a daughter to him," she said, her voice catching. Jimmy's hand rubbed along her spine. "I told him I needed to know he would love me, no matter what." She swallowed. "He didn't say anything."

She felt Jimmy press a kiss to her forehead. "Abs, there is nothing you could do that would keep me from loving you," he said. "Whatever happens, however this turns out, I love you and I'll be right here with you."

Abby kissed his chest. "I know. I..." She hunted for the words. "I don't think I could handle this without you."

Jimmy didn't say anything, just tightened his arms around her. They fell asleep that way.
Sarah opened her eyes to see sunlight streaming into her room. She blinked, and started to get up. A wave of dizziness reminded her of what happened the day before. She put one hand to her head and eased back down, lying on her side. Without thinking, one hand curved across her belly. She blinked back tears and curled into her pillow. Sarah had hoped she would wake up and find out yesterday was a nightmare, but she just couldn't catch a break.

Tears soaked her pillowcase as she tried to wrap her mind around everything. By the time Abby had left last night, Sarah had just wanted to go to bed, and Ziva hadn't tried to stop her. She'd thought it would be tough to fall asleep, but she'd dropped right off. Now she was awake and didn't have a clue what to do.

Sighing, she pushed herself up, more slowly this time. She decided to start with a shower, then go from there. She stood and stripped off her clothes, grabbing her bathrobe. She couldn't help looking in the mirror again before she put it on. She tried to suck in her belly, but couldn't get it all the way. Still, it wasn't as bad as she thought yesterday. If she wore the right shirt and some baggy shorts, nobody would notice.

Sarah pulled her robe on and headed for the bathroom. She saw Ziva sitting on the couch curled up with a book, so she didn't disturb her.

When Sarah was done, she went to pull on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. The first pair buttoned, but they were too snug to really be comfortable. She tried sliding the front of the waistband down a bit and decided that would work. She dug out a tank top that had been fairly loose last summer, but now fit fine through the chest. She made a face at her reflection, but when she turned to the side, she had to pull the shirt tight against her to tell she was carrying a little extra. She wrinkled her nose, but decided it was the best she could do.

By the time she fixed herself some breakfast that sounded halfway appetizing and put the kettle on, Ziva was just finishing her book. Sarah sat on the other end of the couch and tucked her legs under her.

"How are you feeling today?" Ziva asked.

"As in, do I feel sick? Or do I feel like Josh just came back and stomped all over my future?" She knew she sounded bitter, but she didn't care. "How am I supposed to feel?"

Ziva opened her mouth, then closed it again. Finally, she said, "I do not know." She hesitated. "Sarah, whatever you decide, it is your decision. And I know that is both frightening and comforting."

"What if I make the wrong decision?" Sarah hated sounding like a scared little kid, but that was kind of how she felt. "It's not like I can un-do it once I choose, and I don't know what the right decision is. I don't even know if there is a right decision."

"Sometimes, there is not," Ziva said. "I have been in situations before where every decision seemed like a bad one."

"What did you do?" Sarah pulled one knee to her chest, resting her chin on it.

"I made the decision that was the best one I could at the time," she said. "If I even had the choice. There were times I did not."

Sarah bit her lower lip. "You weren't..." She hesitated, not sure how to ask this of her friend. "Did
"you worry about what other people would think?"

Ziva looked away. "There have been times," she said. "The hardest decision I ever made, and the most right one I have ever made, came when I chose my actions despite what people would think." She looked back at Sarah. "It is difficult, especially when it involves family, but knowing when a decision is right and making it even when it is the difficult one is a sign that we are moving beyond childhood, beyond blind obedience to somebody else's rules."

Sarah nodded. She thought about her mother's reaction, and her dad's. What would they think if they found out she was pregnant? What would Tim and Tony think? She swallowed. Her brothers were talking about having their own family. Would they understand that she didn't want this? Or would they wonder why she was passing up on something they wanted? What would her coworkers and friends say? She could imagine the stares and the whispers, the speculation as she started to show. Could she handle that? What about telling Josh? What would he want? Did she want to be tied to him for 18 years? Even if he wanted nothing to do with the baby, if she kept it, she'd need his help with child support. All these questions and no answers. She sighed.

"Sarah?" Ziva's voice was quiet.

"I keep trying to figure out what to do, and I just don't know." She felt tears leak out and swiped at them with the back of her hand. "I never really thought about it before, even after that one time the guy set me up to be raped, what I would do. I just figured I'd use birth control and I'd be OK." She took a deep breath. "I know Abby was right, I don't have to keep it. I could get an abortion. That seems like the easiest solution, because I did everything right and this still happened, and it's going to ruin everything." She stopped.

"Sarah, take a breath," Ziva said. "You are sounding like Abby." She smiled. "We will think about this, and you will find the decision that is right for you."

Sarah nodded and tried to pull herself together. "Right. I can do this." She nodded. "OK, so what are my options?" She got up and walked around the room. "I could get an abortion. It's still early enough, and then I wouldn't have to spend every day thinking about what Josh did to me." She stopped in front of the pictures Ziva had hanging between the windows. "But that doesn't feel right. I always thought it would, but I've seen how excited Abby and Jimmy and Tim and Tony have been about the idea of kids. Mom and Dad and Gibbs are looking forward to being grandparents. They don't know about the baby, but it still feels like I'm taking something away from them."

She walked back over and sat on the arm of the sofa. "I could have the baby, but I know I don't have the money or the job to do that. The coffee shop only pays enough for me to get by, and that's sharing an apartment with you. There's not enough space for a baby, too, and I can't afford a place on my own."

Ziva nodded. "We could look for another apartment, one with more space, but it would cost more."

"I know. And Josh should have to pay child support, but I don't know that he will. And I don't want to have to drag him to court." She made a face. "And if I have the baby, what if she or he looks like Josh? I don't want a reminder of him every day."

"I do not blame you," Ziva said. "That would be difficult." She opened her mouth, then pressed her lips together. "There are other options."

"I know." She wrapped her arms around herself and hugged. "I could give the baby up for adoption. Abby even mentioned that yesterday. But..." She searched for the words. "Tim and Tony want to adopt. If I asked them if they wanted the baby, I..." She faltered. "If it looks like Josh, or it
reminds me too much of him, I'll have to face that every time I see them, and I don't want this to
ruin anything. And, I don't know, it's weird. I'd be the baby's mother and its aunt and how would
we ever explain it?" She sighed. "And knowing they want to adopt, I don't know what they would
think if I wanted to give it up to somebody else."

Ziva moved across the couch and put a hand on her arm. "They would think you made the decision
that you had to," she said. "Tim and Tony, they both care for you every much, and they both know
how much Josh has hurt you." She slid her hand to Sarah's back and started rubbing. "They will
support you, no matter what decision you make. Because it is yours."

Sarah nodded, but she felt like she was choking on tears. She felt Ziva's arms wrap around her and
let herself cry. Her older sister was slim, but strong, and she held on to that anchor.

"Sarah, whatever decision you make, we will support you."

"I know." But as she pulled away, she was less certain than ever of what to do.

-MONDAY, MAY 9, 2010-

Gibbs walked into the squad room, coffee in hand. He expected the usual bullpen chatter and
teasing among the agents, but it was quiet. Tony and McGee were working, McGee on his
computer and Tony on an old case file. Ziva was at her desk, too, but she was just watching the
boys. Gibbs stayed just out of sight and listened to see if he could figure out what was going on.

"Any luck, McHacker?"

"Not yet," McGee replied. "You?"

"Since I'm not even sure what I'm looking for..."

"Good point."

"What are you two working on?" Ziva sounded curious. "We do not have a case."

"Cold case, Zee," Tony said.

"Frozen," McGee added. "It's the one they gave Abby and me last week in Mexico. She's still
working on it, and I offered to help her out."

"And Tony offered to help you." She paused. "I do not understand why a Mexican cold case is our
business, but if you need help, I am more than willing."

"No, we're good, Zee."

Gibbs decided to break things up and headed into the bullpen. "McGee, with Abby," he said.
"DiNozzo, we've got plenty of our own cases without wasting more people working on someone
else's."

"Right, Boss. On it, Boss." Tony handed the folder to McGee as he got up to head downstairs.

"Check with Jarvis. See if he has anything hot you and Ziva can help with."

As his agents scattered, Gibbs thought about what he'd heard. So McGee and DiNozzo seemed to
know what case Abby was working on, but Ziva didn't. At least one member of the team wouldn't
get pulled into this mess from his past.

Abby headed right for her lab. She wanted to run more tests on the bullet, but she knew she'd done everything she could forensically. Now she just had to decide what to do with the information. Did she bury it, or did she write the report? Was there a way to write the report without actually implicating Gibbs?

She pushed the thought away and decided to spend some time on the other problem this week. She got online and started looking up information for Sarah about her options. That was a bad situation, but at least it was a different bad situation. And Sarah might be able to find a way out of her bad situation. Abby couldn't see a way out of her own. And this would kill Gibbs all over again — not just going to jail, losing his job at NCIS, and being sent to a Mexican jail — but to be sent away from the family he'd made to replace Shannon and Kelly in his heart. Away from the grandchildren he'd never thought he would have. Baby Bat-Gremlin would probably be a Christmas baby — just one more reason to love her favorite holiday — and Sarah's baby wouldn't be much older. Assuming she kept it, that is, because that was a big assumption. Sarah wasn't Abby, she didn't want kids, and this one would be a huge reminder of Josh. And Sarah had been trying to forget Josh. Sure, now that they knew she was feeling so lousy because she was pregnant, not just because of Josh, that made it a little better, but not a lot. And it wasn't like Sarah could keep it a secret from him in the fall. She was starting to show a little already, and they'd all seen the pictures of Eileen when she was pregnant — Sarah would look like she'd swallowed a basketball by the time fall rolled around. Unless she found a new job — standing all day would feel horrible. Abby couldn't imagine how Sarah had managed it so far; she'd been exhausted and she wasn't quite as far along. But Sarah had already changed so much of her life because of Josh. And if she kept the baby she'd have to change even more, and that would be just another reminder. There wasn't room for a baby at Ziva's; the apartment was big enough for two, but not for three. And Gibbs would be grumpy enough with her and Jimmy sleepwalking with a baby at home — But Gibbs wouldn't be here. He'd be in prison if Abby didn't find a way out of this mess. She sniffled and wiped at her eyes. She was not going to think about Gibbs until she had another chance to talk to him. She was going to focus on helping Sarah.

"I can't help him, but I can help her."

She didn't realize she'd spoken out loud until she heard McGee ask, "Help who?"

Tim walked into the lab just as Abby spoke.

"Help who?" He frowned. "If it's the cold case, they're past help, have been for 20 years." His heart ached a little at the reminder of Shannon and Kelly.

"McGee!" Abby hit a bunch of keys and turned to face him, glaring. "What are you doing here?"

"Gibbs sent me down here to help you. Anything I can do?" He paused. "Need a hand with that cold case?" He looked past Abby to her computer screen. "I've been doing a little digging-"


"I only volunteer to spar with Ziva if I have a death wish," he retorted, irritated that she wouldn't let him help.
"You're going to wish you'd volunteered to spar with Ziva if you don't get your ass out of my lab."

Tim opened his mouth, then closed it. "Fine." He stalked out, on a mission to find Jimmy, and heard her shut the lab door behind him. Fortunately, the assistant ME was sitting in Autopsy, huddled around the computer with Ducky.

"Jimmy, what the hell did you tell her?"


"Timothy, what on earth is wrong?" Ducky reached for another tea cup.

"Tea's not going to help, Ducky," Tim said. "Abby just booted me out of the lab, told me if I didn't leave I would wish I'd volunteered to spar with Ziva."

"Oh my," Ducky said. "Mr. Palmer, perhaps you should-"

"I wouldn't, Jimmy," Tim said. "She told me to go bug you or Tony. And she shut the door to the lab."

"She-?" Jimmy raked a hand through his hair, curls springing out. "She never does that."

"Not since..." Tim's voice trailed off. "Wait, she did once, remember?"

"Did what?" Ducky asked.

"Shut us out of the lab," McGee said. "When Gibbs had her help him with the mole hunt."

Jimmy nodded. "She had the marker dye in there and couldn't risk anybody else finding out."

"Could..." Tim's voice trailed off, as he organized his thoughts. "Is there a plan we don't know about?"

Jimmy shook his head. "If there is, it's new. Abby would have mentioned it to me, even if she couldn't give me details. She knows Black Lung and Friends are on the same trail she is."

"Well, something's going on," McGee said. "When I walked in, she was talking to her computer."

"She always does that," Jimmy said.

"Yeah, but it's what she said." He thought for a second, trying to remember the words. "She said, 'I can't help him, but I can help her.' And there isn't a her involved in this case that we know of, not one who's alive."

"Ziva?" Ducky asked.

Tim shook his head. "No, she doesn't seem to have any clue this is going on." He frowned. "That's weird. Ziva's usually one of the first to pick up on stuff like this."

"But if it's not Ziva...?" Jimmy frowned. "The only other woman in the case is that lawyer lady, but I can't see Abby wanting to help her."

Tim shook his head. "We're missing something."

"That, my dear boy, might be the understatement of the decade," Ducky said. "The question is, what are we missing?"
Tony split the file with Ziva for the case Jarvis had passed off to them and settled down at his desk. He couldn't stay quiet, or Ziva would realize something was up. So he pasted on his Very Special Agent mask.

"So, Zee-va, how was your weekend?" He wiggled his eyebrows. "You and Damon have any fun plans?"

"No." She looked down at the papers on her desk.

"Not Damon, then," he said. "You and Sarah? Girls' night out? You know, I've never figured what you girls do on those nights, but it always seems to involve alcohol and no men, which is a complete waste of-"

"Tony, we have work to do." She glared at him, then bent over the paperwork again.

Tony knew his gut wasn't as good as Gibbs, even after all these years, but even McQueasy could pick up on this. Something was wrong with Ziva. He thought about calling Damon, but chances were good he had something to do with it. Tony wanted to find out what it was first, so he could go after the man in person if he needed to. Sure, he mostly trusted him, but something had spooked Ziva. If it wasn't case-related, Tony had a bad feeling it had to be something tied to what happened in Somalia. And Damon was the mostly likely to have triggered those feelings, even if he didn't mean to.

"Report." Gibbs walked in carrying a cup of coffee.

Tony jumped up. "Jarvis gave us a case from 1998, a gunny who was on a carrier docked at Norfolk and went UA on shore leave. Never turned up." He read from the file. "Agents reworked the case in 2000, 2004, and 2007, but didn't turn up much in the way of new leads."

"They weren't us," Gibbs said. "Find that Marine."

"On it, Boss." Tony sat back down and mentally cursed the impossible task. Tim better be having more luck on Operation Cold Case.

However, his husband walked back into the bullpen not long after that. Tony looked up, but Tim just shook his head. They didn't have a chance to compare notes until they got home.

"Wait, so both Ziva and Abby are acting weird?" Tim said as he tossed his button-down in the hamper and pulled on a T-shirt. "Abby, OK, I get that. She's in a lousy position. But Ziva obviously doesn't know anything about the cold case."

Tony finished stripping off his suit and flopped back on the bed. "No, but there's definitely something going on with our crazy ninja chick. I haven't been shut down like that since I was trying to make her see Rivken was using her."

Tim turned and lifted an eyebrow. "Any chance Eli's been in touch?"

Tony grimaced. "Oh, hell. That's all we need." He rolled into a sitting position. "If he has, she isn't saying."

"Sarah might know," Tim said.

Tony smiled. "Now that's good thinking." He tossed Tim's cell phone from its spot on the
nightstand. "Call her."

Tim fielded the phone, then set it on the dresser while he pulled on jeans. "If I call Sarah now and Ziva's around, Ziva's going to know we're asking questions." He tossed Tony a T-shirt and jeans. "I'll call her in the morning. She'll be at work, and even if she's busy, she can call back on her break."

-Wednesday, May 11, 2010-

"Oof." Tim looked up to see Jethro's face inches from his own, the German shepherd's full weight on his chest. "OK, OK, I'm up." He pushed the dog until he shifted to the other side of the bed. "Wake your other dad up," Tim said, rolling out of bed. He grabbed sweats and a T-shirt and scuffed around until he found his slippers.

"Blech!"

Tim looked over to see Jethro licking Tony's face and couldn't help laughing.

"Ugh." Tony squirmed away from the dog. "Your tongue is not the one I like waking me up."

"Come on, Jethro." Tim whistled, and the dog bounded after him.

Once their furry family member was outside, Tim poured two cups of coffee and brought them upstairs.

"Tim, I love you." Tony sat on the edge of the bed and took the cup from his hands, inhaling the scent.

"You'd say that to Damon if he was handing you coffee," Tim said, smirking. "Come on, we've got to get moving or we're going to be late." He yawned.

"Joint shower?" Tony asked.

"Just showering," Tim retorted. "We're going to be lucky if we're not late, and if we walk in looking like we were playing around before work, Gibbs will kill us." He winced as he said it.

Tony frowned. "Great choice of words, there, McWriter."

"You know what I mean." He swallowed more coffee and headed for the bathroom. "Come on, let's get ready for another day in the Twilight Zone."

When they got in the car half an hour later, Tony picked up the thread. "We know what's going on with Gibbs and Abby — although our gorgeous Goth seems a little crazy even with what we know she knows — but Ziva's got me stumped."

Tim frowned. "I know. It's like she's shut down again, the way she was after Rivken and after Somalia." He rubbed a fist across his eyes. "You still haven't gotten anything out of her?"

Tony shook his head. "Very Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo can't even get her to snark, so you know something's wrong."

"Yeah, he always make me snark," Tim said, neatly ducking the head slap that followed his
comment. "She didn't want to talk when we made the coffee run yesterday either."

"What did Sarah have to say?" Tony asked. "McSis must know something."

Tim cursed. "I never called her," he said. He yawned as he pulled out his phone.

"Don't take a nap on me, McSleepy," Tony said as he navigated the streets of D.C.

Tim rolled his eyes as Sarah's voice mail picked up.

"Hey, Sarah. Ziva's been acting odd the past couple of days. We were hoping you knew what was up. She won't talk, and Tony's worried something happened with Damon. I'm just worried. Call me." He disconnected.

"She knows you're worried," Tony said. "You always McWorry."

"And most of the time, I'm right to be concerned." Tim shoved his phone back in his pocket. "Look, if I haven't heard from Sarah by this afternoon, I'll go see if Abby knows something."

But he didn't even wait that late. By 1130 the case from Jarvis was driving him nuts, and the silence in the bullpen was worse. Ziva wasn't talking. Gibbs was growling, which was normal. But there were lines in his face that normally weren't there, and every time the phone rang, Tim expected to hear it was Vance calling Gibbs to his office to be arrested. Tony wasn't even throwing paper balls at his head.

Tim headed to the lab. At least, the door was open today, though there was no music.

"Abby?" He walked in, looking for the scientist. He found her in her office, lying on the futon.

"Abs? What's wrong?"

She wrapped her arms around her. "I feel lousy, McGee." She groaned. "I should have stayed home today."

"So go home," he said. "We don't have any hot cases. And if you're sick enough to try and sleep in the middle of the day, you should be at home."

She sighed, then pushed herself upright. "I guess."

He reached down to give her a hand up. "Are you good to drive, or should I get Jimmy?"

She shook her head. "Don't get Jimmy. I'll be OK. There won't be much traffic if I leave now." She moved over to get her stuff from behind her desk, rubbing her low back.

Tim waited until she was in the elevator headed to her car, then went to Autopsy to tell Jimmy that Abby had gone home sick. She might not want a ride home, but she would probably want some TLC later tonight.

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That evening, Jimmy walked into their bedroom to find Abby curled up in a ball.

"Abby?" He sat on the edge of the bed. "Are you OK? Tim said you went home sick."

She opened her eyes and looked at him. Her face was pale, and one hand cradled over her belly, on top of the heating pad. She had pulled out her pigtails, and her hair was tangled around her face. He
flipped on the bedside light and could see tear tracks on her cheeks. Without knowing what was the matter, he reached out and rubbed circles over her back with one hand. "Abby?"

"I'm..." She sighed and moved to sit up, wincing as she did.

"Do I need to call Dr. Mallard?"

She shook her head. "It's just cramps," she said. "Really, really bad ones."

He stopped her from pushing the rest of the way up. "It's OK, lay back," he said. He toed off his shoes, put his glasses on the nightstand, and lay behind her, her back along his chest and his hand over hers. "Are you sure?" he asked. "Cramps don't usually make you cry."

He felt her sigh, and he wrapped his arm more snugly around her.

"That's not why I'm crying," she said. "I've been feeling..." She sniffled. "I'm late, and I had all these other symptoms, and I was sure..."

He placed a kiss on her neck. "You thought you were pregnant."

She nodded, her hair brushing his face. "I was looking for it because of that time we forgot, and I was starting to feel it but it wasn't late enough to take a test. And then I wanted to wait until after Sarah's graduation and then we had that horrible case. And then I had to go to Mexico, and you were so worried already that I didn't want you to think there might be two of us to worry about. So I waited, and then everything went hinky and..." She sniffled. "I wanted it, and then I found out about Gibbs, and I wasn't sure anymore. Because he's going to go to prison, and I'm going to put him there and..."

"Abs," he interrupted. "It's OK. I understand. I would have freaked out if I thought you were in Mexico with our bat-gremlin." He slid his hand up to interlace their fingers over her heart. "How late were you?"

She sighed. "Almost two weeks," she said. She groaned and tightened her fingers around his. "And this is like the worst cramps I've ever had."

He frowned. "That's why you went home?"

She nodded. "It was so bad, I was having trouble focusing. So I came home and had a hot bath, then curled up with the heating pad."

"Is it heavier than normal?"

She nodded. "Why?"

He sighed. "You might have been right," he said, knowing there was no good way to say this. "If you lose a baby early on, in the first six or eight weeks, a lot of times it just seems like a late, heavy period, at least according to my textbooks."

He heard her sniffle. "Abs, turn over," he said, helping her turn until they were facing each other. He kissed her forehead. "Are you OK?"

She just looked at him. "I don't know," she said. "How can- This isn't-" She started crying in earnest, and he pulled her close, feeling her tears soak his shirt as he just held her. He didn't know what to feel. He hadn't known Abby thought she was pregnant, so he didn't really think he should feel like he lost something. But he did, sort of. He rubbed circles on her back, trying to offer what
comfort he could. He didn't know how long they lay there, before she finally pulled away and moved to sit up. He rolled onto his back and looked up at her.

"Do you want to run another bath?"

She shook her head. "I'll be right back." He watched her head to the bathroom, then eased himself up to sitting. Looking down, he realized he was still wearing his suit. By the time Abby returned, he had changed into a T-shirt and shorts. "Come here," he said, patting the spot between his legs. She settled in, relaxing against his back, as he looped his arms around her. "I'm sorry, Abs," he said. "That we lost the baby, and that you went through it alone, and-"

She cut him off. "It's OK," she said. "I mean, no, it's not OK that I lost the baby, because I was really hoping... But it's OK that you weren't here, because I didn't tell you. Next time I'm telling you as soon as I suspect, because I really wish you had been here. I mean, if there is a next time..."

He wanted to pull his arms tighter in a hug, but he didn't want to hurt her, so he settled for twisting his head around to kiss her cheek. "There will be a next time," he said. "Statistically, they've figured out that this happens in about two-thirds of pregnancies. They used to think it was a lot lower because so many women thought they were just late, like you did, but then they started testing hCG levels and realized how many they had missed."

She turned to smile at him. "How did I find the one guy who knows I'd rather hear statistics than platitudes?"

He shrugged. "Maybe not the one guy. McGee would have said the same thing, except he probably wouldn't have the information at his fingertips. It's not like he needs to think about the possibility of Baby McGees."

When she started sniffling again he tried to twist around to see her face. "Abs?"

She just shook her head.

"What did I say?" He thought about it, but she never minded him mentioning Tim before. "Abs? Is it Tim?"

"Not Tim," she said. "Sarah."

"Sarah?" He just stared at her. "Abby, I'm lost."

She tried to move, and he loosened his arms. Next thing he knew, she was facing him, her knees drawn up to her chest. "Sarah's pregnant," she whispered.

"She's what?" Jimmy just looked at her. "By whom?"

"Josh." Abby rested her chin on her knees. "The test we did after she caught him cheating was too early for the pregnancy to show up."

He counted back. "But that was weeks ago."

She nodded. "Ziva figured it out last weekend and made her take an over-the-counter test." She frowned. "I just... She's pregnant, and she doesn't want to be. It just seems so unfair."

Jimmy reached out to rub his hands along her arms. "What is she-? Does Tim-? Is she-?"

"She hasn't decided," Abby said. Not for the first time, he was glad she knew how to understand
him when he couldn't put a sentence together. "Ziva and I are the only ones who know, and she swore us to secrecy until she decides."

He sighed. "Is that why Ziva's been so quiet this week?"

Abby nodded. "I think it's just because she's worried about Sarah and worried because Sarah made her promise not to tell McGee."

Jimmy winced. "He's not going to be happy when he finds out you guys are keeping this a secret."

"I know." Abby sighed. "But this... I can see why she doesn't want to say anything. I don't want everybody knowing about our... I mean... I just..." She sighed. "Everything's hinky enough with Gibbs and Mexico, and Sarah's going to have to say something soon if she keeps the baby, because she's starting to show. And this is just one more thing. I don't want it to be just one more thing. I don't want to have the conversation, and I don't want people to look at me differently."

Jimmy shook his head. "They wouldn't," he said.

"Yes, they would." She sighed again. "They wouldn't know what to say, and Tony would feel so awkward he'd make a joke. And I'd probably start crying again, and then he'd feel horrible, and Gibbs would want to know what he did to me, and I'd have to tell him, and he'd be all protective and make me go see Ducky, and-"

Jimmy reached out and put a finger to her lips. "I get it, Abs."

"And I'm worried that this means I won't be able to have a baby. And I know you have the stats, and this is probably just a one-time thing. And I've been so stressed out, I'd probably have warped the baby anyway so he'd be all hyper and crazy."

"I know." She quieted at his words. "I know, because I'm thinking some of the same things, if not quite as quickly." He smiled. "Why don't you call your doctor and make an appointment? She can take a look, and she'll probably tell you it's OK. This isn't the end, Abby. This wasn't our only chance. We'll get there." He paused. "Just tell me next time, so I can be there while you're wondering and worrying."

She nodded. "And Sarah?"

He sighed. "I'm just going to pretend I didn't hear that. But Abs, she's got to do something soon," he said. "She's got to be what, 9 weeks?"

"Probably 10 by now," Abby said. "And Eileen was right, her family does show early. If Tim or Tony see her, they're going to notice."

Before he could reply, his cell rang, and he answered.

"Black Lung."

"Tony?" Jimmy dropped back against the headboard. "Should I even ask?"

"Conference. Gibbs' house. Just you, not Abby. Need you to pick us up so Mom and Dad don't wonder what's going on if they were to see our cars."

Jimmy wanted to protest. The guys would understand if he stayed with Abby tonight. But to do that, he'd have to tell them, and she didn't want that. And he couldn't deflect, not with Tony. Not successfully. "Hang on a minute," he said. "Abby went home sick. Let me just see if she's OK to be
by herself for a bit." He covered the phone.

"What's up?" Abby frowned.

"Conference at Gibbs. Just the guys, no Ziva."

Abby frowned. "Go," she finally said. "They'll have more questions if you don't."

He uncovered the phone. "OK. I'll head out in a minute." He hesitated. "What's going on?"

"Something's up with the girls, especially Ziva."

"OK. See you in a few." Jimmy hung up and turned to face Abby. "This is not good."

"What's not good?" Abby hugged her knees to her chest. "I mean, there are lots of not-good things right now. Is this a new one?"

He shook his head. "They know something's up, although it sounds like they think it's Ziva that's the one to worry about." He sighed. "Abs, they're going to ask what I know."

She nodded and chewed on her lower lip. "What are you going to tell them?"

"Well, I don't actually know what's going on with Ziva," he said. "I mean, we think she's worried about Sarah, but we don't know that. And with her, it could easily be something else." He frowned. "And I don't even know if they meant Sarah. They could have just meant you two."

"They can't know about me," she said. "I mean, you and Ducky didn't notice. The guys won't have figured it out."

He nodded. "But maybe they picked up on something? Could McGee have noticed something in Mexico?"

She sighed. "You know how I said I didn't want anybody to know?"

He nodded.

"If you have to choose between giving up my secret and giving up Sarah's, tell them about me." She chewed her lower lip. "It's not something I really want anyone to know — but if it buys Sarah a few more days, I can handle it."

"Are you sure?" He reached over to put a hand on her back.

She shrugged. "I'm sure that Sarah doesn't need the guys going over there ready to kill Josh and getting in her way while she tries to decide what to do. If telling them about-" Her voice broke. "About our baby gives her the time she needs..."

Jimmy pulled her into a hug. "Abby, you never fail to amaze me." He kissed her forehead. "I love you for everything you are and everything you aren't, but especially for your big heart."

-Gibbs stood in the basement sanding planks he had picked up Saturday to repair the porch. Sean had offered to help, but Gibbs had declined, not wanting his friend to risk his lungs. Besides, it was good thinking time, and he needed some of that. Mexico was bad enough, but his gut told him there was more going on than that. Things had been off all week.}
Ziva was quiet, the way she was in those long days after they returned from Somalia. He knew she hadn't figured out what cold case Abby was working on, but he didn't know what else would trigger a reaction like that.

He'd been avoiding Abby, dreading the conversation they would have to have, but he knew from listening to Tony and McGee that something was off with her, too, more than just the insidious decision somebody had forced upon her.

Before he could continue that train of thought, he heard footsteps on the stairs and looked up to see Tony, McGee, and Jimmy coming down, serious expressions on their faces. Well, Tony and McGee were serious. Jimmy just looked petrified.

Gibbs kept sanding, but jerked his head in the direction of the sawhorses at the end of the workbench. Jimmy pulled one out, while Tim and Tony sat on the steps.

"Boss, we're worried about the girls," Tony said.

"Ziva and Abby?" He put the sandpaper down and joined them, pulling out another sawhorse.

Tim nodded. "Ziva's the one who's really got us worried," he said. "I even tried calling Sarah to see if she knew what was going on, but she hasn't called me back or returned my e-mail. That's not like her."

"Would she know?" Jimmy said.

"Well, they are roommates," Tony said. "It's a safe bet that if something's wrong with Ziva, Sarah's the most likely one to know what's going on."

"We know it's not the reason we're all worried," Tim said. "Ziva doesn't know what's going on."

"Yeah, and that's another thing," Tony said "Our little ninja chick is almost as good at you Boss, at that kind of stuff, but she seems oblivious to this."

Gibbs tensed, ready to cut the boys off if they mentioned the unmentionable, but Tim took a different approach.

"Abby's got a reason to be off, but she knows we know and she's still acting weird." Tim folded his arms. "I know I always say she uses Abby-logic and her mind is impossible to figure out, but this week it's like she's taken that to the tenth power."

Gibbs just looked at the younger agent.

"What McMath is trying to say is that she's like extreme Abby," Tony said.

Gibbs turned to Jimmy. "You know what's going on?"

"I noticed something was up with Ziva, but I don't know what," he said.

"And Abby?" Tony pinned the assistant ME with his gaze, the way Gibbs had taught him.

Jimmy didn't say anything, but shifted uncomfortably on the sawhorse. Gibbs made a decision.

"DiNozzo, McGee. Beer in the fridge. Go, have one. Upstairs."

When Tony opened his mouth to protest, Gibbs glared at him, and Tony subsided. "Going, Boss."
Once they had left, Gibbs turned to Jimmy. "You know what's up with Abby."

Jimmy nodded.

"It's more than Mexico."

Jimmy nodded again.

"Is she OK?"

Jimmy opened his mouth, then shut it.

Gibbs thought about everything he'd observed during the week, everything he knew about Abby. And then he realized. "She's pregnant."

Jimmy shook his head and looked at the floor.

Gibbs ran through his observations again, but they added up to the same solution. He put a hand on Jimmy's shoulder. "Palmer." He stopped and softened his tone. "Jimmy, I'm not going to tell anyone if you guys aren't ready. Especially now. Abby's in a tough spot, one that's all my fault, and this can't be making it any easier on her. But I've been through this before, and I know it's scary the first time, especially for us. She's living it; you're just going along for the ride."

Jimmy shook his head again. "She's not," he said. There was a hitch at the end of his voice, and he got up and walked away, facing the wall.

Gibbs reviewed what he knew again, thought about everything he'd seen, and realized his mistake. "But she was." He walked over to stand by the young man. "Is that why she went home sick today?"

Jimmy nodded. "She's OK, I mean physically. She wasn't far enough along for us to have to go to the hospital."

"Did you know before today?"

Jimmy shook his head. "She suspected, but she hadn't taken a test yet. She didn't want me to freak about both of them in Mexico, especially since Vance thought it was necessary for McGee to go along as a protection detail. And then, well, she wasn't thinking about that."

Jimmy paused. "You know we wanted to, even though we weren't really planning on right now — we were going to wait until later this year — but it was a good thing, something we wanted." He looked up, his eyes level with Gibbs' eyes. "I'm not making any sense."

Gibbs let himself remember back 30 years. "About two years before Kelly was born, Shannon got pregnant," he said. "We hadn't really planned it, but we were happy when she found out." He sighed. "She dragged me out shopping one weekend because she was getting to the point where none of her pants fit. She kept me out all afternoon, but it was almost fun. Not the shopping, but looking at her as she tried them on and picturing her wearing them." He sighed and dropped his head back against the wall. "She was 10 weeks along. We were going to call our parents the next weekend and tell them." He paused. "Two nights later, she woke me up at three in the morning, cramping and bleeding. I took her to the hospital, but it was too late. We lost the baby."

He made himself look at Jimmy and was rewarded by seeing the young man turn to look at him.

"Did you..." Jimmy paused. "I didn't know until I got home today, and I didn't know until after it had already happened, but it feels like I lost something."
"You did," he said. He let himself remember that long night at the hospital, waiting for news. "Just because I knew before Shannon lost the baby and you didn't doesn't mean I lost any more, or you lost any less."

"She doesn't want people to know," he said. "She doesn't want to have to talk about it or deal with questions. Especially now, with everything else going on."

He understood. "Tony and Tim don't have to know," he said. "But--" He stopped. "Would you tell her, if she wants to talk, the basement's always open?" He paused. "She asked me the other night, and I couldn't answer. I thought it would make things more difficult for her. I should have told her: She is like a daughter to me. And I will always love her, as much as I loved Kelly. No matter what happens." He swallowed. "I don't want to make her a target, but she needs to know."

Jimmy nodded. "I'll tell her." He hesitated. "I don't know if she'll want to talk about this yet. It's still... It hurts too much." He blinked a few times. "I gave statistics and facts. But... With you and Shannon, was that the only time? I mean, was Kelly your next..."

"We didn't try again right away, couldn't handle it. But as soon as we did, Shannon got pregnant, and this time everything went perfectly." He thought about the squalling baby cradled in Shannon's arms that day at the hospital. She was bald and her face was all squished from being born, but she was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. "You two will get your chance, Jimmy. And when you see your baby for the first time, it'll be worth it. Even this part."

Jimmy smiled. "Can I tell Abby that? I think it would help, I mean, if she knows the next time things were fine."

"Tell her," he said. "Come on, let's go upstairs before the guys come down after us."

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Tony sat on the ancient green couch, beer in hand.

"Stop pacing," he said. "Whatever it is, they'll tell us."

Tim turned to face him and crossed his arms. "Will they?" he said. "We don't know what we're talking about. All we know is there's something hinky going on that's not Mexico, and Jimmy seems to know something."

"No, he doesn't." Gibbs stood in the doorway to the dining room. "He doesn't know what's wrong with Ziva, and neither do I." He stepped aside, letting Jimmy into the room. The younger man took the armchair next to the couch and sank back into the cushions.

"Well something's definitely wrong with her," Tony said. "She won't tell off Very Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo, and she won't confide in McGoo. Whatever it is, she's got Sarah on radio silence, and Abby's all wound up." He pushed up and started pacing, alternating directions with Tim.

"Sit down, both of you." Gibbs sounded tired.

Tony stopped and looked at him, saw the lines on the team leader's face. He turned to look at Tim, and they both headed for the couch.

Gibbs stayed where he was leaning against the wall, arms crossed. "Have any of you talked to Duck, seen if Ziva's talked to him?"
Tony shook his head, then reached back and slapped himself. "He is the logical one, isn't he?"

"Ya think, DiNozzo." Gibbs lifted an eyebrow.

"You know, we haven't tried Damon yet either," Tim said. "If it's not work, and it's not the cold case, it might just be something he knows about."

Tony growled. "If it's something he did to her, he'd better start running now." He started to tense up until he felt Tim's hand on the back of his neck.

"If he did something, it wouldn't have been deliberate," Tim said. "You know that. But none of us knows what happened in Somalia. It could be something we wouldn't think twice about but that brings up bad memories for her."

Tony hated when McSensible was right. "I know, I know." He sighed and leaned back into Tim's hand. "You talk to him; you're less likely to maim him."

Jimmy snorted. "Tony, for somebody who's an only child, you're a hell of a big brother."

"Yeah, well, nobody hurts my family and gets away with it," Tony said. "So we've figured out what to do about Ziva. Now what about Abby?"

Jimmy looked over at Gibbs and Gibbs looked back, holding the younger man's gaze for a minute before speaking. "Abby's a different issue." He looked over at Tim, then Tony. Tony had forgotten how powerful the man's gaze could be when it was trained on you. "It's not connected with Ziva, and it's not our business. If she wants to share, she will."

Tony studied Gibbs' expression. "You know."

Gibbs lifted an eyebrow.

"I don't know what you know, but Jimmy told you something down there, or you interrogated it out of him." Tony frowned. He looked over at Jimmy, who was sitting there expressionless. "Hey." Tony reached over and put a hand on Jimmy's arm until he turned to face him. "Whatever is going on, we're on your six. Or Abby's six, if that's where we need to be."

Jimmy nodded and swallowed, but he didn't speak. Tony could see something in his eyes, an expression he'd never seen there before, but he couldn't place it. He looked away, not wanting to put Jimmy on the spot. "So, that just leaves the elephant in the room," he said, focusing on Gibbs again. He could feel tension radiating off of Tim next to him.

"Stay out of it," Gibbs said. "It's not your problem. It's not your fight."

Tony folded his arms. "We're a team, Gibbs. I've been on your six damn near 10 years now. I'm not leaving you out in the cold while you run off and play lone wolf."

"DiNozzo." The warning in Gibbs' voice was clear, but Tony just stared at him, the glare he'd learned in years of working under the man turned back on the master.

Gibbs let out a breath and settled back against the wall. "Tony, Tim, Jimmy." He looked at each in turn. "Mexico is not your problem. It's not Abby's problem, which I'll tell her. Stay out of it. All the way out of it."

"Boss." Tim sounded determined, and Tony could picture the look on his partner's face, even as he kept his eyes on their leader.
“No, McGee.” Gibbs scrubbed his hands against his face. "You get involved, any of you, and I’ll kick your ass. This is my mess, and I'm the one who will clean it up. You are not ruining your careers over this."

Tony shook his head. "Rule 45." He wanted to headslap the bastard, even as he admired the determination it took to walk into a trap knowing it was a trap with no escape hatch. Gibbs gave a short nod.

"I don't know Rule 45," Jimmy said.

"Clean up your own messes," Tony said. "That's the one that got Jenny killed."

"I'm not Jenny," Gibbs said. "But she kept you and Ziva out of that clusterfuck then for a damn good reason, and I'm doing the same. My mess, my fallout. I catch you three, or any of the others, anywhere near this case, and you'll have my boot so far up your ass, you won't sit down for a week." He turned to Jimmy. "That goes double for Abby," he said. "I'm not letting her get hurt any more than she has been."

Jimmy nodded. "You're going to need to tell her that."

"I will." Gibbs stood away from the wall. "All of you, go home. Get some sleep. My gut says this week’s a long way from over."

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I am that evil. *ducks*
Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everybody for your wonderful reviews, especially on the last two chapters. They always make my day! As always HUGE thanks to Kyrie for her stellar editing work. I don't say it enough, but this story would not be nearly as good without her help!

Wednesday, May 11, 2010

That night, Sarah lay in bed, Tim's message from that morning running through her head on an endless loop. Ever since she'd listened to his voicemail while on her lunch break, she hadn't been able to think about anything else. Almost 10 hours later, she still couldn't think of a way to call him without having him realize something was up with her, not Ziva. At least, not without lying, which she didn't want to do. She had known she wouldn't have long to make a decision, but she'd thought as long as she didn't see Tim or Tony — something she could have easily managed for a week or two — she'd be OK. She'd forgotten that they didn't have to see her to suspect something was up. She hugged her pillow and curled around it, wishing she had her stuffed rabbit from when she was little. Bunny was at her parents' house, though, and she didn't want to face them yet either.

Sarah felt the tears trickle down her cheeks and made a face. She hated crying, and she knew it was because of hormones, but that didn't change anything. It was worse in some ways — the baby was making her not feel like herself. She wasn't even all that far along either — not quite three months. Another six to go? With everybody knowing and pointing and whispering? Especially in the fall when Josh came back. He'd take one look at her and either know it was his or think she'd cheated on him.

This afternoon before Ziva got home, she'd spent some time researching online. She wasn't Tim, but it didn't take an MIT genius to use Google. What she'd found hadn't been very helpful. She could wait to decide, if she wanted. Abby was right — D.C. would allow abortions after 12 weeks — so she didn't have to make that decision by the end of next week or even the week after. But unless she decided on an abortion in the next couple of days, she was going to have to tell everybody. It wasn't fair to ask Ziva and Abby to keep it a secret, and somebody was bound to notice.

She'd caught Karen looking at her that afternoon, but the older woman hadn't said anything. Sarah had felt the back of her neck burn when she noticed, though. Karen was the one who'd recommended the ginger tea to her. So wasn't that a slap in the face to pull up a webpage on pregnancy and see that listed as a remedy for morning sickness? Sarah squeezed the pillow tighter. At least the morning sickness seemed to have run its course, for the most part. She still became nauseous if she got near the tuna salad at work, but since she was manager, she was able to assign others to the prep line while she worked as barista.

Sarah felt the seemingly constant drowsiness beginning to overtake her and fought against it. She knew her body needed the sleep, but she needed to figure this out, too. Yet within minutes, she was sound asleep.

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Jimmy woke up before the alarm went off and looked over to find Abby still asleep. She had already been asleep when he had gotten home the night before, which didn't surprise him. Her body needed sleep to heal. She'd curled close to him in the night after he'd climbed into bed with her.

He eased himself out of bed, careful not to wake her. Since she'd gone home yesterday, nobody would be surprised if she was still out sick today. But when he got out of the shower a few minutes later, she was sitting up in bed.

"It wasn't just a bad dream, was it?" She swiped at her eyes with the back of her hand.

He shook his head, not sure what to say. When she didn't say anything else, he sat down next to her. "How do you feel?"

"Physically?" She frowned. "The cramps have stopped."

"What about the bleeding?" He'd wanted to check on that last night, just to make sure they didn't have to go to the hospital, but he hadn't wanted to wake her.

"I woke up about 0300, and it had slowed down but hadn't stopped," she said.

He wrapped an arm around her. "Come on, let's find out. If it hasn't stopped by now, we need to take you to get checked out, just to make sure."

"Yes, Dr. Palmer." She wrinkled her nose at him, but accepted his help getting up. "You know I can walk on my own, right?"

He nodded. "I wasn't there yesterday," he said. "Let me be here today?"

She sniffled. "Don't get me started," she said. "I think I've still got hormones running wacky inside me."

Jimmy dropped a kiss on her forehead. "Come on."

He let her handle herself in the bathroom, just checking to see that there were no signs she needed attention from a doctor. He was relieved to find nothing of the sort.

"Am I going to be OK?" Abby looked at him as he crouched across from her.

Jimmy ran a hand along her arm. "We'll be OK," he said. "You're not alone in this, Abs." He ran his fingers along her tattooed arm band. "You need help with a shower before I leave?"

"Before we leave."

"Abby, take the day off," Jimmy slid his hand around to her back. "Gibbs knows; he's not going to say anything. And he'll glare at anybody who does say anything."

"Wait, Gibbs knows?" Abby looked at him, and Jimmy realized he hadn't filled her in. So he did.

"So, Shannon and Gibbs..." Abby sniffled. "I don't know... I'm glad they had Kelly, but that means he lost two kids, not just one."
Jimmy wrapped his arms around her. "He said you can go talk to him, you know."

She shook her head. "I can't. I... I need to talk to him about Mexico first, and he's been avoiding me. I can't talk to him about this until he tells me what I'm supposed to do for him on that." She sniffled again and started chewing her lower lip. "Jimmy, I have to go in, because I have to get this straightened out before whatever's supposed to happen happens and it's too late for me to fix this."

He pulled back enough to look at her face, searching her expression to see where she was emotionally. Her lower lip quivered a bit, but there was determination in her eyes. He nodded. "OK. But promise me you'll have Ducky check you out? You know he won't say anything."

She nodded. "Can you... Can you tell him what happened? I don't know if I can."

Jimmy nodded and kissed her. "I will do whatever you need me to do," he said.

-The first morning rush was over now that people had gotten their coffee and headed to work, so Sarah took stock of where they stood. She sent one person to wipe down tables and checked with the prep line crew to make sure they were in good shape getting the sandwich ingredients in anticipation of the lunch crowd. At least having things to occupy her mind kept her from overwhelmed by the decisions she needed to make soon. She'd woken up today with no better idea of what to do or how to tell Tim and Tony. She figured if she could let it simmer today, maybe, somehow, some way, she'd figure out her best choice.

Her back already ached, and it wasn't even halfway through her shift. She tried to stretch, but she didn't want to be too obvious about it. At least Karen had today off. She didn't think the rest of the crew would notice since she had tied her apron loosely enough to skim over her belly.

She settled in behind the espresso machine, making drinks at the slower pace of mid-morning. After three years, she could make most of them in her sleep, which was good because her mind was not participating today. It just kept circling around the same topic that had been dominating her thoughts since the weekend.

If she wasn't getting an abortion tomorrow, that meant she had to tell Tim and Tony so Ziva and Abby wouldn't have to keep it a secret anymore. But she wanted to have a better idea of what she was going to tell them.

Did she want to keep the baby? No. She didn't want to be a mother. But it felt like she woujld somehow be taking the easy way out if she didn't keep the baby. If there was one thing her parents had drilled into her, it was taking responsibility. The idea, though... It was overwhelming.

Of course, if she did then she'd have to find a new job — this one didn't pay enough. Not that there was a huge market for English lit majors. She didn't have a teaching degree, and even if she got a teaching certificate, she couldn't imagine a school being willing to hire a 22-year-old unmarried pregnant woman to teach teenagers. Great example there. She could probably try for an office job, but the idea of getting dressed up every day to sit at a desk, file, and type made her want to scream. Not to mention she'd have to find somebody to watch the baby after it was born. Her parents might be willing, but she'd have to find a place to live closer to them, and Alexandria was expensive to find a rental. Plus, she didn't know if Ziva would want to move out there. She didn't even know if Ziva would want to stay roommates if she kept the baby. She'd sounded like it was a possibility the other day, but that was a lot to ask of her. And without Ziva to help split the rent, Sarah wouldn't be able to afford a place for just she and the baby to live.
She didn't want to move back in with her parents. Their new house only had one spare room, so she'd end up sharing with the baby. Not to mention, she really didn't want to go back to living with them. She blinked as she felt tears begin to well up, forcing them back. It wasn't even a month ago she had been all excited about moving in with Ziva, being an adult. Yeah, real adult. More like real adult problems. Sarah made a face.

"You OK?" Michaela walked over. "You're pretty quiet today."

Sarah almost snorted. Michaela was the queen of quiet, and she was asking about Sarah? But she held back. It wasn't fair to the girl, who was just trying to be nice.

"Just a lot to think about," she said. "I'm fine."

Yeah, real fine. Just trying to figure out what to do now that her whole world had been upended. Of course, it wouldn't matter soon — everybody would know. She thought about giving the baby up for adoption, trying to do something good with this three-ring cluster of a situation. But that seemed like the worst possible option. She would have to go through the hell of the next six months being pregnant and explaining herself to everybody, and then she would have to explain after that why she didn't have a baby.

The only benefit was that she wouldn't be stuck with a kid she didn't want for 18 years. More, she wouldn't have that daily reminder of Josh the Jerk. That was the worst part of all this. Being pregnant was bad enough, but on top of that, it was Josh's spawn, which meant the baby would be a constant reminder of everything he'd put her through.

The idea of seeing if Tim and Tony wanted to adopt the baby had crossed her mind a couple of times. They wanted kids — unlike her — and this way they'd be related to the baby, which they otherwise wouldn't if they adopted. But she tried to imagine game nights at their house, seeing the baby crawling around or later having a little kid calling her Aunt Sarah. It would have to, right? She could just imagine the introductions otherwise. "This is my Dad and this is my other Dad and this is my Mom. She's Dad's little sister."

Sarah sighed as she finished another drink and wiped down the steam nozzle. There had to be a solution somewhere. She just wasn't sure what it was.

As the afternoon wore on, Sarah found her thoughts kept circling back around. She still couldn't believe this had happened. OK, so Abby had figured it out, the antibiotics she'd taken for her ear infection made her birth control next to useless, and Abby had done the test too soon after Josh knocked her up and hadn't thought to do another one later. So even though she'd done everything right and followed the rules, now she was stuck with this big, huge problem. And if she didn't do something soon, big and huge were exactly what she was going to be. It would have been easier if she'd found out earlier, right away. Found out, taken the morning-after pill... Or even gotten an abortion earlier. Sure, she could do it now. Maybe she would. But... Sarah sighed.

She kept coming back to the idea of having an abortion, but something was holding her back. As she was getting more cups from the storeroom, she figured out what it was.

Tim and Tony wanted kids, and she had one that she didn't want. She still wasn't sure she could deal with seeing Josh's child at every family event, but the idea of getting rid of it when she knew they wanted kids... That seemed as cruel to them as it would be if someone forced her to raise a kid she didn't want.

Maybe her answer would come to her if she just talked to them about it. She had to do something if it had Ziva distracted enough for Tim and Tony to notice. As Abby had said Saturday, that was the
problem having a family full of investigators. They made a habit of finding out secrets, even if they weren't as naturally nosy as Tony. So far, the guys seemed to think it was Ziva with the problem. When they found out it was Sarah, she was sunk.

-Gibbs was surprised to see Abby's roadster in the parking lot when he came back from getting coffee that morning. He wondered if Jimmy had driven it in and headed down to Autopsy to ask.

He found Jimmy was filling out paperwork. "Palmer."

Jimmy looked up. "Gibbs. Dr. Mallard's not here, and we don't have any dead bodies for your team."

Gibbs shook his head. "Abby?"

Jimmy paused. "She insisted on coming in today. Dr. Mallard's checking on her now." He hesitated. "Gibbs, she needs to talk to you. Not about yesterday. About... the past."

Gibbs felt the past weighing more heavily on his shoulders. "Noted." He softened his tone. "You doing OK?"

Jimmy shrugged. "Just... It's a lot to take in."

Gibbs nodded. "You need to talk, basement's open to you, too. Not just Abby."

Jimmy nodded, and Gibbs left. He headed back upstairs, not wanting to interrupt Ducky and Abby. Before he made it back to the bullpen, his cell rang with a call-out from Dispatch. He took down the information and forced himself to focus on this case, not the one from 20 years ago. On work, not family, past or present. If he could set the right tone, maybe Ziva would relax some.

He walked into the bullpen to find the guys quizzing Ziva for her citizenship exam and was glad to see they were somewhat back to normal.

"Not bad David, not bad at all," he said, walking past them to grab his SIG from the desk.
"DiNozzo, eighth letter of the alphabet?"
"G."

"No, H, for homicide. Got one on the beach in Annapolis, could be Academy-related." He headed for the elevator. "Let's go."

On the way there, he welcomed the distraction of the dead body. It was what his team needed, something to keep them busy so they didn't try and bail him out of the mess of his own making.

Or so he thought. When McGee got a hit on the burnt corpse's fingerprints, Gibbs realized the week was going to be a whole lot worse than he'd thought.

"Words, McGee."

"Boss, this is Special Agent Lara Macy." McGee looked up at him, worry clouding his green eyes. Gibbs didn't have to ask; he knew McGee remembered the tension between him and Mace last year in L.A. Probably even had an inkling of the reason after Nate had pulled him aside at the end of their trip.

With Macy's body, any hope Gibbs'd had that this could be fixed without collateral damage
disappeared.

"According to Special Agent Laura Macy's personnel file, she left the LA office last year under special circumstances," McGee said as Tony stared at the plasma. Ziva stood in front of McGee's desk, watching both men. "She was transferred to the force protection detail to Marseille."

Ziva watched Tony's thumb rub back and forth over the black band wrapped around his badge as he stared at the screen in front of him. She did not believe he even knew he was doing it.

"I thought we were supposed to feel safer on American soil," Tony said.

"That could have happened anywhere, to any of us. That is the risk we take." She knew it was blunt, too blunt, but somebody needed to say it. She walked away from McGee's desk as Tony continued to stare at the plasma.

"The agency's on alert," Gibbs said as he walked into the bullpen. "Director's ordered a threat assessment."

"So now what?" Ziva asked. She was not glad Agent Macy was dead, but after everything that had happened, she was glad they had an active case, one Gibbs would push them on. It would be a distraction from things she could ill afford to think about.

"We assess," McGee replied.

"We figure out who killed another female federal agent." Tony still had not looked away from the plasma.

"And uphold justice to the full extent of the law," McGee added.

"Or whatever it takes." Tony seemed to be talking to Macy's file on the screen, not to McGee.

"OK, she was a Marine, an agent, a daughter." Gibbs paused. "Daughter first. Macy's mom lives on a farm in Cumberland, Maryland. Call her, tell her we're coming."

"On it," McGee said, picking up the phone.

Just then, Ziva's phone rang, and she answered it. "David." She listened, then hung up, calling to Gibbs as he walked away. "Gibbs, a member of Special Agent Macy's team from Marseille is calling into MTAC."

Gibbs turned back toward the rest of the team, then looked up to the catwalk outside MTAC.

"Threat assessment's been put out," Tony said. "Think they know?"

Gibbs did not answer. He left the bullpen, and Ziva walked over to study Macy's file on the plasma. She could understand why Tony was haunted by this case. She had not been surprised Tony was willing to go further than McGee. He had seen too many agents die, been there when Ari killed Kate, when Paula stopped the suicide bomber. He had seen Jenny's dead body. McGee had not.

Ziva could not blame Tony for his determination. Her friend was many things, but most of all, he was intensely loyal. He had chased the man he thought had killed her halfway around the world and had been tortured on purpose, just to avenge her. He had not met Agent Macy, but he would not let her killer slip — was that the word? — because of that.
"I don't think we can do this," he said, leaning a hip on McGee's desk. He kept his voice low, but Ziva was close enough to hear. "Gibbs is right. She was an agent, but she was a daughter, too. We're agents, but we're husbands. We want to be dads. I don't care whether I'm on Cold Cases or you're heading up a special Cyber Squad or we're both on this team, we can't subject kids to this. The dirtbags don't care about who's waiting at home, hoping we come back in one piece."

"Tony." McGee placed a hand on Tony's arm.

"No, McGee, listen." Tony shrugged the hand off. "Losing a parent when you're a kid, it sucks. And my mom wasn't anything like yours. She was a mediocre mom, but it was... You always have this little part of you that thinks 'Oh, I wish I could tell Mom..." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Kate, Paula, Jenny... They were bad enough. But they were single, no kids. Your friend Jim, telling his wife..."

She caught just a bit of movement and figured McGee was nodding. "They had just gotten married," he said. "I went to see her a few days later, and she was... Shattered, I guess."

"When you were lying there in Bethesda and I wasn't sure you would make it..." Tony slid his hip off the desk and crouched so he was next to McGee, at eye-level. "I was a wreck. I don't think I could go through that and take care of kids. I don't want you to have to go through that."

"Tony, one of us could get killed by an idiot driver while we're out on a run," Tim said. "We can't make decisions about kids based on something that has such a small chance of happening."

"Does it?" Tony fingered the black band on his badge again. "You know how many NCIS agents die every year. You know how many have died just from the teams we interact with." He swallowed. "Every police department I've been at has a memorial for cops killed in the line of duty. We don't get a pass because we're Navy cops. There's no secret protective shield like in one of your games."

"Tony, this isn't the right time to make that decision," McGee said. "We're not even talking kids for three or four years anyway. Let's just focus on finding Macy's killer."

As the two men settled into investigating, Ziva realized she would have to talk to Sarah tonight, find out what options her friend was considering. Or this week could get even worse.

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As Tim grabbed his gear from the backseat of the car when they got home that night, he frowned. Straightening, he looked across the top of the car at Tony. "Jethro's not barking."

Tony looked worried. "Could Rachel be walking him?"

Tim shook his head. "No, she texted me after she dropped him off a few hours ago. She took him out when she picked up her kids from school and walked home with them." He shut the car door and headed for the mudroom.

"Bet he loved that," Tony said. "Maybe the kids wore him out?"

Tim went to unlock the deadbolt, only to find it was open. He stepped to the side and pointed to it. Tony nodded and put his hand to the holster on his hip. Tim drew his own gun and motioned with his fingers how they should move once they opened the door.
"At least we don't have to announce ourselves in our own house," Tony whispered. Tim wondered if this was the latest round in the Mexico fallout. First Abby, now him. He shoved that thought away and got ready to clear their own house like a potential crime scene.

Tim stood to one side, Tony to the other, and Tim opened the door. He checked the mudroom, but didn't see anything, so he entered. He worked one side of the room while Tony checked the closet. His husband shook his head, indicating the closet was clear.

Tim pointed their next move, and Tony nodded. They crept into the kitchen, cleared that, and moved into the living room. Tim stepped through the doorway and stopped at the sight of Jethro lying on the sofa. Tony bumped into him, and Tim stepped aside so Tony could see.

The dog wasn't alone. Sarah was asleep on the sofa, her arms wrapped around the big dog as she rested her head on his back.

"Well, shit," Tony whispered in Tim's ear. "This can't be good."
Chapter 49

Chapter Notes

AN: Just a few more chapters to go! For those who have been asking: No, this is not the last Breathe story. However, I am taking a break until fall. I started writing Razor's Edge to knock the rust off my fiction-writing muscles because I had an original novel simmering in my head. It ended up snowballing into the series, but I'm now at a point where I need to take a break and work on the novel for a while. If you want to track the novel's progress on Twitter, I'm @jenniecoughlin. I'll probably have some one-shots between now and then, possibly in Breathe, but there are some obvious questions that will still be open at the end of this story (Bat-gremlins? Somalia secrets?) because they're a different story than this one. Those will have to wait for the next epic. ;)

Thursday, May 12, 2010

Tony put his safety back on and reached for Tim's gun. He went to the study to put both in the lockbox. When he returned to the living room, Tim was sitting in the armchair, watching Sarah and Jethro sleep.

Tony looked at her, then over at Tim, who shrugged. Tony sat on the other end of the sofa, his weight shifting the cushions enough to disturb the dog, who was curled in a circle, Sarah draped across his back. Jethro lifted his head and tried to wag his tail, smacking Sarah in the head.

"Wha-" She started to sit up, blinking her eyes before rubbing them with one hand. "Oh. Hi." Jethro climbed down and headed for the kitchen, and Sarah pulled her knees to her chest.

Tony frowned and looked to Tim, who was sitting forward on the edge of the chair.

"Hi?" he said. "Not that you aren't welcome, Sarah, but what's the occasion?"

She looked down, and Tony could see her teeth worrying her lower lip. He waited and turned to glare at Tim, who settled back a bit. After a few minutes, Sarah looked up, tucking her long hair behind one ear.

"I..." She stopped. "This..." She pulled her hair back with one hand, leting it fall down her back. "I'm not sure how to say this."

"Quick is usually best," Tony said, giving her a small smile. "Like ripping off a Band-Aid."

Sarah nodded and took a deep breath. Then another. Tony risked a glance at Tim, who was back to the edge of the chair. Tony shot him a glare, and Tim eased off a little.

"Sarah?" Tim asked, voice quiet.

She straightened up. "I'm pregnant," she said. "It's Josh's."

Before Tony could even figure out what to say to that, Sarah went on, her words less confident. "I didn't realize until... Ziva figured it out, and she made me take a test." Sarah kept talking as tears started to stream down her cheeks. "I'm an idiot because I've been like this the entire time, and I
didn't realize. And how dumb is that?"

Tony was still trying to process the news, but McGenius was obviously a step ahead of him, because he had crossed the space between them and was sitting next to Sarah, his arms wrapped around her.

"I didn't know, Tim," she said. "I didn't know."

Tony swallowed as Tim rubbed a hand along Sarah's back and let her cry on his shoulder. No wonder Ziva hadn't talked to the guys most of the week. Tony rubbed the back of his neck and wished for a beer. Or a slug of Gibbs' bourbon. At the very least the Nerf gun and a picture of Josh. Something.

He settled for scooting closer so he could put a hand on Sarah's shoulder, the other on Tim's back. He could feel the tension along Tim's spine and ran his hand over the muscles, trying to soothe. Sarah's body heaved as she sobbed, and Tony decided they should have killed Josh back in March.

When Sarah finally pulled away, her face was red and blotchy. "Sorry, Tim," she said. "I'm a little, well..."

Tony was about to say hormonal, then decided that was probably a bad idea. "When did you figure it out?" he settled on.

Sarah sniffled. "Saturday. When I got home from work, Ziva told me she thought I might be." Sarah wrapped her arms around her body. "I didn't even think about it, even though I should have. Josh wasn't making me sick, his spawn was." She made a face. "Abby came over, and we figured out the test came back negative because it was too early." She crossed her arms. "Damn cheating SOB knocked me up, then cheated on me."

Tony tried to do the math. "Wait, that means you're-"

"Really pregnant?" Sarah snorted. "Yeah, tell me something I don't know." She pulled away from Tim and stood up, pulling her T-shirt against her body. Tony couldn't keep his eyebrows from shooting up when he saw the small belly sticking out. Even after Sarah let the shirt go, he could still tell, kind of. She was at the point where you didn't say anything in case the woman in question was overweight, but you kind of wondered.

"So what are you going to do?" Tim asked.

Sarah walked away and went to stand by the living room window, looking out. Tony looked at Tim, who followed his sister, putting his hands on her shoulders and gently rubbing. As he did, he looked back at Tony and motioned his head toward the space next to Sarah.

Tony nodded and walked over. "OK, McSis, tell us what you want to do. We'll help, whatever it is." He looked down at her.

Sarah nodded. She opened her mouth, then closed it. Finally, she said. "I thought about this a hundred times on the way over here and all day at work. I figured out what I would say, but now that I actually have to say it..." She looked down at the ground, and Tony reached out to tip up her chin.

"Just spit it out," he said. "What's your choice?" He paused. "You know it's your choice, right? Not somebody else's?"

Sarah nodded. "But... It's not my choice. Not really." She swallowed. "My choice was not to have
kids, not to get knocked up.” Her short laugh was sharp, bitter. "Looks like my choice mattered a whole lot."

"It is your choice, Sarah, and we'll support you," Tim said, sliding his hands down her arms, then wrapping them around her in a hug reminiscent of the ones Abby always gave.

She shook her head. "You don't know what I decided."

Tony tried to hurry her along. "OK, what did you decide?"

She pulled away from Tim and turned her back to the window so she was facing both of them.

"I thought about a lot of options, but I kept coming back to something Abby said." Sarah wrapped her arms around herself, and Tony could see the slight rounding beneath them. "You two have been talking about adopting, starting a family. Would you... Do you want to adopt this baby?"

Tony looked at Sarah, then at Tim. He wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not that Tim looked as stunned as Tony felt.

"Sarah, I don't know what to say," Tim said.

"You want kids, Tim, you always have," Sarah said. "You know me, I'd be a lousy mom. I don't like kids, and I don't want them. And I really don't want to spend the rest of life resenting this baby. It's not his fault Josh is a jerk.” She stepped between them and started pacing the living room. "I was just going to get rid of it, but I know you guys want kids, and you obviously can't have your own, and it seemed selfish to get rid of mine if you guys wanted it." She turned and walked back. "I can't deal with another 18 years of Josh in my life, and I can't afford to raise a kid alone, even if I wanted to be a mom. So why not give him to you?"

Tony watched Sarah getting more and more agitated as she walked, segueing into a rant about Josh. He felt like punching Josh and decided to get his hands out of sight before Sarah noticed how tightly his fists were curled. As he slid them toward his pockets, one brushed his badge and the black band he had slid over it that morning.

Suddenly he wasn't seeing Sarah anymore, he was seeing Agent Macy's burnt corpse lying in the bonfire remains. He wasn't hearing her rant against Josh, he was hearing his own voice that afternoon.

"I don't care whether I'm on Cold Cases or you're heading up a special Cyber Squad or we're both on this team, we can't subject kids to this. The dirtbags don't care about who's waiting at home, hoping we come back in one piece."

Tony winced and wondered if this was karma coming back to give him a kick in the ass for saying that. But this was Sarah, and she was family. One thing he'd learned from Gibbs, you did what you had to for family. Gibbs had done it two decades ago for his girls. They could step up and do the same for Sarah. He knew Tim would agree; he'd always wanted kids, even knowing what they could go through. That hadn't changed today. Tony opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, Tim did.

"Sarah, are you sure?" Tim asked. "Because... I don't know if we can."

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Tim listened as Sarah told them about Josh. But he wasn't prepared for her request, especially not today. As she slid into a rant, he thought back to earlier, in the bullpen. He'd thought Tony was
over-reacting at the time, but faced with the reality? Tim realized he had the same fears.

"Sarah, are you sure?" Maybe she was just ranting. Maybe she just wanted them to talk her into or out of something. And he had to be the one to say this, not Tony. This wasn't Tony's sister. "Because..." He struggled to find the words. "I don't know if we can."

His baby sister stopped in mid-rant and just looked at him, her face crumpling. Tony was right there, and he pulled her in for a hug, looking at Tim over Sarah's head. Tim was surprised to see shock on Tony's face.

His husband glared at him, and Tim lifted an eyebrow. Tony was the one who, just that afternoon, said he wasn't sure. Tony was the one who'd had doubts about having kids all along. And this wasn't even getting into all the practical things, like if Josh would give up his parental rights.

Tim realized he needed to say something.

"Sarah, I didn't mean it like that," he said. "Just... I really don't know." He walked over and put a hand on her shoulder. "Come on, let's talk about it." He led the way back to the couch, where Sarah sat between him and Tony.

Tim struggled to figure out where to start. "I'm not saying we don't want to adopt," he said finally. "But... it's not that easy." He sighed. "We did some looking into this, or rather Abby did some for us, when we first started talking about how we wanted to be dads."

Sarah nodded. "She mentioned she had sites bookmarked when she pointed out I had more choices than abortion or keeping the baby. That's what gave me the idea to ask you guys."

Tim made a mental note to give Abby hell for not tipping them off. Even if it meant giving up Sarah's secret, they would have been able to consider the possibilities and give Sarah a better answer than what they were prepared for now. But he focused on answering Sarah's unasked question. "We found out a lot of things," he said. " Mostly that it's not that easy. Maryland won't let us both adopt, not unless one of us is the biological father, which isn't the case here."

"Ew."

Sarah made a face. "That's just so wrong." She paused. "Not one of you having a kid, though I don't want to know any details. But one of you being this kid's dad."

Tony snorted. "Yeah, I'm robbing the cradle enough with Mc80s Child here." He waggled his eyebrows, and Tim couldn't help laughing. As Sarah giggled, Tim was grateful once again for Tony's ability to lighten the mood. He thought that might be the only thing to get them through this.

"Moving on," Tim said. "Maryland probably won't let us adopt, though there's no firm ruling on it. D.C. will, but we have to be residents, which means living there for at least a year. And Virginia, well..."

"Virginia wants you two to burn in hell, I know." Sarah made a face.

Tony shook his head. "Not that bad, right Tim?"

"They'll recognize an adoption from another state, even if they won't recognize us as married, so we could move there like we planned after we adopt kids to be near Mom, Dad, and Gibbs." Tim paused. "After we figured all of that out, we decided it made more sense to wait a few years, until Tony was close to leaving NCIS, and adopt all the kids we wanted at the same time, then move out there. Because if we don't both adopt the kid, we can't move to Virginia because they don't recognize us as married."
Sarah pulled her knees to her chest. "So you really can't adopt the baby, not right away, and if you do, you have to raise the baby in the city or not have any more kids." She made a face. "Great, so now Josh is screwing all of us over."

Tony wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "Leave him out of it."

"I don't think we can," Tim said. "He has to sign off on this for us to adopt, since he's the father."

Tony groaned.

Tim looked over at his husband. "You're the expert on Josh psychology. Do you think he would?"

Tony made a face. "I'm not sure that's a good thing to be an expert in." He frowned, and Tim could see him running Josh through the people computer that lived in his brain. Finally Tony shook his head. "Could go either way," he said. "If he wants to put Sarah through hell-"

"We've already established that," she retorted. "He seems to have made it his mission in life."

Tim just rubbed his hand along her arm. "If he wants-" he prompted Tony.

"Right. He could try and fight it, and depending on the judge, he could block it if he gets one that doesn't like two bi guys raising a kid." Tony sighed. "I don't think he'd stand a chance in D.C. unless he agrees to raise the child himself, but Maryland's another story."

"And even if we moved tomorrow, we wouldn't be able to adopt in D.C. until the baby's six months old," Tim said. "Not unless we can find some way around the residency bit." He could feel Sarah shaking and looked down to see she was crying. "Hey, we're not saying no," he said. "We're just... It's not easy." He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her in for a hug.

He looked over her head at Tony, who was looking frustrated. Tim motioned with his head toward the kitchen, and Tony headed there. Tim let Sarah finish sniffling, then pulled away.

"Sarah, give us a couple of days," he said. "It's just... It's a lot to process, and today isn't the best day."

"What happened today?" She swiped at her eyes with the back of her hand and leaned back against the sofa cushions.

Tim hesitated, but decided she needed to know. "An NCIS agent, one I worked with on a case last year, was found dead in Annapolis today. Our investigation still hasn't turned up whether she was murdered because of something in her personal life or because she was an agent." He pulled his badge off his belt and showed her the black band around it. "It's not the first time this has happened, but Tony was questioning if it was fair to have kids with the dangers we run into on the job."

"And then I show up with my wonderful timing and try and hand you a kid." Sarah wrinkled her nose. "Great." She started to get up, but Tim put his hand on her shoulder, stopping her.

"Sarah, I meant what I said. We're not saying no. But it's a big decision for a lot of reasons, and we need some time to talk about it." He hesitated. "I know you don't have a lot of time before people start asking questions."

"Yeah, if Mom or Dad decides to stop by the coffee shop like Dad did a couple weeks ago, I'm hosed," Sarah said.
Tim nodded. "We'll figure this out as quickly as we can, but Agent Macy's death shook us up." He paused. "Can you give us until next weekend? I think we're going to be at the office most of this one trying to find her killer, and the way cases have been coming, next week will probably be pretty hellish."

Sarah hesitated before nodding. "It's taken me since Saturday to even figure out if I wanted to ask you. The least I can do is give you guys some time, too." She sniffled.

"Hey, we're here if you want to talk," Tim said. "No matter what happens. Whether we take the baby or you keep it or you give it up for adoption to somebody else or you get an abortion, we're here for you. I can't say we know what you're going through, but we'll try."

Sarah's sniffles turned into snickers. "Yeah, can't see one of you two pregnant," she said. "It would be like that weird Cosby show episode I saw on a rerun a few weeks ago with the dream sequence where the guys were all pregnant."

Tim groaned. "Oh, god, I remember that one. No, not going there. Ziva would shoot all of us." He checked his watch. "Were you going to have dinner with Ziva, or do you want to stay and eat with us?"

Sarah shrugged. "Ziva and I never plan anything, because she never knows if or when she'll be home. But you guys need to talk without having to worry about saying something that's going to make me either bitch or bawl, which seem to be my only two settings these days." She got up, her movements a little awkward, and walked over to her backpack, rifling through it until she found her cell phone. "Oh, shit, she's called me eight times."

Sarah punched a number on the phone and soon was talking to Ziva.

"I'm at the guys' house. I told them." Tim couldn't hear what Ziva said, but Sarah replied, "Yeah, how did you know?" She listened, then handed the phone to Tim.

"Ziva wants to talk to you."

Tim took the cell. "Ziva?"

"I am sorry, McGee. I was trying to contact Sarah, because I knew today would not be a good day for her to tell you this. I did not know she had decided to ask you and Tony to adopt the baby."

"It's OK, Ziva," he said. "We're just glad we know about it now. We all thought something was wrong with you."

"I am fine, McGee. I just did not want to break a confidence."

"Thanks, Ziva," he said. "One of us will give Sarah a ride home." After ending the call, he handed the phone back to Sarah.

"You don't have to give me a ride, Tim," she said. "I can take the Metro."

He raised an eyebrow. "You really want to do that? You're telling me you worked all day on your feet, you're almost three months pregnant, and your feet don't hurt?"

She shook her head. "Busted." She frowned. "Hey, how do you know that? You don't have a Baby McGee running around somewhere you didn't tell us about, do you?"

He thought about a snarky response about not being Tony, but Sarah might not realize he was
kidding. "Mom's feet always hurt when she was pregnant with you," he said. "Besides, just because I haven't been through it with a girlfriend, doesn't mean I haven't had friends and coworkers who were pregnant. Feet hurt and having to pee a lot are the two things I know."

Sarah made a face. "Um, yeah, actually..."

"You know where the bathroom is," he said.

She dashed out of the room, and Tim headed back to the kitchen to see what Tony was doing.

He watched from the doorway as Tony mixed something in a bowl.

"Dinner?" he asked.

Tony nodded. "Is Sarah staying?"

"No, I'm going to give her a ride home. She wanted to give us time to talk."

Tony turned around. "Where is she now?"

"Bathroom."

Tony nodded. "Right." He checked his watch. "Pizza dough won't be ready to go for a while — I'm just about to put it to rise."

"Pizza?" Sarah's voice came from behind Tim, and he moved aside to let her join them in the kitchen.

"Hey, that's a question." Tony asked. "Sarah your usual pizza reads like something a pregnant woman craves. So what do you put on your pizza now?"

She smiled. "Same thing. I just always want pizza."

Tony snorted. "Too bad. I was thinking it would work in reverse, and you'd want a normal pizza now."

Sarah shook her head. "I think Ziva wishes it worked like that. It still grosses her out when I make it."

Tim made a face. "I think it's disgusting, and I've had 10 years to get used to it since you first discovered the revolting combination."

Sarah stuck her tongue out. "Hey, nobody's asking you to eat it." She smirked. "Maybe I will stay for dinner..."

"Out, both of you," Tony said. "Tim, by the time you get home, I'll have pizza dough ready to go."

Tim nodded and headed to the car, Sarah following behind him. He waited until he had pulled out of their neighborhood onto a main road before bringing up the topic of the day, but when he looked over, she was sound asleep. He looked back at the road and just focused on navigating the traffic.

Tony was just checking on the dough when he heard the door open and Jethro go skidding across the floor to welcome Tim home. He shaped it into two circles and put them on the counter to add toppings, then washed his hands. When he turned around, Tim was standing in the doorway.
Sarah get home OK?"

Tim nodded. Normally his face had more expression than anybody but sometimes Abby, however Tony was having a tough time reading him now. He settled for walking over and opening his arms to hug Tim. He could feel the tension in Tim's back and shoulders.

"OK, after dinner, you're getting a massage," he said.

Tim just nodded, and Tony tried to figure out what it was going to take to get him to talk. He bided his time as they topped their pizzas and slid them in the oven, settling down at the kitchen table with bottles of beer.

"Probably a good thing you took Sarah home," Tony said. "Tonight is definitely a night that calls for beer, and it would be rubbing salt in the wound to drink in front of her."

"Yeah." Tim swigged his beer, then set it down. "So now that she's not here, what do you really think about what she asked?"

"Really?" Tony said. He'd thought about it while Tim was gone. "I know this sounds crazy after what I said today, but I think we should. She's family, and it sounds like she wants this. And it's basically what we wanted, if not quite the way we wanted or when we wanted."

Tim nodded. "I know. But..."

"But." Tony knew everything Tim wasn't saying. "It's not that easy."

Tim shook his head. "And Josh worries me. If he wanted to, he could stop this whole thing. That's assuming we make it through whatever the cartel has planned for us to deal with Gibbs."

Tony nodded. "Boss wants to keep us out of it." But at the McEyebrow, he backtracked. "I know. We won't. We can't do that to him, not when he needs us."

Tim sighed. "And that's just the major stuff. That's not even whether we can shuffle jobs. Jarvis isn't supposed to retire until January, and Vance isn't going to be able to get a new program through with the way they're talking about cutting budgets. And there's all the practical stuff like where do we live and can we even adopt the baby."

Tony shook his head. "My brain can't handle this." He drained the last of his beer. "The only good thing is we've figured out what's wrong with Ziva."

Tim rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I'm just not sure that's making the list of worries any smaller. I'm a little ticked off that Abby knew about this and gave Sarah the idea of asking us and didn't give us a heads-up so we could think about it and have a better answer for Sarah."

Tony got up as the timer dinged and pulled the pizzas from the oven. "Ziva knew, too." He transferred them to plates and sliced the crispy discs.

"Yeah, I know. But she called Sarah a bunch of times today, because she knew it was a bad day for Sarah to tell us about this, let alone ask us about adopting. Sarah just didn't hear her phone." Tim frowned as Tony set his ham and pepper pizza down in front of him.

"No point in getting angry at either of them," Tony said, picking up a slice. "We just do what we've been doing since life went mad. We keep going and figure it out."
Jimmy sorted through stacks of paperwork, looking for a logical way to "mis-file" the autopsy findings for Hernandez. Gibbs might have told them to stay out of it, but he and Dr. Mallard figured this was something they could easily claim had happened by accident.

He was halfway done when the doors hissed open and he looked up to see Tony walk into the room.

"Anthony, I do not have any additional information on Agent Macy for you," Ducky said.

"Not why I'm here, Ducky," he said. "Need some advice, and you've usually got words of wisdom."

"Thank you, my dear boy, but I'm afraid it is only that I have been around rather long that gives my words the patina of age. Not their content, which I'm afraid is rather pedestrian." Ducky straightened up from Macy's body. "Still, I could do with a spot of tea. Mr. Palmer-

"He can stay, Ducky," Tony said. "He knows about this. Knew about it before we did." Jimmy looked up and at the frustrated expression on Tony's face realized the other secret must be out. He bent back over the paperwork, deciding he was better off staying out of this one.

"So, how might I be of assistance?" Ducky stripped off his gloves and started tea water to heating.

Tony hoisted himself up on one of the steel tables. "Families," he said. "What do you think about field agents who have children?"

"Why, I never really thought about it," Ducky said. "As with any other profession, some agents do and some do not. Our director was an agent for many years before assuming his present position, and we have met his children. Agent Wilson is another example. There are many others. Your team, I must admit is rather the exception in that none of you have living children."

"And Gibbs didn't join NCIS until after Kelly died."

"No, he did not." Ducky looked over at the body on the table. "Anthony, I'm rather confused by this line of questioning. Agent Macy, as far as I am aware, did not have children. And her body shows no sign of having borne any in the past."

"It's not case-related," Tony said. He hopped off the table and started pacing. "If I tell you this, do you promise not to tell Gibbs or the McGees?"

"Are you including Timothy in your definition of McGees?" Ducky asked.

"No, I just meant Mom and Dad," Tony said. "Tim knows."

"And young Sarah?"

Tony growled. "Oh, Sarah knows." His footsteps were quick across the floor. "Sarah's pregnant, and Josh the Jerk is the father."

"Oh, dear." Ducky was silent for a minute. "I take it from your line of questioning, then, that the question has come up as to whether you and Timothy should adopt her child?"
"Yeah, she dropped that on us last night, right after she told us he knocked her up." Tony slammed a hand down on the table, and the sound echoed. "Dammit, Ducky, how does stuff like this all happen at once? After Macy turned up dead, I was all for not having a family, because I didn't want us to have kids when we might leave them without a parent — or two parents. Before we had a chance to really talk about it, this lands in our laps."

Jimmy listened to Tony vent and tried to stay focused on his work. Tony didn't know about Abby, and he didn't realize that he was thinking about turning away the very thing Jimmy and Abby were grieving for. Jimmy couldn't think of a better word to describe it. It wasn't like when he lost his dad, at least not what he could remember of that. But it reminded him of when Kate died, even though he wasn't really part of the family then. He wasn't sure how that worked; he hadn't know he had something to miss until it was gone. But last night he and Abby had fallen asleep in silence as he held her close after she told him all about how she'd felt the past couple of days as she realized she was pregnant. Jimmy was kicking himself for not having noticed and made her promise to tell him the next time, so they could go through it together. That at least had gotten a giggle as she told him she would remind him of that when he had to sit with her in the bathroom through morning sickness.

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The next morning, the guys headed in early, and Tim headed straight for the lab. Abby was there, working away on some evidence.

"Hey, McGee," she said.

"Why didn't you tell us?" He hadn't meant to start right in on her, but he was so frustrated at the whole situation, he couldn't stop the words.

"Tell you?"

"About Sarah." He looked at her. "She said you were the one who gave her the idea that Tony and I might adopt, and she came over yesterday — she was there when we got home before we'd even had a chance to talk about Tony's suggestion yesterday that we not have kids because one of us might end up like Macy." He turned away and paced across the lab to the plasma, where Abby had the case information from Macy's file posted. "We weren't talking about kids now anyway, we'd decided to wait. And then Sarah drops this in our lap and when we tried telling her we weren't sure, she burst into tears."

"Well I'm sorry her life isn't fitting into your nice, neat plan," Abby said. "It doesn't work like that McGee. Life is messy, and it happens, and sometimes it sucks."

"Abs, that's not news," he said. "Life has pretty much sucked since we went to Mexico, and this is not helping. Gibbs won't let us help him, and Sarah's asking for something I'm not sure we can give her. Ziva's stuck in the middle, and you could have warned us and didn't."

"News flash, McGee, not everything revolves around you."

Tim looked over at Abby to see her standing, hands on hips, glaring at him.

"I know she's your sister and you're my best friend, but I've had a little too much to worry about this week to think about that." She crossed her arms.

"I tried helping you with the Mexico case the other day, and you chased me out of the lab." He could feel his frustration at everything morphing into anger as he walked around the table until he
was facing Abby. "You wouldn't tell me anything in Mexico, you didn't tell me when we got back, and you won't let me help now. So I'm sorry you're feeling overwhelmed because you can't figure out a way to get Gibbs out of this mess, but if you're not going to let me help-"

"McGee." A head-slap sent him stumbling forward. "Apologize to Abby."

Tim looked over at Gibbs. "Boss-"

Gibbs glared at him. "Abby doesn't have to explain herself to you."

McGee walked into Gibbs' space, knowing he was going to get head-slapped and not caring. "Boss, you don't know what we were talking about, and with all due respect-"

"I don't know what I'm talking about?" Gibbs stared him in the eyes. "McGee. You have no right to yell at Abby. Not-"

"Gibbs, Bossman, wait!" Abby started twisting her hands.

"No. He doesn't get to talk to you like that."

Tim opened his mouth to protest, but Abby beat him to it.

"Gibbs, don't yell at him," Abby said. "He doesn't-"

"Boss, you don't even know why I'm mad at her," Tim said. He stood his ground. "She should have told us-"

"McGee, that was none of your business." Gibbs stepped closer until he was nose to nose with Tim. "There is no reason Abby had to tell you she and Jimmy lost the baby, just because you think you should have known."

Tim just blinked at Gibbs, trying to process what the team leader had just said.

"Gibbs, that's not what he was yelling at me about," Abby said.

Tim looked over at her, standing there with her arms wrapped around her. "Oh, hell." He realized what he'd said. "Abs, I didn't know..."

He'd forgotten he still had a furious Gibbs in his face. "You didn't realize?" His glare got even sterner. "You two have known all week something was up, and I told you to leave it. And you come down here and yell at Abby?"

"Gibbs, don't yell at him," Abby said. She tugged on Gibbs' shoulder and tried to separate them. "He was right to yell at me, because I shouldn't have said what I said and I should have told him." She took a breath, and Tim could hear the hitch. "I just... I told Jimmy to tell about me if he had to, and..." Tears spilled down her cheeks, and Gibbs turned to pull her in for a hug.

"McGee, go get Palmer," he said. "And stay out of the lab until I tell you otherwise."

Tim nodded, but had to say it. "Abby, I'm sorry. Between this and Sarah... No wonder you didn't say anything."

"Sarah?" Gibbs pulled away from Abby a bit to look at him. "What the hell does Sarah have to do with this."

"That's why Timmy was mad, Gibbs," Abby said, pulling away from him. "Ziva just realized
Saturday that Sarah's pregnant, and it's Josh's, and they told me because we were trying to figure out why my test didn't catch it, and I told Jimmy when you guys realized something was going on to tell about me before giving up Sarah's secret because she asked us not to tell anybody until she figured out what to do, and I didn't think that was going to be a big deal, but you guys knew Ziva was worried about something and it all snowballed and then I lost the baby and I had to tell Jimmy what was going on and it's just a big mess."

"Sarah's-?" Gibbs rubbed a hand over his face. "McGee, get Palmer. Then get back up to the bullpen so we can go talk to Macy's mom. You can fill me in on Sarah on the way to Cumberland."

Tim nodded and escaped before anything else could happen.

When he walked into Autopsy, Tony was there talking to Jimmy and Ducky. "Palmer, Gibbs wants you in the lab. I stuck my foot in it, and Abby's crying." He sighed. "I'm sorry, Jimmy. I didn't know."

Jimmy nodded. "We didn't tell you; you couldn't know. And you've got your own things to worry about." He headed out, the doors hissing closed behind him.

Tony turned to face Tim. "Didn't know what? How many secrets do we have floating around?"

"Abby had a miscarriage the other day," Tim said. "Gibbs thought I was yelling at her for not telling us about that and lit into me."

Ducky shook his head. "Did you and Jethro get things straightened out before he banished you?"

Tim nodded. "I take it Tony just filled you in on Sarah?" He turned to face Tony. "Jimmy knew. Abby told him after she lost the baby, said if telling us would keep Sarah's secret for a few more days while she figured out what to do, he could tell."

"So he told Gibbs." Tony hoisted himself onto the empty table. "We've got a drug cartel with friends in high places gunning for Gibbs, somebody killed Agent Macy for reasons unknown, Sarah's got a baby she doesn't want, and Abby and Jimmy lost one that it sounds like they did want. Basically, we're up a creek without a paddle and getting closer to the waterfall."

"I suggest you boys focus on finding justice for Agent Macy, as that is the only one of the four we can do much about," Ducky said. "As for our conversation, Anthony, allow me to think on it for a while. Perhaps I can find a solution."

Tony nodded and hopped down. "Come on, McGee. Before Gibbs finds us not where he wants us and there's another dead agent."

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After returning from Cumberland, Tim followed Gibbs out of the elevator.

"Get a sketch artist out there. Let's ID this guy." The team leader headed for his desk.

"Already made the call, but I can make it again." Tim had a bad feeling this wasn't related to the Burroughs case; it was related to Mexico. Why else would somebody have gone through Macy's notes from her days as an MP?

"DiNozzo."

"What?" Tony spoke through a mouthful of food, and Tim wondered if Tony had gotten him a
sandwich, too. This was shaping up to be another endless day.

"Making it again, Boss." He sat down at his desk, noting the wrapped sandwich by his keyboard.

"Come on, chew." Gibbs sounded impatient, and Tim couldn't blame him. He hoped Tony and Ziva had come up with something. "What do you got for me?"

"Agents spoke to the owner of the bar Burroughs was in the night of the rape." Tony spoke around his food.

"Swallow."

"Remembers an American civilian hanging with her. Young guy. Big mouth. Big drinker." Tony's voice made his distaste clear, and Tim couldn't help but think of Josh. He didn't know if the big drinker applied, but he wouldn't rule it out.

"He got a name?" Gibbs' voice brought Tim back to the present.

"Ahhh, yes." Tony got up and brought up the information on the plasma. "He used a credit card, ran his bank statements. 22, out of Chevy Chase, Tyler Hammond. His dad Randall, he's a big muckety muck builder in DC."

Tim started searching for the name.

"Yeah, he founded Derby Construction." He pulled up the company's site. Great, another spoiled rich kid. "They have sites all over the city."

Tony took over. "Junior finished Georgetown last year, kicked around for a few months, 'til Mommy and Daddy got sick of seeing his face, sent him off to Europe three months ago."

"He still in Europe?"

"Negatory. Got back a week ago. Tyler's home now. Maybe Agent Macy went to see him."

"Maybe she got too close." Tim frowned. Would a college kid really kill a federal agent over a rape?

"Take Ziva. Go see him." Gibbs headed to his desk. "DiNozzo, McGee filled me in. Basement's always open, you two need to talk."

"Yes, Boss." Tony grabbed his gear, and Tim decided he'd better get down to the evidence garage and go through those notebooks, isolate the missing ones. Ducky was right — they needed to find Macy's killer.

-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-

Tony pulled up outside the Hammond estate, his gut churning. This was too much like what he grew up with, and what he knew of Hammond was too much like Josh for his liking. This was not the case they needed to catch this week, not with everything else going on. He looked around as he and Ziva walked over to the ambulance where a few police officers were standing as an older guy ripped one cop a new one.

"Hey guys," Tony said as he walked up. "You Tyler Hammond?" He addressed the college kid sitting on the ambulance bumper, face battered and rapidly bruising.

"Who are you?"
"NCIS."

"Damn Navy," the father said. "Where were you guys a few minutes ago?"

Tony decided he liked it better when no one knew who NCIS was. "Can you tell us what happened?"

Old Man Hammond was ready to take a swing at somebody. "A couple of guys in ski masks pulled up and beat the daylights out of my son."

Tony tried to defuse the situation, especially since he had a pretty good idea of who the two guys were. "Well, that's not good. Can you describe these guys, Tyler?" He kept his tone professional, inquisitive, but he noticed Ziva wasn't saying anything.

"Big." Tyler looked up, his skin purpling where he'd been hit. "I never saw them coming."

"So you did not see their faces?" Ziva's tone was factual, but it set Randall Hammond off again.

"Didn't need to. They took off in an SUV with Navy base permits on the glass." He glared. "Couple of respectable military guys beating up an innocent kid. You know, I have friends at the Pentagon, I'm going to call my lawyer, and I'm going to sue you people."

"OK. All right." Tony turned away from the ambulance and put a hand on Ziva's shoulder. "Why don't you call Gibbs? Give him a heads up. Tell him our attacker's been attacked." And then he was going to make sure Ziva went back to the Navy Yard — he didn't trust either of these men, and while their little ninja chick could more than hold her own, the Hammonds would probably find a way to get back at her. And they didn't need any more complications right now.

Tony waited at the house until Gibbs arrived. Hammond's lawyer showed up first, and Tony winced, knowing that was just going to make things worse. Still, maybe that meant Hammond felt like there was something to hide. The lawyer might be more reasonable than Hammond, who was starting to get on Tony's nerves the way he kept grousing about the Navy being full of thugs.

When Gibbs pulled up, Tony breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, they could get somewhere. He followed Gibbs into the house and back into the living room.

"Special Agent Gibbs." The team leader held out his badge, then flipped it to show his ID. "How're you feeling, Tyler?" Gibbs tucked his badge inside his coat pocket. Tony followed him, noting the similarities between the Hammonds' place and the estates where he grew up. Hammond might be a self-made man, but he cloaked it in a veneer of old money.

"We've been waiting for you for over an hour," Hammond said. "It's nice of you to finally show."

"Busy day today, Mr. Hammond."

"Maybe you need to get your priorities straight, Agent Gibbs. Look what they did to my son." The venom in Hammond's voice was clear, but Tony thought he heard something else there, too.

"Who, exactly?" Gibbs was playing it straight, so Tony just sat back and looked around, cataloging information.

"Navy guys," Tyler said.

"Your Navy," Hammond added.
Tony wanted to protest — they hadn't found any evidence the sailors were guilty of anything except looking out for their shipmate — but he knew he needed to let Gibbs handle this part.

"I was walking to my car," Tyler said, removing the ice bag from his jaw. "They grabbed me, and—"

"You don't need to say any more, Tyler." The blond man spoke from where he stood behind the couch.

"That's sound advice. Who're you?" Gibbs didn't sound nearly as pissed as he usually did when a lawyer showed up.

"Marshall Tompko, Mr. Hammond's attorney."

"Well, you're right, Mr. Tompko. Tyler, you don't have to say anything else. It makes you look guilty." Tony felt a little tension ease from his shoulders. That sounded more like Gibbs.

"My son didn't do anything wrong." Hammond sounded too self-righteous, and Tony was sick of it.

"That's not what Petty Officer Burroughs says." He managed to keep his voice calm, though both Hammonds were pushing his buttons.

"I know all about her and her little story. She's lying." And Tony got a flash of what Sarah could face when Josh found out about the baby. He pushed that aside, needing to deal with this case and this rich jerk first.

"Mr. Hammond, if your son's so clean, why did two Navy sailors drive all the way out here, kick his ass?" Gibbs tone was surprisingly mild, which should have been a warning sign.

"Because Tyler Hammond witnessed them rape one of their own that evening in Marseille," the lawyer said. "He tried to stop it, but couldn't."

Tony resisted the urge to tell the lawyer that was a crock. "That's not the petty officer's story."

"She's afraid, intimidated," the lawyer said. "They're on that ship together 24-7. They know that Tyler can ID them, they're scared he'll talk, and they're desperate."

"It's a theory." Gibbs was barely hiding the skepticism in his tone, and Tony felt like cheering. He hated dirtbags, but rich, entitled dirtbags were even worse. "How about you Tyler? You got an opinion?" Gibbs looked down at the kid.

Tyler removed the ice bag from his jaw, but rather than speak, looked up toward his father. It made Tony wonder what he would see if he got Josh and Mr. Pritchard together in a room? Would Josh defer to his father? Maybe the one they really needed to worry about was Pritchard.

"My son just wanted to help, and this is the thanks he gets." Hammond glared at Gibbs. Tyler looked away from his father and back toward Gibbs. Tony hoped the kid would develop a backbone at some point. You couldn't let your dad run your life forever.

As they headed back to the office, Tony realized that if they did decide to adopt the baby, they were going to need to find a good lawyer just to make sure they could cut Josh out of this kid's life. At least if Sarah gave the baby up to another couple, she could make it a closed adoption so the baby wouldn't have any ties — that might keep Josh and the Pritchard influence far away from it. That wouldn't work if he and Tim adopted it. Tony sighed and wondered when life had gotten so complicated.
Ziva stared at the information on the two sailors that was posted on the plasma near Gibbs' desk. "What if his lawyer's right?" Tony said. "What if her shipmates did do it?"

Ziva kept her back to Tony, not sure she could face him, not during this discussion. She was glad her hair hanging down shielded her face from McGee. Her fingers compulsively twisted, pushing at her cuticles, remembering the ragged, broken feel of her fingertips during her captivity.

"Then I understand why Petty Officer Burroughs has kept her mouth shut." Ziva remembered the passage to Somalia on the Damocles, the way she slept with a gun under her pillow.

"I don't," McGee said. "Why would you let someone get away with rape?"

"Perception." Ziva hoped the would understand. "Burroughs is in the military. If a woman cries rape, no man on that ship would ever totally trust her again." The Israeli forces were less restrictive on women than the American, but Ziva remembered that much from her service before she became Mossad. It was why, even though she knew her team would not hurt her, she refused to tell anybody the details of Somalia.

"Well, you're a woman," McGee said. "What would you do?"

It was a test. She knew it. Ziva looked down at the floor, but she could sense Tony approaching from behind. She decided to give them what she wished she had done, not what she actually did.

"I'm different," she said. "After torturing them until they cried like babies, I would castrate them, give them what they deserve." She was careful not to flinch when Tony approached her.

"Hmmm," Tony said. "Spoken like a true almost-American." She felt his eyes on her and hoped he would let it drop. She did not want to revisit this topic, not here and not now.

Fortunately, Gibbs arrived. "Background check. I'm listening."

Ziva managed to participate in the discussion, but she was almost glad when Gibbs ordered her and Tony back to the ship. The car ride would be difficult, but she could always make him talk about Sarah.

Sarah found herself making drinks on auto-pilot again that morning. Tim and Tony had given her a lot to think about the night before, and she was trying to grapple with it. She had never realized all the things they had to think about, and it made her re-evaluate.

What if they couldn't adopt the baby until it was six months old? Could she raise a baby for six months? Would she have to move in with them, so they could be there too? It would be weird living with them, but maybe she would have to do that anyway so she could feed the baby. She tried to picture feeding a baby, much less doing it with her brothers around. Maggie had always gone into another room to feed Kevin, and Sarah felt like she would probably do the same thing.

As the familiar ache in her feet and back started to build, she thought of a more pressing problem. Could she even do this job in a few months? Her body was protesting now, and the baby wasn't all that big yet. Not to mention she had to pee again. Sarah made a face and tried to finish off the drinks in the queue so she could take a break without getting somebody to cover. She didn't want to call attention to this, not when she wasn't sure how much longer there would be a this.
She managed to get done and get to the bathroom before her bladder exploded. She looked down at her small belly. "You are driving me nuts already, you know that, right?" Fortunately, there was nobody else in the bathroom.

Back at the espresso machine, Sarah tried to think about what would happen if the guys couldn't adopt another baby because of this, if they moved to Virginia to be near Gibbs and her parents. Could she ask them to only have one kid just to help her out? She tried to remember all the other things Tim had mentioned, but it was making her head hurt. Maybe she should call them and tell them to forget about it.

Except they sounded like they were really thinking about the idea, and how flaky would she be if she offered a baby one day and tried to take it back the next? If she did that, and then they did want to adopt, how could they be sure she wouldn't try to do that later? Come to think of it, how could she be sure she wouldn't change her mind later? What would happen if in five years she decided she wanted kids? Or if she later wanted kids and couldn't have them? Would she feel cheated that Tony and Tim had this baby, and she didn't?

Sarah massaged her temples and wished she could have a hit of espresso to chase away the headache. Just another thing the baby was interfering with. She sighed, but kept her hand from drifting to press her belly. She'd asked the guys, and she wasn't going to back out. She just had to focus now on what she would do if they said no.
Chapter 51

AN: If you read my story Unshared Secrets, I used a scene from this chapter as the jumping off point for that story. Some circumstances were changed in that one since it wasn't Breathe, and the POV of the scene was flipped, but you will recognize some lines of dialogue if you've already read that one. Also, this story is past 300,000 words on into the home stretch. Just two more chapters after this!

Friday, May 14, 2010

Gibbs had just left the lab, putting Abby off again, when McGee came running up, telling him the missing notebooks were from Macy's Camp Pendleton days. That just confirmed the suspicion Abby had given him. He cut McGee off, closed the elevator doors, and dialed the cantina.

"Bueno?"

"Hello," Gibbs said. He fumbled for the Spanish. "Habla usted ingles?"

"Si. This is Camilla. Who is this?"

He breathed a sigh of relief. "Camilla. This is Jethro Gibbs, Mike Franks' friend." At least Camilla knew him, would be more likely to help.

"Senor Gibbs," she said. "Como estas?"

"Yeah, I need you to get a message to Mike for me." He tried to figure out the simplest way to say it.

"I have not seen him, but when he comes in I will make sure he-"

"You need to get the message to him now. Right now."

"Si, Senor, I will try."

"The message is Rule Number 44. Repeat it back to me." He hoped Mike was sober enough to remember the rule, to know what to do.

"Rule 44. He will know what this means?" Camilla sounded skeptical.

"Just give him the message," Gibbs said. He thought of another way to ensure Mike understood. "Make sure he has Layla and Amira with him. Just do that, OK?"

"Si, Senor Gibbs. Are you all right?"

Gibbs didn't have an answer, so he hung up. As the elevator moved upward, he realized he needed to find a way to protect his other women and children. Abby, and Sarah and the baby. He couldn't risk telling Sarah, so he would have to hope Ziva and the guys could keep her safe until they wrapped this up. Jimmy would take care of Abby, had been doing a better job lately than Gibbs
had been.

Later, after he'd booked the Hammonds on rape charges and cleared them, at least in his own mind, of Macy's murder, he went down to Autopsy. Duck had to have something for him. The room was dim, just Ducky's desk lamp lighting it. Jimmy was gone, hopefully keeping Abby safe.

"Duck, the knife used to kill Laura Macy. Who made the knife?" He walked over to the doctor's desk.

"For the most part, linking a specific weapon to a knick in a human bone is virtually impossible, but in this case, I can go out on the proverbial limb." Ducky got up and walked over to the autopsy table where the file was spread out. "The pattern is indicative of a KBar 1277." He handed Gibbs a photo from the file.

"1277." Gibbs thought for a second. "That's an Army knife."

"Yes, our assailant knew that the first cut had to be sufficient." Ducky paused. "He ended her life deliberately, brutally, and without hesitation."

"She was executed." Gibbs stared down at photos of the knife and Macy on the table as Ducky walked around to other side.

"Yes, and then left to be discovered." Ducky's words carried force. "To taunt whoever would be hurt the most by her untimely death." He paused. "Not unlike leaving a single bullet to be found in the Mexican sun."

The words echoed in Gibbs' brain, and he looked up and stared straight at Ducky.

"You're familiar with the kind of killer to which I speak."

Gibbs glared at the man he considered his oldest friend. "I am." He straightened up to leave before he could say something he'd regret. He knew not everybody would accept what he had done, but he thought McGee would be the issue, not Ducky.

"No, Jethro, wait." Ducky followed him out of Autopsy. "This is as much about you as it is about Special Agent Macy. Listen to me."

Gibbs didn't want to listen, but Ducky kept going, detailing how he had figured it out.

"You may not have wanted this to come to the surface, but somebody else did, and now they are forcing your hand." Duck looked at him. "Who is it, Jethro?"

Gibbs removed the medical examiner's hand from the elevator and let the doors slide shut between them. Before he could do anything else, his phone rang.

-Tuesday, May 18, 2010-

Tony sat at his desk, still unable to grapple with everything going on. Gibbs had left Friday, and they still hadn't heard anything. Hell, they hadn't even realized he was gone until Monday when Vance asked where he was.

He and Tim had spent the entire weekend trying to figure out what to tell Sarah. The more Tony thought about Josh and what the Pritchards were capable of, the less he wanted to give Josh access
to the baby by having it connected to their family. But even as he grew less sure about the two of them adopting, Tim was starting to come around to it.

"So have you decided what to do?" Ziva looked over at him from her chair. "Sarah spent most of the weekend trying to decide what she would do if you two decide you do not want to help her."

"It's not a question of wanting," Tim said from his desk. "We want to help."

"We just don't know what actually counts as help," Tony said. "You saw the way the Hammonds were. Josh's family has that same mentality, just like my father. Rules don't apply. Interference isn't welcomed. If Josh decides to make trouble, this could become even more of a cluster than it already is."

"I'm not sure that's possible." Tim's tone was dry, but Tony knew what was behind it.

"Yeah, I know," he replied.

"You two cannot agree?" Ziva looked first to him, then to Tim.

"Oh, we can agree," Tony said. "Just not at the same time. First I said yes and Tim wanted to say no. Now he's decided it's a good idea, and I'm not so sure." He buried his head in his hands. "We need some good news."

"I have some good news," Ziva said.

Tony looked up.

"I will become one of you later this week." She smiled. "Tony, you will have to find all new jokes."

Tony decided to take the distraction Ziva was offering and rummaged in his desk drawer for a small American flag that had been there since Veterans' Day.

"This cannot be happening," he moaned theatrically. "How can this be happening?"

"I passed the exams." Ziva smirked. "I will officially become a citizen of the United States of America."

"I've never been more disappointed in my government." He held up the flag.

"Hey, it is my government now." She sounded indignant, but there was a twinkle in her eye.

"Not until Friday." Tony felt obligated to point it out, to keep the charade going.

"I expect to see you all there," she said.

"Ziva, of course I'm going to be there," Tim said, winking at her. "Everyone is going to be there." He hesitated. "Even Gibbs." Tony wondered how McGenius was going to talk his way out of that one. "I bet. Once he comes back from his-"

"Let's call it a vacation," Tony said.

"It is not the first time he has run off on his own." Ziva's tone was matter-of-fact.

"It's not the first time he's run off to Mexico," Tim replied, and Tony tried not to think about the last time Gibbs took a margarita safari. He never thought he'd prefer that Mexican trip, but at the rate things were going... "It's certainly not the first time he's gone without telling us anything."
"Nope," Tim said. "Nothing new to see here."

"Not a poker player among you." Vance walked up to the bullpen entrance. "Terrible, terrible bluffs." He paused, and Tony wondered what the director knew. "We're all used to how Gibbs operates for better or for worse. Let's just stay focused on what we're good at."

"And what would that be, Director?" He needed to figure out how much Vance knew.

"If you don't know, Agent DiNozzo, I'm not going to tell you." Vance turned to Tim. "Agent McGee, I need you."

As Tim walked away, Tony could only hope that meant there was some super-geeky escape plan in the works before something really bad happened to Gibbs.

-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-

Abby was working on evidence for another team in the lab, but her heart wasn't in it. Gibbs was in Mexico, Alejandro was looking for her report, and if the day could get any worse, she wasn't sure how.

"Abby."

Abby looked over her shoulder. "Hi, Ziva." She tried to muster up her usual enthusiasm, but couldn't.

Ziva walked over and put a hand on Abby's shoulder. "Abby, I am sorry." She paused. "I did not realize. I mean about your baby. If I had known... I would not have called you about Sarah."

Abby shook her head. "I didn't tell you," she said. "When you called me, I didn't tell you about the baby because I hadn't even told Jimmy I thought there might be one, and I knew Sarah didn't want hers and it just... It wasn't the right time, not for any of us. And then after I lost him, I couldn't tell anybody, didn't want anybody but Jimmy to know. She pulled away. "I knew you guys would be all worried and look at me differently, and I didn't want that. Because yeah, it sucks, but it was probably for the best, and there's another time that will be better." She let out a shaky breath. "I want my baby to have all its grandparents, and right now... I don't think I could handle all of this and worry about a baby." She turned away from Ziva, fighting to keep the tears from spilling over.

"Abby, it is all right to grieve," Ziva said, her voice soft. "Just because you can say now that it would not have worked does not mean you did not want it." She paused. "I cannot know how you feel. My experience is too different. My situation, it is different. But I do not think you can expect that you will feel a certain way." She hesitated again. "You and Jimmy, I know you wanted a baby. You might not want it now, but you do want it."

Abby nodded and turned back, wrapping Ziva into a giant Abby-hug. She felt Ziva's arms wrap around her loosely. "We did, I mean we do. And we did. And I was an idiot and didn't tell him what I thought, because I didn't want him to worry while Timmy and I were in Mexico to do that forensics training, and then everything happened, and now I don't know what to do. And that Reynosa woman could have taken me, hurt me and the baby. And I knew I needed to tell him, and then it was too late and there was no baby to tell him about but I still had to and it hurt, a lot. And it hurt me and it hurt him and we still want a baby, but I'm afraid of what will happen next time." Abby squeezed even tighter.

"You cannot know," Ziva said. "You might be fine next time. This was special circumstances, no?"

"No. I mean, yes." She nodded and wiped her eyes, careful not to smear her eyeliner.
Ziva pulled back and put her hands on Abby's shoulders. "I have learned many things in my life. Growing up, I dealt with many things other children did not. It was the same in Mossad. I watch McGee and Sarah sometimes, and I wonder if Ari and I might have had a relationship like that if we had grown up in a different family, in a different country." She hesitated. "I do not know what it is like to lose a baby you want. I do not know if I will ever know that." She paused again. "You can know something would not have worked, know the timing would be better in a month or a year, and still regret that it did not take place." She rubbed her hands along Abby's arms before removing them. "You can not want to talk about it and still lean on your friends for their support. We are here. It is what family does."

Abby nodded and pulled Ziva into another hug. "Thanks, Ziva!" She released Ziva and turned back to her computer, typing away. "I know you don't like talking about your Mossad days and everything, so I really appreciate that you're OK talking to me about it." Her fingers faltered. "I just... Gibbs is in danger, and Sarah's in trouble, and I don't want to put any more burden on anybody else."

Ziva shook her head. "We each have our challenges, Abby, and we face them together. That is how we work. We are here for you, and we know you are here for us."

Abby nodded and felt a little better. Not a lot, but for the first time, she thought things might work out OK, if they could all just stop the secrets and work together.

-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-

Gibbs walked into the elaborate villa, past Jason Paul Dean standing guard in the doorway, and sat down on the couch, not caring that his dirty clothes were probably marking up the pale couch.

"You going to make me suffer, use a murder charge against me?" He was skeptical, knew he had to convince Paloma Reynosa whatever scheme she had in mind wouldn't work. "Thing about being a cop, there's this thing called burden of proof."

Reynosa looked at him. "You want evidence? An investigation performed by your own people that conclusively puts your signature on the crime." Her smile was the smile of a viper, and Gibbs felt the trap beginning to close. She was going for sneaky; he needed to play it straight, count on his reputation and the facts of the case to get him through this.

"Show me," he said. "Bring it out in the open. Prove to me that I'm guilty of a crime." He knew even with Abby's forensics there was a hole someplace, enough to keep him out of jail. "I know something about convictions. I get 'em, and I got 'em."

"I don't care to put you on trial, Gibbs."

He knew this wasn't altruism on her part. She had another reason behind her plot to snare him. He waited to see what she had in mind.

"It may not suit my needs to kill you, but it might be useful to kill everyone you ever met." She looked over her glass at him, and he forced his expression to stay impassive. He was suddenly glad Abby had lost the baby, knew none of them would be able to handle the grief if Reynosa went after her, killed them both. As he pushed away those thoughts, Dean dropped a package wrapped in duct tape on the table and handed a piece of cloth to Reynosa. As he bent over, Gibbs could see his own SIG in Dean's belt.

"Starting with your friend Mike." Reynosa unrolled the handkerchief to reveal a finger, the end ragged and bloody. "Your former mother-in-law comes next."
He made himself stay flippant. "You doing me favors now?"

"And then your coworkers."

He breathed a sigh of relief that she considered them coworkers. She didn't realize just how close they all were. If she knew the team was family to him, knew the McGees were family, none of them would be safe.

"If I must, I promise to personally visit Pennsylvania and shoot your father in the head. That would complete the circle."

Gibbs forced himself not to react. If he'd wanted the circle complete, he would have killed Paloma all those years ago, not her father. He wasn't sure she understood that.

"It will start small." Paloma looked at him. "Just make sure this package is delivered." She paused. "How many more lives are your convictions worth?"

Gibbs knew he needed to take the package back, needed to get back on his home soil and to figure a way out of this that wouldn't endanger anybody else. He did not want any member of the team on his conscience. Abby's baby already weighed heavily enough, knowing that this stress probably triggered her miscarriage. It stopped here. Now. Before anyone else he loved got hurt.

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Tim spent the day shuttling between Vance's office and MTAC, trying to track what was going on in Mexico. He knew Tony and Ziva wouldn't come back without Gibbs — that was a given. He just didn't know if all three would make it back alive. Alejandro had said he had a tip about Gibbs' whereabouts and had gone out to raid the headquarters of the Reynosa cartel, but then he had disappeared. Something about the way he had organized it made Tim think Alejandro knew more than he was telling.

His insistence about Abby's report was another red flag. The apparent capture of a U.S. federal agent and the shooting or abduction of a retired agent should have been his top priority, not a report on a 20-year-old cold case.

Tim decided he could take a short break and headed down to the lab.

Abby was there, working at her desk.

"Hey, Abs," Tim said. He stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her shoulders. "Can you forgive me for the other day?"

"Forgive you for what?" Abby turned to look at him, her pigtail brushing his nose.

"For yelling at you about Sarah?" He sighed. "I was mad at Josh and scared for Sarah, and you were the only person handy to yell at. If I'd known-"

She shook her head. "You didn't, Tim. Don't worry about it." She gave him a small smile. "We've all been keeping lots of secrets, and it's coming back to bite all of us in the butt. How about we just promise no more secrets?"

Tim tightened his arms around her shoulders. "No more secrets," he said. "As soon as Tony and I figure out what to do about Sarah's request, we'll tell you guys. Well, as soon as we tell her."

"Deal," Abby said. "And the next time I think I'm pregnant, I'm telling you guys. I'd rather tell you
and be wrong or tell you and then tell you we lost it than have something like this happen."

"Just don't tell us all the gory details," Tim said. "I am perfectly happy knowing I will never wake up to my partner having morning sickness."

Abby giggled. "Tony's probably happy, too. As weak as your stomach gets, you'd be pushing him out of the way to puke with him."

Tim rested his chin on her shoulder. "Abby, I'm worried about them." He knew she was going for light, but he couldn't help it. "What if they don't all come back?"

"Positive thoughts, McGee." She sounded stern. "They will come back, and we will get through this."

-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-NCIS-

That night, Tony watched Gibbs sleep in the back of the C130. His face was dirty, his shirt smeared with grit. Gibbs leaned against the steel wall, apparently asleep. Tony wasn't so sure, but he decided to let Gibbs keep up the illusion, at least until he was ready to talk.

The back of the cargo plane was cold, and he spread a blanket across him and Ziva. They both were silent, though they exchanged glances. He knew she was wondering many of the same things he was.

When Gibbs opened his eyes and looked at them, Tony decided he'd been patient enough.

"You didn't find Franks?" When Gibbs said nothing, he asked louder. "I said, you didn't find Mike Franks?"

"I heard you." Gibbs wasn't giving anything away.

"So you just don't want to talk about it?" There were days Tony wants to kick Gibbs' ass for playing lone wolf, and this was definitely one of them. Sure, he'd said he didn't want any of them to risk their careers over this, but Vance was pretty clear that if it was something he didn't have to notice, he wasn't going to. That left them some wiggle room, if Gibbs would just stop being a stubborn bastard and cooperate.

"Bartender said Franks' family left town the day before."

Tony was glad Layla and Amira were safe. "So he knew something was coming." Tony was pretty sure he knew where the warning had come from. Rule 44 didn't just apply to Abby. "What else did you find out?"

"Federales got tired of me asking questions."

"Why didn't you just tell them you were with the task force?" Tony thought he knew, but he wanted to find out for sure.

"Because," Gibbs said. "I wasn't."

"Huh." One theory confirmed. Wonder what else he could coax out of Gibbs. "Still, I would have thought it would take the whole Mexican government to kick you out."

Before Gibbs could reply, the pilot came on the intercom to warn them of turbulence. Tony and Ziva threaded their arms through the webbing to secure themselves, but Gibbs just settled back and
propped up a foot on the closest crate.

"You get held up at customs, use my name." He looked at Tony, then Ziva.

"Where are you going to be?" He knew he wouldn't get an answer, and Gibbs didn't surprise him.

"Left a mess I gotta clean up."

Tony turned to Ziva. "That's 45, basically." They looked back at Gibbs, but he didn't say another word.
Chapter 52

Thursday, May 20, 2010

Sarah groaned as her alarm went off, even though it was later than normal. She'd gotten the day off of work to attend Ziva's citizenship ceremony. Her parents weren't coming, but Ziva had invited her to join the rest of the team. Sarah had wanted to back out after last weekend, but now that they all knew, except Vance, she had decided to support her friend. Sarah had come to realize that this was a huge milestone for Ziva, stepping away for her country, one her father led the defense of. She only hoped she could have the courage Ziva did when she needed it.

She eased up, glad she was feeling OK. After a quick shower, she rummaged through her closet looking for something that might keep the director from realizing her not-so-little secret. She settled on a sundress that had a criss-cross bodice. It wasn't her usual style — she couldn't remember why she'd bought it last year — but it didn't have a defined waist, which hopefully meant nobody would notice she didn't exactly have one anymore.

Sarah finished dressing and went into the living room, where Ziva was dressed in a pantsuit. Sarah smiled. "You look very nice," she said. "Elegant."

"You, too, look well," Ziva said. She paused. "Sarah, I have something I need to tell you."

Sarah dropped to the sofa as her knees wobbled. "Ziva, the last time you said that I ended up taking a pregnancy test."

"No, it is not like that," Ziva said. "This is about work."

Sarah frowned. "Is everything OK?"

Ziva sighed. "I hope so." She sat on the edge of the armchair across from Sarah. "Last week, you know we were investigating the death of an agent, yes?"

Sarah nodded. "The day I went over to tell Tony and Tim about my mess."

"We learned who killed Agent Macy," Ziva said. "It was somebody who Damon used to work with. We arrested his boss in the fall, with Damon's help. This man, Dean, killed Agent Macy as part of a plot against Gibbs."

Sarah sat up straight. "Is Gibbs OK?"

"Yes, he is," Ziva said. "But we are not certain everything has ended." She paused, but Sarah waited, even though she had a million questions. "This conspiracy, it was organized by a drug cartel from Mexico. Gibbs killed their leader many years ago, and his children want revenge."

"But I know you and the rest of the team have killed people in the line of duty a lot," Sarah said. "Tim doesn't like to talk about it, but I know how much of his Deep Six books is real for you guys — the cases must be pretty real, too."

Ziva nodded. "This was not in the line of duty," she said. "Gibbs killed this man before he was in NCIS."

Sarah thought for a minute, trying to piece together what she knew about the team leader. "When he was a Marine?" She frowned. "Wasn't he a sniper?"
"Yes." Ziva stood and took two steps, joining Sarah on the couch. "The cartel leader was killed by a sniper, but it was not official." She waited until Sarah turned to face her and took both of Sarah's hands in her own. Ziva's small hands were a little cold, and Sarah wondered why on such a warm day. "The drug dealer was on the run from NCIS. He was wanted for the murder of an NCIS agent and the wife and daughter of a Marine serving in Desert Storm."

Sarah didn't understand the look on Ziva's face, and then she thought about what her friend had said. "Shannon and Kelly."

Ziva nodded. "NCIS could not go after him, but Gibbs did."

"So now his kids are coming after Gibbs?" Sarah wrinkled her nose. "But their dad was a drug dealer and a murderer."

"So, too, are his children," Ziva said. She paused. "Sarah, some families are different than yours. This is one such family, as is my own. I escaped, or will in a few hours. These two did not. They used Abby to trap Gibbs with forensics on a cold case, and only some work by McGee and the director enabled Gibbs to escape from the trap they had set for him. Now..." Ziva's voice trailed off.

"Ziva?" Sarah had a bad feeling, and she put one hand on her belly without even thinking. "Tim's OK, right?"

"Yes, he is fine." Ziva's words were quick. "He did his part." She took a deep breath. "Last night, Director Vance sent Tony back to Mexico, to follow the son of the drug dealer. He is a high-ranking Mexican government official, which means Vance cannot go after him without more information."

Sarah curled her arms protectively around her as a shiver ran through her. "Is he... Will he be all right?"

"I hope so," Ziva said. "But he will not be there today, and I needed to tell you about this before the ceremony. I imagine McGee is worried about him."

"Well, yeah, Tony calls him McWorry for a reason," Sarah said. She raked her teeth across her lower lip. "He's not the only McGee McWorrying today, though."

Ziva moved closer and wrapped an arm around Sarah's shoulders, smoothing a hand down her bare arm. "Sarah, I did not tell you this for you to worry." She hesitated. "It is not good for the baby for you to worry," she said. "Abby... Abby believes that her worry about Gibbs and the trap had something to do with why she lost her baby."

Sarah snorted. "Ziva, if stressing over Josh didn't kill this baby, worrying about Tony won't either. Maybe it's doing baby yoga or something in there, because stress doesn't seem to be bothering it." She sighed. "We might all be better off if it did."

"Sarah, please do not say that where Abby or Jimmy can hear you."

Sarah pulled away. "Ziva! I would never say that, not to them. That would be mean and cruel and insensitive and just wrong." She fought back the tears that seemed to want to spill out at the smallest reason. "I just... I know Tony and Tim have been trying to figure this out, and they told me they wouldn't tell me until this weekend because they needed time, and if something happens to Tony in Mexico, it changes everything." She stopped and made herself take a deep breath, then another. "I just don't know how much more I can handle."
"Sarah, whatever happens, you will handle it," Ziva said. "We all will be there to help you."

Sarah nodded, but her stomach was doing flip-flops, and she was pretty sure it wasn't baby somersaults since she hadn't even felt it move yet. She excused herself and went into the bathroom. Ziva wouldn't question that, and these days she could always pee. She sighed. If she didn't figure things out soon, she wouldn't have to tell anybody at work — they would have added up her countless bathroom breaks and gotten baby.

When she walked out of the bathroom, Ziva was in her room, and Sarah found herself staring at the photos on either side of the snowflake ornament on the wall. She looked at Ziva and her brother and sister first, then looked at the family picture from Christmas. She tried to picture it with a little baby in the picture, and maybe Abby showing that another one was on the way. She really hadn't meant what she said earlier — she wished Abby and Jimmy could have the baby they wanted. She tried to imagine the picture without Tony, if something happened to him in Mexico. And she wondered if he would be the only one missing then. Would the baby be missing, too? She couldn't ask Tim to adopt the baby if anything happened to Tony. And she didn't think she could be a good mom. But she had gotten used to thinking about the baby as part of the family, even if she didn't raise it herself. If Tim and Tony decided not to take the baby or this drug dealer's evil children killed Tony, she wasn't sure what she would do. The more days went by, the less she liked the idea of getting an abortion. And she didn't want the baby raised by somebody else. Sarah sighed. She didn't know what to do.

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Ziva tried to focus on the words of her oath as she stood to swear her allegiance to her new country, but she could not help glancing at the empty chairs beside her. She knew one would be empty because Tony was in Mexico, but she could not help but worry about Gibbs. The director looked as mystified as the rest of them, and she could not decide if that was good or bad.

If something had happened to Gibbs, the director would have gotten the call. Sean and Eileen would have noticed if the cartel had taken him, and they would know to call NCIS. And Gibbs would have been cautious with the Reynosas on the loose. He would not have fallen for any tricks.

After the ceremony ended, the team waited until most of the others had cleared out before leaving together. She, along with Vance and McGee, made sure they had outside positions on the group so if the Reynosas made a move, they would be in the best position to protect the others.

As they exited the ceremony room, Gibbs walked in. He frowned as they walked out and headed right to Ziva.

"I missed it?" He frowned. "Ziver, I'm sorry." He hesitated.

"Gibbs? Nothing else happened, did it?" She asked, but the others crowded around to hear his answer.

Gibbs shook his head. "Nothing bad." He turned to the director. "Ms. Hart seems to have lost some paperwork for the task force, a report of Abby's. She wanted to stop by and tell me."

Ziva felt a weight she hadn't even known was on her shoulders slide off. "That is-"

"That's too bad," McGee said. Ziva looked over, but saw the corners of his mouth twitching in a smile. "Abby, isn't it a shame? Especially after the server was having fits yesterday. We still haven't recovered all the files, and all that evidence has already gone back to Mexico so it can't be retested."
Abby's lips spread up in a smile. "I know, McGee. With our own cases, I can just re-test the evidence in the lockup, but with a case where the evidence isn't in our possession, there's not much I can do."

"It's a 20-year-old cold case from another jurisdiction, anyway," Vance said. "I'm not authorizing any more agency time to work on it."

Ziva turned back to Gibbs. "I believe that was worth missing the ceremony," she said. "I am not sure it requires you to break Rule 6, however."

Gibbs shook his head. "New rule."

"New rule?" The team spoke as one.

"Rule 51. Sometimes you're wrong." Gibbs smiled and reached an arm out to pull Ziva in for a hug. "I'm sorry I wasn't here, Ziver. Congratulations."

"Thank you." She stretched up and returned his hug. "Now, I believe somebody said something about cake at the office?"

Vance nodded. "In Miss Scuito's lab refrigerator, so nobody would try to slice into it early."

McGee nodded. "If they tried, Abby will find them. She'll fingerprint it and everything."

Ziva laughed at the memory of the time McGee took the cupcake she had given Abby. "You will not do that again," she said.

"Do what?" Sarah asked. "I don't know this story."

McGee groaned. "Oh, god, now it's never going to go away."

"Come, let us return to the Navy Yard," Ziva said. "It will be better to tell it in the lab where Sarah can see the scene of the crime."

Gibbs leaned against the wall of Abby's lab, watching the Gibblets devour cake as Abby forced McGee to help her re-enact the Great Cupcake Theft, while Sarah laughed hard enough that Jimmy had to put a hand out to stop her from falling off the lab table where she perched.

Vance stood next to him, cake plate in hand. "This isn't over," he said in a low tone. "You said Paloma had other plans if we stopped her here."

Gibbs nodded. "Called JoAnn," he said. "She didn't like hearing from me, but she agreed to get out of town quietly. Team was next on the list, and I've got Darren protecting Abby and Jimmy. Ducky refused a guard, but he's carrying again. Kept his permits up, and we're heading to the shooting range this afternoon. He said he hasn't been in about six months."

"And your father?"

"Called him. Warned him." Gibbs sighed. "He's a stubborn old bastard, said he'd be careful, but he wasn't running from her."

"Fathers and sons," Vance said. "Lot in common."

Gibbs glared at the director, who just raised an eyebrow.
Before either man could look away, Gibbs cell phone rang.

"Yeah, Gibbs."

"Leroy?"

"Dad?" Gibbs paused. "Are you OK?"

"I'm fine, but the store's not. Your senorita came by a little bit ago with two thugs. They shot up the store, terrified most of the town. Ed's men gave chase, but couldn't catch her."

"I'll be there in a couple of hours."

"Son, I told you, I'm fine."

"And you're a target, Dad. You're coming back down here until we catch her."

"Leroy."

"Dad, don't argue."

Jack sighed. "Do I at least get to stay with you and not a safe house? Been too long since I spent any time with Sean and Eileen."

"Later, Dad. Just pack, then sit tight at Ed's office until I get there."

"Gibbs?" Vance looked at him.

He shook his head and whistled, every other face in the room turning toward him.

"That was Jack. Paloma's in Stillwater, or was."

"He's OK?" Abby started bouncing. "He's not hurt."

Gibbs shook his head. "Store's a mess, but he's fine." He thought. "I'm going to get him. McGee, Ziva, you two are in charge of protecting Abby, Jimmy, and Sarah. Duck, better stay with them, too."

"Dr. Mallard, why don't we head to the range right after this," Vance said.

Ducky nodded.

"DiNozzo should be back from Mexico by Saturday," Gibbs said. "Team meeting, my house, 1400. Everybody." He turned to McGee. "Sean and Eileen, too. I don't think she knows about them, but they need to know what's going on."

"Do you want me to-"

Gibbs shook his head. "I'll tell them. Not your job. You just keep the others safe until Jack and I get back."

McGee nodded and turned to Ziva. "Why don't we all go to the house?" he suggested. "We'll have Jethro as an extra alert, there's plenty of space, and we can protect it better with two of us than if we split up."

Ziva nodded. "I will call Damon as well. He has stood patrols before, and he can be an extra set of
McGee turned to Ducky. "Ducky, you're welcome to stay as well. We have enough beds."

"Thank you, Timothy," he said. "I shall confer with the director and determine the best course of action after I finish brushing up on my shooting skills."

Gibbs nodded at how his team was swinging into action. "Go, all of you. McGee, your folks expecting to hear from you between now and Saturday?"

He shook his head. "It's been so crazy lately, they've learned not to expect anything until we actually call."

"Good." He turned to the director. "Can we post a watch there while I'm gone? Keep Paloma out of my house, just in case she tries something, and keep an eye on the McGees?"

Vance nodded. "I'll brief DiNozzo when he checks in."

That night, Tim moved through the living room quietly, checking outside. To anybody else, it would look like he and Tony just had everybody over the way they hadn't been able to in a few weeks. He, Ziva, and Damon had agreed to keep up appearances and patrol from the inside.

Jimmy and Abby were asleep in the master bedroom, and Sarah was in Tim's old bed in Jethro's bedroom. The air mattress was set up in the third bedroom, and Ziva was asleep there now. Damon would trade off with her in a couple of hours, and then once Jimmy and Abby were up, he would sleep. That kept two of them on patrol all night.

Damon stood in the darkened kitchen, his eyes scanning the backyard. "Good thing you guys have that fence for Jethro. Makes this a less-attractive approach for anybody trying to sneak in."

Tim nodded. "Thanks for helping us," he said. "Bet you never thought you'd be standing watch again."

"Can't think of a better reason," he said. "Ziva filled me in on everything while you were getting the others settled. You OK?"

Tim shrugged. "I'll be better once Tony's back. And once we figure out what to do about Sarah." He hesitated. "Don't suppose you have any words of wisdom on that one?"

Damon shook his head. "No wisdom." He walked across to check the side yard through the window, then walked back. "Got an offer, though."

"An offer?"

"You two do adopt, and anything happens to one or both of you, I'll be there to help if you want it."

"You sure?"

"I moved to Ohio, no job, no nothing, to help out Heatherton's wife and daughter. I'd barely even met them. You guys are family."

"Semper Fi." Tim nodded. He shouldn't have been surprised.

"Damn straight," Damon said. "Pretty sure I'm not the only one who feels that way. Ziva does.
Abby, Jimmy... They might not be able to think like that this week, not after what happened, but you know they would be there for you guys if you needed it.”

Tim thought about what Damon said. "Thanks." He saw a movement in the backyard and had his hand on his SIG before he realized it was a squirrel. "False alarm."

Damon nodded. "You'd better check the front," he said. "Just think about what I said."

As Tim continued his patrol, he let Damon's words settle into the back of his mind. He knew the former Marine was right. Now he just needed Tony to get home in one piece so they could talk about it.

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Saturday, May 22, 2010

Tony sat on the C130 and shifted, trying to ease the aches from his muscles. He'd hit the pavement too hard yesterday when Alejandro sprung that trap on him and Franks. God only knew what he was going to tell Gibbs about Franks. Shot, missing... They'd written Franks off before and he'd popped back up, but this time he'd already been hurt. For all his bravado about pulling the trigger with his thumb, the man had better learn how to shoot with his other hand if he wanted to stay alive.

Meanwhile, Alejandro had escaped, and there was nothing he could give Vance to nail the smarmy bastard. His sister was on the run, but she'd been on the run her whole life and nobody had ever caught her before. That was one twisted family, the little brother keeping his sister safe through his government power, and the sister building one of the largest drug cartels in the hemisphere. Would they have turned out the same way if Hernandez hadn't died two decades ago? Tony thumped his head back against the steel wall behind him. He was not thinking about nature vs. nurture or he'd be smack in the middle of his own twisted childhood, and things were screwed up enough right now.

Tony thought of his own little sister and wondered what was going on with Sarah. He and Tim needed to talk when he got home. He had a pretty good idea what he wanted to do about her request, but he didn't know if Tim was on the same page or not.
Chapter Notes

And six months and 300,000-plus words later, it's finally done! There were times I thought this day would never come. :) First, Happy Birthday to Harempriestess! I knew when you said your birthday was this month you'd probably get a chapter on your birthday, but I didn't realize it would be the final one until a few weeks ago. Hope you have a wonderful day! Second, thanks to everybody who's stuck with me through what is now the third-longest NCIS story on this site. It's almost as long as four novels. You guys are amazing. Your reviews have made many crazy days, especially in the past three months, immeasurably better. And finally, she says I thank her too much, but this would not have been possible without the ever-patient Kyrie. She's been editing my fiction — fanfic and original — for more than 10 years and I am an infinitely better writer for her help. If the novel I started working on last week gets published, she'll deserve a lot of the credit. With that out of the way, enjoy the last chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saturday, May 22, 2010

Gibbs left Jack in the kitchen, an agent on duty outside, and walked over to see Sean and Eileen. They needed to know what was going on, and he needed to be the one to tell them.

He waved off the protection detail, not wanting to alarm them. He had his SIG, and they needed to protect Jack more than him.

When Gibbs knocked on the door, Eileen was quick to answer.

"Jethro," she said. "Come on in. How have you been?"

He hesitated. "Been busy," he settled on. "Is Sean around?"

Eileen nodded. "In the kitchen." She headed back, and Gibbs followed.

Sean was at the kitchen table working a crossword puzzle. "Things settling down some?" he asked. "We haven't been able to catch the boys the past few days."

Gibbs hesitated again. "Case. Bad one." He pulled out a chair, motioned for Eileen to sit.

"Something wrong?" Sean straightened up. "Are the boys OK?"

Gibbs nodded. "Not them." He tried to figure out how to find the words. "They ever tell you about my first wife?"

"Shannon, right?" Eileen said. "Jack's told us some stories. She and your daughter were killed while you were in Desert Storm."

Gibbs nodded. "I've told you a few stories myself. Don't know that I ever told you how they died, though."
Sean frowned. "All I know is they were killed."

"Drug dealer." Gibbs clenched his fists. "Shannon witnessed him murder a Marine and agreed to testify. She always did the right thing — something I loved about her — but this time it was dangerous. Too dangerous. On their way to the safe house, the bastard shot the NIS agent protecting them, sending the car off the road. The crash killed both my girls." He forced himself to relax. He couldn't afford to let the anger and grief overtake him again. His lack of control then had put everybody he loved now in danger. "NIS went after him, but he fled to Mexico. They didn't have jurisdiction down there. So even if they had found him, they couldn't extradite unless Mexico was willing. The government down there, well, let's say this cartel is good at getting family members in key government positions." He frowned at the memory of Alejandro. "The case agent, he left the file out when I went to see him."

Sean looked at him, and Gibbs waited the former sailor out. He didn't know what Sean was looking for, but he knew when he found it. Sean nodded. "You went after him."

Gibbs nodded. "Between injuries I sustained overseas and bereavement, I had leave, so I used it. Took my sniper rifle, found the SOB, and I made sure he could never hurt anybody else." He paused. "NIS never closed the case."

Sean looked over at Eileen, and Gibbs watched the two of them exchange glances, but not words. After a minute, Eileen reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. It shouldn't have meant so much. But Gibbs knew Tim was a stickler for the rules, and he'd gotten that from Sean and Eileen. The couple could have shut him down, been horrified at what he'd done.

"I'd have done the same thing," Sean said. "If somebody had hurt my girls, hurt Tim... You don't do that." He leaned forward. "Why tell us this now?"

Admitting the danger he'd put them in was almost harder than confessing the reason why. "His daughter Paloma — she runs the biggest drug cartel in Mexico — set a trap, she and her brother. Alejandro's a high-ranking official in the Mexican justice department. He invited Abby to speak at a forensic seminar so he could get her to investigate their father's cold case."

Sean's eyebrow shot up, so like his son that Gibbs felt a hint of a smile tug at his lips. "Did she..."

"She wrote the report, did her job the way she always does. The way I needed her to do it — the right way." Gibbs wasn't going to mention the baby. It wasn't his story to tell, even if it was another thing he felt guilty about. "The report's been buried. One of the players on the other side realized she was being played. But Paloma, she's still out there." He hesitated. "She was in Stillwater yesterday, shot up my dad's store."

Eileen's hand tightened on his shoulder. "Is Jack OK?"

Gibbs nodded. "I'd called him, warned him. He wouldn't leave, but he was ready for her. Store's a mess, but he's fine. I drove up yesterday, picked him up. He's staying with me until we catch her."

Seannodded. "The whole family's in danger until she's caught. All of you."

Sean nodded slowly. "If she knows about Jack, knows the team well enough to target Abby, she knows who else to go after."

Gibbs nodded. "I've called a team meeting. My place. 1400. Tony just got back from Mexico. Tim is picking him up at the base. We need to put our heads together, make sure everybody's safe. Not just the team, but you two, Jack, and Sarah." He wasn't going to mention the other complication. Not if they didn't know.
"Sarah." Sean looked at Eileen. "Now that she's living with Ziva, is she in more danger?"

Gibbs shrugged. "Don't know. Paloma threatened my team before mentioning Jack, but she hasn't
gone after them yet. She and her brother are still looking for the report, so Abby's definitely a
target. That's why we're meeting."

Sean nodded. "Do we need to call Sarah?"

Gibbs shook his head. "The team knows. Ziva will fill her in, bring her. If she hadn't already told
Sarah. Not sure what she knows."

Eileen looked at him. "Jethro, you were alone 20 years ago. You're not alone now."

He let one corner of his mouth quirk up. "I know. But I wouldn't have done it if I'd known it would
put you all at risk."

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Tim waited at Anacostia for the flight from Mexico to land. When Gibbs had told him about the
team meeting, he'd realized whatever time he and Tony had thought they'd had to make a decision
about Sarah's suggestion was gone. Everybody would need to know about the baby to set up the
protection detail, and Sarah needed to know what they had decided so she could make her own
choice. Which meant they needed to decide. Now.

When Tony walked out of the hangar, jeans and cotton shirt wrinkled and dirty, Tim had to resist
hugging him. This was the first time one of them had gone on a dangerous mission without the
other since they'd been together, and the only reason he hadn't McWorried about Tony the entire
time was because he was too busy thinking about Sarah and her situation.

"Home, Jeeves," Tony said as he approached.

Tim rolled his eyes. "Not opening the door for you," he said.

Once they were off base, away from eyes that might not understand, Tim pulled over and pulled
Tony into a hug.

"Missed you, too." Tony buried his face in Tim's neck, so his next words were muffled.

"Want to try that again?" Tim pulled back a bit.

Tony rubbed the back of his neck, but sat up. "I said, I blew it. Alejandro was right there, waiting
for us."

"Us?"

"Franks showed up. Said he could pull the trigger with his thumb. We didn't get a chance to find
out, though. Alejandro had his goons all set, gave the signal, and they started shooting. Franks got
hit, the rat escaped, and I was caught flat-footed." Tony made a face.

"Gibbs called a meeting for his place," Tim said, checking the time. "Two hours. All of us." He
paused. "Including Mom, Dad, and Sarah."

"Oh, hell," Tony said. "Does he think they're in danger?"

Tim nodded. "Paloma showed up in Stillwater yesterday afternoon and opened fire on Jack's store."
Tony cursed.

"Jack's OK," Tim said. "Gibbs drove up last night and got him, and Vance gave them protection
detail. Abby and Ducky each have one too, which means Jimmy's protected."

"And he thinks Paloma might go after the rest of our family if he can't get to them." Tony's voice
was flat.

"I don't know what he thinks, but he's not taking any chances." Tim ran a hand through his hair as
he pulled the car back into traffic and headed for home. "But if we're going to sort this out, there
can't be any secrets."

Tony cursed again. "Do you think Paloma knows about Sarah?"

Tim shrugged. "I don't know, but Vance needs to if he and Gibbs are going to handle things right.
And if Sarah's going to have to tell everybody, including Mom and Dad, we need to tell her
something."

Tony's language wasn't getting any better, and Tim couldn't help but agree. "Look, when Macy was
killed, I didn't see your point, didn't think the risk was worth us giving up on the idea of a family."
Tim hesitated. "My concerns with Sarah's suggestion were more practical: whether we could,
whether it was a good idea for her given how unsure she seemed about it."

"So what's the McBut I hear coming?" Tony crossed his arms.

"Now I'm with you," Tim said. "I spent last night wondering if you would come back, and then I
tried to imagine what it would be like if you didn't."

Tony huffed out a laugh. "And I spent the entire plane ride back thinking that if it had been my last
mission, we would have missed out on creating a family together."

"We're a mess," Tim said. "But that has to be our problem, not Sarah's. We just need to figure out
what our answer is and tell her."

Tony nodded. "Look, let's get home, let me clean up. We can figure it out on the way over to
Gibbs'."

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Jack fumed at Leroy for making him stay in the house, but he couldn't disagree with the boy. He'd
thought his son was just exaggerating when he'd called a few days ago, but when Paloma Reynosa
walked into his store, he'd realized the danger was real.

Leroy was down in the basement with Vance and the McGees, but Jack had stayed upstairs
wanting to see everybody arrive. He couldn't go outside, but he could at least watch.

Jimmy and Abby arrived first, and Jimmy wrapped his arm around Abby as they came up the
walk. Jack could see their matching tattoos, and he shook his head at his unconventional
granddaughter. Leroy had told him what happened, and Jack was ready when they walked in.

"Jack!" Abby pulled away from Jimmy and wrapped her arms around him. "You're OK! I mean,
we knew you were OK because Gibbs went to get you, but I'm still glad I can see you're OK."

Jack pulled her close. "I'm fine, Abby," he said. "It takes more than a little viper like her to take out
a tough old coot like me." He ran a hand along her back. "Leroy, he told me what happened. About
the baby, I mean." He kissed her cheek.

Abby sniffled into his shoulder, and Jimmy stepped closer, putting a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry for you kids," Jack said. "That's rough."

Jimmy nodded. "We're getting there," he said. "It's been... There have been some distractions. Not that you getting shot at is a distraction." He rushed out his words. "You getting shot at is horrible, not a good thing. It's just-"

Jack heard a watery giggle from the girl he was hugging, before she pulled away. "He knows, Jimmy." She wiped her eyes. "Thanks, Jack. It's probably for the best anyway. I was already on the cartel's radar — if they realized hurting me would get Gibbs' daughter and grandchild, he'd have me locked in the basement for the duration and I'd go crazy. I'd be one of those old Gothic heroines chained up and never seen except at midnight."

Jack couldn't help but laugh. "That's my girl," he said. "Go on, Leroy wants everyone downstairs. I promise, I won't let them keep you chained down there."

Abby hugged him again. "Thanks, Jack."

As they headed back through the kitchen, Jack turned to look outside and saw Tim and Tony arrive. The two men were in the middle of an intense discussion, and Jack wasn't surprised they stayed outside, leaning against the fence. It wasn't long before another car pulled up, and Ziva and Sarah got out.

Ziva only paused near the boys before continuing up to the front door, but Sarah stayed outside with the two men. Jack stepped back from the window so he could greet Ziva and send her downstairs, then turned to study the scene outside. The boys were still talking and Sarah seemed to be listening intently. Then she reached up to hug first her brother, then Tony, which piqued his curiosity.

As the trio walked up the path, Jack continued to watch them and noticed something nobody had mentioned to him. He wondered if he was just out of the loop or if this was news Leroy and the others weren't aware of.

"Hey, Jack," Tony said as they walked in. "Glad you made it through in one piece."

"Tony!" Jack walked over to hug his honorary grandson. "Could say the same for you; Leroy told me you just got back from hunting down those rats."

"Not successfully." Tony made a face. "Can't believe I let them take another shot at Franks and get away."

"I'm just glad you got away," Tim said, wrapping an arm around Tony's shoulders.

"Me, too!" Sarah stepped into Jack's arms, and he could feel her hold on a bit, so he patted her back.

"You kids should head on downstairs," he said. "Safer down there."

"Says the man standing by the front window," Tony said. "Shouldn't you be down there, too? You're the one she's after."

"She's after all of us," Jack said. "I feel better keeping an eye out for her."
The guys headed back through the kitchen, but Sarah stopped in the bathroom off the dining room. Jack nodded, but didn't say anything. There would be time enough for that later if it didn't come up on its own.

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As Ziva navigated through the streets of D.C., Sarah gripped the handle above the seat.

"Oh." Ziva slowed down. "I am sorry. I am not making you sick, am I?"

Sarah shook her head. "No, the baby's being pretty well-behaved today. Just squishing my bladder." She squirmed a bit. "Ziva, I'm going to have to tell everybody today, even though the guys haven't decided yet, aren't I?"

Her friend did not say anything for a minute. "Yes," she said finally. "I believe you must, so that we can make sure you both are protected properly." She steered the car onto the bridge across the Potomac. "Gibbs, he already feels guilty because of Abby and her baby. He thinks, though I do not know if he is right or not, that if it had not been for this Mexican conspiracy, Abby would not have lost the baby. He would not want to risk either you or the baby because of this."

Sarah nodded and bit her lower lip. She had been doing some hard thinking during the past week. "Ziva, I don't know for sure what I'm going to do about the baby, I mean if the guys decide they don't want it." She paused, making sure she was certain before saying the words. "I am going to have it. I don't know if I want to give it up for adoption or keep it — I think probably adoption — but seeing what happened with Abby and Jimmy, I don't know... It just doesn't feel right to get an abortion."

Ziva was silent for a minute. "Sarah, you know I will support you no matter what you decide. But this is a big decision. You cannot make it based on Abby or Jimmy or Tim or Tony or me or anybody. It has to be the decision that is right for you."

Sarah thought about her words before she said, "This is the one that's right for me. It's not the one I would have made if I found out about the baby right after I dumped Josh, but it's the one that I think I need to make now." She shrugged. "Did you ever...? Have you ever felt like something that's happened is all wrong, but without the all-wrong part, you wouldn't have gotten to the place that is right?" She looked over and saw her friend nod.

"When my father demanded I leave NCIS, that I take Michael's place on the Kidon unit, he called it my aliyah, my return." Ziva paused. "Then I was captured, and I thought I would die in the Somali desert. My father did not come after me. He did not send anybody after me. It was Gibbs and Tony, McGee and Abby, who found me and rescued me. And when they did, I made my real aliyah and returned here, to my family. For the first time, I was able to cut the ties that had bound me to my father, to Mossad. I could not after Ari. I could leave Israel, I could work with NCIS. But I could not fully belong." Her fingers gripped the steering wheel. "Only when the situation was so bad there was no way out could I finally live the life I wanted."

Sarah nodded. "And without you being gone, Tim and Tony might never have gotten together."

"It is true," Ziva said. "And if Tony had not made McGee off limits, Abby might never have realized Jimmy was right there. If I had not been able to come back, Damon might not be here now. He might have stayed in Ohio or gone someplace else." Ziva shifted into the lane that would take them down the side street to where Gibbs lived.

"Maybe we should be thanking your father instead of cursing him when his name comes up." Sarah
thought about what Ziva had said. "Of course, who knows. That could mean we'd wind up thanking Josh one day, and that idea makes me sick."

"And my driving does not?" Ziva reached over and put a hand on her shoulder. "You should tell Tony and McGee my driving is improving."

Sarah knew her giggle was weak, but it was still good to have something to laugh about. "They won't believe it. You'll have to prove you can drive without making Tim turn green first."

"So you are ready to tell your parents and Jack and the director?" Ziva said. "I believe the rest of us know."

Sarah thought about it and nodded. "I am."

As Ziva pulled up outside Gibbs house, Sarah could see Tim and Tony standing there. "Maybe they decided?" She turned to look at Ziva.

"We will find out."

They got out of the car and walked up to the gate where her brothers were waiting.

"You are all right?" Ziva asked Tony.

"Pissed off that he got away, but at least I didn't get shot," Tony said. "Still feel like I failed, though."

"We will catch them," Ziva said. "I am certain of it." She headed up the walk, but Tim shook his head when Sarah went to follow.

"Wait a minute, sis," he said.

She looked back and forth between them. "You decided already?"

Tony nodded. "Yeah, for all the craziness going on, it at least helped us put a few things in perspective."

Tim put a hand on her shoulder. "We still don't know how all the logistics of adopting would work or how Josh factors into that. And we're going to have to wait a week or so until all of this cartel mess gets sorted out to have time to find a lawyer and start figuring it out. But if you're still willing to have us adopt the baby, we want to. She or he is family. It wasn't what we'd planned, and it certainly wasn't what you'd planned. But you do what you have to for family."

She looked over, and Tony was nodding. She reached up to hug Tim, then Tony. When she pulled back, they both had big grins on their faces. "Looks like I owe you guys a Fathers Day card next month."

"So," Tony said. "Who gets to tell Mom and Dad about Baby McGee?"

Sarah grinned and winked at Tony. "Tim. He's the good kid — they'll take it much better coming from him."

"Works for me," Tony said. "That's why Abby always has to be the one to tell Gibbs bad news at work — she's the favorite."

Tim rolled his eyes, and Sarah couldn't help laughing.
"Come on, McDaddy," Tony said. "Let's go bring the one bit of good news to this gathering."

"Yeah, yeah," Tim said. "You two know I'll get you back for this, right?"

Chapter End Notes

Yes, this doesn't wrap up every loose end. Just as the team didn't realize in May that it would take four months to catch Paloma, they don't here, either. ;) It's the end of this story, not the universe, and I have many more stories to tell. I hope the novel will be done, or at least in the revision stage, by the fall and I can tackle the next major story in this uni, What We Need, which addresses what happened to Ziva in Somalia. If you want to follow progress, I'm on Twitter and LJ with the same username.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!