

Damage by Xanthe

New Damage graphic below by **Brillianceofthemoon**



Acknowledgements: There is a much longer list of these than usual, partly because of the nature of the story. I wanted to make sure I got a lot of advice along the way and the following people were kind enough to help me.

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Warning: Parts 2, 3, 4 and 6 of this story contain flashback/memory scenes of child sexual abuse. The entire story deals with the theme of child sexual abuse. This is NOT an incest fic. I've tried to deal with the scenes sensitively and they are relatively light of explicit detail, but they do need to be there as they are an important part of the psychology of the character involved.

NCIS Awards, 2009

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Deception Part One by Xanthe



Damage: n.1. Injury or harm impairing the function or condition of a person or thing.

"DiNozzo, David, McGee – with me," Gibbs barked, on his way to the elevator. He heard the familiar sound of his team scrabbling to grab their gear and then felt Tony breathing down his neck as he caught up with him.

"So what we got, Boss? Dead body? Terrorist threat? Break-in at a top-secret Naval installation?" Tony asked eagerly as the elevator door opened in front of them. Gibbs rolled his eyes as he stepped inside. It had been a slow few weeks, and he knew all his people were itching to get their teeth into a case, DiNozzo more than most.

"What's the matter, DiNozzo? McGee's new housekeeping gizmo not interesting enough for you?" he asked, as Ziva jogged into the elevator, and McGee brought up the rear.

"If I hear the words 'document imaging' and 'paperless office' one more time, then the probie is likely to suffer an unfortunate accident," Tony said, smiling at McGee threateningly.

"It's the future, Tony, but then I wouldn't expect you to appreciate the benefits of a paperless working space," McGee replied. "Besides cutting down on physical filing – something I'd have thought you would appreciate knowing your aversion to it - it also saves millions of trees from unnecessary destruction." His eyes glowed with a kind of messianic glee as he spoke.

"Interesting," Tony mused. "I hear the words, but it's just meaningless mumbo jumbo. Tell me, McGeek, how are you ever gonna get laid if this is the kind of stuff that gets you excited?"

"Please tell us that we have something to investigate," Ziva asked Gibbs in a tone of despair. "I do not know how much more of this bickering I can take."

Gibbs thought she had a point. A bored Tony was a trial to them all, and even banishing him to the cold case storage filing room for two days hadn't helped him cool his heels any – in fact, when he'd returned he'd been even more full of pent-up energy than usual. Gibbs had resorted to scheduling extra hand-to-hand combat classes for the entire team just to wear Tony out a little and make him bearable to have around.

"We have something to investigate," Gibbs confirmed as the elevator door pinged open at the parking garage.

"Thank God," McGee said, with a glare in Tony's direction. "What is it, Boss?"

"We have a case of a stolen laptop and a camera," Gibbs replied. He strode out of the elevator and then stopped, and turned. His team were still standing in the elevator, staring at him, unmoving.

"A stolen laptop and a camera?" Tony asked, in a tone of barely disguised disgust.

"That's right." Gibbs nodded. "Belonging to an Admiral Matthew Parrish. There was a break-in at his house in the early hours of the morning, and those items were reported stolen. So we are going to investigate."

"We're going to investigate a minor burglary?" Tony sighed. "No dead bodies?"

"Only yours if you don't move it, DiNozzo," Gibbs threw back over his shoulder as he turned and strode towards the van.

~*~

They were met by the admiral's housekeeper, a plump lady in her mid-fifties.

"I am so glad you're here. I wasn't sure if I did the right thing phoning NCIS, but the admiral is at sea until this afternoon, and I couldn't contact him, and I was so worried in case the laptop had top secret information on it," she said, as she ushered them into the hallway. "You can't be too careful these days. You read these stories about terrorists getting hold of information, and I couldn't sleep last night for worrying that if it got into the wrong hands, and if I hadn't called anyone, then it could all be my fault and people might die," she said.

Gibbs saw Tony and Ziva exchange a glance. The housekeeper clearly meant well but had jumped ahead of herself a little. All the same, she had a point, and he wouldn't be doing his job properly if he didn't establish exactly what was on the laptop and whether it contained any sensitive material.

"You did the right thing," he placated her, and she sighed.

"I don't know. I wasn't sure. I don't want to get Justin into trouble, but the admiral is out of contact and..." She shook her head.

"Justin? I thought the admiral's name was *Matthew* Parrish?" Ziva frowned.

"Oh it is, dear," the housekeeper said. "That's the admiral's name. Matthew Parrish."

"So who is this Justin then?" Ziva asked.

The housekeeper gave another sad sigh. "Oh dear. I feel just terrible about this...you see, Justin is the person who stole the laptop and camera."

Gibbs gazed at his team, and they gazed back at him blankly.

"So – let me get this straight - you're saying that not only were only two items taken, but you know exactly who took them?" Tony asked. "Not a lot of investigating required around here then, Boss!" he added in a cheerfully sarcastic tone of voice.

Gibbs ignored him. "Could you tell us exactly who Justin is, and why you think he stole the items?"

"Justin Merrells," she said, as if that explained everything. "And I know it was him because I saw him."

"You saw him?" Gibbs asked impatiently. He was beginning to sympathise with Tony's view of this case.

"Yes, dear. I live in you see – the admiral is often away and someone has to be here to take care of the place. I'd fallen asleep in front of the television and..."

"Time?" Gibbs asked tersely.

"Around 1.30 a.m. I'd fallen asleep, as I said, and then I heard a noise – like breaking glass – and I don't mind saying I was scared. I tiptoed out here and saw Justin coming out of the admiral's study with the laptop and camera – he was pushing them into a bag as he ran away, and he didn't see me. There's a small bathroom window in here which must be where he got in and out..."

She opened a door along the hallway, and Gibbs surveyed the broken glass scattered around the toilet. It was a small window but just about big enough for someone to climb through.

"I tried to contact the admiral but he's away overseeing a war exercise at the moment and is on radio silence, so I spent the rest of the night worrying about what to do. Justin is a dear boy, but he's very mixed up, and while I don't think he's involved with any terrorists I didn't want to take the chance and..."

"Exactly who is this Justin person?" Gibbs interrupted. "And where can we find him?"

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"Justin Merrells," McGee said, pulling up a screen on his laptop as Gibbs drove. "Age 18, son of Melissa and Tom Merrells."

"His father used to be Parrish's XO," Tony said, peering over McGee's shoulder.

"That's right – they served together for years until Lieutenant-Commander Merrells was killed on active duty four years ago," McGee said. "Justin was fourteen at the time."

"He also went off the rails if this is anything to go by." Tony pointed at the screen. "Two convictions for shoplifting, one DUI, a couple of minor drug busts."

"All dating from after his father died?" Gibbs asked, his jaw tightening. This whole thing sounded like a kid crying out for help more than anything else. He'd seen it happen before in military families, and it was something that always touched him on a personal level. He understood the pressures of military life and how easily families could fall apart when a parent was killed in combat.

"Yes." McGee nodded. "It's like he went to pieces after his dad died."

"And from what the housekeeper said, it seems as if the admiral stepped in and took his dead friend's son under his wing," Tony added. "Tried to straighten him out."

"So if the admiral was so good to him, why did Justin break into his house and steal from him?" Ziva asked, with a frown.

"He's a kid," Tony shrugged. "A mixed-up kid. Kids do stuff like that – they don't need a reason."

"Yes, they do," McGee objected, glancing at Tony over his shoulder.

"I mean a reason beyond the fact that his dad died, and he's a teenager – probably just a case of rampaging hormones combined with grief," Tony said.

"We'll see," Gibbs said, bringing the van to a screeching halt outside the Merrells family home. Privately, he thought Tony probably had it about right, but something about this whole case felt off to him, and he wasn't sure what it was.

Gibbs knocked on the door, and a few seconds later a tall, skinny, blond kid opened it and blinked at them.

"Yeah?" he muttered.

"Agent Gibbs – NCIS. You Justin Merrells?"

The kid blinked at him again. "Yeah," he shrugged. "So?"

"We have a report of a burglary at Admiral Parrish's house last night," Gibbs said. "You know anything about that, Justin?"

The youth stared at him for a second, and then, without warning, he suddenly took off. He ran back into the house, grabbed something from the table, and exited out of the back door. Gibbs sighed. Tony and Ziva took off after the youth, and Gibbs followed on behind at a more leisurely pace. It looked as if Tony was right – this was just a simple burglary committed by a

sullen, mixed-up teenager.

Justin almost made it to the back fence before Tony caught up with him and leapt on him, bringing him crashing down. The boy lay face down in the grass, panting, as Tony pulled his arms behind him and fastened handcuffs around his wrists.

"Justin Merrells, you're, you know, under arrest," Tony said, in a bored tone of voice that suggested he was just going through the motions.

"The laptop is here," Ziva said, picking up the computer which Justin had dropped when Tony had tackled him to the ground. "It seems unharmed."

"Where's the camera?" Tony asked, standing up and dragging Justin to his feet.

"Here," McGee said, following them out of the house, holding up a digital camera. "It was just lying on the table, Boss."

"You know, Justin, you must be about the worst burglar I've ever had to arrest," Tony told the kid. "Couldn't you have at least *tried* to make this interesting?"

Gibbs looked at the youth, taking in the ripped, paint-stained jeans, and baggy, faded blue tee shirt. He looked scruffy and neglected, but young people these days seemed to cultivate that look, so Gibbs wasn't reading anything into it. Justin stared up at him from under a thick wad of blond hair, and Gibbs looked straight at him, surprised. He'd expected to see defiance in the kid's blue eyes, but instead he saw something closer to fear. Justin looked like a scared animal caught in a trap.

"Justin – did you break into Admiral Parrish's house last night and steal his laptop and camera?" Gibbs asked quietly. The youth bit on his lip.

"Yeah," he muttered.

"Why?" Gibbs asked. Justin shrugged.

"I dunno," he whispered, his teenage bravado faltering under Gibbs's hard stare. He dropped his gaze to the ground.

"Uh-uh – wrong answer," Tony said, shaking the youth slightly as he shoved him towards the van. He pushed Justin into the vehicle and then took his seat behind Gibbs. "Ten bucks says you break him within two minutes, Boss," he murmured in Gibbs's ear. Then he turned and glanced at the youth who was staring sightlessly out of the window, his blue eyes empty and weary, all the fight gone out of him. "He's hardly a hardened criminal."

Gibbs gazed at the kid, feeling troubled. Justin looked younger than his eighteen years, and there was something strangely vulnerable about him that Gibbs couldn't put his finger on. Tony was right though - he definitely wasn't a hardened criminal. Gibbs couldn't help feeling sympathy for him; he was just a kid who'd lost his dad - and his way.

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Justin sat across from Gibbs in the interrogation room, arms resting on the table, looking down, that thick curtain of blond hair covering his eyes. So far he'd refused to say a word. He just sat there, staring at his own hands.

"So..." Tony said, flicking through the file McGee had provided for them. "You're going to college next month, Justin. Did you think you'd steal a few things to take with you? Is that it? You took a look around the admiral's house last time you were there, saw he had a high end laptop and a classy new digital camera, and you decided you wanted them?" His tone was forceful, and Gibbs noticed Justin's shoulders hunch tightly as he shrugged in response.

Gibbs put his head on one side and gazed at the kid thoughtfully. He'd told Tony to play 'bad cop'. His senior field agent could be pretty hard-edged when he put his mind to it, and Gibbs wanted to play 'good cop' himself in this particular interrogation – not least because he felt some sympathy for this kid sitting opposite him. He hoped that between the two of them they could drag the truth out of Justin as quickly as possible.

"What are you going to study at college, Justin?" he asked quietly. Justin glanced up at him, and Gibbs could see him responding to his softer tone of voice.

"Art," Justin whispered. It was the first thing they'd managed to get out of him since they'd brought him in. Gibbs shot Tony a fleeting glance and knew Tony had got the message to keep going in hard.

"Not any more," Tony said flatly. "You committed a burglary last night, Justin. You broke a window, forced your way into someone's house, and you stole property that didn't belong to you. You'll be looking at a jail term for that."

Justin's shoulders hunched even more, and he glanced up at Gibbs from helpless eyes.

"Why did you do it, Justin?" Gibbs asked gently. "I thought the admiral had been good to you."

Justin's eyes flashed. "He was. He is," he whispered.

"After your father died, he looked out for you, didn't he?" Tony said forcefully. "When you got arrested for shoplifting, it was Admiral Parrish who came and picked you up. He spoke up for you."

"Yes." Justin bit on his lip.

"According to the admiral's housekeeper, you regularly visited his house. He took you to see ball games and to the movies. He even bought you materials for your art classes," Tony said.

Justin nodded. "Yes," he said again, almost inaudibly.

"And you repay him by breaking into his house and stealing his stuff?" Tony snapped the file shut with his hand and threw it onto the table. "You're a piece of work, Justin," he said, in a disgusted tone of voice, placing one hand on the back of Justin's chair and leaning over him. Tony was a big guy, and Justin was a skinny kid, so the movement, although slow and

controlled, was inevitably intimidating.

"Why the laptop, Justin?" Gibbs asked softly. "Did you think the admiral had important Naval material on it? Were you going to sell it to buy drugs?"

"No!" Justin said in such an outraged tone that Gibbs was sure he was telling the truth. "I was going to put it back," he added pathetically.

"Oh, so you broke into the admiral's house, stole his stuff, and then ran off when we tried to question you – and now you say that you intended to put it back?" Tony demanded, still looming over Justin threateningly. "I don't believe a word of that crap, Justin."

"I was."

"So why steal the laptop in the first place?" Gibbs asked, in a curious, encouraging tone of voice.

"There was something on it that belonged to me," Justin muttered.

Gibbs frowned. "What do you mean, Justin?"

Justin shook his head, biting on his lip. "I was just going to delete it, and then I was going to give it back."

"What do you mean 'belonged' to you?" Gibbs asked, in that same quiet tone of voice. "What did the admiral have that you felt was yours?"

"Nothing. It doesn't matter," Justin said sullenly. He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Gibbs through his hair.

"What about the camera – did you steal the laptop and then think you might as well take the camera too as you'd gone to all that effort to break in?" Tony demanded.

"Does my mom need to know I'm here?" Justin asked, ignoring Tony's question. "I don't want my mom to know about this."

"You should have thought of that before you committed a burglary," Tony snapped.

"You're over eighteen, Justin, so we won't be calling your mom. I suggest you call her though," Gibbs said. "Because you won't be able to keep this quiet. Agent DiNozzo is right, Justin. You'll be going to jail for this."

Justin gazed at him from helpless blue eyes, and Gibbs had that sensation again of a trapped animal. There was such a sense of empty resignation in the kid's expression.

"Does the admiral know I'm here?" Justin whispered. "I don't think he'd want me to go to jail."

"After you broke into his house and stole from him?" Tony asked, in an incredulous tone. "This isn't the same as the shoplifting, Justin. This is much more serious."

Justin wrapped his arms around his body and gazed at Gibbs.

"Talk to the admiral for me, Agent Gibbs. Please," he asked, in a desperate tone of voice.

Gibbs sat back in his chair and looked at the boy for a long while. Then, finally, he nodded.

"Okay, Justin. I'll talk to him. I'm sure you know that he's at sea at the moment, but I'll talk to him just as soon as I can reach him."

Gibbs got up, and, with another puzzled glance at Justin, he left the room, with Tony on his heels.

"I thought he'd be easier to break than that, Boss," Tony said. Gibbs didn't reply. "What do you think?" Tony asked persistently as they returned to the squad room.

"I think we should find out what's on the laptop." Gibbs picked up the stolen laptop lying on his desk and handed it to McGee. "Check it out," he ordered tersely.

"Uh...what am I looking for, Boss?" McGee asked as he opened up the laptop.

"I don't know, McGee – that's why I asked you to check it out," Gibbs replied irritably. "And the camera." He grabbed that and handed it to McGee, who took it with the usual look of wide-eyed alarm that he got whenever Gibbs growled at him.

"Tony – get me the admiral on the phone," Gibbs ordered, turning back to his desk.

"He's still overseeing that war game exercise, Boss," Tony reminded him. "They're maintaining radio silence at the moment."

"I know that, DiNozzo. Get him on the phone as soon as the damn exercise is over!" Gibbs snapped. "McGee – what is it?"

McGee was holding the camera in his hand with a blank expression on his face. "Oh...uh, it's the camera, Boss. There's nothing on it."

Gibbs glared at him.

"There's nothing on the memory card or the camera's own memory. It's completely clean," McGee said with a shrug.

"Wiped?" Gibbs asked.

"Or never used in the first place," McGee replied. "It's pretty new."

"And the laptop?" Gibbs demanded.

"I've only just booted it up, Boss," McGee said hurriedly, his fingers zipping over the keyboard in their usual blur of motion. "But at first glance there doesn't seem to be anything on it. Just the usual stuff; office programmes, couple of spreadsheets, word documents – they

look like letters..." He brought them up onscreen and then shrugged. "Nothing hinky, Boss; just, you know, stuff. Like everyone has on their computers." He glanced up and caught Gibbs's raised eyebrow. "Well, most people. I mean those people who, uh, have computers... which isn't everyone, or even most people, and there's nothing wrong with not having one..."

"McGee!" Gibbs snapped. "Just take a good look at the damn thing."

"On it, Boss!" McGee nodded promptly.

"Boss – I've got the admiral for you," Tony interrupted. "They've just come out of radio silence – but only for a few minutes, so you don't have long."

Gibbs grabbed his phone and put it on speaker so he wouldn't have to repeat the conversation to his team afterwards. "Admiral Parrish? I'm Agent Gibbs."

"Agent Gibbs – hell, I'm sorry about all this," a firm, intelligent voice said, in clipped, precise tones. Gibbs knew from their files that the admiral was in his early sixties and a well-respected officer, as his high rank implied. "Agent DiNozzo just filled me in. Look, this isn't anything for NCIS to get involved in – you guys have your hands full doing important work. I don't want you wasting your time on a couple of items stolen from my house."

"We need to check if there's anything sensitive on the laptop, Sir," Gibbs said. "Any Naval material?"

"Hell no!" the admiral laughed. "That laptop is just for my own personal use, Gibbs – I use it to write my many letters of complaint to the various newspapers that have pissed me off with their inaccurate and biased reporting!" He chuckled, a deep, bass sound. "Look, I understand that Justin's behind this. Did he say why he stole it?"

Gibbs hesitated. "No," he said finally.

"He say anything at all?" the admiral asked.

"Not really. He's been pretty quiet."

There was a pause, and then the admiral gave a deep, heartfelt sigh. "Agent Gibbs, go easy on that boy. He's had a rough time of it."

"Yeah – I can see that."

"His father was a fine man – and a good friend. I've tried my best to look out for Justin since his death, but the kid took it hard. His mom had a breakdown after Tom died, and Justin doesn't have any other family. I've done what I can for the boy, Agent Gibbs. He's not a bad kid – he's just going through a bad time, that's all."

"That's what I thought," Gibbs agreed. "Will you be pressing charges, Admiral?"

"Absolutely not!" the admiral replied. "That kid's been through enough. Look, just let him go, Agent Gibbs. I finish up here in an hour or so. I'll be home late this afternoon, and I'll drop by

and see him. We'll talk it through. I expect he just wants some attention. I've been busy lately and haven't seen him as much as I used to. I'm sure that's what all this is about."

"Okay, Admiral."

"And if you could return the stuff he stole, I'd appreciate it!" the admiral laughed. "That camera cost me a fortune!"

"I'll return them myself," Gibbs said, and then he hung up the phone. That all made total sense, and it was all exactly as he'd suspected. Why then, did his gut still feel so uneasy about this case?

"McGee – you find anything?" he asked. McGee looked up.

"I'm not sure," he frowned. "There seem to be some encrypted files that I can't access. It's good encryption too...I mean, really good, because usually I can get around most encryptions pretty easily, but this one is...well, it's not just layman level, Boss. It's much more professional than that."

"Should we keep looking?" Tony asked. "I mean, this is the admiral's personal property and if he isn't pressing charges..."

Gibbs thought about it for a moment. Technically Tony was right, but some instinct made him reluctant to give up on this just yet. Everything the admiral had said and everything they knew about Justin suggested that this had just been an attention-seeking cry for help by a lonely, mixed up boy who missed his father. The one thing that didn't tie in was Justin saying there was something on the laptop that belonged to him. The boy could have been lying, but it was the one thing that didn't fit.

"Keep looking, McGee," Gibbs ordered. "You've got an hour. I'm going to speak to Justin, and if you haven't cracked those files by the time I've done the paperwork and released him then I'll take the laptop back to the admiral's house myself and draw a line under the case."

He strode off back in the direction of the interrogation room, Tony on his heels as usual.

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McGee picked up the laptop and took it down to Abby's lab.

"Hey, McGee! You bored? I am!" Abby gave a heartfelt sigh. "It's not like I want anyone to be murdered or anything, but it's a lot more fun around here when there are dead bodies. That's all I'm saying!"

"I think Tony would agree with you," McGee grinned. "He's been driving us all crazy. At least now there's this kid – Justin - to question but no dead bodies. Sorry, Abby."

"What's that?" Abby nodded in the direction of the laptop.

"Oh – it's the laptop Justin stole. Gibbs is making me look through it, just in case. Actually I think he's as bored as Tony, and just trying to find something to do," McGee grinned, sitting down at Abby's desk and opening up the laptop. "I just brought it down because there's some weird encryption code – I wondered if you'd seen anything like it."

He pointed at the screen, and Abby glanced at it over his shoulder. "Wow...that's really sophisticated. Does the laptop have any top secret info on it?"

"Nope." McGee shook his head. "Not according to the admiral anyway."

"Hmmm...something smells hinky!" she said, her eyes lighting up at the thought.

McGee grinned at her and settled down to see if he could crack the encryption codes before Gibbs got back.

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Justin looked up when Gibbs entered the room, his blue eyes hopeful.

"Did you speak to Uncle Matthew?" he asked. "Uh...I mean Admiral Parrish."

"Yup." Gibbs nodded, taking his seat across the table from the boy. Tony went to lean against the far wall. "He isn't pressing charges," Gibbs said. The boy's eyes flashed with relief. "What's on the laptop, Justin?" Gibbs asked. The boy shrugged evasively.

"It doesn't matter."

"Did you even find what was on it? Did you find what you were looking for?" Gibbs pressed. "You any good with computers, Justin? I'm not. Hell, I don't understand the first thing about them. And you're an artist, not a computer geek, so I figure they're not your thing, either."

Justin glanced up at him through that curtain of blond hair. "If he's not pressing charges, can I go home?" he asked quietly. "Only...my mom will be home soon and she'll be worried about me. She gets worried really easily," he added, working away at his chapped bottom lip with his teeth, making it bleed slightly.

"I hear she had a breakdown after your dad died," Gibbs said quietly. "That must have been tough."

"It was. She couldn't leave the house. She cried a lot." Justin shrugged.

"The admiral said he hadn't spent as much time with you lately as he used to," Gibbs said. "Is that why you broke into his house? Were you trying to get his attention?"

Justin's eyes flashed. "No! I just...it doesn't matter. I'm going to college next month, and then...I'll be gone then," he finished up lamely. "Can I go home now, Agent Gibbs?"

"Not yet. I have some paperwork to finish up – then you can go home," Gibbs said, with a sigh. He sat back in his chair and gazed at the kid thoughtfully, wondering if there was any other way he could get him to talk.

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McGee liked working in Abby's lab. By preference he chose to work in silence but there was something soothing about the crash and boom of the loud music she liked. It sort of helped him zone out and allowed his brain to worry away at a problem while he worked.

Abby looked over his shoulder every so often, offering suggestions. Her ideas were always good, so he followed them up, adding them to his own, fingers working ceaselessly. Just when he thought he'd have to admit defeat the first layer of encryption fell away, leaving him with one accessible file. He clicked on it, and then instantly wished he hadn't.

"Oh shit," he said.

"What?" Abby came over and looked at his screen. Her hands came to rest on his shoulders, her fingers digging in a little too hard, making him wince. "Oh shit," she echoed. "Gibbs isn't going to like this," she added grimly. He glanced up to see that her eyes were wide and sad. "You know how he gets about stuff like this. He's really not going to like it."

"Yeah. I know." McGee took a deep breath and then reached for his cell phone. "He's going to go ballistic – I just hope he doesn't shoot the messenger."

"He won't," Abby said, still gazing sadly at the screen. "But he'll definitely want to shoot someone."

"Uh...Boss, I've found something," McGee said into his cell as soon as Gibbs picked up. He knew his boss hated being interrupted when he was in interrogation, but he figured he'd be forgiven on this occasion.

"Well – what is it, McGee?" Gibbs demanded irritably.

"Um...I'd prefer not to tell you over the phone. You really need to come down here and see it," McGee told him.

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Gibbs strode into Abby's lab a few minutes later, feeling annoyed by the whole cloak and dagger approach McGee was taking. He'd left Ziva upstairs watching over Justin and brought Tony with him.

"What?" he asked tersely as he reached Abby's central workstation.

"I managed to crack one of the encryption keys," McGee said. "Only one – there are dozens

of others, each of them different. If the others are anything like this one, then they've been encrypted to protect just one file each, which is a lot of effort to go to. Although having seen the contents of the file I can see why someone would make that effort. I just clicked on the top file, so I'm presuming it's the most recent, but I won't know without cracking the other files. I thought you should see this one before I go any further though, because I'm not sure how long it'll take to..."

"You said you'd found something?" Gibbs interrupted, knowing that McGee's explanations could go on interminably otherwise – and they were always especially long and convoluted when he was nervous, which he clearly was right now.

"Yeah - spit it out, McGeek," Tony said, peering over McGee's shoulder. "What have you found?"

"This." McGee clicked on a file and brought up a screen full of photographs. Gibbs felt his gut clench in response. In the first photo, Justin's vacant eyes peered out at them from behind that block of blond hair; he was completely naked, and the torso of a man was visible behind him.

"Several of the photos are clearly from the same photo session," McGee said hurriedly. "But...and this is where I think you're not going to be happy, Boss, um, well even less happy than you are right now...but there are hundreds of photos, all of Justin, all of him in uh...this kind of position, and some of them go back years."

"Years?" Gibbs frowned. "How many years, McGee?"

"I can't tell for sure...but...look at this one."

McGee clicked on a photograph, and Gibbs found himself looking at a Justin with much shorter hair, sticking up in spiky points. He looked much younger in this photograph, his face devoid of any facial hair.

"I think...he's probably about fourteen in this one," McGee said quietly. "The date stamp on the photograph supports that, but it might not be accurate."

Gibbs felt an old, familiar wave of anger rise up inside. Cases involving children always got to him – always had. "Can you ID the man in the photographs, McGee?"

"No." McGee shook his head. "There are no facial shots. Also..." he hesitated. "I'm not sure it's the same man in all the shots, Boss. This man here – his skin seems to be considerably lighter," he pointed out, bringing up one of the pictures. "Also – this one has more chest hair, and this one...well...uh...he's less well-endowed," he muttered, his face flushing bright red. "The rooms are different as well – I think these photos were taken in several different sessions, over several years, each time with different men."

"Christ, that's sick," Gibbs hissed. He forced himself to survey the photographs with an objective eye, but it was hard. Justin didn't look as if he was in any pain, or as if he was struggling – there was just a sense of weary, numb acceptance about him that somehow was just as poignant as if he'd shown any more visible signs of distress.

"Pedophile ring," Tony said, with a dismissive shrug. "Someone groomed Justin, and I think we've all got a pretty good idea who that must have been, and then he got passed around to the other men in the ring. Photos were taken to be shared and passed on too – just within the ring. If the admiral is anything to go by, the men in this ring are all intelligent professionals – they don't take any more risks than they have to, so they keep the ring closed and only admit new members if they're really sure about them. New recruits to the ring gain entry by bringing a child along for the others to use for sex."

McGee and Abby stared at Tony, and Gibbs glanced at him, one eyebrow raised. Tony gazed back at the three of them, looking completely unconcerned.

"What? I worked vice in Baltimore. That's how these things work," he said, with a grin.

"You just sound so matter of fact about it, Tony," Abby said. "I mean, that poor kid. First his dad dies, then his mom has a breakdown, and then the one person who befriends him turns out to be a total pervert."

Tony shrugged again. "So the kid's had some tough breaks – so what? I'm just saying I've seen this kind of stuff before, and this is how it works." He looked totally unfazed by it. "What?" he said again, when Gibbs, Abby and McGee all gazed at him. "Look, you guys have all seen more dead bodies than I bet you can even remember. Don't tell me you still get affected by each new one that shows up. I'm just saying - maybe this kind of stuff loses its ability to shock after awhile."

"I hope stuff like this never loses its ability to shock me," Abby murmured. "Just what kind of cases did you work in Baltimore anyway, Tony?"

Tony grinned. "You don't wanna know," he told her with a lascivious wink.

Gibbs frowned. Tony's reaction was very Tony - in fact it was almost stereotypically Tony – but somehow that made it all the more surprising. Tony was nosy, attention-seeking, and at times highly annoying, but over the years Gibbs had always found him to be the most empathetic of his agents. Maybe he was right, and the things he'd seen during the course of his job had dulled his reaction to them. If so, he was the only one who felt that way, judging by the expressions on the faces of the other people in the room when they looked at those photos.

"Look, there's a kid upstairs who has probably been sexually abused since he was fourteen years old. I want to catch the bastard who did that, and I want to catch every single last bastard in that ring who touched him - or any other kid - and nobody leaves this building until we've figured out how to do that. Understood?" Gibbs thundered.

"Yes, Boss," they all replied in unison.

"McGee – get those other files open. I want to know if Justin is the only kid who has been abused, or whether DiNozzo is right, and we've stumbled across a ring of pedophiles."

"On it, Boss!" McGee said, turning back to his screen.

"Abby – print out three of those photos for me," Gibbs ordered.

"Which three?"

"Oh for God's sake, Abby – I don't care. They're all equally sickening. Just do it!"

She looked at him with wide eyes but scuttled to obey all the same and a few seconds later handed him the pictures.

"DiNozzo – you're with me." Gibbs turned, photos in his hand, and strode out of Abby's lab.

"Now what, Boss?" Tony asked quietly as they got into the elevator.

"Now we go back and speak to Justin again," Gibbs replied tersely. "And this time he's a witness – and a victim – and not a suspect, Tony, so we go easy on him."

~*~

Deception Part Two by Xanthe

Justin looked up, startled, as Gibbs entered the room. Tony didn't lean against the wall this time – he pulled up a chair and sat at the end of the table instead, his back to the door. Gibbs took his own seat opposite the boy. He tried to keep his emotions in check, but he knew he was radiating an angry vibe – he couldn't help himself. He didn't blame Justin for any of this, but his anger at the men who had abused this vulnerable kid was so strong he couldn't hide it. Tony, on the other hand, seemed surprisingly calm.

"Hey, Justin," Tony said softly. "We know what's on the laptop."

Justin gazed at him distrustfully, and Gibbs didn't blame him. Up until now, Tony had been an antagonist, deliberately bullying Justin to get him to open up to Gibbs's more gentle approach. Now Tony's demeanour was completely different.

"I don't know what you mean," Justin replied.

"We saw the pictures," Tony said carefully. "I can understand why you wanted to delete those, Justin. You wouldn't want anyone seeing those photographs."

"I didn't do anything wrong," Justin said, his face flushing, looking at Gibbs for confirmation. "Did I, Agent Gibbs?"

"No, Justin. You didn't," Gibbs replied gently. "But someone did." He placed the photographs on the table, and watched as Justin paled, and swallowed hard. "Did Admiral Parrish take these photographs, Justin?" he asked.

The boy shook his head.

"Was he the man in any of the photographs?" Gibbs pressed.

"No." Justin shook his head again.

"Are you scared of him hurting you?" Gibbs asked. "Is that why you're protecting him?"

"NO!" Justin yelled. "It's not him! It wasn't him!"

"Okay." Gibbs exchanged an uneasy glance with Tony, who had a thoughtful expression on his face.

"How old were you in this photograph, Justin?" Gibbs asked, pointing to the one of Justin with very short hair.

"Fourteen," Justin whispered. "It was taken a few months after my dad died."

"You do know that because you were underage, the man in the photograph and the man taking it were committing a felony, don't you?" Gibbs asked. "Even having possession of this photograph is a felony."

Justin shrugged.

"It's not your fault, Justin – you can tell us the truth," Gibbs urged. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"My dad was angry with me," Justin said. Gibbs frowned, wondering where this was going. "I told him I thought I was gay, and he got mad at me. It was the last time we talked before he died."

Gibbs sighed, and sat back in his chair. This was getting more complicated by the second. Tony leaned forward.

"That sounds pretty confusing for you, Justin," he said. Justin nodded.

"I've known since I was a little kid," he whispered. "But when I told Dad he just got angry. Then he died a few weeks later and...I just needed to talk to someone about it."

"You didn't like the idea that your father died mad at you," Tony said quietly.

"No...I mean yes but also...I thought maybe...maybe he died because he wasn't thinking clearly – because he was so upset by what I'd said to him. I mean...he was in combat, and if he was thinking about me, and what I'd said..." Justin's face crumpled up, and Gibbs saw the tears in his eyes.

"Admiral Parrish was kind to you, wasn't he?" Tony asked gently. "Did you tell him that you thought you might be gay?"

"Yes." Justin nodded. "I told him all about it. I told him about how I'd argued with my dad. Uncle Matthew was the only person I could talk to about it. He said it was okay. He's been good to me, Agent DiNozzo."

"I know, and of course that's why you want to protect him," Tony said.

Gibbs wondered where Tony was going with this. Justin had been adamant that Parrish wasn't involved in the abuse, and while Gibbs wasn't sure he believed him, he was surprised that Tony seemed to have such a good handle on the complexities of the situation.

"He was really nice to you after your dad died, wasn't he?" Tony said softly. Justin nodded. "He really took good care of you, didn't he? You found you could talk to him, and he really listened to you, didn't he?"

"Yes," Justin whispered.

"He probably said he could help you find out if you were gay," Tony added. "He told you he loved you, didn't he? Maybe he kissed you?"

Justin bit on his bottom lip again, drawing more blood. "Yes," he whispered.

Gibbs sighed. So Tony had been right – Parrish had been 'grooming' Justin.

"That's okay. You didn't do anything wrong. I mean, you must have needed someone to talk to after your dad died, especially if you couldn't talk to your mom," Tony added.

Justin nodded. "Uncle Matthew was so nice to me."

"Then he wanted you to meet some of his friends, didn't he?" Tony asked. Justin nodded again, mutely. "They weren't so nice, but you loved the admiral so you did what he wanted, even though it didn't feel right. Maybe he said he'd show your mom the photographs if you didn't go along with it?"

Justin flushed. "She's a nervous kind of person. I didn't want her seeing them," he said. "I thought it might make her cry – she cries a lot."

"Then you got older, and maybe the admiral seemed less interested in you?" Tony asked.

Gibbs sat back in his chair and let Tony do the work – his senior field agent was impressing him by how carefully he was conducting this interview, and his very real empathy for the kid's situation – especially considering how dispassionate he'd seemed in Abby's lab earlier.

"Yeah." Justin looked close to tears. "He said I was getting too old, and that when I went to college it'd be over. And...I was kind of glad because there were things I didn't want to do any more, but also...I was upset because he told me he loved me, and I really thought he did. He was so cold towards me, and I got angry with him. I asked him to let me have the photos, but he refused, and I thought...I didn't like the idea of him having them or showing them to my mom. I had to break into his house, Agent Gibbs!" He gazed at Gibbs beseechingly. "You can see that! I had to try and get them back. I thought I could make a fresh start at college – nobody had to know - but while he still had the photos..." Justin broke off and wrapped his arms around his body.

"It's okay, Justin. We understand why you broke into the house," Gibbs told him.

"I took the camera as well in case there were any on that. He took some on that camera a couple of months ago, when he first bought it – he said he wanted to christen it. That was before he told me it would be over when I went to college. But the camera was clean – and I couldn't figure out how to get at the ones on his laptop. You're right, Agent Gibbs, I'm not good at that kind of stuff. I didn't think he'd have put those weird security codes on them."

"Do you know who the other men are, Justin?" Gibbs asked, leaning forward. "The men in the photos - how many were there?"

"Four," Justin said quietly. "I don't know who they were. I mean, Uncle Matthew introduced them to me, but...they sounded like made-up names, and it was just first names. This is Frank, or Bob, or whatever. He took me to a hotel..."

Tony scraped back his chair, startling Gibbs and Justin. "Sorry," he smiled apologetically. "Do you know which hotel, Justin?"

"Yes." The boy nodded.

"You could take us there and identify the rooms where the photos were taken?" Gibbs asked.

"Yes." Justin nodded again, looking profoundly uncomfortable.

"Would you be prepared to testify against Admiral Parrish in court, Justin?" Gibbs asked him quietly.

"No!" Justin looked panic-stricken. "It wasn't his fault, Agent Gibbs! It was mine. He was just trying to help me figure out about being gay – it was me who wanted more. I can't testify against him – I love him."

Gibbs wished he had an answer to that. He wasn't a specialist in this kind of thing. Maybe he'd just assumed that all abused kids hated their abusers, but he was starting to see that it was a lot more complicated than that. The 'grooming' process Tony had mentioned had clearly fucked with this kid's mind. Maybe it was similar to the kind of brain-washing techniques he'd been taught about in the military. Tony glanced at him, an unreadable expression in his eyes, and then glanced back at the kid.

"I can understand that, Justin," Tony said. Gibbs clenched his hands into fists – he sure as hell couldn't, and he couldn't bring himself to tell Justin that he could either. A wave of anger shot through him.

"The admiral abused you, Justin, plain and simple," Gibbs said bluntly. "That wasn't love. He was just messing with your head, so that you'd do what he wanted. He wanted you compliant so he could have sex with you, and so that he could give you to other men for them to have sex with you too. Can't you see that?"

Tony winced, and Justin gazed at Gibbs from wide, scared eyes, clearly terrified of his palpable anger. Somehow, he and Tony had flipped roles – and now Tony was the good cop, and Gibbs was the one to be frightened of. Gibbs could have kicked himself.

"Look – we can talk about this some more later, Justin," Tony said soothingly. "You must be hungry. Why don't I get Officer David to take you to the cafeteria so you can get something to eat?"

He glanced at Gibbs, a pleading look in his eyes, and Gibbs nodded, brusquely. Tony got up and nodded at the mirror, and a second later Ziva came into the room, her dark brown eyes gentle and sympathetic. She smiled at Justin and gestured to him to follow her. Tony closed the door shut behind her and turned on Gibbs.

"That wasn't smart, Boss," he snapped, much to Gibbs's surprise. Tony rarely argued with him about his handling of a case, but right now Tony's eyes were dark and angry. "He won't agree to testify just because you bully him into it," he said. "And frankly, he's been bullied and manipulated enough. He doesn't need you starting in on him."

"I wasn't trying to bully him!" Gibbs snapped back angrily. "We need him to testify against Parrish, Tony, or we can't bring that bastard to justice."

"We have the photographs..." Tony began.

"The laptop was stolen!" Gibbs interrupted. "Justin admits that. Parrish's lawyer will say that Justin put those pictures on it himself to blackmail the admiral. Besides, it's not clear if Parrish is one of the men in the photographs. No, we *need* Justin to testify, or Parrish will walk free."

Tony nodded, the anger fading from his eyes. "Okay." He shrugged and gave one of his easy, casual grins, as if he hadn't just almost lost his temper with his boss.

"I thought you were the one who'd seen this all before and didn't let it get to you?" Gibbs commented dryly.

"Oh, I was just pissed off that you might have screwed up the case by scaring the kid shitless like that after all my hard work getting him to trust me," Tony grinned. "Like you said, we need his testimony."

Gibbs slapped the back of his head for that. "I don't screw up cases," he growled, striding towards the door.

"No, Boss!" Tony replied cheerfully, chasing after him. "Uh - where are we going?"

"To get two warrants," Gibbs replied. "One to search Parrish's house and one to arrest him. We might find the evidence we need at his house – and I'm damn well going to bring him in the minute he gets off that ship."

He strode down to the squad room, a dozen little things niggling away at him. This case, which had seemed so easily solvable a few hours ago, had suddenly opened up to reveal a massive chasm – and he still had no idea just how deep it went. He wasn't an expert in child sex abuse cases, but it wasn't outside his remit, and he knew there were people he could call in if need be.

Some things were still bothering him though - such as the fact that Justin had stolen the laptop - because that could prejudice any case they tried to make against Parrish.

Then there was his gut feeling that this was just the tip of the iceberg and more digging could reveal a whole network of men like Admiral Parrish.

Finally, there was his irritation with Tony. His agent had viewed those photos without a flicker of revulsion – but had flipped out with **him** when he'd tried to persuade Justin to testify. It was almost like Tony was protecting the damn abusers, as if he didn't **care** about what that kid had gone through, despite the empathetic way he'd questioned Justin back there.

Still, that was Tony – very little ever got under the surface. Gibbs could count on the fingers of one hand the times he'd seen Tony really affected by anything they encountered in their work – or, at least, the times Tony had **shown** he was affected, which was something different.

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McGee cracked the last encrypted folder and then sat back with a sigh. Abby put her hands on his shoulders and massaged them helpfully.

"52 files," McGee muttered. "I hope they're all photos of Justin because otherwise that's another 51 kids who've been abused."

“And if they aren’t all of Justin – let’s hope it’s just one kid per file,” Abby said to him. He glanced up at her. “Or else it’s more than 52 kids,” she told him quietly.

“You okay with this?” He pointed his mouse at one of the files, poised, ready to click.

“No. You?” she asked, her eyes glowing unhappily.

“No,” he agreed.

“Then let’s do it,” she said. “They had to live through it – all we have to do is view and catalogue the evidence.”

He nodded and clicked.

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“Uh, Boss, it’s me. I’ve finished opening up all the files,” McGee’s voice said in his ear.

“And?” Gibbs asked shortly, wishing he could tone down his irritation but having a suspicion that it would be with him for the duration of this case. He’d seen many things in his life, but anything involving hurt or abused children always got under his skin and made him want to lash out.

“Again, I think you should come down here,” McGee said apologetically. Gibbs sighed. This just got worse and worse.

“On my way,” he said tersely, slamming down the phone. “DiNozzo – do you have those warrants for me yet?”

“Working on it!” Tony replied, glancing up at him from his desk as he passed.

“Well work on it faster,” he snapped, striding out of the squad room.

McGee and Abby both turned anxiously towards him as he entered the forensics lab, and he could see by the expressions on their faces that it wasn’t good news. McGee read his mood and knew to just give it to him straight.

“There are 52 files,” McGee said, clicking on one. “We’ve taken a brief look at all of them. All contain photographs of boys who certainly appear to be underage. All the files, except one, contain just one boy per file. The final file contains photos of several different boys. I’m not sure yet whether those are boys from the other files or different boys.”

“So we don’t know if we’re looking at 51 abuse cases or more than that?” Gibbs demanded.

“No,” McGee agreed.

“Well get on it, McGee. I want to know just how many kids these bastards abused,” Gibbs ordered. McGee nodded.

"Anything else?" Gibbs asked.

"Sometimes there are only a handful of photographs in a file, and sometimes there are hundreds," McGee replied. "There are more photos of Justin than any of the other boys – presumably because the abuse took place over a longer time period. And the first fifteen or so files contain photos taken on digital cameras."

"Must be a godsend for pedophiles," Abby commented grimly. "No need to take film to be developed anywhere, and you get instant results – which can be emailed directly to the other members of the ring."

"Maybe Tony's right, and technology isn't always a good thing," McGee said with a little shake of his head. "In the older files, it's clear the photos have been taken on film and scanned so those photos pre-date digital cameras."

"How far back does this go?" Gibbs asked.

"Impossible to say," McGee shrugged. "Although judging by the hairstyles and the furnishings in the various rooms..." He brought up a picture of a boy with longish red hair and pointed the mouse at the psychedelic green wallpaper behind him. "I'd place this one some time in the seventies," he said. "That's one of the earliest I've found."

"Okay – I want to know how many different boys were abused and any clues as to locations," Gibbs said. "Or identities," he added, although he thought he was pushing his luck with that. The boys were all visible, but the men abusing them had been carefully photographed so that their faces weren't clear in any of the pictures.

McGee glanced up at him, an aghast expression on his face.

"Boss that could take days!" he protested. "I mean there are thousands of photographs here!"

"Then you'd better get started," Gibbs growled, turning on his heel. "Both of you."

He winced as he got into the elevator, out of their view. He wouldn't wish that task on his worst enemy, but it was necessary. If they could identify any of the boys or men in the photos, then they stood more of a chance of cracking this ring and bringing the main perpetrators to justice. Just the thought that this ring had been abusing boys – and getting away with it – for decades...

Gibbs snapped his hand angrily on the elevator stop button, breathing heavily. He couldn't help all those kids in the files, with their haunting, empty eyes, but if he did his job, and brought those bastards to justice, then he could prevent there being any future victims.

How did men like this get away with it for so long? He remembered what Tony had said about this particular ring presumably being made up of intelligent, ruthless men who knew exactly what they were doing and how to cover their tracks. He also supposed that the membership of the ring hadn't stayed static over the years – presumably men entered it, bringing a child or pictures of children as their membership fee, and then got access to the other children and pictures. Some of the men might have died and been replaced by others, and maybe some had even been discovered and sent to prison – without revealing the names

of their fellow perpetrators. That laptop downstairs had certainly been well protected. Gibbs doubted that anyone other than McGee would have been able to hack those encryption codes, so those files had been very well hidden.

Gibbs took a few deep breaths, and then he snapped his hand onto the elevator button again. He had a job to do, and he was damn well going to do it to the best of his ability – for the sake of every single kid these men had abused over the years.

Gibbs strode into the Squad Room to find Tony staring at a picture on the plasma.

“Did you get me those warrants?” Gibbs barked out.

“Yes, Boss. Here, Boss.” Tony handed them over.

“That Admiral Parrish?” Gibbs glanced at the plasma.

“Yeah. I was just trying to see if there’s something in his eyes that gives him away, but there’s nothing,” Tony said. “It’s just hard to believe that a guy like this, with all his years in the military and with all the commendations he’s had, could be capable of something like this.”

He turned his head on one side and gazed at the picture again. The man onscreen was a tall, well-built officer in his early sixties. He had silver hair and a genial smile, although his firm jaw and dark grey eyes spoke of a more ruthless character than was, perhaps, obvious at first sight. Even so, Tony was right – the man looked ordinary.

“Like all the best murderers, rapists and pedophiles,” Gibbs grunted. “They look just like us, Tony – you should know that by now.”

“Yeah.” Tony shrugged.

“Okay, let’s get moving.” Gibbs reached for his gun and badge and started striding towards the elevator.

“Uh...Boss, I was wondering – could you take Ziva instead of me?” Tony asked, trotting along behind him. Gibbs turned and gave him his glare – the one that usually silenced Tony immediately and brought him into line. Except that this time it didn’t. “It’s just...I want to build up more of a rapport with Justin,” Tony continued, ignoring the glare. “I thought he and I were - you know, that he was starting to trust me. And if we need him to testify against Parrish then...” He shrugged.

Gibbs stared at him. Something about Tony was out of focus right now, but he had too much on his plate to figure out what it was. Whatever it was, it was annoying. He needed Tony to be on top of his game with this one; hell, he needed ALL his team to be at their best, and Tony kept wrong-footing him by being slightly ‘off’ somehow. It was nothing he could put his finger on, but it niggled at him all the same.

“Okay,” he said eventually, because the request was reasonable enough – it just wasn’t *Tony* somehow. Since when did Tony ask to stay behind to talk to a kid rather than accompany Gibbs out in the field, especially if he was going to make an arrest for God’s

sake? Since when did Tony not want to be wherever Gibbs was for that matter? His senior field agent was like his shadow most of the time.

"Thanks. I'll go tell Ziva to meet you in the parking garage," Tony said, running off.

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"What you got for me, Abs?" Tony said, in a mock-Gibbs tone of voice as he entered the forensics lab. McGee glanced up as Tony handed Abby a Caf-Pow.

"Tony! Gibbs has only been gone, like, an hour!" Abby grinned. "Isn't it a bit too early for you to start impersonating him?"

She took the Caf-Pow anyway and offered her cheek for Tony to kiss, which he did with a happy grin. McGee rolled his eyes.

"And this, McProbie, is for you, so don't say I never do anything for you," Tony said, handing him a coffee. McGee sniffed at it suspiciously. "I didn't put liquid soap in it this time," Tony added. "I promise."

McGee gazed at him through narrowed eyes, and he then took a chance and sipped. It was coffee, and just the way he liked it; warm and milky, no soap.

"Why thank you, Tony. Why are you being nice? It's not like you."

"Well...I figure that out of all of us you guys drew the short straw on this one," Tony said, with a nod at McGee's screen. "Why do we never get to catalogue good porn?" he sighed. "With adults, and, you know, hot women."

"Tony!" Abby elbowed him in the stomach, and he grinned at her.

"I'm just saying!" he protested. "This stuff here will warp the poor probie's delicate brain. Hell...it'd warp anyone's brain." He glanced over McGee's shoulder, and his forehead wrinkled up in a theatrical frown. "Man, this stuff is fucked up."

"Yeah. I feel like I want to scrub out my brain with bleach," McGee sighed. "What are you doing down here anyway, Tony? I thought you were babysitting Justin?"

"I was – but then I showed him Autopsy and he went all 'cool!' on me, so I left him with Palmer. Justin was talking about wanting to paint one of the bodies. Eww." Tony gave a dramatic shiver. "Why are some people so into dead bodies? It's creepy. Uh, present company excepted, Abs," he grinned at her. "So where are we at on this? What have you found?" he asked, standing too close to McGee as he stared over his shoulder. McGee elbowed him back a step.

"We have 52 files full of abused kids, and Gibbs wants us to look at every single photograph for clues as to who they are and who the abusers are," McGee told him.

"Gibbs wants you to ID all those kids?" Tony raised an eyebrow. "Good luck with that."

"Yeah," McGee sighed.

"I mean, it's not really possible, is it?" Tony asked.

"Well, we can do a search on missing kids over the past few decades to see if we can match any of the pictures but..." McGee began.

"Decades? These photos go back that far?" Tony sounded shocked. "No wonder Gibbs is marching around yelling at everyone."

"You know Gibbs. He really hates anything involving cruelty to kids," Abby sighed. "And this – right here – looks like being the kind of case that'll drive him crazy."

"And looking for missing kids might not be much use," Tony said. "If this whole ring operates like the admiral, then these kids weren't missing at any point. They weren't abducted and raped. They were groomed for abuse and manipulated by their abusers into thinking they'd somehow agreed to it – maybe that they even wanted it or enjoyed it."

"In some ways that's even more horrible," Abby said. "It sounds so premeditated. I mean, how could anyone do that to a kid?"

Tony shrugged. "People do all kinds of stuff to get what they want, Abs."

"Hey - maybe Tony can help us with our conundrum?" Abby suggested, glancing at McGee.

"Fire away." Tony nodded.

"Well, like I said, we have 52 files, and there's a different boy in each file," McGee said, pointing his mouse at the screen and zipping through some of them. "But just one boy per file - except this one." He brought up the final file. "This one has hundreds of photos of different boys in it."

"Are they the same boys as in the other files or new ones?" Tony asked, taking the mouse away from McGee and scrolling through the photos at lightning speed.

"Well, we've only just started working on that, but so far we've been able to cross-reference them back to photos we've seen in the other files," McGee replied. "So they're duplicates."

"Well then that's easy," Tony said.

McGee and Abby gazed at him, waiting. Tony didn't elaborate – he just kept on zipping through the photos, a look of concentration on his face.

"Tony!" McGee said, elbowing him again. "Were you planning on sharing the answer with us any time soon?"

"What?" Tony gazed intently at the screen and then clicked away. He looked up with a bright grin. "Oh yeah – this is the admiral's 'favourites' file, Probie. All good porn collections have a favourites file – I know mine does." He gave them a knowing little wink and an even broader

grin. "So he's picked all his favourite photos from the other files and dumped them into this one."

"I don't even like to think about him having favourites among boys who've been abused," Abby said quietly.

"I agree. It's sick." Tony pulled the grin off his face immediately. McGee glared at him. Tony's humour could be annoying at the best of times, but right now it seemed downright inappropriate. "You know, I should get back to Justin before he ends up sketching every dead body in Autopsy," Tony said, and then he turned on his heel and left, with a jaunty wave of his hand, humming to himself as he went.

"Do you ever get the urge to hit him really hard?" McGee asked Abby conversationally.

"Oh yeah," she grinned. "All the time. Luckily Gibbs does it for us." She glanced at him sideways and mimed slapping the back of McGee's head, and they both laughed.

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Tony stopped humming the minute he stepped inside the elevator. He waited until the door closed and then flicked the emergency button to give himself some thinking time. He wasn't getting this right; he knew that. His game was off, and people kept giving him strange looks, so he knew he wasn't hitting the right note. Maybe he was trying too hard.

He had to be more focussed, or this whole situation could end up getting out of hand. He knew Gibbs though – the man was like a dog with a bone when he got hold of something. There was no way he'd give this up easily, but it was going to take him some time to figure it all out. Tony had to use that time to his advantage.

Tony gazed at his reflection in the mirrored elevator wall; a couple of spikes of his hair were sticking up at a weird angle, looking out of place. He smoothed the hair down, robotically. He frowned as he noticed his hand shaking slightly; this was exactly the kind of reaction he couldn't afford. This morning he'd had no idea that this would blow up. Who the hell could have predicted this? If he had known, then maybe he could have prepared himself for it better, but he was thinking on his feet right now and that wasn't easy. No wonder he kept getting these adrenaline spikes; it was the shock of the unexpected. Once he recovered, he'd hit his stride again for sure.

He was still one step ahead of Gibbs, and if he played this right he could keep it that way. There was no reason why the old man should ever find out – McGee hadn't. Okay, so Gibbs was a hell of a lot more observant than the probie, but it was a long shot, even for Gibbs. If Tony could just keep focussed, then everything would be okay. It would be tough for a few weeks, sure - he had to resign himself to that - but then this would all go away and things could go back to how they'd been before. No need to panic. He just had to stay calm and ride it out.

He nodded at himself, and realised he was still smoothing his hair down compulsively so that it was now flat against his skull, giving him an oddly skeletal appearance. He adjusted it back to how it usually looked and then flicked the emergency button again and went down to Autopsy to reclaim Justin.

He was humming again the minute he stepped out of the elevator.

~*~

Gibbs looked up expectantly as Ziva came down the stairs.

"Nothing," she said, with a sigh, gesturing with her palms up, empty. "I can find nothing at all, Gibbs."

"It would help if you'd let me know what you're looking for, Agent Gibbs," the housekeeper said anxiously, hovering beside him as he went through all the drawers in the sleek mahogany bureau in the hallway. "I take care of the admiral – I do all his washing, ironing, cooking and cleaning. I know everything there is to know about him."

"I doubt that," Gibbs muttered brusquely, finishing with the bureau and turning back to Ziva.

"Were you worried that Justin stole anything else?" the housekeeper asked. "I don't see how that's possible. I mean, I saw him leave with that bag, and he didn't have time..."

"We are not here because of that," Ziva interrupted her.

At that moment, there was a noise at the front door, and Ziva drew her gun, glancing at Gibbs.

"I thought that the admiral was not due back until late this afternoon?" Ziva hissed.

"I'm guessing that he found a way to get off that ship sooner rather than later," Gibbs growled back at her. "Wouldn't you, in the circumstances? He has some damage control on his hands right now."

The door opened and a tall, broad-shouldered man in full military uniform entered the house. He was self-assured and imposing, with silver-grey hair and dark grey eyes.

"Admiral Parrish? I'm Agent Gibbs – we spoke on the phone earlier," Gibbs said coldly. The admiral looked confused.

"Agent Gibbs – I'm surprised to see you here," he said, glancing around at the untidy state of the house following their search. "I thought I told you that I didn't want to press charges against Justin?"

"We're not here about that," Gibbs replied. "We're here to arrest you."

The admiral went very still. "On what charge?" he asked quietly.

"I think you know," Gibbs told him, glancing at the housekeeper, unwilling to go into too much detail in front of her. He pulled out his cuffs and went over to the admiral. "For what you did to Justin," he hissed quietly in the man's ear. "And God knows how many other kids."

"I don't know what you mean," Parrish replied, a shocked expression on his face. Gibbs had to hand it to him – the man was a consummate actor. "What are you implying?" Parrish

demanded, allowing Gibbs to pull his hands behind his back and fasten the cuffs on him without resistance. "You should be very careful, Agent Gibbs," Parrish said, in a hard tone. Gibbs straightened up and looked him in the eye. "I hope that you're very sure of your facts, Gibbs, because I don't appreciate that kind of accusation – and I'm not someone you want to upset." He gestured with his head in the direction of the rank insignia on his uniform.

"Oh, trust me, neither am I – and you have - big time," Gibbs told him, pushing him in the direction of the door.

~*~

Ziva gazed through the two-way mirror into the interrogation room where Gibbs was glaring at the admiral, who was sitting easily in his chair, staring back. She glanced up as Tony came into the observation room.

"I think that Gibbs has finally met his game," she said.

"It's 'match', Ziva," Tony corrected her. "So the admiral's playing tough guy, is he?" he asked, coming to stand next to her.

"Yes – he is demanding a lawyer and refuses to answer any of Gibbs's questions."

"Well, he's an experienced military commander – an admiral no less. He isn't likely to be intimidated by the Gibbs death glare, however scary it is to us mere mortals," Tony grinned. He gazed through the mirror at the admiral.

"Where have you been?" Ziva asked him. "Gibbs was looking for you."

"Did he want me in there?" Tony gestured with his head towards the window.

"I do not know, but he was annoyed when he could not find you."

"I was babysitting Justin," Tony replied with a shrug. "Must have had my cell phone switched off by mistake."

"Where is he?" Ziva glanced around as if she expected to see Justin standing there.

"I left him with Abby – she wanted a break from staring at all those photos, so she's taken him to get a coffee. He really wants to go home though."

"Gibbs will not let him go home until he agrees to testify and makes a statement," Ziva told him.

"I know. That's why I've been spending all this time with him. Just need to make the kid see what would be best," Tony said, with a firm nod.

Next door, Gibbs leaned forward and took a sheaf of photos out of the file he was holding. "We found these on your laptop, Admiral, and thousands more like them."

The admiral stared at them, aghast. "My God! These are...Agent Gibbs – these are photographs of Justin," he said in an appalled voice. "Oh God, the poor kid..."

"Are you saying you didn't know these photographs were on your laptop?" Gibbs asked.

"I didn't know because they weren't!" the admiral protested. "Agent Gibbs – I have never seen these photographs before now."

"Then how did they get there?"

"I can only assume that Justin put them there himself," the admiral sighed.

"Why?"

"To blackmail me." The admiral buried his face in his hands.

"He is a good actor, yes?" Ziva said to Tony.

"What makes you think he's acting?" Tony asked, never taking his eyes off the admiral.

"Come on, Tony. He is surely guilty!" Ziva glanced at him, surprised.

"We might not have all the facts yet, Ziva, that's all I'm saying," Tony said to her.

"Sometimes you just need to alter the perspective a little and everything gets turned on its head. Remember when I got framed for murder that time? All the evidence pointed to me, but I was being set up."

"It is a possibility, but I do not believe that is what has happened here," she said. He didn't reply, and when she glanced at him, she found he was staring intently at Admiral Parrish, completely engrossed.

"Why would he want to blackmail you, Admiral?" Gibbs asked.

The admiral shook his head. "That poor kid – he has so many emotional problems. The shoplifting, the drinking, the drugs...he just never got over Tom's death. He started asking me for money a few months ago – said he needed it for college, although I know that Tom and Melissa have provided him with a good college fund. I think it's more likely that he wanted the money for drugs. I refused – but he wouldn't let it go. He said that he'd tell people I'd been abusing him. I thought it was just a teenage rage – I couldn't believe that he'd really make up such a terrible thing. I mean, I know he's a good kid really, Agent Gibbs, even if he is unstable. He's like his mom, you see – she's a fragile kind of personality – you can see that by how she fell apart after Tom died, and Justin is just like her. I had no idea Justin would go this far though."

"You think he set this up to blackmail you into giving him money?" Gibbs asked. "Isn't taking naked photos of himself and planting them on your laptop going just a bit too far for an 18 year old?"

"Oh, it's not that simple, I'm afraid, Agent Gibbs," the admiral sighed. "You see, Justin blames me for his father's death. He always has. I was Tom's military commander, and I

ordered him into the combat situation that led to his death. Justin has never forgiven me for that. So it wasn't just blackmail – it was also revenge."

Ziva glanced at Tony. "That was unexpected," she murmured. "Maybe you are right, Tony. Maybe we do not have all the facts."

Tony's jaw tightened, and she thought he looked very tense as he stared through the window. "Maybe, Ziva," he said softly. "Maybe."

~*~

Gibbs was in a foul mood when he left the interrogation room. Tony exited the observation room at the same time, straight into his path, and Gibbs glared at him.

"Where the hell have you been, DiNozzo?"

"Sorry, Boss – I was just..." Tony waved his hand in a vague way.

"Never be unreachable, DiNozzo – didn't I drum that into you?"

"Yes, Boss. Sorry, Boss. It won't happen again, Boss," Tony said, trotting along after him as he strode into the squad room.

"I know it won't," Gibbs snapped meaningfully. "And where the hell is Justin? I thought you were supposed to be keeping an eye on him?"

"I was, Boss – I just...I left him with Abby," Tony said.

"Well get him back!" Gibbs roared. "Parrish is playing hardball on this – he's thought up a good story and he's sticking to it. We *need* Justin's testimony if we're going to make a case against him."

"You're sure it's Parrish who is lying and not Justin?" Tony asked.

Gibbs turned, slowly, his expression murderous. "Oh yes, Tony. I'm sure," he said grimly.

"How?" Tony asked, seemingly undaunted by the glare Gibbs was giving him.

"My gut," Gibbs grunted.

"It has been wrong before," Tony pointed out. Gibbs stiffened. "I'm just saying – maybe you want the admiral to be guilty," Tony muttered. "It'd be simpler that way."

"Someone took those damn photos, Tony, and Parrish is our most likely suspect. Now go and get Justin," Gibbs said, in a low, even voice, struggling to get his temper under control. "Take him into interrogation room two and get him to agree to testify. That way, we can bring this bastard to justice."

"Yes, Boss." Tony nodded, turning and running off in the direction of the elevator.

Gibbs scratched the side of his head absently as he watched him go. What the hell was wrong with DiNozzo today? He kept pushing at him – and precisely at those times when Gibbs *really* didn't want to be pushed. Nobody liked cases like this, but Gibbs knew his own reactions were intense and extreme. He didn't want to lose it with Tony, but he thought that might be the way this was headed if his agent didn't stop playing devil's advocate. Just what the hell was Tony trying to achieve by it anyway?

~*~

“Agent DiNozzo, I'd really like to go home,” Justin said, gazing at him pleadingly from his blue eyes. He really did look like a kicked puppy.

“I know, Justin.” Tony nodded. “Not much longer now. Agent Gibbs asked me to bring you in here to see if you'd changed your mind about testifying against the admiral.”

Justin gazed at him pathetically. It would be so easy to bend and twist him into doing whatever he wanted. The kid was so clearly vulnerable and that made him malleable. Tony had to give Parrish credit for knowing his dark art so well. He'd got this kid responding to any older, male authority figure. Gibbs would know how to play him without even realising he was playing him. Tony could play him too, so easily. All it would take was just a few firm words mixed up with a little bit of kindness...he could have Justin eating out of his hand in only a slightly longer time than it would take Gibbs.

“I don't want to testify against Uncle Matthew,” Justin said miserably. “I just want this to go away.”

“I understand.” Tony nodded. “And I think you're right.”

Justin looked at him through that curtain of blond hair, surprised.

“You just want a fresh start don't you, Justin?” Tony sighed. “You're leaving to go to college next month, and you can put all this behind you. But if you make a statement, if you formally accuse the admiral of sexually abusing you, and if you agree to stand up in court and recount that abuse...well this is going to stay with you a hell of a lot longer, isn't it?”

“I don't want my mom knowing,” Justin confided. “She isn't very well, Agent DiNozzo, and I'm worried this might kill her. I already killed my dad...”

“You didn't kill your dad, Justin,” Tony said firmly. “You were just honest with him. And I'll be honest with you.” He leaned forward. “Don't testify,” he said quietly, looking straight into Justin's eyes. “Don't make a statement, don't go to court. The admiral is a wealthy, powerful man, and you're a kid with a criminal record. There's the shoplifting, the DUI, the drugs, and the fact you broke into the admiral's house and stole the laptop. They'll take you apart in court, Justin. Don't do it – and don't let anyone talk you into doing it, either. Not me, not Agent Gibbs – not anyone. Just walk away from this. Get as far away from Parrish as you can – never see him again, never talk to him again. Go to college and be someone else. Be someone this never happened to. You can be someone different – hell, you can be whoever you damn well want. Just put all this in a box, stow it away in a corner of your mind, and never think about it again. Do you think you can do that?”

Justin bit on his lip. "I don't know, Agent DiNozzo. How does that work? How can I just not think about it?"

"It won't be easy – you'll have to work at it – but you can do it. It's kind of like a magic trick - every time you think about it, all you have to do is distract yourself," Tony told him. "Think about something else – something you like. Think about a movie, or a song, or a guy you like, or about something you want to paint. Talk to yourself if it helps, or goof around, or kick a ball around, or hum...anything to distract yourself, and then you'll find it goes away. It'll take time, but it'll get easier to the point where you don't think about it at all."

"Supposing Uncle Matthew comes after me?"

"Are you scared of him?" Tony asked quietly.

"No..." Justin hesitated. "Yes," he said softly. "I'm terrified of him, Agent DiNozzo. He can be so nice but then sometimes...sometimes he goes really cold and mean, and he says these things...things that really freak me out. It's like he's got this whole other side to him, Agent DiNozzo, and if I don't testify against him then he'll be free to come after me."

"He won't come after you, Justin," Tony said confidently.

"How do you know that?"

"Just trust me – he won't come after you." Tony leaned forward and spoke into the teenager's ear in a whisper. "I'll take care of that. I promise." He leaned back again, crossed his arms over his chest, and gazed at the kid. Justin stared at him.

"You think it's the right thing not to testify?" Justin asked uncertainly. "Only...Agent Gibbs...he got mad at me when I said I wouldn't."

"I know, but you make your own decisions, Justin. You can't let anyone push you around any more. People – men – have been doing that for far too long, haven't they? First your dad, and then Admiral Parrish, and then the men he gave you to, and now Agent Gibbs. Don't let anyone tell you what to do any more, Justin. Gibbs has his own agenda – he wants to see Parrish sent to jail for what he did to you, and he wants him out of the way so he can't hurt any more kids."

"Maybe Agent Gibbs is right," Justin murmured. Tony nodded.

"He is – but that's his agenda, Justin, not yours. You'll just get caught in the crossfire. They'll crucify you in court. Your mom will be dragged into this, and you won't be able to enjoy college because this will be hanging over you - and it will *always* hang over you. You'll never be free of it. People will always know that you were the kid who was abused. Or worse, that you were the kid who made a false accusation - because there's every chance the admiral will get off even if you do testify against him. I believe you, and Agent Gibbs believes you, but there's no guarantee a jury will."

Justin bit on his lower lip, drawing yet more blood. It welled up in the split and a tiny droplet splashed onto the table. Tony gazed at him steadily.

“Do as I say, Justin,” he said firmly. “You know it makes sense.”

Justin nodded. “I do. I will. I was scared that Agent Gibbs would...that he’d make me do something I didn’t want to do.”

“Yeah, I know, but nobody is going to do that to you again, Justin. You have to make that decision - right here, right now – nobody is ever going to make you do anything you don’t want to do ever again. Agreed?”

Justin nodded eagerly, looking like a weight had been lifted from his mind. “Yes – thank you, Agent DiNozzo.”

“Good. If Agent Gibbs comes after you, tell him you won’t testify and stick to that whatever he says. I know he can be pretty scary but just stand up to him. He can’t make you testify if you don’t want to.”

“I guess not.” Justin still looked uncertain.

"You have to look after yourself now, Justin," Tony told him softly. "Nobody else will, so you have to be strong. You have to step up and take care of yourself, and that means not doing anything you don't want to do, no matter who asks. Understand?"

Justin's eyes flashed, and he nodded slowly. "Yes, Agent DiNozzo. I really do."

"Good. That's good." Tony grinned at him, and Justin gave him a little smile in response. The kid looked happier than he had all day. “Okay then – do you want me to give you a lift home?”

“I can go home now?”

“Sure.” Tony shrugged. “We’re all done here.”

He got up and watched as the kid got to his feet and almost ran for the door. Tony caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror as he left the room. That annoying bit of hair was sticking up again. He flattened it down with his hand, humming to himself.

Really, that had been too easy.

~*~

Gibbs stormed out of interrogation room one after another lengthy and entirely pointless interview with Admiral Parrish. The man was sticking to his story, and he was smart – too smart to be waylaid by any of the traps Gibbs set for him and too sure of himself to be intimidated – and God knows, Gibbs had done his best to intimidate the man. Without a confession, or more evidence, or Justin’s testimony, the admiral would walk – and Gibbs gut churned at the thought of him being free to prey on more innocent kids.

Gibbs hoped that Tony had talked Justin into making a statement. He had every faith in his senior field agent – Tony might goof off occasionally, but he was excellent at his job and rarely failed to do whatever Gibbs asked of him.

Gibbs glanced into interrogation room two but was surprised to find it was empty. Surely Tony couldn't have written up Justin's statement already? And if Justin was still refusing to testify then Tony would be sitting here, waiting for Gibbs to come back in and take over the task.

Gibbs strode back to the squad room but there was no sign of Tony there, either.

"Where's DiNozzo?" he asked Ziva.

"He left," she said, looking up, a surprised expression on her face.

"Left to go where?" Gibbs growled, just barely keeping his temper under control. What the hell was going on around here?

"He left to take Justin home – I thought you knew." Ziva looked just as puzzled as he felt right now.

"No I didn't damn well know." Gibbs dialed Tony's cell phone number. "Where the hell are you, DiNozzo?" he snapped when Tony picked up.

"Justin wouldn't agree to testify – he wanted to be taken home, so that's what I'm doing," Tony replied cheerfully.

"No you're not. Get your ass back here," Gibbs growled. "And bring Justin with you."

"I can't do that, Boss. He's insisting I take him home," Tony replied. "And we can't keep him at NCIS – he hasn't done anything wrong."

"At the very least he broke into the admiral's house," Gibbs barked, clutching at straws.

"But the admiral isn't pressing charges," Tony rebutted. "Look, you can speak to him yourself. He's very insistent."

There was silence, and then Justin's voice came on the line.

"I'm not testifying, Agent Gibbs, and you can't make me," he said in tones of hesitant defiance. There was a pause, and Gibbs heard a whispering sound. "Uh...I asked Agent DiNozzo to take me home. I don't want to make a statement. I don't have anything to talk to you about now. I don't have to do anything I don't want to do. You can't make me. I have to look after myself now."

"Hey, Boss." Tony's voice again. "You heard him – he's made up his mind. Nothing I said would change it. Hang on...I think the line's breaking up..."

The phone went dead, and Gibbs threw it down in disgust. Ziva looked up at him, alarmed.

"Is everything okay?"

"No, everything is not okay," he growled. "Everything is very far from okay."

Something about this whole thing smelled wrong. He couldn't put his finger on it, but he was determined to track it down. There was no way – *no way* - he was going to allow a whole ring of pedophiles to continue to operate when he had a chance to bring them down, starting with the man sitting in interrogation room one right now...which gave him a thought.

Gibbs strode back to the observation room for interrogation room two. Mike, one of the technicians, was sitting there, drinking a cup of coffee and munching on a sandwich.

“Mike – play me back the tape of the interview Agent DiNozzo just conducted in here,” Gibbs ordered. Mike nodded and rewound the tape. A few seconds later it began playing on the TV screen.

Gibbs watched in total silence.

~*~

Tony hummed to himself as he exited the elevator. That was Justin out of the way. Gibbs would no doubt be pissed off, but Tony could handle that. He wouldn't *like* it, because a pissed off Gibbs was a thing to fear, but he could handle it.

Tony sauntered into the squad room, still humming. “Hey Ziva!” he announced cheerfully. “What's going on?”

She glanced up, her eyes full of warning. I know, Tony thought to himself. I know. But I'm still one step ahead, and if I can just keep it that way...

He saw a scrunched up piece of paper on the floor beside her waste basket and bent down to pick it up, then turned seamlessly, in one smooth motion, and tossed it straight towards McGee's waste basket...only for it to hit someone's leg instead. Oh shit. Tony looked up into a pair of stony blue eyes.

“Hey, Boss. Sorry about Justin.” He gave an apologetic shrug. “The kid just wouldn't budge. I did my best.”

“Did you?” Gibbs raised an eyebrow. “With me, DiNozzo. Now!” he barked. Tony made a face at Ziva and trotted obediently along behind Gibbs.

Gibbs led him to the conference room, opened the door for Tony to walk through, and then he closed it behind them.

“Sit,” he ordered. Tony sat.

“What kind of a game are you playing, Tony?” Gibbs asked, in a quiet, deadly tone of voice.

A dangerous one, the little voice in Tony's head whispered.

“Me? I'm not playing any games, Boss,” he replied nonchalantly.

“Watch,” Gibbs ordered tersely.

He picked up the remote lying on the table, clicked a button, and the plasma screen opposite Tony flickered into life. His heart sank as he saw himself and Justin sitting in the interrogation room. He hadn't thought for a moment that Gibbs would go this far – the man never checked over his footage. He trusted him enough to take his word for what had gone down unless there was something specific he wanted to look at.

So he'd made a mistake – it was inevitable when he was thinking on his feet like this. The situation could still be salvaged though, he was sure of that. It might cost him – so he had to decide, quickly, just how much he was prepared to lose.

Gibbs was looking at him, as if waiting for him to say something. Tony looked at the screen. He could see that annoying tuft of hair sticking up on the back of his head, and it irritated him. Unconsciously, he moved his hand up to his head to stroke it back down, even though he was viewing footage of himself and not looking in a mirror.

The tape played through from the beginning. Tony barely heard it. He was too busy thinking, and stroking, and thinking...

It came to an end, and Gibbs turned it off with an angry click of his fingers. Tony flinched. This was going to be bad.

"I want an explanation, Tony," Gibbs said, leaning in, looming over him. "If you have one."

"There's always an explanation," Tony replied, with a cheery grin. He realised his hand was shaking, so he moved it down to his lap and held it there, out of sight. "It's like I was saying to Ziva earlier... sometimes you just have to shift the perspective, turn things upside down, and view them from a different angle..."

"Answer me!" Gibbs slammed his hand down on the table, and Tony jumped. His grin faded. He scraped back his chair to get away from Gibbs and stood up.

"That kid has been through enough," he said quietly. "Everything I said to him was true. If this goes to court they'll tear him apart, and I doubt you'll get the conviction you want, Gibbs. Parrish's lawyer will say that Justin put the photos on the laptop himself, after he stole it. Justin isn't a reliable witness. Nobody will believe him, Gibbs, trust me. He's just a kid, and Parrish is an admiral for God's sake! He's a war hero, he's been decorated, he has commendations for bravery, and there has never been a word said against him, by anyone. There is no other evidence, none at all, to show that he's a pedophile. He's too smart, and he's covered his tracks too well."

"It's not up to you!" Gibbs told him. "It is not up to you to decide who is guilty and who isn't."

"It isn't up to you, either, Boss. I don't regret what I said to Justin. I was right. You're right too – but you're just thinking about the law, and the case, and putting away a bad guy. I'm thinking about Justin."

"So am I! And I'm thinking about all the other kids that men like Parrish and his friends have abused or will abuse if we don't do something!" Gibbs yelled.

“Well, it’s too late for the ones who have already been abused,” Tony told him. “So don’t worry about them. They’ve found ways of dealing with it. Justin needs to find his own way of dealing with it too, and putting himself through a long, ugly court case isn’t it.”

“You manipulated the kid into thinking that,” Gibbs said quietly.

“Oh, and you’re saying that you wouldn’t have manipulated him into giving a statement?” Tony challenged. “The admiral did a good job on Justin, Gibbs. He responds to older male authority figures. He’ll do whatever they want if they’re just firm enough about it. You know that. You know how easy it would have been. You felt it when we were talking to him together earlier – you know you did. The admiral might have been the one to twist Justin in the first place, but you’d have taken advantage of it. You’d have used him, just like Parrish used him.”

Gibbs’s jaw tightened, and Tony thought that was the point at which he had gone too far.

“Give me your badge and gun,” Gibbs said quietly. Tony stared at him. “Now, DiNozzo!” Gibbs barked. “I don’t know what the hell is going on with you, but I can’t trust you right now, so I’m suspending you from duty.”

Okay, so that wasn’t the outcome he had been expecting, but maybe it was for the best. At least it bought him some thinking time, and it made what he had to do later easier.

He surrendered his badge and gun without hesitation, grateful for the fact that his hand didn’t shake as he put them quietly on the table.

“Go home and stay there,” Gibbs ordered. “I’m not done with you yet.”

It should have hurt more, and maybe it would have if he could feel anything at all right now. He loved his job. This was his family, his home – it was where he belonged – the only place he’d *ever* belonged, and Gibbs...well, Gibbs was everything to him. He hated it when Gibbs was mad at him – properly mad, and not just mildly exasperated. He actually liked mild exasperation because it showed Gibbs was noticing him, but anger – he didn’t like that, and he went out of his way never to disappoint his boss, or give him cause to be genuinely angry with him.

This had been unavoidable though, given the options open to him. If he’d had more time to think...if it had been easier to think...but he hadn’t, and it wasn’t.

He started humming to himself as he left the room.

~*~

Gibbs went to get himself a coffee, lost in thought. His anger had faded, leaving him feeling empty and disappointed. He was fond of DiNozzo – more than fond if he was honest with himself – but, more importantly, he had always been able to trust the man before. Of all his team, Tony was the one he trusted the most, implicitly, without reservation. He’d rely on Tony to have his six in any given situation, and would trust him with his life. So how had it come to this?

He sipped on his coffee thoughtfully as he went through the admiral's service record. He spent a long time on it, just reading and thinking, trying to find a breakthrough. If he could just talk to Justin again...but Tony had been right about that much at least. That boy would do or say anything he wanted if Gibbs just asked him in the right tone of voice and with the right degree of authority. Gibbs felt sorry for Justin, and didn't want to make this situation any worse for him, but equally he wanted Parrish to face charges for what he'd done.

Gibbs returned to the interrogation room for one last attempt at breaking Parrish, but the man was too good, and he didn't get any further with him this time than he had the last.

"If you aren't going to charge me with anything, then you have to let me go, Agent Gibbs," Parrish told him with a cold smile.

"Just don't try and go anywhere, Admiral," Gibbs warned. "And if you go near Justin Merrells, if you try to contact him – call him, visit him, email him, whatever - then I promise you that I will come after you, and I will break both your legs."

Parrish raised an eyebrow at him. "You're resorting to crude threats now, Agent Gibbs."

Gibbs shrugged. "Crude? Yes. A threat? No. More like a promise," he said, as he opened the door to the interrogation room.

Parrish walked towards the door and paused when he got close. Parrish looked at Gibbs with a coolly assessing gaze, taking measure of just how tough an opponent he might prove to be. Gibbs had never yet backed down from a fight, and he sure as hell wasn't going to start now, so he returned that hard stare with one of his own. Parrish's eyes flickered, and then his face broke into a slow, icy smile.

In that instant, Gibbs knew everything he needed to know about this man. Admiral Parrish was guilty as hell – not just of abusing Justin but also countless other boys before him. He was a sly, intelligent bastard who, just like Gibbs, never backed down from a fight and didn't like to lose. In that brief moment, the battle lines were drawn, and both men knew they were facing a formidable opponent.

Then the moment was over, and Parrish stalked past him and left. It stuck in Gibbs's craw to watch that man walk out of his custody, but he was determined he'd still find a way to nail him. Gibbs wasn't done with this yet. He didn't *let* pedophiles walk free.

Allowing Parrish to leave, upsetting though it was, made it possible for Gibbs to set a trap for him. Gibbs put a round-the-clock watch on the admiral's house and ordered a communications surveillance as well, so that every call he made and every email he sent would be monitored. If that bastard tried to contact the other members of the ring to warn them, then he'd lead NCIS straight to them. Not that Gibbs really expected the man to give himself or anyone else away; he was too smart for that. It was worth a try though.

Gibbs also decided to post a couple of agents discreetly outside Justin's house – just to be on the safe side. That kid had been through enough.

It was late by the time Gibbs returned to Abby's lab. McGee was sitting where he'd left him, his shoulders wilting. Abby was sitting beside him, looking equally depressed. Neither of

them was speaking. Their hands were moving, and Gibbs could hear repeated clicks as they worked, but they both looked hollow, worn out, and utterly exhausted. Gibbs didn't blame them.

"What do you have for me?" he asked, knowing he was working them too hard but unwilling to let up for even a second.

McGee glanced up. "There are 51 boys," he said. "At least, I think so. We're still cross-referencing the boys in File 52 with the boys in the other files. It's not always easy...the photos were taken at various times and some of the boys are older, or younger, or just look different – their hair has changed or whatever."

"Oh, and we figured out what File 52 was for," Abby said. McGee brought it up onscreen.

"Well, Tony figured it out really," McGee said. Gibbs's jaw tightened. He hadn't told them he'd suspended Tony from duty yet, and he really didn't want to go into that right now.

"Well?" he demanded.

"It's a 'favourites' file," McGee said.

"Although who knows why that scumbag likes these photos the most," Abby shrugged.

Gibbs gazed at the screen as McGee scrolled through a selection of the photos.

"Fear," he said quietly as he looked at them. Abby and McGee glanced up at him. "Fear and distress. In some of the other photos the boys look numb - or even bored and disinterested. What the photos in this file have in common is that the boys all look scared or in pain. He must like that look."

He pointed to a kid onscreen with blond-brown hair. There was a man behind him, holding him up, his big hands covering the child's slender hips. The boy wasn't struggling, but his mouth was slightly open in a silent scream. What really got to Gibbs was the expression in the boy's eyes. They were absolutely desperate, and he was looking straight at Gibbs as if he was pleading with him to help, begging him to make it stop. Gibbs realised, with a sickening wrench, that judging by the angle of the man behind him, and the position of the boy, he was being raped. He was one of the younger ones – perhaps about thirteen, maybe even younger judging by his size and undeveloped body.

"That photo is so horrible," Abby said, gazing at the screen. "Poor Boy 43."

"Boy 43?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

"We numbered the files in order as McGee broke each of the encryptions – Justin is Boy One," Abby sighed.

"Uh Boss..." McGee glanced up at him. "Could we take a break? It's just...I know it sounds terrible, but all these kids are starting to look the same to me. I'm finding it hard to match them back to their individual files – I keep thinking I've seen a shot before, but then it turns out that I haven't. They're all going around and around in my head. See - this kid, Boy 43,

seems familiar – but we haven't even started cataloguing his file yet.” He pointed at the boy with the blond-brown hair.

Gibbs gazed at the photograph. What was it Tony had said? Sometimes you had to shift the perspective? Turn things upside down, view them from a different angle? If you took Tony's behaviour today and shifted the perspective, adjusted the focus a little...

Gibbs shut the laptop with a snap of his fingers.

“You're right – you should take a break,” he said. “You deserve a break – both of you. It's late. Go home. This will still be here tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Bossman.” Abby got up, groaning slightly as she stretched.

“McGee – this is an NCIS laptop isn't it?” Gibbs asked, gesturing to the laptop.

“Of course.” McGee nodded. “I wouldn't work directly on Admiral Parrish's laptop – that's in the evidence garage. I copied his hard drive over – twice; Abby has one copy on her PC, and I have the other on this laptop...uh, why?”

Gibbs just glared at him.

“Okay, well, I don't need to know why. Uh, are you sure we can go home, Boss?”

“Just go,” Gibbs said. “Before I change my mind. Take Ziva with you – she's still upstairs.”

“What about Tony?” Abby asked innocently.

“I'll take care of Tony,” Gibbs replied grimly.

He waited until Abby and McGee left the room, and then he opened the laptop and stared at the photograph again. The boy's eyes were haunted – he looked out at Gibbs with that terrible pleading expression, silently begging for help.

“I'm too late,” he told the boy. “By about 25 years. I'm sorry.”

Gibbs sat down in the chair McGee had vacated and rested his forehead on his hands. He didn't want to do this. He really didn't want to do this but since when had that ever mattered?

Someone had to do it, and that someone had to be him.

~*~

Tony took a shower the minute he got home, scattering his clothes everywhere, abandoning his work suit, shirt, tie and underwear in an untidy path between his front door and his bathroom. He just needed to get clean. It had been a difficult day, and his muscles were tense. The warm water would help.

He stepped under the water and rested his forehead against the tiled shower wall, allowing the warm water to soothe him as it flowed over his back.

“Not your finest hour, DiNozzo,” he told himself, still reeling from the loss of his gun and badge. He flinched as he remembered the expression in Gibbs's eyes when he'd taken them from him. “You could have handled that better.”

He had been thrown though, and, good as he was at thinking on his feet, his mind didn't seem to be working as well as it usually did. He felt fuzzy, and not as sharp as he liked to be.

The water felt good. He might need to stay here for some time. There was nothing else he could do yet anyway – not until later. Gibbs wouldn't admit defeat with Parrish for some time knowing Gibbs, and there was nothing Tony could do until Gibbs released the admiral.

Comforted by the warm water, he started to mull over the day's events. It wasn't easy keeping everything where it needed to be though. It was as if someone had opened up a box and strewn the contents directly in his path; it wasn't easy finding a way to step over them without looking. It was hard not to trip up when he was covering his eyes the whole time.

The first photos had been a shock, but he'd covered that well – maybe a little ‘off’ but not too much. The second time had been harder... Tony found himself humming loudly, which helped. He didn't have to think about the photos. He could watch a movie maybe, or listen to some music, although right now he didn't want to move from under the water. Images flashed vividly before his eyes, and he hummed more loudly. He was annoyed with himself. This really shouldn't be so difficult. He'd done it before.

He turned off the water, dried himself, wrapped his towel around his waist, and then glanced at his watch. He'd spent an hour in the shower. It hadn't seemed that long – he thought maybe it had only been twenty minutes, if that. If he was losing time then that was bad – it meant he wasn't concentrating, wasn't staying focussed, and he needed to concentrate if he was going to get through the next few days. He needed to stay in the moment.

His job was gone – he had to accept that. There was no need for Gibbs to find out the rest, but what he was going to do tonight would ensure he lost his job, if nothing else. He sat on the couch for a long time, dressed only in his towel, staring into space.

When he came to, he was cold, so he went into his bedroom and got dressed; black jeans, black sweater, and black boots. Then he reached for his cell phone. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror as he did so. His hair was still damp, sticking up. He paused and smoothed it back down again, stroking gently. He started humming, gazing at himself absently.

When he looked around again he realised he'd lost another ten minutes, and he was angry with himself. He sat down on the side of the bed and called Abby.

“Hey Abs!” he said cheerfully when she answered.

“Tony! Where are you?”

“Where are you?” he asked, ignoring her question.

“Starbucks!” she laughed. “Want to join us? Me and McGee wanted to unwind. It's been such a horrible day. What a nightmare.”

“I know, Abs - it’s been a nightmare,” he echoed. He thought he got the tone of voice right. It *sounded* right, but he wasn’t sure at the moment because he kept getting things wrong.

“Gibbs has been patrolling the building like a bear with a sore head, and me and McGee had to look at all those hinky photographs...” He could hear the shudder in her voice. He frowned, and stroked his hair fiercely.

“I know, I know,” he said soothingly. He wondered if Gibbs had told her about suspending him from duty but decided to take a chance that he hadn’t. “So, I got called away early. What’s been happening? Did Gibbs release Parrish, or is he going to charge him?”

“He released him,” Abby replied. “I don’t think he’s finished with him yet, but he released him for now. He wasn’t happy about it though.”

“Hmmm.” Tony looked at himself in the mirror. “Uh...yeah. That sucks. Gibbs must be mad.”

“He is. So, are you going to come down here and join us, Tony?”

“No, Abs. I’m feeling kind of tired. I think I’ll call it a day,” Tony replied. “See you tomorrow.” He disconnected before she could reply. He doubted he’d see her tomorrow, but it sounded like the right thing to say.

It was dark outside. Late. He opened his closet and found a black leather jacket – his favourite – and pulled it on. He opened his nightstand drawer, reached for the knife inside, and then stopped. He remembered Gibbs’s rule number nine – never go anywhere without a knife - but maybe it wasn’t such a good idea to take the knife with him tonight. He might use it and that wasn’t what tonight was about. All the same, he liked following Gibbs’s rules, so he hesitated. Then, finally, he left the knife where it was and closed the drawer. It was probably a good thing Gibbs had suspended him; he didn’t want the temptation of being able to get his hands on a gun right now.

He glanced at his watch and then stepped over his abandoned clothes on his way to the front door. He turned off the light and then hesitated. Gibbs had told him to go home and stay there, but he didn’t have to do what Gibbs said, even though the compulsion right now was much stronger than it usually was. Finally, he managed to open the door, close it behind him, and walk slowly down the stairs.

His car was parked in the building parking lot. He was aware of a knot of anxiety in the pit of his stomach. This had seemed to be the simplest solution earlier, but now he wasn’t so sure. It was the right thing to do, he knew that, but he was unsure about his own capacity for doing it. He was worried that he wouldn’t be able to access the emotions he needed for this, and that he wouldn’t be able to follow through. Or that he’d lose control and go too far, and then not even Gibbs would be able to protect him – if he even wanted to after today.

He hesitated, hand on the car door.

“Going somewhere, DiNozzo?” a voice asked quietly behind him. He stiffened. “I thought I told you to stay put.”

Tony turned, an easy grin on his face. Gibbs was standing there, in the darkness of the shadows beside the building, watching him. He had a bag slung over his shoulder, and he looked about as dangerous as Tony had ever seen him.

“Just needed to buy some groceries, Boss – no food in the house.”

“That’s not where you were going, Tony.”

“Isn’t it?” Tony felt his jaw tighten. He didn’t like the way Gibbs was looking at him.

“No. You were going to visit Admiral Parrish,” Gibbs said quietly.

“Why would I do that?”

“To knock him around. To scare him. To frighten him so much that he doesn’t touch any more kids like Justin. You boxed yourself into a corner today, Tony. You genuinely didn’t want to put Justin through a court case, but you also didn’t want this can of worms opened up any more than it already was. So you had to persuade Justin not to testify. All the same, you knew you couldn’t leave Parrish out there, unchecked. So you thought you’d head on over there and deal with him.”

“Do I look like I’m dressed to go beating someone up?” Tony gestured at his clothes.

“Yes,” Gibbs replied curtly. “That’s exactly how you’re dressed. I know you don’t have a gun – do you have a knife?”

“No.” Tony shook his head. It seemed pointless to keep up this charade – Gibbs always could see through him. “I know it’s breaking rule number nine, but I didn’t want the temptation.”

“Smart move.” Gibbs nodded. “You couldn’t be sure how you’d feel when you got there. It might have got out of hand.”

“You weren’t going to get a conviction, Boss,” Tony explained. “I’m just doing what you wanted to do yourself. We might not get him through the courts, but we can stop him hurting another kid. I know I’m not as good at this as you are, but I can do it. I can make him scared enough of me that he won’t touch any more kids.”

“I know you can, Tony.” Gibbs nodded. “But you’re not going to. Let’s go inside.”

Tony hesitated. This wasn’t playing out how he’d expected. All day long he’d been one step ahead of Gibbs, but now he had the feeling he was one step behind. Gibbs didn’t even seem angry with him any more – he was watchful though, and tense, as if unsure what Tony would do.

“Now, Tony,” Gibbs ordered, with a curt nod of his head towards the door.

Tony moved his hand to smooth his hair. He wasn’t sure where this was headed, but he felt like an animal caught in a trap. If he went in there, with Gibbs and that bag he was holding...well he didn’t know what would happen. He just had a bad feeling about it.

“Tony,” Gibbs said softly.

Tony blinked. Gibbs was standing in front of him now, and a second ago he’d been standing by the building. His boss could move surprisingly fast of course, but even so...

“You need to go back inside now,” Gibbs told him, in a strangely gentle tone of voice. “Back into your apartment, with me.”

“How long...?” Tony cleared his throat.

“About three minutes,” Gibbs replied. “I called your name several times, but you didn’t seem to hear me.”

“Going deaf. Getting old,” Tony said, with a grin.

Gibbs smiled back at him, allowing him to get away with the lie. He put out a hand to guide Tony into the building, and Tony found himself flinching. Gibbs’s hand stopped just a fraction away from touching him.

“Come on, Tony. We need to handle this,” Gibbs told him, in a brisk tone.

Tony nodded and walked slowly back inside and up the stairs towards his apartment. He could hear Gibbs behind him. Gibbs and that damn bag of his. He could make a run for it, but he knew there wasn’t any point. Gibbs was, well, Gibbs, and there wasn’t any getting away from him, from this, or from what he was carrying in that bag.

Tony opened the door and turned on the light. Gibbs stepped inside and shut the door behind them. Tony noticed his discarded clothes on the floor and grimaced.

“Sorry – place is a mess,” he muttered, bending over to pick up his shirt.

“Leave it,” Gibbs ordered. “Sit down, Tony.”

Tony moved warily over to the couch and sat down on it. Gibbs sat down on the armchair opposite him and placed his bag on the coffee table between them. He opened up the bag and pulled out a laptop.

“You see, I thought I had more time,” Tony said, watching as Gibbs opened the laptop with slow, smooth movements of his hands, like he was being careful not to make any sudden, jerky gestures.

“Uh-huh.” Gibbs nodded.

“I didn’t think you’d figure it out,” Tony said. “Probie didn’t. Even if you did, I thought it’d take longer; weeks - or days at least. So I thought I had more time.”

“Uh-huh.” Gibbs nodded again as he powered up the laptop.

“I was thinking on my feet,” Tony added, trying to explain.

“I know.”

“That’s why I got things wrong. If I’d known, or if I’d had time to prepare...”

“You did good, Tony.”

“I did? Felt to me like I was screwing things up all day. Then you suspended me.”

“Well, like you said, I was looking at it from the wrong perspective,” Gibbs said. “Once I turned it around...”

He swung the laptop towards Tony, so that the screen was facing him. Tony glanced at it and then glanced away. He moved his hand to smooth down his hair.

“Tony – would you look at the photograph on the laptop please,” Gibbs requested.

Tony did as he was told. He looked into the terrified eyes of a boy who seemed to be asking something of him; begging him, pleading with him, which was fucking pointless because there was nothing Tony could do. The kid had blond-brown hair and there was a guy behind him, fucking him, big hands holding him in place. Tony began stroking his hair absently.

“Tony - that man in the photograph – is that Admiral Parrish?” Gibbs asked.

Tony frowned and squinted at the photo. Everything seemed jumbled up in his mind. He wished he had all his wits about him right now, but he couldn’t seem to gather his thoughts. The room was so noisy – there seemed to be some sort of buzzing noise, like a swarm of bees, or a circling fan. Whatever it was, it was far too loud for him to think straight.

“No,” he replied.

Gibbs was gazing at him intently. “Tony,” he said, “That boy in the photograph - is he you?”

The noise stopped, and the room was suddenly plunged into silence. Tony looked at the boy, and the boy looked back at him from desperate, pleading eyes. Tony stopped stroking his hair and looked straight at Gibbs.

“Yes.”

~*~

End of Deception

Darkness Part One by Xanthe

Gibbs sat there for a moment, just gazing at Tony. He had been pretty certain that the kid in the photo was Tony when he'd come here, but hearing Tony confirm it still hurt. He felt as if someone had ripped out his insides and stamped all over them. Tony was looking straight at him, his eyes a mirror of the scared eyes of the boy in the photograph – the boy he'd once been.

"Thank you, Tony," Gibbs said softly. "I know that can't have been easy."

Tony glanced at the photo and then at a spot over Gibbs's shoulder.

"I thought I could make it go away," he said quietly. "If I played it right today. Thing is, when it all blew up I wasn't expecting..." He trailed off, still glancing absently over Gibbs's shoulder.

"There's no way you could have known what we'd find on that laptop today, Tony," Gibbs told him gently.

"At first, I thought it'd be okay - although I knew I wasn't getting things right, but as the day went on, it got harder."

"At what point did you think there might be photographs of you on Parrish's laptop, Tony?"

Tony frowned and wrapped his arms around his body. "Uh..." He looked as if he was concentrating really hard just to stay in the moment and answer the question. "I'm not sure. The day just kept going from bad to worse, and I couldn't keep things under control. In my head. It all kept slipping away from me."

Gibbs gazed at him thoughtfully. The Tony sitting in front of him right now wasn't the same Tony he had worked with every day for the past eight years. He looked as if he was having trouble concentrating, and he had lost his usual defence mechanism of making jokes and pulling faces. None of that disturbed Gibbs as much as what had happened in the parking lot earlier, when Tony had seemed to go into some kind of fugue state. He'd had to call his name several times before he'd come out of it.

"Go on," Gibbs prompted. Tony nodded.

"When McGee first showed us the photographs of Justin, I felt sorry for the kid, but I also knew I had to protect myself, in case people started to suspect – about me. I tried to act the way people would expect me to act in that situation, but I know I screwed that up because I couldn't get a feel for what was right. I hadn't figured out that there might be photos of me on the laptop at that point – I just didn't want to give away any clues that this was something that might mean something to me."

"You didn't want us to find out what happened to you?" Gibbs asked. Tony nodded.

"I didn't want any of you to find out," he replied, and then he frowned. "But I really didn't want *you* to find out, Boss."

"Tony, you were just a kid in these photos. It's like I said to Justin earlier, none of this is your fault..." Gibbs began.

"When Shannon and Kelly died," Tony interrupted, and then he paused, looking apprehensive. Gibbs felt his jaw tighten. Nobody *ever* talked to him about Shannon and Kelly – they knew it was off-limits - but right now he was asking Tony to talk about something just as personal, so what the hell right did he have to get angry with him?

"When they died," Tony continued, when Gibbs made no move to stop him, "If someone had taken photos of them at that exact moment...if you had found out that they kept those photographs of your worst nightmare in their 'favourites' file..."

Gibbs clenched his hands into fists as he looked into Tony's troubled green eyes.

"Would you want anyone to see those photos?" Tony finished. "Even your closest friends? Especially your closest friends. Would you?"

"No." Gibbs shook his head, understanding Tony's analogy all too well. "Tony, I can't begin to imagine what kind of an ordeal today must have been for you."

"It got worse after I took a look at the admiral's photo – a good look," Tony said. "You came back and saw me, and I made some crack about trying to see what someone is capable of by looking at them, but that wasn't what I was doing."

"You were trying to see if you recognised him," Gibbs said quietly.

"Yes." Tony nodded.

"How many men abused you, Tony?" Gibbs asked. Tony reached up and rubbed the back of his head again, staring into space. Gibbs saw his eyes glaze over. "Tony!" he rapped out sharply, and Tony's look of concentration returned. "How many?"

"Three," he replied.

That wasn't unexpected after what they'd heard from Justin earlier, but Gibbs still felt like he'd been punched in the gut.

"Over what time period?" he asked.

"I think it was about a year."

Gibbs paused, not wanting to know the answer to the next question but having to ask it anyway.

"How old were you when the abuse started, Tony?"

Tony looked uncomfortable. "You won't like it," he warned.

"Don't worry about me," Gibbs said firmly.

"You'll get angry."

"Maybe – but not with you. How old were you, Tony?"

"Twelve," Tony said quietly.

Tony was right; he didn't like it. It was all he could do not to react, but he didn't want his anger – no, his stone-cold fury - to make Tony wary about confiding in him. There might be a 37 year old man sitting opposite him, but he was aware that on some level he was also talking to a twelve year old boy. He had to bear that in mind while questioning Tony.

"Was the admiral one of the men who abused you?" Gibbs prompted gently. Tony gazed at him for a long moment. Gibbs felt a ball of anger form in the pit of his stomach. "Tony? Did Admiral Parrish abuse you when you were a kid?" he pressed.

"Yes," Tony said quietly.

That ball of anger exploded, and Gibbs had to work hard not to lash out, or yell, or leave and go over to the admiral's house and bury his fist in the man's face over and over again. He fought the feelings back down and nodded at Tony to continue.

"Once I figured that out, I knew I had to find out if there were any photographs of me in those files on his laptop," Tony said. "I couldn't risk coming face to face with him at that point because I wasn't sure what I'd do. I thought maybe I wouldn't do anything, because I couldn't *feel* anything, but I didn't know for sure because I can't...I'm not...things are fuzzy for me right now."

"I understand." Gibbs nodded. "So you asked me if you could stay behind, instead of coming with me to search the admiral's house and arrest him."

"Yes. When you'd gone, I went down to Abby's lab to see if I could find out just what I was dealing with. McGee showed me the admiral's 'favourites' file..." Tony broke off again, a flicker of some unreadable expression on his face. "And how flattering is that?" he asked bitterly. He glanced at the photo still on display on the laptop. "I make it into some pervert's porn top ten. Anyway, I saw some photos of me...but I was just a kid then, and the context was wrong, so McGee and Abby hadn't recognised me. I knew I probably wouldn't be so lucky if you ever got to see them though. I know how observant you are, Boss."

Gibbs grunted. His brain hadn't made the connection either, initially. It was only when McGee had mentioned the word 'familiar', and he'd taken a closer look, that something had snapped into place for him.

"I thought about deleting them. It would have been easy enough to create a diversion and get rid of Abby and McGee for long enough to do that on the computers in the lab, but I knew it would be harder to gain access to the admiral's laptop in the evidence garage. Harder – but not impossible. Not for me anyway." Tony gave a little grin. "I had to weigh up the risks of being caught doing that though – and therefore drawing attention to the very evidence I was trying to hide. So I thought, on balance, it was better to take my chance with the possibility that you might never take a good look at those particular photos."

"It was just by chance that I did."

"That just left Justin. You're right; I boxed myself into a corner there. I thought I could spare him the ordeal of a court case and handle the admiral myself, privately. I wasn't thinking straight. I wanted it to go away. I thought I could *make* it go away, Boss. I didn't think anyone would find out. I didn't want anyone to find out."

"Why, Tony? Parrish hurt you when you were just a kid. Now is your chance to bring him to justice."

"I like my life, Gibbs," Tony told him quietly. "I like it how it is right now. This gets out and people will look at me differently. You're already looking at me differently, Boss. And just think about how McGee will look at me..." He shuddered. "And Ziva, Abby – all of them. I want to be who I've chosen to be. I'm not a victim. I am not that kid in those photos. I've moved on, made a success of my life. I've..." He struggled for the words.

"Put those memories in a box and shut them away in some corner of your mind?" Gibbs asked. "Like you told Justin to do earlier?"

"Yes. I don't think about it. If it comes into my mind, then I've found tricks to make it disappear again. I'm really good at that," Tony grinned.

"There's just one problem with that, Tony," Gibbs said, leaning forward. Tony frowned.

"What?"

"You *are* the kid in the photographs," Gibbs told him. Tony's eyes flickered. "And I think that today, faced with the all too clear evidence of that, your mind has been playing tricks back at ya," Gibbs said softly. "Maybe those mechanisms for keeping it all locked away don't work when it's staring you right in the face. Maybe it wasn't something that could ever work long-term. Maybe you need to face up to what happened to you."

"I don't want to," Tony told him bluntly. "I don't want to think about it. I don't want to *remember* it."

"You want to leave Parrish and the others out there, walking around, free to abuse more kids?" Gibbs asked him. Tony glared at him. "Or do you want to help me make a case against him for what he did to you, and God knows how many other young boys?"

"You're forgetting about the statute of limitations," Tony said, folding his arms across his chest. "This all happened twenty-five years ago."

Gibbs made a little motion with his head. "You and I both know that exceptions have been made in cases like this, especially where there are repressed memories."

"My memory wasn't repressed. It was just...contained."

"Okay – but the abuse against Justin was recent. You were right about Justin not being a very good witness," Gibbs said. "But if we could get him to testify, and if his testimony was backed up by a really reliable witness, like, say, a federal agent..."

"No!" Tony snapped. "No. Don't do this to me, Gibbs. Don't guilt-trip me into this."

"Tony, anything you do will be your own decision," Gibbs told him. "But it's out now. You can't put it away in that box again. *I* know, and I can't forget it – I don't have a convenient box in my brain where I can file those photos away."

"No," Tony repeated, in an agonised voice.

"Okay." Gibbs nodded. "But we're clearly dealing with a pedophile ring here from all you've said. Whether or not you testify, any information you can give us about these men might help us crack this ring."

Tony was gazing at him, a look of mute pleading in his eyes. Gibbs paused. He didn't have to do this. He could spare Tony this. He could protect this man sitting in front of him, a man he cared about more than he wanted to admit, and make all this go away for him. He could do that. Except that he knew he couldn't. If Tony could give them information that would bring down a whole pedophile ring, then he had to pursue it. He hated himself for it, but he did it anyway.

"We have more work to do on those photographs," Gibbs said quietly. "And at some point McGee or Abby might figure it out. Do you want to be walking around on eggshells waiting for that to happen? Or do you want to confront it? You said you didn't want to be a victim, and you don't have to be. You can take the initiative; you can sit in the driver's seat and bring these men to justice."

Tony's hand shot out, and he closed the laptop with a hard crash.

"I said no!"

"I'll be with you, every step of the way. I promise," Gibbs told him, leaning forward, every single fibre of his being radiating his sincerity, needing Tony to believe him. "I mean it, Tony. I will walk this with you - every single moment of it. We can find these men, and we can make them pay for what they did to you, and to Justin, and to all those other kids. We can stop them hurting any other boys – we can bring them down, but you have to trust me, Tony. You have to believe in me. I promise you I will not let you down."

Tony gazed at him from doubtful eyes.

"I think this is the only way that this will ever be resolved for you, Tony," Gibbs told him softly. "I don't think you'll ever be able to stuff it back into that box of yours again – do you?"

"I don't know," Tony muttered. "It has been hard. Today. The things I used to do, the tricks I used to use in my head – they don't seem to be working."

"In the short term it'll be tough. I can't tell you that it won't, and you wouldn't believe me if I did. I know it won't be easy for you to re-live any of it. But, in the long term, I think it'll be easier for you to lay it to rest if you face up to it."

"With all due respect, Boss, you're not anyone's idea of a shrink," Tony said, with a ghost of a grin.

"Nope." Gibbs grinned back at him. "Hell, you know my opinion of shrinks, but most of this stuff is common sense. What do you say, Tony? Will you do it?"

"When?" Tony asked.

"Right now. We could go back to NCIS, use an interrogation room, and conduct an interview. If we tape it, then you'll only have to go through it once. Any information you give us will be very helpful, Tony."

"Did you mean what you said about being with me...uh...only...I don't know how I'll be. I might lose it," Tony confessed, and Gibbs noticed his hand shaking as he said that.

Gibbs looked into Tony's eyes and saw an expression in them that he'd never seen before: sheer, stark terror. Gibbs felt chilled to the bone. What Tony had told him already was bad enough, but that was just the bare bones of it. The details would clearly be far worse. Gibbs didn't want to put either of them through it, but he knew it had to be done.

"Tony – you be any way you have to be – you just let this out, and I promise you I will be there," Gibbs told him firmly. He got to his feet. "Yes?" he asked, holding out his hand. Tony gazed at it.

"Someone will have to be in the observation room doing the taping," Tony said, his hand still shaking. "I don't want it to be McGee or Ziva."

"You prefer it to be Mike?" Gibbs asked. Tony shook his head. "It has to be someone," Gibbs pointed out reasonably. "And people are going to find out, Tony. This is a case – you're a witness. You're making a statement. We'll need to gather more evidence. I'll need to bring McGee and Ziva and probably Abby in on it at some point. They're your friends, Tony."

"I don't want to do this," Tony told him.

"I know." Gibbs nodded, keeping his hand outstretched. "But you will."

"How do you know that?"

"I know you." Gibbs shrugged. "Tony, you threw yourself into the river last year to rescue me, and you've put yourself in the line of fire for every single member of the team at some point. I know I can always trust you have to my six. You – above everyone else."

"So? This isn't about that kind of stuff," Tony said with a dismissive shrug.

"The point is that you're **brave**, Tony," Gibbs said forcefully. "Whatever else you are, however you view yourself and your own failings, and whatever doubts you have, that's one thing that can't be denied. You're brave."

"Maybe not this brave," Tony told him doubtfully. Gibbs moved his head impatiently – he didn't believe that for a second.

"Trust me?" he said, looking straight into Tony's eyes, willing him to do just that. He moved his hand forward insistently. Tony looked at it and then slowly, very slowly, he reached out

his own shaking hand towards it. Gibbs grasped it, firmly, holding on tight, and pulled Tony to his feet.

"Come on – let's go," he said softly.

"McGee," Tony told him as they walked towards the door. Gibbs raised an eyebrow at him. "In the observation room – let it be McGee," Tony said. "I can't face the others just yet."

~*~

McGee sat in bed, reading. It had been a long, gruelling day, and he was tired, but he wasn't ready to go to sleep just yet. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw those damn photos. Maybe he'd just get so tired that he'd fall asleep by accident and hopefully have a dreamless night. He sure as hell didn't want to re-live any of the day's events in his sleep; they'd been disturbing enough as it was.

He was surprised when his cell phone rang. It was nearly ten-thirty, and nobody ever called him this late; well, nobody except...he looked at the caller display with a sense of dread: Gibbs.

"Hey, Boss," he said, his heart sinking.

"McGee – I need you back at NCIS," Gibbs said, as straight to the point as ever.

"Uh. Okay. I'll get dressed and meet you there. Is there an emergency?"

"No – but I need you to tape an interview."

McGee frowned. "Uh, Boss, the technician guys, Mike or Steve, they usually do that," he pointed out.

"I know that, McGee, but I'm asking you to do it," Gibbs snapped. McGee jumped at his tone of voice and held the phone away from his ear with a grimace.

"Okay. No problem, Boss," he replied, wondering what the hell that was about.

"And, McGee – this interview is confidential. You don't tell anyone about what's discussed in that room tonight – okay?" Gibbs said. This was all getting more and more mysterious.

"Okay, Boss," McGee replied, and then the phone went dead. Typical Gibbs; never a hello, never a goodbye. Just terse and direct.

He got dressed wearily and returned to NCIS. He could do without this tonight after the day he'd had, but then again, it wasn't as if he'd been going to get to sleep anyway, so he might as well be working.

The squad room was in darkness when he walked in, so he turned on the light and went over to his desk to grab some chocolate from the drawer. This might be a long night, and he needed something to keep himself alert.

The elevator pinged open behind him, sounding unnaturally loud in the silence, and he turned to see Gibbs and Tony walk into the squad room. McGee was about to say something, but then he stopped. Gibbs had one hand on Tony's shoulder, and Tony looked, well, as unlike Tony as he'd ever seen him. It took McGee a moment to place what was wrong, and then he realised what it was: fear. Tony was terrified, and he'd never seen that particular expression on his face before.

"Boss... who are we questioning?" McGee asked.

"Nobody. It's an interview – we're taking a statement," Gibbs said.

"Okay. So... are we waiting for someone to come in and give the statement?" McGee asked, puzzled. He glanced at Tony, but the other agent didn't even look at him. McGee had a bad feeling about this. Tony must have done something – something terrible judging by the look on Gibbs's face.

"No. It's just us," Gibbs said quietly.

McGee realised with a jolt that it must be Tony giving the statement – so he **had** done something. Gibbs reached out, opened his desk drawer, and pulled out a badge. He took hold of Tony's hand and pressed the badge into it.

"Here – I want you to have this back, Tony," he said, and McGee didn't think he'd ever heard Gibbs use that tone of voice with any of them before. It was firm but very gentle – almost soothing. "I'm not going to give you the gun back just yet, Tony. You understand why, don't you?" Gibbs asked.

Tony nodded, and McGee watched, startled, wondering what the hell was going on. When had Gibbs taken Tony's badge and gun off him in the first place, and why? And why was he now giving back the badge and not the gun?

"Okay. Then let's go to the interrogation room," Gibbs said, in that same calm but authoritative voice. "McGee – Tony asked specifically that you do this and nobody else, but it isn't going to be an easy night for any of us. Do you understand that?"

McGee was wide-eyed as he nodded. "Yes, Boss," he said quietly, shooting a furtive glance at Tony, who was gazing blankly into space, an absent look in his eyes, as if he was somewhere else entirely.

"Like I said on the phone, this interview is confidential. You don't tell anyone what happens in that room unless I say you can," Gibbs warned him again.

"Yes, Boss." McGee was starting to feel really freaked out by this.

"Okay – then go set up."

McGee scuttled off to the observation room and checked over the equipment, ensuring there was enough tape in the machines. Then he turned off the light, put on the headphones, and sat down. He opened up his bar of chocolate, snapped off a square, and put it in his mouth.

Tony and Gibbs entered the interrogation room a few seconds later, and Tony hesitated, glancing at the chairs, as if uncertain where to sit. Gibbs gestured with his head at the chair opposite the mirror. That was where the suspects usually sat, so McGee shifted uncomfortably. Gibbs had said this was an interview, not an interrogation, but just what crime was Tony going to admit to?

McGee set the tape running and glanced sideways into the room. Gibbs saw the light go on, signalling that recording had begun, and he started speaking.

"This is Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs, talking to Anthony DiNozzo," he said. McGee didn't miss the fact that he hadn't addressed Tony by his title, so he couldn't be here on official NCIS business. That made him either a suspect or a witness.

"Shit, Tony, what the hell have you done?" McGee muttered under his breath. He broke off another piece of chocolate and stuck it in his mouth.

"Any time you want to start, just go ahead, Tony," Gibbs said.

Tony glanced up and caught sight of himself in the mirror. His eyes flickered, and he reached up to smooth down the hair on the back of his head. Gibbs cleared his throat.

"Don't do that right now, Tony," he said. "I think it distracts you."

"Right. Yes." Tony nodded. "Where do you want me to start?" he asked.

"Wherever feels best for you. This is your show, Tony. Any time you want to take a break, just tell me. You've got water there, but if you need anything to eat or drink, we can get McGee to go get us something. Okay?"

"Yes." Tony nodded again but still didn't say anything. McGee wondered why Gibbs was spelling all this out – Tony knew the procedure. There was a long silence.

"Have you ever told anyone any of the things you spoke to me about earlier?" Gibbs asked eventually.

"Just once. A long time ago."

"Who did you tell?"

"My dad." Tony shrugged.

"Did he believe you?"

Tony looked straight at Gibbs. "No."

"So I can understand why it would be hard to talk about it now. Last time you tried you weren't believed, so you've had to shove it down and bottle it up ever since. But you know I'll believe you, don't you?"

"Yeah." Tony nodded. "I guess." He took a deep breath and seemed to visibly pull himself back into the moment. "Okay. My dad was a marine," he said.

It seemed like an unexpected beginning. McGee glanced at Gibbs – or at least what he could see of the man from behind – and thought Gibbs looked a little startled by that information too.

"He fought in Vietnam," Tony added.

McGee hadn't known that about Tony's father. He wondered if it had anything to do with the way Tony so obviously revered Gibbs, also a former marine.

"While he was in the Corps, he made friends with this guy – Roy Quinn. Roy was more than just his buddy though. It was how you talk sometimes, Boss, about being in the Corps, about how those people become like family to you."

"You have to rely on them to have your six," Gibbs agreed. "In a combat situation. Your life literally rests in their hands. That brings you really close."

"Yeah. Well, that's how it was with my dad and Roy. They fought together, side by side, and then one day my dad was wounded, and they got separated from their unit. It looked pretty bad for my dad, but Roy wouldn't leave him. He could have run off and got himself to safety, but he didn't. He stayed with my dad and gave him his water when Dad's ran out. He dressed his wound as best he could, and he took care of him, and eventually Roy got them both back to safety."

"So he saved your father's life?"

"Yeah." Tony nodded. "My dad left the Corps, came home, got married to my mom, had me, and started up his own business. He stayed friends with Uncle Roy though, and when Roy got out of the Corps, he came and asked Dad for a job. Dad was only too happy to give him one. They worked well together too – they built up the company from scratch. My dad was an entrepreneur – he had a great vision for the company, but he wasn't so good at the small details. Roy, on the other hand, loved that kind of stuff. He took care of the backroom work, and my dad pushed the business forward. They're a great team."

Tony paused and took a sip of water from one of the two bottles on the table.

"Everyone loved Uncle Roy. I adored him. He was one of those people...he was just so nice, so much fun. I used to love it when he came around to visit. He wasn't like other adults – he sure as hell wasn't like my dad. He used to talk to me like I wasn't just a kid, like he really cared what I thought. He showed me card tricks and stuff like that. Dad was kind of strict, and Roy was the opposite of that. I sometimes used to wish he was my dad."

Tony broke off and gazed at himself in the mirror again, and then he started to hum. McGee frowned. He had no idea where this was heading, but Tony was behaving really strangely.

"Tony – you need to concentrate," Gibbs said firmly. Tony stopped humming and nodded.

"Yeah. Where was I? Okay...my mom died when I was eleven, and my dad – he wasn't good at expressing his emotions, but I guess he was pretty upset. He started drinking more – he'd always been a drinker, but it got worse. He threw himself into his work, and he was away a lot more, always going off on business trips. We had a live-in housekeeper, so it was easy enough for him to leave me – and Uncle Roy used to keep an eye on me."

"Okay." Gibbs nodded, and he sounded as if he could see where this was going although McGee remained mystified.

"So...Roy used to visit, and he'd take me out to a movie or a ball game when my dad was away. Or he'd just take me out for a burger. He was really nice. I could talk to him in a way I couldn't talk to my dad. I always used to be able to talk to my mom but...I guess I'd been lonely since she died. I wanted to talk about her, but my dad wouldn't – he got angry and upset if I even mentioned her. Roy would let me talk about her though."

McGee thought he'd learned more about Tony's past in ten minutes than in all of the previous six years they'd worked together.

"One day Roy came to the house, and we watched some TV together, and the housekeeper had gone to bed, and Roy...he uh..." Tony paused.

"What did Roy do, Tony?" Gibbs prompted gently. McGee stiffened, suddenly really not liking the way this was heading.

"He...well...he asked me if I loved him," Tony said. "I said – sure I did, you know, the way a kid would. I mean, he had to be the coolest uncle anyone ever had, and he was always buying me stuff, and taking me places, and spending time with me, and my dad never did any of that shit." He fell silent again.

"What happened next, Tony?" Gibbs asked, after several minutes had passed.

"I...how much do you need to know?" Tony looked up at Gibbs with troubled eyes.

"However much you're comfortable telling."

"Well...he said there was stuff people did when they loved each other, and...I'm not sure how exactly, but he made it seem like if I didn't do it, it meant I didn't love him, and he'd be really upset. That's how it seemed to me at the time. I mean, looking back I can see that was all bullshit, but at the time I felt like I'd really hurt his feelings if I said I didn't love him."

"Did he touch you?" Gibbs asked.

"Yeah." Tony shrugged. "At first, that's all it was. He'd make me kiss him on the lips, which I hated as he smoked these really strong cigars. Then he'd make me sit on his lap, which I thought was weird because I wasn't six, and he'd open my pants and..."

McGee gazed into the next door room, horrified. He noticed that one of Tony's hands was shaking where it was resting on the table. Tony moved his other hand on top of it to keep it still.

"He'd play around," Tony finished.

"How old were you?" Gibbs asked.

"Twelve," Tony replied.

McGee felt the retch forming in the back of his throat and swallowed down the burning sensation, wishing he hadn't eaten that chocolate now. It was hard to believe that Tony DiNozzo – Tony, who had been like a teasing, tormenting big brother to him for all these years – that *Tony*, of all people, was saying this stuff. He could almost believe it was a lie, an elaborate hoax set up for his benefit, if it wasn't for the expression on Tony's face and the fact that Gibbs was sitting there, coaxing this whole thing out of him. Even Tony wouldn't joke about something like this – and there was no way on this earth that Gibbs would.

"My dad was away a lot at this point, and Roy was always buying me stuff and taking me places. Then, after a few months, he said that he was always doing things for me, and it was time for me to do something for him. So he took me to this hotel..."

Tony broke off again. Gibbs waited, patiently.

"What happened at the hotel, Tony?" he asked, after another pause of several minutes.

"That's where he had sex with me the first time," Tony said. Tim stared through the window in stunned silence.

"He raped you?" Gibbs asked.

"He was nice about it. I mean, he was gentle, and he kept stroking me and telling me he loved me and shit..." Tony said, in a confused tone.

"It was still rape, Tony," Gibbs told him. "You were too young to give informed consent."

"Yeah. I know," Tony replied. "But I really liked him, Boss," he said pathetically. "It was...kind of confusing. I loved him, but I didn't like what he was doing to me. He said it was our special secret, and if I wanted him to keep taking me to the movies and ball games then I had to let him do this to me. I knew it felt wrong, but he got it all twisted up in my mind so I didn't know what to think. I didn't want him to stop loving me – my dad never paid me any attention, and I didn't want Roy to stop doing that – but I did want him to stop fucking me."

"Did you tell your father what Roy had done?" Gibbs asked. Tony shook his head.

"Not then. My dad – he's not a very approachable man, and Roy was his best friend. I think he actually loves Roy more than he loves me. Roy saved his life, and Roy helped him build up his business. Roy was always everyone's favourite person – when he came into the room it lit up, and everyone wanted to be his friend. I think maybe I even felt like I was special because Roy liked me so much."

McGee tried to reconcile this Tony, talking in that room, with the man he sat next to at work every day. They seemed like two completely different people.

“There’s more,” Tony said, in a shaky voice, after another long pause.

“I know.” Gibbs nodded. “When you’re ready, Tony.”

“I don’t like this bit,” Tony said.

“Okay – take your time. Do you want some more water?” Gibbs gestured at the bottle on the table, and Tony took another sip. He put the bottle down and replaced the cap and then started again, quickly, as if he wasn’t sure he’d be able to do it if he waited.

“So, one day he took me to the hotel, as usual, and after we’d been there a few minutes this guy showed up at the door. Roy let him in and told me this was a friend of his. Some guy called Marco – maybe he was Italian although he didn’t speak with an accent, and I think even then I knew that wasn’t his real name. He was quite swarthy and really hairy. He had this tattoo on his arm of a knife dripping blood. Roy told me that Marco wanted to spend some time alone with me, and then he just left the room.”

McGee gazed through the window, transfixed. He felt like he was going to throw up at any moment. He’d had no idea, all these years, that Tony was hiding something like *this*.

"Marco was an animal," Tony said bluntly. "He hardly said a word to me, but Christ, he was rough. It wasn't like with Roy. When he fucked me, it hurt like hell. Roy came back after an hour or so, and I remember thinking that Roy would be really mad when he found out what Marco had done to me. I told Roy about it but..." Tony shrugged. "He told me that I had to grow up and stop being such a little whiner. He said it was good for me, and that I was lucky I had them to spend time with me when nobody else would. Then Marco said he wanted some pictures – so he'd remember our time together." Tony gave an ironic grin. "Nice, huh? Like we'd shared some great romantic moment or something."

McGee could see the tautness of every single muscle in Gibbs’s body through his shirt, and he wondered how the hell their boss was taking all this. Everyone knew Gibbs hated anyone hurting kids, and God knows he couldn’t tolerate anyone hurting a member of his team. This had to be killing him, but he remained calm throughout, his voice gentle but firm, keeping Tony on track.

"So he fucked me all over again while Roy took pictures," Tony said, leaning back in his chair. "I was so shocked that Roy was letting this other guy do this to me when he'd said it was some special shit that he and I did together. I couldn't believe Roy was letting it happen. I think that hurt more than what Marco was doing to me, and God knows that hurt even worse second time around. I was dying for it to be over, I was desperate for it to be over, and Roy had to see how much it was hurting me, how scared I was, and how much I was hating it. Anyone looking at those photos could see it."

Tony motioned with his head to the bag that Gibbs had brought in with him. Gibbs picked it up and pulled out a laptop, and McGee recognised it as the one he'd been working on in the lab all day. Gibbs opened it, waited for it to power up, and then pointed at the screen.

"Was this one of the photographs taken on that day, Tony?" he asked. "Is the man in this photo Marco?"

Tony glanced at the picture and then nodded. "Yeah," he replied. "That's him. I recognise the dark skin and the hairy hands – and you can just see the tattoo – there."

Realisation hit McGee. He'd *seen* that photograph. He'd looked at it several times today. He'd looked into that child's scared eyes without realising it was Tony. Now he knew, he felt ill to the pit of his stomach. He reached for the waste basket and threw up into it, a spew of dark chocolate and bile.

~*~

Tony sat back in his chair. This was hard, but he thought he was handling it pretty well. If he let the trained federal agent take over, and kept the kid inside down, then he could view the whole thing with a degree of dispassion. Remembering the details was easier than remembering the feelings – but keeping it purely factual wasn't always possible. Gibbs was helping though. His boss seemed to know the right things to say to keep him in the moment and stop him disappearing off into the memories. He felt like there was a minefield inside his own head, places he didn't dare tread too heavily in case they blew up in his face; but tip-toeing over and around them wasn't easy.

"Do you want to take a break?" Gibbs asked.

Tony shook his head. "If I leave this room now, I'll never come back."

"Okay." Gibbs nodded. "Is Roy Quinn still alive, Tony?"

That was one of those mines he'd been trying really hard not to step on. He reached his hand up absently to touch his hair.

"Tony," Gibbs interrupted him. He blinked.

"Yeah. He is."

"Any idea where he lives?" Gibbs asked.

This was all going to get serious. He'd known that when he first agreed to do this, but knowing it and facing it were two different things.

"Yeah," he said, after a long pause. "He still works with my dad. Why do you think I never go home?"

He saw Gibbs's jaw tighten. He knew what every single nuance of Gibbs's body language meant – hell, he'd been studying the man for years now and had a better handle on him than just about anyone else, except maybe Ducky. Gibbs didn't give a lot away – you had to learn to read the really tiny shadows that sometimes crossed his eyes, or the way his shoulders got all stiff and knotted looking. Right now, he was in what Tony would usually classify as the “red zone”. That meant his temper was on a hair trigger and might explode at any moment. However, his body language was at odds with his tone of voice, which was calm, gentle even, keeping Tony anchored. Tony knew for certain that however angry Gibbs was, however angry Tony's statement made him, he wouldn't express it here, in this room.

"I think Roy felt bad about what happened with Marco," Tony continued. "I don't think he liked it – Marco was rough and that wasn't Roy's style. I think he was also annoyed – he'd spent a lot of time grooming me and Marco came along and tore me up - that made it harder for Roy to keep abusing me. After we left the hotel, Roy took me out for a big meal, and he bought me some cool new sneakers, and then we went to see a movie together. I think he was trying to make it up to me, but I couldn't stop thinking about the fact that he'd let Marco hurt me. When I got home..."

Tony broke off again. There was another one of those unexploded bombs underfoot, and he had to tread carefully.

Gibbs was gazing at him intently. Tony gazed back, needing to find some courage from somewhere. He could feel that noise buzzing in his head again and reached up to smooth his hair.

"When I got home I found I was bleeding. I was terrified – I thought it meant that I was going to die." He could barely hear himself talk over all the buzzing. "I didn't know what to do. That night, I curled up in bed and lay awake all night, waiting to die."

Gibbs reached out a jerky hand for a bottle of water and unscrewed the cap with terse movements of his fingers. He threw his head back and swallowed down half the contents in one go. Then he put the bottle down, abruptly, and his eyes met Tony's again. They were bright, sharp, and unreadable.

"Did you tell anyone?" he asked quietly.

"Yes. I told Roy. He looked kind of annoyed, but he said it would be okay – and that he'd tell Marco to be more careful next time."

Tony gazed at himself blankly in the mirror.

"Next time," he repeated. "There was gonna be a next time. I freaked out for a couple of weeks, wondering what to do, but my dad was back home, and I knew I was safe while he was there so that bought me some time. Then the time came for him to go away again. He was due to go at the weekend, so I plucked up my courage all week, and then, on the Friday night, I knocked on his study door."

Tony reached for his bottle of water and tried unscrewing the cap, but his damn hand was shaking again. It irritated him. He could do without the melodrama. He just wanted to get this whole thing over with, so he could leave this room, get away from Gibbs's laser-sharp gaze, go home, go to bed, and fall asleep. Then tomorrow he could shove all this back into its box and forget about it again.

Gibbs took the bottle out of his shaking hand, unscrewed the top, and handed it to him. Tony took a sip, trying to gather his thoughts, to find the facts without unleashing any of the emotions that went with them. This bit was harder than the rest. He wasn't sure why that should be, but it was. It was harder even than talking about that first time with Roy or what happened with that bastard Marco.

"He'd been drinking – it was early, so not too much, but a little. My dad's a big man, kind of formal, a bit distant. He's a hard person to talk to. He's a good man, but he's very...definite. There are things he believes, and things he doesn't, and that's pretty much it. He could talk to my mom – everyone could talk to my mom – and he could talk to Roy, but not to me. He never could talk to me."

Tony rubbed his cheek absently. His mind was a jumble. He could see a mahogany door and a big desk with a green lamp on it. His father was staring at him over the top of his glasses, looking annoyed at the interruption. There was a tumbler of amber liquid on the desk in front of him and a fire burning in the grate.

He could hear his own voice, reedy and a bit nasal. "Don't go away this weekend, Dad."

His father's voice was deep and rumbling. There were lots of words like 'work', 'business', and 'keeping a roof over your head'.

"Please don't go away, Dad," Tony said, and he couldn't keep the begging tone out of his voice. "Stay here with me. Please."

Then there was a glimmer of something in his father's eyes; some kind of guilt mingled with fondness. Tony felt a little burst of hope; maybe his father wouldn't go. Maybe it was all going to be okay after all. His father beckoned him over and patted his shoulder awkwardly.

"When I come back, we'll do something," he said vaguely, and Tony's heart sank. That feeling of hope disappeared abruptly. "But Roy will take you out while I'm gone. I'll give him some money and ask him to take you somewhere really nice," his father told him.

Tony looked at his shoes and then over to the fire burning in the grate. "I don't want Roy to take me out," he whispered. "Roy does stuff I don't like."

"What – you mean he won't buy you those stupid videos you keep going on about?" his father grinned.

"No. Sometimes he undresses me and touches me."

The slap took him by surprise. He thought maybe it took his father by surprise as well. He put up a hand to his stinging cheek and looked at his father, shocked.

"That's a wicked lie, Tony," his father said, looking just as shocked. "Did you make up that lie to try and stop me going away? Do you have any idea how wicked that is? Roy saved my life, and he's always been so good to you. I know you have a vivid imagination, but you've gone too far this time. You can't go around saying things like that."

Tony didn't know what to say. He just kept rubbing his stinging cheek. His father looked upset.

"I'm sorry – I know you miss your mom, and I know I'm not around much...but you can't tell lies to get your own way, Tony. We've talked about this!"

Tony continued to rub his cheek absently. He could still feel the sting, all these years later.

"Tony, you need to stop doing that now."

A hand fastened gently around his wrist and pulled it away from his face. Looking up, into the mirror, he saw that he'd rubbed a red mark on his cheek. How long had he been rubbing before Gibbs had stopped him?

"See, thing is, I had been telling a lot of lies," Tony said. "Ever since Mom died. Stupid lies, obvious lies. Dad had spoken to me about it a few times. So I can see why he'd think that was a lie too. And I didn't have a way of saying it wasn't. I didn't have the words for it back then. Now, sitting here, it's hard for me to figure out why I didn't just keep going, convince him, make him believe me, but I didn't. I just scuttled out of the room and went to bed." He looked down at the table for awhile and then looked up to meet Gibbs's gaze.

"We never mentioned it again. Next day, Roy took me back to the hotel and that's when I first met Matthew Parrish."

~*~

Darkness Part Two by Xanthe

Gibbs watched Tony intently. Sometimes Tony talked lucidly, without any hesitation, even while recounting events that Gibbs found hard to stomach, and other times Tony drifted, and did that weird stroking thing, and his eyes went blank. Gibbs couldn't get a handle on what would set him off, or what aspect of his account upset him most.

Sometimes he sounded just like *Tony*, and Gibbs would catch a glimmer of Tony humour in his eyes, but other times it was like he was someone else – someone Gibbs had never met or even knew existed. His body language and his speech patterns changed, and his face twisted into expressions Gibbs had never seen on it before. It was like being with a total stranger.

Gibbs had known this wouldn't be easy to hear, but he hadn't realised it would be this hard, either. The federal agent in him wanted to get to the details, so he could pursue these men and get justice for Tony, and for Justin, and for all those kids in the photographs. But there was another part of him that wanted to go out and pound the shit out of anyone who so much as crossed his path, and allow the rage coursing through him to have expression. Then there was the part of him that just wanted to wrap Tony up and hold him, to keep him safe and protect him for the rest of his life. He wasn't sure about that part, or what motivated it – although he had a suspicion - but he couldn't deny it existed.

"You mentioned Admiral Parrish earlier," Gibbs said, when Tony had been quiet for a few minutes. "You said you spent a long time looking at his photograph in the squad room this afternoon."

"Yeah."

"You're sure it was him?" Gibbs asked. Tony looked up at him, his eyes flashing. "I'm not saying I don't believe you," Gibbs told him quickly. "I'm just asking if you're sure it was him and not some other guy."

"It was him," Tony said firmly.

"Can you tell me why you're so sure?"

"Well, he wasn't introduced to me as Matthew, of course, but as Luke." Tony gave a half-shrug, and his mouth twisted into a bitter grin. "Roy wasn't exactly big on imagination – that's why he ran the office while my father did the entrepreneur stuff. Luke had this air of authority about him, even back then. You could see he liked being obeyed. He wasn't rough like Marco, and he wasn't everyone's best friend like Roy. He was military – I could sense that about him, even though he wasn't wearing a uniform when I met him."

"Did he know Quinn from the military do you think?" Gibbs asked, making a note on the file in front of him to check up on that later. "I know Quinn was a Marine, and Parrish is Navy, but they both served in Vietnam – do you think they met there?"

"It's possible." Tony shrugged. "They seemed to be friends – more so than Roy was with Marco. I think Roy might even have been a bit scared of Marco, but he and Luke were tight. There was a lot of hugging and slapping each other on the back, and then they ordered up

some room service, and we sat there, the three of us, in that room, like it was the most normal thing in the world. Luke had brought me a present." Tony hunched his shoulders and made a face.

"What was it?" Gibbs asked.

"One of those viewfinder things they had back then. Man, I haven't seen one of those in a long time. I don't think they exist any more. Any kid today would laugh if he got one as a present, but back then it seemed really cool. It was this red plastic thing, and when you put a disk in it, and held it up to your eyes, you saw scenes from a movie. You clicked, and the disk rolled around so you could see another scene. The disk that came with this one was "The Sword in the Stone" – the Disney movie about the kid who pulled the sword out of the stone and became King Arthur. I didn't eat anything. I spent the entire time just looking through that thing and clicking – must have gone through the whole story about a dozen times. Roy and Luke talked – I can't remember what they talked about. I had this knot in my stomach because I knew what was coming, and I was worried that Luke would be like Marco. The movie helped – I think that was when I figured out that distraction really worked. I just lost myself in that stupid story and was able to forget the stuff I didn't want to think about."

Gibbs thought it was a good defence mechanism for a twelve year old boy to get him through a terrifying ordeal, but he wasn't sure it was something that could work long-term.

He remembered Tony coming back to work early after contracting the plague; he'd said he was going crazy at home, and Gibbs had sensed a kind of panic about him. Tony didn't like too much time alone – he needed constant mental stimulation. Then there had been his time as an agent afloat – it was obvious how challenging he'd found that, and how pathetically desperate he'd been to be recalled. Hell, even these past few weeks, when things had been slow, Gibbs had ordered extra close combat training just to help Tony burn off some steam and keep him from driving the rest of his team insane. Tony needed distraction – whether it was investigating a case, thinking up elaborate practical jokes to play on McGee, or nosing into Ziva's personal life - and now Gibbs knew the reason why.

"After lunch, Roy left. I asked him not to go, but he told me Luke would take good care of me. When we were alone, Luke told me he'd seen the photos of me with Marco, and he had really been looking forward to meeting me. He said if I did everything he told me to then we'd get along just fine. He was menacing but in a quiet kind of way. He was one of those people who can turn in a second. He'd seem really nice and then, without warning, he'd get this mean look in his eyes that would make your blood run cold. He told me he'd been in combat and had killed men, and that it was much easier to kill a kid. He didn't say it like it was a threat, but I knew it was all the same."

Gibbs had met many brave men in the military, men who had given their lives for their country and men who had suffered appalling injuries in the line of duty, and he hated hearing how one man had twisted that to suit his own evil ends. He remembered that fleeting moment he'd experienced earlier, when he'd got a real sense of the kind of man Matthew Parrish was. It had just been a flash, but he'd known, instinctively, that the man had a mean, ruthless streak.

"So you asked how I know it was Parrish. It was a long time ago, and he's obviously a lot older now and looks different, but I just had this feeling when I saw the picture on his service

record that he was Luke. There was one thing I knew would clinch it though – Luke had this long, jagged scar on his inner thigh. He told me some bullshit story about being on a black ops mission and taking out a bunch of Viet Cong single-handedly, but even back then I don't think I bought that. So today, while you were out searching his house, I looked in Admiral Parrish's file."

"He was injured in Vietnam – shrapnel wound to his thigh when his patrol boat was ambushed," Gibbs said. Tony looked up at him, surprised. "I know that bastard's file backwards," Gibbs told him. "I must have read it a dozen times today, looking for something, because I knew there **was** something. I had a really bad feeling about that guy in my gut. I knew he was guilty of abusing Justin – had no idea how far back it went though. Christ, how do men like him get away with stuff like this for so long?"

"Ruthless. Smart." Tony shrugged. "Well organised. Lucky." He hesitated. "And good," he muttered. Gibbs looked at him sharply. "Well they are. Roy played me like a maestro, and Parrish had Justin eating out of his hand. They were good at fucking with our minds, Boss, making us too scared or too in love with them to tell – or a mixture of both."

"No wonder you didn't want to be in the room when I questioned Parrish," Gibbs commented. "I thought it wasn't like you to have your cell phone turned off."

"I couldn't face him," Tony replied. "I wasn't sure how I'd react. Also – I think there's a part of me that's still scared of him, Boss. Marco was an animal who took what he wanted – he was rough, but he hardly spoke a word to me. Parrish was different - he said a lot, most of it designed to scare me. I think he got off on that."

"Oh, he did," Gibbs said grimly, remembering that file of Parrish's 'favourites', and what they all had in common.

"I stood in the observation room, watching when you questioned him. I wanted to be sure it was him," Tony said. "I already knew I intended to go around to his house and beat the crap out of him. I just had to be sure – and I was."

"We'll get him, Tony, but another way," Gibbs told him firmly.

"Next time you question him, I'd like to be in the room."

Gibbs hesitated. "I don't think that's a good idea, Tony."

Tony's eyes narrowed. "Gibbs, I have done everything you asked of me tonight, and you know how hard it's been. This is the only damn thing I'm asking of you in return – you'll be here, with me, so what the hell can happen? I just want to look into that bastard's eyes when you question him. I want him to be scared, the way I was scared back then. I want to **see** that on his face."

Gibbs nodded. "Okay. Tomorrow," he said. "I'll bring him in tomorrow for more questioning."

"Good." Tony nodded firmly.

"Was it just the once, or were there other times?" Gibbs asked. Tony frowned.

"There were several times with Luke, but only a couple more with Marco, thank God. Mainly it was Roy."

"There were no other men? Just those three?"

Tony shook his head. "Just those three," he confirmed.

"How did it end?" Gibbs asked.

Tony was looking and sounding better as he reached the conclusion of his statement, as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He sounded more like Tony now and hadn't had any lapses in concentration for some time. Gibbs thought maybe it had been a relief for him to finally be able to let all this out, and tell someone, after all this time.

"I became quiet and withdrawn," Tony said.

"That's quite a personality change – your dad must have noticed," Gibbs said. Tony frowned.

"Well...I might not have been the kind of kid you'd expect," he muttered. Gibbs glanced at him, with a raised eyebrow. Tony shrugged and didn't elucidate. Gibbs filed the comment away to think about later.

"I'd been reading all these books about boarding schools. They sounded fantastic, so I scoped some out. I thought it'd be a good way of getting out of Roy's clutches – I couldn't face speaking to my dad about the abuse again. Me and Dad didn't really talk much about anything anyway. So, one day I went to his study, and I told him that I wanted to go away to boarding school. He was surprised - maybe even a little hurt - but I had to get away, and I couldn't tell him why. I think maybe he was relieved as well – he never did really connect with me. I know he loved me, but we just couldn't seem to communicate. He agreed that maybe it was a good idea and so that was it. I went away."

"What about vacation time? Did Roy ever try to abuse you again?" Gibbs asked.

"No. I didn't go back very often. I made a lot of friends at boarding school and always tried to get invited back to stay with them during vacations. Dad and I grew more and more apart, and I don't think he really understands why."

Gibbs nodded. He had inferred a long time ago that relations between Tony and his father weren't great, although it wasn't always easy sifting out the truth behind the many exaggerated stories Tony told. One thing he was sure about was that Tony hadn't exaggerated anything tonight. If anything, he'd glossed over and underplayed.

"That's pretty much it." Tony leaned back in his chair. "Do you believe me, Boss?"

Gibbs was startled. "What the hell kind of question is that? Of course I damn well believe you, Tony!"

"I still tell lies, Boss," Tony said quietly. "I tell lies all the time – the same kind I told to my Dad. Stupid lies – pointless lies. Stuff about my childhood, or my girlfriends, or my social life that I've made up. Dates I've changed, half-truths I've embellished. You know that. You can always see right through me. I catch you looking at me sometimes when I'm making something up, and I can tell you know I'm lying."

"Well, I never exactly viewed them as lies – more like entertaining stories. I thought you were just trying to amuse us, but now I see you were building a fantasy to deflect us from the truth, and you did a damn good job. None of us got a glimpse of what you were hiding."

"So how do you know I'm not lying now?" Tony asked.

"Like you said, I always know when you're lying."

Tony leaned forward in his chair. "So, you really do believe me?"

Gibbs gazed at him, puzzled, and then he saw the look in Tony's eyes and understood. Tony had carried this secret around for twenty-five years, and the only person he'd told had comprehensively rejected his version of events. Logically, as an adult, he expected Gibbs to believe him, but there was an anxious twelve year old boy inside him who had no such expectations, and Gibbs was looking at him right now.

Gibbs leaned forward, so that they were face to face, gazed straight into those apprehensive eyes, and spoke emphatically, so there could be no room for doubt.

"Tony – I believe every single word you've said here tonight."

Tony swallowed hard, and Gibbs saw just how important it had been for him to hear that.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

"Was there anything else you wanted to add?" Gibbs asked. He thought they had more than enough to take a crowbar to this case and lever it wide open, but he also suspected Tony might be able to supply more details if he needed them at a later date. It was late now though, and they'd all had a rough day.

"No." Tony shook his head. "Was that okay?" he asked anxiously a second later. "Did I... was there anything else you wanted to know?"

"Not right now, Tony," Gibbs reassured him. "We might need to come back to some of it, but right now I think we're done."

Tony nodded, looking relieved and strangely euphoric, his green eyes glowing.

"Thank God for that."

"Look – I need to make a couple of phone calls, and then I'll take you home." Gibbs paused. "Are you okay to be on your own tonight?" he asked, looking at Tony searchingly. Tony was looking more like his old self than he had all evening, but Gibbs remembered that moment in the parking lot earlier and felt uneasy.

"I'm fine, Boss. You were right, I needed to get this out – I'm feeling a hell of a lot better now," Tony said brightly. Gibbs gazed at him, unconvinced. Tony grinned and spread his arms. "C'mon – I'm thirty-seven, not twelve. I'm a big boy – I can take care of myself."

Gibbs winced inwardly at Tony's reference to the younger age – he wondered if Tony even knew he'd said it. It seemed to him that Tony had been taking care of himself even back when he was just a kid of twelve.

"Okay," he nodded.

He could hardly insist on taking Tony back to his place or on staying over at Tony's. Right now, he was wary about insisting on anything where Tony was concerned. He was mindful of what Tony had said earlier about him bullying and manipulating Justin, and he had a sense that any abuse victim might need to feel in control, so he didn't want to railroad Tony or order him around too much. It felt wrong though. Gibbs was used to trusting his gut and giving orders to his team, and Tony had always responded well to that in the past. Gibbs was aware he was holding back right now and treading carefully. Instinctively, his gut told he shouldn't just drop Tony home and say goodnight, but he couldn't see a way around it.

"Wait here – I'll come back and get you in a few minutes," he said. Tony grinned at him brightly, and Gibbs got up, taking his pad full of notes with him.

His first stop was the observation room next door. McGee looked up when he came in, and Gibbs winced. The probie was as white as a sheet, and he looked horrified. There was clear evidence of vomit in the waste basket next to him.

"You okay, McGee?" Gibbs asked quietly, closing the door behind him. He glanced into the next door room to make sure Tony was okay, but he was just sitting at the table, tapping on it impatiently with his fingers, looking every inch the Tony DiNozzo they all knew so well.

"No," McGee answered honestly. "Boss, I had no idea. I mean, if you'd asked me who, out of all of us, had something like this in their past, Tony would be at the very bottom of my list."

"I know." Gibbs nodded. "But he's made a conscious decision not to be a victim, and he's constructed a lot of ways to make sure people never view him as one. He's the person you'd least suspect precisely because he's been working hard to make sure nobody ever does."

"But to hide something like that for all these years..." McGee shook his head. "He must be one hell of a good actor."

Gibbs glanced into the next door room, where Tony was now drumming out a little dysphonic rhythm on the table with the palms of his hands.

"Yeah. I think he is," he said. "But this is who he's chosen to be, and he doesn't want any of us looking at him differently, so we have to respect that."

"Uh...how?" McGee asked, gazing up at him with puzzled eyes. "I mean, how can I look at Tony and not see that kid from the photograph and not remember all the stuff he said in there tonight?"

"Hell, McGee – if you find a way, you be sure to tell me," Gibbs snapped. "In the meantime, let's just try and handle this – and him - the best way we can. Now, I need to go make a couple of calls. I want you to go in there and sit with him while I do that."

"Do I have to?" McGee asked. "I don't know what to say to him."

"Well get over it – I don't want him out of sight until I drop him off safely at his apartment," Gibbs told him, walking over to the door. "I also don't want him left on his own in the NCIS offices at any point during this investigation in case he prejudices something – we can't be sure what his emotional state is right now. He made some questionable choices earlier today – understandable given the circumstances - but he could have screwed up our chances of a conviction, and I don't want a repeat of that."

He opened the door and then glanced back. "And McGee – first thing tomorrow I want a file with everything we have on Roy Quinn on my desk."

"Yes, Boss." McGee nodded. "Uh, Boss?" Gibbs glanced back. "What do I tell the others? Ziva? Abby? Ducky?"

"Nothing."

"But, Boss...!" McGee protested.

"Nothing!" Gibbs snapped. "Nothing until I've spoken to Tony about how we handle that. We'll have to bring them in at some point if we're going to investigate this properly, but he's been through enough tonight. It was hard enough for him to choose you to do the taping – I don't want him fretting about how we tell the rest of the team. I'll deal with that in the morning."

"Yes, Boss," McGee sighed.

"Good." Gibbs turned on his heel and left.

He went straight to the restroom, leaned over the sink, turned on the faucet, filled his hands with water, and splashed his face with it. He glanced up into the mirror, caught sight of himself, and then went ballistic. He slammed his fist into the wall repeatedly, cursing the entire time, shouting it out, roaring out his rage at what he'd heard tonight.

This case was so personal, so close to home, and the details so horrific that he wasn't sure he could contain his revulsion. He shouted, and roared, and crashed his fist against the wall, riding the wave of his own fury and impotence until the pain kicked in.

Then he leaned his arms against the wall, rested his forehead on his bloody knuckles, and panted for several minutes, calming himself down. Tony couldn't see him like this. Hell, none of his team could see him like this, but he had to let it out somehow. He had remained calm and focussed through every single detail of that sickening story, while every nerve in his body was straining to scream out his fury.

He didn't want to think about a twelve year old boy being repeatedly raped by a man he trusted. He didn't want to think about him being passed around to other bastards for them to

rape. He didn't want to think about that kid being ripped up so badly that he bled and was terrified that he might die. He didn't want to think about that child screwing up every last ounce of his courage to tell his father what was happening, only to be knocked back, disbelieved, and *hit* for God's sake. He didn't want to think about that. He didn't want to think about the abuse continuing, and a lonely child becoming more and more withdrawn until he was forced to manufacture his own escape because no adult came to help him. He didn't want to think about any of that happening to any child in the whole damn world.

But, most of all, he didn't want to think about it happening to Tony.

~*~

McGee squared his shoulders and opened the door to the interrogation room. Tony glanced up and gave him a bright grin.

"Hey, Probie. Sorry if I screwed up your evening. I expect you had a hot date – no, wait, what I am I saying?" Tony laughed. "This is the probie I'm talking to! Your last hot date was last century."

In other circumstances, McGee would have thrown back a retort at him - possibly even thrown Jeanne at him, just to score a hit and keep Tony off his back, but not right now.

He sat down in the seat Gibbs had vacated. "Tony, I don't know what to say," he murmured.

"Then don't say anything, Probie," Tony told him sharply.

McGee shook his head. "I at least have to say I'm sorry. I'm sorry that you went through that, Tony. I can't imagine what that must have been like."

Tony shrugged, looking completely unconcerned. If McGee hadn't seen him stumbling through his statement these past couple of hours, he could almost believe it hadn't happened.

"It was a long time ago, Probie. I haven't thought about it in years, and I wouldn't have started thinking about it today if it hadn't been for those photos showing up."

"Did you tell Gibbs?"

"Hell no! He figured it out."

"How?" McGee frowned. He'd looked at the photos of Boy 43 – of Tony – several times during the course of the day, and he hadn't figured it out.

"How do I know?" Tony shrugged. "He's *Gibbs*, Probie. I do know that if I'd had my way I wouldn't have told a damn person, but he showed up at my apartment and made me spill. One thing led to another, and that's why you and me both ended up here tonight."

"I won't tell anyone," McGee said.

"I know," Tony replied. He looked straight at McGee, his eyes suddenly deadly serious. "You're pretty much my best friend, Tim. Why else do you think I asked Gibbs to call you

instead of one of the others? Talking of Gibbs..." He glanced at the door. "He's been gone some time. Are you sure he's okay?"

"What do you mean?" McGee frowned anxiously. Tony sat back and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Just that you know how much he hates this kind of stuff. Are you sure he didn't go off after Parrish, or isn't pounding some innocent passer-by into a pulp right now?"

"Uh..." McGee looked at the door uncertainly.

"I think you should go and check on him, McGee."

"He asked me to stay with you," McGee said, unsure what to do.

"I'm fine. Look at me, Probie - I'm fine," Tony grinned, opening his arms wide and looking just as fine as he said he was. "Go check on him. I'll wait here."

"You promise?" McGee asked, getting up and going to the door and then hesitating, agonised. Gibbs had told him to stay here with Tony, but Tony seemed okay, and Gibbs did have an almighty temper when it was roused.

"Cross my heart, hope to die," Tony said, motioning his hand across his chest.

Reassured, McGee opened the door and left.

~*~

Gibbs spent a few minutes pulling himself back together, and then he took out his cell phone and dialled. He checked in with the security detail he had posted to trail Admiral Parrish when he left NCIS custody, but they advised him that the admiral hadn't contacted anyone all evening and was still in the house. Gibbs then called the agents he'd posted to keep an eye on Justin in case Parrish tried to threaten him. They reported that he also hadn't left his house.

Satisfied that he had those two situations under control, Gibbs knew he had to turn his attention back to Tony. He was about to leave the restroom when McGee poked his head around the door.

"Uh...oh, you're in here. Good," McGee said, and then his eyes widened as he saw Gibbs's bloody knuckles. Gibbs glared at him.

"What the hell are you doing here, McGee? I told you to watch Tony!" he roared.

"I did - I mean, I was, but then he said I should go look for you in case..." McGee trailed off.

"He played you, McGee!" Gibbs growled, leaving the restroom and sweeping past McGee on his way back to Interrogation.

"Oh shit," McGee muttered, following along on his heels like a puppy.

Gibbs sprinted along the hallway to interrogation room one, pushed open the door, and burst inside.

The room was empty.

~*~

Tony took the elevator down to Autopsy, humming to himself. He didn't bother turning on the light – he just went over to Ducky's desk and began rifling through the drawers. Hell, he needed a drink – a real drink - not more damn water.

He pulled out a bottle and opened it.

"Ah, finest Scottish malt – thanks, Duck," he said, taking a swig – only to find that all he got was a tiny sip. "Aw, hell, Ducky – you shouldn't let this happen!" he sighed, holding up the bottle and finding it completely empty. He frowned as he saw the little note attached to the side. He squinted at it in the faint light from the outside hallway.

"Anthony/Jethro – buy your own!" it said.

"Damn it – busted," Tony muttered, replacing the bottle in the desk.

He moved over to the cupboard where Palmer stowed his stuff, felt around beneath the spare lab coat, and pulled out the little packet he was looking for. He poked his nose cautiously inside and then grinned.

"Ah, Jimmy, you have yet to become old and cynical like the Duckster," he said, pulling out a cigarette from the packet. He found a box of matches in the same place, lit the cigarette, and took a long draw on it. He glanced around Autopsy and gave a shiver. "Man this place is creepy at night."

He went over to one of the steel tables, put his head on one side, and looked at it for a moment, exhaling a plume of smoke as he did so. He took another drag on the cigarette and then coughed and made a face; man he hated smoking. Then, with a grin, he climbed onto the table, stuck the cigarette between his lips, put his hands under his head, and gazed up at the ceiling.

"So this is what it's like to be dead," he muttered, gazing up, imagining Ducky looming over him wearing his protective goggles and wielding a scalpel. "Wonder what he'd say to my corpse? Bitch about the state of my plague-scarred lungs and lament my lack of good sense in getting myself killed probably."

"If he didn't, I would," a dry voice said from over by the door. Tony didn't even look around. He just took another drag on the cigarette and blew out the smoke from around the side of it.

"Hey, Boss," he muttered.

"You gave McGee the slip." Gibbs walked over to stand beside him.

"Yeah. Couldn't stand the way he was looking at me." Tony gave another little cough as the smoke irritated the lining of his lungs, which had never exactly been robust since that bout with the plague a few years back. Gibbs plucked the cigarette out from between his lips, threw it on the floor, and trod on it.

"You don't smoke," he said. Tony glared at him and sat up.

"I know. I was just, you know..."

"Ducky left the empty bottle again, didn't he?" Gibbs grinned.

"Yeah – with a note on it for us both, telling us to get our own. How did he even know it was us?"

"Because it was?" Gibbs perched on the side of the table next to him, his arm touching Tony's arm. It felt warm. Nice.

"Yeah. Didn't know you snuck down here to take a swig too though, Boss."

"Not often. Just sometimes, when I'm working late." Gibbs shrugged.

"Yeah." Tony shrugged too. "Has McGee gone? I can't face seeing him again tonight."

"I figured that was it. I sent him home. You okay?"

"Me? Sure. You were right – just needed to tell someone, get it all out, and now I can forget about it again."

"You think it's that easy?" Gibbs glanced at him sideways.

"Well it will be if McGee doesn't pull those big, tragic eyes on me every time he looks at me," Tony growled. "You going to arrest Quinn, Boss?"

"What do you think?" Gibbs asked, his blue eyes glittering dangerously in the dark room. "God knows how many kids he's abused since you, Tony. He could be out there right now, doing to some other kid what he did to you. He could have been one of the men who abused Justin."

"Yeah. I know. You think I should have done something about this earlier." Tony looked at his shoes. All these years he could have done something but hadn't. "I'm sorry. I screwed up there, Boss."

"The hell you did," Gibbs snapped. "You protected yourself, Tony, the best way you knew how, when nobody else would, when you were just a kid and shouldn't have had to. You've been protecting yourself ever since. I don't blame you for that. Nobody would."

"This is all going to come out." Tony hunched his shoulders and wished he had that cigarette back. "My dad is going to find out."

"Maybe it's time he knew, Tony."

"It'll hurt him. I don't want to hurt him."

"You can't keep protecting him – and he sure as hell didn't protect you."

Gibbs's voice was taut and angry, and Tony turned his head sharply to look at him. Gibbs had some firm ideas about fatherhood, so Tony wasn't entirely surprised by his tone of voice, but he hadn't expected him to sound quite so furious.

Then Tony saw the torn skin on Gibbs's knuckles, and he suddenly sensed the tightly leashed fury in Gibbs's body. He knew Gibbs's dark side; had seen it, feared it, and also admired it in a way, ever since he'd first met the man. Gibbs knew how to channel his rage, keeping it tightly reined until he could unleash it, with full force and deadly accuracy, straight at the intended target. That side of Gibbs had always scared and thrilled him in equal measure.

Now Tony realised that his boss's legendary protective instincts were roused in his defence, and he wasn't sure how he felt about that. He had always wanted proof that Gibbs cared about him; he just wished it hadn't had to happen like this. He'd never wanted the man's pity – he'd always wanted something else entirely.

"What happens next?" Tony asked, pushing that thought away and filing it back in the 'unobtainable fantasies' section of his brain. "You gave me back my badge, but you and I both know I can't be an investigator and a possible witness on the same case."

"No, you can't," Gibbs agreed.

"Boss, don't make me stay at home." Tony tried to keep the desperation out of his voice, but he wasn't sure he succeeded. The thought of having all that time on his hands and nothing to do but think... "I have to stay busy."

"I know." Gibbs nodded. "I've been meaning to have someone go through that cold case backlog for years now and..."

"Aw hell," Tony groaned. "Not the goddamn cold case backlog. I hate working those files."

"I know – better than staying home though," Gibbs pointed out with a grin.

"I suppose," Tony agreed reluctantly. "What about Abby, Ziva and Ducky? You're going to tell them, aren't you?"

Gibbs hesitated. "At some point they'll have to know. I can tell them, or you can."

"Whatever." Tony hunched up again. "But if they look at me like McGee looked at me, or if they start treating me differently, then I'm going to have to take up smoking for real."

"The hell you will," Gibbs growled, slapping the back of his head.

"Ow!" Tony reached up to rub the sore spot.

"Well, you said you didn't want anyone treating you any differently."

Gibbs grinned at him, and Tony grinned back, feeling absurdly happy. With that one gesture Gibbs had managed to allay at least one of his fears.

"Where the hell did you find those cigarettes anyway?" Gibbs asked. "Ducky doesn't smoke."

"Nah – but Jimmy does. He has to hide them in case Ducky finds them – or else suffer one of Ducky's three hour lectures on the effects of smoking on your lungs, complete with pictures of all the lungs Ducky's ever plucked out of the bodies of the long-term smokers he's had on his table."

"Sounds like Ducky!" Gibbs slid off the table and began walking towards the door. "Come on, Tony. Let's get you home."

~*~

Gibbs drove Tony home in silence. Every so often he glanced sideways at the man sitting next to him, but Tony's eyes were closed, and he seemed to be asleep, so Gibbs didn't say anything. He felt better after their chat in Autopsy – Tony had seemed more like himself and there hadn't been any of that weird hair-stroking behaviour or zoning out. All the same, he still couldn't shake off his concern that Tony shouldn't be left alone right now.

They reached Tony's apartment building, and Gibbs pulled up in the parking lot and got out of the car. Tony got out the other side and raised an eyebrow at him.

"Just want to see you actually go into your apartment," Gibbs said, with a shrug. He felt a surge of protectiveness towards Tony. Usually his senior field agent didn't need any protecting - he was more than capable of protecting himself - only right now Gibbs wasn't so sure. He didn't know if Tony's methods of protecting himself were still working; he had a nagging worry that they might be starting to break down.

"Aw, like a date or something," Tony grinned, making a joke of it – typical DiNozzo. Gibbs followed him into the building and up the stairs to his apartment. Tony opened the door, and Gibbs stepped in after him.

"Tony – you've been through a lot today," he said. "Are you sure you're okay to be alone?"

"Sure? I can't damn well wait," Tony griped. "I *want* some time alone, Boss. I'm gonna watch some TV in bed and then get some sleep."

Gibbs stood there, uncertainly. He had no reason to stay, and he couldn't foist his company on Tony, so why did he feel so uneasy about this?

"Okay – but if you need anything, you call me – right?" he insisted.

"Well, I'm down to my last can of beer," Tony said. "How pissed off would you be if I called and asked you to bring over a new six pack?"

Gibbs slapped the back of his head. "Very," he growled.

"I thought so." Tony grinned at him stupidly. "Seriously, Boss, I'm fine. Go home."

"Okay." Gibbs gave him a curt nod. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He left the apartment and returned to his car. He sat there for a few minutes, until he saw the light go on in Tony's bedroom window and then off again a few minutes later, plunging the apartment into darkness, and only then, finally, did he drive away.

~*~

Tony threw himself onto his bed, fully clothed, then turned off the light and sat there in the dark. He didn't feel like sleeping – he wasn't sure he'd be able to sleep. He felt an odd sense of euphoria. It was over; twenty-five years of keeping this secret was behind him, and now he could move on, once and for all.

He grabbed the remote, pointed it at the TV, and then lay there, slumped, flicking through the channels aimlessly, waiting for something to grab his attention.

"Tonio," a voice whispered, and he shivered and glanced at the door. He began humming, and he flicked through the TV channels more urgently, skipping from one to another, searching desperately for something to drown out the sound of that voice. It was no use; there was a box stowed away in a corner of his mind, and a chorus of whispers called to him from it, insistently, demanding his attention.

"Tonio, be a good boy for Marco, the way you are for me. Hmm?"

"Where are you going?"

"I'll be back soon. Marco will take good care of you. Ssh, Tonio – everything's fine."

A gentle hand cupped his cheek, and Roy kissed him on the forehead and then turned and left. Tony looked up at the wiry, swarthy stranger he had been left alone with. Marco reached for him; his breathing was fast and excited as he undressed him.

"Stop...please...Roy won't like it," Tony protested. He tried to wriggle away as Marco held him up, and pushed him forwards, bending him over. "Please...stop..."

"Shut up."

A rough hand slid over his mouth. Marco's other hand was pressing onto his stomach, pulling him back onto him. It hurt, but, worse than that, he couldn't breathe, and he thought he might suffocate. He struggled frantically. Marco removed his hand from his mouth, but only so he could grab his hip instead and keep him steady.

He could smell Marco's sweat, and hear his breathing, loud and guttural behind him.

It hurt so much. He felt like he was being ripped in two. It never hurt like this with Roy. Where was Roy? When he came back he'd be mad at Marco for doing this. This was just something he did with Roy. Roy had said it was special, just between them, their secret – their beautiful little secret.

Tony blinked. He glanced at his watch – it was late, 2 a.m. Damn it, he had to stop losing time like this.

He stroked his hair anxiously. What he needed was a distraction - a better distraction than watching old movies on TV, and Tony knew from experience that there was one distraction that worked better than the TV, better than alcohol, better than anything else.

He got up, grabbed his keys, and ran out of his apartment. He got in his car and drove towards the only bars that would be open at this time of night and offering him a chance of finding a warm, willing body for a few hours of pleasurable distraction. He paused when he got near, trying to decide which way to go.

"Left for girls, right for guys," he mused. He decided it didn't matter. He just wanted to lose himself – it didn't matter what he lost himself in.

"In that case – right," he said out loud, making the turn. He parked the car across the street from a gay bar. Guys were easier to lure into bed for a one night stand than women. Women wanted you to buy them a drink and flirt with them first. Guys just looked you up and down, and if you were fit enough they'd go home with you. That was another thing Tony knew from experience – years of it.

~*~

Terry Dyer looked up from his drink to see the tall, good-looking guy walk into the bar. There were only a handful of people here so late, and he'd more or less given up on the hope of picking anyone up tonight – until now.

The guy glanced around the nearly empty room, looking disappointed. Terry smiled at him, and the guy's handsome face split into a wide grin, and he walked over. He was a big guy, broad-shouldered, and dressed all in black. Terry was surprised he'd come over – he'd seen this guy around before, and he only ever picked up straight-acting, older men – tough guys. Terry was none of those things, so he was pretty sure he wasn't this man's type.

"Well hello, man in black," Terry said when the guy got close. The stranger grinned – he knew a cheesy pick-up line when he heard it – Terry had a suspicion he'd probably handed out a few in his time.

"Hey. I'm Tony." The guy didn't sit down. He just leaned against the table, looking at Terry like he wanted to eat him.

"And I'm Terry. That's a sexy look you're working there, Tony. I like it."

Tony's grin widened. "If you like me dressed, you'll like me even better undressed," he said.

Cheesy – but to the point. Terry laughed. "I'm sure I would. That a proposition?"

"Yeah. It's late. I don't have the time or energy to sweet talk you into bed. I just want sex and my place is nearby. You up for that?"

Terry looked him up and down, taking in the long legs, the toned chest, and the beautiful green eyes.

"Soon will be, handsome," he joked, finishing his drink in one gulp and getting to his feet. "I knew if I waited around here long enough my prince would come," he flirted.

It was an old line, and he had a feeling this guy didn't really respond to twinkie little queens like himself, but what the hell. Tony laughed and slung an arm around his shoulder, making him feel like a dwarf beside him.

"Oh, your prince definitely wants to come," he whispered loudly into Terry's ear as they left the bar.

Tony didn't say a word as he drove them back to his place; he just kept humming to himself. Terry didn't mind. He was a slender five foot eight; bright, witty and cute. He knew he wasn't anything special to look at, but he also knew he had a big heart and a lot to give to the right guy – and that wasn't the man sitting next to him.

Terry was under no illusions that this was the start of something beautiful – it was just sex, and as far as Terry was concerned there was nothing wrong with that. Tony was way out of his league for a start, and in any case guys like him always turned out to be heartbreakers. Terry had had his heart broken enough times not to want to give it away to the wrong kind of guy again – and Tony was definitely the wrong kind of guy. He was the kind of guy your mom warned you about.

He glanced at Tony as they drove. He seemed so big and sure of himself. There was a confidence to him, a kind of swagger. Tony was a player – Terry had seen him work a bar before, so he knew exactly what kind of guy he was going to be getting into bed with. All the same, there was something about Tony that he hadn't expected; a kind of vulnerability and loneliness.

They reached Tony's apartment and went inside. Tony didn't waste a second. The minute they got through the door he grabbed Terry, pushed him against the wall, and kissed him.

He tasted of cigarette smoke, but his lips were soft and agile. Terry slid his arms around Tony's big body and cupped his ass. Tony kissed him like he was drowning, putting everything into it, urgent and needy. Terry drew back.

"This is great, Tony, but I need to breathe, honey," he said. "And you're a big guy."

"Sorry." Tony pulled back, an apologetic grin on his face. "Bedroom's this way."

He grabbed Terry's wrist and led him towards a room at the back of the apartment. Terry wondered for a moment if he should be worried – he didn't know this guy, and Tony seemed kind of zoned out and weird. Yet, even so, Terry didn't get a bad vibe off him. He knew, instinctively, that Tony wasn't the kind of guy who would hurt him. If anything, Tony seemed like something of a lost soul. They went into the bedroom and Terry surveyed the black satin sheets and red velvet blanket on the bed with a roll of his eyes; Tony was **such** a player.

Tony began undressing him the minute they got into the bedroom. Terry was flattered by Tony's urgency but troubled by the look in Tony's eyes. It was as if he wasn't really there – his eyes were completely blank, and he kept humming. It was starting to freak him out.

Tony got him naked and then pushed him onto the bed and began undressing himself. That was when Terry forgot his misgivings – this guy was fucking hot! Tony stripped off his sweater to reveal acres of taut, toned, golden flesh, covered in a nice amount of chest hair, and then shucked off his pants and underwear to reveal a smooth, curving cock – nice size, cut...and disappointingly flaccid.

"I guess I'm not your usual type," Terry murmured, glancing pointedly at Tony's cock. His own was hard and aching just from looking at Tony's beautiful body.

"Hmmm?" Tony joined him on the bed, took him in his arms, and began kissing him all over.

Terry gasped – Tony sure as hell knew his stuff. He was passionate, urgent, and commanding, covering every inch of Terry's body with gentle caresses that made him sigh and moan. He didn't seem to want much back in return – in fact he wouldn't let Terry do much to him at all. He seemed to prefer to be in control, so Terry gave up trying and just allowed Tony to kiss, and suck, and stroke him all over.

"I need you in me, Tony," Terry whispered after awhile, opening his legs wide.

Tony grinned down at him, those perfect white teeth gleaming in the darkness. He reached over, opened his nightstand drawer, and pulled out a condom and some lube. Terry lay back and abandoned himself to the pleasure of having Tony's fingers slide in and out of him. Then he grew impatient for more – he wasn't some tight little virgin who needed a whole lot of stretching. He reached down and pulled Tony's hand away.

"Come on, handsome. Let's feel you inside me," he crooned, rubbing up against Tony. "Hey...what's the problem here, big guy?" he asked, surprised to find Tony still soft. "Am I not doing it for you? Is there something you'd like me to do differently? I give great head."

"No...I..." Tony looked down, puzzled, at his flaccid cock. "This has never happened to me before," he said lamely. Terry laughed out loud.

"Oh honey! That's what they all say!"

"I mean it. Uh...let's just...keep going." Tony ground his hips against Terry's groin. He looked adorably confused. "Won't be long," Tony promised.

Terry grabbed Tony's head and looked into those strangely glowing green eyes.

"You know, honey, I'm not sure that this is what you need tonight. It's late, and you're probably tired. Why don't we just lie here and..."

"No!" Tony said forcefully, and he returned to caressing Terry's body with renewed gusto, kissing, and sucking, and biting...God it was good, but still Tony's cock remained resolutely soft, and Terry was starting to feel more and more uncomfortable. This was all wrong.

"Look, I just don't think it's going to happen tonight, Tony," he said eventually, pushing Tony away. "It's okay – there's nothing wrong with that. It happens to us all at some point." He rolled his eyes. "Look at me – I drink too much and nothing happens in that department at all."

"I haven't been drinking," Tony told him, getting up and pulling on his boxer shorts. He sat down on the side of the bed, forlornly, looking like a kid who'd lost his favourite toy.

"Well, you're tired, like I said."

Tony reached up a hand and rubbed the back of his head, absently.

"You okay?" Terry knelt down behind him, and started massaging his shoulders as best he could while Tony kept rubbing his head like that. "Boy, you're tense, Tony!"

Tony didn't reply – he just kept on rubbing.

"Tony?" Terry asked.

When there was no response, Terry got up off the bed and went to kneel down in front of him.

"Tony?" he said again, softly.

Tony's eyes were blank, glazed over and unfocussed.

"Oh, Tony," Terry said sadly. "You really are a little lost boy aren't you?" He kissed Tony gently on the lips. "Hey, handsome prince – wake up," he teased. There was still no reply, and he was starting to get really freaked out now. "TONY!" he yelled, slapping Tony's face gently, trying to shock him. Still nothing.

Terry took a step back. "Come on, snap out of it!" he ordered. Tony just continued to stare absently into space, humming under his breath.

"Oh fuck...this is just...why the hell do these things have to happen to me?" Terry hissed.

He grabbed his clothes, pulled them on quickly, and ran out of the bedroom. He got as far as the front door of the apartment and then paused and looked back with a sigh.

"Oh shit...fuck you and your big damn bleeding heart, Terry," he sighed.

He returned slowly to the bedroom, to find Tony where he'd left him, still sitting on the side of the bed in his boxer shorts, still rubbing the back of his head.

"Do I call 911? What do I tell them? Are you an epileptic, Tony? Do you have any medicine around here?" He glanced around and then shook his head. "What the hell difference would it make? I wouldn't know how to give it to you. Okay...you must have some friends, Tony...let me think..."

He caught sight of Tony's black leather jacket, abandoned on a nearby chair.

“Look, if you wake up and find me doing this, it’s not because I’m stealing from you – okay?” Terry said, picking up the jacket and searching through the pockets.

He found Tony’s wallet, and then his keys, and then he pulled out some kind of badge. He turned it over in his hand, examining it.

“NCIS? I have no idea what that is, but are you some kind of cop, Tony? Figures. All that swagger and confidence, and that hint of danger, although you’re not very dangerous now, are you, big guy?”

Terry dipped his fingers back into Tony’s jacket pocket again and finally found what he was looking for – a cell phone. He turned it on with shaking fingers.

“Okay – who do I call? Speed dial number one, yes? That has to be the person to call. Yes, Tony?” he asked.

Tony didn’t even look around. He just continued to stare, and stroke, and hum. Terry shivered – this was beyond creepy.

“Okay...okay...here goes...” Terry pressed the speed dial and then waited, shivering anxiously. A few seconds later a man’s voice answered; deep, curt, and kind of grumpy.

“Gibbs,” the man said.

~*~

Gibbs dropped Tony home and then went straight to his basement and spent a couple of hours working on his boat. He knew it was pointless going to bed – he was too angry and hyped up to sleep in any case, and he needed to bring himself down. There was no way he’d be in any shape to interrogate Admiral Parrish tomorrow if he didn’t get a grip on himself first, and when he did question that bastard, he had to do it *right* - for Tony’s sake.

Working on the boat was the only way he knew of calming himself. The smell of the sawdust and the rhythm of moving back and forwards as he sanded down the wood helped. He bored some holes into the boat and then slammed in some wooden pegs, allowing his pent-up rage to flow into the motion.

He was just about to call it a night when his cell phone rang. He reached for it quickly and felt a little spike of anxiety as he saw the name on the caller display: DiNozzo.

“Gibbs,” he answered. “You okay, Tony?”

“Uh...this is Terry Dyer,” an unfamiliar, slightly squeaky voice replied. “Um...are you a friend of Tony’s?”

Gibbs threw down his hammer and began walking towards the stairs – fast. “Who the hell is this?” he demanded, running up the stairs and out of the door. He grabbed his keys from the hall table and reached for his jacket. He had a bad feeling about this.

“It’s Terry – like I said. Look, I’m at Tony’s place, and he’s... well he’s gone kind of weird on me. It’s like he’s zoned out or something. I don’t think he can even hear me.”

“I’m on my way. I’ll be there in ten. Stay there. Do not leave him,” Gibbs ordered tersely, hanging up.

He probably broke every speed limit in the book, but he pulled up at Tony’s apartment building nine minutes later, ran up the stairs, and knocked impatiently on the door. It was opened, and he found himself looking at a diminutive guy with wide, almond-shaped brown eyes and a scared expression on his face.

Gibbs looked the man up and down. He was about twenty-five, with peroxide blond hair, wearing a tight tee shirt, impossibly tight jeans and... Gibbs thought he detected a hint of eyeliner. This must be Terry Dyer – but who the hell was he, and what was he doing in Tony’s apartment?

“Are you Gibbs?” Terry asked, in a drawly, camp tone of voice. “And do you have a first name, honey?”

“Where’s Tony?” Gibbs asked brusquely, brushing past him.

“Oh yeah, you’re Gibbs,” Terry muttered. “He’s in the bedroom. I’ll show you...”

“I know where the damn bedroom is,” Gibbs growled, heading towards it.

He strode through the bedroom door and then stopped dead in his tracks. Tony was sitting on the side of the bed, dressed only in a pair of boxer shorts, and he was staring into space. There was a vacant expression on his face, and he was humming to himself and stroking his hair absently, the way Gibbs had noticed him doing a few times earlier this evening.

“Hey, Tony,” he said softly, crouching down in front of his agent. “You okay?”

Tony made no reply. He just continued staring into space, his eyes blank and empty. Gibbs waved his hand in front of Tony’s face, but there was no reaction.

“How long has he been like this?” Gibbs asked, glancing up at Terry who had followed him into the bedroom.

“About half an hour,” Terry replied. “I didn’t know what to do. I was going to leave but that’s not me, you know? I wouldn’t leave someone in trouble. Besides, he’s a nice guy – and I wasn’t sure what would happen to him if I just left. Is he an epileptic?”

“No,” Gibbs answered shortly. He got up and glared at the diminutive man standing in the doorway. “Now, explain to me – who the hell are you, and what are you doing here?”

~*~

Terry took a step back. While he’d sensed that Tony was dangerous in his own way, this guy here took danger to a new level. Also, what was it with these guys being so tall? He knew he was short, but this man in front of him was almost as tall as Tony. He felt like he’d stumbled

into a land of giants. There was one sexy, little-boy-lost giant sitting on the bed, and one grim-faced giant, just as sexy but scary as all hell, looming over him and looking at him like he was a criminal.

Terry wondered if he'd done the right thing calling this stranger. He was so curt and terse. Would Tony thank him for it, he wondered? On the other hand, who the hell did this guy think he was, coming in here and treating Terry like *he'd* done something wrong when all he'd been trying to do was help?

"I told you on the phone, I'm Terry Dyer, I'm a friend of Tony's and...oh, okay, 'friend' might be overstating the case as we only just met tonight but...oh shit, you're not Tony's boyfriend, are you?"

Terry knew he was babbling, but he always talked too much when he got nervous, and he was definitely nervous right now. Gibbs gave him a glare so baleful he took a step backwards in alarm.

"No, I'm not Tony's...boyfriend," Gibbs growled. Terry relaxed slightly.

"Oh thank GOD," he said, mock-fanning himself in relief. "Only you're exactly his type, and I thought if you were his boyfriend, and you found me and him in here together, then you might go crazy. And you're tall, and, if you don't mind me saying, pretty damn scary. And I just noticed that you have bruised knuckles, so I'm guessing you're the kind of guy who likes to solve disputes with his fists, and I'm really...not. That kind of guy. So if you were going to hit me I'd just go straight down. No resistance! So, uh, don't hit me," he added, with a nervous laugh.

"His type?" Gibbs interrupted, his forehead wrinkled up into a frown.

"Yeah – you're the kind of guy he usually picks up in bars; you know - straight-acting tough guys. Older guys. I was surprised when he went for me, but it was late and there weren't many other guys around, so I guess...well, I'm not selling myself short here, because I happen to think I'm pretty cute, but I guess he had to settle for what he could get at that time of night."

"Bars?" Gibbs growled. "Gay bars?"

"Well, duh." Terry rolled his eyes.

"Tony isn't gay," Gibbs said blankly. Terry laughed out loud.

"Oh honey!" he giggled, and then he caught the expression in Gibbs's eyes and the laughter died in his throat. "Well, maybe he isn't," he said hurriedly, "But I've seen him trawl the bars often enough to know he isn't 100% straight either. Maybe he's bi?"

Gibbs turned back to Tony, a puzzled expression on his face. Terry watched as he reached out and gently touched Tony's shoulder.

"Tony – it's Gibbs," he said. "Wake up."

There was still no response. Tony just kept on staring, and stroking, and humming.

“DiNozzo!” Gibbs rapped out, in a harder tone of voice, making Terry jump. Tony's eyes remained blank. Gibbs rested his hand on Tony's bare shoulder and then frowned.

“Tony, you're cold. I'm going to put a blanket around you.”

He grabbed the red velvet blanket from the bed and drew it towards him, and, as he did so, the tube of lubricant and the condom Tony had got out of his night-stand fell onto the floor. Terry winced, and swooped down to pick them up. He flushed, feeling embarrassed, because Gibbs had seen them. Terry doubted there was anything Gibbs didn't see; the man had eyes like a hawk.

Gibbs wrapped the blanket carefully around Tony's shoulders – he was much gentler than Terry would have expected of such a terse, grim-faced man. That eased his mind a little about phoning him – whoever this guy was, he obviously genuinely cared about Tony.

“Do you know what's wrong with him?” Terry asked quietly, replacing the condom and lube on the nightstand with an apologetic smile.

“Yes,” Gibbs replied, and then he frowned slightly. “Well, kind of,” he added grimly.

“Does this happen to him often?”

“No.” Gibbs grabbed Tony's ceaselessly stroking hand. “Tony, I want you to stop doing that now,” he ordered, in a firm tone of voice. Tony's hand stopped immediately, in midair.

“Wow – he really responds to you,” Terry said. “I tried doing that, and he just kept on stroking.”

Gibbs took hold of Tony's arm and moved it down to his side. Tony started rocking gently, back and forth.

“Well, I guess that's a little better,” Gibbs sighed. He turned back to Terry. “Tell me exactly what happened,” he ordered. “What were you doing right before Tony zoned out?”

“Uh...” Terry flushed. “Well...we were...obviously having sex. Or at least, trying to have sex.”

“Trying?” Gibbs loomed over him, looking angry. “In my experience sex is something you're either having, or you're not. Which is it?”

“Not. Tony uh...he couldn't...” Terry muttered, wondering if he looked as embarrassed as he felt. There was something about this tall, terrifying man that made him feel like he was a stupid, insignificant kid, and he didn't like that feeling or the kind of men who made him feel this way. He was worth more than this. Gibbs raised an eyebrow at him.

“Had he been drinking?” he asked. Terry shook his head.

“He said he hadn’t. He was upset – he said this had never happened to him before, and I know that’s something guys say, but I believe him. He looked pretty freaked out about it – I mean, he looked really desperate rather than just a bit pissed off. I told him it was okay, and that he was probably just tired, but then he just zoned out on me. He’s been like this ever since.”

“Had he taken any drugs?” Gibbs asked, glancing around the room.

“Not with me!” Terry bristled angrily. “I don’t do that kind of shit. And I didn’t get the vibe that he did, either. I mean, his eyes were kind of glowing, but I didn’t think at any point that he was high. If he was, they were really crap drugs. What’s with all the questions anyway? Are you a cop?”

“I’m a federal agent,” Gibbs replied.

“Oh shit,” Terry hissed, glancing over to the nightstand where he’d emptied out the contents of Tony’s jacket pockets. “You’re not just one of Tony’s friends, are you?” he sighed, catching sight of the NCIS badge he’d found.

“No,” Gibbs agreed. “I’m also his boss.”

“Oh Tony, honey, I’m sorry,” Terry said miserably, kneeling down in front of Tony and gazing at him. “I didn’t know. I mean, who the hell has their *boss* as number one on their speed dial? I don’t even know my boss’s cell phone number, let alone have her on speed dial.”

“You did the right thing,” Gibbs said curtly from behind him.

“I wonder if Tony will think so when he wakes up.”

“I need your name and contact details, and then you can go.”

Terry leaned forward and deposited a tender kiss on Tony’s forehead. He heard Gibbs make a weird little sound in the back of his throat, and got the distinct impression that he didn’t like him touching Tony.

“Good night, handsome prince,” he said softly to Tony. “I hope you’ll be okay. Maybe a kiss from your own Prince Charming will wake you, huh?”

He glanced up at Gibbs who was looking at him like he was a rattlesnake he wanted to shoot. Terry got up, pulled out his wallet, plucked out one of the little personal cards he’d had made to give to guys in bars who asked him for his number, and handed it to Gibbs.

“That’s me,” he said, pointing at the card. “Terry Dyer.”

Gibbs gave it a peremptory look and then pocketed it. “Thank you, Mr. Dyer. I’ll call you if I have any more questions about this case.”

“Tony isn’t a case – he’s a person,” Terry snapped, feeling angry. He’d had a shit night, he was tired, and this guy was really starting to piss him off. “I don’t know what the hell you see

in him, Tony honey,” he said, in a flash of anger, glancing at Tony - who continued to gaze off creepily into the distance, taking no notice of him whatsoever.

Gibbs did though – he took a step towards Terry, eyebrows raised in disbelief, looking at him as if he’d gone insane.

“Oh what?” Terry said, with a defiant toss of his head. “Like there’s any way those guys he picks up in bars aren’t all you in his head.”

“Good night, Mr. Dyer,” Gibbs growled. He took hold of Terry’s arm and pushed him unceremoniously towards the door. Terry shook him off, irritably.

“I’d like to say it’s been a pleasure meeting you, but that’d be a lie. You’re not exactly a people person are you, Mr. Gibbs?” Terry snapped.

Gibbs turned towards him, his entire body stiff and intimidating, and shot him a glare that would have had many a grown man quaking in his boots. It cut no ice with Terry. He wasn’t going to be pushed around by anyone. Terry drew himself up to his full height – which admittedly wasn’t very tall – and shot him a glare of his own in response.

“Thank you, Terry,” Terry said. “Thank you for not running out on Tony, thank you for calling me, thank you for staying with Tony until I got here and explaining what happened to him. Sorry you had such a shit night and the hot sex with the very hot guy didn’t happen, but hey, you did the right thing. So thanks.”

Gibbs stared at him for a moment and then those stony blue eyes of his suddenly softened, his body relaxed, and his mouth quirked up into a little grin - and that was when Terry saw it.

“Oh...now I get it,” he said softly. “Now I get what he sees in you.”

Gibbs held out his hand. “Thank you, Terry,” he said, quietly and sincerely. “Thank you for helping Tony.”

Terry took the hand – it was warm, extremely hard, and slightly calloused. Gibbs shook his hand firmly, gazing at Terry from those beautiful blue eyes, and Terry felt himself going ever-so-slightly weak at the knees.

“You’re welcome,” he muttered. “Take good care of Tony – he really is a nice guy. Personally I don’t think you’re good enough for him but...”

A finger was placed over his mouth. “Let’s both quit while we’re ahead shall we?” Gibbs said pleasantly, grasping his shoulder and ushering him firmly but courteously out of the door.

~*~

Gibbs shut the door behind the feisty little guy who had seemed to want to pick a fight with him, reached for his cell phone, and dialed.

He had to wait for several rings and then, finally, a flustered voice answered.

“You do know what time it is, Jethro, don’t you? I thought we’d established that you’d only call me at this time of night in the case of a genuine emergency.”

“It is. I need you, Ducky. Tony’s apartment. Now,” Gibbs said, and then he disconnected.

He returned to the bedroom but there was no change in Tony’s condition. He just sat there, staring blankly into space. At least he wasn’t stroking his hair again – but he was rocking back and forth and humming to himself. Gibbs knelt down in front of him again, rested his hands on Tony’s knees, and gazed into his eyes, looking for something – anything – that would reassure him that Tony was still in there.

“Where are you, Tony?” he asked, waving his hand in front of Tony’s eyes. Tony gave no reaction. “You are full of surprises, DiNozzo. Christ, what a day.”

He hesitated, and then gently stroked Tony’s cheek with the back of his hand.

“First, finding out what you’ve been hiding all these years, and then finding out what you like to do in your spare time – or at least who you like to do it with. I always had you down as straight, Tony – but I guess that was just another thing you wanted us all to believe. Damn it – so much of your time and energy has gone into all this hiding and lying. Aren’t you tired of it?”

There was no reply. He got up and saw the lubricant and condom on the nightstand where Terry had left them. He picked them up and stowed them away in a drawer.

“I’m going to have to tell Ducky about what happened to you when you were a kid, Tony,” he said. “But I’m not going to give away all your secrets.”

He sat down on the side of the bed beside Tony. Then, awkwardly, he put his arm around Tony’s shoulders and squeezed.

“I will get you through this, DiNozzo,” he said. “Just don’t go under – because I don’t know how to reach you wherever you are right now. I can’t follow you there, and I don’t know how to bring you back.”

~*~

Roy was smiling at him, gently petting him all over. Tony lay there unmoving, feeling angry and resentful.

“Do we have to do this now?” he asked petulantly. “You said you were going to take me to the movies.”

“And I will, later. Tonio...do this for me and after I take you to the movies, I’ll buy you those roller skates you wanted - hmm?”

Tony sighed and moved his legs, so Roy could do what he wanted. "You mean it about the skates?" he asked.

"Yes, Tonio...of course...my beautiful boy. Just be good for me, and you can have whatever you like."

Roy beamed at him and then leaned forward and kissed his mouth. Tony hated the taste of cigars, the feel of rough stubble on his chin, and the way Roy's tongue darted between his lips. It made him want to wipe his hand over his mouth, but he knew Roy didn't like it when he did that.

He closed his eyes and thought about what colour roller skates he'd get Roy to buy him afterwards.

~*~

Ducky looked dishevelled and more than a little peeved when Gibbs opened the door to him half an hour later.

"Well, what is it, Jethro?" he demanded, walking in, carrying his medical bag with him. "You said it was an emergency?"

"It is, Duck."

Gibbs led the ME into Tony's bedroom, and Ducky paused, glancing at Tony with a quizzical expression on his face.

"Anthony?" he enquired. "Tony?" There was no response. Ducky raised an eyebrow at Gibbs.

"It's a long story, Ducky," Gibbs sighed. "I didn't know if there was something we should be doing for him right now, or if he needs to go to the hospital."

"How long has he been like this?"

"At least an hour," Gibbs replied. "It's happened before but just for a few minutes at a time – I've never seen it last this long."

"My God – are you saying this isn't the first time...?" Ducky broke off, shaking his head in disbelief. He undid his coat and threw it onto a nearby chair, along with his hat. Then he bustled around, doing various little tests – pulling up Tony's eyelids, taking his pulse, and all the time muttering under his breath.

Finally, he turned back to Gibbs. "I don't see there's any point sending him to the hospital at this stage. He could come around at any minute, and he's not in any physical danger. But I do think we should make him more comfortable. The boy will end up with a stiff back if he stays like that for much longer. Well don't just stand there! Help me, Jethro."

He beckoned Gibbs over, and between them they managed to get Tony into the recovery position, lying on his side on the bed. He went easily enough – he wasn't stiff or unresponsive. His body uncurled into the position they put it in, and he lay there, still humming and rocking. It was eerie.

Ducky pulled the blanket over him and tucked it in under his chin. “Oh, my poor dear boy,” he sighed. “What on earth has happened to you?” He glanced up at Gibbs. “I think it’s time you told me everything,” he said firmly. “And then we can decide what to do next.”

Gibbs gestured with his head for Ducky to sit in the armchair next to the bed while he sat down on the side of the bed, next to Tony. Then he spent the next fifteen minutes telling Ducky exactly what had happened to Tony – everything he knew, starting with the existence of those photographs, and the entire story of how he’d been sexually abused when he was twelve.

Ducky remained uncharacteristically silent throughout – but his face grew paler and his eyes more watery behind their spectacles as Gibbs continued. When Gibbs finished, Ducky took off his glasses, wiped his eyes, put the glasses back on again, and then gave Gibbs his finest glare.

“You will find these men who hurt Anthony, and when you do you will not be gentle with them, Jethro,” he instructed.

“Oh trust me, Ducky, I have no intention of it,” Gibbs growled. He put his hand on the blanket covering Tony’s shoulder. “Damn it, I shouldn’t have left him on his own tonight. I knew it was a mistake.”

“How did you find him?”

Gibbs hesitated. “He went out after I dropped him off. Picked up someone called Terry in a bar. Terry called me and told me he’d zoned out.”

“Bless Terri,” Ducky said, with a little smile. “That restores my faith in human nature somewhat at least. There are good people out there as well as bad.”

“What’s wrong with him, Ducky?” Gibbs asked.

“I can only make a guess,” Ducky said, glancing over at Tony’s humming, rocking body. “But you said that Tony put these memories into a box in his head and refused to acknowledge them for all these years?”

“That’s what he said to Justin, yes,” Gibbs nodded. “He said he’d found ways of distracting himself.”

“Ah yes...” Ducky gave a sad nod. “Our Anthony is very good at providing distractions, isn’t he? I always did think it strange that such a fun-loving young man spent almost as much time at the office as yourself, Jethro. And then there was all the mischief, and the movies, and the generally frenetic level of activity involved in just being Anthony DiNozzo. And of course, sexual intercourse clearly helped distract him, strange though it may seem given the nature of the abuse, but that’s not uncommon in such cases. And, I would suppose, given how stressful today was for him, it was almost inevitable that he’d go out looking for a young lady to spend the night with tonight.”

Gibbs nodded. He saw no reason to disabuse Ducky of the conclusion he’d jumped to about Terry’s gender.

“But what happens when the distractions don’t work any more?” Ducky mused. “Knowing how determined our Anthony is, I would imagine that he’d redouble his efforts – try harder. Yet, today must have been such a shock for him. It’s one thing to suppress memories for all this time, but quite another to confront photographic evidence of the very memories you’ve been keeping under lock and key. His mind has probably been struggling to cope with the intolerable strain all day.”

“He knew the abuse happened, Duck,” Gibbs said. “He was able to recount it in a fair amount of detail, quite lucidly. It clearly wasn’t easy for him, but he did it. So it’s not like he’s blocked it out.”

“No. I think it’s all rather more subtle and complex than that,” Ducky sighed. “Tony most definitely does know it happened. After all, it’s likely that his whole psyche is constructed on the basis of keeping himself from ever being that boy again – someone who could be hurt, abused, and taken advantage of. You say nobody ever found out about the abuse?”

“No. He tried to tell his father, but he wouldn’t listen. I’m only the second person he’s ever told,” Gibbs said, feeling his jaw tighten as he spoke.

“So it’s been his secret all this time, and he’s been protecting that twelve year old boy inside the best way he knows how. It might not be perfect, but it’s worked for him all these years. It does require him to keep busy – which explains a lot - I think we all know how wearying a bored Anthony DiNozzo can be,” Ducky said wryly. “But those are his coping mechanisms. Then, today, those mechanisms broke down – spectacularly. Firstly he had to talk about the abuse, which meant remembering some of the details he’s been trying to avoid, and then his various means of distraction - such as sex - stopped working for him.”

Gibbs winced, recalling what Terry had said about Tony’s failure in the bedroom and how distraught he’d been about it.

“I don’t understand what this is all about though,” Gibbs said, his hand still resting on Tony’s gently rocking shoulder. “Where is he right now? Is he conscious? Can he hear us? He’s definitely not asleep.”

“No, he isn’t,” Ducky sighed. “Oh, Jethro – haven’t you figured it out?”

Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

“By suppressing those memories, Tony has given them enormous power,” Ducky said. “If I may use an analogy...”

“You usually do,” Gibbs muttered. Ducky shot him a wry grin.

“Imagine, if you will, that you are on a diet...”

“I’ve never been on a diet, Duck,” Gibbs interrupted irritably. Ducky glared at him.

“Okay...I’ll imagine it,” Gibbs grunted.

“If I ask you, right now, NOT to think about chocolate cake...tell me, what is the first thing that you think about?”

“Chocolate cake,” Gibbs retorted immediately.

“It’s a well known psychology experiment,” Ducky said, with a wave of his hands. “Ask someone not to think about something, and usually that’s *all* they can think about. Tony’s coping mechanisms have broken down, his distractions aren’t working because of the shock of today’s events, and those memories have come back with a vengeance. And, because of the enormous power they hold for him - the power he has invested them with - and all the no doubt turbulent emotions he has associated with them, they are stronger and more overwhelming than any normal memory. Strong enough to disconnect him from the present and plunge him back into the past.”

“Ducky...” Gibbs gazed at the ME, horrified. “Are you telling me that’s what’s happening to Tony right now? That he’s re-living those memories?”

Ducky glanced at Tony sadly. “Well, I can’t say for certain, Jethro, but yes, I’m very much afraid that he is.”

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Tony wasn’t sure if he hated Luke or Marco more. Marco hurt him, but Luke scared him.

Luke undressed him while he stood there, sullenly, eyes down. Then Luke pulled him, naked, onto his lap and caressed him firmly, hands sweeping over his body. He talked as he touched him, whispering straight into his ear.

“So Tony – I enjoyed our last little meeting. Do you know what I liked most? I liked it when I stuck it in you, and you squealed like a little piglet. A juicy little piglet. You can squeal again this time if you like. Are you afraid of me, Tony? You should be.”

He *was* afraid. Luke was a tall, broad-shouldered man, with thick, dark hair, and steely grey eyes. His hands were always cold but not as cold as his eyes. Luke placed him onto the bed, on his hands and knees. Tony moaned, and curled up into a tight ball. He hated this. At least Roy stroked him, and told him that he loved him, and that he was a good boy.

Cold hands descended on him, roaming over him, demanding and clinical. He heard the mattress give as Luke knelt on the bed behind him.

“Roy told me you were a good boy, but I’m not seeing much evidence of that right now, Tony. Open up for me...that’s right... Come on - I saw those photos of you, you little slut – I know you can do better than this. That’s it...squeal, little piglet, squeal.”

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“Christ, Ducky.” Gibbs got up and paced around the room. “We have to do something to wake him up.”

“Jethro, you said he’s been in these fugue-like states before and always came out of them by himself.”

“Yeah, but he’s never been out of it for this long before. I don’t pretend to understand how this works, but you didn’t hear his statement earlier, Ducky. Those men raped him repeatedly – one of them raped him so viciously he bled and was scared that he was going to die. It’s bad enough he went through that once, but to re-live it over and over again? While we damn well stand by and watch?” Gibbs slammed his fist against the wall, barely noticing the flash of pain as the movement hurt the self-inflicted wounds of a few hours ago.

Ducky got up, came over to him, and grabbed his right hand. “Do I even want to know how this happened?” he asked, glancing at the torn, bloody flesh and the bruising across the knuckles. Gibbs pulled his hand away. Ducky blinked at him owlishly from behind his glasses. “Jethro, I remember that case with Kyle Boone many years ago; the one that cost you your second marriage. Your fists looked like this a lot then, too,” he said softly. “You always do this when a case gets to you, and of course Tony is so much more to you than just a case.”

“Ducky, it’s not important. I’m fine. I’m more worried about Tony, and how we get him to wake up. Supposing he’s lost inside his own mind and can’t find a way out?”

“I think you should have more faith in the boy, Jethro,” Duck told him gently, glancing over at Tony. “He’s very determined. He might be struggling right now, but I don’t think there’s any way our Anthony will give in without a fight, do you?”

“It shouldn’t be a battle he has to fight alone,” Gibbs growled. “Bad enough that he didn’t have anyone to help him when he was twelve, but I’ll be damned if he has to do it by himself now.”

He went over to the bed and sat down beside Tony. He hesitated for a moment and then reached out and stroked Tony's hair.

“Tony, it’s Gibbs. Listen to me - you’ve been out for long enough. You need to find a way back to us now.”

There was no reaction.

“I mean it, DiNozzo,” Gibbs said in a firmer tone of voice. “Get your ass back here.”

He glanced up at Ducky who was giving him a sad look, as if he thought this approach was very unlikely to work, but Gibbs wasn’t about to give up yet. He remembered a few years ago, when Tony had been fighting for his life with the plague, and how he’d ordered him not to die. Even leaving aside the night’s revelations, and the dubious character insights provided by Terry Dyer, he had always known that Tony worshipped the ground he walked on and would do his best to obey any order he threw at him.

“Tony!” he rapped out. “Come back now. It’s safe here – just me and Ducky.”

He stroked Tony’s hair again and then remembered something else about that time with the plague. He leaned forward and spoke directly into Tony’s ear.

“Tony, wherever you are right now, you will **not** stay there. Understand me? Come back. Now!” He combined the firm crack of that last word with a sharp tap to the back of Tony’s head.

Tony blinked.

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Tony glanced around, disoriented. Last thing he remembered, he'd been sitting on the side of the bed, and now he was lying down and Gibbs was here. Where had his boss come from and what the hell was he doing here?

"Boss?" he muttered, sitting up. He groaned, his back and shoulders aching. He felt stiff. Then he saw Ducky standing by the wall. "Ducky? What the hell is going on?"

"You had another one of your episodes, my dear boy."

"Episodes?" Tony frowned.

"You were out of it, DiNozzo. Like you were in the parking lot earlier," Gibbs told him. "And like you were a couple of times during your statement, although just for a few seconds. This time it was longer."

"How long?" Tony asked quietly.

"A couple of hours," Gibbs replied. Tony bit on his lip. "You want to tell us what's going on?"

"Not really." Tony swung his legs over the side of the bed and then looked down, flushing. He was at least wearing a pair of boxer shorts, but apart from that he was naked.

"You do know...?" Ducky began.

"That I've been losing time? Yes, Ducky. I know," Tony said curtly. "It hasn't happened in a long while. I thought it was just a temporary blip, and it'd go away again."

"I don't think the human brain works quite like that, Anthony," Ducky murmured. Tony glanced at him sharply, and then at Gibbs for confirmation.

"He knows," Gibbs said.

Tony knew it had to happen sooner or later, but even so, he felt a wave of impotent fury at the news.

"I'm most terribly sorry, my dear boy," Ducky said quietly. "I'm also very concerned about your mental state right now."

"I'll be fine," Tony snapped. "I just need some time and space...and I'd really like to be left alone for just a goddamn minute."

"Out of the question," Gibbs told him tersely. Tony glared at him.

“What Jethro means is that you were lucky tonight, Anthony,” Ducky said, in a placating tone. “Your lady friend, Terri, had the good sense to call Jethro. Another time you might zone out while taking a bath, or while driving, or in some other potentially hazardous situation.”

“Terry? Oh shit.” Tony buried his head in his hands, remembering. He glanced up at Gibbs who was gazing at him steadily from those steely eyes of his, giving nothing away – as usual. Tony cleared his throat. “What happened to Terry?”

“Gone,” Gibbs replied. “Nice person though,” he added. “Thought the world of you. Didn’t like me for some reason. Told me I wasn’t a ‘people person’.”

“Yeah, I don’t know how to break this to you, Boss, but you don’t always make a great first impression.”

“Tony…” Gibbs gazed at him thoughtfully. “Do you know where you go when you ‘lose time’ as you put it?”

Tony gazed back at him blankly. “I need a drink.”

“I’ll go and get you some water,” Ducky said, disappearing out of the door.

“Lady friend?” Tony queried when he’d gone, raising an eyebrow. Gibbs shrugged.

“I just told him the name – and from there Ducky jumped to his own conclusion.”

“Fuck it!” Tony roared, slamming his hand against the night stand. “Can’t I have any kind of a fucking private life? Does everyone have to know every last damn thing about me?”

“I won’t tell anyone,” Gibbs said. “None of my business.”

“It’s not what you think,” Tony muttered, embarrassed by his outburst. That wasn’t like him – usually he managed to keep everything buttoned up and under control. He sure as hell never lost it with Gibbs of all people. “Well, it’s not exactly what you think anyway,” he said quietly. “I’m not lying about the women – there have been plenty of them. I’ve just never mentioned the men – there have been plenty of them too.”

“Okay.” Gibbs shrugged again. “You don’t need to explain anything to me, Tony.”

“I need the sex,” Tony said quietly. “And to be honest it’s never really mattered who it’s with – men or women.”

“Distraction,” Gibbs said. “I understand.”

Ducky returned with a glass of water and Tony took it, his hand shaking slightly as he reached out.

“You didn’t answer my question, Tony,” Gibbs said to him. “Do you know where you go when you lose time?”

Tony swallowed down the entire glass of water in one gulp.

“Yes,” he said, in a tight, pinched voice. “I know exactly where I go.”

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Ducky looked from Tony to Gibbs and back again. Gibbs looked both furious and appalled at one and the same time, and Tony – well Tony looked scared and oddly defensive. Ducky's heart went out to them both, and he decided it was time that he took charge of the situation.

“Look, it’s practically dawn, and you look terrible – both of you,” he admonished. “Anthony – you need some sleep. I’d really prefer you not to fugue again, so I’d like to administer a sedative if that’s alright with you, my boy? It would give your poor brain a rest and allow you to recover.”

“Oblivion sounds just great to me right now, Ducky,” Tony muttered, still gazing wretchedly at Gibbs.

“And you, Jethro,” Ducky said firmly. “I know you like to pretend you don’t need any sleep, and yes, I also know that you can keep going for days on end with just the occasional catnap. Now, I’m sure that’s a very special and vital sniper skill and so forth, but everyone needs sleep. Therefore, I suggest that you go home and catch a couple of hours' rest, while I stay here and watch over Anthony.”

Gibbs didn’t look happy about that, but Ducky managed to quell any incipient rebellion with a glare.

“I really don’t intend to take no for an answer,” he said. “From either of you.” He turned to glare at Tony as well – he didn’t seem too happy to hear that he’d have company while he slept. “I will be staying,” Ducky said in a tone that brooked no argument. “You won’t hear a peep out of me. I’ll sit on the chair over there.” He gestured to the armchair next to the bed.

Gibbs grunted and then got up. “Get some sleep,” he said to Tony. He grasped Ducky’s arm and led him out into the hallway. “Do not leave him,” he said. “At any point. For any reason.”

“I can assure you, Jethro, I’m quite capable...” Ducky began. Gibbs cut him off.

“He ditched McGee earlier. He might be looking all pale and pathetic right now, but he’s still *Tony*, which means...”

“That he has an inventive mind and the ability to dissemble rather well. I know, dear boy, I know. I have known our dear Anthony for quite as long as you, and I know all his admirable and also less than admirable little traits and foibles. Don’t worry about us, Jethro. I will ensure that Anthony gets some sleep – I simply ask that you go home and do the same.”

“I will.” Gibbs glanced back at the bedroom door again and then left. Ducky went to get another glass of water from the kitchen, and then he returned to the bedroom.

He opened up his medical bag, got out the sedatives, and handed them to Tony.

“I always come prepared,” he said, giving Tony the glass of water. “Whenever Jethro calls me in the middle of the night, it’s either because he’s found a dead body or there’s someone requiring medical assistance. I’ve therefore learned to come prepared for the dead or the living.”

“Or someone who’s a bit of both,” Tony muttered wryly, throwing the pills into his mouth and gulping down the water.

Ducky gazed at him sadly. “Ah, my dear boy, I very much want to keep you in the land of the living,” he said softly. He watched as Tony slid back into the bed and pulled a sheet and blanket over himself. “I’ll be here, Anthony,” he said, turning off the light. He sat down in the armchair beside the bed.

“Seems kind of weird – someone watching me sleep, Duck,” Tony muttered.

“It won’t bother you for long, my dear boy,” Ducky replied softly. “Those are very good sedatives. Before long you will be...”

He broke off as he heard Tony’s breathing change, and a gentle snore emerged from under the blanket.

“I really am most terribly sorry about all this, Anthony,” Ducky said softly, knowing his patient was asleep. “I fear that I may have misjudged you. Of course that was precisely what you wanted, I’m sure. Far better that we all saw a clown than that we caught a glimpse of that vulnerable young boy you must still be underneath. And yet I do blame myself – you see, I often **did** see glimpses and chose to ignore them, like pieces of a puzzle that I discarded because they didn’t fit the preconceived image of it that I held in my head.”

He clasped his hands together in his lap and gazed at Tony’s sleeping form.

“I’ve always been aware of your somewhat complex personality, my dear boy,” he continued. “I’m afraid I completely misdiagnosed you when I told Jethro that you were a narcissist not so long ago, and I feel I absolutely must apologise to you for that. In fact, I suspect you might be the complete opposite. What you are, what you **really** are, far from being so obviously on display for all to see and judge, is actually very well hidden.”

Ducky reached into his pocket and pulled out a packet of mints. He popped one into his mouth. “I suppose we all present a face to the world,” he mused, as he sucked quietly on the mint. “We all wear a mask that we want the world to see to a certain extent, but I doubt that many people’s masks are as carefully constructed as yours, my dear Anthony. Yours is really a work of art – a thing of quite considerable beauty in its own way. I do not mean to imply that you have been deliberately deceiving us all this time. I doubt that is the case at all.” He shook his head in the darkness, one ear listening for the deep rise and fall of Tony’s chest as he slumbered.

“You were simply forming a defence, lest anyone get too close. You see, I really do believe that adult Tony is doing his best to protect that child who was so cruelly used, and if he has to spin a rather elaborate web of subterfuge to do so then that is simply what he **has** to do. There are some things one cannot hide of course. Your sense of empathy has always been well known to me, and your courage and loyalty cannot be faulted. These features shine

through. For the rest? I suspect we barely know you – the real you – at all. And for that, Anthony, I truly am very sorry.”

End of Darkness

Disintegration Part One by Xanthe

McGee got into the office early and had the report Gibbs had asked for ready and waiting on his desk by the time Ziva arrived. He felt uncomfortable being around her, working on this case and not being able to speak to her about it. He longed to talk to someone. Gibbs had ordered him not to say anything though, and he could understand why – this wasn't his secret to tell. Tony would either tell people himself, or Gibbs would do it for him if he thought they needed to know.

It had been hard for McGee to get that image of Boy 43 out of his head all night, and he hadn't slept much. Every time he closed his eyes he saw those photographs, and it was impossible for him to reconcile the scared child in those pictures with the man he'd been working alongside these past six years. Tony was so self-assured, so confident, and so...annoying. There was no getting around the fact that Tony could irritate them all when he was in one of his bored moods, but now McGee regretted every harsh word he'd ever said to him.

"Tony is late. Gibbs will not be happy," Ziva commented, breaking into his train of thought. McGee doubted Gibbs would care in the circumstances. "Gibbs is also late," Ziva added, with a frown. "Now that is much more unusual. Do you know what is going on, McGee?"

He glanced up, unwilling to tell an outright lie.

"Yes," he said, and then he looked back at what he was working on, reviewing a list of missing persons dating back to the 1970s, checking through all the boys aged under eighteen.

"Well?" Ziva raised an eyebrow.

"I can't say," McGee told her. That was like a red rag to a bull. She got up, came over, and perched on the side of his desk, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

"A mystery? Hmmm - I like mysteries," she said, twirling some of her dark hair between her fingers.

"It's not that kind of mystery, Ziva," he told her firmly, pushing her off his desk.

"What does that mean?" She looked surprised that her joking tone had been so comprehensively rebuffed.

"It means it's not something to be ferreted out – it's not funny, it's not a practical joke, or something we can all laugh about. It's serious, and it's not...it's not something I can talk about. Maybe Gibbs or Tony will tell you, but I can't."

"Very well. My apologies. I will not ask any more questions." She went and sat back down at her desk.

"Ziva – I'm sorry," McGee sighed. "But I really can't talk about this."

She looked up at him, her dark eyes understanding. "It is fine, McGee. I understand secrets. I have kept many myself."

The elevator pinged, and McGee looked up in alarm, his heart beating a little too fast. He didn't like himself for it, but he dreaded seeing Tony again. Hearing that testimony last night had changed his view of the other agent, and he didn't know how to behave around him now.

He was relieved when Gibbs strode into the squad room.

"What do you have for me, McGee?" Gibbs demanded, sitting down at his desk. He looked as supremely focussed as ever – and just as tightly wound up as he had been last night. McGee doubted that was going to change any time soon.

"I've left that file you asked for on your desk," McGee replied.

"Good." Gibbs picked it up and began reading it.

"Uh, how's Tony?" McGee asked. Gibbs raised his head slowly and gave him an indecipherable look.

"He'll be in later," he said tersely, which McGee was pretty sure hadn't answered his question.

Gibbs was quiet for half an hour as he read. McGee peeked at him surreptitiously every so often, but Gibbs, as always, was giving nothing away. When he finished, he got up and handed the file to Ziva.

"I want a warrant for this man's arrest, Ziva, and a search warrant for his house," he ordered.

She began flicking through the file. "Roy Quinn. On what charge?"

"Possession of child pornography for starters," Gibbs replied curtly. Her eyes widened.

"Do we have probable cause?"

"Oh yeah," Gibbs growled. "We definitely have that."

"Uh, Boss – there's one problem," McGee said, getting to his feet. "I did some digging, and Quinn is away on vacation right now – in Thailand - perhaps not an altogether surprising choice of holiday destination. He isn't due back until next week."

Gibbs gave him a glare that caused him to sit back down on his chair again.

"We could still go and check out his house," McGee suggested tentatively.

"And run the risk of someone warning him, so he decides never to come back? I don't think so, McGee. No way am I letting this bastard slip through my fingers!" Gibbs roared. "Okay – he'll wait. Ziva – get the warrants ready anyway. In fact – get me a warrant to search his business premises too."

She nodded and turned back to the file, then paused, and glanced up again.

"Gibbs – it says here that Roy Quinn is CEO of DQ Enterprises," she said. "Is that not the name of the company Tony's father owns?"

"Yes it is, Ziva," Gibbs replied tersely. "Now get me those warrants."

"Yes, Gibbs." She nodded, her eyes wide.

"McGee – we clearly can't move on Quinn for a few days, so let's turn our attention back to Admiral Parrish. Did you check the surveillance logs for him this morning?"

"Yes, Boss, I did." McGee was glad that he'd got in early and gone through everything he thought Gibbs might ask him. This case was like a powder keg – and that meant Gibbs was liable to explode if any of them made the slightest mistake. Even leaving aside his boss's temperament, McGee wanted to do his best work in any case – for Tony's sake.

"And?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow. McGee shook his head.

"Admiral Parrish didn't call anyone – on his landline or cell phone – all night. He didn't send any emails, either. He also didn't leave the house. He's still there."

"He's a slippery bastard," Gibbs muttered. "I thought he'd be too smart to warn his fellow perverts that he's under suspicion. What about the housekeeper?"

"No, Boss. She didn't make any calls, either."

"But has she left the house?" Gibbs demanded. "He could have asked her to mail some letters."

"She's still there, Boss. You gave orders that she was to be followed and apprehended if she tried to mail anything," McGee reminded him. Gibbs slammed his fist down hard on his desk, making both McGee and Ziva jump.

"Damn it. I was hoping we'd get something."

"We could leave it a little longer, Boss," McGee suggested. "Give him a few days – he might contact them when he thinks we're not watching any more."

"And leave him out there with the potential to abuse another child?" Gibbs growled. "I don't think so."

Privately, McGee thought that unlikely given that they were following Parrish's every move, but he understood Gibbs's feelings on the subject.

"I want the other men in that ring, but I'm not prepared to risk a child's safety to get them," Gibbs said. "There are other ways in any case. Parrish is a slick bastard, but my gut tells me that Quinn will be easier to break."

"If we can get our hands on him," McGee murmured.

"Oh, we will, McGee," Gibbs said, in a grimly determined tone of voice. McGee glanced up; Gibbs's eyes were dark, and McGee felt a shiver go up his spine. "We will," Gibbs repeated, and McGee knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that there was no place in the world where Quinn would be safe from his boss.

Dozens of children had been abused, including one of his own agents, and Gibbs wouldn't allow these men to get away with that. McGee knew that his boss would do everything within the law to bring the abusers to justice. He also knew that if the only justice Gibbs could get was the rough kind then he'd take it, as a last resort.

McGee waited until Ziva had left the squad room, and then he got up and went over to Gibbs's desk.

"Boss – I was wondering, supposing we can't get Parrish, Quinn and Marco through the courts? Are they going to turn up in dumpsters with bullets through their heads one day?" he asked quietly.

Gibbs sat back in his chair and gazed at him speculatively.

"Would you have a problem with that, Tim?" he asked, just as quietly.

McGee shook his head. "No, Boss," he said firmly. "I just want to be clear what the end game is here."

"I won't ask you to get involved," Gibbs told him sharply. "If anything needs to be done, I'll do it alone."

"I understand," McGee said thoughtfully. "But, Boss, I want you to know that if that's what you end up having to do, then I'll have your six."

"It could get ugly," Gibbs warned.

"It already got ugly – twenty-five years ago."

Gibbs nodded. "Noted and understood, Tim."

McGee nodded back at him, both of them understanding each other, and then he returned to his desk where he continued with his work as if nothing had happened.

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Gibbs gave it a couple of hours, but when there was still no sign of Parrish contacting anyone, he gave the order for his agents to arrest the admiral again. McGee was right – he could leave it a few days, and keep Parrish under tight surveillance, but his gut felt uneasy about doing that. He suspected Parrish had a contingency plan for just this eventuality, and with his military training, he might have a well-designed escape route waiting for him.

In addition, Gibbs had no doubt that a successful man like Parrish had plenty of favours he could call in. Gibbs was sure the admiral's friends wouldn't help him if they knew what he'd done, but it was unlikely that they knew about the admiral's dark side. They'd think they were

helping a friend who had been falsely accused, and Parrish might end up getting away as a result.

The admiral was seething when Gibbs's agents brought him into the squad room, hands cuffed behind his back.

"I thought I told you yesterday, Gibbs – I'm the wrong man to piss off."

"And I thought I told you – so am I."

Gibbs got up, went over to the admiral, and looked him in the eye. He remembered everything he'd heard about this man from Tony last night and felt his entire body stiffen in disgust. He knew he could take out his gun, shoot this bastard between the eyes while his hands were in cuffs, and not feel even a twinge of remorse about it.

"You couldn't make this stick yesterday – what's changed today? I told you Justin planted those pictures on my laptop himself!" Parrish protested.

"I know that's what you told us," Gibbs growled. "But we've had another complaint against you that backs up Justin's story."

"What?" Parrish narrowed his eyes. "You're lying. I don't believe you."

"I'm not, and you should. I took a statement from another of your victims last night. Different boy," Gibbs said, gazing at Parrish intently as he spoke, interested in the other man's reaction.

He saw the briefest flicker of something in Parrish's eyes as he took in that news. Was Parrish trying to figure out who it was? Was he going through a mental list of all the boys he'd abused and trying to figure out which one was the most likely to have reported him? Well, Gibbs doubted that Tony DiNozzo was on that list, so he still had the element of surprise on his side.

Parrish was probably already thinking on his feet and concocting some convincing story like the one he'd made up about Justin yesterday. Gibbs was almost looking forward to playing his trump card on the admiral – because there was no way Parrish could talk himself out of what he'd done to Tony.

"Take him to interrogation room one, McGee," Gibbs ordered, with a flick of his head.

He decided to let Parrish sweat for awhile. He had told Tony he could sit in on the interrogation, but he regretted that promise now. It was all very well his senior agent being present during the questioning of a suspect, but Tony wouldn't be there in that capacity, and Gibbs was pretty sure that it wasn't a good idea to put Tony and his abuser in a room together. On the other hand, he had promised – and the shock factor of confronting Parrish with one of his victims might be enough to prompt a confession out of the man.

Gibbs felt uneasy all the same. Tony's mental state was clearly fragile, judging by what had happened last night. Supposing Tony went into one of his fugues while in the interrogation room?

He turned the problem over in his head and had just decided to proceed alone when Tony arrived, with Ducky in attendance. Gibbs gave his agent a searching look; Tony wasn't dressed in one of his usual sharp suits. Instead, he was dressed casually, in jeans and a loose green shirt, and, while paler than usual, he looked a hell of a lot better than he had last night. All the same, something about him seemed different. Gibbs wasn't sure what it was – maybe the expression on his face, or the way he carried himself - or maybe it was the haunted look in his eyes.

"You are late," Ziva said to Tony. "Very late."

"Dentist," he replied, throwing his bag down behind his desk. He patted his jaw as if he'd had some work done and then glanced at Ducky. "They gave me a sedative – man those things really knock you out."

"The dentist..." Ziva mused. "You have not had to visit the dentist since...oh, I do not know, maybe it was when you were dating Jeanne," she said meaningfully. Gibbs saw a flicker of a wince cross Tony's face – saying he had a dental appointment had been Tony's lie of choice during his undercover work with Jeanne.

"Well that was a couple of years ago, Zeeevah!" Tony replied with a grin, taking her comment entirely at face value. "Been awhile – so it's hardly surprising I needed some work done today."

Gibbs beckoned Ducky over to his desk. "He okay?" he asked quietly.

"He insists that he is," Ducky replied. "But I'm not sure I'm convinced. He did at least sleep well – even if it was a highly medicated kind of sleep. Did *you* sleep well, Jethro?"

"Sure, Duck," Gibbs shrugged. Ducky's sharp blue eyes saw right through him.

"Ah, I suspect you are both lying to me," he said ruefully.

Gibbs glanced at Tony, who was busy regaling Ziva with a long and frankly unlikely story about how he'd got the dental nurse's phone number.

"He well enough to work, Ducky?" he asked.

Ducky gazed at Tony thoughtfully. "I think it would be cruel to refuse him the distraction that work affords," he replied meaningfully.

"Think he'll go into a fugue in the office?"

Ducky sighed. "Hopefully not – if you keep him busy enough, Jethro, and, knowing you, I'm sure that won't be too much of a problem. But the human brain is a sensitive and complex thing, and there are no guarantees. Just keep a close eye on him."

"Intended to, Duck," Gibbs grunted.

Ducky nodded and patted his arm. "Well, I've delivered him into your capable hands, Jethro. I will be in Autopsy if you require my services any further."

"Take Ziva with you," Gibbs told him. "I want to talk to Tony."

"Very well. She will have to know at some point though, Jethro," Ducky pointed out. "As will Abigail – if they're going to work on the case then you have to tell them."

"Yeah, I know – but not right now. I have enough on my hands right now."

Ducky nodded and stopped by Ziva's desk to ask her to accompany him down to Autopsy on some pretext or other. Gibbs looked up to find Tony standing in front of his desk.

"So, I hear you have Parrish in interrogation room one," he said quietly. "You weren't going to start without me, were you, Boss?"

There was something hard-edged about him, Gibbs thought; something unlike the usual eager-to-please Tony. This Tony was more brittle.

"Are you sure you want to be in there?" Gibbs asked. "It might be tough."

"You promised," Tony said, in a hard tone of voice.

Gibbs gazed at him thoughtfully. Tony was right – he had promised, and the last thing he wanted to do was betray Tony's trust right now. He had a feeling that would be a move he would live to regret.

"Okay," he said with a curt nod. "But I do all the talking."

"Boss..." Tony began, a hint of protest in his voice.

"I do **all** the talking," Gibbs repeated. "Or you don't get to sit in there. Take it or leave it, Tony."

Tony nodded, grudgingly. "Okay."

"You sit – that's all you do. You just sit," Gibbs said. "I'm hoping your presence will provoke a confession out of him, but if it doesn't, then we just live with that. We have enough to charge him, and we'll keep on digging – see if we can find some more."

Gibbs stood up and looked his agent straight in the eye. "This might be harder than you think."

"I have to do this," Tony said. Then his gaze faltered, and he looked suddenly like a scared child. Gibbs felt his stomach flip – he had definitely **never** seen Tony look like this before. "He's in my head, Boss," Tony whispered. "If I can just face him – face him now as an adult, knowing he can't hurt me any more, then maybe I can get him out."

It made a kind of sense. Gibbs nodded. "I understand."

"He used to scare the crap out of me," Tony added. "I can still feel the fear, Gibbs. I need to...need to..."

"Pull out the monster's teeth?" Gibbs suggested.

"Yeah," Tony agreed. "That's exactly what I need to do."

Gibbs swept into interrogation room one a few minutes later with Tony behind him. He sat down opposite Parrish and gestured Tony to sit beside him. This was going to be harder than usual because he had to be aware of the reactions of two people instead of one, so Gibbs knew he had to keep his wits about him. He had installed McGee in the observation room to be another pair of eyes for him, so they could compare notes later.

"I see you've brought back-up this time," Parrish said, gazing at Tony stonily across the table. "Why, Agent Gibbs? Do you think you can intimidate me into admitting to something I didn't do?"

"No." Gibbs shook his head. "I don't think anyone could intimidate you, Parrish. I think it's more likely that you do the intimidating."

"I have no idea what that means," Parrish replied. He linked his hands together and rested them on the table, looking calm and untroubled.

"This is Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo," Gibbs said, with a nod in Tony's direction. "You spoke to him on the phone yesterday."

"I remember." Parrish nodded.

"He remembers too," Gibbs said. "Although he remembers you better as someone called Luke."

Parrish went very still, and his gaze flickered searchingly over Tony's face as if looking for clues. Gibbs watched him closely. He was glad they were taping this, so he could play it back later, because Parrish wasn't giving much away.

"I don't understand what that means," Parrish said, clearing his throat. Gibbs noticed that he was still looking at Tony though.

"I can see that you're not sure who he is," Gibbs said. "So I'm going to refresh your memory."

He opened up the laptop and brought up a picture of Boy 43.

"He knew you as Luke – you knew him as Tony. Circa 1984. Recognise this shot? You should - it's in your favourites file."

"Is this some kind of joke?" Parrish asked, but Gibbs noticed the flash of recognition in his eyes as he glanced at the photo. "I don't know who the poor boy in this photograph is, Agent Gibbs, but you can't possibly try and set me up using one of your own agents."

"I'm not trying to set you up, Parrish," Gibbs said with a shrug. "Agent DiNozzo is the boy in that photograph, and he says you raped him when he was twelve years old."

Gibbs noticed Parrish glancing at Tony again, and Gibbs could almost see the cogs in his mind turning as he tried to figure out if Tony really was the boy in the picture. Gibbs turned to glance at Tony as well. Tony wasn't saying anything, but his entire body was wound up tight and there was an anxious, vulnerable expression in his eyes that made him look exactly like the child in the picture. Even Parrish had to be able to see that they weren't playing a trick on him, and Tony really was who Gibbs said he was.

"Do you know a man called Roy Quinn?" Gibbs asked Parrish suddenly. Parrish's eyes flickered just a tiny amount at the unexpected question, and then he recovered.

"I once knew a marine by that name when I was serving in Vietnam," he replied. Gibbs had to admire him for how coolly he was playing this – he was completely deadpan.

"He a friend of yours?" Gibbs asked.

"I knew him. I haven't seen him in a long time."

"Did you share boys with him?" Gibbs asked. "Did you and he groom underage boys for sex? Did you bully and coerce them to the point where they agreed to sex and then share them with each other?"

"No, and I resent the implication."

"Wasn't an implication, Parrish – it was an accusation."

"Where's your evidence?" Parrish demanded.

"Tony gave me a statement last night."

"How old is Agent DiNozzo now?" Parrish asked, glancing at Tony dismissively. "In his mid-thirties? You say I knew him in 1984? Are you seriously saying this accusation against me is based on a child who was twelve at the time remembering someone he hasn't seen in twenty-five years and making an accurate identification of him? I don't think so, Agent Gibbs. If your agent really was sexually abused as a child then I'm very sorry for him, but he wasn't abused by me. This is a case of mistaken identity."

"Agent DiNozzo identified a scar on your inner thigh," Gibbs told him.

"I was injured in Vietnam. It's on my service record which you have access to. Of course I have a scar on my thigh! You wouldn't have to see it to know it's there – you don't get hospitalised with a shrapnel wound and have it magically disappear!" Parrish shook his head. "This is pathetic, Gibbs. Do you seriously think any of this will stand up in court?"

"Yes, I do." Gibbs nodded. "Tony's a very reliable witness – he's a federal agent."

Parrish glanced at Tony speculatively, his eyes icy cold, like a snake considering its prey. His tongue protruded through his lips slightly, wetting them as he surveyed Tony. There was a streak of pure, cold-blooded evil in Parrish, and as Gibbs watched him watching Tony he had a sudden sense of what it must have been like for a twelve year old boy to be trapped in a hotel room with this man. No wonder Tony had been so scared of 'Luke'.

Tony reached up and began stroking the back of his head. Gibbs moved his foot sideways and surreptitiously nudged Tony's shoe with it under the table. Tony made a little sound in the back of his throat, but he nodded and moved his hand down to his lap. It was out of Parrish's sight, but Gibbs could see that Tony's hand was shaking. He wished he could give his agent more verbal reassurance – the point of bringing him in here was that he got to face down Parrish as an adult, but instead it looked as if being in Parrish's presence was simply reawakening his childhood fears.

Parrish was still giving Tony that cold, deadly, speculative look. Then suddenly he looked straight at Gibbs and smiled – and Gibbs felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

"I'm sorry for Agent DiNozzo, Gibbs. It's terrible for him if he really is the boy in this photograph." Parrish nodded his head towards the laptop where the photo was still displayed. "He's so young – barely more than a child. So young, so innocent." He shook his head sadly.

Gibbs frowned, wondering what the hell kind of game Parrish was playing.

"Fresh and innocent, like a lamb," Parrish murmured softly. "Or..." He glanced straight at Tony as he spoke, a malicious gleam in his eyes. "A little piglet."

Tony's reaction took Gibbs completely by surprise. One minute he was sitting silently in the chair beside him, holding his shaking hand in his lap, mutely watching the interrogation, and the next he went ballistic. He was like a different person, someone Gibbs had never seen before, as he exploded across the room. He was making a low, keening sound in the back of his throat as he grabbed Parrish and threw him bodily out of his chair, then jumped on top of him. He pinned Parrish to the floor, one hand wrapped around his neck, and then pounded his fist into the man's face – once, twice, three times - before Gibbs managed to pull him off, and McGee burst into the room to help.

"Tony... what the hell...? DiNozzo - back off!" Gibbs yelled, holding Tony's arms behind his back, using all his strength to contain his struggling agent. Tony was like a bomb, exploding all over the place, and even Gibbs, with all his experience and training, was finding it hard to hold him. Eventually he managed to shove him back against the wall, and then he stood in front of him, one arm pressed across Tony's chest to keep him there, and looked into his eyes. A stranger looked back at him; a stranger whose gaze flickered over his shoulder and stared with a blind, blank hatred at the man lying on the floor.

"Tony!" Gibbs grabbed hold of Tony's jaw and forced him to look at him. "Snap out of it! Now!"

Tony looked at him as if he didn't even know who he was, and then, slowly, the stranger disappeared, and Tony was back again. Gibbs cautiously relaxed his hold but still kept his own body between Tony and Parrish.

"He assaulted me," Parrish hissed. Gibbs glanced at him over his shoulder. McGee was helping him to his feet, and Parrish was wiping blood from the corner of his mouth. "He's unstable – he went for me with no provocation. I didn't say anything - **anything** - to provoke that, Agent Gibbs. You saw me. You heard me. You have the tape to prove it! He just went crazy. He's out of his mind, Gibbs – and hardly what I'd call a reliable witness."

Gibbs could have kicked himself; Parrish had laid a trap for him, and he'd just walked straight into it.

"Boss?" Tony said, in a shaky voice.

"It's okay, Tony," Gibbs told him softly. "Come with me – I'm going to get you out of here. You should never have been in here in the first place. McGee – take care of Parrish."

He took hold of Tony's arm and led him out of the door. Tony followed him blindly, like a child, looking completely out of it.

"What did I do?" Tony whispered as they got into the elevator. He crouched down on the floor, his back against the wall, covered his head with his arms, and began rocking. "What did I do, Boss? What did I just do?"

"It's okay." Gibbs flicked the emergency switch, stopping the elevator, and knelt down in front of him. "It's okay. I should never have taken you in there."

Tony just kept on rocking. Gibbs wasn't sure what to do. He'd never seen Tony like this. He reached out a tentative hand to touch his hair, which was the only bit of his head visible right now. Tony relaxed a fraction, so Gibbs began to stroke with more confidence. That seemed to work - Tony uncurled and gazed at him from shocked eyes.

"This was my fault, not yours, Tony," Gibbs said firmly, removing his hand. "Okay? It's not your fault."

"I did something bad," Tony muttered.

"No – you did something understandable. Tony...what was the trigger? One minute you were fine, if a little shaky, and the next you just lost it."

Tony flinched and reached up to stroke his hair. Gibbs grabbed his hand and stopped it before it got there. He kept hold of Tony's hand to prevent him doing it again.

"Don't go there, Tony. Stay with me," he said. He grabbed Tony's jaw with his free hand and made him look at him. "Don't zone out on me. Talk to me instead – don't go back into the memory alone – share it with me."

Tony didn't reply – he just kept on rocking.

"Can you do that, Tony?" Gibbs asked him insistently. "Can you talk it out instead of zoning out?"

"I don't know. It's in my head. I can see it. I can hear it. I can feel it. It seems pretty real." His eyes started to glaze over; Gibbs tapped his jaw firmly, and his eyes came back into focus.

"Try," Gibbs ordered.

Tony grimaced. "Squeal, little piglet, squeal," he muttered.

Gibbs gazed at him blankly, and then the realisation hit him. “That’s what he used to say to you?”

Tony nodded. “He kept asking me if I was scared of him. He wanted me to be scared of him. He wanted me to squeal when he...he kept saying it...I used to curl into a ball...’Are you scared of me, Tony? You should be. Roy said you were a good boy, but you aren’t being good right now. I saw those pictures of you, you little slut, you can do better than this...open up for me...that’s better...Does it hurt when I stick it in you? You can cry if you like. Cry for me. Squeal. I like it when you squeal, Tony...you’re like a piglet, a juicy little piglet...so squeal like one, you little slut...”

The litany went on and on until Tony’s voice became hoarse, and eventually he stopped talking. He was shaking visibly, so Gibbs put his arms around Tony’s shoulders, pulled him against his chest, and held him tight. Tony rocked against him, and Gibbs didn’t know what to do except hold him. He didn’t have a clue how to deal with this, so he just worked on instinct. He stroked Tony’s hair soothingly, and gradually, slowly, Tony began to calm down.

Gibbs continued to hold him until the shaking stopped, and then he drew back. Tony was gazing at him from eyes that were embarrassed and scared at one and the same time. He looked like both a frightened child and a grown man, a mixture of emotions etched onto his face.

“Sorry, Boss,” he muttered with a wince. He was white with humiliation.

“It’s okay, Tony. I asked you to talk it out instead of zoning out, and that’s what you did. At least we managed to stop you going into a fugue.”

“Fuck it.” Tony got up, unsteadily, holding onto the rail in the elevator. Gibbs went with him, putting a hand under his elbow to steady him. “I feel like such an idiot. I know it was years ago, and Parrish can’t hurt me now, but still something inside me just snapped. I had to protect him, keep him safe.”

“Keep who safe?” Gibbs frowned.

“The kid...me...it’s hard to explain. He’s inside me, Gibbs, and I have to look out for him.”

“I can understand that,” Gibbs said. “Nobody else looked out for him – for you – back then. You had to do it all by yourself.”

“When I went away to boarding school, I told myself I could be someone different,” Tony explained. “Someone this didn’t happen to. The kind of person nobody hurt. Nobody knew me at boarding school – they didn’t know what I was like before, and I damn well wasn’t going to let them know, either. So I had to hide him away – nobody was ever supposed to see him, and nobody has until now.” A flicker of anger passed over Tony’s face. “I didn’t want you to see him, Boss,” he growled. “Not you, of all people. That’s why I’m so fucking embarrassed right now. I’m...kind of protective of him.”

“Ya think, DiNozzo?” Gibbs commented dryly, remembering how hard it had been to restrain Tony back in the interrogation room. “But it’s okay to let him out, Tony. I think you’re gonna have to let him out more often if you’re going to get better.”

“Fuck no. Never again. That was bad enough.” Tony ran a shaky hand through his hair.

“You can’t hide him any more. And he might surprise you. He might be stronger than you think.”

“He’s a basket case. And I don’t want you thinking of me like that. I’ll lose my job.”

“You won’t lose your damn job, Tony! I won’t let that happen.”

“I don’t want you, or anyone else, seeing me that way,” Tony hissed. “He’s weak, damaged. He’s not lo...” He broke off. “Likeable,” he finished, but that hadn’t been what he’d intended to say.

“You can’t divide yourself in two,” Gibbs told him sensibly. “You can’t split yourself up and reject the bits you don’t like. You have to find a way to accept them, or they’ll come back and bite you like they did today.”

“Yeah, well, that’s easier said than done. Did you ever see the movie ‘Deliverance’?”

Gibbs frowned. Much as he knew Tony liked his movie references, he couldn’t see how one could possibly be appropriate right now. He shook his head.

“Well, ‘Deliverance’ is a pretty famous movie from the 70’s, Boss. Parrish had clearly seen it when he fucked me as a kid. I didn’t know it at the time, but there’s a scene in the movie where this guy is raped and gets told to squeal like a pig. I’m guessing Parrish liked the way that sounded. I rented the movie when I was a freshman at college, not realising what was in it, and lost about three hours. Woke up to find I’d pissed myself and thrown up. Whole place was a mess. Christ that guy is sick.”

“I will make Parrish pay for what he did to you, Tony,” Gibbs vowed grimly. “I promise you that.”

“You don’t know who you’re dealing with,” Tony said. “He’s smart, Boss – and he still scares the shit out of me. I don’t mind admitting that.” Tony dropped his gaze to the floor like he wanted to sink into it. Gibbs lifted his chin with his fingers and made him meet his eyes.

“I made you a promise, and I’ll damn well keep it,” he hissed. “Parrish will go to jail for what he’s done. I’ll work night and day to make that happen. Hell, I have to, because if I fail I won’t be able to look you in the eye like this again, Tony. Understood?”

Tony seemed surprised by his intensity. He gazed at Gibbs searchingly, and then he nodded.

“Understood, Boss,” he said quietly. “If anyone can take that bastard down, it’s you.”

He straightened up his shirt, which had become torn in the fracas back in the interrogation room, and then he reached out and flicked the switch on the elevator again.

“And now we’re going to see Ducky I assume,” Tony sighed.

“Oh yeah,” Gibbs growled. “Now we are definitely going to see Ducky.”

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It had been a busy day in Autopsy, so by the time he was able to take a break Ducky decided to treat himself to a nice cup of tea and one of the fine Scottish shortbread biscuits that his cousin had sent him for his birthday. He had to abandon any thought of putting his feet up for a quiet half hour though, when he saw a grim-faced Gibbs usher a frankly pallid Tony out of the elevator and into his domain. Ducky took in Tony's torn shirt, and the pent-up fury in the way Gibbs was moving, and sighed.

"Mr. Palmer, would you be so kind as to go out and find some real Twinings English Breakfast tea for me," he said. "I fear someone has substituted Liptons, and it just isn't the same at all." He put his cup down with a theatrical grimace.

"Of course, Dr. Mallard," Jimmy said eagerly, always happy to run errands for him.

"Thank you – and do take your time, Mr. Palmer. No need to rush." Jimmy took off out of the door, nearly knocking into Gibbs on his way in.

"There an emergency somewhere, Ducky?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

"I'm afraid Mr. Palmer will be gone some time." Ducky shook his head sadly. "I sent him looking for tea."

"Shouldn't take him more than ten minutes."

"Real English Breakfast Tea, Jethro," Ducky told him with a chuckle. "That will take him a tad longer, I warrant. Now, what can I do for you two gentlemen? Tony - did you hurt your hand?" He glanced at Tony's right fist, which was streaked with blood.

"The blood isn't mine, Ducky," Tony said.

"All the same – if you'd like to sit down." Ducky gestured him onto one of his autopsy tables, and Tony sat on the side of it and held out his hand for Ducky to clean off the blood. He was right about it not being his – the knuckles underneath were reddened, but that was all. "You and Jethro are as bad as each other," Ducky admonished. "I never see young Timothy in here with bruised fists, and dear Ziva's methods of fighting are, I fear, too subtle to leave a mark. Yet with you and Jethro it's always the same. You two are more alike than I think either of you realises."

Tony grinned at him, looking delighted by that comment.

"Are you going to tell me which poor unfortunate was on the receiving end of your fists on this occasion, Anthony?" Ducky asked, and then wished he hadn't as Tony's grin faded, and he reached up with his free hand to smooth down the hair on the back of his head. Ducky frowned and glanced at Gibbs, who grasped his arm and led him away out of earshot.

"I need you to keep an eye on him for a couple of hours, Duck."

"He's not a parcel, Jethro. You can't just pass him around," Ducky remonstrated.

"I'm not passing him around. I just can't leave him alone right now. You can see what kind of a state he's in." He nodded in Tony's direction. Tony wasn't in the fugue-like state he'd been in the previous night, but he was still smoothing his hair down with repetitive movements of his hand. "Why does he do that weird stroking thing, Duck?" Gibbs asked. "I thought it caused the fugue, but he's still with us right now, so that can't be it."

"It's a self-comforting mechanism, Jethro," Ducky replied. "He's trying to calm himself down and make himself feel better. And no, it doesn't cause the fugues – it's his attempt to head them off – one of them anyway. I've noticed he has several – the humming for example. Unfortunately, it doesn't always work, as we've seen."

"He just had a total meltdown," Gibbs grunted. "I'm not surprised he needs to comfort himself right now."

"You know, this might all be more than we can deal with," Ducky told him quietly. "He might need proper psychiatric help, Jethro."

Gibbs shook his head. "You know Tony – there's no way you'll be able to talk him into seeing a shrink, Ducky."

"Me? Oh, I wouldn't even try," Ducky replied with a wry chuckle. "You're the only one he listens to, Jethro, as you well know."

"I doubt he'd hear it, even from me. And I don't think we're there yet. This has all happened so suddenly – give him a few days, and he might settle down."

"He might – with some help." Gibbs raised an eyebrow. "*Your* help, Jethro," Ducky clarified. "He's dealing with something extraordinarily distressing right now. You can't expect him to be the same Anthony DiNozzo you've worked with these past eight years - your capable, if sometimes wayward, second-in-command. You have to handle him differently."

"Ducky - I just spent the past ten minutes holding him in the elevator while he shook like a scared kid in my arms," Gibbs growled. "Trust me, that's not the way I usually handle Tony."

"But can you work the case and be there to give him what he needs as well, Jethro?"

"I'm not giving up the case, Ducky," Gibbs snapped. "Not while those bastards are still out there."

Ducky sighed. "I thought you'd say that."

Gibbs ran a hand through his hair, looking more troubled than Ducky was used to seeing him.

"I'm not sure I'm getting this right, Duck," he admitted. "I just made a big mistake – I allowed him to sit in on an interrogation with one of his abusers."

Ducky gazed at him, horrified. "I'm presuming that was where the blood came from?"

"Yeah. The bastard said something deliberately to push Tony over the edge, and he lost it. He went ballistic. I've never seen him like that before, Ducky. You know Tony – if anything ever gets to him, he never lets it show. And he sure as hell never loses it like he did back there."

"Well, he's under extreme duress at the moment."

"I know. Thing is, I wouldn't usually have agreed to his request to be there – I knew it was a mistake. I just don't know the best way to handle him right now, and I don't want to say or do anything to make any of this worse for him than it already is."

"Ah." Ducky nodded. "You're second-guessing yourself, my dear Jethro – and that isn't like you at all."

"It's something he said yesterday about how Parrish had conditioned Justin to respond to older, male, authority figures. Made me wonder if that's how he sees himself and me."

Ducky glanced over at Tony, who was still sitting on the side of the autopsy table, stroking his hair absently. "You know, this reminds me of a book I'm very fond of. Have you ever read 'The Little Prince', Jethro?"

Gibbs looked at him as if he'd gone insane.

"No, well, I thought not. It's an enchanting tale, but perhaps a little too whimsical for your tastes. It's full of wise little insights into the human condition. I'll spare you all the details, but at one point in the book the little prince of the title tames a fox, and the fox tells him that he is responsible forever for what he has tamed."

Gibbs glared at him. "He isn't a fox, Ducky, and I haven't 'tamed' him."

"Except that you have, Jethro, in your own way," Ducky told him softly. "I know that boy's history. He didn't get on well at any of those places where he worked before you found him, did he? I was never exactly sure why, but you do, I think. You saw something in him, something he needed, and you picked him up, dusted him down, whipped him into shape, kicked him around a little, to be sure, but he needed that – and, most importantly, you gave him a place to belong. Everyone knows that boy worships the ground you walk on, Jethro, and now you've drawn all his darkest secrets out of him right when he's at his most vulnerable. If that doesn't make him your responsibility, then I don't know what does."

"I told him I'd be there for him through this, and I will," Gibbs growled.

"Then you may have to give some thought as to what, exactly, that will entail," Ducky said, patting his arm. "What exactly are you prepared to give, Jethro? Because...forgive me, you're a good man, but you're not someone who is comfortable in the emotional arena. I know why," he added hurriedly, seeing a familiar dark look creep into Gibbs's eyes. "And I sympathise, I really do. But that boy over there is just as damaged as you are – and, in fact, that actually makes you uniquely qualified to help him if you're prepared to try. Are you, Jethro?"

Gibbs stared at him, and Ducky wondered if he'd gone too far. His friend **was** a good man, but Ducky wasn't sure that he'd yet woken up to the scale of the task on his hands. He could see the conflicted look in Gibbs's eyes.

"The damage inflicted on you both – you and him – for the most part isn't visible," Ducky said softly. "It's in here." He patted Gibbs's chest. "You hide behind the walls you've built to keep yourself safe, and he's done the same. But as his come crashing down, you might find that you need to venture out from behind yours if you are going to help him. Are you ready for that, Jethro?"

Gibbs glanced over at Tony and then back at Ducky. A muscle in his jaw twitched violently. "Just take care of him, Ducky," he said in a terse voice. "I'll be a couple of hours." Then he turned on his heel and left. Ducky sighed, and glanced back at Tony.

"Well, I did my best, Anthony," he said sadly.

~*~

Gibbs left Autopsy in a furious mood. He returned to interrogation room one and found McGee sitting in the chair opposite Parrish, neither of them speaking.

Parrish looked up as Gibbs entered the room.

"Ah, Agent Gibbs – I'm glad you've finally returned. I want you to know..." he began.

"Shut it," Gibbs interrupted him savagely. "Listen up, Parrish, and listen well. I'm sure you've made plenty of mistakes in your life, but there are two that you will live to regret. The first is the day you laid a finger on a kid called Tony DiNozzo twenty-five years ago...."

"I never touched him, but leaving that aside – the second?" Parrish raised an eyebrow, his cold, grey eyes assessing Gibbs carefully.

"The second is what you said to him today," Gibbs told him.

"I didn't say anything to provoke such an extreme reaction," the admiral protested, gesturing to his bruised face.

"Oh, we both know that you did," Gibbs growled. "I'm not going to waste any more time on you, Parrish. I'll see you in court."

"Whatever flimsy case you have against me won't stand up to any scrutiny, Gibbs."

"You'd better hope for your sake that it does - because you'll find prison a much safer place than anywhere else on this planet, believe me."

"Another one of your threats, Agent Gibbs?" Parrish said derisively.

"Did you hear me threaten the admiral, Agent McGee?" Gibbs asked, turning to his agent. McGee shook his head.

"No, Boss. I didn't hear any threats. Agent Gibbs doesn't make threats, Admiral Parrish – he makes promises."

"And I always keep my promises, Admiral," Gibbs told him grimly. "So, like I said, you'd better hope you get sent somewhere safe, out of my way – because if you walk free, I will come after you. And trust me, when I catch up with you I'll definitely make you squeal like...what was it, Parrish? A piglet?"

Parrish's jaw settled into a tight line, and he quirked an eyebrow at Gibbs, a hint of malicious glee in his eyes. It was all Gibbs could do not to punch the man. Even after all these years he was still enjoying the control he had over Tony and taking a sick kind of pleasure in his ability to scare him.

"Do we understand each other, Parrish?" Gibbs asked quietly.

"Oh, we understand each other perfectly, Agent Gibbs," Parrish replied smoothly.

"Good. Then I'll see you in court." Gibbs turned on his heel and left. He went straight to the squad room and made a phone call.

"Walt? It's Gibbs. I need a favour."

Forty-five minutes later, Gibbs walked into the NCIS gym to find Walter Silberman waiting for him. Walt was an old buddy going back to his marine days. He was six feet five of solid, packed muscle, as fit now as he'd been at boot camp all those years ago.

"Hey, Jethro," Walt said, pulling on a pair of boxing gloves.

"Walt," Gibbs replied shortly. He taped up the torn, bruised skin on his knuckles, aware that Walt was watching, and then pulled on his own pair of gloves.

"Not a day for talking, huh?" Walt muttered, stepping into the ring.

"No. Just fighting. Don't go easy on me, Walt."

"Wouldn't dare, Jethro," Walt replied with a chuckle.

Gibbs went at him with every single ounce of pent-up fury in his body, and Walt pummelled him back relentlessly, neither of them giving an inch.

This was what he needed – what he'd needed since this nightmare had first begun. Gibbs thought of Tony, huddled on the floor of the elevator with his hands over his head, re-living an experience so appalling that it made hot, bitter bile rise in the back of Gibbs's throat. How could any man hurt a child like that? Gibbs lashed out, grunting as his fists connected with flesh, needing to feel the pain in his hands, the shockwaves in his wrists and shoulders, and the raw, panting urgency of his own fury.

Walt could take everything he threw at him - always had, always would. Gibbs was transported back seventeen years, to another time and a different kind of pain, and there was Walt, big and steady, taking his punches and handing out his own, never holding back, a rock in the storm.

Gibbs was aware that a little circle of NCIS staff was forming around the outside of the ring, watching silently as the two ex-marines gave a master-class in hand-to-hand combat, and still they fought on. His fury went slowly from being red hot to white cold as they fought; the heat gradually cooling as he threw himself around the ring, exhausting himself.

Walt caught him a glancing blow on the jaw, and Gibbs landed a punch to his old friend's solar plexus. Walt grunted, barely seeming to notice it, and wrong-footed him, landing him on the floor. Gibbs rolled over and was back on his feet again in a second. Walt lumbered after him, slower now but still as unstoppable as a steamroller.

Gibbs fought until his arms ached, and his own sweat was blinding him. He fought until his breathing was a rasping sound in the back of his throat. He fought until he couldn't see the scared face of a twelve year old boy every time he closed his eyes. He fought out his sense of impotence at not being able to help Tony. He fought out his anger at not being there twenty-five years ago when a boy was taken to a hotel room and raped repeatedly by a man he'd trusted and then handed around to others to do the same. It was the same anger he felt at not being there seventeen years ago when his family had been killed.

He fought out his inability to protect the people he loved - and then he fought even harder to try and come to terms with the fact that he classed Tony with Shannon and Kelly, in the category of people he loved. Even though he'd known that for some time, he'd never really faced the truth of it before. So he fought it out, all of it, until finally he was spent.

Then he stopped. Walt gazed at him.

"We done?" he asked.

"We're done."

"You heard him – beat it," Walt growled at their audience, and they all scuttled off.

Gibbs got out of the ring, and Walt followed him into the locker room.

"Want to talk about it?" Walt asked.

Gibbs hesitated. Walt had seen him at his lowest point, after Shannon and Kelly had been killed, and he'd stuck with him through everything. He had never once been judgemental about any of the ways Gibbs had found to cope with their loss. He was one of his closest friends.

"I fucked up. I can't fuck up again. Something big is going down. I have to get it right," Gibbs told him.

"This work or personal?" Walt asked. Gibbs hesitated again.

"Both," he said finally. Walt sighed.

"The work thing you'll get right – you always do," he said. "The personal thing – that's the shit you're lousy at, and I'm guessing that's the real reason I'm here right now." He ran a

rueful hand over his solar plexus. "And feeling like I've gone ten rounds with Mike Tyson," he added.

Gibbs glanced at him, saw how sweaty, battered, and exhausted he looked, and gave a little wince. "Thanks, Walt," he said quietly.

"You're welcome, Jethro," Walt replied. "Did it help?"

Gibbs nodded as he unwrapped the tape from around his knuckles. "For now," he said. Walt put a hand on his shoulder.

"You need me – you call me," he said. Gibbs looked into his friend's concerned brown eyes and nodded.

"I will."

Gibbs headed for the showers and the welcome relief of the warm water pounding on his aching body. His two closest friends, Ducky and Walt, the people who knew him best, had both said the same thing: You get the work stuff right but the personal stuff – anything involving emotions – you're crap at that, old friend.

Well, then he'd just have to figure out how to be better at it, because Tony was relying on him. Ducky was right – Tony needed his time and attention right now, and he had to find a way to give it to him. Parrish wasn't going anywhere, and their next lead, Quinn, wasn't due back in the country for a few days. That gave him some time to try and get into Tony's head and turn him around. He had to get him ready to face the next big ordeal that was coming his way. Gibbs was sure the next few weeks would be one ordeal after another for Tony, and it was his job to get him through them.

His team were good – he'd let McGee run lead agent during any absences he took while he put Tony back together again. He'd been impressed with that conversation they'd had earlier, and his handling of Parrish. McGee had been turning from a boy into a man over the past year, and he was ready for this.

Gibbs exited the shower feeling better than he had all day. The fighting had cleared his mind, the way it always did; now he could see the simple truths shining through the complexity of the situation.

He would stop second-guessing himself. He'd be no use to Tony if he let his sympathy for him over-ride his own gut instincts. Tony needed him to be *Gibbs*, the man he knew and trusted, and not some stranger tip-toeing around him on eggshells.

Gibbs got dressed, grabbed his bag, and left the gym.

Tony was his priority right now, and he'd be damned if he let him down.

~*~

Tony looked up in relief when Gibbs strode through the door.

"Oh thank God! Ducky's been making me rummage around in internal organs, Boss."

"Not your own, I hope, DiNozzo," Gibbs said.

Tony studied him – Gibbs's hair was damp, and he smelled freshly showered. He also had a number of bruises on his jaw that hadn't been there earlier and a small cut above his left eye.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with your agents learning about basic anatomy, Jethro," Ducky said, glancing up. His eyes darkened as he took in Gibbs's battered appearance, but he didn't draw attention to it. "It appals me how little the average member of the human race seems to know about their own body. Take Anthony here – he seems to think that the spleen is located in the pelvic region."

"In my defence, I didn't actually think that *was* a spleen when I first stuck my hand into it," Tony muttered. "All dead squishy things feel the same, Boss."

"Well you're done here," Gibbs told him.

"Hallelujah," Tony muttered in a heart-felt tone. "Uh, no offence, Ducky."

"None taken, my dear boy." Ducky beamed at him. "It's been a pleasure to have your company. I don't think Mr. Palmer needs to worry about you replacing him though. You don't really have a rapport with the dead, Anthony."

"You know – I think I'll take that as a compliment, Ducky," Tony grinned. "Where are we going, Boss?" he asked, as Gibbs gestured with his head that he follow him out of Autopsy.

"Home," Gibbs replied.

Tony hesitated. It hadn't been a great day, but he didn't want to go home and be alone with his thoughts right now.

"You know – I think I'd prefer to stay with the dead bodies," he muttered, pausing in the elevator doorway. Gibbs made an impatient gesture with his head. Tony got into the elevator reluctantly.

"We'll go to your apartment first," Gibbs said. "So you can get what you need. Then back to my place. You're staying with me."

"Don't I get a say in this?" Tony asked.

Gibbs gazed at him, his expression as unreadable as ever. "No," he replied.

That felt oddly comforting. "Okay then," Tony said with a nod. "Just as long as we're clear."

He had been wondering, in light of Gibbs's absence all afternoon, whether his boss was tired of dealing with him. He had screwed up in interrogation and then completely lost it in the elevator, and Gibbs didn't like his agents screwing up. His boss seemed to read his thoughts.

"I told you I'd see you through this, and I meant it, Tony," he said firmly. "But if you want to keep out of the clutches of a shrink, then you have to let me in. Any time you feel yourself going off into a fugue then you talk to me about it, like you did in the elevator."

"Yes, Boss," Tony lied. He had no intention of losing it in front of Gibbs again. It was bad enough that it had happened once. He needed to keep a much tighter grip on himself. He wasn't sure why he was struggling with this so much. He'd kept these thoughts and feelings under control for the past twenty-five years, so why the hell were they causing him so much hassle now? What was wrong with him?

He was grateful at least that he'd managed to evade most of the rest of the team all day. Abby had come to Autopsy once while he'd been there, but she didn't seem to think it was strange that he was assisting Ducky. Then again, Abby was Abby – she slept in a coffin for God's sake! Who knew what her definition of 'strange' was? He hadn't seen either McGee or Ziva though, and he was thankful for that.

Gibbs drove them to his apartment in silence, and Tony packed some things. He wasn't sure how long he'd be staying with his boss, and he wished the invitation had been made under different circumstances. He wasn't entirely sure how he felt about the thought of sleeping under Gibbs's roof. The last thing he wanted was for the man to take him in because he felt sorry for him, but it did mean that he got to spend time alone with Gibbs, and that was something he always relished.

They returned to Gibbs's house, and Tony dumped his clothes in the spare room. Then he went downstairs and hooked up the TV and DVD player he'd insisted on bringing with him.

"No offence, Boss, but I'm not going down to that drafty basement every time I want to watch something," Tony had told Gibbs. "Also – that TV you've got down there is ancient. I don't think you even *can* hook a DVD player up to it."

His boss had just grunted, and Tony had taken that as permission to bring them both along. How Gibbs got by with just one tiny TV and no DVD player was beyond Tony, but he knew he couldn't. His distractions came in many forms, and this was an important one.

Being with Gibbs was another one – and a good one. Tony threw everything into making Gibbs forget about his meltdown in the elevator earlier. It felt good to be back on familiar ground, assuming his identity as Tony DiNozzo, over-active frat-boy, talking too much, clowning around, and generally getting in Gibbs's way as his boss fixed them something to eat.

Tony launched into a long-winded lecture on the history of film from its invention to the modern era, barely pausing for breath as he covered various different styles and gave potted filmographies of all the major directors. Gibbs sat opposite him as they ate, hardly saying a word, that sharp gaze of his fixed on Tony in a way that made him uneasy.

Tony started speaking twice as fast to prevent Gibbs interrupting him. He didn't want his boss to draw attention to the massive elephant that was currently sitting quietly in the corner of the room. Tony was done talking about what had happened to him as a kid. He'd spilled his guts out last night, and he wasn't going there again. He'd given Gibbs the information he wanted and now it was over. Done. Time to move on.

They finished eating, and Tony leaned against the glass kitchen door, still talking as Gibbs put their plates in the dishwasher. It wasn't a conversation as such – Gibbs just moved around the kitchen while Tony talked. He hoped he was being lively, entertaining and amusing – but even to his own ears his voice had a hint of desperation to it.

“Why don't you show me?” Gibbs asked. It was the first thing he'd said in about half an hour. Tony blinked. He had been talking so fast that he wasn't actually sure what he'd been saying. “One of these movies you're talking about. Show me,” Gibbs prompted.

Tony felt a rush of relief. This was good! He was on familiar ground here. They went into the living room, and he chose a classic war movie that he thought Gibbs would like.

Gibbs sat down on the couch, and Tony sat down beside him. It was an old, saggy couch, and they both sank down towards the centre of it, thighs and upper arms touching. Tony wished he could let go, and sink into Gibbs the way he was sinking into the couch. He wanted to give it all up and let Gibbs take over. If he did that, maybe Gibbs could make it all go away.

Tony needed his distractions: movies, music, sex, joking around, working too hard, talking too much...and Gibbs. It took a lot of energy to keep moving from one to the other, but he had to because the effects of each one always waned eventually. Then the only option was to move onto the next. Sometimes he got so tired of it. He wished he had a safe haven for when it all got too much, and he couldn't shut out the memories any more. He wished he could take Gibbs up on his offer to share them with him, but he hated the thought of his boss seeing him like that again.

Tony talked through the movie, although now he was just gabbling, and he wasn't sure he was saying anything that made any sense. Every so often Gibbs would turn and look at him, a quizzical expression on his face, and Tony knew that Gibbs knew exactly what he was doing. That made him talk even faster; distraction...he needed a distraction, so that he didn't have to stare into a pair of cold grey eyes, or feel a pair of cold hands on his body; cruel, demanding, and invasive.

“Are you scared of me, Boy?”

“Hmm?” Tony stopped in mid-sentence and turned to Gibbs.

“I didn't say anything,” Gibbs told him with a wry grunt, as if he'd be lucky to get a word in edgeways.

“Oh, right. Anyway, the thing about all the movies from this era is...”

“I've killed men with my bare hands. It's one of the first things they taught us in training. It's much easier to kill a child of course – the neck is smaller. I could snap it easily with just one hand – like a matchstick.” One cold hand slid around his neck to illustrate the point. He felt his breathing hitch in panic.

“Tony? You okay? You're stroking your hair,” Gibbs told him. Tony blinked. He realised his hand was on the back of his head and moved it, quickly, down to his side.

“I'm just tired. I think I'll go to bed now, Boss.”

He leaned forward to get up and a hand reached out and touched his arm. He flinched and went very still. That had been stupid of him. He knew he wasn't allowed to leave. He was locked in here. He had to stay still. If he didn't, Luke would snap his neck the way he'd been taught in training. He had to do what Luke said because it was easy to kill a child and even easier to get rid of the body.

"It's safe to remember it, Tony," Gibbs said. Tony blinked. Gibbs's fingers were warm. They were curled around Tony's wrist, drawing him back to the present.

"A child's neck is small," Tony told him. Gibbs nodded, as if what he'd said made total sense. "I wasn't big at twelve. I shot up around fourteen, but at twelve I was small." He reached up and touched his own neck. "Hands are cold," he muttered. "Big and cold. A child's neck breaks easily. Like a matchstick." He made a hard clicking sound with his thumb and fingers. Gibbs didn't move.

Tony placed his hand loosely around Gibbs's throat. Still Gibbs didn't move. Blue eyes gazed at him, radiating trust. Gibbs's neck was warm, the skin stubbly beneath his fingertips.

"I want you to do exactly what I say..." Tony's hand tightened around Gibbs's neck. "Did you know that you can put a child's body in a suitcase and carry it out of a hotel? Nobody thinks anything of people carrying suitcases in and out of hotels. Then, later, you can throw it in a dumpster or set fire to it in your yard. Nobody ever finds out."

He stroked his thumb over Gibbs's Adam's apple, and up and down his throat.

"It's quick. No time to scream," he said. Gibbs's gaze never faltered. Tony put his head on one side. "You don't scream though, do you? You squeal, Tony. Like a piglet. I like that sound. Are you scared of me right now? You should be."

He tightened his grasp and leaned in close.

"Go and kneel on the bed for me, you little slut," he said coldly, straight into Gibbs's ear.

He blinked. Gibbs was unmoving, his eyes appalled.

"Tell him no," Gibbs growled.

Tony swallowed hard, angry with himself. He'd told himself he wouldn't do this in front of Gibbs again, but he had. Christ, what the hell must Gibbs think of him right now?

"Tony?" Gibbs said quietly. "Did you hear me?"

"No... what?"

"Next time – tell the bastard no."

"But that's not what happened!" Tony snapped.

"I know that, Tony. Look, you can't change the reality of what he said to you and what he did to you, but you can change the power the memory has over you. Tell him to fuck off. Tell

him that you're in control now, and he can't hurt you any more. Hell, tell him that I'm here if it'll help. Tell him that if he touches you, I'll kick his sorry ass. Just make it stop."

"It didn't stop though," Tony said helplessly.

"I know – but you can stop the power these memories have over you if you take control of them. It's worth a try."

Tony nodded. "Okay then, I'll try. Next time."

"Good," Gibbs said firmly.

Tony gazed at the floor, berating himself for his own weakness. Gibbs must think he was so pathetic, allowing this to get to him after all this time. He was angry with himself. He'd been twelve, not six - why hadn't he fought back? Why had he believed Parrish? Why hadn't he seen that he was playing him? He'd been an idiot – a stupid, weak idiot.

"He's still in my head," Tony explained. "When I saw him today, I thought it was my chance to get him out, but he still scares me. I don't know why. I'm too big for him to hurt any more. I can take care of myself, and I know I could beat him in a fight. So, why is he still in my head, Boss?"

"Because he's an evil bastard who played mind games on you when you were too young to fight back," Gibbs told him. "But you do now. You're safe here – next time he's in your head, stand up to him. Tell him where to go. I'll be here with you. He won't be able to hurt you."

Tony nodded. He wasn't convinced, but if Gibbs thought it was worth a try, then he'd do it. Then, feeling that he'd made enough of an idiot of himself for one evening, he got up.

"I'm tired," he said. "I'm going to bed."

"You need anything, or if you start remembering any of this again – you wake me," Gibbs ordered. Tony nodded.

No way, he thought to himself as he walked wearily up the stairs to the spare bedroom. No fucking way.

~*~

Disintegration Part Two by Xanthe

Gibbs sat on the couch after Tony left, staring blankly at the movie still playing on the TV screen without taking any of it in. He felt chilled to the bone. What he had witnessed had been so ugly, so evil, that it made total sense of Tony's current fragility.

Tony had mimicked Parrish's clipped way of talking, every inflection and intonation sounding just like him, but his eyes had been those of a petrified child hearing those words for the first time. Gibbs had known Parrish was a ruthless bastard, but knowing it and being confronted with the reality of how he worked on his prey were two entirely different things.

Where had Tony's father been in all this? How could he not *see* what was happening to his son right under his nose? Were these men that clever? Or had Tony's father been that neglectful? Or maybe it had been a combination of the two.

What if it had been Kelly? He couldn't stop himself asking the question. Supposing it had been her – would he have noticed? Would he have seen the shadows in her eyes? Would she have suffered in silence, too scared to tell him what was happening? Would she have found it easier to come to him than Tony had found going to his father? Would he have listened to her, or dismissed her out of hand and accused her of lying?

Hell, of course he would have listened to her! He was her father. So what kind of a father had Tony's dad been? Gibbs felt angry with the man without even knowing him, and yet Tony had said he was a good man. An awkward man, admittedly, someone who didn't find it easy talking to people, and, from everything Tony had said, a heavy drinker. Maybe that explained it.

What kind of a child had Tony been that his father hadn't noticed him becoming quieter and more withdrawn though? Tony had said he wasn't the kind of kid Gibbs might expect. He'd also admitted constructing a new identity to hide behind when he went to boarding school. Gibbs wondered if he was witnessing the cracks starting to show in that identity. If tonight was anything to go by, that was exactly what was happening. Tony had been frenetic all evening, talking incessantly like he was on some kind of drug. He had been every inch the Tony DiNozzo Gibbs had known these past few years but more so, like he was playing a part, and there had been a kind of desperate intensity to his performance.

Gibbs snapped off the TV and got up, unable to shake the events of the evening from his mind. He hadn't felt in danger himself at any point – the memory had been powerful, but Tony had been lucid throughout. Gibbs had known he wouldn't hurt him. No, what had been so distressing was hearing the words, feeling Tony's hand around his throat, seeing the terror in his eyes, and knowing that this had actually happened to him.

He had witnessed, at first hand, a man scaring a child into sexual compliance, and the image haunted him. Gibbs went down to his basement and reached, automatically, for his bourbon. Then he hesitated. If he started drinking he might not stop, and he had to stay sober in case Tony needed him. He put the bourbon back and turned towards his boat instead.

"I guess we all need our distractions," he murmured, as he began working.

~*~

Tony got undressed, pulled on a pair of boxer shorts and a tee shirt to sleep in, and then got into bed. He lay there, looking up at the ceiling blankly. He was trapped in a nightmare, and he couldn't see a way out. The choices he'd made as a child, which had seemed like such a good idea at the time, were coming back to bite him. He felt so damn helpless.

He wasn't used to feeling like this. He'd done a good job, over the years, of creating a strong, robust personality, the kind of guy who could handle anything. Nothing ever touched Tony DiNozzo – even if bad things happened, they just rolled off him, leaving him – the real him – untouched and unscathed underneath. He didn't let people get close enough to use him, or make him feel weak, or small, or afraid. He didn't stay too long in one job, or get into relationships that lasted more than a few weeks. Beyond the occasional phone call, he didn't keep in touch with his family, and nobody ever got to see inside him. He kept his co-workers at a distance, laughing and joking with them but never allowing them to see beneath the surface.

For years it had worked, but then he'd slipped up; he'd stayed too long in his current job. He'd grown attached to the place and the people – or, more to the point, to one person in particular. That was weakness. He should have been ruthless about it and cut and run years ago. He'd meant to, but somehow he'd never got around to it, or he hadn't wanted to get around to it. So he'd taken the easy way out, and he was paying for that right now.

If it hadn't been for those photos, those stupid, damn photos, and if Gibbs wasn't such an observant son of a bitch, then maybe none of this would have happened. Nobody should have seen those photos...nobody should have seen him looking like that - so weak and pathetic. That was a part of his life that he'd put behind him. He'd wrapped it up carefully and stored it out of sight, and he'd been so diligent about making sure that nobody got so much as a glimpse of it. It didn't seem fair that after all his hard work it had blown up in his face like this.

He heard footsteps on the stairs, and then, a second later, his bedroom door opened. He closed his eyes and feigned sleep.

"You okay, Tony?" Gibbs asked.

Tony turned and mumbled something incoherent, and Gibbs went away, closing the door silently behind him.

Tony heard him go into the bathroom, saw a light go on under his bedroom door, and heard running water. Then it stopped. The light went off, and he heard footsteps again. There was a series of moving around noises and then silence.

Tony lay awake for a long time, unable to switch off. He could leave – run away – but he knew that there was no place on this earth where he'd be able to hide from Gibbs. The man would track him down wherever he went. Gibbs wanted his conviction – he wanted Parrish behind bars, and Tony couldn't blame him for that. He sensed that Gibbs was affronted by the admiral. Gibbs, who idolised the honest, decent, military man, must be cut up inside about that bastard reaching such a high rank.

"Semper fi, Gibbs," Tony muttered. "They're not all like you."

So, running away wasn't an option, but staying here was equally unthinkable. If only he could do something that would piss off Gibbs so much that he'd wash his hands of him and throw him out – but what? He couldn't think straight right now, but there had to be something.

There was another way out of course... Tony pounded his fist into his pillow, trying to get comfortable. He wouldn't take that other way out. He couldn't. He was too much of a coward. All the same, he was glad Gibbs had taken his gun away, so he wouldn't have the temptation.

"Come here, Boy," a cold voice whispered. "Come to me."

Tony turned onto his back. He needed a distraction – and quickly. Maybe he could go downstairs, turn the TV on low, and watch something...but he didn't want Gibbs to wake up and find him. If only he could go out, go to some club, and find some willing person to bring back for sex...

"Because that worked so well last time, DiNozzo," he told himself, shuddering as he remembered the events of the previous night. Besides, that was out of the question while he was staying with Gibbs.

He did still have his right hand. He slid it down the front of his boxers, took hold of his cock, and closed his eyes, trying to summon up his favourite jerk-off fantasies. There was the one where he was at an orgy with his favourite movie stars from the past. He liked glamour, and that certain cool, untouchable quality. He was unbuttoning Gene Tierney's silk blouse, fingers slipping onto her porcelain skin, skimming her beautiful breasts... No, that wasn't working; his cock remained soft in his hand.

Okay, so he was sharing a beer with Humphrey Bogart. They were on a yacht, both of them leaning on the rail, watching the sunset. Bogey was dressed in loose flannel pants and a white linen shirt. Tony leaned over and kissed Bogey's stubbled cheek. Bogey turned towards him with a crooked smile, challenging him. Tony accepted the challenge and trailed a line of kisses down Bogey's neck until he reached the hollow of his throat, and then...Bogey turned into Gibbs in front of his eyes and pushed him away.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, DiNozzo?" he growled.

"Trying to have sex with a screen legend, Boss, if you'd get out of the damn way," Tony muttered irritably.

His cock remained soft in his hand. His thoughts turned to Gibbs. Gibbs was one of his favourite jerk-off fantasies, but not one he gave into that often because the reality of working so close to the man and wanting him so much hurt like hell. Still, all else had failed, and he had to have some distraction, some release, or...

"I told you to come here, Boy. Don't make me wait."

Tony sat up. He was sure there was someone in the room – a shadow, over there, in the corner. He turned on the light quickly, his heart pounding, but the room was empty.

Tony sat on the side of the bed and rubbed the back of his head anxiously. Nothing was working, and he had to do something. His throat was dry, and he wished he had brought a

glass of water up with him when he'd come to bed. He could go downstairs to the kitchen to get one, and hope he didn't wake Gibbs in the process.

"That's better. On your knees." An icy fist slipped into his hair and pulled back his head. He knew what was coming next...

Tony got up, quickly, and left the room. He tiptoed down the stairs, wincing when he trod on a stair that squeaked. Why couldn't he move silently, like Gibbs?

"Always creeping up on people, taking them by surprise," Tony muttered. He reached the bottom of the stairs and hesitated. It was dark in the downstairs hallway, but he didn't want to turn on the light in case that woke Gibbs. The kitchen door opened off the living room, so he fumbled his way into the living room in the darkness. He'd feel better if he could just get a drink of water. His throat was parched.

"Open your mouth, Boy."

He hesitated. It was hard to see in here, but there was a shadow over by the far wall, next to the TV. Was someone there? He hurried towards the closed glass kitchen door. Just a few more steps...

The room changed, and he found himself staring at the brown swirly pattern on the carpet.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you!"

He looked up. Luke towered over him, glaring down on him.

"I told you to open your mouth."

"I don't like it," he muttered.

The hand in his hair tightened, making him squeal. Luke gave a cold, malicious smile.

"I'll do anything else," Tony said. "Just not that. I get scared when I can't breathe..."

The fingers of Luke's other hand fastened around his throat. Tony panted in fright.

"Please don't."

He blinked. He could hear the rasp of his own breathing, shallow and scared. His throat was dry. He'd been going to get a glass of water. The kitchen door was just in front of him. If he could make it into the kitchen and get the water, he'd be fine. Just a couple more steps...

He paused...he was sure there was a shadow here, in the room with him. He reached up a hand to smooth down his hair and glanced around, humming softly to himself. The room flickered and then disappeared.

"Do you know," Luke said, holding him there, one hand in his hair, the other around his throat. "That Roy is your legal guardian? If anything happened to your father, then you would have to go and live with Roy."

Tony felt his breath catch in the back of his throat, and he took a deep gulp of air. Luke stroked his neck with his thumb.

"Of course, Roy would be too busy to look after you all the time, but I've said you can come and stay with me when he gets tired of you. Now open up."

"Tell him to fuck off, DiNozzo," a terse voice said. "Say no. "

"No," he whimpered.

Luke's hand tightened in his hair. "Your father could be killed in an accident," he said. "Plenty of people have accidents."

Tony gazed up at Luke, horrified.

"Do you want your father to have an accident, Tony? Is that what you want?"

"Tell him I'm here," that voice said in his ear. He recognised the voice, but he didn't know who it belonged to. He just knew that it was someone he had to obey. "Tell him to go away," the voice insisted.

"Go away," he said obediently, and then he flinched expectantly.

"Don't make me angry, Tony!" Luke snapped.

"Tell him to leave you alone."

Tony didn't know what to do. He didn't know which of them he should obey – the man standing in front of him, or the voice in his ear. Both were demanding and imperative.

"It's easy to kill someone and make it look like an accident," Luke told him. "It's a shame your father has such a bad son. Now open your mouth and take it."

He didn't want his father hurt because of him. He opened his mouth and almost gagged as Luke thrust himself into it. Luke grabbed his head in both his hands and began moving his thighs against his face. Tony tried to pull back, only to find he was held fast.

Where was the voice now? Where had it gone? He tried to call for help, but Luke was pushing away in his mouth, and he couldn't even talk, let alone scream.

He struggled in Luke's grasp, trying to get away, but Luke was too big for him. Luke held him in place, making him take it. He couldn't breathe. There was a buzzing sound overhead, like a swarm of bees. He struggled furiously, pushing and squirming, fighting for breath. In sheer desperation, he flung out his arm and...

There was a loud crashing sound and then silence.

Tony found that he could breathe again.

Gibbs was out of bed, wide awake, gun in hand, the second he heard the noise. He ran down the stairs three at a time, stormed into the living room, turned on the light, and then stopped. There wasn't an intruder. There was just Tony, standing there, arm outstretched, blinking.

Tony glanced at him over his shoulder. "Hey Boss," he said cheerfully, his green eyes dazed but his voice standard DiNozzo, sounding as if nothing was wrong.

"Tony," Gibbs said quietly. "Stand very still. Don't move."

Tony looked confused by the order, but he didn't move. "I came down to get a glass of water, Boss. Didn't mean to wake you."

"Okay. That's fine, Tony but just don't move," Gibbs warned, putting down the gun. He went over to the couch, found the discarded pair of boots he'd left there earlier, and pulled them on.

Tony remained exactly where he was, unmoving, as ordered. "My hand hurts, Boss," he said, still looking dazed.

"I know. Hold on, Tony."

Gibbs found a pair of his own battered leather slippers under the coffee table. He picked them up and went over to Tony. His boots crunched on the shattered glass of the kitchen door which was strewn all over the floor. The dazed look faded from Tony's eyes. He looked down at his hand, which was sticking through what remained of the door, blood running down his wrist. Tony seemed to see it for the first time.

"Oh shit," he muttered.

"Yeah. That about sums it up," Gibbs commented wryly, kneeling down beside Tony and sliding the slippers onto his bare feet. He got up and gently took hold of Tony's arm. There was a big hole in the kitchen door – and a large, jagged piece of glass pointing up directly at the soft underside of Tony's wrist. Gibbs carefully pulled Tony's arm back, through the hole in the door, taking care that the glass didn't rip into any more of his skin on the way back out.

Gibbs walked Tony over the broken glass on the floor and deposited him on the couch. Then he sat down on the coffee table in front of Tony, took his injured hand onto his knees, and examined the damage. There were several small cuts and a couple of much larger ones – both of which were bleeding copiously. Gibbs could see a few pieces of glass still sticking into the wound. He removed them, and then he took hold of Tony's other hand and clamped it down firmly on the biggest cut.

"Hold it there," he ordered.

He got up and crossed the room, crunching on glass as he went, and opened what remained of the now shattered kitchen door. He filled a bowl with water, grabbed his first aid kit and a couple of kitchen towels, and returned to where Tony was sitting, his hand still clamped down hard on the bleeding cuts.

"There are less messy and less noisy ways of trying to kill yourself, DiNozzo," Gibbs joked, taking hold of Tony's hand again. Then he looked up into Tony's pale face and wished he hadn't said that.

"I wasn't," Tony muttered.

Gibbs bathed the cuts gently, washing the blood away so he could see how bad the injury was.

"I couldn't breathe," Tony explained.

"Was it Parrish again?"

Tony nodded. "Yeah."

"I told you to wake me." Gibbs pressed a towel over the largest cut to see if he could stop the bleeding.

"Yeah. Right," Tony grunted. Gibbs looked up sharply.

"Tony – I told you to wake me, and I meant it."

"I can't be like this!" Tony told him angrily. "I can't be this fucking pathetic, Gibbs! You got called out of bed last night by my lousy fucking one night stand for God's sake. Then you had Ducky nurse-maid me at work all day, and now you've got me staying in your fucking house! I'm trying to keep it together, trying to get it back under control, but it just...it slips away from me, Gibbs. It takes over my head. I can't put it back."

"Then stop trying," Gibbs told him. "That whole thing you had going – keeping it in a box in your head? That's not working any more. Give up on it, Tony. Did you try fighting back instead, like I told you?"

"Yeah." Tony shook his head. "Didn't work. I'm not strong enough. I'm so fucking weak. I thought you were there, in my head, but it was just my mind playing tricks on me. Again. Ow...damn it..." He winced as Gibbs pressed down harder on the wound to stem the bleeding.

"Hold on, DiNozzo. I just need to see if this is going to stop by itself, or if you're going to need stitches," Gibbs told him. He sat there, holding Tony's hand in his lap, wrapped up in a towel. Tony looked pale and upset, and as unlike DiNozzo as he'd ever seen him. They were silent for a moment, just gazing at each other.

"It might have worked, if I'd tried harder," Tony said eventually. "I got scared. I couldn't breathe. He..." He flinched, and reached up his good hand to rub the back of his head.

"What did he do, Tony?" Gibbs asked, trying to head off another fugue.

"Doesn't matter," Tony muttered. "I struggled because I couldn't breathe – that must have been when my hand went through the door."

"Why couldn't you breathe?"

Gibbs opened the towel and examined the wound again. It was still seeping blood but not as much as before. Tony wasn't in any immediate danger, so he decided to bandage his hand and get Ducky to look at it tomorrow to see if he needed to go to the ER.

"Tony?" He glanced up. "Why couldn't you breathe?"

Tony's eyes were dark. "There was something in my mouth," he said. Realisation hit Gibbs, and he worked hard to fight down the surge of anger. "And he had his hand in my hair, so I couldn't pull back. I couldn't breathe." He took a few deep gulps of air.

"You're okay now," Gibbs told him firmly.

He worked on, gently, quietly, and efficiently, wrapping the bandage around Tony's hand, using skills he'd acquired as a soldier applying field dressings in combat. Tony leaned back on the couch and ran an angry hand through his hair.

"I should have moved on years ago," he said quietly.

Gibbs glanced up, frowning.

"I can take care of myself," Tony told him. "I don't need anyone looking out for me."

"I know that, DiNozzo. But everyone needs help occasionally."

"You don't," Tony muttered. "I don't, either. I've always taken care of myself, Gibbs. I've done it before, and I can do it again."

"You shouldn't have had to do it before," Gibbs growled. "You were only twelve, Tony. You shouldn't have had to handle that all alone."

"I did though – and I did just fine," Tony snapped at him. "I don't like authority, Gibbs," he said, suddenly and unexpectedly.

"Ya think, DiNozzo?" Gibbs grinned at him.

"No – I mean, I don't like these older guys; military, police captains – authority figures – I don't like them telling me what to do. I can't trust them."

"No. I can understand that," Gibbs said quietly.

"You don't understand shit," Tony growled.

"Then tell me."

"There's something in me – wants to please them, wants them to like me, wants to roll over and die if they tell me to, so I have to be careful. They sense it – think they can use me, play me. They always do, even when they don't know it. That's why I left Peoria. The captain

there... he was playing me. I lost it with him, told him where to shove his fucking job – that's why he gave me such a lousy reference - but I had to protect myself."

"And you've done that," Gibbs told him. "You've done a great job with that, Tony."

"Yeah – by moving on, by not sticking around and letting anyone get close to me. I ran out of Philly and Baltimore before I could screw up that way again. And then, idiot that I am, I ended up doing it anyway. With you. You were a mistake, Gibbs. You were a mistake I shouldn't have made."

Gibbs finished making one circuit of Tony's hand with the bandage. He sat back and looked at Tony, puzzled by what was going on in Tony's head. Tony's expression was dark and intense. Gibbs started wrapping the bandage around his hand again.

"You played me too," Tony said. Gibbs paused, hands in mid-air. "It's okay. I let you do it because I trusted you. And I liked it," he added. "It made me feel safe. Being around you made me feel safe. I knew you wouldn't let anyone else get to me, or play me, and I knew you wouldn't betray me. So I felt safe."

"That why you stayed?"

"No." Tony shook his head. "I stayed because I'm in love with you."

Gibbs paused again. Tony's eyes were deadly serious.

Tony leaned forward, cupped the back of his neck in his good hand, pulled him towards him, and pressed his lips against Gibbs's mouth. His lips were soft and warm, agile and seductive, the kiss tentative but firm. Gibbs sat there, still cradling Tony's other hand in his lap. Tony drew back, and grinned at him.

"Now you can throw me out," he said, and there was a satisfied, bitterly triumphant look in his eyes.

"No." Gibbs shook his head and continued bandaging Tony's hand as if the kiss hadn't happened.

"No?" Tony looked angry and confused.

"No," Gibbs told him firmly. "That the best you can do, DiNozzo?"

"What the hell do you mean?"

"You think I don't know how much you want to run out? The only reason you haven't is because you know I'll damn well track you down wherever you go, and you're right – I will. Easier to get me to throw you out but that's not gonna happen – and trust me, kissing me sure as hell isn't the best way to go about it."

There was a shocked expression on Tony's face, and his mouth was slightly open in an unasked question.

"You think I don't know that place you're in now? You're wrong. I do," Gibbs told him firmly. "I was there once myself, after Shannon and Kelly died. That first year after they were killed I drank myself stupid every night and went out looking for fights. Every night. Night after night. My friend Walt used to wade in after me and drag me out, but he couldn't stop me. Nobody could. Drinking and fighting were the only things that kept me going. That stopped after about a year when I found a new distraction. You think you sleep around, DiNozzo? Trust me, I know all about that as well."

"Never figured you for someone who did one night-stands, Boss."

Gibbs snorted. "Hell yeah. Too many to count. For about six months I slept with any warm body that would have me. I'd wake up in strange apartments, in hotel rooms, even in my own bed occasionally but always with some stranger lying beside me. And never the same one twice. My friend Walt had to rescue me from a couple of bad situations there, too."

Tony winced. "Yeah, been there, done that," he muttered. "Why are you telling me this, Boss?"

"So you know I'm not going to give up on you, no matter what," Gibbs told him. "And because not all the people I woke up with were women."

Tony's eyes flashed. He looked so totally dumbstruck by this piece of information that Gibbs had to bite back a chuckle.

"Which is another reason why I'm not shocked, pissed off, or whatever the hell reaction you wanted out of me when you kissed me," Gibbs told him. "And Tony? There is nothing you can do that will make me throw you out, so forget it."

He finished bandaging Tony's hand and then removed it from his own lap and put it back in Tony's.

"Nothing?" Tony asked. He looked like a kid who had been pushing boundaries and wanted the reassurance of knowing they would always hold firm.

"Nothing," Gibbs repeated, in the firmest tone he possessed. He leaned forward. "Nothing," he said again. "I told you I'd be here for you, Tony, and I meant it - no matter what you do to my house." He gave a little grin at that, his gaze flickering over to the shattered glass on the carpet by the door. Tony's lips quirked up in return, but the smile was barely there.

"You need to get some rest," Gibbs told him. "Seriously, Tony - you look like shit. Let me get you some painkillers, and then you can go back to bed."

"I can't." Tony shook his head. "Gibbs, every time I close my eyes I'm back in that hotel room. I can't go to bed."

"Then we'll stay here, but you will damn well get some sleep."

He got up, took the stuff he'd used to bathe and dress Tony's cut hand back into the kitchen, and returned with a glass of water and the painkillers. Tony swallowed down the tablets in one gulp and then emptied the glass thirstily. Gibbs turned on the lamp on the coffee table

and turned off the main light. Then he sat down on the couch beside him. Tony looked at him miserably.

"I won't sleep," he said. "After what happened, I'm too scared to even try."

"You'll sleep," Gibbs predicted confidently.

He put a cushion on his lap, then wrapped his arm around Tony's shoulder and pulled him down so that he was lying with his head on the cushion, his bandaged hand nestled carefully in front of him.

"Put your legs up on the couch," Gibbs told him.

Tony looked up at him quizzically, as if he'd gone insane. Gibbs was reminded of that fox analogy of Ducky's; Tony's green eyes shone with a hesitant kind of light, like an animal that wanted to come into the house and rest beside the fire but was too scared to cross the threshold.

"Do it, Tony."

Tony moved his legs up onto the couch, and Gibbs pulled the comforter off the back of the couch and covered Tony with it.

"This won't work," Tony told him, his body stiff and tense.

"Try," Gibbs said, and then he leaned over and turned out the light.

He sat back on the couch, and then slowly, carefully, like petting a wild animal, he began combing his fingers through Tony's hair, smoothing it. Tony stiffened at first, but Gibbs didn't say anything, he just kept stroking. He knew this was Tony's self-comforting mechanism, and he suspected that it really did help to calm him down when he was distressed.

Tony gradually started to loosen up under his hand, his body losing its stiffness. Gibbs kept rhythmically moving his fingers through Tony's thick, short hair, and slowly, very slowly, Tony relaxed, his body becoming heavier as he sank into the couch.

Gibbs closed his eyes. Ducky had said that he was uniquely qualified to help Tony precisely because he was damaged too, but Gibbs couldn't help but wonder if this was just a case of the blind leading the lame, both of them groping their way along and neither of them knowing where the hell they were going.

He heard Tony's breathing deepen, and then he gave a little snore. Gibbs grinned.

He fell asleep still stroking Tony's hair.

~*~

Tony wondered where he was when he woke up. His hand was throbbing, but he felt like he'd been sleeping for hours. He was warm and safe. There was something resting on the side

of his head, heavy and reassuring. He lay there, trying to figure out what it was and where he was. Then the events of the previous night came flooding back in, and he stiffened.

Christ, he'd made a fool of himself; first by smashing up Gibbs's house and then with that stupid, humiliating kiss. He'd been so sure that Gibbs would think he'd crossed a line and throw him out. But his boss's lips had been surprisingly receptive, and while Gibbs hadn't responded as such, he hadn't shoved him away, either.

Tony hated that Gibbs was seeing everything he'd tried so hard to keep hidden all these years. Nobody had ever seen who he really was before, and he'd always wanted to keep it that way. Now he was unravelling, and he was stuck here, and he didn't know how to deal with it.

Tony slid out from under Gibbs's hand and rolled off the couch. He paused for a moment and glanced at his boss. A thin strip of light shone in from a chink in the drapes, and Tony could see that Gibbs was still asleep, his head back, his mouth slightly open.

Tony saw the broken glass on the floor and winced. He found a newspaper on a nearby chair and began picking up the larger shards of glass and placing them on the paper, as quietly as he could, using his good hand. His other hand continued to throb, and he could see some blood seeping through the bandage.

"Basket case," he muttered as he surveyed the all too obvious remains of last night's meltdown. "Idiot."

He thought he'd got this weak, needy side of himself under control. He remembered those first few weeks at boarding school, and the intoxicating realisation that he could be someone else. Nobody knew him here. He wasn't the shy kid here – he wasn't someone who got taken to a hotel room and fucked because he was too weak to say no. Here he could be loud and noisy, the centre of attention, always goofing around. It was exhilarating exploring his new personality. He loved this Tony DiNozzo – he was strong, brave, and fearless. Nothing and nobody could ever hurt this Tony DiNozzo; he wouldn't let anyone get that close.

When he shot up in height a year or two later, he found he was good at sports. All kinds – football, basketball, hockey, soccer. He threw himself around, took risks, and relished this new, agile body. This body was one that *he* got to control, nobody else. He could almost forget about the boy he'd put in a box, but sometimes, just occasionally, there were moments when he lost time.

There had been that occasion in the locker room when the coach, a big, heavy guy, had come up behind him and wrapped an arm around his neck, intending to congratulate him on an outstanding performance on the pitch. Tony had instinctively gone very still, and had only just managed to resist an impulse to get on his hands and knees for Luke to fuck. Later, when he was alone, he'd lost about half an hour.

Then there had been that time at Peoria, when the bastard captain had put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed, threateningly.

"What's the matter, DiNozzo – you won't take one for the team? You not a team player? We don't like guys who aren't team players around here. They find their lockers get broken into, and their stuff gets pissed on."

He didn't like being threatened, and he didn't like the way the captain was looking at him, like he was just a kid who could be made to do whatever he was told. He knew where that ended. Later, at home, he lost twenty minutes. That was when he knew he had to get out. He'd handed in his notice the next day.

There had been other times – moments here and there - but nothing too serious. As long as he kept moving and didn't let anyone get too close, then he was okay. Once he started working with Gibbs he stopped losing time altogether. Gibbs made him feel safe – and that was why he should have got away from the man years ago. He didn't need protection, he could take care of himself – hadn't he proved that, over and over again? Yet he'd been seduced by Gibbs's strength, certainty, and fierce protective instincts. The boy in the box needed taking care of and that was tiring. Sometimes, if he was honest, Tony resented that kid, draining all his energy. He wanted someone to take care of him sometimes, and that was why he was attracted to Gibbs. Not that the man ever took much notice of him, but he was there; solid, strong, and reassuring, and that was enough.

Tony finished picking up the biggest pieces of glass and wrapped the newspaper carefully around them. He took the paper into the kitchen.

"I fucking hate you," he said, as he threw the glass in the trash. It was all too tangible evidence that the boy in the box had got out and was now running amok and ruining his life. "You fucking little shit. I fucking hate you," he seethed.

"Who are you talking to?" a quiet voice behind him asked. Gibbs had managed to sneak up on him, as usual.

"Him," Tony replied, turning. Somehow, Gibbs still managed to look sexy, even when dressed in boxer shorts, a tee shirt, and a pair of unlaced boots.

"Who is 'him'?" Gibbs asked.

"Him. Tonio." Tony pointed a finger at his head. "He got out and smashed up your house. That's kind of embarrassing."

"He's you, Tony," Gibbs told him, in an exasperated tone.

"Well, I don't want him, Gibbs. I wish he'd go away. I've looked after the snivelling little brat all these years – I protected him so nobody got to hurt him again, and now he does this." He pointed at the shattered kitchen door.

"He's scared. You're scared, Tony," Gibbs told him quietly. "He's just a part of you. I'm guessing that as long as you keep ignoring him he's going to keep on trying to get your attention."

"Yeah, well, you'd know all about that," Tony said shortly, pushing past him on his way back into the living room. Gibbs grabbed his arm.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You. Me. Eight years of it," Tony replied.

Gibbs released his arm. "You've got my attention now, Tony," he said softly.

"No, *he* has," Tony growled. "Is it possible to be jealous of your own sub-personality? Because if it is, I am."

Gibbs gave a little grunt of laughter, and Tony relaxed and grinned.

"You're the one who makes me laugh, Tony," Gibbs told him. "You always have." He glanced around. "You cleaned up?"

"Yeah – the mess was embarrassing me."

"How's your hand?"

"Throbs." Tony held it up.

"I'll call Ducky. It probably needs medical attention."

"Yeah. Figures. First I lose it in an interrogation, and now I'll walk into the squad room with a big white bandage on my hand. There's no way Ziva will let that one drop." Tony leaned against the wall and watched Gibbs fill the kettle and put it on the hob.

"Then tell her the truth."

"No." Tony shook his head.

Gibbs glanced up. "Nobody is going to judge you."

"No. They're going to *pity* me. That's worse. All anyone will see when they look at me is that stupid fucking kid who didn't know how to say no."

Gibbs turned around to face him. "Tony, this kid you talk about - I don't know him. I do know that he's a kid, and he's hurting right now, but that's not the only reason why I care about him. I care about him because, whether you accept it or not, he's also you."

"No, you care about him because he's a kid, and you hate it when kids are hurt," Tony pointed out. "Any kid."

"Yeah, but I don't bring them all home with me," Gibbs told him. "And I sure as hell don't sit up on the couch all night so they can get some sleep."

Tony flushed. "Yeah, sorry about that. It won't happen again."

"You can't promise that," Gibbs replied with an impatient flick of his head. "And it doesn't matter. You know, when we were first married, before Kelly was born, sometimes I'd come home late at night from a training exercise to find Shannon sitting on the couch with a blanket wrapped around her. She used to like staying up late to watch these stupid horror movies in the dark, but then she'd be too scared to get up and turn on the light, so she'd just stay sitting on the couch until I got home."

He smiled at the memory, and Tony watched him, transfixed. Gibbs never talked about anything personal. He never let his guard down, or let any of them in, and he never, ever talked about Shannon and Kelly. Now, as he reminisced about his first wife, he looked relaxed and there was that easy smile on his face - and Gibbs had never been a man for whom smiling came easy. Tony wished he could bottle the moment and keep it. It was the first time Gibbs had ever opened up to him about anything personal, and he felt honoured.

“Sometimes,” Gibbs continued, “I was so tired I’d just throw myself down on the couch beside her, and she’d snuggle up against me, and we’d both fall asleep. Sometimes...sometimes, if she was really scared, I’d get a cushion and put it on my lap. Then she’d put her head on it, and I’d stroke her hair until she fell asleep.”

Tony gazed at him with a shocked sense of realisation. Last night on the couch hadn’t been some random act of kindness towards a fucked up and unwanted houseguest. It had been something intimate, the kind of moment Gibbs had only shared with one other person before, and she had been the love of his life.

“You still miss her,” Tony said quietly, and it wasn’t a question. He had caught a glimpse of the damage that Gibbs usually kept so well-hidden, and it was humbling. He forgot all his own problems for a moment, as his well-developed sense of empathy kicked in. Gibbs didn’t let anyone see those raw wounds in his heart, but they were still there. They’d never healed over, not even a little bit, and he still ached for what he’d lost.

“Every single day,” Gibbs replied softly. There was something so obviously broken about him that Tony wondered how he’d never seen it before, and then he realised that he’d never seen it because Gibbs never let anyone see it, just as Tony never let anyone see the boy in the box.

“You want coffee?” Gibbs asked, and in an instant he was back to normal.

Tony cleared his throat. “Yeah. I’ll just go take a shower and get dressed if Ducky is coming over.”

~*~

Ducky arrived half an hour later, unwrapped Tony’s now soggy bandage, took one look at the cuts underneath, and immediately proclaimed that he had to be whisked off to the ER.

“I would suture it myself, Anthony,” he said, as he peered at Tony’s cut hand through his glasses. Gibbs leaned against the wall, watching. “But since that unfortunate incident, I’m not as confident operating on the living as I am on the dead.” He gestured to his own hand, where he’d been stabbed not so long ago.

“Great. You know how I just love hospitals.” Tony made a face.

“Ah, yes,” Ducky chuckled, glancing over at Gibbs. “You and Jethro both. It always amuses me how two such very macho men can become positively green-faced at the thought of a visit to the hospital. Although, frankly, in your line of work and with the way you both throw yourselves into the path of danger at the drop of a hat, I’d think you’d be used to it by now.”

“Might be used to it - don’t have to like it, Duck,” Gibbs commented. “Do you want me to come with you, Tony?”

“No.” Tony shook his head, looking straight at him. “Ducky can take me. I know you have to work, and frankly I’ve taken up enough of your time, Boss.”

Gibbs nodded. It didn’t take two of them to drive Tony to the hospital, and Ducky was best placed to make sure Tony got the treatment he needed in any case.

He watched them leave, and then he reached for his cell phone.

~*~

Walter Silberman sat reading his newspaper, surrounded by three dogs, two cats, and his wife, Cyndi. He had hired someone to take care of his successful business and was semi-retired these days, just doing the rounds when necessary.

The phone rang; Cyndi answered and then handed it to him, with a stern look.

“It’s Jethro. Tell him no,” she mouthed, and he grinned and ran his hand over his sore abdomen. He wasn’t as young as he used to be, and Cyndi had given him hell for allowing Gibbs to use him as a punching bag yesterday.

“Hey, Jethro,” he said, taking the phone. “Look, could we skip the sparring part, and maybe go for a coffee instead? I know you prefer talking with your fists, but after yesterday I get the feeling that actual talking might be more help to you right now.”

He heard Gibbs grunt on the other end of the line. “Cyndi tore you a new one, didn’t she?” he said. Walt laughed out loud.

“Yes she did, old friend, and she’s right. Give me a few days recovery time, and I’ll knock your puny little ass around again, but for now – I’m beat.”

“Wuss,” Gibbs accused.

“Yeah,” Walt chuckled. “Seriously though, Jethro – I can meet you at that FHC place you like so much in about twenty minutes.”

“See you then.”

The line went dead, and Walt clicked off the phone with a sigh.

“He okay?” Cyndi asked. She was as fond of Gibbs as he was – she and Shannon had been close. Cyndi hadn’t been able to have kids, and Kelly had been like a surrogate child to them. They had both been devastated when she’d been killed.

“I’m not sure. You know Jethro. Something’s got to him, but it’s like pulling teeth finding out what. I knew yesterday was just the start of it though.”

“He needs someone in his life. Someone who cares about him,” Cyndi said firmly.

“Yeah, well, you saw the way those marriages of his all ended,” Walt sighed. “And when I say ‘ended’ I mean ‘crashed and burned’.”

“He’s too nice a man to be alone.” Cyndi fed a piece of bacon from her plate to one of the dogs. “Well, maybe ‘nice’ is the wrong word,” she grinned. “He’s a cussed S.O.B, but he’s a good man, and he’s been through so much. He deserves to find someone.”

“There isn’t a woman alive who’ll measure up to Shannon,” Walt told her, getting up and planting a kiss on her cheek.

“Not a woman, no,” Cyndi said softly. Walt raised an eyebrow at her. “No *woman* stands a chance,” Cyndi said pointedly.

Walt remembered a time when Gibbs had played the field like a man trying desperately to convince himself that he loved being single again and was going to enjoy everything on offer. At a rough estimate seventy per cent of his conquests had been women, but the rest had been men. Walt hadn’t been judgemental. Gibbs and Shannon had got together young, and Walt figured that Gibbs had missed out on a certain amount of experimentation in his youth and was making up for it. That had been a long time ago though, and Walt was pretty sure he’d only dated women since then.

“You trying to tell me something, Cyndi?” he asked, as he reached for his keys, put a baseball cap on his bald head, and walked towards the door.

“Would I?” she grinned at him, and he laughed out loud and patted one of the dogs that had followed him hopefully to the door.

~*~

Walt was waiting for Gibbs when he arrived at the coffee house, long legs stretched out in front of him, baseball cap perched on his head.

“Here you go.” Walt pushed a cup of coffee towards him. Gibbs took a sip – it was hot and strong, just the way he liked it.

“Cyndi still got you on decaf?” Gibbs asked, gesturing with his head towards the cup Walt was cradling. “I don’t know how you can drink that swill, Walt.”

“It’s either that, or I sleep on the floor.” Walt grinned at him.

Gibbs gave a wry little chuckle. Cyndi was five foot nothing of pure steel. She and Walt might look comical together, Walt towering over his diminutive wife, but Cyndi was definitely the one in charge in that relationship. Walt was more of a gentle giant kind of guy – except in a fight. Gibbs could only think of one other person he’d prefer to have by his side in a fight, and he was having his hand sewn up in the hospital right now.

“So, I kicked your ass yesterday, and you wanted me to kick it again today,” Walt said, taking a sip of his coffee. “What’s eating you, Jethro?”

“You didn’t kick my ass. You’re getting fat and slow, Walt,” Gibbs retorted. “Too much fine living. I don’t know why the hell a man your ages retires.”

“I’m semi-retired – and am I hearing this from the same Leroy Jethro Gibbs who took off to Mexico a few years ago and swore he wasn’t coming back?”

Gibbs grinned at him and gulped down some of his coffee.

“And you haven’t answered my question,” Walt said, leaning back in his chair. “What’s going on, Jethro?”

Gibbs swung the coffee around in the cup, wondering where the hell to start.

“You said yesterday that it was both work related and personal,” Walt prompted.

“Yeah.” Gibbs wondered how anyone found this talking stuff through shit easy.

“She a redhead?” Walt asked.

Gibbs shook his head. “Not this time.”

“Thank God for that,” Walt said in a heartfelt tone. “No offence, Jethro, but I’ve watched you climb into and out of marriage with too many Shannon clones to know that it never works out.”

“Well, this one isn’t anything like my last three wives,” Gibbs growled.

“Good. What is she like?”

“Fucked up.” Gibbs took another gulp of his coffee. “Hurting. Scared. Vulnerable.”

“Jesus.” Walt shook his head. “How long have you known her?”

“Eight years.”

“Eight?” Walt echoed, in disbelief. “How come you never mentioned her before?”

“I was trying not to, you know, give into it.”

Gibbs watched as Walt took off his baseball cap and scratched his bald head thoughtfully.

“Why?” Walt asked. “There something wrong with her?”

“No.” Gibbs shook his head. “Just – we work together and that never works out.”

“Well it didn’t work out once, with Jenny, but that doesn’t mean it never works out,” Walt sighed. “Although trust you to extrapolate a whole life lesson from one failure. I bet you even have a rule for it, don’t ya?”

“Rule number twelve,” Gibbs said promptly. “Never date a co-worker.”

“Stupid dumb rule. If I’d followed that rule I’d never have married Cyndi – she was my secretary,” Walt pointed out.

“I know. This is more complicated than that though.”

“Why?”

“There’s a case,” Gibbs said, unsure where to begin. “Bad case – the kind that makes me want to pound my fist into the wall.”

“Knowing you, I suspect you did actually pound your fist into a wall,” Walt sighed. “That why you were taping your knuckles before we sparred yesterday?”

“Trust you to notice. I never could hide anything from you, Walt.”

“Well, you’ve hidden this woman from me for eight years,” Walt grunted. Gibbs winced.

“It isn’t a woman, Walt,” he said softly, and then he waited. Walt gazed at him steadily for a few seconds and then rolled his eyes.

“Damn it – why the hell is Cyndi always right about everything?” he muttered.

“What?”

“Never mind. Does this guy have a name?”

“Tony.”

“He your second in command at NCIS? The one who took over when you went to Mexico?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’ve been pretending not to like him for eight years?” Walt asked incredulously.

“It’s easily done,” Gibbs grunted. “Look, I can’t tell you the details, but Tony is mixed up in this case I’m working on. Something bad happened to him – and I mean really bad, pretty much as bad as it gets - and I told him I’d see him through it. He’s counting on me, Walt, but I keep thinking I’ll fuck him up even worse than he already is. He’s staying at my place at the moment and Christ, this morning I even found myself telling him some stuff about Shannon – stuff I’ve never told anyone.”

Walt gazed at him steadily. “You want to know what I think?” he asked.

“That’s why I’m here.” Gibbs braced himself. Walt had that no-nonsense look in his eyes. The same one he’d had sixteen years ago when he’d told Gibbs he was done with pulling him out of bar fights, and he had to get his act together.

“I think you’re scared, Jethro,” Walt said. Gibbs felt himself bristling. He knew himself to be many things, but he wasn’t a coward. “I’ve watched you,” Walt told him. “I’ve watched you all these years. I understood all the drinking and fighting after Shannon and Kelly died, and I

sure as hell understood all the one night stands. Then I thought you'd got your shit together, but you hadn't – not really. You just replaced the drinking, fighting, and fucking with working instead. You work like other people breathe, Jethro."

"I like my job, Walt," Gibbs growled.

"I liked mine – didn't make me want to do it eighteen hours a day," Walt retorted. "And I watched those Shannon clones. They wanted you, and they made all the moves. They pursued you, and you let them. They climbed into bed with you, and you let them. They moved in with you, and you let them. They married you, and hell, you even let them do that. Then they left you – and you let them, because the truth was you didn't really give a damn. They never touched you – not any of them. You were safe, Jethro, because you never let yourself care. I bet the people you work with think you have a heart made out of pure stone, and I can see why."

"You know, this isn't helping me yet, Walt," Gibbs muttered.

"Yeah, well, the truth isn't always pretty," Walt replied briskly. "You walled up that heart of yours after Shannon died because you're just too chicken to let anyone else in, Jethro. That's why you're freaked out right now."

"Freaked out?" Gibbs frowned. "Do I look freaked out?"

Walt grinned. "Judging by that cut above your eye that I gave you yesterday, and those torn knuckles you gave yourself – yeah. This is how Leroy Jethro Gibbs looks when he's freaked out. And do you know why?"

"I know you're going to tell me." Gibbs sat back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Too right I am. You're freaked out because this Tony person is as fucked up as you are, so you can't hold him at arm's length like you did all those ex-wives of yours. You lowered your guard and gave him a tiny peek inside your soul, and now you've let him in you don't know how to get him out again. You're not scared of fucking him up, Jethro; you're scared of loving him. You remember how much it hurt when Shannon died, and you don't want to go through that again."

"You done?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

"No. It does fucking hurt, Jethro. It hurts for all of us. Love is like that. So get your head out of your ass and join the human race. Eight years. Eight goddamn years." Walt shook his head.

Gibbs swallowed down the last of his coffee. "See, this is why I prefer fighting to talking," he growled.

"Yeah. I know." Walt gave him a rueful grin. "Look, Jethro – is the fact that he's a guy holding you back?"

Gibbs thought about it for a moment. "I've never had a relationship with a guy, only sex," he said finally. "Never even considered it. But is it holding me back? I don't know. Maybe. Probably."

"Well don't let it," Walt told him firmly. "Because there isn't a woman in the world who'll ever be good enough for you after Shannon. At least with a guy you stand a chance."

"Maybe." Gibbs nodded, thinking Walt did have a point there.

"What's he like?" Walt leaned forward, his brown eyes curious. "I mean really like – not the fucked up stuff, the other stuff. Why do you like him?"

"He talks a lot. He likes movies. He's strong, intelligent, independent, and capable. He can be an idiot. He goofs off and gets himself into trouble, but he can be surprisingly serious just when you least expect it. He's got a sensitive side he never lets anyone get close enough to see, and he empathises with people far more than you'd expect from someone like him. And he's funny. He makes me laugh."

"Sounds a lot like Shannon," Walt grunted, finishing his own coffee.

Gibbs smiled. "Yeah."

"Does he feel the same way? Does he like you?"

"Yes." Gibbs nodded.

"So what's the problem?" Walt asked. Gibbs glared at him. Walt always did have a way of simplifying everything down to nothing. "Except for the fact you're chicken," Walt added, with a grin.

"I told you, he's fucked up..."

"So are you." Walt shrugged. "So what? Does that mean that neither of you is allowed to be happy? Just take it one day at a time."

"You make it sound so easy," Gibbs grunted.

"It's as complicated as you make it. Look, Jethro – don't screw this one up. He sounds like he might actually be good for you. Besides, Cyndi wants you to find someone, so I'd take it as a personal favour to me if you'd get on and do just that, so she'll stop bending my ear about it."

Gibbs laughed out loud and then glanced at his watch. "I gotta go. Next time can we make it the gym instead of the coffee place, Walt?"

"Yeah, I guess," Walt sighed, rubbing his solar plexus absently. "And you're welcome, Jethro."

"I didn't say thanks," Gibbs growled.

Walt grinned. "You will. One day."

~*~

Abby glanced up hopefully when she heard footsteps outside her lab and then sighed when McGee entered the room.

“Problem?” He raised an eyebrow.

“No – I just thought you might be Gibbs,” she said, turning back to her screen. “Where *is* Gibbs, McGee?”

“Well, I don’t know,” McGee shrugged. “Doing, uh, case-related stuff I expect. He left me in charge.”

“Yeah, right.”

“He did!” McGee protested.

“McGee, there is no way Gibbs left you in charge of a case this big. If he had to go somewhere he’d have left Tony in charge.” She frowned. “Where *is* Tony, McGee?”

“Uh...I don’t know that either,” he said evasively, sitting down beside her and opening up the laptop he’d brought with him.

“You do!” She turned on him. “What’s going on, Timmy? Spill!”

“Nothing. I mean...look, I really don’t know where Tony is, but Gibbs definitely did leave me in charge of this case.”

“Something is hinky,” she said. McGee flushed. “And you know what it is! Come on, Tim, tell me!”

“I can’t,” he said earnestly, flushing up to the tips of his ears. “Seriously, Abby - I just can’t.”

“Yesterday I found Tony helping Ducky with dead people,” Abby mused. “Why?”

“I really have no idea – honestly.”

"And Tony and Ducky both came in really late yesterday. Together." Abby raised an intrigued eyebrow at McGee.

"Maybe they're having an affair?" he said, rolling his eyes.

"Don't be stupid, McGee!" She thwapped his arm. "There's no way Tony and Ducky are having an affair because Tony is crazy in love with..." She stopped herself just in time.

"Tony is crazy in love with who?" McGee questioned.

"Himself!" She grinned. "Talking of Ducky - where is he, Tim? He isn't here, either."

“I’m here, and as I’m in charge I’d like you to get on with some work please,” McGee told her, pointing at her screen. She smiled at him happily.

“I do like a man who takes charge. That sounded almost Gibbsian, McGee!”

“Gibbsian?” McGee raised an eyebrow.

“It’s definitely a word. Like hinky.”

“Hinky isn’t a word, Abby.”

“McGee! How can you say that?”

McGee sighed. “Okay, hinky’s a word.”

“Okay then. Back down the salt mines.” She clicked her mouse and brought up a photograph. “You ever hate your job, McGee?” she sighed, looking at yet another picture of a boy with sad eyes.

“At the moment? Every single day.”

~*~

Gibbs had just returned from the cold case filing room and sat down at his desk when Tony walked through the door. He had a massive white bandage on his hand that stretched half-way up his forearm.

“Tony! What on earth happened to you?” Ziva exclaimed.

“I walked into a door,” Tony said with a grin.

“I do not believe you.” She perched on the side of his desk and examined the bandage. “That sounds like the kind of thing women say when they are being beaten by their husbands.”

“You’re right, Ziva,” Tony agreed. “I was beaten by my husband.”

“No – you are still lying,” she said, rolling her eyes. “What really happened?”

“He walked into a door, Ziva, like he said,” Gibbs growled. “How did it go at the hospital, Tony?”

“Fine. I’ll need the dressing changed every day until the stitches can come out though.”

“Me or Ducky can do that,” Gibbs said, getting up. He picked up the massive pile of files on his desk, walked over to Tony’s desk, and dumped them on it. “Cold cases,” he said. “All for you, DiNozzo.”

“Aw, Boss!” Tony protested. “C’mon! There has to be a dozen of them!”

“Then the sooner you get started, the sooner you’ll be done,” Gibbs said pleasantly.

“Yes, Boss,” Tony sighed.

“Tony is not working on the Parrish case?” Ziva asked, in a surprised voice. “But there is so much to do, Gibbs. We need all the help we can get. The cold case files can surely wait?”

“Not Tony,” Gibbs told her. “He’s not working this one.”

“But Gibbs...”

“Tony is not working this case,” Gibbs repeated icily. He glanced at Tony, who had picked up one of the files and was burying his nose in it studiously, pretending he wasn’t listening. Gibbs’s phone rang, and he picked it up.

“Uh, Boss?” McGee’s voice. “Abby’s had a breakthrough down here, and I think you should come down and see it.”

“On my way.”

He stopped off for a Caf-Pow and took it along to Abby’s lab. She took it and lifted her cheek in anticipation of a kiss.

“Not yet, Abs. I want to see what you’ve got first,” he told her, with a little smile.

“Gibbs!” she protested. “I’ve hardly seen you in days!”

“You saw me yesterday, Abby,” he pointed out.

“For about ten minutes!”

“Well you’re seeing me now. What have you got for me?” Gibbs glanced at McGee.

“I went through all the missing persons data but didn’t find a match on any of our boys,” McGee told him. “Abby sent all the photos to the National Center for Missing or Exploited Children but so far we’ve had no matches there, either. Then Abby had a great idea. Abby?” He gestured with his head. Abby grinned.

“It *is* a great idea,” she said. “Even if I do say so myself! I picked the clearest photo of each boy, and I began ageing them.”

Gibbs glanced at McGee, who made a little movement with his eyes.

“Then I ran them through the facial recognition software and matched them against pictures in the criminal database,” Abby said proudly. “I thought that some of our boys might have grown up a bit hinky after what happened to them, and that they might have criminal records.”

“Good thinking, Abs,” Gibbs said. “What did you come up with?”

“Oh...I’m not done yet. I’m taking it one boy at a time.”

“She’s up to Boy 41 now,” McGee told him meaningfully. “That’s why I called you down. So you could...uh, see for yourself.”

“And – we have four matches,” she said triumphantly. “So I started a spreadsheet.” She pulled it up onscreen. “Boy One – Justin Merrells. We know about him already. Boy Fourteen – Ben Parkes.” She brought up the picture of round-faced, blond boy. “Lots of minor drugs charges. He’s in prison right now. Boy 34: Leo Baranski. He died a few years ago in a car accident. He had a few convictions for DUI though, so I’m thinking it’s related. And Boy 39: Xavier Ramirez. He’s currently doing ten years for aggravated assault and battery.”

“Good work, Abs.” Gibbs leaned over and kissed her expectant cheek. “McGee – go and interview Parkes and Ramirez. See if they’ll talk about these photos and confirm they were forced into underage sex. Find out if they know the names of any of their abusers.”

“On it, Boss!”

“And do some digging - see if Baranski had any connection to Quinn or Parrish,” Gibbs added.

“We’ve got a first name for Boy 32 as well,” Abby said, pointing with her mouse at her spreadsheet. “He’s wearing an identity bracelet. I managed to blow it up and his name is Ryan. Not much – but it’s something.”

“I have one more name for your spreadsheet, Abs,” Gibbs told her quietly. “Boy 43.”

“Yeah? Cool!” She put her fingers on the keyboard and waited expectantly.

“Anthony DiNozzo,” he told her quietly. She looked up, confused.

“What?”

“Boy 43.” He nodded at her spreadsheet. “Anthony DiNozzo.”

“Gibbs!” she protested. “That’s not funny.”

“No. It’s really not,” Gibbs agreed.

“It’s true, Abby,” McGee said quietly. “Tony is Boy 43. That’s why he hasn’t been around much lately.”

“But Boy 43...he’s the one who looks so scared,” she whispered. “Whenever I see him I always want to reach in there, scoop him up, and take him home with me.”

“Well I’ve done that,” Gibbs muttered.

“Tony is staying with you?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Good! I hate to think of him being alone in his apartment while this is going on. I’m so glad he’s got you, Gibbs.”

“Yeah, well, this is tough for him, Abs, as I’m sure you can understand.”

“Is he okay?” Her pale green eyes were wide and worried.

“Not really.” Gibbs shrugged.

"Boy 43 is one of the younger kids in those photos." Abby twirled one of her pigtails anxiously in her fingers. "I mean, he looks really young."

"He was twelve," Gibbs told her quietly.

That took a moment to sink in. “Twelve? And did Parrish...?” She broke off, looking horrified.

“Uh-huh.” Gibbs nodded. “That’s why Tony can’t work on the case, Abs. You can’t let him touch any of the evidence. Understand?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “Where is he?”

“Upstairs. Working on cold cases.”

“He’ll be hating that.” Abby made a face. “Is that why he was helping Ducky yesterday?”

“Yup.”

“Who else knows?”

“You, me, McGee, Ducky. That’s all.”

“Ziva?”

“Not yet. She’ll have to know at some point, but at the moment he’s really uncomfortable with people finding out,” Gibbs explained. “I wouldn’t have told you, but you’re on Boy 41. In another half an hour you’d have been ageing up Boy 43, and then you’d have found out the hard way.”

“There isn’t really an easy way to find out something like this, Gibbs.”

“No,” he agreed. “There really isn’t.”

“I need to see him.”

“Well, he’s upstairs. Just don’t...you know, make it any worse for him than it already is,” Gibbs told her.

“I won’t, I promise,” she said quietly.

~*~

Abby accompanied Gibbs and McGee upstairs in the elevator, still reeling. She couldn't even begin to get her head around this, but she hurt inside just thinking about it.

She ran into the squad room and found Tony sitting at his desk with a big white bandage wrapped around his hand. He was nose deep in a file and surrounded by dozens of others, almost as if he was hiding.

“Tony!”

She was glad of the bandage because it gave her an excuse to hug him. He looked surprised as she ran over to him, pushed him back from his desk, sat down on his knee, and threw her arms around him.

“Your hand! I didn't know you'd been hurt!” she exclaimed, burying her face in his neck, so he wouldn't see the tears in her eyes. She hugged him tight, unwilling to let go. She felt his hands go uncertainly to her back, and he patted her feebly.

“Okay, Abs, let me breathe!” he joked, panting in an exaggerated way, sounding just like the same old Tony DiNozzo.

She drew back and looked into his eyes, seeing shadows in them that she hadn't seen before. Or maybe she'd seen them but just not registered them. There had been times when she'd caught him off guard, in an unexpected moment, and seen a glimpse of a stranger in his eyes. Then he'd always smiled at her and the stranger had disappeared, and she'd forgotten all about it. Now she remembered all the times that had happened, and she wondered who that stranger was.

“What happened to your hand?” she asked, taking hold of his hand and examining the bandage carefully, more for something to do to stop herself crying than anything else.

“He *says* that he walked into a door,” Ziva told her.

“He *did* walk into a door,” Gibbs growled.

“How do you know?” Ziva frowned.

“Because it was my kitchen door, Ziva!”

“Oh.” Ziva looked completely confused. “So you really did walk into a door, Tony?”

“Yes, Ziva, I really did,” Tony grinned.

Abby felt sorry for Ziva, but she understood why Tony was uncomfortable with people knowing about this. She felt guilty that *she* knew. She felt bad that she'd spent the past two days sitting downstairs in her lab looking at such intimate, shocking photographs of him. She couldn't begin to know how he must feel about that.

“Ziva, would you like to come with me? I’m uh, going to prison,” McGee said. Ziva’s eyes widened.

“Now that is an invitation I cannot refuse,” she replied, with a little grin.

Abby waited until the two of them had left, and then she turned back to Tony and hugged him again, burying her face in his neck, never wanting to let go.

“You know, don’t you?” Tony said in a quiet voice in her ear.

“Yes. I’m sorry, it’s just I was ageing up all the photos, and I was on the boy in file 41 and you’re Boy 43, so Gibbs had to tell me, or I’d have found out anyway,” she replied into his neck.

“It’s okay, Abby,” he said softly. “I’d have told you myself, but it’s – you know – hard.”

He sounded strange, kind of small and childlike. She drew back and looked into his eyes again, and for one strange, dislocated second, found that she was looking into the eyes of Boy 43. It was the same scared, desperate, trapped look; the same lost expression; the same sense of sadness. Now she knew, she wondered how she could ever not have known. It seemed so obvious now.

Then the look was gone, and the old, familiar, joking Tony was back.

“Abby, your studded bracelet is kind of digging into my neck,” he said with a grin, and she laughed and moved her arm.

“What really happened to your hand?” she asked him.

“He really did walk into a damn door!” Gibbs roared behind her.

“Oops.” She and Tony shared a little ‘Gibbs is mad’ grimace, and then they both laughed.

She rested her forehead against Tony’s, and he put his arms around her and held on tight.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m so sorry, Tony. I hate that this happened to you. You’re one of my closest friends – you’re *family* - and I love you so much.”

“Love you too, Abs,” he whispered into her ear. “Don’t treat me any differently though, will you?”

“Uh...I’ll try. I might need to hug you a lot though – for awhile at least.”

“Okay. I can live with that,” he chuckled into her neck.

She drew back. “Oh wait! I have a cool idea!” she exclaimed. “I’m going bowling with the sisters tonight. How about you and Gibbs come along?”

“Uh...” Tony held up his bandaged hand. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea, Abby. Do you, Boss?” he called across the room to Gibbs. Gibbs shrugged.

“I don’t see why not. You’re always telling us you could beat us at any given ball sport with one hand tied behind your back, DiNozzo.”

Abby laughed.

“Yeah, but not my right hand, Boss!” Tony complained. “I mean, this here is my bowling hand!” He surveyed his bandaged hand sadly. Abby leaned forward and kissed it.

“You’ll have to be a southpaw for the evening, Tony,” she told him. “Because I’m not taking no for an answer.”

“Boss!” Tony called frantically across the room. Gibbs looked up again, with a grin.

“You heard her, DiNozzo. What’s the matter? Afraid the nuns will kick your ass?”

“No, I’m just afraid of them period,” Tony muttered. “Well come on! Bowling nuns? It’s freaky!”

“Tony! These are some of my best friends. You’ll love Sister Rosita.”

“Why?” Tony looked intrigued. “Is she hot?” Abby thumped him gently in the ribs. “Ow!” he complained with a grin.

“She’s not hot – but she *is* totally cool,” Abby told him. She kissed his cheek and then got up off his lap. “And I will see you both tonight.”

She gazed at him again, but Boy 43 wasn’t there any more and just Tony gazed back, with the usual hint of mischief in his glowing green eyes. She wondered where Boy 43 had gone, and whether she’d ever get a glimpse of him again.

“Problem, Abs?” Tony asked, and she realised that she was still gazing at him.

“No,” she frowned. “Just...” She leaned forward. “It’s Boy 43. He’s okay. I like him. You don’t always have to hide him.” Then she ran back down to her lab before he could reply.

~*~

Tony gazed at himself in the bathroom mirror. He felt tired, much more tired than he had any right to be after sitting on his butt all day going through those damn boring files. True, his throbbing hand had made things harder than usual – simple things he did every day like pissing and typing now took twice as long - and the painkillers zonked him out a little. Even so, he didn’t think he should feel *this* tired. He’d been injured far worse during his time at NCIS, and it hadn’t affected him this much.

He was dreading going to bed later. Today had been okay – the cold case files, boring though they were, had been a distraction. Knowing Gibbs was watching him with that laser-sharp gaze of his had helped keep him on track, even though the compulsion to zone out had been there a couple of times during the day. Tonight though... He went cold every time he thought of lying in bed in Gibbs’s spare room. Luke lurked in the shadows everywhere, and Tony felt as defenceless against the man now as he had been when he was a kid.

“C’mon!” he muttered to his reflection, trying to access his usual levels of high-octane energy. “There are only so many things you can smash or break in Gibbs’s house.”

His reflection gazed back at him, green eyes completely stony.

“Your problem is you have no sense of humour,” he told the man in the mirror. “Lighten up! We’re going bowling. At least that’s one place Roy never took you as a bribe to keep you from telling anyone about him fucking your underage ass. Whore.” He grinned at himself. “Remember all that stuff you got for keeping your mouth shut, Tonio? All the roller skates, sneakers, skateboards, trips to the movies, burgers and all that shit? Boy, you were cheap.”

The door opened, and Gibbs appeared behind him.

“You gonna be in here all night, DiNozzo?”

“Sorry, Boss - everything just takes longer with only one hand,” Tony explained, holding up his bandaged hand.

“You okay with going bowling?”

“Didn’t know I had a choice,” Tony muttered.

“I’m not trying to run your life for you,” Gibbs growled. “You don’t want to go, we don’t have to.”

Tony sighed. “No, it’s fine. At least if we go out, then there’s no danger of me subjecting you to another lecture on the history of film.”

Gibbs gave a quirk of a grin. “Actually, it was pretty interesting.” Then he shrugged. “Well, the bits of it that made any sense.”

Tony grimaced, remembering the verbal diarrhoea of the previous evening. He finished drying his hands, ran his fingers through his hair, and then walked over to the door. Gibbs stopped him as he passed and put his hands on Tony’s shoulders.

“You did good today, Tony,” he said, looking straight into Tony’s eyes.

“Yeah, I didn’t attack anyone, or fall apart in an elevator, or smash up any of the fixtures and fittings,” Tony joked, looking away.

Gibbs put a hand on the side of his face to make him look at him again. “You did good,” Gibbs repeated firmly. Tony gazed at him in surprise, and then he nodded.

“Thanks, Boss,” he said quietly.

The bowling alley was busy when they got there, and that made Tony feel tense. He had kept control of himself all day, but being around people was becoming increasingly difficult. Sometimes he felt that he was holding on by the barest thread, and it might break at any moment. Supposing there was some kind of trigger here? Supposing he lost it again? The last thing he wanted to do was make an idiot of himself here, in such a public place.

Abby introduced him to the nuns, but Tony found it hard to remember all their names. He wanted to access his usual easy charm, but he couldn't seem to find it. There was a buzzing sound in his head, his hand throbbed, and he was so damn tired. All he wanted to do was sleep, but he dreaded the thought of closing his eyes for even a second.

Gibbs was first up to bowl, and as Tony sat there, watching, he realised that he'd never been in this situation before. He'd never been with people who *knew*. All his life it had been his secret, and one he'd tried his best to keep hidden, but now it was out there. More and more people were finding out every day, and he didn't have a clue how to handle it.

Who was he? Now that they knew, now that he didn't need to hide himself any more, who the hell was he? Was he Tony, who goofed around and kept everything from getting too serious? Or was he the boy he'd packed away in a box years ago - a quiet kid with a shy, reserved personality?

"Penny for them, Tony," Sister Rosita said, sitting down next to him. She was a large woman in her forties, with a happy, beaming smile and a thick Irish accent - which surprised Tony as he'd always assumed from her name that she was Spanish.

"Oh, that's overpriced," Tony replied with a smile. "They aren't worth that much."

They both turned as Gibbs knocked down all ten pins on his first attempt.

"Typical," Tony snorted, as Abby threw her arms around Gibbs, and he swung her around, grinning and punching the air.

"Your boss is quite the charmer," Sister Rosita laughed. Tony looked at her in surprise. "He's a perfect gentleman of course, but he always has a little gleam in his eye when I talk to him, and he's quite a flirt," she said, in her warm, lilting accent.

Tony stared at her, completely taken aback. Gibbs? A flirt? "You've met him before?"

"Oh yes! Abby's brought him along a couple of times - not often because I gather he's something of a workaholic, but we love it when he joins us. Although..." She leaned forward and spoke to him conspiratorially. "He does like to win, doesn't he?"

Tony laughed. "Oh yeah. He sure as hell does."

He looked over to where Sister Harriet was engaging Gibbs in conversation, and he saw that his boss looked relaxed and completely at ease. He was talking in a way that was positively animated - for Gibbs anyway.

"And you find him charming?" Tony asked.

"Oh yes! He's quite a favourite with us!"

Tony thought about how authoritarian and taciturn Gibbs could be at work, but he supposed everyone needed to let their hair down and relax occasionally. Even so, this was a side of Gibbs he hadn't seen before, and he was intrigued. Maybe everyone had different sides of themselves they didn't like people to see.

Tony rubbed his forehead with his hand. He wished he could get that buzzing sound out of his brain – it was driving him crazy, and it was hard enough to think as it was without having a swarm of bees inside his head.

Sister Rosita gazed at him thoughtfully.

“That’s quite a burden you’re carrying there, Tony,” she said quietly. He glanced over at her sharply, thinking, angrily, that Abby might have told her about his past. “You have a big, easy smile, but your eyes tell a different story.” Sister Rosita gazed at him thoughtfully. “I don’t know what your burden is, but you’re among friends tonight – can’t you rest here awhile and be yourself?”

“Yeah, well, I haven’t figured out who that is yet,” Tony muttered.

“Don’t try so hard – just be,” Sister Rosita advised, and then she looked around. “It’s your turn, Tony,” she said, pointing.

He got up and picked up a bowling ball with his left hand.

“Let’s see what you can do, southpaw!” Abby called.

It felt all wrong, and his stride was off as he approached the alley. He released the ball too soon and winced as it crashed onto the floor and then dawdled down to the end where it knocked over a single pin.

“Aw, Tony!” Abby gave him a hug of commiseration. Gibbs just grinned at him.

“What was it you were saying about beating us with one arm tied behind your back, DiNozzo?” he asked.

Tony tried to think of the smart DiNozzo reply, but it just wasn’t there. He couldn’t seem to get anything right at the moment. The buzzing sound got louder, and he shook his head and reached up a hand, absently, to stroke his hair.

“Hey.” Gibbs was suddenly beside him. “You just need to adjust your stance to account for the fact you’re bowling with your left hand instead of your right,” Gibbs said, picking up another ball and handing it to him. He stood behind Tony, put one hand on his hip, and stroked his other hand down Tony’s left arm to his wrist.

“You need to put your weight on the other hip,” Gibbs said, and his voice was low and deep in Tony’s ear. Tony felt himself relaxing, which was strange because he usually hated it when people – men – stood close behind him. This felt good though. Gibbs felt good, pressed against his back, strong and warm, close and comforting. The buzzing sound in his head receded, and Tony leaned forward and released the ball smoothly. It rocketed down to the end and knocked over all the remaining nine pins.

“Not bad for a southpaw!” Tony grinned at Abby. She giggled and high-fived him. “Thanks, Boss!” Tony said, sitting down again.

He could still feel the weight of Gibbs's hand on his hip and the reassurance of Gibbs's body against his own. He could hear that deep, low voice speaking straight into his ear, and smell the scent of the man.

One by one the sisters came over to him to talk, and he was relieved that nobody expected anything of him. He liked being Tony DiNozzo. He liked being the one who clowned around and got all the laughs. He liked making people like him, and he liked dazzling them so much that they never saw beneath the shiny surface of the face he presented to the world. But being Tony – upbeat, restless, teasing Tony - took energy, and he was all out of juice right now. That stupid damn kid in his head had drained him dry, and there was nothing left.

He rubbed his head again. The buzzing sound was always there, in the background, but if he just sat quietly, and didn't try too hard, it didn't get any louder. He knew it was there though. Waiting.

"Is he okay?" he overheard Abby ask Gibbs. "He's really quiet."

"Yeah, well, you told him he didn't always have to hide Boy 43, Abby," Gibbs replied softly. "So he isn't."

Tony saw her look around, realisation showing in her eyes. Then she came over to him and sat down on his lap. He put his arms around her, and she rested her cheek against his, and they sat there in silence watching the bowling.

A few seconds later, Gibbs came over and sat down beside them. He rested his arm along the back of the seat so that it was touching Tony's shoulder, his fingers just brushing Tony's hair.

Tony tightened his clasp on Abby, and she reciprocated, hugging him back. He leaned back into Gibbs's fingers and relaxed as they began stroking the back of his head, softly, rhythmically, soothing him.

None of them said anything. They just sat there in silence. But, for the first time since his mother died, Tony didn't feel that he was alone.

~*~

Tony was silent on the drive home. Gibbs glanced at him every few minutes, wondering what was going on in Tony's head. He looked tired and there was a bleak expression in his eyes.

When they got back to the house, Tony went straight to the kitchen and got a glass of water.

"So I don't need to go walkabout again in the middle of the night," he said, holding it up, a note of bravado in his voice that did nothing to hide the fear in his eyes. Gibbs noticed that his hand was shaking. Tony started to hum.

"Tony – what's going on right now?" Gibbs asked.

"Nothing's going on. I'm fine." Tony looked surprised.

"You're humming."

"So?" Tony shrugged. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing – just the humming seems to be part of the whole head stroking and eyes glazing over thing that happens when you're about to fugue," Gibbs said. "So what's going on?"

Tony frowned, looking angry and scared at one and the same time. "There's this damn buzzing sound in my head. If I hum, I can drown it out sometimes, that's all."

"Do you know what the sound is?"

"No. It's nothing. I'm tired. I'm going to bed," Tony said abruptly, walking over to the door.

"Are you scared of going into a fugue again?" Gibbs asked him quietly. Tony stiffened and then turned.

"Yes I'm fucking scared of going into a fugue again, Gibbs," he growled. "The first night after this whole nightmare began, I woke up after two hours stuck inside my own head to find myself half-naked, the guy I was intending to fuck gone, and you and Ducky standing over me. And the second night I smashed up your house, and you had to sit up with me on the fucking couch until I got to sleep. So, I figure I don't have much dignity left where the nights are concerned. I'm wondering what night three has in store for me; maybe I'll run down the street stark naked to complete my total embarrassment."

"We could sit on the couch again, if it'll help," Gibbs suggested.

"No. This is pathetic. I'm a grown man." Tony shook his head. "I can't make you sit up on the couch and nursemaid me to sleep every night."

He turned again and squared his shoulders, visibly, and then took a deep breath and resumed his journey like a man going to his execution.

"Tony," Gibbs said, as he reached the door. "Would you like to sleep in my bed?"

Tony stood there, and Gibbs could see every muscle in his body tense up. He turned back, slowly.

"Just sleep," Gibbs said, because the last thing he wanted was for the invitation to sound sexually charged. Tony had enough mixed-up feelings to handle right now without Gibbs introducing sex into the equation. "If it would help?"

"For God's sake, I'm not going to ask you to..." Tony began angrily, and then he ran out of steam. He bowed his head and gazed at the floor. "Yeah," he muttered. "It would help."

~*~

"Idiot," Tony berated himself around the side of his toothbrush as he cleaned his teeth. "You're like a six year old kid sheltering in Daddy's bed from the monsters. Christ, you disgust me. You're this fucking lead weight, pulling me down."

A pair of scared but determined eyes stared back at him from the mirror.

"This is a guy I want to respect me," he told his reflection. "And not just that. This is a guy I want to like me. I want him to find me attractive, and there's nothing attractive about neediness. Don't you fucking understand that?"

His reflection shrugged at him.

"Oh, you understand, but you don't care. You just need what you need, and I always give in to you to head off a meltdown. You're so fucking weak. You've screwed up my entire fucking life. I hate you."

He swiped a towel across his face and threw it at the mirror. Then he turned out the light and went into the bedroom. Gibbs was already sitting in bed, reading a book. Tony felt stupid walking across the room towards the other side of the bed. He hesitated when he got there, unsure what to do next. Gibbs glanced up at him over the top of his glasses.

"Just get in, DiNozzo," he said, in an oddly affectionate growl.

Tony slid under the duvet and lay there stiffly, looking up at the ceiling.

"If you feel like you're going into a fugue, you talk to me," Gibbs ordered. "Wake me up – I don't mind. And remember what I said about standing up to that bastard. Don't let him hurt you any more, Tony. Take control of the memory."

"Didn't work last night," Tony pointed out. He couldn't forget the sensation of Luke fucking his mouth all the way to the back of his throat, blocking his airway, one cold fist wrapped in his hair so he couldn't get away. He recalled the desperate struggle, and then the movement of his hand thrusting wildly through the air and the sound of shattering glass.

"Didn't take you for a quitter, DiNozzo," Gibbs said. Tony glanced sideways at him. Gibbs removed his glasses and looked at him. "You try something once, and it doesn't work out so you give up? Try again, Tony. Didn't I teach you anything?"

Tony nodded, grimly. Gibbs shot him one of his rare smiles, and that gave Tony the determination to at least try. He didn't want to let Gibbs down. Gibbs leaned over, put his book on the nightstand, and then turned off the light. Tony lay there in the darkness, listening as Gibbs settled down beside him.

"You won't get to sleep if you don't close your eyes, Tony," Gibbs told him. "Just relax. I'll be here."

Tony gave a little sigh and turned over onto his side, away from Gibbs, with his back to him. A second later he felt Gibbs turn too, and then he felt Gibbs's chest pressing against his back. Gibbs's hand slid over his stomach and came to rest there, warm and firm, holding Tony close. Normally, that would have been a trigger for him to get out of the situation. He never let the people he fucked hold him like this. Once the sex was over, he preferred them to leave, but if they had to stay then he liked them to stay on their own side of the bed. This was different. This was like it had been back at the bowling alley; instead of making him panic it made him feel safe.

"Okay?" Gibbs asked.

"Yeah," Tony replied softly. "Very okay."

"Good. Now sleep."

Tony closed his eyes, cautiously, and waited. There was nothing. No buzzing, no whispering in the shadows. For now, at least, it seemed he was safe.

It was a little after three a.m. when Tony woke up. He slid out of the bed and got up to use the bathroom, then returned and got back in, trying not to wake Gibbs in the process. Gibbs muttered something in his sleep and moved away, over to the other side of the bed, and Tony lay there alone in the dark. He missed the weight and feel of Gibbs's hand on his belly and the warm press of his body against his own. Tony steeled himself and then closed his eyes.

"Bzzz...bzzzz...bzzzz..." Maybe it wasn't bees. It was a more mechanical, regular sound than that. "Bzzzz...bzzzz...bzzzz..."

He was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling. It was a hot day, and above him a ceiling fan was turning. There was something caught in it, and it made a little buzzing sound as it revolved above him.

He gazed at it. It was discoloured – maybe it had once been white, but now it was a yellowy colour.

Someone was looming over him, unbuttoning his blue and white plaid shirt, the one his mom had bought for him just before she died. He lay there, gazing up at the fan, watching it turn. His shirt was pushed open and cold hands slid across his chest. A warm mouth followed, trailing saliva over his bare skin. He gazed fixedly at the fan.

His jeans were unbuttoned and yanked down his legs, then thrown onto the floor. His briefs followed. Cold hands touched him again, so cold they made him jump. He clenched his hands in the sheets and refused to take his eyes off the fan circling above him.

"Didn't you like my present?" Luke asked him.

"What?"

"I gave you a present. Didn't you like it?"

He thought of the little red plastic viewfinder, and the disk of "The Sword in the Stone", and nodded.

"I liked it," he said, still gazing at the fan.

He was startled by the slap on his thigh, and he jumped and looked down for the first time into a pair of hard grey eyes.

"Then put out for me, you little slut," Luke hissed. "That's what you do, isn't it? You put out for presents? That's what Roy told me."

He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do. He didn't like this new man Roy had left him with. He was mean, and Tony was terrified that he would hurt him, like Marco had hurt him. Tony clenched his hands more tightly in the sheets.

"Sorry," he whispered.

"You will be if you don't start trying harder," Luke snapped. "Look at you, lying there like a fish on a slab. Turn over." Cold hands turned him onto his stomach, and his shirt was removed, leaving him completely naked. Those hands roved everywhere, caressing and pinching him. He buried his head in the pillow and listened to the sound of the fan overhead.

"Bzzzz...bzzzz...bzzzz..."

Another slap – on his ass this time. "Open up for me, you little slut. Don't play the shy virgin. I saw those photos. I know you can do better than this."

"BZZZZ...BZZZZ..." The sound was ringing in his ears, deafening him, making so much noise that he couldn't hear anything else. There was something he was supposed to do. Something someone wanted him to do. Gibbs – that was it. Gibbs had told him to do something, and he always did whatever Gibbs told him to do.

"I said open. Roy was wrong. You aren't a good boy at all. You're a little sack of shit. Now do as I tell you."

"No," he muttered. The noise in his head was so loud it was hurting him. Where was Gibbs? He had said he'd be here, and he fucking well wasn't. Where the hell was he? Tony couldn't do this alone.

"What did you say?"

"I said no," he whimpered into the pillow.

He was slapped again, harder this time. Luke grabbed his hips and pulled his buttocks apart. Tony scrunched the sheets in his fists and wriggled, trying to get out of his grasp.

"Please don't, please stop, please, please..." he begged.

"You don't want me to stop." The sun was shining through the window, turning Luke into a huge, looming shadow on the wall in front of him, like a giant monster, towering over him. "You like it. It's what you're for. You're a little slut who loves being fucked."

"Gibbs!" Tony shouted. His hands clenched in the sheets as Luke's cold fingers tightened their grasp on his hips. He felt something hard press against him. "Gibbs, where the hell are you? You said you'd be here...Gibbs!"

He was quivering, his entire body covered in sweat, and Luke was pushing against him, demanding entrance. The shadow on the wall in front of him grew even larger, threatening to engulf him completely.

"I am here, Tony," a strong voice said in his ear. A warm, firm hand slid over his stomach, and another stroked his hair. "I'm here. You can do this. Tell him no. Make him go away."

Luke's hips were thrusting against his ass. "Take it – it's all you're good for," Luke told him.

"No," Tony said fearfully.

"Yes, you little slut."

"Fight back, Tony," Gibbs said. "He can't hurt you. I'm here."

Tony felt a renewed sense of courage. He could do this. He could fight this monster.

"No!" he said again, more firmly this time, and as he said it he felt himself growing. He felt his legs lengthening, his body filling out, and his muscles flexing beneath his skin. He was big; too big to be held down by this bastard. He was tall, strong, and powerful, and he could fight back. He wasn't a helpless kid any more.

The shadow on the wall in front of him was predatory and grotesque. Tony faltered for a moment, afraid to turn and face the man casting it.

"Tony – you can do this," Gibbs told him, and his hand pressed even more firmly against Tony's stomach. "I know you can." There wasn't even a hint of doubt in his voice.

Tony pulled himself up to his full height. He gathered every single ounce of courage he possessed and then turned and looked straight at his tormentor.

Luke didn't seem as terrifying as he once had. Tony didn't have to look up at him now because they were at eye level. Tony gazed at him from the distance of years, taking in the dark hair, the square jaw, and the cold grey eyes, seeing his tormentor properly for the first time. Luke wasn't a monster - he was just a man. Luke gazed back at him, his eyes coolly assessing.

"Don't fight me, Boy," he said in that clipped, precise tone of voice. "We both know you don't have the balls. I'm going to fuck you, and you can't stop me."

"I can," Tony said in a tight voice. Luke wasn't real. He was just the shifting shadows inside his own mind. He had to remember that. "I know who you are now," Tony told him. "I know who you are, I know what you are, and I won't let you touch me again."

Parrish's face twisted into a predatory smile. "You can't fight me, Tony."

"Go away, Parrish," Tony said tiredly.

Luke reached out cold fingers towards him, but they were ghostly and insubstantial.

"I said go away!" Tony roared. "Fuck off! Leave me alone!"

The ceiling fan circled above him – bzzzz, bzzzz, bzzzz – and Matthew Parrish shimmered briefly and then faded into nothing. The room disappeared, and the buzzing noise in his head slowly died away, until it too was gone.

Tony blinked.

Gibbs was leaning over him, holding him, one hand stroking his hair, the other wrapped around his waist. Tony could just about make out the intensity of his blue eyes in the darkness.

"You back with us, Tony?"

"Yeah." Tony grinned at him tiredly. "I did it, Boss," he said, in a tone of quiet triumph. "I kicked the bastard's ass, told him to get out of my head – and he went... just like that. He slunk away without a fight."

"He's a damn coward," Gibbs grunted. "Like all the worst bullies." He continued to stroke Tony's hair, looking down at him all the time with that intense look still in his eyes. "I'm proud of you, Tony. I knew you could do it."

Tony grinned up at him stupidly, and then, just as stupidly, he angled his head up and kissed Gibbs on the lips. This time Gibbs didn't go still. This time he moved his head down and gently returned the kiss. Tony drew back, took another look at those intense blue eyes, and then he went back in for another kiss.

Gibbs moved his hand to cup Tony's face and his lips moved against Tony's. Tony hesitated, and then he took his life in his hands and parted Gibbs's lips with his own. He pushed his tongue into Gibbs's mouth and began exploring. Gibbs was motionless for a moment, and Tony wondered if he'd gone too far, but then Gibbs responded, his tongue sliding passionately against Tony's.

It was a slow, tender kiss. Tony came up for air and then pushed Gibbs back on the bed. He rolled on top of him and kissed him again, harder this time, wanting more, his mouth restlessly questing... Gibbs put his hands on Tony's shoulders and pushed up, stopping him.

"I won't be one of your distractions, DiNozzo," he said quietly.

"I'm not... I'm not doing that," Tony replied, looking down on him. "I'm ready for this, trust me."

"Maybe you are." Gibbs gazed up at him. "But I'm not."

Tony frowned. He rested his elbows on the pillow, on either side of Gibbs's head, and stroked Gibbs's hair away from his forehead, looking down on him the whole time, feeling confused.

"Despite my many marriages, there hasn't been anyone I really cared about since Shannon," Gibbs told him. "It's not easy for me to let anyone in, and you're too important to me to fuck it up. And besides, I've never had a relationship with a guy before; plenty of sex but never a relationship."

"I've never had a relationship with anyone before," Tony grunted, with a little laugh. "Unless you count the whole Jeanne thing, which I don't since technically that wasn't even me she was in love with."

"That's probably the only way it could have been for you in the past, but it's not the way it'll be with me, Tony. I know you. You won't get away with any of that shit with me."

"Yeah." Tony dropped a kiss on Gibbs's forehead. "But I *want* you, Gibbs. I want you so much." He moved his body hungrily against Gibbs's solid flesh beneath him, needing more.

"You've *got* me," Gibbs told him, and his hands came up to rest on Tony's ass. "Let's just take it slowly, one step at a time. There's no hurry."

"You mean that? You're not going to disappear on me, are you?" Tony asked, reluctant to release his hold on Gibbs, keeping him pinned down. He'd wanted this for so long that it seemed hard to believe it was really happening.

"No, Tony, I'm not going to disappear," Gibbs replied, his hands stroking Tony's ass firmly.

Tony kissed him again, just to be sure, and Gibbs opened up sweetly and allowed him the kiss. Tony drank him in, eagerly, thrusting against him until Gibbs pushed him away with a chuckle.

"Sorry," Tony said sheepishly, rolling off Gibbs and onto his side, so he could still look at him. "I just...I've wanted this for such a long time."

"I know. Me too."

Tony reached out and rested a hand on Gibbs's chest, tracing the lines of wiry muscle beneath his fingertips.

"I never knew. You never said anything."

"Yeah, well, I'm not any good at all that shit. And then there's rule number twelve..."

Tony laughed out loud. "Well, the rules are made to be broken, Boss."

"No, they're damn well not," Gibbs retorted. "They're there for a reason."

Tony found a nipple and circled it with his finger through the fabric of Gibbs's tee-shirt. "I'm good at sex," he said. "Really good. You sure...?"

"I'm sure," Gibbs replied firmly. "But are you sure, Tony, that you're as ready as you think you are?"

His hand slid down inside Tony's boxers, and Tony hissed in a deep breath and then slowly released it. Then he realised what Gibbs meant; his mind might be turned on right now, but his cock wasn't. Gibbs must have seen the expression on his face, because he removed his hand and cupped Tony's cheek instead.

"Hey – like I said - one step at a time. Tonight was breakthrough enough, wasn't it?"

Tony turned onto his back, put his hands under his head, and stared moodily up at the ceiling. Gibbs turned onto his side and rested his hand on Tony's stomach.

"It's just weird," Tony muttered. "Because I'm such a damn whore. I've slept with half the city, and I've never had any problems getting it up before. I'm not used to it not working, Gibbs. It's freaking me out."

Gibbs propped his head on his hand and gazed at Tony thoughtfully in the darkness.

"Tony, you've been through a lot these past few days. It's understandable. Maybe it's a control issue."

"No." Tony shook his head. "I never lose control during sex. And, in case you were wondering, I always go on top."

Gibbs grinned. "Ah, then Houston, we may have a problem."

Tony gave a wry grunt. "You too, huh? Should have guessed."

"I don't think it matters much right now, Tony," Gibbs told him. "Like I said, one step at a time. We'll figure it out. You did good tonight. You stood up to that bastard and got him out of your head."

"Because you were here," Tony told him. "I don't know if I'll always be able to do it. I don't know if I'll be able to do it when you're not around."

"We'll see."

"I was a little whore, Gibbs. I put out for presents; roller skates, skate boards, a trip to the movies, or a ball game. New sneakers." Tony made a face. "You know how much I love my shoes, Gibbs. Roy would buy me pretty much anything I asked for. He knew he had to keep me sweet, and I colluded in that. I went along with it. Hell, I even felt like I was manipulating him sometimes; withholding kisses until I got the promise of something I wanted and then holding him to it afterwards. I was a sneaky little shit."

"You were a kid, Tony. You were being manipulated by a ruthless sexual predator who knew exactly how to play you to get what he wanted."

"I was a cheap, easy little whore," Tony snapped, disgusted by himself.

"Why do you keep calling yourself names?" Gibbs said sharply. "You were a child getting yourself through a difficult situation the only way you knew how."

"You don't understand, Gibbs. Tonio, Boy 43, *him*, whatever you want to call him, was a stupid, snivelling little shit who let people fuck him for trinkets. I can't stand the whiny little brat."

Gibbs rested a hand on his stomach. "Why do you hate him so much, Tony? He was just a kid. You're pretty hard on him. If we were talking about another kid – about Justin maybe – would you say these things? Or is it just because he's you?"

"He ruined my fucking life."

"No, Roy Quinn did that. And Matthew Parrish. And whoever the hell Marco is – and, trust me, I'm damn well going to find out and make him pay. But that child you once were didn't do that, Tony."

"That kid, the kid I was then, he was weak and stupid. He let people take advantage of him – hell, he went along with it. I hate that he's still inside me, and I've had to look out for him and protect him all these years. I want to smash his stupid face in. I want to hurt him, Gibbs." Tony turned his face sideways and found Gibbs looking at him with a troubled expression in his eyes. "I want to fucking hurt him."

"I don't," Gibbs said firmly. "I want to help him. I don't want to hurt him – he's been through enough. I want to hurt the people who did this to him. I want to tell him that it wasn't his fault, and that he's safe now. I want him to know that nobody will ever get to him again because they'll have to go through me. I want to tell him that he's mine now, and that I will always be there for him. I want him to tell him that he's loved."

Tony stared at the ceiling, blinking back tears. Gibbs pulled him over and wrapped his arms around him. Then, for the first time, Tony cried. He buried his face in Gibbs's shoulder, tangled his fists in Gibbs's tee shirt, and cried like a child.

Gibbs let him fall apart in the warm safety of his arms, stroking his shaking body throughout. Tony clung onto him, his body convulsing against him, as he allowed someone to finally see the full extent of the damage he had kept hidden for so long.

Gibbs didn't turn away as Tony had feared people might if they knew who he really was. He took all of Tony's anguish and held firm, his body strong, solid, and warm as Tony raged against him. Tony couldn't hold back. He cried out the loneliness, isolation, pain and exhaustion. He cried for that kid, and what had been done to him, because Gibbs was right – he *was* the boy in those photographs, and the long years of denying that were over.

He cried for a very long time, unable to stop the tidal wave of emotion coursing through his body. He had never cried about what had happened to him as a child before. He had never allowed himself to feel those emotions. They were too big, too much for him to endure alone. Now he wasn't alone any more.

Eventually, Tony realised that he had stopped crying. He found himself lying in Gibbs's arms, almost on top of him, his chin resting on Gibbs's shoulder. His entire body was spent, and his breathing was coming in little hitching gasps. Gibbs's tee-shirt was sodden, and Gibbs's hands were still gently stroking his back in comforting little circles.

"It's okay, Tony. I've got you," Gibbs murmured. "I've got you."

~*~

End of Disintegration

Demons Part One by Xanthe

It was late when Gibbs woke the next morning, but at least it was Saturday, so they didn't have to get to work. He needed to piss, but he didn't want to disturb Tony, who was lying wrapped up in his arms, fast asleep. Last night had been intense, and Tony looked shattered.

Gibbs thought Tony's meltdown had been both inevitable and cathartic. Tony had needed to let it all out – hell, he'd needed to let it all out for years, but he hadn't felt safe enough until last night. He'd been carrying around a heavy burden since he was twelve; no wonder his grief, when he'd finally released it, had been so explosive and painful.

What Gibbs hadn't expected was the strength of his own emotions. It had been a long time since he'd had someone in his bed that he cared about like this and who roused all his protective instincts. He hadn't felt like this about anyone since Shannon, and he hadn't expected to ever again. Holding Tony in his arms last night, being there for him as he'd promised he would – well, Walt was right – love damn well hurt.

Gibbs lay there for an hour but finally his need to piss forced him out of the bed. He disengaged himself as quietly as he could and went into the bathroom. He relieved himself and then turned on the shower. His tee shirt was still damp from Tony's tears; he stripped it off, and his boxers, and got into the shower.

He began soaping himself, still lost in thought. When he had told Tony that he'd be here for him he had meant as a friend, nothing more. But Walt's words the previous day had really hit home. He had sleep-walked his way through three marriages and countless affairs and had been untouched by them all. He'd been numb inside since Shannon and Kelly died and hadn't honestly expected ever to love anyone again. Now he wondered how the hell he'd been such a total idiot. He loved Tony, had loved him for years probably, and it had taken a crisis of this magnitude to make him face up to it.

Gibbs knew what he was like in love – he didn't do things by half-measures. He was protective, possessive, passionate, and far more romantic than any of his co-workers might expect. He felt deeply, and losing his family had damn near killed him. He had walled off his heart to prevent himself feeling that kind of pain again, but somehow...somehow the pain had found a way in anyway.

He ached about what had been done to Tony, and he knew he wouldn't rest until he'd tracked down and punished all the men who were responsible. Tony was his now, and he'd kill for him if necessary and die for him without hesitation. That was just the way he was. He had always loved with ferocity, and it was no different this time around. That was another reason why being in love scared the hell out of him so much.

"Hey...you started without me," a voice said behind him, startling him. He turned to find Tony peering around the shower door. "Want some company?" Tony leered suggestively, and within seconds he'd stripped off and stepped into the shower with him.

Before Gibbs could ask him how he was, Tony grabbed him, pushed him against the shower wall, and kissed him, hard, on the mouth. It was the first time they'd been naked together, and Tony's body felt damn good against his own.

When Tony pulled back to catch his breath, Gibbs turned the tables on him and shoved him against the opposite wall, directly under the shower head, and now it was his turn to go in for a kiss. Tony gasped under the spray of water, and Gibbs drew back a little, knowing Tony's fear of suffocation.

Tony grinned, and used the moment to his advantage to lunge forward and push Gibbs back again. Gibbs went with an "oomph" as the breath left his body, and a second later their roles were reversed once more, and Tony was pinning him against the other wall again.

"D'you think we're always going to be fighting each other for who is in charge?" Tony grinned, leaning in to claim a deep, passionate kiss from his lips.

Gibbs allowed Tony to plunder his mouth for several seconds before sliding a knee between Tony's legs and then, taking him by surprise, flipping him onto the middle wall.

"Nope," Gibbs told him with a grin, holding him there. "I'm always going to be in charge – but sometimes I'll let you think you are."

Tony laughed out loud. "Just because you're the boss at work doesn't mean you get to be the boss at home," he said, in a low, throaty voice, straight into Gibbs's ear.

Gibbs grabbed hold of Tony's arms and held them above his head as he leaned in for another long, deep kiss. Tony sighed and melted against him, surrendering completely.

"You were saying...?" Gibbs whispered wickedly as he drew back. Tony gazed at him from lazy, sexy eyes.

"Oh, I don't really give a shit. Just kiss me again, Gibbs."

Gibbs did. He kissed him long and hard, with every ounce of passion in his body, aware that his cock was now standing to attention, pressed between both their bodies. When he finally released him, Tony looked down.

"Want me to take care of that?" he asked, grasping Gibbs's hard cock expertly in his hand and rubbing his thumb gently over the crown, making Gibbs gasp. "Much as I'd like to give you a blowjob, I can't stand having anything in my mouth - it always makes me feel like I'm choking," Tony said apologetically. "I do, however, give damn good hand jobs." Tony gave another one of those happily lascivious grins and moved his hand slowly up Gibbs's hard shaft to illustrate the point.

"No." Gibbs removed his hand.

"You still not ready?" Tony asked with a roll of his eyes. "I mean, c'mon! That was hours ago!"

Gibbs shook his head. "Hell, I courted Shannon for a year before she so much as let me touch a breast."

"Yeah, but that was the olden days, Gibbs!" Tony protested. Gibbs slapped the back of his head for that.

Tony laughed and trailed a languid finger down Gibbs's wet chest. He circled a nipple with his fingers, sending sparks of arousal through Gibbs's body. Tony gave the kind of smile that showed he knew exactly what effect he was having, and his tongue slid out between his lips and licked at them suggestively.

Gibbs moved his hand down and brushed Tony's soft cock with his fingers. "I won't be ready until you're ready, Tony," Gibbs told him firmly.

Tony's eyes widened in surprise and then darkened. He dropped his head, causing the water to soak the back of his hair.

Gibbs reached out a finger and tipped up his chin to make Tony look at him. "What's going on?" he demanded. "No more secrets, Tony."

"Supposing I'm never ready?" Tony asked. "At some point you'll lose interest."

"You'll be ready," Gibbs promised confidently. "One day. I'm not in a hurry, DiNozzo."

"Since when? You're not a patient man, Gibbs."

"At work," Gibbs said. "But, as you pointed out, we're not at work now."

"And what happens when we are?" Tony asked quietly.

"Nothing." Gibbs shrugged.

"What if people find out?"

"I don't care." Gibbs reached for the soap again.

"Really?" Tony frowned. "Seems like something you would care about."

"Nope." Gibbs lathered soap over his chest and then threw the soap to Tony. "You?"

"Well, when your co-workers have seen photos of you being fucked, aged twelve, it shifts your perspective and nothing else seems to matter really," Tony said quietly.

Gibbs fought down a growl of anger and gave a curt nod, understanding. Tony seemed to sense his change in mood.

"Is this for real?" he asked grimly. "Are we for real, Gibbs? Because if we aren't, tell me now, and I'll get out of your hair. I understand if this all got too heavy for you. You were just trying to be nice, because I was freaking out all over the place, and now you don't want to risk sending me off into another meltdown so..."

"DiNozzo!" Gibbs growled. Tony winced at his tone of voice. "When have you ever known me try to be nice?" Gibbs asked with a raised eyebrow. Tony managed a little grin at that.

"That's a good point, Boss."

"It's for real," Gibbs told him. "You're mine now, Tony."

"Hmmm...sounds like you're the possessive type," Tony murmured, looking intrigued.

"You knew that already," Gibbs snorted.

"Yeah – it's one of the reasons I always feel safe with you. I know you'd never let anyone else touch me. Even before all this shit blew up. And..." Tony looked straight at him. "For someone who was once passed around like a piece of fucking meat by someone who said he loved me I guess that's kind of important."

"Nobody will touch you again, Tony," Gibbs said firmly. "They'll have to get through me first, and that will never happen."

"I believe you." Tony was quiet for a moment, and then he looked up. "You sure you're prepared to wait?" he asked uncertainly. "I mean...this has never happened to me before, and I don't know long it'll be until..." He gestured in the direction of his cock.

Gibbs frowned. "Tony – do you think I'm only interested in you for what you can do for me in bed?"

"Hell, you're a guy, Gibbs," Tony shrugged.

"Yeah, but sex isn't everything."

"It isn't?" Tony grinned.

"No. You're not a commodity, and sex isn't something you have done to you, or you do to others. I'm not only interested in you for what you can do for me in the bedroom. I won't sleep with you until you're ready because it won't do anything for me. And, equally, I won't let you just use me for sex the way you've done with all the other people you've been with."

Tony looked startled.

"There's no pressure," Gibbs told him softly. "I haven't had sex for a couple of years now – it isn't a big deal for me."

"It is for me," Tony replied in a tight voice. Gibbs turned off the faucet.

"I know. That's why waiting isn't such a bad thing. I think your body knows what you need right now better than you do, DiNozzo." He opened the shower door and got out.

"And what's that?" Tony raised an eyebrow.

"Some loving," Gibbs replied. "Those men used you for sex when you were just a kid – hardly surprising you've got it all mixed up in your head and think people will only be interested in you if you put out for them."

Tony winced at that, and Gibbs thought he'd hit a nerve.

"Love doesn't come at a price, DiNozzo," Gibbs told him. "You're mine. I love you. I'll take damn good care of you, and you don't have to earn any of those things in the bedroom. You already have them, and you can't lose them. Understand?"

Tony gazed at him for a long time, swallowing hard, his eyes suspiciously shiny. Then, finally, he nodded.

"Good." Gibbs threw a towel at him. "Then let's go get something to eat."

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After breakfast, Gibbs sat across from him over the kitchen table and removed the sodden dressing on his hand. Then he put on his glasses and inspected the sutured cuts. Tony watched him, fascinated. Being with Gibbs wasn't anything like he'd expected. Then again, his fantasies had never gone beyond Gibbs pulling him into bed and the two of them having hot, sweaty sex, so he wasn't sure what he'd expected. Just that it hadn't included this kind of intimacy. Intimacy usually scared the hell out of him, but he had to admit that right now, with Gibbs, it felt pretty damn good.

Gibbs was quiet, examining Tony's hand in silence. He looked like he was lost in thought, but Tony knew him better than that. Something bad was coming; he could feel it. Gibbs reached for the new bandage and then looked straight into Tony's eyes.

"Go on. Hit me with it," Tony sighed. "I know you're gonna say something I won't like."

"You're right." Gibbs cleared his throat. Tony wondered what the hell was coming next; Gibbs looked pretty serious. "On Monday, I'm going to Long Island. One of the things I want to do while I'm there is take a trip to the hotel where the abuse happened," Gibbs said quietly. "I'm taking McGee with me."

Tony pulled his hand away. He had known this would happen, but somehow, with everything else that was going on, he had managed to put it out of his mind. He didn't like to think of Gibbs walking along that hallway to that room, opening the door, and stepping inside. It made Tony go cold.

"I don't like the sound of this, Gibbs," he said, cradling his injured hand against his chest.

"I know." Gibbs nodded. "I'd like to ID it. I want to see if we can match it to the room in the photographs. The furnishings will be different after so long, but we can take some photos – see if we can get Abby to match the layout of the room, the windows and doors and so on. At the moment, I'm not sure what kind of a case we'll be able to build, and we might never need it, but it could be a useful extra plank of evidence and specific details like this really help in court. Do you remember any of the room numbers? It would help us if you did – save us having to do a search."

"Room 204," Tony said immediately. "There was only ever one room and that was Room 204." Gibbs raised a surprised eyebrow. "Like I said, Roy wasn't an imaginative type of guy."

If anything he was a bit OCD. He liked doing the same things, at the same times, in the same places. He always booked Room 204."

"Room 204. That's definitely the room in the photographs?"

Tony nodded. Gibbs held out his hand and gestured with his head towards Tony's injured hand. Tony relinquished it with a sigh, allowing Gibbs to take it back.

"Kind of risky going to a hotel," Gibbs commented, reaching for the new bandage. "Why didn't Quinn just take you to his place?"

"He was married," Tony replied.

Gibbs nodded. "Yeah. Of course."

Tony glared at him. "You knew that though, didn't you? You've had McGee put together a file on him, haven't you?"

"What do you think, DiNozzo? You tell me the guy raped you when you were twelve, and you expect me just to shrug my shoulders and leave him be?"

"No," Tony said quietly. "I mean, I know you're going to arrest him at some point, but...I don't know what I thought. I don't know what I want. I just feel like I've let a genie out of a bottle, and I don't know how to get it back in again now."

"You can't," Gibbs told him bluntly. "It's out of your control."

"That's what scares me."

Gibbs gave him one of his unrelenting stares. Tony sighed.

"Okay. I know. I know this has to happen, and I know it *should* happen. Hell, I suppose I should be surprised it hasn't already happened, knowing you."

"Only reason it hasn't is because Quinn is out of the country right now," Gibbs grunted. "He's back tomorrow. Now, I've read the file, but is there anything else you can tell me about him?"

Tony gave a bitter little laugh. "Oh yeah. I know a lot of things about Roy Quinn, Gibbs. Just need to think where to start. Okay - Roy's wife was called Margaret," he said. Gibbs nodded at him to continue. "She was a weird kind of person. She was really cold whereas Roy was warm and friendly to everyone. She hated kids. Maybe she couldn't have them, or maybe she didn't want them, but either way they didn't have any, thank God. We didn't see much of her - Roy usually went places alone. I can only remember her coming to our house a couple of times. Roy often came around for dinner, but she never came with him unless my mom specifically invited her. I don't think she came around again after my mom died. I heard from Dad that she died a few years ago."

Gibbs began bandaging his hand. Tony liked watching him. He liked the way Gibbs peered through his glasses and how his hands moved; fast but skilful, firm but gentle. Gibbs always knew what he was doing, and Tony was attracted to his certainty.

"And the hotel wasn't risky at all," Tony added. "People come and go in hotels all the time – nobody notices who they are. Roy said I was his son, and when Luke or Marco visited I assume they just went straight up and knocked on the door – nobody stops you walking around a hotel. I doubt anyone knew they were there. They just stayed for a few hours, fucked me a couple of times, and then left. We usually only stayed for the afternoon. Roy used a false name and paid in cash. Afterwards, he'd usually take me to see a movie." Tony rubbed his head. "Then he'd drop me back home with the housekeeper."

Gibbs finished bandaging his hand and fastened the dressing.

"How does it feel?" he asked, nodding at Tony's hand.

"Better than it did. Doesn't really hurt any more unless I knock it."

"You knocked it a few times in the night, but I've checked and all the sutures held."

Tony winced as he remembered his meltdown, and how he'd grabbed Gibbs's tee-shirt in his fists.

Gibbs gave Tony a searching look. "You said you *usually* only stayed for the afternoon?" he questioned.

Tony stiffened and put his good hand up to smooth down the hair on the back of his head again. Gibbs touched the fingers of his bandaged hand gently, keeping him in the moment.

"Yeah. Most of the time. There were a couple of times..." Tony rubbed the back of his head urgently, and Gibbs pressed down more firmly on his fingers, stopping him from zoning out. "Maybe Margaret was away, I dunno, but a couple of times we stayed overnight. I think Roy had a fantasy that we were lovers. That somehow this whole fucked up thing was normal, and that we loved each other. He told my dad's housekeeper that he was taking me camping or whatever. Roy wanted to sleep next to me, holding me, and when he woke up in the night he always woke me up too, so he could fuck me."

Tony rubbed his head repeatedly. He remembered being woken by kisses on the back of his neck, and Roy crooning in his ear.

"Tonio, Tonio...come on my beautiful boy. Wake up for me, Tonio. Ssh...just move your leg, my little sleepy one. Mmmm...does this feel good? My special little Tonio."

"Tony?"

Tony blinked. Gibbs was squeezing his fingers and giving him that sharp-eyed look.

"Sorry. I'm still here. So, you're going there on Monday? To Room 204?"

"Yeah."

"Okay." Tony nodded. He thought about it for a moment. "I'll come with you."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Gibbs told him. "You've given us the room number, so we can take it from here."

"I want to go with you," Tony said firmly, and he wasn't sure why. Maybe it was a morbid kind of curiosity, or maybe it was something else.

Gibbs studied him for a moment and then nodded. "Afterwards..."

Tony knew what was coming next. "Afterwards you're going to Roy's house to search it, and then you're going to arrest him," he said quietly.

"Yes." Gibbs nodded. "But only once we have confirmation he's on that plane. I don't want anything spooking him into not getting on that flight."

"Once you arrest Roy, my father will find out," Tony said, gazing fixedly at the table. This was the one thing he dreaded, above everything else. It was all going to come out, finally, after all these years, and he had no idea what his father's reaction was going to be.

"Yes, he will," Gibbs said bluntly. "Tony – you should know that I also have a warrant to search the premises of DQ Enterprises."

Tony looked up, startled. "Why? My father wasn't involved in any of this!" he protested.

"I know. But Quinn is the CEO of your father's company," Gibbs told him. "So I want to check it out."

"Christ, Gibbs. My father will go mad." Tony pushed his chair back from the table with an angry scraping noise.

"I don't damn well care," Gibbs replied stonily.

"Well, I do!" Tony snapped. "This has nothing to do with my father, or his business. None of this is his fault!"

"Well, you and I will have to agree to disagree on that," Gibbs said. His jaw tightened, and Tony got a glimpse of a fury so intense it startled him. "Look, your father is going to find out whether we go to his offices or not, so you have to prepare yourself for that, Tony."

"I don't think there's anything I can do to prepare myself for that, Gibbs."

Gibbs gazed at him steadily, and Tony pushed away a sensation of angry panic. He had started this, but Gibbs was going to make him finish it, and that scared the hell out of him. Gibbs might have held him when he cried like a baby in the night, and he might have just bandaged his hand with gentle fingers, but he was still *Gibbs*. He was still demanding, unfaltering, and the bastard he'd always been. He wasn't someone you could sweet-talk or manipulate. He'd make Tony do this. There was no way out.

"Who are you taking with you when you go to Roy's house?" Tony asked. "Not me, I assume?"

"Ya think, DiNozzo?" Gibbs growled, rolling his eyes.

"McGee?"

"No. If you're coming with us, then he's going to take you back home after we visit the hotel. I am not letting you go anywhere alone."

"So it has to be Ziva," Tony said quietly. "Which means..."

"Yeah." Gibbs nodded. "She has to know, Tony. How do you want to play this? Do you want me to tell her?"

"No. I'll tell her," Tony said, taking himself – and Gibbs – by surprise. Gibbs raised an eyebrow. "I'll tell her," Tony repeated. "Tomorrow. I'll tell her tomorrow. I can't do it today. I feel like I've been hit by a truck today, and I need some time to get my head around it. Drop me off at her place tomorrow morning, Boss. I'll take her out for coffee and tell her."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. You had to do it with Ducky and Abby, and we let McGee find out for himself in the observation room, poor bastard. I should do Ziva. She's my partner. I should have done it before now."

"Okay." Gibbs nodded. "What do you want to do today, Tony?"

"We're not going into work?" Tony asked, surprised.

"It's Saturday, DiNozzo!"

"So?" Tony snorted. "You always work through weekends when you've got a big case, and I know you've had breakthroughs with this one. Why else was McGee going to a prison yesterday?"

Gibbs made an irritated clicking sound in the back of his throat. "McGee can follow up any leads we get – I've put him in charge in my absence, and he's more than capable. It'll do him good to get out of your shadow anyway."

"My shadow?" Tony frowned. "Since when have I been overshadowing him?"

"You like to keep him in his place."

"No, I just have to make sure he doesn't take mine - with you," Tony replied. Gibbs looked startled by that. "Most everything I've ever done in this job is about you," Tony explained. "I didn't want you liking him more than me, finding him better at his job, sharper...he already has those geek skills that I don't have. I've had to work hard to be invaluable to you, Boss."

Gibbs nodded. "I know," he said quietly. "And you are, Tony, so you can stop trying so hard. Look, last night was quite a night, and you look beat. Let's take the weekend to get you in better shape, so you can face whatever happens next week."

Tony really did feel like he'd been hit by a truck. He wasn't sure why he was so washed out. Sure, he had the hand injury, and the incident in the night had been emotionally draining, but he wished he could just get over it and move on. He wasn't used to feeling so damn weak. He wanted to blame Tonio, the boy in the box, but Gibbs didn't like it when he did that, so he tried to squash down the internal rebuke.

They went out and bought some glass for the kitchen door, and then Tony lay on the living room couch, watching Gibbs replace the shattered glass with the new pane. He liked watching Gibbs work on the door, just as he'd liked watching him work on his hand earlier.

At NCIS Gibbs was full of imperatives, striding around, handing out orders, pushing his team relentlessly, and demanding that they always produce their best work for him. At home, Gibbs was different. He was patient and methodical. He didn't seem to want anything of Tony at home, unlike at work. Every time he passed the couch he dropped a kiss on Tony's head or tousled his hair affectionately. He didn't even seem to mind Tony watching him, although it often irritated him when Tony did that at work.

Tony wished he could be more than a boring lump on the couch, but he didn't have the energy. He didn't want to talk, and Gibbs was one of those people who didn't seem to need conversation. It was companionable just to be in the same room together. Tony didn't feel like he had to entertain and amuse; he could just be.

"Looks good," Tony commented when Gibbs was done. Gibbs shrugged.

"Easy enough job."

"For you," Tony grinned. "Not my thing."

They ate lunch, and then Gibbs went down to the basement to work on his boat. Tony followed him. He was aware that he was following Gibbs everywhere, but he couldn't bear to let the man out of his sight right now. He hated his own weakness, but he felt battered, bruised, and confused, and Gibbs was his lifeline. There was something reassuring about being in the man's presence, allowing him to take charge, and, most of all, having someone to lean on. Tony hadn't leaned on anyone since he was twelve years old, and he hadn't realised how tired he was. It was a relief to be able to take a break and be with someone who really knew him. He didn't have to pretend any more. He could let the boy out of the box for awhile and let Gibbs take care of him, so he didn't have to. It was a welcome respite.

Tony sat on a sawdust-strewn old armchair in a corner of the basement and watched Gibbs work on the boat.

"You bored?" Gibbs asked. "Want to watch TV?" He nodded towards the ancient set on top of his work bench.

"I'm fine," Tony said, closing his eyes. Tonio didn't need distractions. He just wanted to breathe a little.

He liked the sound of Gibbs working on the boat. It was slow, rhythmic, and hypnotic. He liked the smell of sawdust, and the knowledge that he was safe here, alone with Gibbs. Nobody could touch him here. Gibbs wouldn't let anyone touch him.

Gibbs didn't want anything from him; not sex, or conversation, or entertainment. He could rest awhile here, with Gibbs, and let it all go.

He was soon fast asleep, soothed by the reassuring sound of Gibbs sanding down the boat.

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Gibbs glanced over at Tony and was glad to see that he'd fallen asleep. He looked pale and drained. Gibbs didn't think he'd seen him look this bad since he'd had the plague. Not that it was surprising considering what he'd been through these past few days.

Gibbs found an old blanket under the boat – one he sometimes used when he fell asleep down here at night after too much bourbon. He dusted off the worst of the sawdust and then gently draped it over Tony's sleeping form, pausing to drop a kiss on Tony's hair.

"I will get you through this, Tony," he said quietly. "I promise."

Gibbs wondered what it must have been like for Tony all these years, never allowing anyone to get close enough to love him, and then he realised that he already knew, because he'd been living like that himself for the past seventeen years. At least he remembered a time when life had been different - when he'd trusted himself to love, and when he'd been loved in return. Tony had never had that – or at least, not since his mom died.

Gibbs vowed to make that up to him. He wanted to reach the lonely, abused child and the lost, confused man and give them both the love they needed to heal.

Tony slept all afternoon. As evening approached, Gibbs went quietly upstairs to the bathroom to wash his hands. A few seconds later, he heard Tony creep into the room behind him.

"Didn't want to wake you," he said, glancing over his shoulder. Tony was still pale, but he looked a little more human now than he had earlier.

"I was awake. Just dozing," Tony replied. He ran a hand through his sawdust-sprinkled hair, making it stick up in points. "Look, I don't want to piss you off by following you around, but I really don't want to be alone right now."

Gibbs knew just what it had cost Tony to make that admission, and he nodded, flashing Tony an understanding smile. Tony was like a stray dog, abused by his former owners and starved of genuine love and affection, sticking beside the one person who had shown him any love.

They ordered take-out and ate it on the couch in front of another one of Tony's DVDs. Gibbs was more interested in Tony than the movie. He remembered long evenings with Shannon, back when they were dating, before they'd had sex. They would sit in the movie theatre, neither of them watching what was onscreen as they kissed and petted. It seemed like a more innocent time, but he wondered if it was what Tony needed right now; affection without the inevitability of sex, love without strings, intimacy without demands.

"Come here," he said, putting up his legs on the couch and opening them. He pulled Tony between them, so that he was lying on the couch with his head resting on Gibbs's chest. Then

Gibbs leaned down and kissed him. Tony looked surprised, but he opened up eagerly enough to allow Gibbs's gently exploring tongue into his mouth.

Gibbs kissed him slowly, sliding a hand down inside Tony's shirt to lazily stroke his bare skin. Tony sighed happily and responded eagerly to the kiss. Then he pushed Gibbs back onto the couch, and his hips started to move rhythmically against Gibbs's body. Gibbs moved him back to where he had been before and continued kissing him at a more leisurely pace. Every time Tony got too eager, Gibbs pushed him back, and Tony soon got with the programme.

Gibbs had forgotten how good it could be just to kiss. Tony's lips were surprisingly soft, and he tasted so good. Gibbs felt Tony start to relax and enjoy it as he realised that sex wasn't the goal here. He wondered if Tony had ever shared any real intimacy with anyone, except maybe Jeanne. Even then, Gibbs wondered if that had been Tony play-acting at intimacy, wanting the real thing but without the risks that came with it, and using his undercover identity to protect himself.

Now, Gibbs demanded intimacy from him, and slowly, hesitantly, Tony responded. He stopped trying to force the pace and unwound in Gibbs's arms, giving himself up to the long, hazy kisses.

They spent the entire evening on the couch, just kissing, and by the end of the evening Gibbs had kissed Tony into a state of boneless relaxation. He knew how much Tony always dreaded going to bed, but maybe tonight Tony would be relaxed enough that they'd get through the entire night without drama.

Maybe.

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Tony couldn't understand how he could sleep for most of the day and still feel exhausted when he went to bed.

"It's all that kissing," he told his reflection in the bathroom mirror. "That'd wear anyone out." His reflection grinned at him, and he grinned back. He liked the way his lips looked a little swollen, and the touch of beard burn on his neck from Gibbs's stubble. Who knew that kissing could be so good? He'd only ever viewed it as a prelude to sex before. This was all new to him.

He went into the bedroom, slid into the bed beside Gibbs, turned onto his side, and relaxed immediately when Gibbs pressed up close behind him, and put a hand on his belly. Tony fell asleep within seconds.

Gibbs got up to use the bathroom a few hours later, and Tony heard him return to bed. Then Gibbs pressed up behind him again, pulling him close.

Tony walked dreamily along a hallway. At the end of the hallway was a door with gold numbers on it.

Room 204.

He could hear a child's voice, counting out the steps in his head.

"342, 343, 344, 345."

He reached the door and stood outside, gazing at the gilt numbers.

2-0-4.

He didn't want to go inside. He wanted to turn away, but he knew that he couldn't. The door swung open, and he found himself walking into the room, his legs carrying him in even though his mind was screaming at him to turn and run.

There was a child lying on the bed, fast asleep. Tony went over to him, got into the bed beside him, and then disappeared into his body.

"Tonio," a soft voice whispered in his ear. "My sleepy boy! Wake up and let Uncle Roy make love to you, sweetheart."

Tony stiffened. "No," he whispered.

"Why are you being so cold, Tonio?" Roy asked, in a hurt tone of voice. "My beautiful Tonio."

Hands swept over his body, gentle but insistent. He drew his knees up to his chest, put his arms around them, and hugged them tight.

"No," he said again. He could do this. He'd done it before. He didn't have to agree to this any more.

"Oh, Tonio! I can't believe you've betrayed me, my love," Roy whispered sadly in his ear. "Wasn't I always good to you? Wasn't I always gentle and kind? Didn't I buy you everything you wanted? I always loved you, my darling boy. Do you want to see me go to prison? Is that really what you want?"

Tony blinked, and lay there, staring at the wall. A few hours ago he'd felt completely relaxed, but now he felt like he was going to throw up. The urge to run was almost overwhelming. Today had been good, and they still had tomorrow, but then on Monday.... It was all going to kick off on Monday, and he didn't think he'd ever be ready for that. Was there any way of persuading Gibbs not to do this? No. He knew Gibbs too well. There was no way the man would let this drop.

Tony felt like he was on a rollercoaster, right at the top of the ride, just before all hell broke loose, and everything went into freefall. It had been bad enough so far, through the long, slow climb to the top, but now it was going to get far worse. First there would be telling Ziva, and then there was going back to that hotel room, Gibbs arresting Quinn, and his father finding out.

Tony reached up automatically to stroke his hair. Supposing he couldn't keep it together? He'd already had several meltdowns. Supposing he had another? In front of McGee, or Ziva, or...in front of his father? Gibbs didn't know what he was asking of him. Gibbs had told him

he was brave, but he knew he wasn't brave about stuff like this. Sure, he'd dive into a river to rescue someone he loved, or take a bullet for a member of his team, but he couldn't do this.

Tony slid quietly out of the bed. He walked silently along the hallway to the spare bedroom, got dressed, threw some clothes into a bag, and then tip-toed down the stairs. He didn't have his car here – Gibbs had refused to let him drive since this had all started. Tony found Gibbs's jacket hanging over the banister. He reached into the pocket and took out Gibbs's car keys. Then he opened the front door, and stood there, hesitating.

He wanted to leave. He had to get away from Gibbs and all his kisses and those warm, loving hands that made Tony feel so good. He had to run from the inevitable disappointment Gibbs would feel when Tony eventually let him down, which he would.

He couldn't do this. He couldn't look into Ziva's dark brown eyes and tell her what had happened to him. That wasn't who he was. He wasn't a victim – he was the guy who joked around and didn't take anything seriously. This wasn't *him*.

He couldn't go back to that hotel. He couldn't walk into Room 204 as if nothing had happened to him in there. He couldn't stand by while Gibbs arrested Roy Quinn. He couldn't just sit at his desk, working on cold cases, while NCIS agents walked into his father's offices with a search warrant. He couldn't do any of those things. He didn't have the courage.

Kind brown eyes gazed at him approvingly. "You always were a good boy, Tonio," Roy whispered. "I knew you wouldn't let this happen. You love me, don't you?"

Tony rubbed his head anxiously. "I don't know," he muttered.

"You don't want to see me go to prison," Roy insisted. "Remember all the happy times we shared? Remember what a shy little boy you were, and how I talked to you and brought you out of your shell? Remember how much I loved you."

"Shut up," he hissed. "Please...shut up. I can't think...I can't decide..."

The door was open in front of him. He could leave. He could just step through this door and leave behind the one person he'd ever truly loved. He could drive away, catch a plane, and go somewhere this hadn't happened. He could start again, some place where nobody knew him. He could be someone else. He didn't have to be Tonio any more, or even Tony DiNozzo. He could think up a new name and invent a different identity. He could be free. He took a step forward, and then another.

"You're doing the right thing, Tonio," Roy whispered insistently in his ear. "You can run away, and nobody will ever find you."

"You don't know Gibbs," he snorted. "He'll track me down wherever I go."

"You're too smart for that, Tonio. You're my beautiful, clever boy. You don't belong to him - you belong to me. You love me."

Tony rested his hand on the open door, and then he closed it without stepping through.

"No, I don't, Roy," he hissed. "I don't fucking love you. I love *him*."

"What will your father say, Tonio?" Roy asked reproachfully. "Do you really want to upset like this? I saved his life. Without me, your father wouldn't even be here. Without me, you wouldn't even exist. You owe me your life, Tonio. You're mine."

"No, I'm not," he growled. "I'm not yours, Roy, I never fucking was."

"No, you're mine." A hand slid over his stomach, and Tony blinked. Gibbs was standing behind him, and he realised that he must have been talking out loud. "You're your own person, Tony, and you're mine. Mine by your own choice, by adult consent," Gibbs said quietly into his ear.

"Sorry, Boss," Tony muttered. He couldn't turn to face Gibbs and look him in the eye. He was too ashamed of himself.

"It's okay. I've got you."

Tony looked down at the keys in his hand and the small bag of clothes at his feet. Christ, this looked bad.

"I thought you found a way of dealing with this last night?" Gibbs said softly. He sounded dull, flat, disappointed. Tony winced. Gibbs was still holding him, one arm wrapped around him, one hand pressed flat against his stomach.

"This is different," Tony replied. "I have more than one demon in my head, Gibbs. Roy Quinn doesn't scare me shitless - he guilt-trips me instead."

"You're anxious about Monday." It wasn't a question. They both knew he was.

"Yeah." Tony nodded.

"I don't think you should come with us to the hotel," Gibbs said. "You can stay behind with Ducky."

"I don't need a babysitter!" Tony growled angrily.

"I know, but I'd feel happier knowing someone's with you when I'm not," Gibbs said sensibly. "Just for now - while you're not always in the moment."

Tony remembered walking along that hallway in his dream, seeing that door at the end with the gold numbering on it, and stepping inside. He was afraid, but that was all the more reason to go.

"I want to go back to Room 204," he said. "I have to see it. It's always going to be in my head if I don't."

"You sure?" Gibbs asked. "Only you thought it would be a good idea to face Parrish and that didn't work out so well."

"This is different. I need to see it," Tony said quietly. "I need to deal with this, Gibbs. I can't keep avoiding it. It's out now – I have to face it. It's the only way I'll be able to move on. Hell, you're the one who has been saying that from the beginning!"

"Okay."

"You're going to bring Roy back to NCIS for questioning, aren't you?" Tony asked.

"Yes." Gibbs linked both his hands firmly across Tony's stomach, encircling him. It made him feel warm, safe, and protected. "There's no reason for you to see him though, DiNozzo. In fact, you won't see him. I won't put you in a position where you even catch sight of him across the squad room."

"But you'll interrogate him, and he'll twist things," Tony said. "That's what he does. Supposing he makes you believe that it wasn't how I said it was? That I'm lying?"

"I am not your father, Tony," Gibbs snapped. "I already know what happened because you told me and I believe you. There is nothing Roy Quinn can say that will change that."

"I feel bad – like I've betrayed him." Tony reached up to rub his head anxiously. "He was kind to me, after my mom died. He would talk to me for hours, take me places. He just wanted me to love him. The problem is, although I didn't like him fucking me, I never stopped liking *him*, and I wanted him to like me."

Tony glanced over his shoulder and saw a frankly terrifying expression in Gibbs's eyes.

"You don't understand it – you didn't understand it with Justin, either," Tony snapped. He pushed his way out of the circle of Gibbs's arms and turned on him. "You said it was all about sex, but it didn't feel that way. It felt like he really liked me."

"You're right. I don't understand," Gibbs said stonily. "Seems to me that he was a bastard who preyed on a lonely child. He forced you into a sexual relationship you didn't want and were too young to consent to."

"It's more complicated than that."

"No, it fucking isn't!" Gibbs slammed his fist against the wall, and Tony flinched. Gibbs grimaced and ran his hand through his hair. "Okay, explain it to me," he said. "I'll listen – I don't promise I'll understand, but I'll listen."

"I loved my mom, Gibbs," Tony said wretchedly. "No, I didn't just love her – I adored her. She was the only person I could talk to, and then she died, and there was nobody. Nobody. My dad threw himself into his work, and I was this lonely little rich kid sitting in an ivory tower with nobody to talk to. Then Roy came along. He knew my mom. He talked to me about my mom, and he let me talk about her. He made me feel like I mattered...like I was..." He broke off, shaking his head.

"Loved?" Gibbs said softly.

"Yeah." Tony nodded, wrapping his arms around himself. "It didn't feel like a lie."

“Must have eventually,” Gibbs told him. Tony looked up. “You got out, Tony. You found yourself a way out of that situation. You took care of yourself, protected yourself. You knew it wasn’t really about love even back then.”

Tony stared at him, and then, finally, he shrugged and let it go. He couldn't explain it to Gibbs – there was no way he'd ever understand.

Gibbs picked up the bag at Tony’s feet. “Come on, let’s go back to bed,” he said.

“You must think I’m a total coward. Running out like that,” Tony muttered.

Gibbs wrapped an arm around Tony’s shoulders and pulled him back towards the stairs. “I didn’t see you run out,” Gibbs told him, planting a kiss on the side of his head. “I saw you shut the door and decide to stay.”

~*~

Ziva grinned as Eli, wet from his shower and wearing only a towel around his waist, stole up behind her and wrapped his arms around her.

“Stop it!” she laughed. “You are not even dry!”

“I thought you were going to join me in the shower,” he said, nibbling her ear. She made a face and pushed him off, still giggling.

“I already went out for a run, bought some groceries, took a shower and got dressed while you slept, you lazy oaf.”

“Then you must be exhausted,” he purred. “Want to come back to bed?”

She turned around to face him. “I could kill you with my bare hands,” she warned, as he grabbed her again.

“You could, but then who would kiss you in that special place?” he asked with a suggestive waggle of his eyebrows. She grabbed his wet face and kissed him. He was slippery beneath her fingers, his dark chest hair shining with droplets of water.

“You are very naughty,” she chided.

“I know. You want to get the handcuffs out again and restrain me?”

She cupped his ass cheeks through his towel. “That does sound tempting,” she mused. At that moment there was a knock on the door. Eli raised an eyebrow.

“Visitors? At 10 a.m. on a Sunday?”

“I will send them away,” she promised.

She went over to the door and opened it to find Tony lounging in the doorway.

“Tony!” she exclaimed, surprised. He never usually visited her apartment.

“Morning Ziva,” he said cheerfully. “Hmm, am I interrupting something?” he grinned, glancing over her shoulder at Eli, who was still standing there in his towel. Ziva grimaced. The last thing she wanted was for Tony to know about Eli. He would ask her a dozen questions, look through all her personal belongings to find out every last detail about her new boyfriend, and then tease her about it mercilessly for weeks.

“This the guy you work with?” Eli asked, coming to stand beside her.

“Yes, this is Tony.” Tony stood there, grinning at her. She saw his eyes flicker, insolently, over Eli’s semi-naked body, and then he looked back at her with a suggestive leer. “He is the annoying one I told you about,” Ziva said. Tony pouted.

“Oh, I’m hurt,” he replied. “Look, I’m sorry, Ziva, this is obviously bad timing, but...I was wondering if you had time to grab a coffee with me?”

She was even more surprised by that. This really wasn’t Tony-like behaviour at all.

“If Eli doesn’t mind that is,” Tony grinned. She gaped at him.

“How do you know his name...?” she began. “Oh never mind. You really are very annoying, Tony.”

“Yes I am,” he agreed cheerfully. “So – coffee?”

She glanced at Eli who shrugged at her. “I do have some work to do,” he sighed.

“Plans to draw up?” Tony raised an eyebrow. “I once wanted to be an architect, but the thought of drawing all those straight lines put me off.”

Eli glared at him. Ziva leaned over to kiss his cheek. “I will not be long,” she promised. He gave Tony another glare and then turned and went into the bedroom.

“How do you know he is an architect?” Ziva asked, grabbing her bag and keys.

Tony gave her another one of his infuriating grins and tapped his nose as they walked down the stairs.

“What else do you know about him?” she demanded.

“He’s 34, he likes sushi, and you met him at synagogue,” he replied promptly. “And he has great taste in women,” he added, with his best and most appealing, ‘please don’t hit me’ smile. She did anyway, elbowing him firmly in the ribs. “Ow!” He pretended to double over.

“Where is your car?” she asked, glancing around the parking lot.

“Not here. We’ll have to take yours. Unless there’s a coffee place within walking distance?”

“There is not.” She shook her head. “And how did you get here if you did not come by car?”

“Gibbs dropped me off.”

She glanced at him, startled. “Why?”

“Because I want to talk to you,” he said, neatly side-stepping her question.

“Why?” she said again. An unreadable expression flickered in his eyes.

“Let’s just go get some coffee, and then I’ll tell you,” he said quietly.

She felt her hackles start to rise. She wasn't someone like Gibbs, used to feeling things in her gut, but she was used to trusting her instincts in combat situations. Right now, she got the feeling that something bad was going to happen.

She drove them to the nearest Starbucks at her usual breakneck speed. Tony clung onto the edge of his seat the entire time, muttering under his breath. She grinned. It served him right for snooping about in her private life.

“So, what is going on, Tony?” she asked, as soon as they were seated with two cups of coffee on the table in front of them.

Tony bit on his lip and gazed out of the window for a long moment. Ziva stared at him. This really was very unusual behaviour, even for Tony. She wondered if she should fill the silence but decided against it. She sipped her coffee and waited. Several minutes passed, and then, suddenly, Tony started speaking.

“First off, I have to apologise,” he said.

She raised an eyebrow. “For digging into my personal life and finding out about Eli – that IS very annoying.”

Tony shook his head. “Oh no, not for that,” he grinned. “That’s just what I do. You should have expected that.”

She kicked him under the table, and he laughed out loud. Then the laughter faded and that unreadable expression was back in his eyes.

“Tony, what do you need to apologise for?” she asked quietly.

“For the fact I didn’t have the guts to tell you this before. You’re the last one on the team to know.”

“The last one to know what?” She reached out and put her hand over his bandaged hand where it was resting on the table. He didn’t draw away.

“We’re going to Long Island tomorrow,” he said.

“Yes. I know.” She took a sip of her coffee and watched him over the rim of the mug.

“You have a warrant to arrest Roy Quinn, the CEO of my father’s company.”

“Yes.”

“For charges relating to child pornography,” he added.

“Yes.” She went very still, never taking her eyes off him.

“There’s a reason why Gibbs won’t let me work the case,” Tony continued, his face twisting into an expression she had never seen on it before.

“Tony, I am not stupid,” she said quietly. “There are parts of a puzzle here. I would be lying if I said I had not started to piece them together. I was not sure if I had it right in my head, but then you came into work with that bandage on your hand...”

“Gibbs isn’t happy,” Tony interrupted, as if he didn’t want to hear the end of that sentence.

“No, I have noticed that. He is like a bear with a sore leg.”

"Head," Tony corrected automatically.

There was another silence. He stared into his coffee.

“Tony, how is Quinn’s case related to that of Admiral Parrish?” Ziva asked, squeezing his hand gently.

He swallowed hard, and then met her eyes again. “Quinn once took some photographs of me in a hotel room on Long Island,” he said quietly. “Those photos were on Parrish’s laptop. Gibbs saw them and connected the dots.”

She sat back, allowing that information to sink in. She had had her suspicions of course, but it was very hard to imagine Tony, the man sitting in front of her right now, the man who sat across the room from her every day at work, having this kind of secret.

“May I ask,” she said tentatively. “How old you were when Quinn took those photographs?”

He hesitated.

“You do not have to answer that question if you do not wish to,” she told him. He gave her a faded smile and gently stroked his thumb over the back of her fingers.

“I was twelve,” he replied.

She sat there for a moment, unmoving. Her heart was beating a little too fast, and she felt both angry and sad. She waited until the feelings abated, collecting herself, showing nothing of her distress. This had to be hard enough for him as it was.

“And aside from the photographs, did both Quinn and Admiral Parrish...?” She could not bring herself to finish that sentence.

“Yeah.” He nodded.

She thought about that for a long while and then leaned forward. “Tony, I know ways of inflicting slow and painful deaths,” she said quietly. “And ways, also, of disposing of the evidence. It would give me great pleasure if you would like me to...”

He gave a little chuckle and shook his head. “No, Ziva. Thanks for the offer, but no. Let’s do this the NCIS way, with, you know, law and justice and all that stuff. If that doesn’t work...well, I doubt you’ll get a chance to do it your way as I suspect Gibbs will get there first, but if he doesn’t, I might well take you up on your offer.”

She nodded and squeezed his bandaged hand very gently. “How did you really hurt your hand?” she asked. He grinned.

“Oh, I really did walk into a door!” She frowned at him, and he sighed. “Okay, so I was having a major freak-out at the time, but it was definitely me versus the door – and the door won.”

“You are staying with Gibbs? He said it was his kitchen door.”

“Yeah and yeah. And he won’t let me drive at the moment – so no car.”

“Why will he not let you drive?” She wrinkled up her forehead.

“It’s not a good idea. I’m not...as stable as I usually am, right now,” he admitted, his eyes darkening.

She gazed at him steadily. He was the Tony she knew so well, and yet he was not. He was also someone else; someone scared and vulnerable. She had never seen this person before, and her heart went out to him. Tony never liked to be serious about anything, so she could imagine how much it had taken for him to tell her this.

“You said that everyone else knows?”

“Yes, and I’m sorry you’re the last. If it’s any consolation, you’re the only one I’ve told in person. McGee found out when he taped my statement. Gibbs told Ducky because I needed medical help, and Abby because she was close to finding out anyway.”

“I do not mind. It is not a competition,” she said. He picked up his mug and drank his coffee down in one go. “And besides, you have known all of them for longer than you have known me. I will always be the outsider to a certain extent...”

He looked up sharply. “Ziva, that’s not true.”

“Yes, it is.” She gave him a tight smile. “I do understand. I have other allegiances, and you are all wary of that. It gets in the way of our team bond sometimes, I think.”

“Not for me.” He shook his head. “I had no idea you felt this way.”

“Well, we do not ever really talk, do we?” She put her head on one side and surveyed him. “You do not ever want to be serious, Tony.”

“No. I don’t.” He shrugged. “And I want you to know just how much it’s killing me right now.”

“I understand.” She nodded. “When your secret is very big, it is best never to allow anyone to get close enough to catch even the smallest glimpse of it.”

He gave a little laugh. “Trust the Mossad officer to know all about that.”

“I understand you much better than you might think, Tony. You have done an excellent job of fooling us all over the years. I think that you might even be good enough for Mossad.”

He grinned exuberantly, knowing that she had just paid him her highest compliment. Then he glanced at his watch. “I should go before Eli comes down here and starts beating up on me.”

“He is an architect, Tony, not a fighter. Even McGee could take him out,” she grinned. “So you would probably be able to do it.”

“Hey – you just said I was good enough for Mossad!” he pouted, and she laughed at him. It felt as if they were back on easy, familiar territory.

“I know that you do not rate my skills as an investigator very highly, Tony,” she told him. His eyes flashed. “While we are being honest, we might as well speak of these things,” she shrugged.

“You’re excellent at undercover work, and if we need someone in a fight,” Tony told her seriously. “But crime scene skills – investigative skills – those aren’t your natural forte.”

“I know.” She nodded. “But they are yours. The team is missing you in this investigation. Gibbs is missing you. He will not say it, but he relies on your particular skills. He is very good; very dynamic, very active in pursuit of the truth and an excellent leader. He is unrelenting and demanding, and he always gets results. His interrogation skills are the best I have seen anywhere, including Mossad. He needs you though. Your skill is in having ideas, piecing together all the clues, making the connections, and using your inherent nosiness to do the digging in all the right places.”

“I think there was a compliment in there somewhere,” he said with a frown. She grinned.

“There was. I am saying that while I lack your particular skills, I will do my best not to let you down in this investigation as you are unable to participate yourself. I will do absolutely everything I can to bring these men to justice. None of the children they harmed will go un-avenged. The child you once were - that twelve year old boy - *he* will not go un-avenged. I promise you that, Tony.”

He sat back in his chair, and for a moment she thought she saw that child peeping out of his eyes; shy, reserved, and a little freaked out by all the attention, and then the moment was gone.

“Thank you, Ziva,” he said quietly.

~*~

Demons Part Two by Xanthe

McGee looked up as the elevator pinged. He was the only one in the squad room, and while he relished the peace and quiet, it did feel pretty eerie. Usually this place was full of life, bustle, and energy, and it felt strange to be here alone. There were other people around – the Director was in his office, and there were a couple of support technicians in MTAC, but for the most part, the building was deserted.

Gibbs strode into the squad room a few seconds later and sat down at his desk. He didn't seem surprised to see McGee here on a Sunday morning.

"What have you got for me, McGee?" he asked.

McGee got up and took a thick file over to him. "This is the file you asked for," he said, with just a flicker of distaste as he handed it over. "Every single photo on Parrish's laptop, catalogued and numbered." He wasn't surprised that Gibbs didn't flick it open. The contents of that file would be a challenge to the strongest stomach. Gibbs just nodded.

"What happened at the prison?"

"I spoke to Xavier Ramirez. He was reluctant to talk at first. Ziva had to..." He hesitated, looking for the right word.

"Sweet talk him?" Gibbs raised an ironic eyebrow.

"Something like that," McGee agreed with a little grimace. "He's a streetwise little punk – very brash, but not as hard as he likes to make out. He admitted eventually that Parrish did start abusing him when he was fourteen, but he refuses to testify against him. He's absolutely terrified of Parrish, Boss – just like Justin and..." He hesitated and bit his lip.

Gibbs gazed at him stonily. "What else did he say?"

"I don't think Ramirez is the brightest button in the box, Boss, and Parrish – he really is a bastard."

"I already know that, McGee."

"Reading between the lines, it seems that after Ramirez got too old to be of interest to Parrish, he tried to blackmail him – said he'd go to the police if Parrish didn't give him money."

Gibbs clicked his jaw in annoyance.

"Yeah. That was a bad move," McGee agreed. "One night Ramirez and his brother were leaving a bar, and they ran into a gang of what they claim were Navy personnel, although they weren't in uniform. They were both beaten up pretty bad – Ramirez's brother lost an eye. Parrish visited Ramirez in hospital and told him that he'd been lucky. He didn't actually admit that he'd sent the men to beat them up, but Ramirez says it was definitely him."

McGee handed Gibbs another file. "This is my full report. There's also an e-copy in your inbox, Boss."

"And the other kid? Parkes?" Gibbs demanded.

"Refused point blank to speak to us," McGee sighed. "So Tony's is still the only statement we have unless we can get Justin to make one."

"Is there a reason why you didn't pull the rest of your team in today, McGee?" Gibbs asked.

"Uh, yes," McGee nodded. "We worked all day yesterday and well into the night. Abby finished up with the photos, and me and Ziva wrote up our reports on the prison visit and got everything requisitioned and in place for tomorrow. I knew I could finish up everything else myself today, and next week will be busy, and...well, probably pretty stressful. They've done a good job and deserved a day off. Owing to the nature of the case, and, uh, who is involved, these past few days have been difficult and distressing for all of us."

Gibbs sat back in his chair, gazing at him steadily, and then nodded, and McGee thought he saw the faintest hint of approval in his boss's eyes. "You're sounding like a real team leader, McGee. Good work," he said softly. "So, everything is ready for tomorrow?"

McGee hesitated.

"McGee!" Gibbs snapped. "I thought you just said..."

"Oh it is, Boss. I mean, I've done everything I can to get all the teams and vans assembled, and all the transport arrangements made, and warrants issued, and so on, but..."

"Well?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

"Director Vance won't sign off on it, Boss. He says he wants to see you in his office."

"He's in today?" Gibbs glanced up at the stairs, in the general direction of Vance's office.

McGee nodded. Gibbs's jaw tightened, and he got to his feet and grabbed the big file of photos that McGee had given him.

"Uh, Boss?" Gibbs paused. "Is Tony doing okay?" McGee asked quietly. "Abby is really worried about him." And so am I, he thought, but he didn't like to say that. Gibbs's expression was completely unreadable.

"He's hanging on in there, Tim," Gibbs replied. "That's about it. I don't think there's much more we can ask of him right now."

"The way he was when he attacked Parrish...and then he hurt his hand..." McGee winced. "And he barely said a word all day on Friday while he was working those cold case files. He just doesn't seem like Tony at the moment."

"This is really tough for him, Tim," Gibbs said quietly. "He's getting there, but he's struggling right now, and he needs our help to see him through it."

"I understand." McGee nodded.

"Good – because I'm relying on you, McGee." Gibbs put a hand on his shoulder. McGee looked at the hand and then looked up, startled. "When it all kicks off next week – and trust me, it *is* going to kick off - there will be times when I'm not around. I don't want Tony left on his own at any point, or for any reason – understood?"

McGee nodded.

"I need you to be sure that you always know where he is, and who he's with – I want you, Ducky, Abby, or Ziva with him at all times. That thing with his hand..." A flicker of a grimace crossed Gibbs's face. "Well, let's just say I don't want a repeat of that."

"Okay, Boss." McGee had no idea what had happened to Tony's hand, but he could guess it hadn't been the straightforward accident Tony had made it out to be. "Where is he now?" he asked.

"With Ziva. Telling her."

"Thank God. That was becoming really awkward," McGee sighed, relieved that Ziva would now be in the loop.

"He's my priority, so you're on your own for the rest of the day, Tim. I'll get the Director to sign off on this, and then I'll leave the rest of the details to you." Gibbs began walking towards the stairs, and then paused and turned. "I know you'll do a good job, Agent McGee."

~*~

Leon Vance glanced at his watch, and then glanced at the photograph of his wife and children on his desk, and winced. Jackie generally tolerated him working long hours, but she did not approve of him working on a Sunday. He didn't like it much himself, but he had a potential headache on his hands, courtesy, as usual, of Leroy Jethro Gibbs.

Vance gazed at the massive file of paperwork McGee had given to him. It seemed that Gibbs wanted to requisition just about every resource NCIS had to work on his current case, and frankly, Vance was getting sick of the high-handed way Gibbs conducted himself.

Vance ran this agency, but you wouldn't think so judging by the way everyone behaved around Gibbs. The entire agency was either in awe of the man, or terrified of him, or both, and Vance had a suspicion that if they had to choose between obeying him or obeying Gibbs they'd choose Gibbs. That pissed him off no end.

For all that he said he had no interest in the top job, Gibbs acted as if he was the de facto boss of NCIS. Sometimes, Vance felt he existed merely to rubber-stamp anything Gibbs put in front of him; it was time to take a stand. Gibbs had to learn that he couldn't have everything his own way. It was time that he learned exactly who was in charge.

At that moment, the man in question burst through the door, without knocking.

"You wanted to see me, Leon?" he growled, all high-handed arrogance and tight-lipped intensity as usual.

"Yes, I did, Agent Gibbs," Vance growled back.

Gibbs came to stand in front of his desk. Usually when people stood there they had the grace to look like subordinates, but somehow Gibbs managed to make it feel like Vance was answering to him.

"Do you see the name on that door, Agent Gibbs?" Vance snapped. Gibbs's eyes didn't even flicker towards the door. They stayed fixed on him.

"I do. It says Director Leon Vance," Gibbs replied.

"That's right. *Director* Leon Vance."

Vance sat back in his chair and slid a toothpick into his mouth. He gazed at Gibbs as he chewed on the stick. Usually this was a technique that worked – he'd cowed many a subordinate by just sitting back and staring at them in silence, subjecting them to his unrelenting glare. Gibbs didn't even shift on his feet; he just glared back.

"What, Leon?" he growled, and it annoyed Vance that Gibbs felt so free to call him by his first name. "You chose today to have a pissing contest with me? Trust me, now is not good timing."

"When the hell ever is? Bad enough that you treat NCIS like your own personal fiefdom, Gibbs, as if the chain of command doesn't damn well apply to you, but now you get Agent Flunky McGee to hand me this?" He pointed to the massive file on his desk. "You want to requisition half the agency's resources, and you expect me to just sign off on that," he growled. "Without details?"

"There are details in the file," Gibbs replied.

"Not many," Vance snapped back. "I know we're holding an admiral for possession of child pornography, and now you want to go chasing after some ex-marine for the same thing."

"Oh, it's bigger than that, Leon," Gibbs told him. "This isn't just a case of possession of child porn – these men have been raping children for decades, and we have a chance to bring them down."

Vance frowned at him. "You're saying that you've stumbled upon some kind of pedophile ring?"

Gibbs nodded.

"Then why the hell isn't that in the report?" Vance demanded.

"Because I thought you trusted me, Leon!" Gibbs snapped. "I thought you trusted me enough to know I wasn't just asking for all these resources for the hell of it. I thought you knew me well enough to know that I have a damn good reason for it!"

"And why the hell couldn't you have trusted *me* enough to put all the details in your report?" Vance snapped back.

Gibbs got control of his temper, visibly. "Because I haven't had time," he said quietly.

"I don't care if you have to stay up all night on it – make the damn time," Vance ordered. Gibbs's eyes suddenly turned very cold.

"I can't do that, Leon. I have other priorities right now," he said icily. "I know the job has always come first with me, but not this time. This time I'm juggling priorities, and I expect you to trust me enough to understand that."

There was something about the intensity of his voice and body language that alerted Vance. He spat out his toothpick and leaned forward.

"Explain it to me, Jethro," he said quietly. "I'm listening."

Gibbs threw a file on his desk. "This is what we're investigating," he said. "Go on, Leon, take a look, and then you can have the same sleepless nights as the rest of us."

Vance flicked open the file and grimaced as he saw the pictures.

"There are 51 boys in that file. 51 boys who were abused between, we think, some time in the 1970s and now. Parrish could well be the tip of a very large iceberg, Leon, and I will not stop until I've found out just how far this goes."

Vance winced as he turned the pages in the folder. All of them were neatly catalogued and labelled, and all of the pictures were equally explicit and disturbing.

"Some of these boys are just children," he murmured, looking at a picture of a boy who didn't appear to be much older than his own son.

"Yeah." Gibbs nodded.

"And you have an admiral and an ex-marine on your list of possible perpetrators – so you're wondering..." Vance paused.

"Yeah, I'm wondering, Leon, if this is part of a wider pedophile ring currently operating in the military. If there are other marines or serving Naval officers involved, then it's my opinion that NCIS should throw every damn resource we have at it. Or maybe you disagree?"

Vance glared at him. "It would have killed you to fill me in on this before now?"

Gibbs's eyes flickered in annoyance. "I wanted to bring you enough to make a case, Leon," he said quietly. "And I've been busy."

"That boy you arrested – Justin Merrells? Is he one of the boys in these photos?" Vance asked.

"Yes." Gibbs nodded. He flicked open the file and pointed at a blond kid on the first page. "He's Boy One."

"He going to testify against Parrish?"

Gibbs hesitated. "At the moment he's too scared. Parrish is a Svengali figure. All the boys he abused are terrified of him, even years later."

"Have we made IDs on any of these other boys? Are we going to be able to get any of them to testify against Parrish?" Vance asked.

"I haven't given up on persuading Justin to testify," Gibbs told him. "We've identified a handful of the other boys. One of them has given us a statement that might help us bring this ring down."

"Who is this Roy Quinn you're going to arrest, and how is he linked to Parrish?" Vance asked, pulling the folder of paperwork towards him and opening it. There was silence. Vance glanced up. "Gibbs?"

"Our witness says that Quinn and Parrish worked together. They would groom a boy for sexual abuse and then pass him on to other men – or at least that's what happened to him," Gibbs growled. "Parrish is ruthless and smart. We've found nothing at all except those photos on his laptop, and they were heavily encrypted so we almost didn't find them. He won't give us any other names, addresses, details – nothing. We might get more out of Quinn than we got out of Parrish. If there are other men in this ring – and I have reason to believe there are – then I want to find them. All of them."

"Okay." Vance nodded, glancing through the file. "You're right, Gibbs – NCIS needs to throw everything we have at this. You can have all the resources I can give you."

"Thank you, Leon," Gibbs said, in a tight little voice. Vance reached for his pen and began signing his name on all the requisition requests.

"I have children, Gibbs," he said quietly. "I have a son. If I'd known all the details..." He shook his head. "Then I'd have signed these straight away. You know that."

Gibbs nodded. "Yeah, I know that, Leon," he sighed. "And if I'd had time to brief you before now then trust me, I would have. I wasn't deliberately trying to keep you in the dark."

Vance gave him a tight little smile. He signed his way through the file and then handed it back.

"The kid who has given us all this information – who is he?" he asked.

Gibbs's knuckles went white as he clenched his hand around the file. "He isn't a kid," he replied. "He's a grown man now. The abuse happened in 1984."

"Statute of limitations," Vance pointed out.

"I know – we can't get Parrish for abusing him, but the information he's given us has helped blow this thing wide open. Worst case scenario is that we just get Parrish for possession of child porn."

"Best case scenario?" Vance raised an eyebrow.

“Hell, I don’t just want to bust Parrish for possession! I want to get him for the actual abuse!” Gibbs said angrily. “If that means persuading Justin to testify then that’s what I’ll damn well do – his case is recent enough that the statute of limitations doesn’t apply.”

“Okay. Who is this witness who has been such a big help to us? How did we find him? I don’t see any paperwork here about him. Where’s his statement?” Vance demanded. Gibbs’s eyes flickered irritably. “We need to make this watertight, Gibbs!” Vance snapped. “The media will be all over a case like this. We need to make sure the agency comes out of this smelling of roses, or heads will roll.”

“Oh, I’ll make sure that the agency comes out of this just fine,” Gibbs growled. “If that’s what you’re worried about, *Director*.”

All this time Vance had been wanting Gibbs to call him by his title and now, suddenly, he wished he hadn’t.

“Gibbs – I just meant...”

“I know what you meant,” Gibbs snapped, walking towards the door.

“Gibbs – you didn’t answer me. Who is the witness?” Vance asked, icily, trying to regain at least some of the upper ground in this confrontation. He didn’t like the way Gibbs was making him feel, as if he was some petty bureaucrat who didn’t give a damn about people. That wasn’t who he was, and he wanted Gibbs to know that. Gibbs paused by the door, his hand on the handle, his back rigid and tense. He stood there for a moment, looking like he was struggling to make a decision, and then he turned, his jaw twitching in annoyance.

“It’s DiNozzo,” he said.

Vance stared at him, not understanding. “DiNozzo what?” he asked.

Anthony DiNozzo was probably his least favourite agent, after Gibbs himself. DiNozzo shared some of Gibbs’s more irritating character traits. He was the kind of agent who thought nothing of picking locks and entering premises without a search warrant, he had some highly unorthodox methods of conducting investigations and interrogations, and he didn’t seem to feel the need to include all the facts in his reports. Like Gibbs, he had little understanding of modern technology and was forever disappearing off to pursue his own lines of enquiry. He was also, like Gibbs, someone Vance found hard to read, although in a completely different way. Whereas Gibbs never gave a thing away, intimidating with his body language and sheer force of will, DiNozzo gave every appearance of being a total idiot – except for the fact that he clearly wasn’t. It was hard to take him seriously, and yet you under-estimated him at your peril.

“Gibbs?” Vance pressed. “What has DiNozzo got to do with this?”

“He’s our witness,” Gibbs replied. Vance frowned.

“I don’t understand...”

"Take a look in the damn file, Leon! Boy 43," Gibbs growled. "Tony is our witness, he's prepared to testify if need be, and yes, before you ask, of course I've pulled him off the case. Now, I have somewhere I need to be, and it sure as hell isn't here. You have a nice day, Leon."

He stalked out of the office, slamming the door shut behind him. Vance sat back in his chair, staggered by the turn of events. He glanced at the file Gibbs had brought in and then flicked through the neatly labelled photographs until he came to Boy 43. He felt sure that he'd misunderstood this – or Gibbs had.

The page fell open on a kid - one of the younger ones in the file. His hair was dark blond, and he was gazing straight at the camera with a look of fear and pleading in his eyes. Vance gazed at the photograph, taking in the position of the child and his probable size in relation to the large adult hands that were visible on his hips. The child looked desperate, terrified, and...familiar. It took a moment for Vance to see it, but when he did it was as clear as day: He was looking into DiNozzo's scared eyes, gazing at DiNozzo's anguished face, and staring at a photo so obscene it made him feel ill.

Vance snapped the file shut with a crash of his hand. He felt dirty just having looked at it.

He got up and tucked the file under his arm. Then he strode out of his office and went down into the squad room. Gibbs was long gone, but McGee looked up when he saw him.

"Agent McGee – I believe that Agent Gibbs has left you in charge of this case in his absence?"

"Uh...yes, sir," McGee nodded.

"Good. You keep me in the loop on this one, McGee, and if there's anything - **anything** - you need, you come straight to me, and I will expedite it immediately. We're all working this one together – we will find these men, we will crack this ring, and we will bring all those involved to justice."

"Yes, sir." McGee straightened up in his seat.

"DiNozzo is one of our own," Vance said quietly. "Let's nail these bastards." He threw the file down onto McGee's desk and then turned and left.

He didn't even collect his coat and briefcase. He just went straight down to the parking garage, called for his driver, and got into his car. He had seen many things over his years working at NCIS, but few that had affected him so much. He couldn't get that photograph of that child – of DiNozzo - out of his head. He had an overwhelming urge to get home so that he could put his arms around his son, hold him tight, and keep him safe.

~*~

Tony was relieved when Gibbs picked him up from Starbucks. He was glad he'd finally managed to tell Ziva, but he didn't really like being away from Gibbs right now. Partly, that was because he was scared of going into a fugue – only Gibbs really knew how to handle him when that happened. Partly, also, being with Gibbs helped relax him, and Tony knew that if

he needed to fall apart for any reason, then he could; he didn't have to be vigilant around Gibbs. Then, also, there was simply the fact that Gibbs was Gibbs, and Tony loved him.

They spent another quiet day together. Tony was grateful for the respite, even though he knew it was just the calm before the storm. After dinner, Tony grabbed a bowl of popcorn and a couple of bottles of beer and sat down on the couch expectantly, a stack of DVDs piled up on the coffee table in front of him. Gibbs raised an eyebrow as he entered the living room with a cup of coffee.

"I thought we could, you know, do a repeat of last night," Tony said, flushing slightly. No way was he going to admit how much he'd enjoyed all that kissing.

"Uh-huh." Gibbs said, an unreadable expression in his eyes.

"Because last night was great. I mean, uh, watching a movie together. I know you're not really into movies the way I am, but you're gonna love this one." Tony pointed the remote at the TV and clicked to start the movie playing.

"Uh-huh," Gibbs said again, sitting down beside him. He grabbed a handful of popcorn and settled back in the couch as if he was actually going to watch the damn movie and not spend the night kissing him. Tony gave a little sigh of disappointment, and Gibbs's hand snaked along the couch and stroked the back of his head. "Something on your mind?" Gibbs asked.

Tony glanced at him sideways. "Just...uh, about the kissing thing..."

Gibbs raised an eyebrow, giving nothing away. "What about it?"

Tony sighed. "I've never spent an entire evening just doing that before."

"I know."

"Without it, you know, leading to sex," Tony clarified.

"I know." Gibbs's fingers continued stroking the back of his head.

"But we're not having sex."

"Nope," Gibbs agreed.

Which was weird of and by itself, because Tony *wanted* to have sex with Gibbs. However, he felt reassured by knowing that it would only happen when his body was ready for it and that Gibbs didn't seem to have a problem waiting. In fact, knowing that Gibbs enjoyed his company, and could be intimate with him without sex, was a revelation to him.

Tony grabbed a handful of popcorn, stuffed it into his mouth, and watched the movie intently. Gibbs didn't say a word. There was silence for several minutes. Finally, Tony gave in.

"Damn it, Jethro – could we do the kissing thing again?" he asked. Gibbs grinned.

"Any time you want, Tony. I was just waiting for you to ask."

He opened his legs, and Tony settled eagerly between them. He was becoming accustomed to how it felt allowing someone to hold him. He'd never really liked snuggling before, but this felt completely different. He liked the feel of Gibbs's hard body against him, and the reassuring strength of his arms around him. He liked the way Gibbs would lazily stroke under his shirt with the tips of his fingers, and, most of all, he liked being kissed.

They were long, slow, effortless kisses, going nowhere, and that was partly why Tony liked them so much. There was something almost mesmerising about spending an evening doing this. Tony would never have imagined how incredibly relaxing it could be. Gibbs tasted of coffee and popcorn, and his lips were warm and soft. Every so often they paused to glance at the TV, or snack on the popcorn, but then they'd settle down again for more kissing. It was so gently intimate, and it soothed Tony like nothing else.

By the time they retired to bed a few hours later, Tony felt like he was walking on air. He got into bed beside Gibbs and felt Gibbs settle down behind him and place his hand on his stomach, the way he always did.

Tony closed his eyes, fell fast asleep, and slept through the entire night for the first time since this began.

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McGee met Gibbs and Tony at the airport early the following morning to catch the shuttle to New York. Ziva had gone ahead on an earlier shuttle to rendezvous with the agents and vans already waiting for them there. Gibbs wanted this whole operation to go off with military precision, and McGee hoped that he'd done his bit to ensure that happened. He'd been at NCIS until late last night going through all the details with a fine toothcomb.

"Did you get the confirmation we were waiting for, McGee?" Gibbs asked, as they queued up to buy their tickets. McGee nodded.

"Quinn's flight took off at 19:30 last night," he said. "And according to the passenger manifest and passport control he was definitely on it. It's a seventeen hour flight so he'll be arriving at JFK at 12:30. I've made all the arrangements for you and Agent O'Brien to arrest him and fly back to DC with him when he arrives."

McGee cast a surreptitious glance at Tony. He looked much better than he had on Friday. He wasn't as pale or drained, and he was completely ignoring their conversation as he laughed and joked with a pretty young woman standing behind them in queue. In fact, apart from the bandage on his hand, he looked just like the old Tony.

McGee wondered what the hell Gibbs had done to keep Tony occupied all weekend and how he'd managed to get him looking human again. The idea of staying a whole weekend at Gibbs's house, holed up with their taciturn boss, was McGee's worst nightmare. Tony had always had a weird kind of obsession with Gibbs though, and McGee knew he'd stayed with their boss a couple of times before when there had been various problems at his apartment, so maybe it wasn't such an ordeal for Tony.

McGee wondered what on earth they did and what they talked about. Gibbs was hardly a chatty person. If this had happened to him, McGee didn't think Gibbs was the person he'd

want to scoop him up and look after him. In fact, he shuddered at the thought of it. If he was falling apart, then he thought he'd rather do it in the presence of someone kind and avuncular like Ducky, not Gibbs. He was sure that Gibbs *did* have a softer side - he just didn't think he'd ever seen it.

Tony flirted outrageously with the girl at the check-in desk, churning out a series of stupid jokes that made McGee roll his eyes. Gibbs barely seemed to take any notice, but when Tony's antics became over the top, even for him, McGee saw Gibbs put a hand on Tony's shoulder and squeeze, firmly, and Tony calmed down after that.

They boarded the shuttle, and Tony proceeded to tell a long, implausible story about how he'd once sat next to a hot woman on a shuttle flight and managed to sweet talk her into an assignation in the plane toilet within the 45 minute duration of the flight. McGee found this frankly unbelievable, even for Tony.

"Are you sure it was a hot woman, Tony?" he asked. "Just...it sounds more like something a couple of gay guys would do to me."

Tony flushed, and McGee felt a wave of intense embarrassment. Oh shit - he'd said the wrong thing. Given the nature of this case, the last thing he should do was make any kind of crack about Tony's sexuality. It was the kind of thing he'd usually say in an attempt to hold his own with his teasing co-worker, but on this occasion he could see that it was wildly inappropriate.

McGee took his seat behind Tony and Gibbs, still wincing over his comment. He didn't know how to behave around Tony any more. Tony had told him that he was one of his closest friends, but they hadn't really talked since that night Tony had given his statement. McGee didn't know what to say, and he longed for the easy intimacy they'd once shared. He had enjoyed the way they goofed around and played stupid jokes on each other, even if Tony's jokes usually went too far.

Gibbs said nothing as Tony launched into another monologue, talking too fast, pausing every now and then to smooth down the hair on the back of his head. None of them had said a word about why they were here and where they were going. McGee couldn't begin to understand how Tony must be feeling right now as they travelled to the hotel room where he'd been repeatedly abused as a child.

Tony's speech got even faster as the flight progressed, like he was on some kind of drug. He was now rubbing his head repeatedly, and whatever it was he was saying had long since stopped making much sense. Then, suddenly, Gibbs reached up, took firm hold of Tony's wrist, and replaced his hand by his side. Tony stopped talking in mid-sentence. Gibbs rested his own hand over Tony's where it was lying on the armrest between them, and McGee was surprised to see Gibbs's thumb gently stroke over the back of Tony's hand.

Tony deflated like a balloon. One minute he'd been all high-octane energy, spewing verbal diarrhoea, moving restlessly and stroking his head obsessively, and the next he seemed to slump, visibly, into his chair. McGee was startled when Gibbs moved his arm, wrapped it around Tony's shoulders, and pulled him towards him. Tony rested his head on Gibbs's shoulder, and Gibbs whispered something in his ear. Then both men fell silent. McGee had no idea what that was all about, but at least Gibbs seemed to know a way of calming Tony down, however unexpected the method.

Tony remained silent for the rest of the flight, and when they landed and got to their feet, McGee saw how pale and strained he looked compared to how he'd been earlier. Now McGee knew just how much this trip was costing Tony, and, judging by the tight set of Gibbs's jaw and his taut shoulders, he knew it too.

An NCIS agent met them at the airport and drove them to the hotel. Gibbs had been adamant that the only people going into that hotel room would be himself, Tony and McGee, presumably to keep Tony's ordeal as contained as possible.

McGee wished that he was anywhere but here, doing this. He had spoken to the hotel manager, who was expecting them and had ensured that Room 204 would be free and available to them, but there was nothing else he could do to make sure that this ran smoothly. He'd done all he could.

The NCIS agent parked the car and there was a moment of silence. Then Gibbs turned to Tony.

"Okay, Tony. We're here. I've said this before, but are you sure about this? You don't have to go in there. You can stay here with Agent O'Brien - me and McGee can go and get the evidence we need."

"No." Tony shook his head, and McGee thought he looked as scared as he had a few nights ago when he'd stood in the squad room psyching himself up to give his statement to Gibbs. "I have to do this."

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Tony remembered the hotel's driveway and parking lot as vividly as if Roy had brought him here yesterday. The sign above the hotel door had changed, but in many respects the hotel itself looked exactly the same.

He found himself experiencing that sinking sensation he always used to feel when Roy drove him here. He'd sit in the front seat of Roy's car on the journey, his stomach full of dread, his fingers twisting away morosely on the Rubik's Cube Roy always kept in the glove compartment.

"Never did like that stupid thing," Tony muttered as they got out of the car.

"What stupid thing?" McGee asked.

"Rubik's Cube," Tony replied. McGee and Gibbs exchanged a puzzled glance over his shoulder.

"I was pretty good at it actually," McGee said. "My best time was six minutes seventeen seconds. What was your best time, Tony?"

"Oh please." Tony pulled a face. "Like I ever solved the stupid thing. I wasn't a little McGeek like you, Probie. I was..."

He stopped abruptly. What the hell had he been like? Usually, he told stories that made it sound like he was noisy, mischievous, and adventurous, the way he was now, but that was who he had become after he went to boarding school. Before that, he hadn't been any of those things. He'd been quiet, serious and shy.

"I was the kind of kid who got taken to a hotel room and fucked," he finished bitterly, ignoring the shocked look on McGee's face.

He was grateful for the warm, firm hand Gibbs put on his shoulder, and the way he steered him towards the hotel entrance.

"Any time you need a breather, you tell me," Gibbs said in a low voice into his ear. Tony nodded. "And you talk to me, Tony. You tell me what's going on. This gets too much, we'll bail out."

The foyer was different to how he remembered it. They'd moved the reception and created a lounge area with easy chairs. He stood beside Gibbs as his boss talked to the manager and felt himself shrinking. He stood shoulder high to Roy, who was leaning on the reception desk waiting for his room key, a cigar in his mouth.

"Another fishing trip, Mr. Quayle?" the receptionist asked.

"That's right. My boy loves it! Gives me a chance to spend some time with him and gets us out of his mom's hair," Roy laughed, patting Tony's shoulder. "Isn't that right, son?" Tony nodded and gazed blindly at his feet.

"This way," the manager said, but Tony knew the way. He could walk this journey in his sleep, every single hated step of it. He remembered the way his stomach always coiled up anxiously as they walked, and how he would become quieter and slower the further they went, every step feeling like a mile. Roy, by contrast, became more upbeat and vivacious the closer they got to Room 204.

Tony felt his stomach churn again all these years later. He found himself counting each step, the way he always used to as a child, for something to do so he wouldn't have to think about what would happen next. If he was lucky it would just be him and Roy, but if not, then it might be Luke or Marco.

The manager stopped outside a door.

"This can't be right," Tony said. Gibbs looked at him questioningly. "That was only 317 steps. It should be 345," Tony said.

"You're taller now, Tony. You have longer strides," Gibbs pointed out quietly. Tony felt like an idiot. Yeah, of course, that was so obvious. He saw McGee and Gibbs exchange a little glance and wanted to kick himself.

The manager opened the door, and Gibbs walked inside. Tony hesitated and then saw McGee looking at him with those big, tragic eyes, full of a sympathy Tony didn't want. He walked swiftly into the room, more to get away from the look McGee was giving him than anything else.

He wasn't prepared for the feeling of déjà vu that hit him the minute he stepped inside. The room's furnishings had changed, but everything else was the same. Even the bed was in the same place. The brown swirly carpet had been replaced with something more contemporary in a dull green colour, and the walls were a neutral, inoffensive cream. The bathroom door was straight ahead, and there was a window to his left, opposite the double bed.

"You okay?" Gibbs asked him quietly. Tony nodded.

"Sure. It's just a room," he said, with a nonchalant shrug.

Gibbs gave him a look that showed he didn't buy that bullshit for even a second. "We're going to get to work. You talk to me if anything happens. Understand?"

Gibbs's eyes were intense and full of meaning. Tony nodded and turned to look around the room again.

McGee opened up his bag and got out his camera. Gibbs had a file with him. Tony didn't know what was in that file, but he had a pretty good idea.

"I want the angles to match as exactly as possible, McGee," Gibbs said in an undertone, pointing at something in the file, something he kept turned away from Tony so that he wouldn't see it.

"Tonio – come here, my beautiful boy."

Tony sat down on the armchair in the corner of the room and closed his eyes wearily. He watched as Roy locked the door behind them and sat down on the side of the bed. A kid walked reluctantly over to him. He had dark blond hair, cut into thick bangs across his forehead, and a sulky mouth.

"Don't be like that, Tonio," Roy chided him. He smoothed Tony's long bangs away from his eyes. "Such beautiful eyes! My lovely boy!" He tipped Tony's chin up and kissed his mouth. He stank of cigars. Tony hated the stench, but he just stood there, allowing Roy to slide his tongue between his lips.

"I've had an idea," Roy told him, as he began slowly unbuttoning Tony's shirt.

"What kind of idea?" Tony asked sulkily.

"An idea for something that will make things easier for you," Roy said, his eyes twinkling. "Here – drink this."

He handed Tony a bottle of chocolate milkshake, Tony's favourite. Tony was surprised – Roy didn't normally give him a drink when they got in here. Usually he was too eager to undress him. Tony wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth though, so he opened the bottle and drank it down while Roy smiled at him encouragingly. Tony tried to make it last, but eventually it was all gone, and then Roy took the bottle away from him and pulled him close. Tony felt his former sulkiness return, and he went stiffly and reluctantly into Roy's embrace.

"Come on, Tonio, don't you want to be nice to your Uncle Roy? If you're nice to me, then I'll buy you something special later."

"What kind of something?" Tony asked, brightening a little.

"Anything you want!" Roy laughed. "But you have to be nice to me first," he warned.

Tony nodded. He knew what being "nice" meant. He unlaced his boots and toed them off, then took off his socks. Roy liked him to be completely naked. He liked tickling the soles of his feet and kissing every inch of his body.

Roy watched him get undressed, his eyes gleaming approvingly. When he was done, Roy guided him onto the bed and told him to wait there for him. Tony closed his eyes, listening to the sounds of Roy getting undressed. Roy had skinny legs and a little pot belly. Tony didn't like looking at him when he was naked. Then he felt Roy climb onto the bed beside him. Roy spent a long time stroking something wet and slippery inside him – he didn't always take so long doing this, but this time he stretched Tony for ages. Then he did what he always did, crooning into Tony's neck and kissing his hair the whole time.

Tony didn't like how it felt. He never did. There was a game he played that sometimes helped. If he tried really hard he could believe that he wasn't really here, inside his own body. He was like a guest in his own mind, watching from a distance, as if none of this was really happening to him. He couldn't always do it – sometimes he couldn't get his mind to take him to that place, but when he could it made it easier.

The room was warm, and Tony began to feel very drowsy. All his muscles were relaxed, and he felt spaced out.

He heard Roy's breathing coming faster, panting warm breath into his hair, and then he felt that little shuddering movement Roy always made.

"That's it. Good boy," Roy said, kissing the back of his neck again. Roy got up, abruptly, and began dressing. Tony lay there, feeling floppy. He was puzzled. Usually, Roy didn't get dressed so soon afterwards. Usually he cuddled him and kissed him, sometimes for ages.

Tony managed to turn himself, with a great effort of will. Roy bent over him.

"That's it. You just lie there and relax," he said. There was a knock on the door, but it sounded so far away. Even despite the fog in his head, Tony felt his insides clench in fear.

"Who is it, Uncle Roy?" he asked. Roy smoothed the hair away from his head.

"It's Marco, my love," he said softly. Tony tried to get up, his head spinning.

"No, please, no..." he begged. Last time, Marco had hurt him, and he'd bled. He was terrified of the pain and the blood, and he didn't want it to happen again. He tried to crawl his way off the bed, but Roy caught him and put him back.

"Now, now, Tonio, you mustn't be naughty," he chided anxiously.

"He'll make me bleed...I'll die...please...it hurt so much..." Tony whimpered.

"You won't bleed this time," Roy told him. "I've given you a little drink to help relax you. This time it'll be fine. You'll like it, Tonio. Be good for Marco, please. For me?"

There was another knock at the door, more imperative this time.

"No!" Tony wailed. "Please! NO!"

"Yes." Roy's expression hardened. "Enough of this nonsense, Tony. I don't buy you all those things for nothing. This is how you earn them. This is how you show your love for me. You do love me, don't you?"

Tony gazed at him, confused. Roy's eyes darkened.

"You're an ungrateful boy. Is this what I get in return for taking such good care of you? Who else would love you if I didn't, Tonio? Hmm?"

"I'm sorry!" Tony said anxiously. "I do love you, Roy."

He was relieved when Roy's eyes shone with approval once more.

"Good boy."

Roy went to open the door. Marco walked in, and the door was shut and locked behind him.

"I see you got him ready for me," Marco said with a grin, glancing over to the bed. He wasn't a tall man, but he was muscular and wiry. He had a tattoo on his forearm of a dagger dripping drops of blood.

"He'll be good this time, I promise. Don't be so rough. I can't risk taking him to a doctor," Roy hissed.

"Little brat tensed up last time."

"Well, I've stretched him myself, so he'll be fine today," Roy snapped. "Just don't leave any marks and don't tear him. It's my ass on the line here."

"This time," Marco growled. "Fair's fair, Quinn. Other times you've had a share of what I got for us, remember."

"Yes, I know. And that's why I'm letting you have Tony again. I'm just saying – be careful."

Tony gazed at them stupidly, trying to follow what they were saying. His head felt cloudy, and his body didn't seem to belong to him. It was floppy and heavy.

Roy walked towards the door, and he whimpered. "Don't go, Uncle Roy," he begged.

"I must, darling. You'll be fine," Roy told him, and then he was gone. Marco locked the door behind him and then turned back to the bed with a vicious smile. Tony tried to get to his feet.

If he could just push himself up he could get off the bed, run into the bathroom, and lock the door. But he couldn't. He felt like he was moving in slow motion, every action taking forever.

He watched Marco get undressed and lay there, hating himself for not being able to get away. Marco saw him watching and grinned. He came over to the bed, got onto it, and grabbed Tony roughly.

"Roy sent me those photographs he took last time," Marco said in a cheerful voice, pushing him onto his front. "I liked them. You're a good little fuck, Tony."

Tony tried to move away, but it was too much effort. He turned his head and gazed, blankly, at the wall. He felt Marco behind him. It didn't hurt this time. He couldn't really feel anything. He was too zoned out.

The wall was moving. No - he was moving, not the wall. He was moving back and forth, back and forth, a few inches along the bed each time, the side of his face sliding along the white sheet. He couldn't move, couldn't scream, couldn't do anything but lie here. Marco was heavy, like a lead weight on top of him. He tried to angle his head so he could catch his breath, but he couldn't seem to get enough air into his lungs. Marco put a hand on his shoulder and...

"Tony, are you okay?"

Tony jumped up, grabbed the hand on his shoulder, and pushed his assailant violently against the wall. He slid his hand around the man's throat and squeezed as hard as he could.

"Don't fucking touch me!" he growled hoarsely. A pair of horrified eyes gazed at him, and he heard a choking sound.

"Tony." Another voice, in his ear, low and deep, one he knew he had to obey without question. "Let him go."

He released his grip instantly. The man he had attacked put his hand up to his throat, panting for breath.

"Get out of here, McGee," that deep voice behind him said. McGee hesitated.

"But, Boss, what if he tries to hurt you..."

"He won't hurt me, McGee. Now go!"

McGee reluctantly left the room.

Tony stood there, still panting, unmoving, waiting for instructions. Shit, he'd fucked up. If he just stayed very still, and did as he was told, maybe it would be okay.

"Tony, I want you to listen to me please..."

"Tony, get down on your hands and knees..."

He was shaking as he obeyed, terrified of what Luke would do to him. Luke didn't like it if he was slow, or disobedient, and he knew that he'd just done something bad. He felt confused. A minute ago Marco had been here, but now Luke had taken his place. He didn't remember that happening, but he wasn't thinking clearly at the moment. There had been something in that milkshake Roy had given him.

He curled up into a little ball on the floor, head on his knees, and waited. Luke usually just came up behind him and fucked him. He wasn't like Roy – he didn't like stroking him or petting him.

He shivered as he waited. Luke liked to pinch him, to take hold of his skin and twist it until Tony squealed. The man crouched down beside him, and Tony felt his entire body start to shake. An arm came towards him, and he flinched.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to...I'll do whatever you want," he whispered, shaking violently. A hand touched his head, and Tony whimpered. The hand rested there, stroking his hair gently. It felt warm and reassuring. Tony uncurled a little.

"Tony...where are you?" the man asked.

Tony blinked. Where was he? He was here, among the ghosts. Those ghosts were all around him. He could see them moving across the room, settling on the bed, picking him up, stroking him, bending him over, fucking him, and making him open his mouth or his legs. They were walking naked into the bathroom, or pulling him onto their laps and fondling him. They were sitting on the bed, and on the armchair, sometimes naked, sometimes clothed. They were everywhere in this room.

Over there was the bed, and beyond that was the bathroom, and over there was the window, and the radiator, and above the bed was the ceiling fan. He knew every inch of this room by heart.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "Please...I'm sorry. Don't hurt me...please don't hurt me..."

There was movement, and Tony tensed, waiting for the cruelly pinching fingers or the cold hands on his ass. Instead, strong hands lifted him up, and someone pulled him close and held him. He felt a warm chest under his cheek and heard the reassuring sound of a heartbeat.

"It's okay. You're safe with me. I've got you," that firm, deep voice said.

Tony felt the anger radiating from the man's body like a vivid white flame, scorching hot, and he flinched. "I'm sorry," he whimpered again.

"Ssh, it's okay. I'm not angry with you," the man said, and Tony clung onto him helplessly, relieved beyond belief.

The man moved, so that he was sitting with his back to the wall. He pulled Tony with him and then wrapped his arms tightly around him again, holding him close. Tony felt safe in the man's arms. He could still see the ghosts moving around the room, but he knew they couldn't touch him. This man wouldn't let them touch him.

He felt his body start to relax, and he lay with his cheek resting on the man's chest, and his body curled up against him. The man's strong arms were warm and comforting around his body, and the man was kissing his hair and saying, "I'm sorry", over and over again. That was all wrong, because Tony knew this man never usually said those words.

Tony watched from the safety of the man's arms as a child moved silently among the ghosts. He had floppy dark blond hair and solemn green eyes. He never smiled. He just did as he was told; dressing, undressing, sitting, standing, bending, kneeling...and all the time he looked so sad.

Tony felt angry with the kid. Why was he so passive? Why the hell did he stay and allow these things to be done to him? He could just stand up and leave. Then the anger faded. He couldn't believe how young the child looked, or how small he was. He was just a kid. He didn't know how to stand up to three grown men. His father had always taught him to respect his elders. He didn't know he could say no. He was lost, confused, and helpless - and he wanted so much to be loved.

Tony couldn't hate him any more. He just felt sorry for him. He wished he could stride in there, among the ghosts, pick that child up, and take him away. The child slid off the bed and looked straight at him, as if he'd seen him. Tony looked back at him. He flinched from what he saw in those solemn green eyes.

"I did try and protect you," he muttered guiltily. The child nodded. "I'm sorry I hated you so much," Tony said softly. "I know you did your best. I know it wasn't your fault."

The child nodded again. He began walking slowly across the room. He stopped a few feet away and looked at Tony uncertainly. Tony sat up and held out his arms. The child ran into them, and Tony hugged him tight. He felt strong, adult arms around him, hugging him in return, warm and comforting.

Tony buried his face in the child's neck and held him close. He couldn't hate this kid. He had been through so much. He couldn't deny he existed, either. He did. He always had, no matter how hard Tony had tried to forget him. He was real, and he'd suffered, and he deserved to be acknowledged. He couldn't be stuffed into a box and forgotten about. Why would anyone do that to him? Hadn't he been through enough?

Tony stroked the child's hair and felt his own hair being stroked. He hugged the child tight and felt him become insubstantial, dissolving in his arms, merging with him.

"I love you, Tonio," Tony whispered. He felt a warm, pulsing glow in reply, and then the child disappeared completely into him. The endlessly moving ghosts in the room blinked out, one by one, and suddenly the room was silent and empty.

Tony found that he was sitting on the floor near the wall, across from the bed. The armchair was overturned on the floor beside him. Gibbs was sitting on the floor with him, his back against the wall and his arms wrapped around Tony.

Tony glanced up with a grimace. "I think I hurt McGee, Boss," he said.

"He'll be fine. Are you okay, Tony?" Gibbs asked, gazing at him searchingly. "Are you back with us?"

Tony nodded. He leaned back against Gibbs's chest and listened for the reassuring sound of his heartbeat again. Gibbs's chest was hard and warm against his cheek. He liked how it felt.

"I screwed up. I shouldn't have let you come here..." Gibbs began.

"No. It was the right thing," Tony interrupted him.

He was exhausted, but somehow he felt at peace. He had let something go, or accepted it, or come to terms with it. He wasn't sure he understood it – he just knew it had happened. His body ached, his hand throbbed, and he felt drained beyond belief, but he didn't hurt inside the same way any more.

"I had to stop avoiding him, Gibbs. I had to stop hating him. I didn't realise how small he was - and how young. I've been judging him pretty harshly."

"Yeah, you have." Gibbs kissed Tony's hair.

"I thought I could forget him, but he didn't want to be forgotten."

"No. The poor kid just wanted someone to listen to him. Nobody ever did. Not his dad. Not even you."

"You did," Tony said quietly. He glanced up at Gibbs. "You were right. Roy didn't love me. He was just using me. The second time he gave me to Marco he was afraid I'd bleed again and need to see a doctor, so he gave me some kind of drug to relax me. It didn't hurt, but I felt so damn helpless. I couldn't breathe properly, or move, or get away. I just lay there and took it, but I was screaming inside."

Gibbs didn't say anything, but Tony felt that searing anger course through his body again. Tony sat up and turned to face him.

"Go and arrest Quinn, Boss," he said quietly. "Go and get that bastard. I can handle everything that happens. I didn't know the difference before. I do now."

"What difference?" Gibbs smoothed Tony's hair where it had become all mussed up.

"I've never been loved before, Gibbs. Didn't know how the real thing felt until just now."

Tony leaned forward and kissed Gibbs on the mouth. He had spent the previous two evenings being kissed, and held, and loved by this man. Nothing had been asked of him and that love hadn't come at a price.

Gibbs had been with him through every single one of his meltdowns; holding him, taking care of him, and seeing him through them. He had never once let him down or walked away from him. He had been with him every step of the way, as he had promised he would.

"Couldn't learn to love Tonio until you loved me," Tony said. "Didn't know how. Nobody ever showed me."

~*~

End of Demons

Chapter End Notes:

Friendly feedback always adored!!!

Defences Part One by Xanthe

Ziva glanced around for the hundredth time. It was a beautiful house, full of antique furniture, and the décor was sumptuous. She had never been in a house as exquisitely furnished.

"Quinn sure as hell likes beautiful things," Agent Marley muttered, as he opened up the 18th century Japanese lacquered cabinet in the lounge.

Ziva winced inwardly, not liking to think about whether a twelve year old Tony had once been one of those "beautiful things" Quinn liked so much.

"I do not care how beautiful they are," she snapped at the team of agents she had been assigned. "Go through everything again. Pull out every drawer and look behind and under every item of furniture."

She saw them exchange glances.

"We've been through everything twice now, Officer David," Marley said in a reasonable tone of voice.

"Then we will look again," she replied, her tone and look a fair match for Leroy Jethro Gibbs on a bad day. The agents scuttled to obey her.

She was proud to have been left in charge of this search but annoyed that so far it had proved fruitless. Surely a man such as Quinn, with his proclivities, must have something, somewhere, that showed him for who he was? In Ziva's experience most men kept pornography, but there was none in this house - of any variety.

Quinn was clearly a wealthy man, with a love of fine wines and fine dining judging from what she'd found. He had a closet full of expensively tailored clothes, and his entire house looked like something that might be photographed for one of those glossy lifestyle magazines. Yet there was nothing to show his dark side; no photographs, no magazines, no DVDs. There was nothing on his computer, which Agent Harris had been through three times already at her insistence. Agent Marley had been through the entire contents of the big mahogany desk in his study. He had checked out every single contact in the large, leather-bound, address book Quinn kept in his desk drawer and found no record of him even knowing Matthew Parrish, let alone meeting him for the purpose of sexually abusing children.

"It is just like Parrish's house," she sighed as she walked around the place.

She knew that Gibbs wouldn't be pleased. There had to be something. She had been entrusted with this task, and she would not fail her partner. If Roy Quinn had anything illegal in his possession, then she *would* find it.

~*~

Tony left the hotel foyer with Gibbs walking silently beside him, and then he made a face as he saw McGee sitting on a bench outside, waiting for them.

"I...give us a couple of minutes, Boss," he said, heading for the bench.

McGee turned his head and saw him, and Tony winced as he saw the red marks on McGee's neck. Shit; he must have squeezed pretty hard back there. He sat down beside McGee - who was eyeing him cautiously.

"Tim...look man, I'm sorry about..." Tony gestured with his hand to McGee's neck.

"Don't worry about it. It's just a bruise," McGee said, shaking his head. He gazed at Tony with big, anxious eyes, and Tony fought down a wave of irritation.

"You've gotta stop looking at me like that, Probie," he said, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees. "It's freaking me out."

"I'm sorry, Tony. I just don't know how to behave around you any more."

"Can't you be like you used to be?"

"I could...but you're not," McGee replied. "And also...I've looked at every single one of those photos, Tony. In detail. It's really hard for me not to remember them when I look at you. Then you do stuff like the way you just freaked out in that hotel room, and the way you were with Parrish in the interrogation room last week, and I don't even know who you are. I look in your eyes, and you're not even in there."

"I won't freak out again," Tony promised him. McGee raised a disbelieving eyebrow. "Well, I don't think I will," Tony grimaced, staring at his own hands. "I...what happened back there helped. I don't think it'll happen again."

"I wouldn't blame you if it did," McGee said quietly. "I can't understand what this must have been like for you, Tony. Uh...are you okay staying with Gibbs? Because if not, you can stay at my place if you'd prefer."

Tony turned to smile at him. "Thanks, Probie. I appreciate that. But I'm fine staying with Gibbs. In fact, I think it's the best place for me right now. He's able to handle all the shit I've been throwing around."

"I'm not sure he'd be my first choice of roomie in your circumstances," McGee said. Tony laughed.

"Oh, you'd be surprised, Tim. Actually, he's been fantastic. I'm not even sure I'd be functioning at this point if it wasn't for him."

"So he actually does have a human side?" McGee raised an eyebrow. Tony gave a soft little chuckle.

"Yeah, he really does - but don't tell anyone, Timmy - he'd hate it if it got out."

McGee grinned at him. They were silent for a few minutes. Tony watched as Gibbs finished stowing away their bags in the car and then pulled out his cell phone and began talking tersely into it.

"So, I've been seeing someone," McGee said, in a conversational tone. Tony turned to look at him incredulously.

"When you say 'someone' do you mean an actual woman, or are we talking about another one of those virtual someones that pass for women in your world, McGeek?" Tony grinned.

"Well, okay, so I haven't actually met her in person, but we met via my online game, and she's really nice," McGee said.

"Okay, I know I'm going to regret this, but tell me about her," Tony sighed.

"Well, she's a mage, and she's got level ten sword-fighting skills, level five powers of healing, and ..."

Tony waved his hand in the air. "My eyes are glazing over already, Probie! Did you at least get a picture of her?" he asked, intrigued.

"I did." McGee looked very pleased with himself. He pulled out his wallet and showed Tony a picture of a pretty brunette.

"And you're sure this is actually *her*?" Tony raised an eyebrow.

McGee laughed. "I'm sure, Tony. She's totally cool, and we talk for hours online. Seriously. I think this could really work out this time."

Tony slapped an arm around his shoulder. "Of course it could, Probie," he sighed. "Of course it could."

McGee grinned at him, and they both laughed out loud. Tony appreciated him at least trying to get things back to normal between them. It might take awhile, but it was a start.

~*~

Gibbs finished up talking to Ziva on his cell phone and then went over to where Tony and McGee were sitting on a bench outside the hotel entrance, sharing a joke.

"It's time for me to leave," Gibbs said. He saw Tony's eyes flash, and he knew that Tony felt the same as he did. After what had just happened in the hotel room, he didn't want to let Tony out of his sight any more than Tony wanted to be apart from him. "Are you going to be okay, Tony?" he asked quietly.

"I'll be fine, Boss," Tony replied. "The McGeek is entertaining me with stories about his imaginary girlfriend."

"She isn't imaginary, Tony!" McGee protested.

Gibbs glared at them both, and they gazed up at him sheepishly. Gibbs suppressed a grin. It was good to see some semblance of normality returning.

"McGee – remember what I said yesterday," Gibbs said, with a meaningful look at his agent.

"Yes, Boss," McGee replied, as he and Tony got to their feet.

"And Tony – don't give McGee any trouble," Gibbs ordered.

"Aw, would I, Boss?" Tony grinned.

"Yes. Don't." Gibbs fixed him with a sharp stare. Tony grimaced.

"Yes, Boss," he said quickly.

Gibbs put his hand on Tony's neck and pulled him close. "You need me, you call me," he said softly, straight into Tony's ear.

"I will," Tony promised.

Gibbs pressed a kiss to the side of his head, ignoring McGee's startled look, and then released him and turned to go.

It was a wrench, leaving Tony behind with McGee. Then he remembered what Tony had said about Roy Quinn drugging him to make it easier for Marco to rape him, and he got into the car without looking back. He had a job to do.

~*~

Ziva closed her cell phone with a wince. She had been right – Gibbs was not happy.

"Agent Marley – we are finished here," she said, looking around at the ransacked house. They had been here for several hours. There was nothing here. She knew that if there had been she *would* have found it. "Get all our agents together and meet me at the van."

"Yes Ma'am! Where are we going?" Marley asked.

"The offices of DQ Enterprises," she replied. "It is time to widen our search."

~*~

Roy Quinn finished watching the in-flight movie and settled back in his seat. It had been an excellent vacation, but he was looking forward to going home and getting back to work. He wasn't as young as he'd once been, although he'd definitely enjoyed what he'd been able to buy in Thailand. Things were easier out there. More relaxed. You just had to know where to ask for what you wanted, and you had to be able to afford it, of course. That wasn't a problem for him; he had plenty of money.

He got out his book and opened it. A couple of boys brushed past him on their way to the toilet. Roy pushed his glasses down his nose and gazed at the boys over the top of them. Brothers, he thought. The oldest was about sixteen, big boned and gangly. He was too old to be interesting, but his brother was a few years younger, at that beautiful age Roy loved so much. Not so young as to be irritating, but young enough not to have hair on his body or face. He had silky blond hair, blue eyes, and a little rosebud of a mouth.

Roy smiled at the boy approvingly, and the kid made a face back at him. Roy grunted. Kids these days were a handful. They weren't as innocent as they had once been. Now you had to catch them earlier, before they were corrupted by the internet and the trashy TV shows they showed these days. They weren't as easy to befriend now, either. It had been so much better in the past, when you could get close to a child without anyone reading anything into it. Children themselves were much more aware as well – they knew too much and didn't respect adults any more. It was such a shame.

The plane landed, and Roy was relieved that there wasn't too much of a queue to get through passport control. He handed his passport to the man at the desk. The officer looked at him and back at the picture on his passport.

"Mr. Quinn? I need you to come with me," he said.

"Is there a problem?" Roy asked, surprised.

"No, sir. I just need you to accompany me."

The officer closed his booth and led Roy off to a room over to one side. Roy frowned, wondering what the hell was going on. He entered the room - and then stopped. Standing in front of him was a tall, intimidating man with furious blue eyes.

"Roy Quinn, my name is Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs from NCIS, and I have a warrant for your arrest," the man said, his voice so hard and low that it was barely more than a growl. Roy's heart skipped a beat.

"You're arresting me? For what? I haven't brought anything illegal back in my luggage!" he protested. "No drugs or anything like that! Do I look like a drug smuggler? I'm the CEO of a successful company, and I was travelling perfectly legally."

Gibbs moved towards him, and Roy took a step back in alarm. This man radiated tightly contained fury, and he moved with all the deadly intent of a predator. Roy hadn't met anyone this intimidating since his years in the Marine Corps. Even Gianni had never scared him this much.

"It isn't a drug bust, Quinn," Gibbs said, removing a set of handcuffs from his pocket. "Read him his rights, O'Brien," he ordered the man standing behind him.

Roy barely registered the words as they were read out. He was too intent on Agent Gibbs, who had invaded his personal space and was now gazing down on him with an expression of furious loathing in his eyes. Roy looked at the floor, unable to meet that scorching stare. He felt like a scared rabbit facing a wolf. He was so terrified he couldn't move. He could feel the heat from Gibbs's body; the rage emanating from him was so tangible he could almost touch it. This Agent Gibbs was like an angry god from one of those temples he'd visited in Thailand.

Roy gathered all his courage and raised his gaze slowly, inch by inch, until he was looking straight into Gibbs's piercing blue eyes. What he saw there made his blood run cold. This man knew him. He knew everything he was, and everything he had ever done. And he hated

him. He wanted to tear Roy apart, limb by limb, and only his iron self-control was stopping him.

In a way, Roy felt strangely relieved. It hadn't been an easy life. There had been so much lying, and sneaking around, and it had been a strain living with the perpetual fear of being found out. Now it seemed that the waiting was over, and the past had finally caught up with him. There was no point in resistance or denial; Agent Gibbs already knew him far too well. Now, at last, he could finally relax.

Gibbs turned him around with a flip of his hands, pulled his arms behind his back, and snapped the handcuffs on his wrists – too tightly - making him whimper in pain.

"Which one?" Roy whispered. "Which one of them was it, Agent Gibbs? Which one of my little loves has betrayed me?"

He thought back to all the beautiful little boys he'd enjoyed over the years. There had been so many of them. A succession of pretty little faces danced before him. So, one of them had finally given up their special secret; but which one had it been?

"Anthony DiNozzo," Gibbs growled, in a low, savage voice, straight into his ear.

"Ah." Roy smiled happily. "Tonio. My beautiful Tonio. I'm so glad it was him. It's fitting."

He felt Gibbs's hand tighten on his shoulder, and then he was shoved out of the door. He could feel the intensity of the anger radiating from Gibbs, and knew that he could expect no mercy from this man.

"He was always my favourite you see, Agent Gibbs," he explained, with a fond little sigh. "My Tonio. He was such a special little boy. Of them all, I loved him the most."

~*~

Tony sat at his desk, reading through the cold case file for the fifth time. He wasn't taking in any more of it this time than he had the last. He glanced at his watch. Despite the fact he'd given every appearance of not listening when McGee and Gibbs had discussed the day's timetable at the airport this morning, he'd heard every word. Roy's plane had landed a couple of hours ago, and that meant that he was already in Gibbs's custody. It also meant that he knew Tony had betrayed him, finally, after all these years. Tony felt uncomfortable about Gibbs and Roy meeting. They belonged to such different parts of his life. It was like two realities colliding, and he found it hard to get his head around.

Then there was the guilt. He **knew** he didn't owe Roy anything, but even so a little part of him still felt like a traitor. Roy had always made such a big thing about this being their 'special secret', and Tony had been the one to betray it.

And then there was Gibbs, stalking around with vengeance in his heart. He was like a comet flaring across the sky, a portent of angry doom, as cold and hard as ice, leaving a fiery trail in his wake.

And finally there was his father – maybe Ziva was already knocking on the door of DQ Enterprises and waving her warrant in his father's startled face.

Tony stared sightlessly at the file in front of him, rubbing his forehead repeatedly with his pen. Roy, Gibbs, Dad. These three men had all had a major impact on his life in their separate ways, for good or ill, and now they were all lurching towards a head-on collision with each other. His head was exploding just thinking about it.

He heard McGee answer his cell phone and conduct a short, curt conversation. Then he heard McGee make a call. Just one word: "Now". He wondered what the hell that was all about.

Three minutes later, a shadow fell over his desk, and he looked up to find Ducky and Abby standing there.

"Ah, my dear Anthony, you're just the person we need," Ducky said, smiling at him.

"Totally!" Abby agreed.

"You see, we seem to have something of a dispute on our hands, and we require an independent arbiter," Ducky said.

"And that – would be you," Abby butted in.

"Me?"

"Yes, you see, it's on the matter of Italian food, and we all know that you are an expert on that subject," Ducky explained.

"We know that because you tell us all the time," Abby added helpfully.

"Hey – I'm a DiNozzo!" Tony said, wondering what the hell this was all about. "Of course I'm an expert on Italian food."

"And that's why we've come to you," Ducky said.

"Did you have any lunch?" Abby asked, grabbing his hand.

"Me and McGee had a sandwich on the shuttle."

"A sandwich?" Ducky shook his head. "Well, that won't do at all, Anthony! No, the human body requires far more sustenance than that during the day. I'm sure you've heard the adage: 'Breakfast like a king, lunch like a prince, and dine like a pauper!'"

"Uh...no, I hadn't, but I have now," Tony replied, making his 'I'm freaked out' face at Abby. She grinned.

"You ever been to Carluccio's?" she asked, pulling him up out of his chair.

"The fancy Italian place down the street? Not yet – it only opened last month," Tony said, bemused.

"Exactly!" Ducky beamed. "You see, young Abigail here was kind enough to accompany me there for lunch a couple of weeks ago, and we got into something of a dispute on the relative merits of the calamari versus the spaghetti bolognese. What we require is for an expert on Italian food..."

"That would be you," Abby said.

"To accompany us there again and give us your judgement on the dishes in question," Ducky finished.

"What now?" Tony asked. "Right now? Isn't it a little late for lunch?"

"Not at all," Ducky told him, plucking his jacket from the back of his chair and helping him into it. "And it's my treat, my dear boy, because you really would be doing us the most tremendous favour."

Tony cast a glance at McGee, who shrugged helplessly. "Doesn't look like you have a choice, Tony."

"You don't," Abby agreed. "So just give in, DiNozzo."

Tony gazed down at his feet, so they wouldn't see the expression in his eyes. He knew exactly what they were doing, and he was grateful for it. Then he plastered on his best Tony face and looked up again, with a bright grin.

"Carluccio's huh?" he said, putting an arm around Abby's shoulder. "Didn't I hear there was a really hot waitress working there?"

~*~

DQ Enterprises occupied a large, modern, office building. Ziva got out of the van and glanced up at the glass towers, impressed. She had known that Tony's father was wealthy, and that his company was very successful, but she hadn't expected anything this impressive.

She squared her shoulders, took the warrant out of her pocket, and strode inside. A gaggle of agents followed her.

A receptionist stood up when she saw them, a startled look on her face.

"Can I help you, Ma'am?" she asked politely, her eyes flickering from Ziva to the men behind her, with their NCIS caps and jackets. Ziva gave a satisfied little smile; DQ Enterprises might be impressive, but so was a full muster of NCIS agents.

"We have a warrant to search this place," she said, waving the warrant in the receptionist's face. "Please show me where I can find Roy Quinn's office. We will start there."

"Uh...I...this is...please...let me just..."

Ziva felt a little sorry for the woman, but she didn't have time to waste.

"All your staff are to be gathered in the foyer – they are to stop work immediately."

Ziva gestured with her head at Marley. He took a handful of agents, and they began sweeping through the offices. They didn't want anyone deleting any files, or trying to shred evidence.

"You will show me to Roy Quinn's office – now," Ziva commanded. The receptionist surrendered to her tone and authority, and Ziva felt a sense of satisfaction as she followed the woman down the hallway and into an elevator.

Quinn's office was on the top floor, with a beautiful view. It was as neat and tidy as his house. Ziva had a suspicion that Roy Quinn might have a touch of OCD about him. There were a couple of beautiful paintings hanging on the walls, and all the office furniture was a fine, polished mahogany.

Ziva stepped inside and glanced around. "You will leave now and return to the foyer," she told the receptionist. The woman nodded and scurried away. Ziva ordered one of her agents to begin searching the filing system in the outer office, where Quinn's secretary sat, and instructed another to start investigating the hard drive on his office computer.

Ziva sat down at Quinn's desk and began going through the drawers, systematically. As before, everything was neat and ordered, and there was nothing here she would not have expected to find. She doubted they would find anything here in any case. What kind of man would keep any record of his criminal activities in his office? Surely, if Roy Quinn possessed anything incriminating he would have kept it at home? They had found nothing there – maybe the evidence simply didn't exist.

There was a small filing cabinet with various files containing personal information, such as household insurance and a maid and gardening service. Ziva supposed it was easier for Quinn to deal with these matters at the office than at his home. He probably got his secretary to take care of them.

She went through each one, wishing that Tony was here. He was so good at this kind of thing. He had a nose for it – and he had ideas. He'd see a file and jump to some completely unrelated conclusion which he'd then follow up. Gibbs had chosen his team well. He was like the director of a movie, overseeing and bringing together every aspect of their work, while each team member played their part. They each possessed different talents, and Gibbs knew how to direct them to best effect. Together they were formidable, but they were one person down right now, and Ziva was acutely aware of the loss.

She glanced at the pile of files on the desk and sighed. It would take some time to go through them all, and she wasn't even sure what she was looking for. She wished Tony was here to relieve the tedium of the search. That was another vital function he performed for the team. She hadn't been aware, until now, of just how much they all relied on his ability to lighten the atmosphere and make them all laugh.

She began working her way through a file containing various invoices, some addressed to Quinn personally, some clearly passing through the company for payment: Utilities, storage, travel plans.

A commotion outside the door caught her attention, and she looked up to find herself face to face with a tall, angry man that she knew immediately was Tony's father. The resemblance was unmistakable. This then, was how Tony would look in thirty years' time, with thinner hair and a heavily lined forehead, but still a solid, broad-shouldered, handsome man.

"My name is Alessandro DiNozzo," he said. "I'm the president of this company, and I'd like to know what the hell is going on here."

He even sounded like Tony, but he lacked that vital spark of charm that Tony possessed. This man was formal, authoritative, and humourless, and Tony was none of those things. She stood up and surveyed him coolly.

"I am Officer Ziva David," she said. "From NCIS."

"I can see where you're damn well from! What I want to know is why you have brought my entire company to a standstill and are going through my CEO's office."

"We have a warrant to search these premises." She handed it to him.

"Looking for what?" he demanded. "I can assure you that my company has always operated within the law. You won't find any evidence of illegal activity here."

"We are not seeking such evidence. There is no accusation of wrongdoing against your company, Mr. DiNozzo. We are investigating Mr. Quinn in a private capacity."

"What the hell...?" DiNozzo shook his head, looking completely confused. "Look, Roy is on vacation at the moment, but he'll be able to clear this up I'm sure. He should be back soon and..."

"We have already arrested Mr. Quinn."

"What?" DiNozzo frowned. "Oh, for God's sake - this is ridiculous! Look - my son works at NCIS. He'll be able to put you straight on this." He drew his cell phone from his pocket and flipped it open. "I'll give him a call, and we'll get this whole thing..."

Ziva put her hand over his and closed his phone. "You will not call Tony," she told him.

He looked at her, startled. His eyes were the same shade of green as Tony's.

"You know my son?"

"Yes, I do." She nodded. "You will not call him."

"Why the hell not?"

Because Gibbs will kill me if you do, she thought to herself wryly. She took out her own cell phone and texted a quick message to McGee.

"I have a question for you," she said when she had finished. She grabbed a file off the desk and leafed through it to find what she was looking for. "These are big, impressive offices, Mr. DiNozzo," she said as she searched.

"Yes they are." He shrugged. "We moved into them a year or so ago – we were expanding fast and needed more space. So? That isn't a crime."

"No, it isn't," she agreed. "I see you own the office building – you are not renting it."

"Can't see the point in handing over a ton of money to someone else every month," he replied, frowning. "I'd rather buy outright."

"I understand." She nodded. There was something solid about this man; something energetic and driven. She liked him, despite herself. He did not remind her of her own father. He wasn't Machiavellian. He wasn't someone who played people off against each other or practised the dark arts of espionage. He was, as he said, an honest businessman who loved his work and his company. She wondered if he also loved his son.

"Do you use the building to capacity?" she asked.

"No – we've got a couple of empty floors," he said. "Roy wanted to rent them out to make extra cash, but I vetoed the idea. I like knowing this entire place is mine." He said that with a certain amount of pride, and she couldn't fault him for it. He had worked hard to build this company, and he was proud of his achievement. "We'll grow into it eventually."

She nodded. "Why then, if there is spare capacity in the building, does Mr. Quinn need to rent a storage unit?" she asked, handing him one of the invoices from the file. DiNozzo took it, frowning.

"I don't know," he said irritably. "Roy takes care of all the back office stuff – I don't get involved. If he needs extra storage, then he needs it."

"And you trust him implicitly," she said, rocking back on her heels and gazing at him searchingly.

"Yes I do!" he snapped. "That man saved my life, and he's helped me build this company into what it is today. He's a damn good administrator. He's also my best friend, Officer David. You won't find a better man anywhere."

"I wonder if your son would say the same thing."

DiNozzo's eyes flashed. "Of course he would! Just how well do you know my son, Officer David?"

"Better than you, I think."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"When did you last see him?" She answered his question with her own. He frowned.

"He's a busy man, and so am I. We catch up on the phone occasionally."

"When did you last see him?" she repeated. "Does he ever come home?"

"No," DiNozzo ground out eventually, his face twisting in annoyance. "I've visited him a couple of times in DC though, when I've been there on business."

"Do you ever wonder why he does not come home?"

"Like I said, he's busy. What are you getting at?"

"I think he does not want to come home because of who he might see here," she told him. "I wonder, does he even think of it as home any more? Home is where your family is, after all, and his family is in DC. I should know – I am part of that family. Now, if you will excuse me – I have a lead to follow up." She took the invoice for the storage unit from the file, folded it, and put it in her pocket. "Goodbye, Mr. DiNozzo," she said, walking towards the door. He stared after her.

"Oh!" She paused when she got to the door. "I forgot – you may try and call Tony now, if you wish, but he will not pick up."

She gave him a tight little smile and left the room. She heard him trying to call Tony again as she walked away, but she knew McGee would have taken care of it, and Tony wouldn't answer. That is what families did – they protected each other.

~*~

Gibbs pushed Quinn out of the elevator and into the squad room. He had said nothing to the man for the entire journey and didn't intend to until he got him into the interrogation room where every incriminating thing Quinn said could be taped.

He glanced around the squad room sharply; he'd called McGee when they'd approached the Navy Yard and told him to make sure Tony wouldn't be there when he brought Quinn in. As he had expected, Tony was nowhere to be seen.

"Interrogation room one is all set up, Boss," McGee said, his eyes flickering over Quinn with cool distaste.

"Good. How's my senior field agent?"

"Abby and Ducky took him out. I told them to make sure he'd be gone awhile."

Gibbs gave a curt nod. "Okay, then let's get started. Mr. Quinn says he doesn't want a lawyer present."

McGee raised a surprised eyebrow. "Does he understand the severity of the charges?"

"Apparently." Gibbs shrugged, glancing at Quinn. The man gazed back at him serenely.

"I promised you my full co-operation, Agent Gibbs."

Gibbs gazed at him speculatively; Quinn certainly hadn't made any attempt to deny the charges.

"You scared him that much, Boss?" McGee said, in a whisper, as they walked towards Interrogation.

"I didn't lay a finger on him, McGee."

"Uh...sometimes you don't have to, Boss. You can scare people with a look," McGee muttered.

"Well, I sure as hell hope he's scared," Gibbs said grimly. "He should be."

McGee handed Gibbs a file and then disappeared into the observation room, and Gibbs pushed Quinn into the interrogation room. Only when he'd pushed Quinn down onto the chair did he remove the handcuffs. Then he took his own seat opposite Quinn and looked at him for a long time.

So, this was Roy Quinn, the man who had made Tony's childhood a living nightmare. Gibbs gazed at him. He was of average height, with a round, jolly kind of face. He clearly lived well, judging by his paunch. He was nearly bald, with just a few strands of dark hair swept over the back of his head. Gibbs remembered something Tony had said about Quinn having a certain kind of charisma, and he could see that. There was something infectious about the way his mouth turned up into a permanent little smile, and his brown eyes had a twinkly quality. Gibbs could see how a child might respond to that kind of easygoing charm. There was something of the teddy bear about Quinn. He looked so incredibly harmless.

"Agent Gibbs..." Quinn began, clearly discomfited by the silence and Gibbs's searching gaze.

"Shut up," Gibbs snapped.

Quinn fidgeted anxiously in his chair but didn't say anything. Gibbs waited another few minutes, and then he opened up the file in front of him, pulled out a photograph, and placed it on the table.

"Let's talk about Tony DiNozzo," he said.

Quinn's eyes lit up with a kind of sick glee as he looked at the photo. Gibbs fought down an urge to slam his fist into the man's face. He had known that today would be a challenge, but if Tony could get through it, then he was damn sure he could. He had to control that angry fire within and keep it wrapped in ice. He could do that. It might take very single ounce of his willpower, but he could do it.

"Ah, Tonio...my beautiful Tonio," Quinn said, picking up the photograph. "He really was so beautiful. The most beautiful of them all. He will always have a special place in my heart."

"He says you starting sexually abusing him when he was twelve years old," Gibbs said.

"Abusing him?" Quinn frowned. "Oh, it wasn't like that, Agent Gibbs! I loved him. We shared something very special."

"He was a child," Gibbs growled.

"I know. A lovely child," Quinn sighed. "Such big green eyes, such beautifully soft skin."

Gibbs fought down a savage burst of rage. This was going to be even harder than he'd thought. "Tell me what happened," he ordered curtly.

"Ah...details. I can see you are the kind of man who appreciates the fine details, Agent Gibbs, just like me." Quinn nodded. "Where shall I start? I loved him from the minute I saw him, of course. He was my friend Alessandro's little boy. Just a little lad when I first met him – too young really to be of interest. Then he grew up into this adorable young man." He glanced up at Gibbs, his eyes shining. "I did try to stop myself, Agent Gibbs," he said earnestly. "I told myself that I wouldn't do anything; that I'd admire him from afar and just love him alone in my head at nights."

Gibbs swallowed back his bile and crossed his arms over his chest.

"But then his mother died, and he was so alone. He was very close to his mother; her death hit him hard, and he was such a little lost soul. You would have needed a heart of stone to have resisted! Anyone would!" Quinn shook his head dolefully. "He was such a shy little boy, Agent Gibbs. You had to have known him back then to understand. He used to creep around that big house, looking so solemn and sad. Alessandro is a good man, and a dear friend, but he has never been very good with children. Unlike myself." Quinn beamed at him. "So Tonio was lonely, without anyone to talk to. He didn't make friends easily. He was too shy and serious. I took great pleasure in drawing him out of his shell. Even then, I told myself I'd just be his friend, nothing more." He shook his head again. "But Tonio was so trusting and so loving and..." He made a futile gesture with his hands. "I'm only human, Agent Gibbs."

Gibbs ignored that. "Tonio was your pet name for him?"

"Oh no." Quinn smiled fondly. "Not mine. His mother's. That's what she called him. When she died, there was nobody else to call him that – his father never used it. So, I thought he might find it reassuring if I used it."

Gibbs clenched his fists, slowly, and then unclenched them again. He thought of a lonely boy who had just lost his mother, and how this man had deliberately used her pet name for him in order to ensnare him.

"He says that you took him to a hotel room and raped him."

"I don't believe he said that!" Quinn protested. "No, we made love, Agent Gibbs. We were in love."

"He was twelve years old!"

"You think children can't fall in love?" Quinn asked, with a surprised look. "Society doesn't understand of course, but they can. Tonio loved me with all his heart. He wanted me to make love to him. He used to beg me to touch him."

"Really?" Gibbs said sceptically.

"Oh yes." Quinn nodded. "He just loved being snuggled, and kissed, and petted."

"And did he like being raped, Quinn?"

Quinn's eyes clouded over. "That's such an ugly word, Agent Gibbs, and it isn't what happened."

"You say you loved him," Gibbs growled. "Can you explain to me exactly what kind of love there is in handing over a child to strangers to be raped?"

Quinn shook his head sadly. "Well, I didn't want to do that."

"And yet you did."

Quinn pursed his lips together and looked mulishly at the ceiling.

"Could you identify the man in this photograph, Quinn?" Gibbs pushed the photo towards him.

"No. I really couldn't." Quinn shook his head.

"Do you deny taking the photograph?" Gibbs asked.

"No. I don't deny it."

Gibbs stared at him incredulously. "Mr. Quinn, are you seriously intending to play hardball with me on this?"

Quinn licked his lips nervously. "I...I've co-operated with you fully so far, Agent Gibbs!"

He had as well. There was something almost childlike about his eagerness to furnish Gibbs with all the sordid details of how he'd abused Tony.

"I can only tell you about myself," Quinn said firmly. "Nobody else."

Ah, so that was it. Quinn thought he could somehow give him half the story – the half he chose to give. Even now, Quinn was still trying to play mind games.

"I'm not twelve years old, Quinn," Gibbs said dangerously. "You can't play me!"

He slammed his hand down on the table with a resounding crash, and Quinn jumped, looking visibly scared. Gibbs enjoyed the sight and scent of his fear. He wanted more of it. He wanted to make Quinn as anxious as he'd made Tony all those years ago. He wanted him to be more frightened of him than he'd ever been of anything or anyone in his life.

"I can assure you that I'm not trying to play you, Agent Gibbs," Quinn muttered nervously. He glanced around the room and then leaned across the table and spoke to Gibbs in a conspiratorial whisper. "I'm not an idiot, Gibbs. Alessandro is proud of his son, and I ask after him often. I know all about NCIS. I know that Tonio works here. Is he here now? Is he in the room behind that mirror, watching me? Is my dear Tonio here, Agent Gibbs?"

He looked over Gibbs's shoulder, straight into the mirror.

"I hope he is. I hope he knows how much I love him still. I forgive him for betraying our little secret."

"He isn't there, Quinn," Gibbs said icily.

"Well, I don't suppose you would tell me, even if he was." Quinn grinned at him in a way that was infuriating. "Could I see him, Agent Gibbs? I would so love to see him again."

"What the hell do you think?" Gibbs snapped.

"Do you work with him? Do you know him? Ah, don't answer that! I can see it in your eyes. You know him – you know him well. If you know him, then you must also know how easy he is to love," Quinn said, with a little giggle of glee. "He is, isn't he? Oh, Agent Gibbs, I see from the expression on your face that you know what I mean. How can you despise me for loving him when you love him too, hmm?"

Gibbs considered what it would feel like to put his hands around this man's neck and snap it. He decided that Quinn had been playing him for long enough – it was time to fight back.

"You should know that we've arrested Matthew Parrish," he said. Quinn's eyes flashed in genuine shock. He hadn't expected that.

"I don't know anyone of that name," he said.

"Yes, you do. You introduced him to Tony as 'Luke'. We found a bunch of files on his laptop. These photos were in them." Gibbs gestured at the photographs. "You used to take Tony to this hotel room." He placed some photos they'd taken earlier in the day in front of Quinn. "And then you either raped Tony yourself, or you gave him to other men for them to rape. One of those men was Parrish. Another was a man called Marco. That wasn't his real name though – what was?"

Gibbs could see the naked panic in Quinn's eyes. He had been prepared to admit to his own crimes, but he wasn't prepared to implicate anyone else.

"What was his name?" Gibbs demanded. Quinn licked his lips nervously. Gibbs leaned across the table and beckoned him forwards. Quinn leaned towards him, his eyes wide and frightened. "Listen," Gibbs said softly, his voice barely more than a whisper. "You might think you're scared of Marco, and you might feel too afraid of him to tell me who he is, but you need to understand something."

"Yes?" Quinn swallowed nervously.

"I used to be in the Marine Corps, just like you. I fought in Desert Storm. I've done Black Ops in Colombia. I was a sniper." Gibbs paused for a moment. "Tony has worked with me for eight years. He's my second in command and one of my closest friends."

He sat back suddenly, leaving Quinn still leaning forward over the table.

"Do I look like the kind of man who doesn't care about his friends?" Gibbs roared, slamming his hand down on the table again, missing Quinn's face by inches. The realisation slowly dawned in Quinn's eyes that however much he might fear Marco, he should fear Leroy Jethro Gibbs far more.

"Gianni," Quinn said quietly. "His name was Gianni Marconi."

"That's better." Gibbs leaned back in his chair. "Now, I think we should start from the beginning, Quinn. Tell me about Gianni Marconi."

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Ziva waited while a bored assistant unlocked the door to the storage unit. She had traced the details and found that the unit was registered to DQ Enterprises, and the company had been paying for it for years. It wasn't expensive; Quinn just authorised the invoices whenever they came in, and nobody had ever asked what it was for. It was clever; a storage unit like this in his own name would be the first place anyone would look if they were investigating him, but registered in the company name, it just got swallowed up in the paperwork. She might even have missed it herself if she hadn't had that conversation with Tony's father and been so impressed by how large the DQ offices were.

Ziva entered the unit and looked around. All it contained were two filing cabinets. It was as scrupulously tidy and well organised as the rest of Quinn's life. Ziva tried to open one of the cabinets and found that it was locked.

"Do you have the keys to these?" she asked the assistant.

"Nope. They belong to the client. We just rent out the space. What they put in them is their own business," he replied, chewing on his gum and gazing at her insolently.

"Very well." She gave him a smile of pure steel. "You may go."

He shrugged and lumbered off. She took out her lock pick – silly little locks like these would be easy to break. It only took her ten seconds to get into the first cabinet. She opened the top drawer, and then took a sharp intake of breath as she looked inside.

There was a whole drawer full of files, each one neatly labelled.

"Andrew, Ben, Ethan..." She picked up a file and looked inside. Her stomach did a flip as she saw photographs, and what looked like notes. Her jaw tightened as she read the notes. She gave the photographs a cursory glance and then replaced them. She hesitated, her hand hovering over the files. There was no 'Anthony'.

She closed the drawer and opened the one below it. All the boys' files were in alphabetical order. She closed the second drawer and crouched down in front of the bottom drawer.

"Ryan..." She frowned. There was no 'Tony'. There was a 'Tonio' though. She pulled out the file and her heart thudded, almost painfully, in her chest.

There were some photographic negatives, nestled in a protective wrapper. And there was a pack of photographs – quite old photographs, a little faded. A boy she recognised

immediately as Tony stared at her from them. She replaced the photos quickly in their envelope and glanced at the notes, which seemed to be in diary form.

"August 14, 1984. Today I kissed him! He's such a sweet little boy, so willing. He kissed me back and told me that he loved me."

She skipped on ahead. "November 3, 1984. Tonio loves being kissed on his soft, pink belly, and tickled on the soles of his feet. When I made love to him, he squealed with happiness."

She shut the file with a snap of her fingers. She could not read any more of that.

She picked the lock on the other filing cabinet and opened it. This one didn't contain files on individual boys; instead, it was full of child pornography. Some of it had clearly been downloaded from the internet, and some of it was envelopes full of loose photos. A few of the envelopes still had little post-it notes attached from whoever had sent them; "You'll like these", "Look at this kid's mouth!" and so on.

Ziva pulled out her cell phone and called Agent Marley.

"I have found what we are looking for," she told him tersely, and then she ordered him to bring the vans over. She put her cell phone away, opened up her bag, pulled out her camera, and began taking photos of the storage locker and each of the filing cabinets.

She came across a file containing a neatly itemised list of contact details. One of the names on the list was Matthew Parrish.

~*~

"I served with the Marine Corps in Vietnam," Quinn said, his hands moving anxiously as he spoke. Gibbs noted that they were big, heavy hands, with fingers like fat sausages.

"I know."

"Of course you do." Quinn nodded nervously. "I was injured and sent to a hospital in Saigon. That was where I met Matthew."

"Matthew Parrish?" Gibbs clarified.

"Yes." Quinn nodded again. "Matthew had been injured when his patrol boat was ambushed, and he and I clicked. We became good friends. There was a Navy Hospital Corpsman there called Gianni Marconi. I didn't like him. He was...there was something quite threatening about him. But he was friends with this little local Vietnamese boy. Matthew and I...well, we both used to watch that lovely young boy. He was older than he looked, I think – quite small but probably about fourteen. That's a little older than I like them, Agent Gibbs. My favourite age is..."

"Twelve?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow. Quinn smiled.

"Yes. It's such a beautiful age. They are teetering so enticingly on the brink of puberty – they have these sexual feelings, but they aren't yet fully awakened. I like to be the one to awaken

them." He gave a beaming smile, and Gibbs gave him an icy stare in return. He felt dirty just being in the same room as this man, getting this glimpse into the loathsome way his mind worked.

"Go on," Gibbs ordered.

"Well, this boy was so beautiful. He had the most perfect white teeth and such big brown eyes."

Gibbs frowned. He flicked through the file in front of him and found a grainy photograph of a boy with Asian features. Boy 51. The first boy these men had abused.

"This him?"

"Oh yes! That's him," Quinn beamed. "Isn't he lovely? He followed Gianni around everywhere. One day, I noticed Matthew looking at him, and I recognised that look. Gianni recognised it too. We started having these conversations...just little things at first, about the boy, and how much we liked him. Gianni told us that the boy liked us too, and that he'd be happy to spend some time with us, in exchange for money and cigarettes. And that's how it all began. He was a lovely boy." Quinn's smile faded.

"What happened to him?" Gibbs asked, making a note on his pad.

"Well...Gianni promised him that he would take him back home with him, and of course he couldn't. Once the boy realised that wasn't going to happen, he told Gianni that he would go to his CO and let him know what they had been doing together. Of course Gianni couldn't let that happen."

Gibbs stared at Quinn, horrified. "He killed him?"

Quinn's hands moved around nervously. "Well...I can't say that for sure, but one day he came and told us that the problem had been taken care of. We never saw the boy again."

"And you let this man, this child murderer, spend time alone with Tony?" Gibbs asked incredulously, the anger rising inside him again.

"Well, I had to!" Quinn protested. "You see, Gianni had taken some photographs – enough to incriminate both Matthew and myself. When I left the Corps, I assumed that I wouldn't see either of them again, but then...one day Gianni got in contact. I have no idea how he knew where to find me, but somehow he tracked me down. He said he had a new boy, and he asked me if I was interested."

Gibbs gazed at him stonily, his arms folded across his chest.

"I told him I wasn't...but...it had been a long time, and I was lonely. Gianni was so fearless. He wasn't a nice man – I knew that. He wasn't cultured or educated, but he was good at ferreting out the young and...troubled." Quinn gave sad smile. "Life's unfortunates, I call them; boys who have been abandoned or beaten by their parents. Poor boys. Gianni had a knack for finding them. So I caved in." He gave a little sigh. "I went to visit him and the new

boy he'd found. This happened a few times, and then he said I had to start contributing to the arrangement. Matthew too. So...we did."

"Was Tony the first boy you groomed for abuse?" Gibbs asked.

"Not the first, no." Quinn gave an apologetic little smile. "And it wasn't abuse, Agent Gibbs. All the boys I slept with were perfectly willing."

"You manipulated them, Quinn. You played mind games on them!"

"No! Really, it wasn't like that. They all enjoyed my company. It took a little time and effort to woo them, I'll admit, but isn't it the same with women? Don't tell me, Agent Gibbs, that you haven't spent some time and money buying a woman meals, taking her on dates, and telling her how beautiful she is in order to get her into bed."

"Oh, trust me, Quinn, it is nothing like the same," Gibbs growled.

"Well, if you say so." Quinn gave him a knowing wink.

"Where can I find Gianni Marconi?" Gibbs asked, refusing to rise to the bait.

"I don't know." Quinn shook his head.

Gibbs shot him a vicious, predatory grin. "Wrong answer."

"Oh, I really don't know," Quinn said hurriedly. "Honestly, Agent Gibbs! I haven't seen or heard anything from Gianni in years. He just disappeared completely a few years ago. I have no idea where he went. He never could hold down a job for very long, and he drank heavily. I did wonder if he'd lost his job and been thrown out of his apartment. Maybe he ended up on the street. Maybe he's dead by now."

"That's not the full story," Gibbs said. Quinn looked nervous. "Come on – you're a wealthy man, Quinn, and from everything you've said Gianni wasn't above a bit of blackmail. How much did you give him?"

"A lot." Quinn licked his lips nervously. "I was happy to do it – I have more than enough money – but Matthew...he doesn't like being crossed, Agent Gibbs. He's something of a control freak to be honest."

"Yeah. I know all about Matthew Parrish – he's a cold bastard." Gibbs leaned forward. "Did he have Gianni killed?"

"Oh no!" Quinn shook his head. "Nothing like that. At least, I don't think so. That doesn't sound like Matthew."

"No, you're right. He prefers scaring people. He likes having power over them." Gibbs leaned back again with a grunt. "So what did happen to Gianni?"

"I think Matthew might have sent some people to frighten him away." Quinn gave a little wince. "You could be right, Agent Gibbs. Matthew does like to have the upper hand. I believe he gets a certain amount of pleasure from it."

"I'll tell you something he definitely got pleasure from – terrifying a child with stories about how he'd kill him and carry his dead body out of a hotel in a suitcase if he wasn't sexually compliant," Gibbs snapped. "And putting his hand around his neck and telling him how easy it would be to snap it, like a matchstick."

Quinn rubbed his podgy fingers over his face, shaking his head. "I don't believe that happened, Agent Gibbs," he protested. "Matthew loves children. He adored Tony."

"He tortured Tony!" Gibbs roared. "Tony was terrified of him. And you – you left Tony alone in a room with Parrish. You allowed him to rape him repeatedly. Tony used to curl up into a ball of fear and physically shake whenever Parrish went near him. What's your justification for that, Quinn?"

Quinn shook his head vehemently. He reminded Gibbs of a child sticking his fingers in his ears and chanting, "La, la, la" over and over again, refusing to hear what he was being told.

"It wasn't like that. Tony liked Matthew a great deal. Matthew bought him presents. Tony liked presents...."

Gibbs decided it was time for a break. There was only so much provocation he could take, and if he spent another minute in this room with this sick, twisted man, he thought he might lose control. He got up.

"Are we done?" Quinn asked, as he walked towards the door.

Gibbs turned without pausing and strode back over to him. Quinn leaned back in his chair, frightened. Gibbs leaned over him, getting into his personal space, as intimidating as he knew how to be, so close that their noses were almost touching.

"Oh no, we're not done, Quinn," he said darkly. "We are a long way from being done." Then he shoved himself away and walked back over to the door.

"Agent Gibbs..." Quinn's voice quavered a little as he spoke. "You say that you've worked with Tony for some years?"

"Yeah." Gibbs paused, one hand on the door, wondering what the hell was coming next.

"You see, I've always wondered - all these years I've wondered - what kind of a man did he turn into? What's he like?"

Gibbs wrenched open the door and then glanced back. "What's he like, Quinn?" he growled, barely able to control his temper. "What's he like? Oh, I'll tell you what he's damn well like. He's what you made him, and I can sum it up in one word: Damaged."

~*~

Defences Part Two by Xanthe

McGee scurried out of the observation room and met Gibbs in the hallway.

"Gianni Marconi," Gibbs spat at him. "I want everything we've got on him on my desk by first thing tomorrow morning."

"On it, Boss!" McGee said.

"Coffee," Gibbs growled. "I need coffee," and then he was gone.

McGee didn't blame him. McGee had already heard Tony's version of events, but hearing it from Quinn's point of view had been something else – like he'd had a ringside seat at some sick and perverted circus. He wondered how on earth Tony had come through it even halfway as sane as he was. So many little details about Tony's personality made much more sense to him now.

McGee placed a security officer outside the door to the interrogation room and returned to the squad room. He wasn't expecting Gibbs back any time soon. It hadn't been easy listening to any of Quinn's testimony, and Gibbs was the kind of man who needed occasional time-outs in order to cool down. He hoped Gibbs wasn't pounding his fist into any walls, but it wouldn't surprise him if he was.

McGee called Abby and told her to keep Tony out of the office for another couple of hours. Abby sounded as if she relished the mission, and he suspected that she and Ducky would take Tony to a movie.

McGee settled down to start finding out what he could about Gianni Marconi. It wasn't easy; the guy had a military service record and a sporadic job history. He had a few minor convictions for petty crime – and then he just seemed to disappear off the radar. McGee dug around for a couple of hours, becoming increasingly frustrated. He didn't want to be the one to tell Gibbs that one of Tony's abusers was untraceable. He knew that Gibbs wouldn't rest until he had brought all these men to justice.

Ziva returned some time later with a posse of agents, each of whom came bearing boxes. The agents piled the boxes on her desk and the surrounding area, and then she dismissed them. McGee suspected that she'd enjoyed her time in charge a little too much.

"This is what you found in Quinn's storage locker?" he asked, getting up to take a look at the boxes. "Wow – that's a hell of a lot of evidence. Well done, Ziva."

He couldn't help but notice the little spike of pride that flared in her eyes.

"Thank you, McGee." She took off her NCIS cap and scratched her head. "I would feel happier if I had not seen what these boxes contain though," she sighed.

"I know the feeling," he said sympathetically, patting her shoulder. "I had to work my way through all those photographs, remember?"

She nodded and then glanced around. "Where is Tony?"

“Abby and Ducky took him out for a late lunch.”

“A very late lunch,” she grinned, glancing at her watch.

“Well, Gibbs was bringing Quinn back, and he didn’t want Tony anywhere in the building.”

“Understandable. Has he finished interrogating Quinn?”

“Not yet – he’s taking a break,” McGee grimaced. “It isn’t easy listening to that man talk. The inside of his brain must be...” He shook his head, disgusted.

“I know. I have seen a glimpse of it.” Ziva gestured to the boxes.

At that moment a tall, authoritative man exited the elevator and strode into the squad room. Ziva straightened up and stepped forward.

“Ah – Officer David - we meet again. Where is Agent Gibbs?” the man demanded. There was something familiar about him, and McGee stiffened as he realised who he must be.

“I believe he is interrogating a suspect right now, Mr. DiNozzo,” Ziva replied.

“I want to see him,” DiNozzo said. He was a little like Gibbs. Very imposing and sure of himself – he was someone who was used to barking out orders and having them obeyed.

“Agent Gibbs does not like to be disturbed when he is in interrogation,” Ziva told him firmly.

“I don’t care what the hell Agent Gibbs *likes*,” DiNozzo snapped. “You weren’t very helpful earlier, Officer David, but I’ve made a few calls and found out what the charges are. I can tell you, right now, that Roy simply isn’t capable of what he’s been accused of.”

“Really?” McGee raised an eyebrow. “We haven’t met, but I’m Agent McGee. I’m assuming you’re Alessandro DiNozzo? Tony’s father?”

“Yes, I am. Now where the hell is Agent Gibbs?”

McGee exchanged a glance with Ziva. “Officer David is right – he really hates being interrupted in interrogation. Who let you come up here by the way? Security is usually pretty tight and...”

“I know a few people, Agent McGee. I pulled some strings.”

“I bet you did,” McGee muttered.

At that moment, the elevator door opened and there was a sound of happy laughter and chatter as Ducky, Abby, and Tony stepped into the squad room. McGee winced at the bad timing. Tony was laughing at something Abby had just said, and then he looked up – and everything seemed to slow down.

McGee saw the exact moment that Tony came face to face with his father. The smile on Tony’s face faded, the colour drained from his face, and he came to a complete standstill.

Beside him, Abby and Ducky kept on walking for another couple of paces before realising that something was wrong, and then they turned back, with puzzled frowns.

"Dad," Tony said quietly.

"Tony – thank God! I've been trying to contact you, but your co-worker prevented it." DiNozzo glared at Ziva, and then turned his attention back to Tony. "Do you know anything about these accusations against Roy?" he asked. "They're talking about him possessing child pornography and abusing children. Do you know anything about that?"

Tony's put up a hand and rubbed his cheek repeatedly, making the skin redden. McGee remembered how his father had slapped him there when he'd tried to tell him about the abuse.

"Yeah," Tony muttered, so quietly that McGee could hardly hear him.

"Then I need you to speak to this Agent Gibbs person and tell him that he's got it wrong."

Tony gave a wry snort and shook his head. "Even if that was the way it worked – and, trust me, if you knew Gibbs you'd know it isn't - I can't do that, Dad."

DiNozzo frowned. "Come on, Tony – there must be something you can do. This is your Uncle Roy we're talking about here – we have to help him. You must know these accusations aren't true."

Tony's entire body was stiff, his face white. "I'm sorry, Dad, but they are true," he said quietly.

DiNozzo was startled. "What makes you so sure?"

"Because I made them, Dad."

There was a shocked silence. McGee looked from Tony to his father and back again, holding his breath. DiNozzo looked as if he was having trouble understanding what was going on.

"What do you mean?" he said eventually, in a confused voice. "Why the hell would you do that, Tony?"

"I tried to tell you about it," Tony said helplessly.

Realisation showed on DiNozzo's face. "You mean...are you talking about what you said to me in my study that time? But that was a lie...you were lying..."

"It wasn't a lie," Tony muttered, his voice almost inaudible.

"What?" DiNozzo barked.

Tony took a deep breath, and spoke more firmly this time. "I said it wasn't a lie, Dad. Roy abused me when I was a kid."

His father looked around the room. "Is there anywhere private we can go?" he demanded in a taut voice. "I don't know what the hell is going on here, but I want to talk to you without all these onlookers."

"No." Tony shook his head. "I don't want to be alone with you right now, Dad."

"Oh, for God's sake..."

DiNozzo took an angry step forward, and McGee moved between him and Tony instinctively, without even thinking about it. Ziva did the same. Looking back, over his shoulder, he saw that Abby had slipped her hand into Tony's, and Ducky had placed one hand protectively on Tony's shoulder. DiNozzo would have to go through four people to get anywhere near Tony.

DiNozzo pulled up short, looking stunned. It was clear that he was completely bemused. None of this tallied with his world view, and he simply couldn't take it onboard.

"Tony, you're asking me to believe that Roy - Roy of all people - would do something like that to my son?"

"Yes," Tony said simply.

"Do you have proof?" DiNozzo asked. Anger blazed in Tony's eyes.

"You need proof? You're saying that my word isn't good enough? You don't **believe** me?"

McGee knew how important it was to Tony that he was believed, and, most of all, believed by this man standing here. Gibbs had believed him, implicitly, without question, but his own father either wouldn't or couldn't.

"If you want proof, we have proof, Mr. DiNozzo," Ziva interrupted, in a silkily dangerous tone of voice. "I have just returned from that storage unit Roy Quinn was renting - the one I told you about. Would you like to know what I found there?"

DiNozzo frowned and turned towards her as she walked over to the boxes on her desk. McGee glanced over at Tony and saw his eyes radiating panic.

"Ziva...no," McGee began, but it was too late. She had opened up one of the boxes and picked up a file with 'Tonio' written neatly on the top. McGee made a move to intercept it, but DiNozzo had already wrapped his hand around it. McGee glanced back at Tony with a wince. His knuckles were white where he was squeezing Abby's hand. Ducky was pulling at his shoulder gently.

"Maybe we should leave, Anthony," Ducky said, in a kind voice. Tony squared his shoulders.

"No," he said quietly. "No, I think I really need to stay. I've been avoiding this for far too long."

DiNozzo glanced at him and then glanced down at the file. Uncertainty flickered in his eyes, and McGee saw that he was apprehensive about opening it.

“Do you really want to take a look inside, Dad?” Tony asked. “Are you sure you can handle what’s in there?”

"I can't believe you're lying about something this important, Tony," DiNozzo said, in a shaky voice. "But...Roy? I can't believe that he'd do something like this, either."

“Then I guess it comes down to which one of us you believe in the most. Is it Roy, or is it me? Is it your best friend, the man who saved your life, and helped you build up your business? Or is it your son, who, let's face it, has always been a disappointment to you.”

DiNozzo's eyes flashed. "That's not true, Tony," he protested.

Tony shrugged. "Feels true."

"You shut me out! You never gave me a damn chance!"

"And if you want to know why, then take a look in the damn file!"

DiNozzo hesitated.

“Do it, Dad,” Tony said softly. “See for yourself.”

DiNozzo took a deep breath and then flicked open the file with a determined flourish of his hand. He fished inside an old packet of photos, took one out, and stood there, completely silent, gazing at it. He looked like he'd been turned into stone. Then he made a little sound in the back of his throat and turned towards Tony.

“When were these taken?”

“When I was twelve,” Tony replied quietly.

“Where...?”

“In a hotel room...” Tony began, but DiNozzo held up a hand to stop him.

“No...I mean...where was I?” he asked, in a strangled voice.

“You know, I’ve been asking myself the same question,” an icy voice said behind them, and Gibbs strode into the squad room. McGee felt a wave of the most intense relief. Finally, someone had arrived to take charge of the situation.

“Mr. DiNozzo, I'm Agent Gibbs, come with me. McGee – help Ziva start cataloguing the evidence. Tony...” Gibbs went over to Tony and stood in front of him. “Where do you want to be, Tony?” he asked quietly. “With me, or do you want Abby and Ducky to take you someplace else?”

Tony glanced at his father over Gibbs’s shoulder. The man was still gazing at the photo with a look of horror on his face. And there was something else as well – an appalled kind of sadness. McGee felt sorry for him.

"With you," Tony said quietly.

Gibbs nodded and turned back to take DiNozzo into a conference room. Tony started to follow him, but his arm remained behind, his hand still tightly gripped by Abby. He came to a halt and glanced at her over his shoulder.

"It's okay, Abs," he said. "I'm fine. I'll be with Gibbs."

"Okay." Abby nodded furiously.

"So you can let go," Tony told her.

"Okay." Abby nodded again.

"Any time today would do, Abs." Tony gave her a little grin. Ducky stepped forward and disentangled her hand from Tony's.

"Come with me, Abigail – you look as if you could do with a nice cup of tea and some of my cousin's splendid shortbread biscuits," he told her, leading her off towards the elevator, one arm wrapped around her shoulders.

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Tony followed his father and Gibbs into the conference room, feeling shaky. He couldn't bear to look at his father – he didn't want to see what was in his eyes. It reminded him too much of the way his father had looked after his mother had died.

He was glad of Gibbs's hand on his shoulder, pushing him into a chair, of Gibbs's strong, solid, presence, and his ability to dominate an entire room without saying a word.

"Sit down, Mr. DiNozzo," Gibbs said gruffly.

His father sat down at the head of the table, a couple of chairs along from Tony.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked, in an anguished voice.

"I tried." Tony rubbed his cheek again. "You wouldn't listen."

"You should have made me listen!"

"You're right. This is all my fault." Tony sat back in his chair and crossed his arms across his chest like a petulant teenager. "For God's sake, Dad! I tried. I was just a kid. You were never easy to talk to, and I didn't know what to say!"

"Roy..." His father shook his head. "I can hardly... Roy?" He looked broken, and Tony's mood changed immediately. He wanted to go over there and put his arms around his father. They had never found a way to be close, but he'd always loved him, and he had never wanted to see him hurt like this. "Roy saved my life," his father whispered, and the sense of betrayal seeped from every word, breaking Tony's heart. "He was my closest friend. I trusted him. I

relied on him. And all these years he knew what he'd done to you. Where is he now, Agent Gibbs?" He raised his head and looked at Gibbs.

"In one of my interrogation rooms. Under guard," Gibbs grunted.

"Does he deny it?"

"No." Gibbs shook his head. Tony felt his gut clench knowing Roy was so close, and he wondered what he had said to Gibbs. He wondered if any of what he'd said had changed Gibbs's view of him and that made him feel cold inside. He knew Roy had a way of twisting things, and he was sure Gibbs wouldn't be taken in by that...but all the same, it bothered him. "No, in fact he's been very co-operative. He admits everything he did to Tony."

"Were there other children?" his father asked.

"Yes." Gibbs nodded. "But I think he had better access to Tony, over a longer period, than any of the other boys."

A wince passed over his father's face. "I used to go away on business. I trusted Roy. He was so good to Tony. Roy was married...I never felt there was anything...strange about him." His father glanced at him, and Tony shrugged, helplessly. "Is that when it happened? When I was away?"

Tony nodded.

"And you asked me not to go. Christ, you practically begged me not to go."

His father gazed at him pathetically. He looked like he'd aged twenty years in the past twenty minutes. Tony tried to swallow down the lump in his throat. He hadn't wanted this to happen. He didn't want to see his father looking like this. His father was always such a big, authoritative man; a man of certainties. Tony didn't like being the one who'd stripped those certainties from him.

"I neglected you," his father said.

"No, Dad..." Tony began, and then he paused. "Yeah, you did," he said quietly.

"I knew I was neglecting you. You and your mother were so close. I looked into your eyes, and all I could see was what I'd lost. I avoided you." His father pinched the bridge of his nose. "I knew that was what I was doing, but I had no idea that Roy was exploiting all my failings in such an evil way."

"Roy Quinn is a ruthless sexual predator who hid his tracks very well," Gibbs said. "He was good at what he did, Mr. DiNozzo. For that, at least, you can't blame yourself."

"Small comfort," his father muttered. Gibbs made a little movement with his jaw, and Tony could see that he felt his father deserved all the misery he was experiencing right now.

Gibbs glanced at him. "Tony – do you want to tell your father the rest of it, or do you want me to do that?" he asked.

Tony felt his mouth go dry. "Is there any need? I mean...isn't this enough?"

"He should know it all, Tony. It'll come out anyway, eventually - better to tell him now."

"What more is there?" his father asked.

Gibbs's jaw tightened grimly. Tony couldn't bear to look at either of them, and he gazed down at his own hands where they were resting on the table.

"We're investigating a pedophile ring," Gibbs said tersely. There was a long silence. Tony looked up to see the utter incomprehension in his father's eyes.

"It wasn't just Roy, Dad," he explained. "He gave me to two other men."

His father got up and was halfway to the door when Gibbs intercepted him.

"Where is he, Agent Gibbs?" he demanded, in a voice that was half-way between a growl and a whimper. "I will kill him. I swear that I'll kill him with my bare hands!"

Gibbs shook his head. "Trust me, if that was an option, I'd have done it myself," he said grimly. "He will go to prison, Mr. DiNozzo. I promise you that."

"And these other men?"

"One of them is already in custody. The other...we'll find him too. They will pay for what they did to Tony. None of them will escape justice. Whatever form it might take," Gibbs muttered in a grim undertone.

"I failed you, Tony," his father said, standing there, next to Gibbs. He looked shaken to his core and utterly and completely broken. "I failed you in every respect."

"No, Dad..."

"I'm your father! My first duty towards you was to protect you – to keep you safe. I failed you."

Tony saw the spark flash in Gibbs's eyes, and he winced. Now was not a great time to have Gibbs remember Kelly.

"Yeah, you did." Gibbs said bluntly. "You failed him, and you'll have to find a way to live with that, Mr. DiNozzo."

"How?" His father looked completely out of his depth, and Tony couldn't remember a time when he'd ever looked like that. Gibbs shrugged.

"It isn't easy. I should know," he muttered. He put a hand on his father's shoulder, and his expression softened. "But Tony's gonna need you in the coming months. There will be the trials – I don't know yet whether Tony will need to give evidence or not, but either way, he'll need all the help he can get. Don't fail him again."

His father put a shaky hand through his hair. "Of course. Anything I can do..." He took a series of deep breaths. "Look, Tony, I must be able to help in some more practical way. You know I've always been adamant about you earning your own money, but I'd like to at least help out financially..."

"No," Tony said, surprising himself with the force of his own voice.

His father seemed surprised as well. He looked at Tony, his expression confused, as if he thought Tony had misunderstood. "I'm talking about a considerable amount," his father said. "You wouldn't ever have to work again unless you wanted to."

"No," Tony said again, just as firmly. "I got paid, Dad. I fucking well got paid - in roller skates, and sneakers, and all that shit Roy used to buy me back then. He gave me presents to help me keep my mouth shut - and, sometimes, to help persuade me to open it," he added, with a twisted little smile.

His father flinched, visibly. Even Gibbs gave a little wince. Tony knew he was probably going too far, but he couldn't help himself.

"I don't want your money to make it okay. I don't want to get paid for it all over again. It happened. It's not something you can make better with money, or presents, or any of that shit. It wasn't okay. It was never okay. It never can be okay."

"I just want to do something to help," his father said despairingly.

"There isn't anything you can do, Dad," Tony replied. "I wish there was. I honestly wish there was, but there isn't."

"Your friend, Officer David, she said you stopped coming home because of Roy. Is that true?"

"Yes." Tony nodded. "I had to take care of myself, Dad - nobody else did," he said, knowing he was hurting his father but saying it anyway because it was true. "I had to get myself out because otherwise...I don't know what would have happened."

"That's why you asked to go to boarding school?"

"Yes."

"And that's why you changed? You were such a shy, sensitive child, but it seemed like you changed overnight. All the girls, the parties, the fast cars..."

"I guess." Tony shrugged. "I don't know. I don't know how I'd have turned out if it hadn't happened - who the hell can know that? Don't think I haven't asked myself, but I don't know."

"Will you at least allow me to visit you, and - maybe you'll consider coming home again one day?" his father asked.

Tony glanced at Gibbs, and then at his father. "Okay. Maybe...but you have to accept me for who I am."

"Of course. That's not a problem." His father looked puzzled.

Tony gazed at him thoughtfully. "And if I brought a guy home – would that be a problem?"

His father frowned. "A guy?"

"A boyfriend?" Tony prompted.

"You're not gay. All the women..." His father shook his head. "What are you saying? I don't understand."

"I'm not pretending any more, Dad, and I'm not hiding any more – I've done enough of that. I don't know if Roy screwed with my sexuality, but I do know that I've slept with almost as many men as women. I guess that makes me bisexual, and right now I'm in a relationship with a man. At least...I think I am." He cast a wry look at Gibbs. "It certainly feels that way, but what the hell would I know? I've never had a real relationship before. Yet another thing that Roy probably screwed up for me. I'm all screwed up in here, Dad." He put a finger to his head and twisted. "And who knows how much of it is down to Roy and his pervert friends, and how much of it is just regular screwed up, the way everyone is."

"After what you've been through, do you think I care about any of that?" his father asked quietly.

"I don't know. Do you?" Tony asked. "I don't suppose having a bisexual son is what you want, any more than having the fucked-up, abused son is what you want. But hell, the womanising, wastrel son wasn't what you wanted, either. Let's face it, Dad – I have *never* been what you wanted."

"I won't judge you." His father made a helpless gesture with his hands. "I failed you as a father – I can hardly lecture you about failing me as a son."

Tony gazed at him with a new sense of hope. This wasn't what he had expected of his father.

"If you mean that, then maybe...maybe we can salvage something from this whole mess, Dad."

"I hope so." His father nodded. "Are you going to be okay?" His eyes flickered to Tony's bandaged hand. "With all this going on? Are you okay? Do you need anything?" He paused. "Do you need me?"

"I'm fine," Tony said, with a faint hint of a smile. "I've got my friends."

"Ah, yes – your friends." His father managed a faint smile in return. "I think I've met them. Judging by how they defended you earlier, at least I know that you're in safe hands."

Tony glanced at Gibbs again and got a brief flicker of a smile from him too.

"Yeah, I am," Tony said meaningfully, still looking at Gibbs. He got up and went over to his father. "Are you going to be okay too?" he asked. "I feel like I've destroyed your entire life with this. The business, Roy..."

"Tony...you're my son," his father said helplessly. "Compared to what happened to you, none of that matters."

They looked at each other for a long time. Then his father cleared his throat. "Well, I should..." He gestured with his head towards the door.

"Yeah." Tony shrugged.

His father didn't move. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I'm so sorry, Tony."

He reached out and patted Tony's shoulder clumsily. Tony batted his arm aside and pulled him into an awkward hug. "Yeah, I'm sorry too, Dad," he muttered into his father's ear.

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Gibbs escorted Tony's father down to the foyer. He looked shaken to the core, and Gibbs's earlier antipathy towards him faded. He still blamed him at least partially for Tony's ordeal, but the man had been genuinely shocked and horrified by what had happened to his son and had tried to offer Tony an olive branch.

"You going to get home okay?" he asked. DiNozzo nodded.

"I'll be fine." He looked Gibbs in the eye. "You don't think much of me do you, Agent Gibbs?"

Gibbs shrugged. "We all make mistakes," he said. "You and me – ours are harder to live with. The hard part – for you – starts now, and it's a long, hard path. I know. I've walked it."

DiNozzo gave him a searching look. "What happened to you?" he asked quietly.

"Let's just say that I couldn't protect my daughter any more than you protected your son. Maybe it was a different kind of failure – but I felt it just as hard. At least you have a chance to make it up to Tony – I never got a chance to make it up to my child. Don't waste that chance, Mr. DiNozzo. If you do, you'll lose him forever."

DiNozzo nodded, slowly. "I'll do my best. He doesn't want me around right now – and I don't blame him. Will you protect him, Agent Gibbs? I know it's a couple of decades too late, but...I need to know that someone is looking out for him."

"I'll do that." Gibbs nodded.

"And when – if - he finally comes home – is it you who will be coming with him, like he said? I saw the way he looked at you back there."

Gibbs gave a curt nod. "Yeah. It'll be me."

DiNozzo grabbed his arm. "Don't let him down, Agent Gibbs."

Gibbs glared at him. "I won't."

DiNozzo let go of his arm with a grunt and turned to go.

"Mr. DiNozzo!" Gibbs called him back. "If you were tempted to take the law into your own hands in respect of Roy Quinn – don't. I recognise that look in your eyes," Gibbs said quietly. "But trust me, there are others better placed than you to ensure justice is served."

"Like you?" DiNozzo asked, with a raised eyebrow.

"Quinn will go to prison for a long time. I'll make sure of that," Gibbs told him grimly. "If, for any reason, he doesn't, I'll take care of that as well. Understood? Tony is my responsibility now – not yours."

DiNozzo gazed at him for a long time and then nodded. "I understand. Take good care of him for me, Gibbs," he said, and then he turned and left.

"Always," Gibbs growled at his retreating back.

Gibbs watched him until he'd gone; a tall man, who had walked into this building proud and certain and left it broken and betrayed. Gibbs didn't think he'd ever get over it, but then again, he didn't think he deserved to.

Gibbs returned to the squad room and ordered Ziva to give him a brief update. He glanced at the boxes of files she had brought back with her, with a flicker of distaste.

"Go through everything in these and see if there are any current contact details for Gianni Marconi," he commanded. She nodded and scurried away. Gibbs felt a certain satisfaction knowing he had both Parrish and Quinn safely locked up in custody, but he also knew he wouldn't be completely happy until he had found Marconi and brought him to justice too. And if those files revealed the identities of any other pedophiles, then Gibbs would track them down as well. He wouldn't stop until the job was done.

"McGee – put Quinn on ice for me," he ordered. "I don't feel like having the pleasure of that S.O.B's company again today. I'll pick up where I left off tomorrow."

"Okay, Boss," McGee said. "I don't blame you. You going somewhere?"

"Yeah," Gibbs said grimly. "Home."

It had been a long day, and he thought Tony had been through enough, with first that meltdown in the hotel room, then Quinn's arrest, and now that emotionally draining conversation with his father.

It wasn't easy juggling the case and Tony, but he'd done enough work for today, and Tony needed him more right now. Gibbs was looking forward to another evening on the couch and a hell of a lot more kissing. Tony needed some loving.

He returned to the conference room, shut the door behind him, and paused. Tony was standing by the window, looking out, his forehead resting on his arm. He looked exhausted, but his shoulders had lost that hunched look they'd had for days.

"Hey," Gibbs said softly.

"Hey." Tony didn't move.

"You okay?"

"Yeah." Tony nodded slowly. Then he pushed himself away from the window and turned around to face Gibbs. "Yeah, I really am. I feel...fine." He looked surprised. "Kind of light-headed. Giddy. Like there's been something pressing on me all this time, weighing me down, but now it's gone."

"Good." Gibbs went to stand in front of him. He put his hands on Tony's shoulders. "It's been one hell of a day, but you took everything that was thrown at you, and you didn't once quit, or give up, or cave in. I'm damn proud of you, Tony."

Tony's eyes glowed in response to the praise. "You think I should have taken the money though, right?" he grinned.

"Hell yeah! I've always wanted to be a kept man."

"Liar," Tony laughed. "You'd damn well hate it."

"Yeah, I damn well would."

Gibbs put his hand around the back of Tony's neck, pulled him in, and kissed him hard on the mouth. Tony gave a sweetly satisfying little sigh and leaned into him. Gibbs wrapped his arms around Tony and held him close, his hands cupping Tony's ass. Tony slid both his arms around Gibbs's waist and held on tight, opening up his mouth to accept Gibbs's demanding tongue. Gibbs kissed him forcefully for a long time – until he felt Tony's body relax completely against his and heard Tony's soft moan. Then he pulled back a little.

"I think it's time to go home," Gibbs murmured.

"You finished for the day?" Tony raised an eyebrow. "Kind of early for you."

"Yeah, I know, but something more interesting just came up," Gibbs grinned. Tony raised a confused eyebrow, and Gibbs glanced down. "I don't think that's your damn cell phone digging into my thigh, DiNozzo!"

Tony's eyes flashed excitedly, and he gave a holler of sheer joy. "Oh yeah! Little Anthony is back in business!" he whooped. Gibbs rolled his eyes. "I gotta get you home, Gibbs. I gotta get you home right now," Tony said, grabbing his arm and pulling him over to the door. "I wonder why it came back now? But then again, who the hell cares? Will it go away again? Don't answer that...we gotta put it to good use..."

Gibbs pulled him back. "Slow down, Tony."

"Slow down?" Tony raised an incredulous eyebrow. "Slow down? Gibbs, you have no idea how many fantasies I've had about you over the years. You have no idea how often I've sat at my desk, hiding a massive hard-on, staring at you across the room, fantasising about running over there and ripping your pants off your ass. You have no idea how many lonely nights my right hand and Little Anthony have spent together, just dreaming about you...Slow down, he says? No way, Gibbs – no fucking way!"

He put his hand on the door and then turned to face Gibbs, his eyes narrowing dangerously.

"Don't tell me you're still not ready," he growled.

Gibbs grinned. "I told you – I'll be ready when you are, and you seem pretty ready."

Tony came back over to him and grabbed his face in his hands. "Ready? I am this close - this close - to shoving you onto that table and tearing your clothes off you. Do not make me wait, Gibbs."

He pulled away, wrenched open the door, and strode outside like a man walking on air.

"Probie!" he yelled, as he ran into the squad room. "Call that girl and ask her for a date – a real date, not some weird cyber-date."

McGee gazed at him in surprise. "Is he okay?" he asked Gibbs, who was following on behind.

"Oh yeah," Gibbs grinned. "He's fine. Trust me."

"Zeevah!" Tony grabbed her and swung her around. "Don't let Gibbs make you stay here all night. Get Eli to take you somewhere nice – get him to spoil you – you deserve it."

"Uh...very well, Tony, I will do that," she replied. "Are you sure he is okay?" she mouthed at Gibbs.

"He will be," Gibbs said, with a roll of his eyes. "DiNozzo!"

"Yes, Boss!" Tony almost careened into Gibbs in the course of his exuberant dance around the squad room. Gibbs tightened a hand around his wrist.

"My car. Now," Gibbs ordered, in a low tone, straight into Tony's ear.

"On it, Boss!" Tony ran over to the elevator at full speed. Gibbs followed on behind at a more sedate pace. He paused and glanced at his team, who were sitting at their desks, their mouths wide open in surprise.

"Well you heard him," Gibbs shrugged. "It's been a tough few days, and I know you've been putting in the hours. Go have some fun, people. I want you back here first thing tomorrow morning."

"Yes, Boss," they said in unison.

"And McGee, Ziva - good work," Gibbs growled, before setting off in pursuit of Tony.

~*~

Tony sat in the passenger seat, banging his bandaged hand impatiently on the window as Gibbs drove them – no, that should that be *inched* them – home.

“Oh c’mon!” Tony protested after five minutes of slow crawling. “You choose now, in all the time I’ve known you, to obey the goddamn speed limit?”

Gibbs gave him a sideways glare. “Tony, it’s been a long day, and I’m tired. I don’t want to cause an accident.”

“The only accident you’ll cause is the one in my pants,” Tony hissed, “If you don’t damn well speed up.”

“What’s the matter, DiNozzo? You think I can’t get you hot and hard again when we get home?” Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t say the words ‘hot and hard’ like that, Gibbs,” Tony pouted. “It’s not fair. I’m only human.”

“Stop banging your hand against the window. If I have to take you back to the ER to have your stitches re-done, then I promise you that I’ll do something you find *really* unfair.”

Tony glared at him some more, but Gibbs did have a point about his hand. It was starting to ache – but then again so was another part of his anatomy.

Gibbs drew up in the driveway – finally! - and got out of the car, and Tony followed him into the house, kicked the door shut behind them, and then grabbed hold of Gibbs and pushed him against the hallway wall. The blood was coursing through his body, pounding in his hard cock, and he felt more alive than he had for days.

He kissed Gibbs hard on the mouth, running his hands eagerly over his body. Gibbs allowed him one kiss and then pushed him back against the opposite wall. Tony went with a soft thud, and then Gibbs was on him, kissing him back with a matching passion. Tony reached down and cupped Gibbs’s ass cheeks in his hands, kneading them firmly. This felt so good that he thought he might be losing the capacity to think. He had to get Gibbs undressed – and soon.

He grabbed the lapels of Gibbs’s jacket and pushed him back against the opposite wall again. Then he leaned in close, so that he was looking straight into a pair of intense blue eyes.

He knew what he wanted to do to Gibbs, but he doubted that was on offer. Gibbs had been pretty clear about the fact he liked to go on top, and Tony couldn’t really see him as a natural bottom. On the other hand, he’d fucked plenty of tough guys who he’d thought weren’t natural bottoms, and he’d taken great pleasure in reducing each and every one of them to whimpering wrecks. Tony was good at sex, and he damn well knew it. If Gibbs would let him, he could show him the kind of time he’d never had with anyone before. If he wouldn’t...well there were other things they could do – but none of them involved Tony allowing anyone to fuck him, not even Gibbs.

“So, how do you want to play this?” Tony asked, aware that his voice seemed to have been transformed into a low, throaty growl.

Gibbs took hold of his head between his hands and gazed at him. “Oh...I think we’ll do this your way,” he said softly.

Tony didn’t really register that. He figured that first time out Gibbs would want to keep it light, and hell, just having Gibbs naked against his own naked body, and being able to touch him, and stroke him, and make him come was enough for Tony.

“That’s fine. That’s okay. That’s enough...” Tony whispered, nuzzling at Gibbs’s neck eagerly.

“Tony.” Gibbs grabbed his head again and forced him to look at him. “I said we’ll do this your way,” he repeated. Tony must have looked as surprised as he felt, because Gibbs gave a little chuckle of amusement.

“You’ll let me...?” Tony stared at him, bemused. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t fantasised about this for years, but he had never thought that Gibbs would ever let him do it.

“Sure. I trust you.” Gibbs gave him a quirky little grin and patted the side of his face.

Tony felt like all his Christmases had come at once. He reached out and gently stroked Gibbs’s hair, leaning into him.

“Thank you. I’ll make it good – I promise. I’m really, really good at this. You’ll love it.”

He didn’t wait to hear Gibbs’s response. He grabbed hold of Gibbs’s hand and led him impatiently up the stairs, pausing to push him against the banisters every third step and claim yet more deep kisses.

He was aware of Gibbs letting him have his head and do things his way, as he’d promised. He remembered what Gibbs had said in the shower a few days ago, about how sometimes he’d let Tony think he was in charge. This had to be one of those occasions because, however much he seemed to be surrendering, Tony knew that Gibbs could reassert control in the blink of an eye. Tony also knew that he’d always let him – but right here, right now, Gibbs was giving it up to him. That turned Tony on like nothing else, and he pulled Gibbs into the bedroom and pushed him down onto the bed.

He straddled Gibbs and then paused, looking down on him. He wanted to savour this moment. He’d never felt more turned on, and it was such a relief to feel his hard cock pressing against the front of his pants. In his darkest moments, he’d honestly wondered if he’d ever get his libido back. Now, he was on top of Gibbs, looking down on him, and about to do something he’d only dreamed about for the past eight years.

He didn’t want to rush this. He hadn’t lied – he was a damn good lay – and he wanted Gibbs to have the best he could offer. He leaned forward and kissed Gibbs on the mouth again and then dropped a series of little kisses onto the fading yellow bruises on Gibbs’s jaw. He worked his way down Gibbs’s neck to his shirt and then drew back. Gibbs was looking at him

with an amused expression on his face, but Tony saw that he was also curious – and turned on, judging by the dark arousal in his eyes.

Tony slid a finger under Gibbs's shirt and began to undo the buttons, never taking his eyes off Gibbs as he worked. He wished Gibbs didn't always wear tee shirts under his shirts. He wanted to get straight at naked skin, but he also wanted to get the maximum amount of eroticism from this moment. He didn't want Gibbs to be disappointed by any aspect of his performance.

He undressed Gibbs slowly, like opening up a long-awaited parcel, taking his time, always going back to deliver little kisses to Gibbs's mouth, or to suck on his neck, or nibble at his earlobes. Gibbs let him work, gazing up at him the whole time, that curious expression always in his eyes.

Tony opened Gibbs's shirt and then reached for his pants.

"Now that's not your cell phone," he purred, as he felt a very promising hardness. Gibbs rolled his eyes in exasperated amusement.

"You got me, DiNozzo. That's definitely not my cell phone."

Tony grinned exuberantly, delighted that he had the power to turn Gibbs on in this way. He undid Gibbs's pants and then lifted up so that he could slide them down Gibbs's legs, along with his boxers. He almost didn't want to finish the job, because he was so desperate to get back to Gibbs's straining erection. But he also wanted Gibbs totally naked, so he pulled off his boots and socks and threw them all into an untidy heap on the floor along with his pants and boxers.

Then he straddled him again, and gazed at Gibbs's beautiful erect cock, his hand almost tingling at the thought of holding it. He moved his left hand towards it, irritated by the bandage on his right, and needing the skin-on-skin contact. Gibbs gave a little shuddery grunt as Tony wrapped his hand around it. Tony loved how it felt – all that thick, warm hardness, covered in soft skin, pulsing powerfully between his fingers.

"God that feels good," Tony murmured, sliding his hand up and down the shaft. He leaned forward and kissed Gibbs while he moved his hand and felt Gibbs gasping into his mouth with each stroke. Tony thought he could come just from this, and it would be enough, but he also knew what else was on offer so he held back, wanting to have it all.

Gibbs moved his hands to grasp Tony's hips, and Tony pushed them away. He slid Gibbs's tee shirt up his body with his bandaged hand, revealing Gibbs's hard bare chest, covered in silver curls of hair. Tony started at his belly button and nuzzled his way up to one of Gibbs's nipples - and then sucked down expertly. Gibbs gave a little moan, and his hand came up to grab Tony's shoulder. Tony shook it off and moved on to Gibbs's other nipple, sucking and licking as he went. Gibbs arched up into him as Tony worked his nipple with his mouth and his hard cock with his hand.

Gibbs slipped a hand down the back of Tony's pants, and Tony moved sideways, dislodging it. He could feel his own cock leaking, and he needed to get them both naked as soon as possible. He drew back and undressed at lightning speed and then turned back to the bed to

find that Gibbs had divested himself of his shirt and tee shirt. Tony pouted a little, because he'd wanted to do that himself, but then he forgot about it as he greedily drank in the sight of all that enticing bare flesh.

He straddled Gibbs again, intercepting Gibbs's hand just as it came up to touch his bare hip. He took hold of both Gibbs's arms and pushed them up, so that they were above his head, where he could keep them out of the way. He was aware of just a moment of resistance and then felt Gibbs give, and allow him to do what he wanted. He grinned and leaned his body forward, deliberately trapping both their cocks between their bellies. Gibbs gave another gasp, and Tony captured it with his mouth, moving his hips rhythmically so that both their cocks were stimulated.

He looked down on Gibbs as he moved, saw how aroused he was by the action, and grinned again, his eyes glazing over slightly. This was something he was good at. He knew all the moves, and he intended to use every single one of them on Gibbs. This was his playground, his arena, and he knew how to...

He was jolted out of this reverie by Gibbs suddenly pushing up and rolling them both over, so that Tony was now on his back, and Gibbs was on top. Gibbs gripped his head between his hands, and Tony struggled to focus back in the moment.

"Once more with feeling?" Gibbs told him, with a raised eyebrow.

"What?" Tony frowned.

"The technique is great, DiNozzo, but I won't be another notch on your bedpost. You make love to *me*. I told you before – I'm not a distraction."

"I'm not doing that!" Tony protested, struggling against Gibbs's arms. He realised that he'd been right earlier about Gibbs allowing him to take control. Gibbs could take it back whenever he damn well wanted, and they both knew it.

"Prove it," Gibbs said, relaxing his grip.

Tony launched himself back up, feeling annoyed. He didn't want to screw this up. Gibbs was right; he had a kind of formula. He had a way of kissing, licking, sucking, biting and moving...and he was treating Gibbs just like he'd treated all the guys he'd picked up in the past.

He sat down on the side of the bed and buried his face in his hands, his cock drooping.

"Hey...I told you, sex isn't something you do to people, or have done to you," Gibbs said, wrapping an arm around his shoulders.

He bestowed a little kiss on the back of Tony's neck. Tony wriggled away from it. Gibbs slid a hand down towards Tony's cock, and Tony grabbed his wrist, stopping him before he got there.

"Ah...I thought so." Gibbs drew back. "Is this the way it always is, Tony?"

“What the hell do you mean?”

“I mean - you get what you want, and you give your partners what they want, and everyone gets off, but you don’t like anyone touching you, do you?”

Tony frowned. “It isn’t like that. I like it just fine...But I...” He shook his head.

“You told me once that you never lose control during sex. You can’t afford to, can you?”

Tony slid both his hands through his hair and gazed blankly at his own knees. Gibbs sat down beside him and rested one hand lightly on his shoulder.

“I’m not sure what people are going to do when they touch me during sex,” Tony said miserably. “I prefer to be the one making all the moves. I don’t like it if they do something unexpected. This one guy stuck his finger up my ass when I was busy fucking him...I freaked out and gave him a black eye and neither of us got off that night. I have to be careful. I don’t want to end up hurting anyone.”

“You won’t hurt me,” Gibbs said confidently.

“I don’t know that,” Tony admitted, shame-faced. “You saw me with McGee earlier – I had my hand around his throat, and that was just because he touched my shoulder...”

“Yeah, but you were stuck in a memory back then. That’s not going to happen now.”

“But supposing I do something like that to you?” Tony asked helplessly.

“Not gonna happen.” Gibbs shook his head.

“How do you know?”

“Tony – back in that hotel room you responded immediately when I ordered you to drop McGee. And besides, I’m not McGee; I could take you in a fight, no matter where your head was when it happened. You won’t hurt me.”

“You don’t know that. I can’t *risk* that,” Tony hissed, gazing at him miserably. “Shit, Gibbs...I’ve been all over the place these past few days. Who the hell knows what might trigger something?” He dropped his eyes, unable to meet Gibbs’s hard gaze.

“Tony...it won’t happen,” Gibbs told him firmly, gripping his chin and making him look at him. “It won’t happen because I trust you - and you trust me.”

“Not enough to let you fuck me. Not enough to even let you touch me,” Tony pointed out.

“I couldn’t fuck you yet anyway, Tony.” Gibbs said with a shrug. “I have too many images in my mind right now to be comfortable with that. It was always going to be this way.”

“Yeah, Boy 43 strikes again, huh?” Tony shook his head. “Damn it!” he roared, smashing his fist into the nightstand. Then he winced at the flare of pain and sucked on the side of his hand to relieve it.

“You want to end up with both hands in bandages?” Gibbs queried, and then he laughed out loud. Tony gave a little grin in return, abashed by his own outburst. Gibbs tousled his hair affectionately. “Now...you promised me that you’d show me a good time – how about you make good on that?”

He took hold of Tony’s hand and placed it on his own cock, which was now semi-erect but responded eagerly when Tony grasped it. It was a wide, solid, meaty cock and Tony felt a tingle of arousal. His own cock began to harden again in response. He grinned, and pushed Gibbs back onto the bed again.

This time Gibbs let him have his way, and surrendered control easily. He allowed Tony to cover his body with dozens of little kisses and caress every inch of him. He turned onto his front when Tony flipped him, and Tony spent several long, entirely pleasurable minutes caressing his firm, plump ass. Who knew Gibbs had been hiding an ass this tasty beneath those jeans and shirts?

Tony pulled his ass cheeks apart and dipped a tongue eagerly between them. He couldn’t give blowjobs, because the feeling of choking and suffocation always overwhelmed him, but he loved rimming. Gibbs made a series of throaty little sounds as Tony slid his tongue into him, and Tony glowed with pleasure. This was the hottest thing he’d ever done in his life.

His cock was now so hard that he needed to move things on. He pulled away and glanced around, aware that he probably should have thought of this before.

“Nightstand drawer,” Gibbs growled.

Tony grinned as he opened it and found the condoms and lubricant inside. “You must have been a boy scout,” he teased.

Gibbs glared at him. “Just figured we’d need them at some point.” Then he turned over onto his back. “I want to watch.”

Tony nodded. He usually preferred taking his partners from behind. Every single man he’d fucked these past eight years had been a poor substitute for Gibbs, and it had been easier to fantasise that it was Gibbs he was fucking if they were on their hands and knees, and he couldn’t see their faces. But now that he had the real deal, he wanted to look into his eyes and know that it really *was* Leroy Jethro Gibbs he was inside.

He lubed his fingers and then lay down beside Gibbs and slipped one of them inside him. He sensed Gibbs’s initial hesitation and could feel him making a conscious effort to relax.

“Easy,” Tony whispered, using his free hand to stroke Gibbs’s chest. He hadn’t asked Gibbs if he had ever bottomed before – just because it wasn’t his preference didn’t mean he’d never done it. And yet, Tony couldn’t imagine that he’d ever let anyone in before. Gibbs wasn’t exactly famous for letting people in emotionally, and Tony doubted that he had physically, either. He felt kind of giddy at the idea that he might be his first, and that it was only him that Gibbs trusted enough to do this.

Tony slid his finger in and out expertly, moving his body against Gibbs’s as he worked. He moved up for a kiss every so often and was gratified when Gibbs slowly began to unravel and

relax against him. A second finger was allowed in without any resistance, and Tony saw Gibbs's eyes start to darken with arousal again. The third finger was a tighter fit, and Tony didn't want to rush anything. He stroked Gibbs's cock firmly as he finger-fucked him, pausing to kiss him frequently, and Gibbs responded as Tony had hoped, opening up, his body becoming increasingly boneless under Tony's caresses.

"Y'know, if you're gonna do this, now would be a good time," Gibbs growled suddenly. "Cause I don't know how much longer I can hold on here, DiNozzo."

"On it, Boss!" Tony grinned.

He removed his hand and reached for the condoms. He peeled one onto his rock hard cock, slathered on some lubricant, and moved over, so that he was between Gibbs's thighs.

He was unable to resist leaning in for another kiss, and then he spread Gibbs's buttocks with his hands, snubbed his cock into his entrance, and slid forward. He heard Gibbs give a little growl, but he was a marine through and through, and if it hurt he wasn't about to show it. Tony hoped it didn't. He locked gazes with Gibbs, smiling at him stupidly, and rocked forward, inching in cautiously, feeling no resistance. Gibbs's body was open and welcoming.

Gibbs felt so damn good – there was so much heat and intensity, and his blue eyes were unwavering as they gazed up at him. Tony buried himself deep inside him, gasping as the tight pressure of Gibbs's body sent little shockwaves of pleasure through all the nerve-endings in his cock.

He paused when he was lodged as far inside Gibbs's body as he thought he could go, and looked down on the man beneath him. Gibbs looked up at him, that curious expression back in his eyes, along with something else. There was an expression of such total trust and affection there, that Tony felt a lump rise in his throat. He had never thought he'd see that particular expression in Gibbs's eyes, and he was suddenly aware that this was as big a deal for Gibbs as it was for him. He leaned down and kissed Gibbs gently on the mouth in recognition of that fact. Then he drew back, to find that Gibbs was still gazing up at him.

"More," Gibbs murmured, and he opened his legs wider and moved his hips so that Tony could ease himself in even further. It felt so good that he had to blink a few times to adjust. He hung there, gazing down on Gibbs in disbelief. He was here, doing this. He was here, making love to Leroy Jethro Gibbs - and he was damn well going to wring a scream of pleasure from Gibbs's lips if it was the last thing he did.

He moved his hips back and then thrust forward, just gently. Gibbs gave an almost grudging grunt - but Tony caught the spike of pleasure in his eyes.

"Feels good, huh?" he grinned smugly, moving his hips again – more forcefully this time. Gibbs glared at him.

"Just keep moving, DiNozzo," he growled.

"Anything you say, Boss!"

He took Gibbs's cock in his hand and began stroking it in time to the smooth thrusts of his hips. His own cock was sending ripples of pleasure through him at the intensity of the friction – and his heart was pounding at the sight of Gibbs lying beneath him, looking up at him.

Gibbs never once tried to touch him. He just let Tony take the floor and do this his way. Sex had never been this good with anyone else. The knowledge that it was Gibbs he was making love to; Gibbs who was beneath him, letting him in; and Gibbs whose hard cock he was stroking made all the difference.

Tony loved the sound Gibbs was making – part growl, part gasp - and he loved the feel of his body around his cock, milking him. Most of all, he loved how Gibbs was looking up at him, his eyes shining with that heady combination of love and trust.

Tony felt Gibbs's body convulse beneath him, and then Gibbs's come erupted over his hand, and he gave that hoarse shout of pleasure that Tony had been hoping to wring from him.

Tony thrust again; once, twice, and then he was coming too.

“Oh shit...Boss! Gibbs! Jethro!” he yelled, and then he collapsed onto Gibbs in a boneless, sweaty heap.

“I think you covered all your bases there, Tony,” Gibbs grinned. “But, for future reference, Jethro works better for me in the bedroom.”

“Jethro.” Tony grinned back, stupidly, contentedly, and then angled up his face for a kiss. Gibbs obliged. He wrapped his arms cautiously around Tony's naked back, but Tony felt fine with that. He liked being held by Gibbs, and this felt perfectly safe. Gibbs was right – he trusted him.

They lay there for a little while, happy and exhausted, and then Tony propped himself up on his elbows and looked down into Gibbs's eyes.

“Was that okay?” he asked, as anxious about his performance in the bedroom as he always was about his performance at work. He just couldn't help wanting to impress Gibbs, whatever he was doing.

“Hell yeah!”

“That the first time you...” Tony gestured with his head.

“Yup.” Gibbs nodded. “Not the last though.”

Tony gave a delighted smile. Then he moved his hips so he could withdraw. He tied off the condom and threw it in the trash and then got back into the bed beside Gibbs, lying so that they were face to face.

Gibbs wrapped an arm around him, his hand warm and heavy on Tony's hip, and kissed him.

“Y'know, I never got the big deal about kissing before,” Tony murmured.

“And now?” Gibbs went back in for another long, slow, leisurely kiss. Tony sighed and melted into the embrace.

“Now...I think I like it almost as much as sex,” Tony replied, when he came up for air.

He meant it. He didn't usually like his sexual conquests to stay around after sex, and he had never liked any kind of post-coital intimacy or cuddling before now. It was different with Gibbs. He didn't just enjoy it with Gibbs; he actively craved it.

“I want to try it,” Tony said suddenly.

“Try what?”

“The touching thing.” Tony bit on his lip. “I don't want what they did to me to define me, Jethro. I don't want them to keep screwing things up for me. I want you to be able to touch me during sex without me freaking out, and I want you to fuck me. I watched you just now and it looked so damn good. I want to know what that feels like to be fucked by someone you love, and who loves you.”

“You will,” Gibbs said.

“That simple huh?” Tony made a face. Gibbs's hand stroked slowly, gently, cautiously along his naked thigh.

“No,” Gibbs replied bluntly. “It'll take time, but you'll get there. One day.”

~*~

End of Defences

Daylight Part One by Xanthe

Vance paced up and down the hallway, with long, impatient strides.

“What the hell is taking them so long?” he growled.

Gibbs was sitting on a bench with his back against the wall and his legs up on a chair he’d commandeered from somewhere, looking completely unfazed by the long wait.

“It’s a big case, Leon,” he said with a shrug. “A high ranking Naval officer – an *admiral* for God’s sake - up on child sex offence charges. The media interest alone is piling the pressure on them; they know they have to reach the right verdict.”

“And will they?” Vance asked, leaning against the wall and looking at Gibbs searchingly. He had thrown everything he had at this investigation, and he was pinning everything on the outcome of this court martial.

“Hell yes,” Gibbs said, with an impatient flick of his head.

“Parrish had some pretty convincing character witnesses.”

“And we provided enough evidence to sink him, Leon. Quinn’s testimony alone was damning.”

“Thanks to you.” Vance sat down. He had no idea how Gibbs had got Quinn to testify against Parrish, but he guessed that he’d terrified the man into it. Quinn had certainly sung like a canary in the court room. “You did a good job on this case, Jethro,” Vance said quietly.

Gibbs turned to look at him. “I had to, Leon.”

Vance got a toothpick out of his pocket and stuck it between his teeth. It immediately made him feel better. “Yeah,” he agreed. “You did. We all did.”

And they had. Gibbs had been working his team into the ground for months. They had worked most weekends, and Vance didn’t think that any of the team, but especially Gibbs, had taken more than a day or two off in all that time. The prosecution team told him that Gibbs had provided more evidence, of greater detail, than they had needed to make the case and present it in court.

At that moment, Justin stepped into the hallway, his mother and boyfriend beside him as they had been throughout. He was a tall, skinny, blond kid, with a little ginger goatee. His boyfriend was just as tall and skinny, but darker.

"Justin. Mrs. Merrells. Liam." Gibbs nodded at them. "How you holding up?" he asked Justin.

"Okay, I guess," Justin shrugged. "Do you think it'll be much longer?"

"I don't know, Justin. I hope not."

Vance stood up. "You did a good job in there, Justin," he said. "Took a lot of guts."

Justin's pale skin flushed, but he looked pleased by the praise.

"When Agent Gibbs told me that Parrish had done the same stuff to Agent DiNozzo and a whole bunch of other kids that he did to me, I knew I had to testify," he replied. "How's Agent DiNozzo doing?" Justin asked Gibbs.

"He's doing fine," Gibbs replied, with a flash of a smile. "One day he might even forgive me for talking you into testifying."

Justin gave a little grin in response. "You can be pretty persuasive, Agent Gibbs. It was the right thing to do though. Tell Agent DiNozzo I'm okay – and that I appreciate him looking out for me."

"It's just a pity Parrish pleaded not guilty so you had to take the stand," Vance grunted. Parrish's lawyer had given Justin a tough ride on the witness stand. Luckily both his mom and his boyfriend were supportive, and he seemed to be handling the pressure.

Tony had been prepared to testify, but it hadn't been necessary in the end. Vance thought his agent had done enough in any case. It had been Tony's original statement that had led them to Quinn's storage locker, and the information they'd found there had blown open the entire pedophile ring. Gibbs had made three other arrests and identified several of the remaining boys in the photographs. Quinn had already been tried and convicted – unlike Parrish, he'd pleaded guilty, so the trial had been quicker and less painful for all concerned.

Parrish's court martial was the big one – he was a high-ranking, serving Naval officer, and Gibbs had personal reason to see that justice was done. Vance had never seen Gibbs more driven or obsessive. The man even frightened him at times, and Vance wasn't a man who frightened easily.

There was a sudden movement in the doorway, and they were called back in. Vance took his seat and watched as Parrish stood. He was dressed in full military dress uniform, complete with the many medals and decorations he'd acquired during his long and distinguished Navy career. How could a man be so brave and yet such a monster? It confounded all Vance's values. He didn't understand it; he didn't think Gibbs did, either.

Parrish looked so tall and certain, every inch the war hero, standing there in his uniform. It would take a brave jury to convict him. Vance felt all his old doubts returning – no matter how good a case Gibbs had made, there was still a chance that Parrish would walk. Not that he'd walk far; Vance was sure of that, judging by the look Gibbs had worn on his face these past few months. That was a headache Vance didn't want. He had no doubt at all that Gibbs could kill a man and dispose of the evidence without trace, and he wouldn't blame him for taking the law into his hands in this instance, but Vance didn't want anything leading back to the agency. This was too high profile a case, with too much media interest, for any of them to survive that.

Vance bit down hard on his toothpick and felt it snap in two. Only he and Gibbs from NCIS were in court today to witness this. The rest of Gibbs's team were finishing up the paperwork for one of the other cases while DiNozzo – well, Vance wasn't sure where DiNozzo was. He

assumed that Gibbs had arranged for him to be kept out of the way somewhere, because Tony DiNozzo hadn't made an appearance at Parrish's trial or Quinn's sentencing. Give Gibbs his due, he might be a hard bastard, but he'd protected his boy throughout this entire ordeal.

The charges were read out again, and Vance closed his eyes, waiting to hear the verdict. He worried away at the two woody shards of the toothpick with his tongue.

"Guilty."

He almost didn't register it. The other charges were read out, one after the other, and he heard the same word after each one: "Guilty."

The court room erupted in a buzz of stunned reaction. Justin's mom wept into her handkerchief, and Justin's boyfriend swept him up into a hug.

Vance turned to look at Gibbs, but the man just sat where he was, unmoving, gazing at Parrish's back with a stare that could penetrate stone. The admiral stood there, just as unmoving as Gibbs, nothing about his body language betraying his feelings about the verdict. Vance wondered if Parrish could feel Gibbs's hard stare slicing through his shoulder blades.

"Guilty - guilty on all charges," Vance said, feeling a huge sense of relief coursing through his body. He spat out the remains of the toothpick into his hand and shoved it into his jacket pocket. "Christ, Jethro, we did it. You did it. That bastard is going to go down for years for this."

Gibbs's eyes flickered. "Oh yeah. Guilty on these charges and all the others - the ones we couldn't bring," he growled softly, still not taking his stony gaze off Parrish.

"Isn't this enough?" Vance asked.

The savage flare of fury in Gibbs's eyes told him that it wasn't. Not for Gibbs.

"He's lost everything he loves, Jethro," Vance pointed out. "The uniform, the status - he goes from admiral to convicted felon overnight - and for someone like him, that has to hurt."

At that moment Parrish finally moved. He turned, slowly, to stare straight at Gibbs. Gibbs stared back at him. Vance froze. It was like a snake looking at a wolf.

Parrish's icy stare said everything: You have ruined me. When I am free, I will come after you.

Gibbs's reply was equally clear: If you do, I'll be waiting for you.

Parrish gave Gibbs a slow, macabre grin of pure malice and mouthed the word "squeal" at him. Gibbs's jaw tightened, and his eyes narrowed. Vance thought that if it was possible for a man to be killed by a look, then Parrish should have dropped dead in that instant. Then the moment passed, and Parrish turned back.

"He won't have an easy time of it in jail, Jethro," Vance said softly. "They don't much care for child molesters where he's going."

“Hell, Leon, they don’t much care for child molesters any damn place,” Gibbs growled, getting to his feet. “You know, I think I’ve had my fill of Matthew Parrish. Let me know what the sentence is when it comes in. I have someplace else I want to be right now.”

Vance put a hand on his arm. “You’re right – you do. Go home. Don’t come back to the office for a couple of weeks. Get some rest - you’ve earned it.”

Gibbs made an irritable motion with his head. “I have work to do.”

“The only work you need to do for the next two weeks is on that damn boat of yours,” Vance told him. “I’m giving your team the time off too. You’ve been working them into the ground, Jethro.”

“Not down to me, Leon. I never once asked them to work the hours they’ve been putting in. They did that all by themselves.”

Vance nodded. Gibbs turned to go.

“Hey, Jethro - give my regards to DiNozzo,” Vance said. Gibbs paused and then turned back, with one eyebrow half-raised. Vance grinned and shrugged. “He’s still staying with you, isn’t he?”

Gibbs’s expression hardened. “I don’t think he’ll ever be leaving, Leon. You have a problem with that?”

Vance laughed out loud. “After what that boy’s been through? Hell no! There might be some details you and I should figure out, but that can wait. Go home – tell him he can sleep easy now. We all can.”

“Not me,” Gibbs growled.

Vance sighed. “Gianni Marconi?”

“While he’s still out there, some kid somewhere is in danger.” Gibbs made a little clicking sound with his jaw. “He’s a murderer and a child rapist, Leon.”

“The man probably died years ago.”

“Well, until I find out for sure I’ll keep on looking,” Gibbs shrugged.

Vance sighed. He supposed he hadn’t really expected anything else. Gibbs had been following up leads on Marconi since Quinn’s arrest, but so far he’d only found dead-ends.

“Fine. Just let yourself enjoy this victory for now though – okay?”

Gibbs gave a tight little shrug and then managed a half-grin. “Okay,” he agreed.

“Oh – and Jethro?” Vance called him back one last time. Gibbs raised an exasperated eyebrow at him. “Don’t talk to the press on your way out.”

Gibbs laughed out loud at that. He had become something of a minor media celebrity for his curt, borderline rude replies to their questions. Vance had stepped in quickly to ensure he was the official 'voice' of the agency, but not before a couple of videos of Gibbs's responses to some of their more inane questions had become instant YouTube classics.

"My lips are sealed, Leon. This is your moment."

Vance watched him go over to Justin and talk to him and his mom for a few minutes, and then Gibbs slipped quietly out the door. It wasn't his moment – it was NCIS's moment - and Vance was so damn proud of his agency.

His agency, the people in it who had worked around the clock to get this result, and that man walking out of the room right now whose unshakeable thirst for justice had driven this investigation from the beginning.

Vance was proud enough to burst.

~*~

It was late when Gibbs got home. It was an unseasonably hot spring evening, and the house was in darkness when he opened the door. He walked through to the living room and saw the lights shining on the back patio.

Tony and Alessandro DiNozzo were sitting out there, talking quietly, enjoying the warm weather. Tony was sitting back in his chair, his long legs stretched out in front of him, nursing a beer. Alessandro was sitting next to the remains of a barbecue which was still smoking gently. He was wearing an NCIS baseball cap and was sipping a glass of bourbon. There were a couple of empty dinner plates on the table between them.

Both men looked up when he opened the patio door.

"Hey," Gibbs said quietly, looking at Tony.

"Hey." Tony looked back at him, and they gazed at each other in silence for a long moment. "So we're done," Tony said quietly.

"Yeah. We're done." Gibbs nodded.

"Good."

Alessandro looked from Gibbs to Tony and back again. "That's it? Do you two talk in code? Anyone gonna fill me in on what happened? Did that bastard go down?"

"He went down," Tony said.

"And you know this how?"

"He knows because if Parrish had walked, I wouldn't be able to look him in the eye," Gibbs replied. Tony gave him a small, tight smile and Gibbs knew they were both remembering

Tony's meltdown in the elevator months ago, and the promise Gibbs had made to him that day.

"That and the fact he came home," Tony added. "If Parrish had walked, he'd have arrested him for something else the minute he set foot outside that court room. Wouldn't have been your fault if he'd walked though, Jethro; you put together a hell of a case."

"My case, my investigation...my insistence that you tell me all about it in the first place," Gibbs shrugged. He leaned down and planted a kiss on Tony's head and then pulled up a chair and sat down on it with a weary sigh.

"Bourbon?" Alessandro asked, holding up the bottle.

Gibbs nodded. He'd come to have a genuine respect for Tony's father. He might have failed Tony twenty-five years ago, but he hadn't failed him now.

He'd made every effort to patch up relations with his son these past few months. He'd put everything in his life on hold in order to spend time with Tony, including his business. And, as he'd promised, he hadn't made any judgement about his son's relationship with Gibbs. In fact, he and Gibbs got on rather better than Gibbs suspected Tony was comfortable with. They had a lot in common.

Tony went into the house and returned with a glass. Alessandro poured the bourbon into it, and Gibbs swallowed it down in one gulp. Alessandro didn't say a word; he just poured another measure of bourbon into the glass and then sat back.

"How's Justin?" Tony asked.

Gibbs and Tony had fought several times on this issue. Tony had never wanted Justin dragged into a trial, but Gibbs wanted Parrish to face charges for actual sexual abuse rather than just possession of child porn.

"He's fine. He's tougher than he looks. Vance was more uptight - you should have seen him pacing. I think he went through an entire jar of toothpicks today." He gave a wry chuckle and knocked back the rest of his bourbon. Alessandro poured him some more. "Justin's just relieved it's all over."

"Does he regret agreeing to testify?" Tony asked.

"No," Gibbs said shortly, with a challenging stare in Tony's direction. "And you've changed your tune. Last time we talked about this, you called it 'being bullied into testifying by...!' what were your exact words, Tony?"

Tony grinned. "Oh, you haven't forgotten." He glanced at his father, who raised an eyebrow. "I called him an obsessive-compulsive justice junkie," he explained. Alessandro gave a little laugh.

"Well, if the shoe fits, Jethro."

"It does," Gibbs grunted. "Your son knows me far too well."

"You eat anything?" Tony asked. "We could fire up the barbecue again – still got a couple of steaks left - and there's salad." His eyes twinkled mischievously as he said that.

"Can't stand salad, as you well know," Gibbs grunted. "Anyway, I'm not hungry."

Tony gazed at him for a moment, and Gibbs knew he was seeing all the things he didn't want to tell him. Tony's playful manner was always misleading – he saw much more than he ever let on.

"What did you guys do today?" Gibbs asked, trying to deflect that sharp-eyed scrutiny.

"We went to the zoo," Tony said.

"The zoo?" Gibbs raised a disbelieving eyebrow. "You two?"

"Well, Tony's taken me to just about every tourist attraction in DC over the past couple of weeks," Alessandro said. "That was the only one left."

"The spy museum was definitely the best," Tony grinned. "But the zoo was okay. It was hot though - Dad's got this massive bald spot on the back of his head, so I gave him my baseball cap to stop his scalp frying."

"Headslap him for me, will you, Jethro?" Alessandro said, rolling his eyes. Gibbs grinned and made a gesture with his hand, mock-slapping him, and Tony laughed. "Just you wait, Tony - hair loss is genetic, so if I'm going bald on the back of my head today, that's where you'll be going bald tomorrow," his father pointed out.

"Not me," Tony winked. "Gibbs has slapped the back of my head so often over the years that the increased blood supply has made the hair grow really strong there."

They all laughed at that, and Gibbs reached out and gently rubbed the back of Tony's head, enjoying the feel of that thick, soft hair under his fingertips.

There was an easy companionship around the table that he had never thought would be possible between the three of them. He wondered what would have happened if Roy Quinn hadn't got his claws into Tony back when he was a kid. Would he and his father have somehow found a way to be close? They had now – but maybe only because of Alessandro's desperate need to make amends. Gibbs kind of liked the idea of the two of them spending a day at the zoo – it might be twenty-five years too late, but at least father and son were finally spending some time together and discovering they did have things to talk about after all. It might take some time to repair the relationship completely – and maybe that would never be entirely possible - but they'd all been willing to try.

"Well, it's getting late. I'm going to head back to the hotel," Alessandro said, getting up.

None of them had been sure how this visit would pan out, so Gibbs hadn't offered for him to stay at the house. He didn't want Tony stressing out about a difficult house guest while Parrish's court martial was going on. As it turned out, it wouldn't have been a problem, but Gibbs was relieved that he and Tony got the place to themselves at the end of the day all the same.

"Night, son." Alessandro patted Tony's arm affectionately. "Night, Jethro." He held out his hand. "And thank you," he said quietly. Like Gibbs, he wasn't a man of many words, but he meant every single one of them. Gibbs shook his hand firmly, and then Tony got up and showed his father to the door.

He returned a couple of minutes later and put his hands on Gibbs's shoulders.

"So...just how beat are you?" he asked.

Gibbs put his head back to find Tony looking down on him with that intent look he always got in his eyes when... "Oh God. You're insatiable," he growled.

"Why, yes I am!" Tony grinned. He dug his fingers into Gibbs's shoulders and then frowned. "Man you're tight here, Jethro. I should have realised all this was getting to you far more than you were letting on. This is like solid brick instead of muscle."

"I'll be fine." Gibbs liked the way Tony kept on massaging his shoulders anyway. "I've got a couple of weeks to unwind. Vance is making us all take some vacation time."

"Me too? I mean, I've just had a couple of weeks off," Tony said, his fingers working away at the knots in Gibbs's tense muscles.

"Tony – you've worked the same hours as the rest of us these past few months, even though you weren't working on any of the cases," Gibbs pointed out.

"Only way I got to see you," Tony muttered.

"And you solved four cold cases all by yourself."

"Nearly died of boredom in the process," Tony complained. "Going through endless witness statements, making a load of pointless phone calls, sifting through a ton of old forensic and autopsy data."

Gibbs grinned – he knew Tony was pretty damn pleased with his solve rate, and he had done a fantastic job even if it wasn't the job he wanted to be doing.

"I'm looking forward to getting back to normal and working with you guys again instead of sitting on the sidelines, watching," Tony commented. Gibbs winced as his fingers found a particularly sore spot.

"I don't think McGee is looking forward to you working with us again so much."

"Aw c'mon! The probie needs a little hazing to keep him on his toes. He's been getting way too serious lately," Tony grinned.

"Forget McGee – you gonna be okay working with me again?" Gibbs asked quietly.

Tony frowned. "Sure. Why not?"

"A lot has changed since we last worked cases together, Tony."

"You haven't – not at work anyway," Tony replied. "I don't expect you to be any different there. I know you're gonna kick my butt around again, same as you always did. Now – are we done here? 'Cause these shoulders need more work than I can give them while you're still dressed."

Gibbs allowed Tony to pull him upstairs to the bedroom.

"Get undressed," Tony ordered, before disappearing into the bathroom. Gibbs did as he'd been told, and Tony reappeared a few seconds later with a bottle in his hand.

"Please tell me that's not honey dust," Gibbs groaned.

Tony grinned. "It isn't – although that's a good idea. Maybe another time," he leered. "This is massage oil." He held up the bottle. "I'm gonna try and loosen your shoulders some more. Get on the bed – on your stomach."

Gibbs obliged, and a few seconds later he felt Tony straddle him. He gave a little grunt as Tony's slippery fingers dug into his shoulders, finding sore spots that he hadn't even realised were there.

"So... what happened in court?" Tony asked as he worked.

"Hmmm?" Gibbs muttered into his pillow.

"Something happened in court," Tony said, with one of those little flashes of perception he so often had. "What was it?"

Gibbs thought of Parrish mouthing the word "squeal" at him. It had been a calculated move, designed to elicit a response from him. Men like Parrish didn't like to lose. He had wanted Gibbs to go charging over to him and possibly even take a swing at him in front of witnesses. It had taken all Gibbs's self-control to stay where he was and not give Parrish exactly what he wanted.

"Whoa," Tony murmured into his ear, as Gibbs's muscles bunched up beneath his fingers. "That bad huh?"

Gibbs grunted and gave a little wince as Tony's fingers found a tight knot in his shoulders. Tony worked away at it for several minutes. He knew his stuff, and before long Gibbs felt his body loosening under Tony's strong hands.

Sometimes Gibbs wondered which of Tony's three abusers he hated the most. Roy Quinn had led Tony into this nightmare, taking a shy, grieving child by the hand and sweet-talking him into ever worse acts of pain and degradation. Gibbs had spent enough time with the bastard to know that even now he didn't even think he'd done anything wrong. He remained deluded to the end.

Matthew Parrish was a different kind of bastard. He didn't hide his acts behind words of sentimental romance, like a bad Hallmark card, the way Quinn did. He liked having power over people, and he had enjoyed scaring a twelve year old Tony out of his wits. Gibbs still went cold when he remembered Tony going down on his hands and knees in that hotel room,

trembling in fear. Parrish was cruel, calculating, and ruthless, and he'd got into Tony's head and screwed with his mind as much as his body.

Then there was Marco. Gianni Marconi. He'd almost certainly murdered that Vietnamese boy he'd abused all those years ago, and he'd used Tony like a piece of meat. He'd raped him so viciously that he'd bled, and then got Quinn to take photos of him raping Tony a second time. Gibbs had been looking at those photos for months now, and he didn't think he'd ever be able to get the pleading, desperate look in that child's eyes – in Tony's eyes - out of his mind. It haunted him.

Gibbs wasn't sure that he could choose between them. He hated them all with an equal intensity, and until he brought Marconi to justice his job was only part done.

Gibbs couldn't stay still any more. He rolled out from underneath Tony and plucked the bottle of massage oil out of his hand.

"Your turn." He nodded with his head at the bed.

Tony raised a puzzled eyebrow. "Look, I've just spent two weeks trawling around DC like a tourist. I haven't worked my ass off to bring a hard case to court, and I haven't had to spend the past two weeks listening to a guilty bastard lying through his teeth on the witness stand. I should be the one handing out the massage, not you."

"You're right – I've had a tough day. All the more reason why we should do it my way," Gibbs growled softly. "C'mon, DiNozzo – I want to touch you."

Tony's expression softened. He loved it when Gibbs stroked and touched him, but he could never lose himself entirely in the sensation. Just when Gibbs thought they might be getting somewhere, Tony would tense up and scramble away from him apologetically. Then he'd get angry with himself about it, which annoyed Gibbs more. It was always going to be slow-going, and he wished Tony would give himself a break.

Tony removed his clothes and lay down on the bed. Gibbs straddled him and poured a pool of oil into his hands. He rubbed them together, warming them, and then placed them on Tony's shoulders. He loved caressing Tony's broad, muscled back. He slid his fingers down, gently working out any knots he felt, and, in the process, felt his own shoulders opening up. The action, and the intimacy, was relaxing him as much as it was relaxing Tony.

He leaned forward and trailed a line of kisses along Tony's spine and then scooted back and placed his hands on Tony's firm, round buttocks. He loved the way these felt under his fingers. He knew he wanted to slide his hard cock between them and make love to Tony, but Tony wasn't ready for that yet. Maybe he'd never be ready for it.

Tony began moving his hips rhythmically against the bed. He looked completely wanton and abandoned right now, the ends of his hair dark from the oil, his body loose and relaxed under Gibbs's fingers.

Gibbs leaned forward and kissed Tony's buttocks and then slid them open and licked the dark hole within. Tony gasped, his hands clutching the sheets. Gibbs sank his tongue in deeper and rimmed Tony, enjoying the sensation of Tony's ass cheeks beneath his fingers.

They really had come one hell of a long way. It had been slow but strangely satisfying watching Tony gradually learning to relax and accept his touch over the past few months. It was kind of like watching his boat slowly take shape beneath his fingers, and Gibbs got the same sense of satisfaction from it. Sure, sometimes it was frustrating. There were times when it felt like they were taking one step forward and two steps back, but when Gibbs remembered where they'd started out, he realised just how far they'd come.

Gibbs stroked Tony's lower back, signalling to him what he was going to do next. Tony glanced over his shoulder and nodded, moving his ass up hopefully. Gibbs poured more oil onto his hand and slid a finger into Tony's hole. Tony sighed, and Gibbs moved his finger back and forth, enjoying the way Tony's body rose and fell beneath him.

He risked another finger and felt Tony tense a little. This was as far as they'd ever got, and they both knew it.

"Easy," Gibbs murmured, leaning forward to kiss Tony's ass cheeks again. "Just let me know when you want me to stop."

"I don't want you to stop," Tony growled. "That's the damn point."

"Then stop fighting it – just let go," Gibbs said, and he sank his teeth gently into Tony's butt cheek in reproach. Tony laughed and squirmed. Gibbs kept moving his fingers and then risked a third. Tony bunched his hands in the sheets and then slowly relaxed again. Gibbs smiled – this was definitely progress. He knew Tony was loose enough to take him; the problem wasn't physical - it was mental.

He licked the hollow of Tony's back, moving his fingers smoothly the entire time. Maybe tonight would be the night. Now that Parrish and Quinn were both behind bars, maybe Tony would relax enough to let Gibbs inside him.

Gibbs's fingers were starting to ache, so he removed them. Tony looked at him questioningly over his shoulder.

"What do you want me to do now?" Gibbs asked.

"Fuck me," Tony said grimly, his jaw clenching. Gibbs laughed out loud.

"No way in hell I'm gonna fuck you with that look on your face," he said. "It's not an ordeal, Tony. When I fuck you, I want you to enjoy it. If you won't enjoy it, I won't fuck you."

He didn't add that the idea of fucking a grimly tense Tony made his skin crawl. The thought of taking his pleasure in Tony without Tony getting any in return reminded him of Boy 43. The memory of the look on that child's face as he was being raped was guaranteed to make Gibbs's cock wilt immediately.

"I *want* to enjoy it," Tony said miserably.

"Yeah, me too." Gibbs gave a rueful smile. He leaned forward again to stroke Tony's ass, but the sudden movement must have spooked Tony, because he rolled over, an expression of

panic on his face. Gibbs went sideways immediately, allowing Tony his space. Tony calmed down, passing shaky fingers through his hair.

"Sorry. I know you weren't...shit." Tony slumped down on his side and looked at Gibbs despairingly.

"No problem," Gibbs told him firmly.

"Christ, you must be sick of having to be so damn patient with me," Tony growled.

"Stop trying to please me," Gibbs said sharply. "I told you before - sex is something we share. I won't take anything you don't want to give."

"I just want to lose control." Tony rested his hand on Gibbs's thigh and stroked his thumb over the skin. "You have no idea how much I want that. All my life I've had to be guarded, vigilant, to make sure nobody ever got in. Now I *want* you in, but I can't seem to let go enough to make it happen. Fuck it, I hate him so much."

"Quinn?"

"Yeah. I know it's different with you – I know the difference between rape and consensual sex. I just freeze whenever I think it might happen."

Gibbs nodded. He knew all this – they'd talked about it several times – but Tony could never get beyond it.

"I don't know why it's Quinn in my head and not the others. Maybe because I knew I hated Luke and Marco, and I knew I wasn't consenting with them. With Quinn it was so confusing. I liked him. I wanted to please him, and I wanted him to love me and..." Tony broke off.

"And you feel the same about me," Gibbs grunted.

"No! I mean, yes, but in a completely different way," Tony insisted. "I never wanted him to fuck me, but you're not forcing anything on me. And...I, you know, love you, and I didn't love Quinn."

Vulnerability sparked in Tony's eyes as he said that. Gibbs wished he could give him the reassurance of a caress, but he didn't want to freak him out again. He gave him a little smile instead.

"I hate always having to be so in control," Tony sighed. "Whenever I have sex, there's always a part of me sitting on the sidelines, watching. I want to lose myself in it, but I never can."

"Hey – what we do is pretty damn good. You don't hear me complaining," Gibbs said. Then he grinned. "I've had more sex in the past few months than I had in an entire decade before, and it's been damn good sex too, Tony. I enjoy it, and you sure as hell seem to."

"I do!" Tony said, his hand sliding around to cup Gibbs's ass. "But..."

"No buts," Gibbs told him firmly. "Stop beating yourself up over this, Tony. It'll never happen while you think about it so much. And right now you're talking too much when there's something else you could be doing."

Tony smiled and rolled over on top of him, the way he always did when he needed to feel in control again. Gibbs let him. He understood the impulse. Every time Tony felt vulnerable, he had to reassert himself, and Gibbs always allowed him to do that. Tony trusted him, but his psychological scars went so deep that it would take time for him to believe, deep down, that Gibbs wasn't going to abuse that trust. Gibbs remembered Ducky's analogy about the fox. He might have Tony resting by his fireside and eating out of his hand – he might even have him tame enough to pet - but he didn't yet have him at the point where he could completely let go and trust Gibbs not to hurt him.

Gibbs allowed Tony to push his hands above his head and work on his body with that intent look he always got when they were having sex. He opened his legs obligingly when Tony wanted to slide his fingers inside him and opened them even wider to allow Tony to sink his hard cock into him. He loved the feel of Tony going in – it was such an incredibly pleasurable sensation. Tony grinned down on him, the way he always did, all dazzling white teeth and glowing green eyes.

It was lazy, comfortable sex. Gibbs sank back onto the pillows as Tony nuzzled at his neck and slowly moved his hips. Gibbs liked this kind of sex. It wasn't urgent or passionate, but it was intensely intimate. Tony always took his time and liked to maintain eye contact throughout. This kind of sex always relaxed them both whenever they'd had a hard day, and gave them a sense closeness and connection.

Tony moved his head and kissed Gibbs repeatedly as he slid in and out of him with gentle, unhurried thrusts. Gibbs rested his hands on Tony's broad back and stroked him, keeping his movements slow and unthreatening.

The friction of Tony's body against his hard cock, where it was trapped between both their bellies, slowly took Gibbs towards a hazy, lazy orgasm. Then he just lay back and watched Tony as he worked his way towards his own climax.

He liked the way Tony's tongue protruded between his lips as he thrust, making them glisten sinfully. He liked the little noises of pleasure Tony made as he got close to orgasm. He **really** liked the way Tony always looked so surprised when he was inside him, as if he still couldn't believe Gibbs would allow him to do this, even after all these months.

Most of all, Gibbs liked the way Tony always gasped out his name when he came and then kissed him on the lips straight after, as if saying "thank you", or to reassure himself that Gibbs still loved him. It was strangely endearing.

Tony rested on him, panting after his orgasm, his thick hair soft beneath Gibbs's chin. Gibbs kept his hands resting lightly on Tony's body. Sudden movements always freaked Tony out in any kind of sexually charged setting, but Gibbs satisfied himself with just stroking Tony's back softly with his fingertips.

Tony kissed his shoulder, relaxing on top of him, still lodged deep inside him. Gibbs liked the weight and feel of him, and he was comfortable having him there. Letting Tony in, both

emotionally and physically, had proved to be far more rewarding than he'd expected. If this was the only way they ever had sex, then Gibbs was perfectly happy with it. It was Tony who wanted more.

Gibbs kissed Tony's hair every so often as the sweat cooled on their bodies, until eventually Tony withdrew and rolled over, his back towards Gibbs. Gibbs moved up behind him and pressed his hand over Tony's stomach. This was the way they always went to sleep, and he knew that it made Tony feel loved and safe. Gibbs kissed the back of Tony's neck and felt Tony go drowsy and limp in his arms. Gibbs closed his eyes, his weariness kicking in. He was almost asleep when Tony spoke.

"What did he do that pissed you off?"

Gibbs didn't reply. He thought he'd headed this off earlier.

"Parrish," Tony said quietly. "What did he do at the court martial today?"

Gibbs considered lying to him, but he hadn't done that since this began, and he didn't want to start now. He didn't want to tell him the truth, either. Tony had come a long way, but he was still vulnerable.

"He mouthed something at me. That's all."

"What was it?"

"Just a word."

"What word?"

Gibbs sighed. He knew Tony all too well, and when he got hold of something like this Gibbs knew that he wouldn't let it go. Gibbs pressed his hand more firmly over Tony's stomach and held him tight.

"Squeal," he said quietly. Tony tensed up as if he'd been hit. "It was aimed at me, not you, Tony. He was trying to get me to react and go after him in court in front of all those people – trying to land me in trouble. Also, the son of a bitch takes a sadistic pleasure in this kind of thing."

"Ya think, Gibbs?" Tony flung over his shoulder. Gibbs snorted and kissed the back of his neck again. He stroked Tony's belly softly until he felt him start to relax again.

"You okay, Tony?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Sure," Gibbs said smoothly.

"You said we were done earlier," Tony murmured. "Are we?"

"We're done with Parrish. If he comes after you when he gets out, which I doubt, then I'll take great pleasure in putting a bullet through his head. No second chances."

"I believe you. But you didn't answer my question. We're not done yet, are we?"

Gibbs sighed. "No," he replied. Tony pushed his hand away and turned over to face him. "Well, like you said, I'm an obsessive-compulsive justice junkie." Gibbs gave a little shrug.

"And Marco is still out there somewhere," Tony said quietly.

"Yeah." Gibbs felt his gut clench. "And Marco is still out there somewhere."

~*~

Chapter End Notes:

Friendly feedback always adored!

Daylight Part Two by Xanthe

"Tonio."

Tony's eyes snapped open. The clock said it was 4 a.m.

"You do love me, Tonio, don't you?" an insistent voice said in his ear.

Tony blinked. The memory of the first time Quinn had raped him was in his head. Maybe that wasn't surprising in the circumstances. Tony put his hand on Gibbs's hand where it was resting on his stomach. He was safe here. Quinn was in prison now. He couldn't hurt him any more. Hell, Gibbs hadn't let Quinn so much as catch a glimpse of Tony since his arrest.

This memory was a particularly difficult one for him, and one he'd often tried to push down. There was no point in doing that any more though; he'd learned that the hard way. This time he let it come, holding onto Gibbs's hand the entire time for reassurance.

Roy had been excited, like a randy teenager, his body quivering with excitement as he locked the hotel room door behind them.

"We're going to do something special today, Tonio," he said, his brown eyes alight. Tony didn't like the expression in them. It didn't look like Uncle Roy was in there any more. He seemed strange and distracted, and he was looking at Tony in a really weird way.

"Are we going to see a movie?" Tony asked, wondering what Roy meant by 'special'.

"No – something much better. We're going to do something very grown up. You do love me, Tonio, don't you?"

Tony nodded, reluctantly. Roy had asked him this before, and he knew how upset he got if Tony didn't agree.

"Say it," Roy prompted.

"I love you," Tony said listlessly. He didn't like all this sappy stuff, but Roy liked it and if saying it made Roy happy, and meant he got to see a movie later, then what did it matter?

Roy's face lit up. *"Do you know what people do when they love each other?"* he asked.

"Kiss?" Tony hazarded. That was usually the answer Roy wanted. Roy beamed at him.

"They make love, Tony," he said softly.

Tony stared at him. Making love was something that happened between the beautiful women and equally beautiful men on movie screens. It didn't happen between old guys like Roy and kids like himself.

"I don't get it," Tony said.

"I'll show you." Roy reached out and began unbuttoning his shirt. Tony fought down a little

wave of revulsion; Roy had done this before, and it wasn't so bad. Roy removed his shirt and folded it neatly. He always folded everything neatly. It was like some weird compulsion he had. Then he turned back to Tony and ran a nicotine-stained hand over his bare chest. "You're so beautiful, Tonio," Roy sighed, his breath hitching in his throat. "That's why I must have you. You do understand that, don't you?"

Tony nodded uncertainly, unsure what Roy meant. Roy's fingers fumbled at Tony's pants, and Tony stood there, unresisting. Roy had done this before as well. He liked to put his hand inside and play. Tony didn't like it exactly, but it wasn't that bad; Roy liked it, and when Roy was happy he could be so nice.

"It's going to be so good, Tonio. Your first time. Our first time together," Roy told him as he finished undressing him. Tony bit on his lip, feeling anxious, but he nodded anyway. What was going to happen? "You mustn't tell anyone though," Roy warned him. "This is our special secret. Nobody else must know. You like secrets don't you, Tony?"

Tony nodded again.

"Good boy. Such a good boy." Roy kissed him on the mouth, and Tony felt himself flinching. He hated the smell of cigars on Roy's breath, and the way he tried to put his tongue in his mouth. Roy pulled back, much to his relief. "Go and lie on the bed, my beautiful boy," he said, pushing Tony over towards the bed. Tony went. This was new, but then they'd never been in a hotel room before. He wasn't sure what was going to happen next. Roy started undressing, and he closed his eyes. He didn't want to see Roy naked. He felt Roy get onto the bed beside him, and then he began stroking and kissing him. His fingers were gentle but invasive.

"This is good isn't it, Tony? You're loving this aren't you? Oh, I can tell you are!" Roy said. Tony bit down hard on his lip. He didn't like it, but Roy seemed to think he should. Maybe there was something wrong with him?

Tony felt his breathing hitch at the memory. He knew that he could roll over and wake Gibbs, and they could talk through the memory. They'd done this a few times and it often helped. But it was the middle of the night, and Gibbs had had one hell of a day. Tony decided to ride out the memory alone.

"I love you, Tony," Roy crooned as he stroked him. "You're such a good boy. I love you so much. There, just let me do this...that's right...you're such a dear boy. Remember, you must never tell anyone about this, Tony - this must always be our special little secret."

"It hurts," Tony said, wriggling.

"Hush now, Tony," Roy told him, his hands clasping Tony's thighs more firmly. "I'm always doing things for you. I'm always buying you presents and taking you places. This is just a little thing you can do for me. It only hurts to begin with - you'll soon learn to love it, I promise you, Tony. There, there...good boy. Let me stroke you until it feels better, hmm?"

Tony took several deep breaths, calming himself. The rest of the memory was mercifully blurred. He'd kept his eyes closed through the worst of it. He'd wanted to crawl off that bed and run away, but he'd felt paralysed. He could remember his rising sense of panic, how he'd

struggled to breathe and longed for it to be over, but he hadn't moved. He'd just pushed all those feelings down and kept them repressed for years.

Back then he'd wanted to escape, but hadn't been able to get away. Now he wanted Gibbs, but he pushed him away every time he got too close. The irony didn't escape him. Even after all these years, he felt as if Roy was still controlling him.

"You still belong to me, Tonio, in your heart. I shaped you. I made you what you are."

Tony eased himself out of the warmth of Gibbs's arms and got up. He pulled on a bathrobe and paused to gaze back at the bed. Gibbs was still asleep, his silver-grey hair resting on the pillow, one arm flung out, laying claim to the bed the way he always laid claim to everything. Tony didn't mind being laid claim to by Gibbs. It had been pretty much all he'd ever wanted.

He walked quietly out of the bedroom and wandered along to the spare room. He hadn't slept in here since that night he'd smashed his hand through the kitchen door. That seemed like a lifetime ago now. He'd been a different person then. Now Quinn and Parrish were both behind bars, and if Gibbs would just let the thing with Marco drop, then maybe they could get on with their lives. Except he wouldn't. Tony knew that. There was no way Gibbs would ever let that drop.

Tony glanced around the room. Boxes of his stuff were dumped on the bed. They still hadn't completely cleared out his apartment – they'd made the occasional random journey over there to pick up some of his stuff, but he hadn't had time to unpack it, and he was also unsure about how much space he could take up in Gibbs's life. Tony didn't know how moving in worked, and Gibbs was a territorial kind of man; he liked his own space and his own stuff. Tony was starting to trust that Gibbs meant to keep him around, but he didn't want to push his luck.

Living with Gibbs had been surprisingly easy. By rights, it should have been harder. Gibbs had, after all, gone through four wives, and Tony had never lived with anyone as part of a couple before. Somehow, they just seemed to get along without annoying each other too much.

Tony closed the door to the spare room and walked downstairs. The kitchen door was shut. He touched the glass with his fingertips. He hadn't fugued in months – not since the hotel room. Once he'd stopped trying to shove that boy into a box the fugues had stopped.

It wasn't easy though. The memories would hit him when he least expected it. Anything could set him off - a stray word here or there, or someone standing too close behind him. Tony allowed the memories to come now, instead of pushing them away. They didn't have the power over him that they had once had.

Tony opened the kitchen door and went inside to get a glass of water. He returned to the living room and twitched open the drapes to look out at the yard. It was pretty outside in the early morning light; Gibbs was a gardener as well as a carpenter, and the yard was in full spring blossom. Gibbs liked working with his hands; he was practical, a craftsman, and he displayed a patience at those tasks that he rarely showed at work. Tony could see the qualities that had made him such a good sniper.

Tony glanced down at his own hand, where it was holding the glass of water, and traced a

finger over the faded scars on it. He wasn't patient. He had wanted to bypass all this pain and skip straight to recovery. Even now, he knew that if he could pack this all up and never look at it again then he would, but he also knew that it didn't work that way. Ignoring it, squashing it down, only stored up problems for later. Dealing with it was harder – and at times frustratingly slow – but it was the only way forward. He'd learned that the hard way.

There was a photograph of Gibbs, with his arms around Shannon and Kelly, on the shelf in the alcove. Tony picked it up and looked into Kelly's bright blue eyes. She'd been such a pretty little kid. Tony suspected there were elements of the bereaved father and the lost child in his own relationship with Gibbs. It was part of what connected them, and what made it work so well between them. The different damage they'd suffered made them uniquely qualified to heal each other.

The family grouping in the photograph looked so natural – like they all belonged together. Did he and Gibbs look that way? Like they belonged together?

"How can you belong to him when you still belong to me?" Roy's voice purred insidiously in his ear.

Tony put the photograph down and reached up to rub the back of his head. He didn't want to do this, but it felt undone, unfinished. It felt like something he was avoiding, and he knew where avoidance led.

"Hey," a voice said quietly behind him, and he glanced over his shoulder. Gibbs raised an eyebrow at him. "What's going on?"

Tony continued rubbing the back of his head. Gibbs moved closer and reached out a hand to stop him. His fingers were warm around Tony's wrist. He held it loosely in his grasp and gazed at Tony searchingly.

"Tony?"

"I need to see Roy."

He watched Gibbs's eyes darken.

"No. Remember what happened when you saw Parrish?"

"Yeah, I remember," Tony grimaced. "But I have to do it anyway. Roy's where it all started for me – and I don't think I'll ever be free of his voice in my head until I face him. I need to see him, Jethro."

"What the hell for?"

"Because he's the one thing I'm still avoiding," Tony said quietly. "The times when I faced up to it; when I told you all about it; when I saw Parrish; when I went to that hotel room; and when I finally found the guts to tell my father what had happened and *make* him listen; they weren't easy, but they were breakthroughs. I need to do the same with Roy."

"He's a sick bastard," Gibbs warned. "You won't like getting a glimpse into the inside of his

head. I know I sure as hell didn't."

"I already know what the inside of his head is like," Tony said bitterly. "I've been there, Jethro. I'm still there, in a way."

"Then why...?" Gibbs began.

"Because it isn't finished for me until I do!" Tony said forcefully. "Listen, Jethro - the way you feel about finding Marco? That's how I feel about facing Roy. It's just something I have to do if I'm ever going to get over what he did to me and move on."

That got through to Gibbs. He might not like it, but he'd supported Tony in every decision he'd made this far, and he'd do it again. He gazed at Tony for a long time, a muscle in his jaw twitching furiously, and then, finally, he nodded. He wrapped an arm around Tony's shoulders.

"Okay. I'll make arrangements in the morning," he said in a tight tone of voice. "But there's no way I'm letting you go alone. I'm coming too. Now – let's go back to bed."

~*~

Roy Quinn sat waiting expectantly for his visitor, wondering who it was. So far nobody had been to visit him, not even when he'd first been arrested. To be honest, he was a little disappointed by that. He had once had so many friends, but it seemed they had all abandoned him now. He missed Alessandro the most; they had been the best of friends for so long. Maybe his visitor was Alessandro. He hoped so.

The door opened, and Roy's heart missed a beat as he caught sight of a tall, broad-shouldered figure. The years rolled back, and for just an instant he was in Vietnam with Alessandro again, helping his injured friend to safety, and then the moment passed. This wasn't Alessandro standing in front of him; this was someone even more precious.

"Tonio," he murmured, pressing his hand against the transparent panel dividing them. Tonio was all grown up now, in his mid-thirties, a big, solid man just like his father. Roy struggled to reconcile this handsome, confident-looking adult with the boy he'd once known. He gazed at the man in front of him searchingly, and then he saw it: Tonio – his Tonio - was still there, peering out at him shyly from green eyes that were suddenly aching familiar. Roy didn't see the self-assured federal agent - he saw the boy - and he felt his eyes grow suddenly misty.

"You didn't forget me," Roy said softly. "You came to see me, Tonio."

He suddenly became aware that someone else had followed Tonio into the room, and he stiffened: Agent Gibbs. He hated that man and feared him even more.

Tony sat down in front of him, while Gibbs took up position leaning against the wall behind him.

Roy ignored Gibbs, choosing to concentrate on Tonio instead. "I knew you would want to see me, Tonio," he said, smiling happily. "I knew you couldn't resist. Agent Gibbs doesn't understand what was between us – he says I damaged you - but it wasn't like that, was it, Tonio?"

"That's not my name," Tonio replied bluntly. His green eyes were dark as he leaned forward. "That's not my name, Quinn. My name is Tony. The only person I ever wanted to call me Tonio was my mom. Not you."

"I understand." Roy nodded. "It was such a sweet name. It suited the boy you were then but not the man you are now, so tall and grown up. It's not the right name for you now, I can see that."

Tony leaned back in his chair, staring at him. Roy stared back. "You look a lot like your father," he commented. "How is Alessandro?"

"He's fine," Tony said shortly.

"He hasn't been to see me."

Tony looked at him incredulously. "Did you really expect him to visit you after he found out what you did to me?"

"What did I do?" Roy raised a surprised eyebrow. "All I ever did was love you, Tony. People don't understand – Agent Gibbs doesn't understand - but you do, Tony. You were there. You know how it was between us. We were in love."

Roy heard an angry little growl emanate from Gibbs's throat, but he was too scared to look at the man. He was such a dark, glowering, brooding presence, standing over there by the wall. Roy wished he wasn't here, spoiling this precious reunion.

"That wasn't love, Quinn," Tony said quietly.

"Ah, I see he's poisoned you against me," Roy murmured sadly. "I'm sorry about that, Tony because you're only lying to yourself. Just think about all those long years you kept our little secret – why would you have done that if you didn't love me, hmm?"

Tony's eyes were troubled and confused. He looked as adorable as he had all those years ago, during their affair. Roy smiled at him indulgently.

"I didn't want to remember it," Tony said. "I tried my best to forget."

"I don't believe that," Roy replied, still smiling. "I never loved anyone as much as I loved you, Tony. There were others – I'm not denying that – there have been so many others, but I didn't love any of them as much as I loved you." He leaned forward. "Has there ever been anyone else for you, Tony?" he asked eagerly. "Can you honestly say that anyone has ever loved you as much as I loved you?"

"I ran away from you, Quinn," Tony replied. "Doesn't that tell you something about how much I loved you?"

"I was hurt," Roy admitted with a nod. "When you went away to boarding school, I thought I'd at least see you in the vacations, but you always stayed just out of reach. When you did come home, you avoided me. I was very hurt by that, Tony."

"You raped me," Tony told him quietly. "You gave me to other men and let them rape me."

Roy shook his head vehemently. "I always loved you. Yes, I had to make some difficult choices, and I'm sorry you didn't enjoy your time with Gianni and Matthew as much as I'd have liked, but I'm flattered too, in a way. Your heart belonged to me – you didn't like giving yourself to anyone else."

Tony laughed out loud. "Christ, you've got a unique way of looking at things, Roy."

Roy grinned. "Oh, you still have such a beautiful smile! You were such a serious little boy – I always loved it when you smiled."

Tony's smile faded, and he leaned forward. "I want you to listen to me, Roy. You ruined my childhood. Not my life – because I've made a success of that, despite you – but you completely fucked up my childhood. Every memory of me that you treasure is one that makes me feel sick. You exploited my loneliness and fractured my relationship with my father. You didn't love me, and I sure as hell didn't love you. You used me to satisfy your own sick fantasies. When I think of the way you used to touch me – the way you used to fuck me - it makes me want to throw up."

Roy moved his hand up to his throat and felt the pulse fluttering there, in his own neck.

"You don't mean that, Tony," he said softly. "This is Agent Gibbs talking, not you." He glanced over Tony's shoulder and caught Gibbs's icy stare. He leaned forward. "When I look in his eyes, I see the thousand different ways he wants to kill me. Does he scare you too, Tony? He should. He's a monster."

"No, he doesn't scare me." Tony shook his head. "And he's not the monster, Roy. You are. I can't believe I came here. You're a sick bastard, Roy. You're not worth my time."

He got up, and Roy gazed at him pathetically, wanting him to stay just a little bit longer. "I always asked after you!" he said hurriedly. "I always asked Alessandro how you were and what you were doing. I followed your career. I'm so proud of you, Tony!"

Tony's jaw was taut, his hands bunched into fists. "I'm not yours to be proud of, Roy."

"Of course you are," Roy insisted. "You'll always be mine."

Roy heard a low, feral growl emanate from Gibbs's throat, and he flinched. It wasn't Gibbs who slammed his hand angrily against the transparent screen dividing them though – it was Tony.

"No, I'm my own damn person!" Tony said forcefully. "So don't think about me again, Roy. Any time you find yourself thinking about Tonio, and all the sick things you did to me, remember me the way I am right now. I'm not that little kid any more – I fight back now."

"But Tonio will always be in my head – in my heart!" Roy protested.

"Not any more." Tony shook his head. He seemed suddenly big and intimidating. "He doesn't belong to you any more, Roy. He belongs to me now. So if you ever try using him in some sick jerk-off fantasy in your jail cell, I promise you that little kid will turn into me and beat the shit out of you. I'm in your head now, Roy, the way you've been in mine all these years." He stood back and gave a tight little smile. "How does it feel, Roy? I hope it hurts."

Gibbs stepped forward, and Roy cowered back instinctively, terrified of the man.

"You know, I don't think it's me you should be scared of, Quinn," Gibbs said, in a wry tone. He nodded his head in Tony's direction. "It's him."

Roy looked up into Tony's cold green eyes, and his heart flipped anxiously in his chest. Maybe Gibbs was right. He couldn't see any trace of his adorable little Tonio in Tony now. All he could see was the icy fury of a strong, resilient man – a man who hated him.

Tony glanced sideways at Gibbs with an expression Roy had never seen on his face before: It was love, affection, and trust all rolled into one. Tonio had never looked at him like that.

"I'm done. Come on, Jethro. Let's go," Tony said softly.

Roy watched them leave. As a prisoner, friendless and alone, he had nothing except his treasured memories, and now they had been ruined. Tony had stolen them from him. Roy glanced down at his own hands to find that they were shaking. Then he glanced back as the door slammed shut behind his visitors.

Tonio was gone.

~*~

Tony strode out of the prison feeling strangely euphoric.

"He's pathetic," he said as he got into the car beside Gibbs. "I can't believe he ever had any kind of power over me. He's just a deluded old man."

"Yup." Gibbs grinned.

"Christ, what a complete loser." Tony shook his head. Gibbs just continued grinning at him. "What?" Tony asked.

"I just liked what I saw you do back there. It's what I've been waiting for."

He started the car and began driving. Tony gazed out of the window for awhile, lost in thought, before finally registering that he didn't have a clue where they were.

"Uh, where the hell are we going?" he asked. Gibbs shrugged.

"You'll see."

Tony leaned back, wondering what this was about. They pulled up in the middle of nowhere an hour or so later, and Gibbs got out of the car.

"This is it?" Tony frowned.

"Nope. First we have to do some hiking." Gibbs opened the trunk of the car and pulled out a couple of fully packed rucksacks.

"You have got to be kidding me!" Tony protested. "I hate hiking."

"I know." Gibbs gave him an infuriating grin.

"There aren't any horses around, are there?" Tony glanced around. "The one thing I hate more than hiking is riding."

"No horses. Just a good, long hike and then some camping."

Tony gazed at him in disbelief. "Camping? We're going camping? Don't I have a say in this?"

"Nope." Gibbs threw the rucksack at him; it was so heavy Tony almost dropped it.

"Is this some weird Marine thing?" he asked, as Gibbs began fastening his own rucksack onto his back.

"Nope. This is a Gibbs thing. Come on. We have some distance to travel before sunset."

Tony glared after him as Gibbs set off without a second glance. Finally, with a resigned sigh, he pulled the rucksack onto his shoulders and set off after him.

They walked for what felt like miles to Tony's city-slicker legs. He was fit enough for his NCIS work, but he never kidded himself he was in Gibbs's league. The man was still Gunnery Sergeant-fit, and could probably drop to the floor and do a hundred push-ups without breaking into a sweat.

Tony trailed along behind him, feeling increasingly angry. They still had a few days vacation time left, and Gibbs wanted to waste it communing with the great outdoors? What the hell for? What was so great about nature anyway?

They climbed up the side of a mountain – or that's what it felt like to Tony - and he arrived at the long, flat summit panting, the sweat trickling uncomfortably down his back, to find that Gibbs had removed his rucksack and was busy unfurling his bedroll.

"What took you so long?" Gibbs demanded. Tony glared at him.

"This isn't fun."

"Sure it is. Look at the great view."

Gibbs pointed, and Tony had to concede, grudgingly, that it **was** a great view. The countryside stretched out for miles beneath them, and the sun was hanging low in the sky, bathing everything in orange light. Tony fought to get his rucksack off and then turned to find Gibbs had finished with his bedroll and was busy unpacking some food.

"Tell me you at least brought a tent," Tony grumbled.

"Nope." Gibbs grinned at him. "There's nothing like spending the night looking up at the stars."

"We could get eaten by wild animals," Tony complained. Gibbs rolled his eyes.

"I brought my rifle, but somehow I think we'll be safe, Tony." He put a hand on Tony's shoulder and pushed him over to the edge. "What do you see?" he asked.

"Nature?" Tony shuddered.

"How does it make you feel?" Gibbs was giving him an oddly intent stare.

"Like I want to kill someone, preferably you right now," Tony muttered.

"What did you say?" Gibbs demanded. Tony stared at him; this was weird.

"That I want to kill someone?" Tony repeated more hesitantly.

"What's the problem, Tony?" Gibbs asked, getting in his space. Tony thought about it for a moment.

"This is my vacation too, Jethro, and you didn't ask me if I wanted to spend it hiking up some fucking great hill. You might be my boss at work, but we're not at work now."

"So, you're pissed with me?" Gibbs was nose to nose with him now, completely getting in his face. "It doesn't sound like it."

"Yeah, I'm pissed with you," Tony muttered. "Kinda." He didn't like the way this was heading.

"I never see you get angry," Gibbs told him. "Or at least never with anyone but yourself. You're entitled to be angry with me. You're right – I didn't ask you if you wanted to come out here."

"Why the hell did you bring me here then?" Tony asked sullenly.

"To get you mad. Get mad for me, Tony. We are out here, right in the middle of nowhere – there's nobody for miles around. Nobody can hear you. Yell at me. Scream at me. Just find the anger, and get mad."

Tony thought about it for a moment and then shrugged. "It's not really my thing."

"Sure it is. I once heard you yelling at some little kid inside your own head – why can't you

yell at me?" Gibbs demanded.

Tony frowned. "That was different."

"Why? Because he was a defenceless little kid who couldn't fight back? Bullshit!"

"No – because...I don't know..." Tony shrugged helplessly.

"You're angry, Tony. You're mad as hell," Gibbs told him. "I know you are – but you won't let yourself feel it."

"What's the point?" Tony snapped. "It won't change anything."

"It's part of what's holding you back. Tony – some men once took you to a hotel room and raped you, repeatedly. That wasn't your fault. You were just a kid. It was their fault. Get mad about it, the way you got mad at Quinn back there. Get mad about what happened to you. Find that anger and get it out."

Tony gazed at him helplessly, feeling both sullen and confused. "I'm not like you. I don't growl and snarl whenever I'm pissed off," he muttered.

"No – you just turn it in on yourself," Gibbs said. He moved a step closer. Tony stood his ground. "Do it, Tony. Shout, scream - lose control. It's safe. I'm here, and I can take anything you throw at me."

Tony looked around. Gibbs was right about one thing – they were in the middle of nowhere.

"Remember how good it felt back there," Gibbs said softly. "Remember how you felt, finally standing up to Roy Quinn and telling that twisted bastard the truth? Where's that anger, Tony? It's in there. I know it is." He put his hand on Tony's stomach, and Tony heaved in a deep breath. "I can feel it," Gibbs hissed. "You can feel it too, can't you, Tony?"

Tony found his breathing coming in deep, harsh gasps. There was a fury inside him, buried so deep he hadn't even been aware of it. He never got angry; even when he was annoyed he didn't do more than snap. He was always in control. He never let his feelings out – he had to keep them contained, in case someone got hurt. His rage felt so big, and went so deep, that he thought it might tear him apart if he let it out.

"That kid wasn't to blame for what happened to him, Tony," Gibbs continued, his hand warm against Tony's belly. "You weren't to blame for it. Those men were. Scream at them, Tony. Scream at the pain, and the fear, and the confusion, and the degradation. Scream at the injustice of it. Scream it out."

"I feel like an idiot," Tony said, pushing Gibbs's hand away, clamping down hard on the rage inside and trying to make it go away again.

"So?" Gibbs growled. "I'm the only one here to see you. I'll scream with you if you want." He threw back his head and yelled at the darkening sky overhead. Tony watched him, fascinated. Gibbs always seemed to find it so easy to access that anger inside.

Tony opened his mouth and managed to squeeze out a small growl. It sounded pathetic to his own ears, like a cub trying to emulate a wolf.

"What the hell was that?" Gibbs taunted.

Tony felt a surge of anger, and he opened his mouth and screamed. The scream seemed to rip out of his belly and fly across the deserted landscape, taking him by surprise. God, it felt good!

Tony paused for breath and then opened his chest and yelled again. Gibbs was right – he **was** angry. He hadn't realised just how angry until he got up here and started yelling. The fury felt like a twister that started in his stomach and emerged from his lungs in a constant flowing torrent. He surrendered to it, flinging out his arms and roaring out his rage.

Tony turned around and around, screaming at the top of his lungs, furious with the world. He was angry with his mother for dying, and he was angry with his father for not being there for him. He raged against the injustice of what had happened to him, and he yelled out his fury towards Quinn, and Parrish, and Marconi for what they had done to him.

A warm breeze rustled through his hair, and he felt his shirt billowing out around him. Gibbs was there, goading him on and guarding him at one and the same time, his blue eyes shining in the orange half-light.

The anger was so massive, and went so deep, that once he started letting it out he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to stop. He thought that maybe he'd just have to stand on this hillside forever, yelling at the sky. His body was a conduit for his fury, and it just kept rising up inside, on and on, too big to be contained.

He yelled, he hollered, he shouted, and he raged. He lost control. He prowled around the hillside, screaming until his throat hurt and his voice was hoarse. He wasn't aware of himself any more – he was just a ball of burning anger, blazing so brightly he was sure he had to be visible for miles around. And through it all there was Gibbs, standing beside him, watching over him, and keeping him safe.

Tony wasn't aware of time passing. He wasn't aware of anything except his own fury. Then, suddenly, it was over. He found himself standing with his arms outstretched, a shout dying in his throat. His body felt weightless, as if all that anger had been weighing him down, making him heavy.

"You done?"

Gibbs came up behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder. Tony swung around, knocking the hand away. He seized Gibbs, and for a moment he wasn't sure if he wanted to scream at him or hit him, and then he realised that he didn't want to do either of those things. Another need rose up inside him, just as powerful as his rage had been earlier, and he pushed Gibbs over towards the bedding.

"Fuck me," Tony whispered urgently into Gibbs's ear. "Fuck me into the ground. Fuck me so hard that I can't think about anything else. Fuck me. Please...fuck me."

Gibbs didn't say a word; he just began stripping Tony of his clothes. When he was done, he pushed Tony down onto the bedding. Tony pulled Gibbs down on top of him, undressing him urgently. Gibbs was solid and powerful, his scent familiar and reassuring. He kissed Tony hard on the mouth, and Tony lost himself in the sensation. He wasn't thinking now; he was just feeling.

Gibbs moved over him, caressing him with his mouth and fingers, igniting Tony's senses wherever he touched. The stars were starting to come out above, little pinpricks of light in the almost-dark sky. Tony arched up against Gibbs, his body acting on instinct. He wasn't watching from the sidelines any more – he was lost in the moment, and it felt so incredibly good.

Gibbs took control, and Tony surrendered to his expert touch. It was such a relief to just let go, and let Gibbs take care of him. Gibbs's hands and mouth were everywhere, touching him all over, and this time it didn't freak him out – it turned him on. He opened his legs to allow Gibbs's slippery fingers inside his body, and then mewled, wanting more. Gibbs grabbed his arms and pushed them above his head, and Tony went limp and angled up his head for a kiss. Gibbs covered his body with his own, and kissed him hard, exploring Tony's mouth forcefully with his tongue. Then he drew back, his eyes holding a question.

Tony nodded, not needing to even think about it. Gibbs kissed him again and then grasped Tony's buttocks in his hands and positioned his hard cock between them. Slowly, carefully, he began pushing inside. Gibbs was big, but Tony's body stretched easily to accommodate him. Tony gave a moan of pleasure - it felt so incredibly *good*.

"Okay?" Gibbs asked, looking down at him.

Tony nodded. "More!" he panted.

Gibbs grinned and thrust forward, surging into him with more force. Tony wrapped his legs around Gibbs's back, wanting to pull him inside as deep as he'd go. Gibbs paused, buried to the hilt inside Tony. Tony nodded again, and Gibbs moved his hips back and then thrust forward again, even more powerfully. Tony gasped as white lights exploded inside his head.

"Oh shit," he whimpered.

"More again?" Gibbs asked.

"Mmmmm," Tony replied incoherently.

Gibbs drew back and then surged forward once more, filling him completely. Tony lay there, gazing up at Gibbs blindly. He wasn't aware of anything except how good it felt to have Gibbs moving inside him. Gibbs thrust into him deeply, every inward movement of his hips sparking flares of rippling pleasure through Tony's body. Gibbs's gaze never left his face as he thrust in and out, and Gibbs's hand was firm on his cock, stroking it in time to the movements of his hips. Tony didn't have to do anything except enjoy. He was boneless, weightless - and totally not in control.

Tony screamed again, but this time he wasn't angry. This time he was ecstatic. He screamed out his orgasm as every single nerve-ending in his body exploded at the same time. He

thought he was coming, but he wasn't sure because everything seemed hazy. There was just him, and Gibbs, and the stars above, and rolling waves of intense pleasure.

Tony's screams became whimpers and then they slowly died away. Gibbs rested himself on his elbows, his cock still lodged deep inside Tony's ass, and kissed Tony tenderly on the mouth. Tony moaned into the kiss, and Gibbs held him there, kissing him for what seemed like hours, until the sky had turned completely black overhead. Then, finally, he rolled off him and pulled the spare blanket over them both.

"I fucking love you," Tony whimpered.

Gibbs grinned and stroked his fingers lazily down Tony's chest. "Love you too, Tony."

"I still hate hiking, and nature, and camping, and all that shit, but I fucking love you - and I fucking love being fucked by you," Tony sighed.

"That's a lot of fucking." Gibbs leaned over and kissed his mouth again.

"Yeah." Tony grinned stupidly. "And you gotta promise me there will be a whole lot more."

Gibbs laughed. "Hell yeah! That's something I can definitely promise."

~*~

Terry Dyer glanced up at the apartment block as he walked past. He often came this way. He told himself that it was the quickest route to work, but he knew there was another reason. Every time he passed by, he always looked up and counted along the windows to Tony's apartment. He often wondered what had happened to Tony. They had shared such a strange, dramatic night. It was like catching a tiny glimpse of a TV show and wondering how it had ended. There hadn't been any sign of Tony though, in all these months. The drapes were always open, even when it was dark, and there were never any lights on in the apartment.

Terry glanced away from the window, and his eye was caught by a man loading a box into a car in the apartment parking lot. He was wearing faded, ripped jeans, a red tee shirt, and a baseball cap with the letters "NCIS" emblazoned across the front. Terry paused, in shocked recognition, and at the same moment the man looked up and saw him.

"Hiya!" Terry said feebly. Tony gazed at him.

"Hi," he said uncertainly. "Uh...have we met?"

"Kind of. Once." Terry made a face. "Typical – he doesn't even remember you, Terry. I remember you though, Tony. Of course, you were only conscious for the first half hour of our acquaintance, so I suppose I have to forgive you for forgetting me."

Tony flushed and made a face. "Shit. Sorry. I remember now. Not the best night of my life." He sounded apologetic at least.

"I always wondered if you were okay," Terry said. "Nobody called. I gave Mr. Grumpy my

phone number, but I never heard anything."

"Mr. Grumpy?" Tony looked confused for a moment, and then his face split into a delighted grin. "Oh man, I can't wait to use that one on him."

"Unwise, DiNozzo," a voice said, and both Terry and Tony jumped. Gibbs appeared seemingly from nowhere, carrying a box. Like Tony, he was dressed in jeans and a tee shirt. Gibbs dumped the box in the car and turned back to Terry. "Mr. Dyer. How are you doing?"

"Fine. Nice to see someone remembers me," Terry said pointedly. "Although, to be fair, I might have been on a one night stand with you, Tony, but I ended up talking more to him."

Terry glanced at Gibbs. The guy looked a hell of a lot more relaxed today than he had that night. He still looked like he could kill you with a flick of his hand, or that icy stare of his, but right now he was smiling and looked happy.

"Are you okay now, Tony?" Terry asked, with a little flutter of his eyelashes.

"Yeah." Tony glanced at Gibbs, who rested a territorial hand on his shoulder.

"Oh. Right. I see," Terry sighed. "I wondered why I hadn't seen you in the clubs since that night. I guess you don't need to pick up those Mr. Grumpy clones any more now you've got the real thing, Tony. God help you."

Gibbs gave a wry chuckle, shaking his head. "You and I never did exactly hit it off, did we, Mr. Dyer?"

"What the hell happened while I was out of it?" Tony asked, looking from Terry to Gibbs and back again, a confused expression on his face.

"Oh, he was just jealous of me," Terry said. Gibbs laughed out loud at that, and it was so unexpected coming from a man like Gibbs that Terry couldn't stop himself barking out a little laugh too; Gibbs's laugh was surprisingly infectious. "You moving, Tony?" Terry asked, glancing at the boxes.

"No...I kind of moved ages ago. Just never got around to clearing out the rest of my stuff. Should have done it before, but we were too busy with...things." Tony shrugged. "I'm living with Mr. Grumpy now," he added, grinning sideways at Gibbs. Gibbs grinned back at him and moved his hand. Tony hunched his shoulders, as if expecting a slap, but instead Gibbs just stroked his hair. Tony laughed out loud and relaxed. There was something so easy between them - so right. Terry envied them.

"Well, good luck," he said. "Nice to, uh, bump into you again." He waved his hand and began walking away.

"Hey, Terry," Tony called after him. Terry turned, and Tony gave him a megawatt smile that made his heart skip a beat. "Just wanted to say thanks – for not running out on me that night. For, you know, taking care of me, and for calling Jethro."

"Jethro?" Terry raised a surprised eyebrow in Gibbs's direction. "That's his name? Wow, the

world is full of surprises," he muttered to himself. "And you're welcome, Tony. I'm glad you're okay."

Terry turned and continued walking. He glanced back over his shoulder and saw them closing up the trunk of the car. Then Tony turned and looked up at his old apartment window.

"I just realised I never slept here again after that night," he murmured. "Feels like a lifetime ago." He glanced through the car window. "Hey, where are my black satin sheets?" he demanded. "Are we missing a box?"

"Aw, did I forget to bring that box down?" Gibbs asked.

Tony's eyes narrowed. "I spent some damn good nights on those sheets, Mr. Grumpy."

"Call me that again, and you can sleep on them again – in the spare room."

The teasing banter faded behind him as Terry passed out of earshot. He knew that he wouldn't need to come this way again. Handsome princes never did end up with guys like him anyway. He should know that by now.

~*~

McGee was sure it was ridiculous to feel nervous about going to work, but he did. It was like the first day back at school after the summer break. They had all been working on the fallout from that stolen laptop and camera for so long that he was sure it would feel strange to go back to their old jobs.

Director Vance had assigned a different team to cover for them at crime scenes for the past few months. McGee knew that he'd offered Tony the job as team leader, but Tony had turned it down. McGee still wasn't exactly sure why, but he suspected that Tony hadn't wanted to be split up from his team, even if he wasn't able to work on the pedophile cases with them. More specifically, McGee was sure that Tony hadn't wanted to be far away from Gibbs. That was understandable – after hearing what Tony had been through as a kid, McGee had a whole different perspective on his obsession with Gibbs. He'd always been aware of it – hell, anyone with eyes had been aware of it – and they'd all teased Tony about it over the years. Now, it kind of made more sense.

Still, it was going to be weird working with Tony again. McGee wasn't sure whether they could ever go back to the way they had been before. It seemed like such a long time ago, and they all knew so much more about Tony now. McGee longed for the old days of easy banter, but they seemed long gone. These past few months had been intense, and there hadn't been much time for goofing off. Tony had only been a semi-detached team member for that time, sitting at his desk but working his own cases, so they had interacted with him much less. Annoying though he could be, McGee now saw exactly why the team needed Tony so much. He provided light relief, and for the past few months that had been missing.

The elevator pinged, and the doors opened. McGee squared his shoulders and then walked out into the squad room.

Tony was sitting with his feet up on his desk, sipping a cup of coffee as he flicked through a magazine, and Ziva was perched beside him, reading the magazine over his shoulder, sipping her own coffee.

"Hey, McProbie! Coffee!" Tony pointed to the cup on the side of the desk without taking his eyes off the magazine.

"Why thank you, Tony," McGee said, with a surprised smile. Maybe it wouldn't be the same as before. Maybe it would be better. McGee certainly liked the idea of a new, improved Tony. On the other hand, McGee was sure he could see pictures of scantily clad people in the magazine, so maybe Tony hadn't changed all that much.

He took a sip of his coffee and then spat it out again. Tony and Ziva burst out laughing.

"Soap? You put soap in my coffee, Tony?" McGee tried to make his tone sound threatening, but he was barely able to keep a straight face. God, it felt good to be laughing with Tony again, instead of tiptoeing around him!

At that moment, Gibbs swept into the room, and Tony almost fell out of his chair in his hurry to stuff his magazine hastily into his desk drawer. Gibbs went over to his desk, grabbed his gun and badge, and then made for the elevator.

"Come on, people, gear up," he said impatiently. They all scrambled to grab their stuff and follow him.

"What we got, Boss?" McGee asked, wiping coffee off his tie.

"Dead petty officer in an alley outside a bar," Gibbs replied as the elevator door opened.

"Why is it always the petty officers that get themselves killed?" Tony mused as they stepped inside. "Why not the lieutenants? You should start a spreadsheet on it, McGeek."

Gibbs reached out and slapped the back of his head soundly.

"Ow!" Tony rubbed his head. "What was that for? I'm right about the petty officers!"

"Maybe." Gibbs shrugged. "But that was for reading trashy magazines on my time, DiNozzo."

"Yes, Boss. Thank you, Boss," Tony said promptly, still rubbing his head.

The elevator doors closed, and McGee's face creased into a massive grin. Just like that, everything seemed to be back to normal.

~*~

Ziva glanced around the crime scene. The dead petty officer was a woman in her late twenties, with long dark hair.

"She was pretty," Ziva mused.

"Yeah." McGee took a photograph and then paused and grinned. "Hmm. Feels good to be back."

"I doubt our dead petty officer would agree with you, McGee," Ziva pointed out.

She took in a dozen different details that she wouldn't have noticed a couple of years ago; the position of the dead woman's body; the slightly paler band of skin on her finger where a wedding ring might once have been; and the blood on her knuckles.

Tony was kneeling beside the body. He got up when Gibbs came over.

"What you got for me, DiNozzo?" Gibbs asked.

"Our dead petty officer is called Sara Sharma. She was drinking in the bar last night. According to the barman, she saw a guy being abusive to his girlfriend and got involved. There was a fight, and the barman threw them all out – that was the last he saw of her."

Ziva watched as Gibbs wrote something in his notebook.

"Is Tony still staying with Gibbs?" McGee asked her in an undertone. She frowned at him. "I mean, isn't that kind of weird?" McGee whispered. "I could understand it a few months ago when Tony was falling apart, but now?"

Ziva watched as Gibbs said something to Tony, and Tony arched an amused eyebrow in reply. They shared a momentary joke. Ziva frowned thoughtfully. Something had changed between them; something subtle. Tony was still Tony, but he seemed less fidgety now and far more relaxed. He wasn't pulling faces at Gibbs or getting in his way any more.

"Have you not figured it out yet, McGee?" she asked. McGee gave her a startled look. "Tony is no longer trying to attract Gibbs's attention," she said softly.

McGee glanced over at them. "You're right. But what has that got to do with him still staying at Gibbs's house?"

"Tony does not need to attract Gibbs's attention any more," Ziva told him, with a little smile. "Because now he has it - and he knows it."

"Oh." McGee still looked stumped. Then the realisation hit him. "Oh!" he said, looking back at them again. "Really? Tony and Gibbs? I mean, I had noticed they seem pretty close, and I've seen Gibbs put his arm around Tony a couple of times, but I assumed he was just looking out for him." He looked over at them again with a frown. "Are you sure?"

Ziva smiled. "Yes, I am sure. I am a trained investigator. I see these things." She laughed at the bemused look on his face and patted his arm. "Tony isn't staying with Gibbs any more, McGee," she said softly. "He lives there now."

"My poor dear girl. How did such a pretty thing meet such a sad end, hmm?" Ducky mused, as he worked on the body in front of him.

He glanced up as a shadow fell over the corpse. "Ah, Jethro. Punctual as ever."

"You said you had something for me, Duck?" Gibbs asked.

"I do, yes. I have empathy," Ducky said. He watched in delight as Gibbs gave him an entirely predictable glare. "Empathy," Ducky repeated. Gibbs made an impatient motion with his head, but Ducky had no intention of letting him off lightly. It had been months since they'd had a chance to chat over a dead body, and he intended to positively relish the moment. "Empathy - the power of understanding and imaginatively entering into another person's feelings," Ducky explained.

"I know what it means, Duck," Gibbs said, with just a trace of a sigh. Clearly he knew he wasn't going to be allowed a quick getaway today.

"Our dead petty officer has evidence of several old injuries," Ducky explained. "Scars on her back, fractured wrist, broken nose...I would go so far as to say that she was regularly beaten. And judging by this..." Ducky held up her hand and pointed to a slightly paler area of skin on her ring finger. "I would say that she was once married - but not any more."

"Your point, Ducky?"

"I'm getting to it. Slowly." Ducky smiled happily to himself. He loved his friend dearly, but sometimes Jethro was far too impatient. "I spoke to Anthony earlier. He said our dead petty officer got in the way of an arguing couple at a bar last night. Empathy, my dear, Jethro. This poor young woman got involved in a fight that was nothing to do with her because she had suffered an abusive relationship herself. I've heard that it is often the case that those people who have known the greatest pain are most able to empathise with the suffering of others."

He glanced at Gibbs sharply.

"For example, I have often found Anthony to be an extremely empathetic person, underneath all the silliness. And I am glad that in his hour of need there was someone nearby who had experienced great suffering himself and was therefore able to give Anthony the time, space, and support he needed in order to heal."

"Is this going somewhere?" Gibbs asked impatiently.

"I believe it already did," Ducky said softly. "I'm not blind, Jethro, and nor am I easily shocked. I am delighted that you have found happiness, and even more delighted by who you have found happiness with."

Gibbs raised an eyebrow. "You called me down here to tell me that?"

Ducky grinned. "Yes I did."

Gibbs rolled his eyes and strode towards the door. He paused when he got there, and glanced back. "I read that book you told me about, Ducky."

"Hmm?" Ducky frowned.

"The one about the fox?"

"Ah, *The Little Prince*! Technically it's not actually about the fox, Jethro. In fact, he's a relatively minor character. What did you think of it?"

"Irritated the hell out of me."

Ducky laughed. "Ah, I rather thought it wasn't your kind of thing. It is full of wise little sayings though. *'It is the time you have wasted for your rose that makes your rose so important'*," he quoted happily.

"Roses, foxes, princes, sheep – couldn't understand a word of it," Gibbs grunted.

Ducky shook his head. "Just don't neglect that boy, Jethro, the way you did some of your wives. You can be frighteningly single-minded at times."

Gibbs grinned. "No intention of neglecting him, Duck, but thanks for the unsolicited advice. As usual." Then he turned and strode out.

Ducky watched him go with a fond smile and then turned back to his dead petty officer.

"*'One runs the risk of weeping a little, if one lets himself be tamed'*," he quoted to her. "You know, my dear, I was never really sure whether the fox tamed the prince, or the prince tamed the fox," he mused, as he returned to his work.

~*~

"What you got for me, Abs?" Gibbs demanded as he walked through the door. Abby turned, with a delighted smile. It had been just over a week, and she hadn't stopped smiling in all that time. She loved having her team back together.

"Well...you didn't give me much to work with," she told him.

"I know."

"But I'm good – I mean, **really** good."

"I know that too." He handed her a Caf-Pow.

"Thank you, Gibbs!" She took a happy sip and then returned to her keyboard, fingers chasing over it at top speed. "So, I ran all the tests I could think of and the upshot is..." She pressed one final key and a picture came up onscreen with the words "Positive Match" flashing over it in big green lettering.

Gibbs's expression changed, and he gazed at the screen intently. "It's him?" he asked quietly.

"It's him," she said, nodding.

"Good work, Abs." He leaned over and kissed her cheek and then strode towards the door.

"Where are you going?" she called after him. He paused and turned to her, one eyebrow raised. "Okay. Stupid question. But what about the case?"

"Tony is perfectly capable of handling the case."

She was familiar with the dark look in his eyes, but it made her sigh anyway.

"Oh no – now you've gone all scary again," she said, making a face. "And that's a shame, Gibbs, because I like the way you've been all week."

"The way I've been all week?"

"You know – kind of relaxed and smiley. I just assumed it was because of all the great sex you're having with Tony, and I'm so happy for you, Gibbs! And for Tony, because if anyone deserves great sex it's him, but...uh...did I just say too much?" She winced.

"Uh-huh." His blue eyes were glacial, but she saw just a glimmer of amusement in there somewhere.

"Sorry." She put her hand over her mouth. "Is it a secret? I just assumed everyone knew. I mean, there are some things you don't have to be a forensics expert to figure out."

"It isn't a secret, Abby, but it's not..." He grimaced. "Just keep the sex comments to yourself, okay?"

"Okay." She drew her finger over her mouth, like she was fastening a zip. He shook his head and then turned and strode out of the room. "Be careful!" she called after him.

She put her fingers in her hair, twirled her pigtails anxiously, and then turned back to Major Mass-Spec.

Half an hour later she heard footsteps, and Tony walked into the room.

"What's going on, Abs?" he asked. She frowned.

"No – it's 'what you got for me, Abs'?" she said, in her mock-Gibbs deep voice. "Gibbs left you in charge of the case, didn't he?"

"Yeah – but I'm not trying to be Gibbs, Abby."

"You're not?" She frowned at him. "But you always do Gibbs when Gibbs isn't here."

"I used to, but now I'm doing Tony." He grinned at her. "And Tony says, 'What's going on, Abs?'. That's his catchphrase. Good, huh?"

She gazed at him. "I think it could use some work. Also, you should stop referring to yourself

in the third person because that's just freaky."

"Understood." He grinned at her, and she launched herself at him for a hug. She had mostly got the hugs down to a manageable two a day, but it was hard. There were times when she felt that she just *had* to hug him, and he seemed okay with that.

"So what *have* you got for me?" he asked, with a resigned sigh, when she finally released him. She walked back to her workstation and was about to fill him in when she realised that he'd gone very quiet. She looked around to see him gazing at the picture onscreen, all the blood draining from his face.

"Oh shit! Tony, I'm sorry, you weren't supposed to see that." She slammed her hand down on the keyboard, and the picture disappeared.

"That picture – that was Marco...Gianni Marconi - wasn't it?" he asked quietly. She winced.

"Yes. Sorry," she said again.

"And Gibbs just disappeared in the middle of a case."

"Yes," she sighed.

"Gibbs never disappears in the middle of a case."

"No. He doesn't." She twisted her pigtails anxiously in her fingers again.

"You gonna tell me where he went?"

"Uh, no." She made a face. "Gibbs would kill me if I said anything, and you want me to live, don't you, Tony?"

His expression softened. "Of course I do, Abby."

He reached up and rubbed the back of his head absently. This was a danger signal they were all familiar with by now. She grabbed his hand and squeezed it.

"Sister Rosita has been asking after you. If you're not doing anything later, would you like to go bowling with us?"

"Yeah. Okay." He smiled at her, but those shadows were back in his eyes. She felt honoured that he didn't feel he had to hide them around her any more. "Hey, Boy 43." She pulled him down into another hug, and he put his arms around her and held on tight. "It's okay. I've got you," she said softly.

~*~

Nurse Roberts glanced at the ID that was flashed at her and then at the man holding it.

"You're Agent Gibbs?" she asked. She'd never met a federal agent before, and this one was

grim-faced and intimidating.

"Yeah. I phoned earlier." He put away his ID and gazed at her expectantly.

"You were asking about Gianni?"

His jaw tightened, and he gave a curt nod.

"Well, he's in intensive care. I didn't realise his case was being investigated by the government."

Gibbs frowned. "His case?"

"Yes – isn't that why you're here? Because of what happened to him?"

"What did happen to him?" Gibbs asked.

"Oh – I thought you knew. He's just a harmless old homeless guy, but a few months ago he was brought in with third degree burns over half his body."

A muscle in Gibbs's jaw twitched. "Do you know how he was injured?"

"Well, I assumed that's what you're here to investigate. The local police think he was deliberately set on fire."

"Any idea who did it?"

"Nobody's sure, but there are rumours it was a bunch of kids."

Gibbs gave a frightening little smile. "Let's hope so," he said. Nurse Roberts frowned.

"I'm sorry?" she murmured, assuming she'd misheard.

"Can I see him?" Gibbs asked.

"Sure." She led him towards the room where Gianni was being cared for. "He can't really talk much though – his lungs were badly damaged by smoke inhalation. Also..." She paused, one hand on the door handle. "I don't know how familiar you are with burns victims, Agent Gibbs, but you should prepare yourself. He's in a bad way. He's in terrible pain, so we've put him on a constant morphine drip, but that means he's pretty much out of it for most of the time. We're just offering palliative care really – he won't be with us for much longer."

"I understand." Gibbs nodded.

"It's such a shame," she sighed. "Poor old guy. What on earth did he do to deserve this? I honestly wonder what the world is coming to. I mean, what harm did he ever do anyone?"

Gibbs didn't reply. He just gave her another one of those tight, disturbing smiles as she opened the door to Gianni's room.

~*~

Gibbs walked over to the bed and looked at the man lying on it. His skin was red and oozing in some places and looked like it had been melted off his body in others. He was a mess.

"I did warn you," Nurse Roberts sighed. "Gianni – you have a visitor," she said loudly.

The man on the bed moved his head a fraction, and Gibbs found himself looking into one dark eye.

"We couldn't save his other eye," Nurse Roberts told him.

"Could I have a few moments alone with him?" Gibbs asked.

"Sure." She nodded and walked towards the door. Gibbs followed her there and shut the door behind her. Then he returned to the bed. Most of the skin on Marconi's body had been badly burned, but there were patches that were untouched. There was a small area of unharmed skin on his neck and another on his wrist. Gibbs glanced at it, and his jaw tightened as he saw a tattoo – three red droplets of blood dripping down Marconi's forearm, part of a larger tattoo that had been burned away.

Gibbs sat down on the chair beside the bed and opened up the bag he'd brought with him. Then he leaned over and spoke directly into the man's ear.

"You don't know me, Marconi, but I know all about you. You're dying, and to be honest, there's nothing I really want to do make that happen any faster. I don't want to put you out of your misery. I just want to tell you a story – but I want you to be fully conscious when I do, so I'm going to remove this."

Gibbs leaned forward and removed the morphine drip from Marconi's arm. Then he leaned back and took a file out of his bag.

"This story goes back a long way, Marconi," he said quietly. "I'd start with, 'Once upon a time', but it isn't really a fairy story - although there are children involved. It belongs more in the horror genre I think."

He opened the file and showed it to Marconi. The man's one eye flickered. "I don't know if you remember this kid. I don't know his name, but we'll call him Boy 51. He's Vietnamese. You should remember him – you had sex with him, and you murdered him."

Marconi made a gurgling sound in the back of his throat. Gibbs leaned forward.

"What's that? I didn't hear you."

"Fuck...you..." Marconi mouthed. Gibbs grinned.

"You don't like my story? That's a shame. I have several more I want to tell you. Let's move on to another boy. We do have a name for him. His name is Anthony DiNozzo, and you raped him several times. You hurt him so much the first time you raped him that he had to be drugged the next time just so you wouldn't rip him up again."

He turned to another page in the file. The pictures had all been cropped, so they were just faces – Gibbs didn't want Marconi taking any kind of vicarious pleasure from looking at them.

"This is Tony. Do you remember him?"

Marconi's one good eye flashed at him, and Gibbs saw that he did. "Are you in pain now I've taken away your morphine, Marconi?" he asked. "Tony was in pain when you raped him. You made him bleed."

Marconi made a gasping sound in the back of his throat, and he gestured feebly towards the morphine drip.

"We caught Parrish and Quinn," Gibbs told him, ignoring the gesture. "They're in prison right now, and that's where you'd be heading too if it wasn't for the fact that a different kind of justice seems to have caught up with you instead. Nurse Roberts said a bunch of kids set fire to you? Rough justice, sure – but you have to appreciate the irony."

He gave a tight little grin.

"There are a lot of kids in this file, Marconi, and we don't have names and stories for all of them, but I want you to see a picture of each and every single one of them before you die. It might take awhile." Gibbs shrugged. "But you can do without the morphine while we do it, can't you? I know it must be painful, but then so is bleeding internally because some bastard twice your size raped you."

Marconi's breathing was more shallow and pained now, so Gibbs guessed he was really missing the morphine.

"I'm sorry I didn't get the chance to arrest you," Gibbs said, conversationally. "But this will have to do. Nurse Roberts says you don't have long to live anyway, and, like I said, I don't want to do anything to put you out of your misery. I hope you linger on in pain for another few weeks. Now...where was I?"

He turned a page in the file. Marconi moved his hand and grabbed Gibbs's wrist. Gibbs leaned forward.

"Fucking...little...brats. Enjoyed...every single...one..." Marconi mouthed. Then he leaned back, a triumphant look in his eye.

"Yeah, I thought you'd say that," Gibbs growled. "That's why this is going to take a couple of hours. If the pain gets too much, you let me know. I won't do anything, but it'll sure as hell make me feel good."

He gestured to the file. "This is Boy 32. His name is Ryan Watson..."

Tony was lying on the couch, dozing, when he heard the front door slam. He looked up as Gibbs walked into the living room. Tony gazed at him searchingly; he looked drained and exhausted but grimly satisfied.

"Hey." Gibbs leaned over to drop a kiss on his head. "You still up?"

"Yeah." Tony grabbed hold of his head and pulled him down so he could kiss his mouth. "Where have you been?" he asked when he released him.

Gibbs shrugged. "Tying up some loose ends," he said evasively.

"Right," Tony said slowly. "And are they all tied up now?"

"Yes." Gibbs nodded firmly. "They are." He stretched, and his back made a little popping sound.

"I saw Marco's photo on Abby's computer screen," Tony said quietly. Gibbs sighed. "Not her fault," Tony added.

"I'm not angry with anyone. I was going to tell you anyway."

"So – are we done? For good this time?" Tony felt his gut clench anxiously.

Gibbs took off his jacket, flung it down on a nearby chair, and then turned to look at Tony again.

"Yeah. We're done," he said. "For good. Gianni Marconi won't be hurting any more kids."

"Want to tell me about it?" Tony asked quietly. He wasn't sure if he wanted to know. Judging by that look in Gibbs's eyes, he probably didn't.

Gibbs shook his head. He ran a hand over his chin, and Tony heard it rasp on the stubble. "Trust me?" he asked.

Tony gazed at him for a long moment, and then, finally, he nodded. "Always," he replied.

~*~

Gibbs gave a tight little grin. "I know it's late, but I need to go work on my boat," he said to Tony.

It felt like a compulsion. He needed to lose himself in the grain of the wood and the smooth feel of it under his fingers. Tony nodded. Gibbs knew he understood – he knew all about the need to lose yourself in something.

Gibbs went upstairs first and got changed into a pair of soft, old, grey sweatpants and his very old, very faded, NIS tee shirt, and then he went to the basement. He paused at the top of the stairs. Tony had got there first and was sitting on the sawdust-strewn armchair in the corner.

Gibbs smiled at him, recognising immediately that he was in the presence of Boy 43. It had taken him awhile to identify the shifts in Tony's personas, but he'd become an expert at it now. He was fascinated by the process Tony had gone through, integrating the shy, introverted boy he'd once been into the extrovert, fun-loving persona he'd adopted to protect himself. Both were recognisably Tony, but the extrovert Tony, always the protector, was usually the more dominant. At work, Tony was pretty much the same as ever, but he allowed Boy 43 to shine through more often than before.

Boy 43 made most of his appearances at home, where he felt safest. He liked to follow Gibbs around and sit, quietly, as close to Gibbs as possible. He was happy to hang out in the basement, saying nothing, just enjoying their time alone together. The extrovert Tony found the boat boring, and either tried to persuade Gibbs to abandon it in favour of sex, or just left him to it and went upstairs to watch his DVDs. Gibbs had offered to get a big plasma screen for the basement, but Tony preferred watching DVDs in the comfort of the living room, and Boy 43 never wanted to watch DVDs when he was in the basement. He preferred to hunker down in the armchair and watch Gibbs working on the boat.

Gibbs didn't mind which of them he was with – at least life was never dull, and he liked spending time with the quiet, sensitive Boy 43 as much as with the more talkative, extrovert Tony.

Gibbs ran down the stairs and poured himself a glass of bourbon. He took a sip and then set to work on his boat. Tony sat there, curled up into a ball on the armchair, eyes half-closed, watching him work. Every now and then, Gibbs paused to take a sip of his drink and tousle Tony's hair, or drop a kiss on his head. Tony didn't speak, but his eyes gleamed at these small gestures of affection.

Gibbs worked well into the night, climbing over the boat, banging in wooden pegs and sanding down the curved prow. He liked the way Tony's eyes followed his every movement. He loved their quiet intimacy, and the way neither of them felt the need to fill the silence.

Gibbs allowed the peace to soothe him and slowly dissolve the cold, hard knot of vengeance he'd nursed in his belly for so long. It was over. The bad guys had been dealt with. Justice had been done. Tony was safe. He would always carry the psychological scars of what had been done to him, but he was over the worst of it. He'd faced up to it in a way that made Gibbs proud. He'd been right, that night back at Tony's apartment, to describe him as brave. He was. Gibbs thought he was the bravest person he'd ever known, and he'd known a few.

Gibbs's glanced over at Tony and saw that he was fast asleep, still curled up in the armchair. Gibbs smiled, and grabbed the blanket he kept under the boat. He shook out the worst of the sawdust and then gently placed it over Tony.

It hadn't been easy. When he'd made that promise to Tony, all those months ago, that he'd stick by him every step of the way, he hadn't realised just how tough it would be. He hadn't once considered walking away though. Loving Tony came as easy to him as breathing, no matter how much it had hurt at times. And it had hurt. It still did sometimes. But with the pain had come greater rewards than he'd ever expected.

He'd forgotten how good it felt to be in love. Ever since Shannon's death, he'd kept his heart frozen and aloof behind the high, cold walls he'd built to keep himself safe. Only Tony's

heart-breaking vulnerability had persuaded him to venture out and take a risk. Now, looking at the sleeping man in the armchair, he was so damn relieved that he had.

That reminded him of something. He took his cell phone out of his pocket and dialed a number. It was late, and he wasn't expecting anyone to pick up, so he wasn't surprised when his call went straight to voicemail.

"Hey, Walt, it's Gibbs," he said, speaking quietly so as not to wake Tony. "That thing we were talking about a few months ago - the thing you kicked my ass about? Well, I took your advice, and it all worked out fine in the end, so tell Cyndi she can stop bugging you about it."

He paused and looked at Tony sleeping in the chair, a little sprinkling of sawdust in his hair.

"Oh – and Walt? Thanks."

The End

**I have to say, this one took a lot out of me. Your feedback is always much appreciated :-
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