

Ten Years On by Xanthe

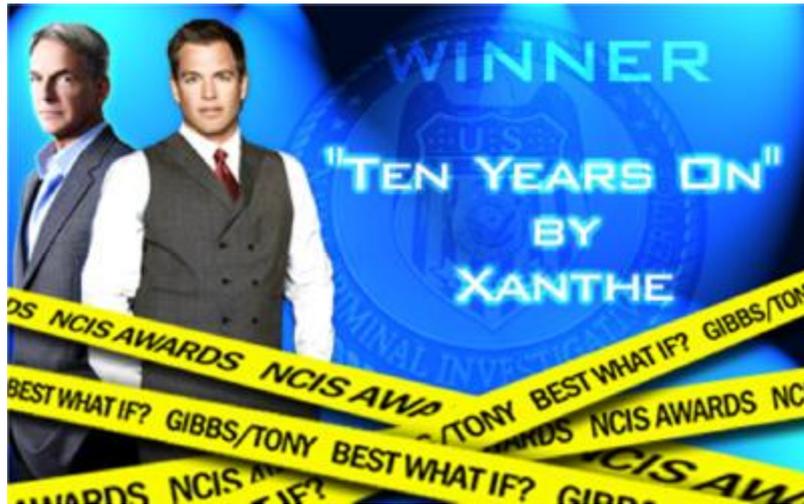


Story archived: <http://www.xanthe.org/ten-years-on/>

Story Notes:

Warnings: Not a deathfic but some characters are dead when the story begins.

Thanks as always to Bluespirit, the most fabulous pink sparkly girl in the land, for the beta and the lovely graphic. Also a big thank you to my other betas, Nikita and Aisling for their considerable help and useful suggestions. All mistakes are mine.



NCIS Awards, 2009

1. **Ten Years on Part 1** by Xanthe

2. **Part 2** by Xanthe

Ten Years on Part 1 by Xanthe

Tim McGee stood outside MTAC, resting his arms on the railing, gazing down at the squad room. He wasn't happy, and everyone knew he wasn't happy. He had already given the team a bawling out but the main object of his ire hadn't yet returned and he decided he'd wait here until he did. If nothing else it would freak out his staff.

Beneath him, the team all scurried around like so many little ants, aware of his displeasure. They were at least pretending to be busy, but he saw them shoot little glances at him every so often, and he noticed them making several frantic, furtive phone calls, leaving messages when there was no pickup. He stood still, looming over them, a constant presence, intimidating them by sheer force of will – he'd learned that trick from the best and he'd

always been a quick study.

The elevator pinged, and the heads of every single person in the squad room swivelled towards the sound. The air of panic was palpable. Blazing stand-up fights between the director and his senior field agent were rare, but when they happened everyone ran for cover.

McGee's heart did a little flip of relief as Tony DiNozzo's tall, broad frame came into view. At least he was still alive...if a little the worse for wear. He had a cut on his jaw and a bruised cheekbone, and McGee was pretty sure that if he could see Tony's knuckles they'd be torn and bloody.

Tony strode into the squad room and his team got up, like three frightened rabbits.

"Carter – there's a suspect having his fingers taped up downstairs. When the medics are done with him put him in Interrogation Room One and wait for me," Tony ordered.

"How did he break his fingers?" Carter asked.

"Sheer carelessness on his part. There was a doorway and he was going through it even though I asked him very nicely to stop. Somehow the door got shut on his fingers. Accidents happen." Tony shrugged, the malicious gleam in his eye making it clear it had been no accident.

He opened his desk drawer and threw his gun into it, then looked up, a dark expression on his face. "Carter – you're still here, and yet I distinctly remember telling you to be someplace else," he said. Carter looked as if he was going to sink through the floor.

"Uh...I know...uh...I just wanted to find out if I should start the interrogation, Boss?" Carter asked. Tony raised an eyebrow. "No...I shouldn't, because that's your job...you're the boss...I should just put him in the room and sit and wait until you get there."

"Ya think, Carter?" Tony growled, sitting down at his desk – Gibbs's old desk - and clicking onto his emails.

Carter turned and gazed, agonised, at Agent Morris and Agent Banks, who both gazed back with terrified eyes. Then Agent Banks looked away and sat down at his desk – McGee's old desk – and pretended to be busy. McGee made a mental note of the fact that Banks had opted out and left his team to go it alone.

"You tell him," Morris mouthed.

"No - you," Carter mouthed back.

McGee smiled, and bit back a laugh. This was almost like the old days. His smile faded; he missed the old days.

"I want to live," Morris mouthed.

"So do I!" Carter returned.

"I'll shoot you both if one of you doesn't tell me what's going on," Tony said without even looking up from his screen. "You – Morris. Spill."

"Uh, Boss...it's just that the director was here looking for you," she said, with a grimace. "He said that when you came back you were report straight to him."

"Did he now?" Tony glanced up, straight at McGee far above him, and then turned back to his computer screen. "Well, I'm busy," he said, loudly.

"He seemed pretty mad," Morris said. "He uh...he said we'd all be fired if you didn't report straight to his office when you returned."

Tony glanced up again, one eyebrow raised. McGee gazed down at him, steadily, and raised an eyebrow of his own, waiting. Tony glared at him. McGee glared back. Finally, Tony sighed and got up.

"I'll fire you myself if that suspect isn't processed by the time I get back," he snapped at his team. They all scurried off in different directions.

Tony stood there, looking up at him, eyes narrowed threateningly. McGee folded his arms across his chest and tapped his foot. Tony got the message. He swept towards the stairs, took them two at a time, strode along the hallway towards him, and then took it a step too close, invading McGee's personal space.

"You wanted me, *Director*?" he said, in a soft, dangerous tone.

McGee took a step forward, invading his space back in return, so they were now nose to nose. Tony gave him a hard look but McGee stood his ground, unfaltering, eyes blazing, and eventually Tony had the grace to look down.

McGee glanced at the cut on Tony's jaw and his bruised cheekbone but said nothing, still holding the glare. Tony glanced up at him through his eyelashes, eyes admitting defeat, and only when McGee was sure the entire squad room had seen that he'd won this particular altercation and got his AWOL senior field agent under control did McGee speak.

"My office. Now," he said tersely, loud enough for everyone in the squad room to hear, and then he turned on his heel and led the way.

You could have heard a pin drop as they left.

McGee held the door open for Tony to stride through, and then pushed it firmly shut behind him. Slamming doors wasn't his style, even though he was very tempted right now.

"You shouldn't scare the kids like that, Probie," Tony drawled once they were alone, a faint hint of old Tony mischief in his eyes. McGee wished they saw it more often but even so, he wasn't going to let it distract him from making it clear to Tony exactly who ran this agency.

"I'm not the one who scares them," McGee pointed out.

"Are you kidding me? You've been down there doing a Gibbs on them," Tony said. He fished his cell phone out of his pocket. "I don't know what you said to them but I have seventeen calls from them, all begging me to tell them where I am."

"They should have known where you were!" McGee snapped. "That's my point!"

"It's not their fault. I didn't want them to know." Tony sat down in McGee's big black chair and put his feet up on McGee's desk.

"Which brings me to my other point," McGee said. He walked over to his desk and stood behind Tony. "Regulations say that no agent, and that includes you, Special Agent DiNozzo, goes out on an arrest without backup."

"Like Gibbs never did," Tony muttered. McGee slapped the back of his head.

"You're not Gibbs. Now get out of my chair, Tony."

"You only had to ask, Director McGeek," Tony replied, with a grin. He got up, lumbered across the room, and threw himself down on McGee's couch.

"Tony – the rules are there for a reason," McGee said, in a softer tone, sitting down at his desk.

"I know." Tony shrugged.

"This guy you went after – he's something to do with Jonssen, isn't he?"

Tony's entire body stiffened. "Looks like it," he muttered. "I'll know more when I've questioned him."

"Tony, it's been four years," McGee told him. "Maybe you need to accept..."

"Do you accept? Does Gibbs?" Tony interrupted, his eyes flashing angrily.

"No...but you can't let the way you feel blind you to the real risks you take whenever you get a lead on Jonssen," McGee pointed out.

"They're my risks to take," Tony snapped.

"Is that why you didn't take your team? Why you didn't even tell them where you were going?"

"Yeah." Tony shrugged.

"You should let them in. They're good people," McGee said. "And I'd feel much happier if they were with you, providing backup, when you go off the grid like this."

"Well I wouldn't be off the grid if I took them with me, would I now, Probie?"

McGee sighed – they'd come to an agreement, when he became director, that Tony wouldn't call him 'probie' in public. Tony had stuck to that agreement religiously ever since, but he took great delight in still using the nickname in private, even though McGee outranked him. Technically speaking, anyway. Sometimes McGee felt like he was **still** a young probie, and Tony his completely infuriating but always more senior colleague.

"Look, Tony, if you won't do it because of the rules, then do it for me," McGee said, trying another tack. Tony raised a questioning eyebrow. "I don't want to be the one who has to tell Louis that his dad is dead because he went out without backup," McGee told him quietly. It was a killer blow, and he knew it. Tony's eyes flashed, angrily.

"That's not going to happen," he snapped.

"It might. That kid already lost his mom - you want him to lose his dad too?"

"He's got Gibbs – and you and Ducky," Tony replied. "He's got more than enough daddies in his life. He'll be fine."

"I can't believe you just said that!" McGee said, heatedly. Only Tony could ever make him this angry. Tony did at least look a little ashamed by his words.

"Look, I'm not great at the whole father thing, Tim, you know that," Tony said, softly, and McGee knew he'd reached him now. Tony rarely opened up to anyone these days. The time when he would tell them anything and everything about his personal life was long gone. Although...even back in the old days, for all the information he gave them it had never been easy knowing how much of it was true and how much of it Tony made up to misdirect people from the truth. In that, at least, he hadn't changed.

"You're his dad and he thinks the world of you," McGee said. "I know he'd like to see you more often - the kid idolises you – anyone can see that."

"He shouldn't." Tony shook his head. "I've let him down, Tim. It's been four years and I still haven't caught the bastard that killed Abby. Jonssen is still out there, and every lead I get on how to bring him down goes nowhere." He kicked out and caught the coffee table with his boot, sending it flying half-way across the room.

"Do you think Abby would have wanted you to do this?" McGee asked. "Do you think she'd prefer to have you chasing down the man who killed her rather than raising your son – her son?"

"Don't throw Abby at me," Tony growled. McGee took a deep breath.

"I loved her too. We all did," he pointed out. The anger faded from Tony's eyes.

"Yeah. I know," he muttered.

"Tony – you lose all sense of reason when it comes to Jonsen and I'm not going to let you take these risks," McGee said firmly.

Tony glared at him. "You're not going to stop me following up any leads I get," he said, eyes narrowed.

"No, I'm not," McGee replied. "But you will take backup."

"Or else?" Tony raised an eyebrow.

"I'll bring on the big guns," McGee said, with a tight little grin. Tony sat up straight.

"You wouldn't do that to me, Probie."

"I can and I will," McGee replied. "Tony – I told you last time that if you went out without backup again I'd tell Gibbs."

Tony stared at him for a long time. It was a stare that would have had all his team running for cover but McGee didn't falter under that hard-eyed gaze, and stared right back at him, holding his ground.

"You won't," Tony said at last, flatly.

"Yes I will," McGee replied.

"Gibbs doesn't need to know about this," Tony growled.

"Gibbs doesn't need to know about what?" a voice at the door asked. Both McGee and Tony jumped and then McGee gave a wry smile; even after all this time Gibbs still knew how to creep up on them unawares.

"Nothing," Tony said quickly. "What are you doing here, Boss?"

"It's lunchtime, Tony – you said you'd take Louis out, remember?"

"Oh. Right. Yes. Where is he?" It was clear from Tony's expression that he'd forgotten and that made McGee even angrier than he'd been earlier. Whenever Tony got a lead on Jonsen he forgot about everything else – even his son.

"I left him downstairs with Agent Morris. She looks terrified – have you been scaring your

team again, DiNozzo?" Gibbs asked, with a raised eyebrow.

"No more than you scared us, Boss," Tony replied. "It does them good; keeps them on their toes."

"Hmm. Just so long as you remember to throw them the occasional 'attaboy' as well as slapping them stupid," Gibbs said.

"Yeah. Right. I got three 'attaboy's in ten years," Tony replied dryly, rolling his eyes. "And a slap on the back of the head at least once a day."

"And what does that tell you, Tony?" Gibbs asked.

"That you like hitting me?" Tony suggested innocently. Gibbs gave him his patented Gibbs glare and Tony winced. "Or that you were just trying to slap some good sense into a highly annoying field agent to help him learn faster, Boss," he added hurriedly. Gibbs nodded.

"That's better," he said.

"I got several 'attaboy's and only a few head slaps," McGee said, in a self-satisfied tone.

Tony glared at him. "Well, that's because you like to suck up, McGee," he commented sourly.

"Okay boys, break it up," Gibbs growled. "Tony – what the hell happened to you?" He grabbed Tony's hand and surveyed the grazed knuckles, and then touched his fingers firmly to Tony's face, turning his head so he could see the cut on his jaw and the bruising on his cheekbone.

"He went out without backup," McGee said, taking a savage kind of pleasure in dropping Tony in it – but if Tony wouldn't listen to him he was damn sure he'd listen to Gibbs.

"Is that so?" Gibbs asked, in a dangerous tone.

Tony glared at McGee. "Thanks, Probie," he muttered.

"He was chasing a lead on Jonssen. Again," McGee said.

"You want to tell the man what I ate for breakfast too while you're at it?" Tony demanded.

"I warned you, Tony – last time you did this I told you what I'd do if you didn't obey my orders," McGee said firmly.

"Aw, our little probie is all grown up and giving us orders now, Boss," Tony said facetiously. A second later, Gibbs's hand struck the back of his head lightly and he made a high-pitched squeaking sound, and put up a hand to rub the sore spot. "Okay, I deserved that," he muttered.

"He's the director – you do as he says, Tony," Gibbs told him.

"Like you always did when you were senior field agent and Directors Morrow, Shepard and Vance gave you orders?" Tony demanded hotly. McGee grimaced – Tony clearly had a death wish.

"Never disobeyed a direct order," Gibbs told him. Then he slapped his head again – hard this time. "And that's for going out without backup, DiNozzo."

"They slow me down!" Tony said angrily.

"Then teach them to go faster," Gibbs replied, implacably.

"Daddy!" a voice cried, and a small, dark-haired boy ran into the room and launched himself at DiNozzo. Tony swung him up in his arms and smiled at him, a taut, strained smile.

"Hey, Louis - how are you doing?" he said. "You have a good time helping Boss build the boat this morning?"

"Yeah. Boss says she'll be ready to sail by the end of the summer," Louis replied. His smile faded, and he put a finger on Tony's cut jaw. "Did a bad guy hurt you, Daddy?" he asked. Tony shook his head.

"Nah. I just got careless," he said. "Went somewhere without taking my friends with me to help out. It's okay though – Boss and McGee tell me my friends will be coming with me next time, so I won't get hurt again."

He glared at Gibbs and McGee pointedly over Louis's shoulder.

"You're bleeding. You want one of my Spider-man band-aids?" Louis asked him solemnly.

McGee almost laughed out loud. He wondered what Tony's team would say if their hard-assed boss came back with a band-aid on his jaw covered in cartoon characters.

"I've got one," Louis said. "I got a splinter working on the boat this morning and Boss put one on my finger." He held up the finger in question and Tony kissed it, obligingly.

"I don't think I need a band-aid, Lou, but thanks anyway," he said, putting the kid down.

The child was four years old, and while he looked the spitting image of Tony, his eyes and his personality were all Abby. "We've got the black hair dye and studded collars ready for him the minute he turns into a teenager," Tony would often joke, the humour never quite reaching his eyes. It was painfully obvious that the little boy hero-worshipped his big, heroic, field agent father. His light green eyes were shining as he looked up at Tony.

"Is Uncle Tim coming to lunch with us?" Louis asked, glancing at McGee hopefully.

"I don't know – ask Uncle Tim," Tony said. "He's being kind of a grouch today so who knows." He shot a look in McGee's direction, and then looked back at his son. "Thing is, Louis...I know I said I'd have lunch with you today but something has come up and I have to work."

Louis's face fell. "You're not coming to lunch?"

Tony's eyes flickered for a second, but then hardened. He crouched down in front of his son.

"No. I have a bad guy sitting in a room downstairs and I need to go talk to him," he said.

"Is he the bad guy who hurt you?" Louis asked. "I know you said he didn't but I think he did."

Well, he was Abby's kid, and he had her knack for seeing right through Tony, McGee thought to himself.

"Yeah - that's right." Tony nodded.

"How do you know he won't hurt you again?" Louis whispered.

"Well...because I kind of broke his fingers and now he's scared of me," Tony replied. Louis's eyes widened like saucers and Gibbs sighed.

"Way to go, DiNozzo," he muttered.

Tony got up, and he and Gibbs stood face to face for one tense moment. Then Tony reached into his pocket, took out his wallet, and handed Gibbs a fistful of twenty dollar bills.

"Ducky's downstairs – it's his consulting day today. Why don't the three of you take Louis to that nice Italian place Louis likes so much – the one with the special ice-cream," he said to Louis. "You like it there, don't you, Lou?"

"I guess," Louis replied, unhappily.

McGee wanted to hit Tony himself for letting the child down like this, but he knew, as Gibbs knew, that there was no stopping Tony when he thought he had a lead on Jonssen, so lunch was out of the question.

"Of course you like it there – you're a DiNozzo – you know good, old-fashioned Italian food when it's put in front of you!" Tony tousled Louis's hair.

"Last time we were there the lady at the restaurant told me I have a French first name and an Italian last name," Louis said.

"Well, considering your mom wanted to name you Lestat, you got off lightly, Lou," Tony told him, with a wink. "Louis was the compromise option in a world full of bad vampire names."

You're lucky I vetoed both Spike and Angel and we won't even get into some of the others."

"What's a com-promise?" Louis asked.

"Something your dad has forgotten how to do," Gibbs muttered darkly.

Tony glowered at him, then crouched down and kissed the boy on the cheek. Then he stood up, and, with a hard look that just dared either McGee or Gibbs to stop him, he strode out of the room. Louis watched him go, his eyes solemn.

"Hey – he'll come with us another day," Gibbs said softly, holding out his hand. Louis took it, looking suddenly very small and subdued.

McGee was glad the child had Gibbs as his primary care-giver because Tony wasn't around often enough to pay him the attention he needed. He wasn't sure exactly how the arrangement worked, but Gibbs had been retired for just a few months when Abby had been killed. Louis was a baby at the time and Tony had been out of it for about six months after Abby's death so Gibbs had stepped in and taken care of the child.

He was surprisingly good with Louis, and had just packed up and moved in with Tony and Louis so he could look after the child while Tony worked. McGee had assumed it would be a temporary arrangement while Tony got himself straightened out but that had been four years ago and there was no sign of anything changing. He was glad about that – Louis needed a father figure in his life, someone solid who would be there for him, and Tony wasn't that person right now. He wondered whether he ever would be.

As for Gibbs – well everyone knew how much he had adored Abby, and he wasn't about to let her son down now she was gone. He had raised Louis pretty much on his own, with Tony's occasional help – when Tony wasn't working himself into the ground.

"Did Daddy really break the bad guy's fingers, Boss?" Louis asked, as Gibbs led the child out of the door.

It always amused McGee to hear Louis call their old boss "Boss", but that was what Tony called him, so that was what Louis had learned to call him, and there was something kind of right about it. Besides, McGee couldn't exactly see Gibbs answering to 'Uncle Jethro' somehow.

Gibbs glanced at McGee over Louis's head. McGee shrugged, and gave a gesture of futility with his hands. He might be the director but Gibbs was the only one Tony ever really listened to – that, at least, hadn't changed.

"Probably," Gibbs replied tersely.

"Is he going to kill him?" Louis asked, his eyes wide and a little scared. Gibbs raised an eyebrow in McGee's direction.

"I sure as hell hope not. What do you think, Uncle Tim?" he asked, pointedly.

McGee sighed. "Oh god - I'd better go and make sure he doesn't," he said, running off in the direction of Interrogation Room One.

Agent Morris and Agent Carter were both standing in front of the big window watching Tony do his interrogation when McGee arrived. He let himself in silently and walked over to watch, ignoring the nervous looks Morris and Carter shot towards each other at his presence.

McGee suppressed a sigh when he saw Tony's suspect. The fingers on his right hand were neatly taped up, but he also had a big cut on the bridge of his nose and a bruise around his eye. McGee hoped that the man was actually guilty of something or they'd have one hell of a lawsuit on their hands. Not that Tony cared about that. He was too consumed by his own desire for revenge to give a damn about embarrassing the agency – or about damaging his own career come to that. McGee worked overtime sometimes just to make sure Tony's recklessness didn't lose him his job – or worse, land him in jail.

"I know you work for Jonssen and you know you work for Jonssen," Tony was saying to the man. "It'd make this go a lot easier if you just admitted it."

"Or what? You hold me down and slam a door on my hand again?" the man asked. "I want to see a lawyer."

"I've sent for one. Might take an hour or two for him to get here though." Tony gave a tight grin. "So that gives us plenty of time to chat before he arrives, Stackton."

"You have a legal department – you could get a lawyer in here within ten minutes," Stackton said.

"I could, but let's face it, I'm not going to," Tony said. McGee groaned and buried his face in his hands. "Jonssen pays you a retainer, doesn't he, Stackton?"

Stackton glared at him. "I'm not saying anything until I get a lawyer."

"Where is he? Where is Jonssen? He too scared to come back to the US?" Tony asked. "If he didn't do anything wrong why is he so scared?"

"Lawyer," Stackton replied, with a smug grin.

"That why he has to pay you a retainer? Because he's too chicken to come back? So he needs you to do his dirty work for him over here?"

"Maybe he knows you'll pull him in for questioning the minute he sets foot on US soil," Stackton said.

"If he's got nothing to hide then that shouldn't worry him," Tony replied.

"Says the man who just broke my fingers. Where's my lawyer?"

"Where's Jonssen?"

Stackton just smirked. Tony smiled, and settled back in his chair. McGee stiffened, waiting for it...A second later Tony brought his hand down hard on the table.

"Tell me!" he roared.

Carter and Morris both jumped, glancing at each other nervously, and then at McGee.

"He learned from the best," McGee told them, with an impatient flick of his head.

"Hey – put me in a room with the boss and I'll tell him anything he wants to know," Carter joked. He was a smart-mouthed, good-looking young agent, always joking around and utterly and completely loyal to his temperamental boss. It was so achingly familiar that McGee found it painful to watch sometimes.

"I don't know where he is!" Stackton said, looking genuinely shaken. "One of his overseas companies deals with me – I never speak to Jonssen directly. So what if I occasionally do some work for him and he pays me for it? That's not illegal!"

Tony nodded, smiling again. "Thank you. And no it isn't illegal. It is criminal though – it's criminal that your scumbag boss is still out there when he should be behind bars."

"You've never managed to make a single charge against him stick," Stackton said, with a vicious grin.

"We nearly did," Tony said grimly.

"Forensics didn't exactly pan out though, did they?" Stackton said softly.

McGee winced. "Oh shit," he said, heading for the door. "Well come on!" he yelled at Carter and Morris. "We all know what's going to happen next!"

They burst into the next door room just in time to find Stackton's chair overturned, and Stackton himself pressed against the wall with Tony's hand wrapped around his throat and Tony's fist poised to strike.

"Agent DiNozzo! Agent Carter will take it from here," McGee said firmly.

Tony's eyes were blazing as he stood there, fist still held back in readiness.

"The forensics didn't pan out because Jonssen killed our forensic scientist before she got a chance to prove her case," Tony hissed. Stackton grinned at him.

"What – you only got one forensic scientist?" he asked. The hand Tony had wrapped around his throat tightened.

"Oh I think you know that Jonssen killed Abby and set fire to her lab to destroy the evidence," he growled.

"Another thing you feds don't seem able to prove," Stackton gasped. "Seems to be a long list – either Jonssen is innocent, or you guys are really bad at your jobs."

"Agent DiNozzo!" McGee said hastily, seeing Tony's eyes flash, and an old, familiar expression of angry despair settle there. Stackton clearly knew all the right buttons to press.

Tony stood there for a moment, fist still poised, Stackton grinning at him triumphantly, and it could have gone either way.

"Tony," McGee said softly. "Let him go. Carter will take it from here."

Slowly, the anger drained out of Tony, and he lowered his fist and released his hold on the prisoner. Stackton sank back against the wall, panting but still grinning widely. Tony turned on his heel and left without another word.

"He's insane," Stackton said to McGee, rubbing his bruised neck. "He could have killed me!"

"Yes, he could." McGee nodded. Then he moved close. "And if you don't co-operate fully with Agent Carter then next time I might just let him," he said in a low, deadly tone. Stackton's eyes widened. "He's all yours, Carter," McGee said tersely, and then he left to go after Tony.

He was halfway down the hallway when he became aware that someone was calling to him. He turned, to find Agent Morris running after him.

"Director McGee? I was wondering if I could have a word with you?" she asked.

McGee paused, trying to get his irritation under control. He wanted to go after Tony and calm him down, but he suspected that Tony was long gone by now in any case – he'd probably taken off somewhere to punch his fist into a wall in private. He'd likely reappear in a couple of hours with a badly bruised hand and a dark look in his eyes that would take days to fade.

"What is it, Agent Morris?" he asked, more curtly than he'd intended. She was a tall, elegant woman, with thick dark brown hair, cut into a bob, and intelligent brown eyes. She always reminded him of someone but he could never quite place who.

"I wanted...look, this is difficult, but I want to make a complaint against Agent DiNozzo," she said.

"Did he say something inappropriate?" McGee sighed.

"What? No...nothing like that." She looked surprised, and McGee realised that it had been a long time since Tony had been inappropriate around women in **that** way. "Look, I don't want to make a formal complaint – I just thought that if I spoke to you about it, off the record, then maybe you could do something."

"What's your complaint then, Morris?" he snapped, impatiently. Complaints against Tony were commonplace – dealing with them had become a major part of his job since he became Director.

"It's just that Agent DiNozzo treats me differently to the other agents on his team," she said. McGee raised an eyebrow. "I could understand it if I wasn't as good as they are but I am! I'm excellent at my job but he consistently passes me over for dangerous fieldwork. I get all the babysitting assignments, the stuff any probie could do – but I'm not a probie, Director. I'm the senior agent on his team!"

McGee nodded, suddenly realising who she reminded him of. "You know why Agent DiNozzo does this?" he asked. She frowned.

"I've been thinking about it – but all I can assume is that it's some kind of chauvinism. Maybe he doesn't think a woman can do the job as well as a man."

McGee laughed out loud and she looked at him, curiously.

"Oh, he doesn't think that, trust me," McGee chuckled. "This is the man who worked with Mossad officer Ziva David for many years. So I can assure you that he **really** doesn't think that."

"So why then? Is it me? Does he think I'm not good enough?" she asked. She was a confident woman, but McGee could see just a hint of insecurity flitting through her dark eyes.

"No, that's not it. It's more complicated than that," McGee told her. "He probably doesn't even know he's doing it – not consciously anyway. Did he ever mention the name Caitlin Todd to you?"

She shook her head, frowning. "No – why?"

"Well, she was someone he worked with, a very long time ago," McGee murmured.

"What happened to her?"

"She was shot dead while out working on a very dangerous case," McGee told her tersely. Her eyes widened. "She was a lot like you," McGee added.

Morris looked outraged. "Well just because she looked like me doesn't mean..." she began

hotly. McGee held up his hand, interrupting her.

"Did he ever mention Ziva David to you?" he asked. She shook her head again. "Well, he and Ziva were close – they worked together for years until she was killed defusing a bomb. It was another dangerous case and he was covering her while she worked because there was a good chance the people who planted it would return to ensure it went off. She was good – very good – but there wasn't enough time, and it exploded."

"Is that where he got that big scar on his arm?" Morris asked, looking a little shaken. McGee nodded.

"He was trapped under the debris for three hours before we managed to cut him out. Bits of her were all around the place. Can you imagine what that was like for him?"

Morris nodded slowly. "I understand, but just because he's lost..."

"And you know about his wife?" McGee said. Morris took a deep breath.

"Yes, sir," she said quietly.

"She was killed right here, under his nose, down in the forensics lab, and he couldn't do a damn thing to stop it," McGee told her.

"It wasn't his fault," Morris said.

"You try telling him that," McGee replied wryly. "Maybe you're right, maybe he *is* a chauvinist, but he always says we lost the best of us and he was right. These women – Kate, Ziva, Abby..." his voice choked a little as he said that last name. "They were the best of us, Agent Morris. And we lost them – we lost all of them, and if Tony is trying to keep you out of the firing line that's the reason why. It's not that you're not good enough – it's that you're too good and he doesn't want to lose you."

"That's nice to know – but it still doesn't make it fair or right, sir," she said softly.

"I know." McGee nodded firmly. "I'll have a word with him. Agent Morris – Felicity - just...cut him some slack, okay? He might be a bastard but he's a good man."

She bit on her lip, her dark eyes full of empathy. "I know that, sir. You couldn't work with him and not know that, even if he is as scary as all hell."

"Good." McGee turned to go, and then felt her hand on his arm.

"Sir...people say...it's just...I heard that he used to be very different?" she asked.

"Yeah." McGee nodded, turning back. "He was. I've worked with him for years and he was a very different person back when I started out. He was kind of an idiot, always goofing around, playing stupid jokes, teasing us and driving us all insane."

"I can't imagine that," she said, shaking her head.

"No, well – events can change a person," McGee sighed.

"Is that why you don't fire him?" she asked. McGee raised a warning eyebrow. "Just...he's been investigated by the FBI more times than I can count," she said hurriedly. "And it's no secret that his methods are considered unorthodox. He's a loose cannon."

"And he gets results," McGee growled. "He's the best agent I have." He shook his head, seeing the look in her eyes. She wasn't the only one who wondered why he kept DiNozzo around when he had the potential to be such a massive liability. "Listen," he said. "There was once a young probie who made a big mistake – he shot an undercover cop, and couldn't sleep for second-guessing himself and what he'd done. He was on the verge of handing in his badge and giving up his job - and it was Tony who went to his apartment and spent half the night talking him out of his funk."

"You were the probie?"

"Yeah – and Tony's many things, a lot of them not very pretty I agree, but the one thing he is now and always has been is loyal to a fault. He's also a brilliant agent – he's the second best field agent I've ever known."

"The first being Gibbs?" she asked. "He seems to be a legend around here."

"He is," McGee grinned. "With good reason. Look, Felicity, I know Tony's a bastard of a boss to work for, but all I can say is that you should have tried working for Gibbs. Now *that* was tough."

"But Mr. Gibbs is always so nice when he comes in with Louis," she said. "He's a real sweetheart."

McGee laughed out loud, and patted her arm. "How you feel about Tony – that's how we all felt about Gibbs," he told her. "Now, if there's nothing else I have someplace I need to be."

He was about to turn and leave when she touched his arm again.

"You lost all those people too," she said quietly. He looked at her sharply.

"Yes I did," he murmured.

"I'm sorry, sir," she told him. He swallowed, hard. She smiled at him. "You're a good man, sir," she told him. "And he's not the only one who's loyal - you always stick by him, no matter what."

"You had to know him," McGee said, his voice sounding a little hoarse. "You had to know him back then. You had to know them too – all of them. Kate, Ziva, Abby...it's, it's been hard

for us, Felicity, losing them. Tony's right - they really were the best of us. I wish you'd known them. I wish they were here now so that you *could* know them. If they were, things would be very different around here."

She squeezed his arm. "I know *you*, Director," she said softly. "And I know what a good job you do here, juggling a hundred different problems at once – at least half of them caused by Agent DiNozzo." She smiled again, and then drew back. "Sorry – just...I should probably get back to work now."

McGee nodded and watched her go, feeling suddenly winded. The past never failed to make him smile and make his heart ache in equal measure. It was hard seeing these new people, so bright and full of promise, and remembering himself, the way he'd been back then, before time and events had taken their toll on him – on all of them.

McGee made his way back to the squad room but Tony wasn't there – he hadn't expected him to be. He probably wouldn't return for a couple of hours. Even so, it wasn't worth leaving anything to chance where Tony was concerned, so McGee pulled out his cell phone and put through a call to security.

"This is Director McGee," he told the chief. "I want you to put two men outside Interrogation Room One. They are not, under any circumstances, to let Special Agent DiNozzo in there without my express authorisation."

That done, he thought he deserved some lunch.

Louis was finishing off his ice-cream by the time McGee made it to the restaurant. It was a warm day so he was sitting on the restaurant's back patio with Gibbs and Ducky, smears of green all around his mouth, and he was slowly but happily sucking on his spoon.

"Hey – pistachio right?" McGee said, grinning at him as he took the empty seat opposite him, next to Ducky and across from Gibbs.

"Uncle Tim!" Louis's face lit up. "Is Daddy with you?" he asked. McGee shook his head.

"No, he...uh, had to do some work," he said lamely.

"Did he kill that man?" Louis asked. McGee winced.

"No – that was just a joke, Louis," he said quickly, crossing his fingers as he spoke. Gibbs raised an eyebrow at him. McGee grimaced.

"You know, Louis – why don't we go over to the play area?" Ducky suggested, glancing from Gibbs to McGee and back again. There was a jungle gym and a slide over in the corner of the restaurant's yard.

"Can I, Boss?" Louis asked, his chin dripping ice-cream.

"Sure – let me just clean you up."

Louis grinned happily as Gibbs grabbed a napkin, spat on it, and wiped it over his face, and then Ducky took Louis's hand and led him away. Ducky had retired a few years ago but McGee thought he never seemed to grow a day older. His hair was thinner now but he was still lively and vigorous – of them all, McGee thought that maybe he'd changed the least. He still came into NCIS one day a week to take newbies on a tour of Autopsy, or look over Palmer's shoulder and comment on his work while regaling him with various long and sometimes improbable anecdotes. Jimmy didn't seem to mind – everyone loved Ducky and they all enjoyed having him around, even if it was just for one day a week.

"So – what's going on?" Gibbs asked, stirring his coffee. His hair was now completely silver, but his blue eyes were as sharp and formidable as ever. Retirement – or maybe it was looking after Louis - suited him. He looked more relaxed these days, and, if anything, he looked younger now than when he'd been at NCIS. The lines on his face were softer, and he smiled more often. He had an air of contentment about him and that was something that McGee had never seen in him before. He could still be as focussed and demanding as ever though, and whenever McGee was with him he felt he regressed to being a young probie again, even now, as a forty-something man in charge of a federal law enforcement agency.

"Tony thinks he's found one of Jonssen's lackeys, Mark Stackton, but I don't think that guy is going to talk. He's more scared of Jonssen than of Tony – even if Tony did have him up against the wall with his hand around his throat," McGee sighed. "You were right, Boss. I only just got there in time to pull him off."

"Where did he go?" Gibbs asked.

"Wherever it is he goes when he's feeling like this," McGee shrugged. "He'll be hitting something right now – the wall, the punching bag in the gym – we just have to hope it's not, you know, a person."

Gibbs grunted. "Christ. He'll be hell when he gets home."

"Do you hide the bourbon or just leave it beside his bed to get it over with?" McGee asked. It was no secret that Tony turned to drink when things got bad.

Gibbs glared at him. "He knows better than to drink in the house when Louis is around – or to come home drunk for that matter. I made that damn clear to him," he growled. McGee was glad that he hadn't been there when the two of them had had that particular conversation. "If he wants to get drunk in a bar then he can sleep it off in the office or find a hotel room," Gibbs added.

"I just had a conversation with Agent Morris and it got me to thinking..." McGee said, and then he paused. Gibbs took a sip of his coffee. McGee hesitated.

"Well spit it out, McGee," Gibbs ordered.

"Do you think we're doing the right thing?" McGee asked anxiously. "I mean, we rush around after him, we cover for him, we smooth things over for him - maybe we shouldn't."

"What's the alternative?" Gibbs asked.

"I don't know. I just feel, sometimes, like we're his enablers or something," McGee sighed. "I mean – you look after Louis for him and I protect him at NCIS. We all make it possible for him to carry on being like this."

"No." Gibbs shook his head. "We do what we have to do, Tim."

"Well, with all due respect, Boss, I do sometimes wonder if either of us thinks objectively about this situation. I mean...Abby meant the world to both of us, and you..." He broke off. Gibbs glared at him.

"Say it," he ordered.

"Well, you empathise with him too much, Boss!" McGee said forcefully. "You know you do! Your wife was killed too and you know how that feels so you cut him a lot of slack because of that."

"You think that's it?" Gibbs shook his head. "Yeah – I know what it's like, Tim. I know how he feels every single damn day he gets up, and yeah, I do put myself in his place. I do wonder how I'd feel if I hadn't put a half dozen bullets through the bastard that killed Shannon and Kelly. At least I got some kind of – what's the fancy word they use for it? Closure? Yeah, I got that and Tony hasn't, and I do understand what drives him, and why he's so obsessed with getting Jonssen."

"And all this time Louis is growing up and Tony hardly sees him!" McGee said, in a heated voice. "Maybe, if we made Tony face up to reality, he'd get his priorities right and realise he has a son who needs him and his revenge isn't as important as that poor kid over there." McGee glanced over to where Louis was hanging from some monkey bars.

"You think that if we stepped back that's what'd happen?" Gibbs asked, in a tone of disbelief.

"It might!" McGee protested.

"No." Gibbs shook his head. "Tony's father died a couple of years ago, Tim – did you know that?" he asked.

"I was vaguely aware of it. What does that have to do with anything? I know he and Tony weren't close."

"He left Tony a fortune," Gibbs told him. "And I mean a serious fortune. Tony doesn't have to work ever again if he doesn't want to, and if I said I wasn't going to look after Louis any more, I know that Tony would just hire someone to take care of the kid and I *won't* let

that happen, not to Abby's son. You tell him you're not covering for him at NCIS, and he'll just go off on his own, follow up his own leads, outside the law, and end up either dead or behind bars for the rest of his life."

McGee gazed at him, aghast.

"We do what we have to do to keep Tony contained, to try and help as best we can, to stop this mess getting any messier, and, hopefully, to keep Louis's dad alive for long enough for the kid to at least have his dad around, even if he's not in his life as much as we'd like. We lost Kate, and Ziva, and Abby. We're not damn well losing Tony too," Gibbs said firmly.

"What if we screw up though?" McGee said quietly. "Tony is out of control, Gibbs – you know it and I know it. One of these days he *will* get himself killed. I'm sure of it."

"He's not out of control," Gibbs said firmly. McGee glanced up at him sharply. "Not yet anyway, and I won't let it happen," Gibbs snapped. "You're right though – he's close to it and he needs a few slaps upside the head. You keep him tethered at the office and I'll slap some sense into him at home. Between us we'll contain him. That's the best we can hope to do though – because unless he finds Jonssen and either kills him or puts him behind bars, I can't see him changing."

"And what if he does?" McGee asked. "What happens after?"

Gibbs sat back in his seat, a muscle in his jaw twitching.

"Don't say you haven't thought about it," McGee hissed. "What is he after the burning desire for revenge has gone? *Who* is he? Do we get Tony back? The old Tony? Or does he not have anything to live for any more?"

"He's got Louis," Gibbs stated firmly.

"He hardly spends any time with the kid! To all intents and purposes you're Louis's dad. You've raised him."

"I wanted to," Gibbs said softly, and McGee knew that and he knew why. Gibbs was great with kids – always had been – and while McGee knew that Louis was in no way a substitute for Kelly, the little boy did fill at least some of the gap that her loss had left in Gibbs's life. McGee was glad of that – Louis adored his "Boss" and Gibbs loved the child with all his heart in return, but Gibbs wasn't Louis's father – Tony was.

"I know," McGee said. "I know, Boss, but I'm just saying – I don't know how much longer we can all keep doing this. Something has to give."

"I'll talk to Tony," Gibbs said grimly, and McGee grimaced at his tone. He wouldn't want to be in Tony's shoes when Gibbs got hold of him. "We'll do what we have to do, Tim," Gibbs told him. "To keep Tony safe. We'll do whatever it takes."

"Even if he hates us for it?" McGee asked.

Gibbs gave him a terse grin. "Hell, if he doesn't hate us for it then we aren't doing it right!"

At that moment they were interrupted by a squeal, and they looked around to see Ducky kneeling in front of Louis, showing him a magic trick that was clearly delighting the small boy. He giggled and then launched himself at Ducky, throwing his arms around his neck and giving him a big hug. The way he moved was so familiar that it made McGee's throat constrict. He looked at Gibbs to see him looking at Louis in the exact same way.

"I still miss her so much," McGee murmured.

Gibbs cleared his throat and finished his coffee in one gulp. "Yeah. That's why we have to do our best for that boy over there," he said grimly.

"I suppose there's one good thing in all this," McGee mused, watching as Ducky got to his feet and held out his hand to Louis.

"Which is?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

"That Louis takes after Abby and not Tony," McGee grinned. "Because otherwise you really would have your hands full, Boss!"

Gibbs managed a little chuckle at that, and they both turned as Ducky and Louis reached the table.

"It's your turn to amuse our young friend now I think, Uncle Timothy," Ducky said, with a meaningful smile in McGee's direction. Louis was great fun but he had the combined energy of both Abby and Tony, who were two of the most high-octane people McGee had ever known, and that made the child exhausting company sometimes.

"You're a hard act to follow, Ducky," McGee complained, reaching out to tickle Louis and pulling a mock-scary face at the same time. The little boy immediately dissolved into a fit of giggles.

Ducky took his seat at the table. "I take it we have more problems with our mutual friend?" he murmured to Gibbs, with a glance at Louis to make sure he hadn't picked up on who they were talking about. The child threw himself at McGee who picked him up and hung him upside down so that his soft dark hair brushed the ground.

"Yeah." Gibbs nodded. "He's got a lead on Jonssen."

"Another one?" Ducky sighed. "I wish he'd just let it go."

"He can't, Duck, and I can understand that," Gibbs said.

"But you've seen what he gets like whenever this happens. It's not good for him – for any of

us," Ducky said. "I remember the last time – he drank himself into the ground for weeks, and then there were all those mysterious injuries he sustained and which he made me treat." He gave a little wince. "All those bruised knuckles and black eyes – either from bar fights or over-zealous, work-related encounters. It was all very dispiriting."

"Like I said – we're his enablers," McGee muttered. He flipped Louis back onto his feet and sat down at the table again.

"McGee isn't sure we go about this the right way," Gibbs explained to Ducky. "But I don't think we have a choice."

"Well, Jethro, he long since stopped listening to me I'm afraid – and, I'm sorry to say this, Timothy but I don't think he listens to you, either. That just leaves you, Jethro. Now he *does* still listen to you."

"I know," Gibbs snapped. "I've told McGee that I'll have a word with him."

"Who are you talking about?" Louis asked, curiously.

"A friend of ours, my dear Louis," Ducky told him, brushing his untidy dark hair into a semblance of neatness with his hand.

"Is he okay?" Louis asked. "Your friend? Why are you all talking about him in whispers? Is he dead?"

McGee gave a little laugh. Louis had a kind of morbid fascination with death, although he didn't really understand it. Maybe that was just his mom coming out in him again.

"No he isn't dead, Louis," Ducky replied gently. "He's just...lost his way."

"He's lost?" Louis's eyes glowed anxiously. "You have to find him! I got lost last week – in the shopping mall. I was really scared. A nice lady found me and they called for Boss over the loudspeaker thing."

"I only turned my back for a second," Gibbs grunted. "I hate shopping malls. Although I did tell you to stick close by as there were so many people there that day," he said to the child. Louis nodded.

"I know. Boss yelled at me and hugged me a lot when he found me," Louis said. "He said I scared him but I was scared too when I couldn't find him. I was really scared."

He bit on his lip, gazing at Gibbs, and then put his arms up, looking upset by the memory. Gibbs lifted him up onto his knee obligingly and kissed his hair. That seemed to reassure Louis because he stuck his finger happily in what remained of his now melted ice-cream.

"I told Boss I got lost because I saw a puppy and went to stroke her. I want a puppy," he said wistfully, sucking the ice-cream off his finger. Gibbs raised his eyes heavenward and McGee

wondered how many times Louis had been asking him for one since that day in the mall.

"McGee! Where the hell are you hiding, McGee?" a loud voice rang out from the back door of the restaurant. They all looked up, in surprise, to see Tony striding towards them.

"Daddy!" Louis scrambled off Gibbs's lap and charged over to him but Tony brushed him aside without even looking at him, almost knocking the child over in the process.

"You put security on the damn door? Security? To keep *me* out?" Tony shouted, looking as if he was about to explode.

"Oh hell," McGee muttered under his breath. "Here it comes." He stood up. "You weren't in control of your temper back there, Tony – you're not in control of it now, either, by the look of it," he pointed out. "I don't want anyone dying in our custody."

"I wasn't going to kill him. I was trying to scare him!" Tony growled. Louis shrank back against Gibbs and McGee winced – the last thing any of them wanted was for Louis to see Tony in one of his rages.

Gibbs got up, and handed Louis to Ducky.

"Duck – please take Louis to the restroom. Tony and I are going to have a little talk."

"No we're not – McGee and I are going to go back to NCIS where he is going to call off his security detail so I can do my job," Tony seethed.

"Shut up and sit down," Gibbs said, in a low, dangerous tone. Louis's eyes widened. Ducky took the child's hand and led him away.

Tony glared at both Gibbs and McGee but McGee held his ground, staring Tony out.

"I said, sit down, Tony," Gibbs growled. "Don't make me say it again." Tony looked as if he was about to go off like a firework. His body was tense and his eyes dark, flashing angry sparks at them both. Gibbs put a hand on his shoulder. "Easy," he said softly. The effect was instantaneous, and, McGee thought, a little surprising. Tony inhaled sharply, and then, with a glare at McGee, he sat. McGee relaxed.

"Go wait over there," Gibbs said to McGee, gesturing with his head towards the doorway. "I'll handle this." McGee turned and went to stand by the door, waiting for Ducky and Louis to return from the restroom.

He glanced back at the table. Tony was sitting down, facing him, every muscle in his body still screaming his rage. Gibbs was standing behind him, both his hands on Tony's shoulders, clamping down tight and talking into his ear in a low, urgent voice.

"I don't give a damn who you've found – don't ever talk like that in front of Louis again. He doesn't need to see you like that. And I don't care how angry you are - you damn near

knocked him over when you charged in here and there's no excuse for that."

"McGee is behaving like an idiot. Carter won't get what we need from Stackton. I need to talk to him again!" Tony protested angrily.

"According to McGee, last time you talked to him you nearly choked him."

"Well, I've calmed down now."

"I can see that." Gibbs's tone was so dry that McGee couldn't help but smile. Gibbs squeezed Tony's shoulder, and McGee was surprised to see Tony's anger evaporate visibly. His entire body seemed to deflate, and he glanced up at Gibbs with a desperate, pleading expression in his eyes.

"I need to speak to Stackton, Boss," he said in a quieter voice.

"I know – but it's Tim's call. He's in charge, Tony. And he's not going to agree to it if you keep yelling at him. You might want to think about making nice instead."

"When did you ever make nice to anyone?" Tony muttered. Gibbs slapped the back of his head.

"When I had to," he growled.

Then he sat down beside him, sliding one arm around his shoulders as he sat, keeping in continuous physical contact with Tony. He leaned in close and whispered something straight into Tony's ear. McGee watched, frowning, wondering what was going on here. Tony listened though – he and Ducky had been right about that; Tony was listening to Gibbs, even if he wouldn't listen to them. As Gibbs spoke he moved his hand, stroking Tony's shoulder insistently the entire time. McGee was aware that he was watching a master class in bringing Tony down, and he wished he knew what the trick was.

"Yes?" Gibbs said, drawing back a little. "Can you do that?"

Tony bit on his lip, and then, eventually, he sighed. "Okay. I'll try," he muttered.

"Good boy." Gibbs moved his hand and ruffled Tony's hair as if he was Louis and not a grown man in his forties.

At that moment Louis and Ducky emerged from the restroom and came over to where McGee was sitting.

"Are Daddy and Boss still fighting?" Louis asked McGee anxiously.

"I don't think so. And they weren't really fighting earlier, Louis. They were just...talking loudly," McGee told the little boy, hauling him onto his lap and cuddling him. Louis was a great cuddler and he nestled in close, reaching out to play with McGee's tie in a distracted

way, still keeping one eye on his father and Gibbs.

"Why was Daddy mad with you?" Louis asked, his eyes still worried despite the reassurance of the cuddle. Like his mother, he hated it when the people he loved were on bad terms with each other.

"I did something that upset him but it's going to be okay. It's kind of like when you ran after that puppy at the mall last week and Boss was mad with you," McGee said. "It was okay after though, wasn't it? Boss hugged you and it was okay."

"Yes." Louis nodded solemnly. "Will you hug Daddy?"

"Maybe not," McGee grinned. "I don't think your dad likes being hugged that much."

"Boss hugs him and he likes that," Louis said.

McGee frowned. He'd never really thought much about the day-to-day lives Gibbs and Tony must lead, living under the same roof with Louis, even if Tony did seem to spend every waking hour at the office. Gibbs had never exactly been a huggy kind of man though – only Abby had ever really been able to give him hugs. He couldn't exactly see him hugging Tony so maybe Louis had got that wrong. He glanced back at the table, to see that Gibbs had moved his arm back so that it was around Tony's shoulder again, and had pulled him close and was talking to him, saying something McGee couldn't hear in soft but firm tones. So maybe Louis hadn't got that wrong after all, he thought, with some surprise.

"Me and Boss play a game – we try and make Daddy smile," Louis told him. "When it works we high five – but Daddy mustn't see us doing that," he added with a grin. "It's cheating if I hug or kiss Daddy or Boss hugs or kisses him though because that always makes him smile."

McGee frowned, and glanced up at Ducky, who raised an intrigued eyebrow at him. McGee thought he was seeing a whole new side to whatever domestic arrangement Tony and Gibbs had going on between them.

"Well, trust me – your dad definitely wouldn't smile if I hugged him right now," he told Louis.

"I don't like it when Boss and Daddy yell at each other," Louis confided. "When I went to my friend Nathan's house his mom and dad yelled at each other the whole time. I hated that. I'm glad Boss and Daddy don't do that."

McGee chuckled to himself at the likeness Louis was drawing between what he clearly saw as the dynamics of two different sets of married couples. Then he glanced back at Tony and Gibbs again. As he watched, Gibbs pulled Tony over, pressed a kiss to the side of his head, and then released him with a little push and a grin. Tony shot him an oddly affectionate smile in return, and Louis laughed.

"See – there – Boss cheated!" he said. "He always cheats!"

"I can see that," McGee murmured with another puzzled glance at Ducky. He wouldn't have said that this was normal behaviour for either Gibbs or Tony but then, as he'd told Agent Morris earlier, a lot of things had changed over the past few years.

Tony got up and walked over to where they were sitting. McGee braced himself, but Tony's earlier towering rage had dissipated, although that darkness was still there, in his eyes. Whenever Tony got a lead on Jonssen that obsessive darkness always came back. He just hoped Ducky hadn't been right earlier about the drinking and bar fights. It was hard enough handling Tony when he was sober.

Tony gave McGee a grudging nod and then crouched down in front of him, so he was at eye level with Louis.

"Hey, Lou. Look - Boss just told me I was kind of mean to you when I pushed past you earlier. I'm sorry about that. So...why don't you, me and Boss head out for the park and throw a ball around?" he suggested. "That's if Uncle Tim will give me the afternoon off?" he asked, glancing up at McGee. Louis glanced up too, his eyes alight with hopeful happiness at the thought of spending an entire afternoon with his father.

"Tony – you have about three months vacation time stacked up. I'd be delighted if you took the afternoon off," McGee replied. "So would your team I suspect. I think we'd all enjoy the peace and quiet."

"Okay then." Tony nodded. He stood up and looked McGee in the eye, his expression a little shame-faced. "When Carter's done with Stackton, and we've gone over the tapes, will you let me interrogate him again, Probie?" he asked.

"Only if I'm there with you," McGee replied firmly. "So the security detail stays on the door until I'm ready to go in there with you – and I'll need to know exactly what angle you're going to take with this, Tony, because right now we're holding a man on suspicion of working for someone you don't like very much – and that's not actually illegal."

"Should be," Tony grinned.

McGee grunted. "And Carter might do better than you think with him, Tony. He's a good agent."

"I've taught him well," Tony replied, with an offhand shrug.

"Yeah – and he's desperate to impress you so maybe he'll have something for us if we let him do his thing."

"He's desperate to impress me?" Tony raised an eyebrow. McGee rolled his eyes.

"They all are, Tony, but yeah, him in particular. He reminds me a lot of you – and of how you used to be, around Gibbs, back in the old days."

Tony's jaw tightened - he always got antsy whenever McGee reminded him of the old days.

"They're nothing like us," he snapped.

"Yeah – they are – they're good people," McGee told him. "You should try letting them in, Tony. Treat them like a proper team – the way Gibbs did with us."

"The way Gibbs *sometimes* did with us," Tony commented sourly, with a glance in Gibbs's direction as he walked towards them.

"The way I sometimes did what?" Gibbs asked. Tony grinned at him.

"Nothing, Boss! Come on, Louis - let's wait outside while Boss gets the check."

He swung Louis up and hauled the kid easily onto his broad shoulders. Louis squealed with delight and held onto Tony's hair, making Tony grimace theatrically. Ducky went ahead and opened the door for them and McGee watched them go.

"Looks like you worked some magic there, Boss," he said to Gibbs as they went into the main interior of restaurant and over to the bar to pay the check. Gibbs got out his wallet, and fished out some twenty dollar bills.

"It's like putting a band-aid on a gunshot wound," he muttered. "He's still a bomb waiting to go off. Do *not* let him interview Stackton alone," he added, glancing at Tony's disappearing back, Louis perched atop his shoulders, laughing as they went.

"I had no intention of it," McGee replied grimly. "I already told him that."

They both waited, and McGee gazed up at the TV screen above the bar as the waitress dealt with the check and handed Gibbs his change.

"Heh – looks like it passed." McGee pointed to the rolling news at the bottom of the screen. Gibbs glanced up as he put some quarters back in his wallet. "The gay marriage thing," McGee added. "So gay marriage is now legal in the state of Virginia - about time too." Not that it affected him, but he had some gay friends living nearby and he had always thought it was stupid that marriage was a right denied to them.

"No idea why *anyone* thinks marriage is a good idea, gay or straight," Gibbs grunted.

"So it's not something you'll attempt again?" McGee asked, as they left the restaurant.

Gibbs laughed. "Only if I lose my wits," he said. "And if I do, you have my permission to shoot me."

McGee grinned back at him - and Gibbs reached out and touched his arm. "What about you, Tim?" he asked. "The years are passing. Hell, I'd been married three times by the time I was

your age but you've never tried it once."

"Oh well...I just never met the right girl," McGee replied, feeling himself flush. "Or...I met her but she married someone else."

Gibbs gazed at him steadily.

"And then...you know, got herself killed and left us all with a kid to look after," McGee added, with a wry, self-deprecating grin. Gibbs nodded, and slapped his shoulder gently.

"It's been a long time. Maybe you need to start looking for someone else?" he suggested.

"Like Tony has?" McGee asked. "He used to date a different woman every night of the damn week but there's been nobody for him since Abby."

Gibbs gave him a searching look. "Tony's circumstances are different. As for Abby - I know you both loved her but she made her choice. Look, Tim, you're one of the youngest directors NCIS has ever had and you're doing a great job over there – I always knew your career would be on the fast track. You were just too damn bright and too damn good at your job not to make it to where you are right now. But...there are other things in life besides work you know."

McGee laughed out loud. "Is that really Leroy Jethro Gibbs I hear giving me that advice?" he asked. "The same Leroy Jethro Gibbs who never arrived at work after 08:00, or left before 21:00?"

Gibbs gave him a tight little smile. "Yeah, well, maybe looking after Louis these past few years has given me a different perspective," he said. "You going back to the office now?"

"Yes. Strange as it may seem I have more to do as Director of NCIS than run around after Tony DiNozzo all day long. I have a whole stack of paperwork to deal with and a meeting with SECNAV later. I also want to take a look at what Carter has got out of Stackton before Tony comes charging back in," he said.

"Okay. I'll try and keep him out of your hair for as long as I can," Gibbs promised, and then he patted McGee's arm again and strode off after Tony and Ducky.

McGee spent several hours trying to clear at least some of the paperwork that had built up on his desk as a result of his wasted morning, and then he spent the rest of the day and most of the evening in a long, tiring meeting with SECNAV.

The new SECNAV had only been in the job for a few months and she was a hard-nosed kind of woman, keen to stamp her mark on her new post. McGee was good at his job and had an excellent memory so he was able to keep up with her habit of barking unrelated questions at him and expecting a thorough answer – frankly, an apprenticeship with Gibbs had left him easily able to cope with even the toughest boss. All the same, he was tired and had a

splitting headache by the time he returned to the office. It was nearly 10pm and he knew there was no way he'd be getting home before midnight.

His assistant was long gone, and he unlocked the door to his office with a relieved sigh, grateful for the peace and quiet, and then, without turning on the light, he headed over to his desk to find the stash of Advil he kept in his top drawer. He opened the packet, knocked two into the palm of his hand and then looked around for the bottle of water he usually kept on his desk.

"Want to wash them down with this?" a voice drawled and he jumped, startled, and snapped on the desk lamp to see Tony sitting on his couch, legs up on his coffee table, holding up a glass of bourbon - *his* bourbon. The bottle was open on the table in front of him – as was the door of McGee's wet bar in the corner. McGee felt his jaw tighten – he'd taken enough crap from Tony today and was in no mood, after a long day and with his thundering headache, to take any more.

"Tony, what the hell are you doing here?" he growled.

"I often come up here when you're tucked up at home in bed, McGeek," Tony told him. "You keep the best liquor."

"How the hell did you get in here? The office door is kept locked," McGee snapped.

Tony just looked at him as if he'd said something really stupid, which he had; they both knew that Tony could pick just about any lock if he put his mind to it – a trick he'd learned from Gibbs and Ziva.

McGee sighed. "You come here and drink my whisky – seriously?"

"No, mostly I come here and spend the night on your couch," Tony replied. "That's usually after I've been drinking although it sure as hell helps knowing that I can get a refill if I need one – that's an extensive collection of liquor you've got there, Probie. Didn't even know you liked to drink."

"I don't," McGee muttered, going over to the table and grabbing the glass of bourbon out of Tony's hand. "I keep it to offer to visitors."

He threw both Advil into his mouth and took a deep swallow of the bourbon, making a face as it burned his throat on the way down. Tony held out his hand to have the glass back. McGee glared at him.

"Hey – you said you keep it for visitors. *I'm* a visitor," Tony said.

"No, right now you're a trespasser. You broke into my damn office, Tony!" McGee snapped. "Why the hell are you here anyway?"

"Can't go home. Too drunk. Didn't know you'd be coming back," Tony said. "Besides, I want

to be here first thing tomorrow to interview Stackton.”

“I authorised him to be put in the cells overnight,” McGee told him. “And it is not a given that I’ll let you interview him first thing tomorrow, Tony. I want some time to review the interrogation file first – and the pretty damn paltry paperwork you filed detailing his supposed ‘crime’.”

“He can lead us to Jonssen – I know it,” Tony said mulishly.

“Maybe – or maybe he’s another of your dead ends,” McGee said tersely. Tony’s expression darkened. “Either way, I have some work to do – and you are in the way.”

“Nah. I’ll just lie here...” Tony swiped the glass from McGee’s hand and downed the rest of the contents in one gulp. “You won’t even know I’m here.”

McGee thought about it, but he really didn’t like the idea of a drunk Tony DiNozzo snoring his head off on his couch all night. He also wasn’t sure what Tony might look at while he was in here – although he was pretty sure he’d have already looked through Carter’s interrogation report which he’d asked to be left on his desk. All the same, Tony had clearly spent some time in a bar this evening and McGee wasn’t sure he was in any fit state to find a hotel room. He could put him in a taxi and send him home but...

“Gibbs won’t let you in the house if you’re drunk, will he?” he asked, remembering what Gibbs had told him earlier, in the restaurant. Tony pulled a face.

“Nah. He’ll just throw my sorry ass out again if I go home like this. Doesn’t want Louis to see his dad stinking drunk.” He poured some more bourbon into his glass, and then threw his head back and took a long gulp. “He’s right,” he slurred. “Used to see my dad drunk all the time when I wasn’t any older than Lou. Had to put him to bed myself some nights later on. Never was a night he went to bed sober. Glad Louis’s got someone looking out for him.”

McGee sighed. He wished Tony had had someone like Gibbs looking out for *him* when he’d been a kid – maybe, if he had, he wouldn’t be so hard to handle right now.

“You’re pissed off with me,” Tony said. “I can tell.” He didn’t seem bothered by it. In fact he just held up the glass again, said “cheers”, and downed the rest of the bourbon in one gulp. McGee fought back a wave of irritation.

“Yes, I’m pissed off with you, Tony,” he said.

Tony belched, loudly, grinned at him stupidly, and then reached for the bottle. He fumbled with it, still grinning inanely, and something about his drunken stupor annoyed McGee beyond belief. It had been a long day, and his anger spilled out. He grabbed the glass out of Tony’s hand and threw it across the room where it smashed against the opposite wall and shattered into pieces, leaving a big stain on the wallpaper.

“Oops,” Tony said.

“Fuck it, Tony!” Tim yelled, losing control of his temper. “You drive me fucking insane! I’ve had it with you! Yes, you lost Abby but we all did and we’re not all getting drunk the whole time. You don’t fucking understand what you’ve *got*, and you’re throwing it all away, chasing after revenge and oblivion and...and...the fucking *darkness* rather than just sucking it up and getting on with it, like the rest of us are doing. Do you see Gibbs drinking himself stupid every night of the week, huh? Or me? We lost them too! We all lost Kate, and Ziva, and Abby – not just you!”

“Aw. You’re angry. Wanna hit me, Timmy?” Tony said, pointing at his already bruised jaw. “Go ahead. Go on. I’ll give you the first one for free.” His eyes sparkled dangerously and McGee knew he was relishing the thought of a fight.

“No I don’t want to fucking hit you! I want to shake you!” McGee shouted.

Tony grinned at him, a dark, hostile grin, and reached across the coffee table for the bottle of bourbon. For some reason that irritated McGee and he launched himself over the table to get to the bottle first and remove it from Tony’s reach. Tony shoved him out of the way and McGee shoved him back – hard - harder than he’d intended. Tony took a clumsy swing at him, catching McGee unawares, and connected a feeble blow to McGee’s midriff. In sheer exasperation, McGee lashed out and landed a swinging punch to Tony’s mouth. Tony fell off the couch and onto the floor with an almighty crash where he lay, giggling inanely, his lip cut and bleeding.

“Tony...shit...” McGee felt angry with himself for allowing Tony to get to him. He moved towards him and then, a second later, found himself flying through the air as Tony kicked his ankles out from under him. He ended up banging his head against the coffee table and lay there on his ass, gazing blearily at Tony who was gazing back at him with a twisted grin on his face. “I fucking hate you, Tony,” he said.

“Yeah. I know.” Tony shrugged.

“You’re such a bastard. I loved her too, Tony. I loved Abby – but she chose *you*. Have you any idea what it was like to stand by and watch the two of you...”

He closed his eyes shut tightly. He’d loved Abby for years, ever since he first met her. They’d dated for awhile, many years ago, but she’d never been as into him as he was into her. She’d let him down gently, but she was so nice that he’d mistaken that for meaning that he still had a chance with her. Maybe he’d just never listened to the messages she kept giving him that it was never going to happen between them. In his head he’d just always assumed that it *would*.

Tony, meanwhile, had pursued his life of endless bachelorhood with his usual gusto – punctuated only by meaningful glances at and a low-level flirtation with Ziva. McGee had never been entirely sure what was between them but he knew they were close, and he suspected that at some point the relationship ended up in the bedroom. He hadn’t been all that interested – he was too fixated on Abby, and on his certainty that they’d one day end

up together and all he had to do was hang on in there until she woke up to that certainty too.

Then Ziva had been killed on that horrible, long, endless day and they'd spent hours freeing Tony from the collapsed building where he was trapped. Gibbs had paced around like an angry, caged tiger, yelling at anyone who came near him. At that point he hadn't known which of his agents was dead and which alive; they had body temperature readings that *someone* was still alive in there, but they didn't know who. McGee often wondered whether Gibbs was relieved or disappointed that it was Tony. He'd known Tony the longest of all of them and the two men had always had some kind of weird bond, but Ziva was a woman and Gibbs had some old-fashioned views about the women under his command.

Tony had been half dead when they finally dragged him out, and Gibbs...well, it was as if someone had turned back the clock to when Kate had been killed – only worse. Tony was in the hospital for weeks – he had more broken bones than McGee could count, and it had been touch and go whether they'd save his left arm. He'd been left with terrible scarring there but even worse than that was the fact that the light seemed to have gone out of him.

When McGee visited him in the hospital he found him subdued, unable to make his usual stupid jokes, and prone to obsessing about those few hours leading up to the bomb blast and if they could have done anything differently. What he never talked about, to McGee at least, were those dark hours he'd spent trapped in that burned out building, with bits of Ziva's body all around him, knowing she was dead and trying to come to terms with that as he lay there badly injured.

That was the first time McGee had witnessed the dark well of anger inside of Tony that he'd since become all too familiar with. Looking back, he thought that maybe that was when Tony had begun to change, although none of them had been aware of it at the time. The only people he had responded to, in those first few weeks after the bomb blast, were Gibbs and Abby.

Gibbs visited him whenever he could tear himself away from tracking down the people who'd killed Ziva and putting several bullets in them, the way he'd done with Ari, and with the man who'd killed his family. Abby went to see Tony every day though – and McGee realised for the first time that she and Tony had a strange bond that went way back, to a time long before he'd joined NCIS. They had both always had a certain childlike quality to them – or just plain childish in Tony's case – and now they clung to each other like children. At first he'd dismissed their growing closeness as just her warm heart reaching out to his obvious distress, but it had slowly dawned on him that it was turning into something more than that.

When he finally confronted her about it they had a big argument – largely his fault he thought, in retrospect.

"You're sleeping with Tony?" he accused after finding out that she'd spent every night since Tony's release from the hospital at his apartment. "Tony? For god's sake, Abby! How long do you think that'll last? Tony's incapable of loving any woman for longer than a month!"

“Don’t be an idiot, McGee,” she said, her face looking strained and taut. “Me and Tony...well, it was kind of always going to happen. It just had to wait until we both grew up a bit.”

“What? What do you mean *always* going to happen?” he asked, totally mystified. “Since when?”

“Since we first met.” She shrugged. “We both knew we’d get around to it one day.”

He just stared at her, totally and utterly unable to get his head around what she was saying.

“We just had to walk on the wild side a bit first,” she added with a grin. “Both of us. Him and all his girlies, and me and all my crazies. Now we’re done with that. We’re kind of getting a bit too old for it as well. It’s okay to sleep in a coffin and make out with vampire wannabes when you’re in your twenties, but it gets totally uncool when you’re heading past 35.”

“I think you’re both completely insane,” he told her.

“McGee,” she said softly, patting his arm. “Don’t be like this. You and me – that was a long time ago, and Tony needs me right now. I have to be there for him.”

“Well don’t come running to me when it ends in tears – and it will.”

“Hey.” She pulled him into a big hug and he hung there stiffly, until finally it was too much for him and he gave in, and surrendered. It was always impossible to hold out against Abby for long. “I’ll always love you, Timmy. You know that,” she whispered in his ear.

He did know that, but it hadn’t made it any easier. He had been wrong about her relationship with Tony ending in tears as well. It hadn’t. In fact, they’d been obviously and deliriously happy for a couple of years, and McGee had been forced to suck it up, and learn how to live with it. He’d been the best man at their wedding, even though it had hurt to stand there and watch Gibbs walk Abby down the aisle in a black silk dress and deliver her up to Tony of all people.

Tony had never hurt her though, the way McGee had thought he would – although he was pretty sure that Gibbs had taken Tony to one side and promised to break all the *other* bones in his body if he ever hurt his beloved Abby. Whether it was because of that, or whether it was because he’d just finally grown up, Tony clearly doted on her and never looked at another woman from the minute they got together. Abby just as clearly adored Tony and was as happy as McGee had ever seen her, and, in time, he had grudgingly had to admit, to himself at least, that he’d been wrong, and somehow this most unlikely of couples worked - which made it all the more devastating when Abby had been killed.

“Here, Probie, if you’re going to go getting all dark and maudlin on me then you’ll need this,” Tony said, snapping him back to the present, handing him the bottle of bourbon. McGee took it, threw his head back, and took a deep gulp of the fiery liquid.

Tony laid back against the couch, blood seeping out of his split lip and running down his chin.

“She wasn’t even supposed to be here that day,” McGee muttered, taking another deep slug of the bourbon. “She was still on maternity leave but her replacement just wasn't as good, and couldn’t get the forensics to pan out, and she had dropped into the office with Louis and I mentioned it to her...I shouldn’t have done that.”

“You didn’t know, Probie,” Tony sighed.

“But it’s always stayed with me!” McGee said savagely, staring at the bottle of bourbon in his hands. “If I hadn’t asked for her help...”

“She was the best - of course you asked her, Probie,” Tony said softly. “Besides, you weren’t Director then so it’s not like you ordered her to help out. She wanted to.”

“I know. I know.” McGee shook his head, took another gulp of bourbon, and handed the bottle to Tony, who took it with a twisted little smile.

“I could have stopped her too,” Tony said. “I was senior agent and you and she were both on my team. Hell, we all could have stopped her but there was no reason to think anything would happen to her.”

McGee remembered how they’d all looked after Louis together in the squad room while Abby worked in her lab for a few days. It had been such a great time – the first time since Ziva had died that he felt they’d all pulled together as a team again, and it had started to feel like it used to, back in the old days. Of course, looking back, he realised that was the last time he’d felt that way. A few days later Abby had been killed inside her own lab – and all the evidence she’d been working on had been destroyed as well.

Jonsen had walked free and then fled immediately, before he could be called in for more questioning on a number of outstanding unsolved crimes he was linked to, and Tony had made it his life’s work ever since to track the bastard down. It wasn’t a goal that McGee was unsympathetic to – they all wanted to catch Abby’s killer. He was pretty sure that Gibbs would have been the first in line for that particular crusade if it hadn’t been for Louis. Someone had to take care of the baby, and Tony had been a wreck for several months. Gibbs had just assumed the responsibility with typical efficiency and lack of fanfare.

McGee watched Tony take a slug of bourbon and then hand the bottle back to him. Tony’s back was against the couch, while McGee was propped up against the coffee table. His head hurt and he could feel a little trickle of blood seeping out of the cut on the side of his forehead. Tony looked even worse – the split lip McGee had given him just adding to his other facial injuries from earlier in the day, giving him a battered look.

“I’m sorry I hit you, Tony,” McGee said.

“Nah – I deserved it.” Tony shrugged. “I’m sorry I tripped you – you’ve been a good friend to me, Tim. And I know how you felt about Abby. I guess we all felt that way. I know it’s not just me who...I know you all miss her too. I just can’t...” His hands curled up into fists. “I can’t stop myself, Tim – you know that.”

“Yeah. I know,” McGee sighed. He glanced at the stained wall and the shattered shards of glass all over the floor. “Shit. I should clear this up before Gary comes in tomorrow.”

“McGee! You’re the goddamned director!” Tony laughed. “Who the hell cares if your assistant sees a broken glass? Maybe he’ll just figure you had a good night for once, McAll-work-and-no-play.”

“Someone has to keep this place running.”

“Well, it’s not my idea of fun. I’m glad I turned the job down.” Tony grinned at him provocatively.

“Tony! They never asked you!”

“They would have if I’d been interested,” Tony said with a wink.

“Tony – you were being investigated by the FBI for the what – seventh time? - when the job became vacant. Trust me; you weren’t even on the list!”

“Sixth,” Tony said, with a wounded pout. “Also, the first few times weren’t my fault – first time it was Abby’s weird forensics gremlin making trouble for me. Second it was Jeanne wanting revenge for the many crimes of love I committed there.”

“Third time Gibbs covered for you,” McGee said.

“Yeah. And the fourth,” Tony agreed.

“And the fifth time *I* covered for you,” McGee pointed out.

“Yeah.” Tony grinned. “Thanks for that, Probie.”

“And the sixth time Agent Sacks took pity on you,” McGee sighed. “You’re lucky that way, Tony.”

“Don’t want anyone’s pity, Probie,” Tony said, taking back the bourbon from McGee. McGee thought that although Tony had several hours head start on him, he was catching him up fast in the being drunk on his ass stakes. “Besides, Sacks just gave in eventually to the legendary DiNozzo charm. They all do in the end – it’s only a matter of time – although in his case, I grant you, a *lot* of time, but hey, the guy’s as stubborn as Fornell, may he rest in peace.”

McGee grinned, because for a moment that sounded a little like the old Tony, all monstrous

exaggeration and misplaced confidence.

“Anyway, I’m just saying I *could* have made Director, although I think we both know I’d have been lousy at it. Like Gibbs would have been if they’d ever been stupid enough to offer it to him.” They both paused for a moment to shudder at that thought. “And hell, you’re a good director, Tim, better than any of the others I’ve worked for – ‘cept maybe Morrow. I liked that guy.”

McGee reached over to swipe the bottle back from him. “Nearly gone,” he complained, looking at it.

“You’ve got more in the bar.” Tony gestured with his head.

They sat there in silence for a long time, and then McGee remembered something.

“Agent Morris made a complaint about you,” he said.

Tony laughed. “Really? Took her long enough. Usually they complain about me within a week and she’s been with me for nearly three years.”

“Don’t you want to know what she complained about?” McGee asked. Tony’s eyes darkened and he shrugged.

“I know what she complained about,” he muttered.

“She thinks you pass her over for the dangerous field work,” McGee told him. Tony shrugged again. “I took a look at her case record – she’s right.”

“Yeah,” Tony replied.

“I told her why,” McGee said. Tony raised an eyebrow. “I told her she reminds you of Kate. I told her you lost Kate, Ziva and Abby and you don’t want to lose her.”

“Shouldn’t I be sitting *on* the couch if you’re gonna psychoanalyse me, McFreud?” Tony commented, gesturing over his shoulder to the couch he was slouched against.

“Am I wrong or right?” McGee asked.

“Who cares?” Tony waved a hand. “You do know she has the hots for you, right?” he said. McGee stared at him.

“Who?” he asked, frowning.

“Agent Morris. The beautiful Felicity. She lights up like a Christmas tree whenever you walk past her desk.”

“No she doesn’t. That’s just crap, Tony,” McGee growled, feeling himself flush all the same.

He really didn't want to talk to Tony about his love life – or lack thereof - or his feelings for Felicity Morris, which he thought he'd done a good job of keeping hidden. He was good at unrequited love – he'd had years of experience after all.

“Would you even notice if a woman looked your way, Tim?” Tony asked him, in a quiet voice, the teasing tone gone. “Maybe you need to pull your head out of your ass, stop living in the past, and go out and get yourself laid. Might stop you being such a grouch.”

“I’m not a grouch. I’m...Agent Morris?” McGee asked, still blushing.

“She’s hot,” Tony grinned.

“I hadn’t noticed,” McGee parried, disingenuously.

“Yeah – you had.” Tony leered at him.

“Stop it, Tony – that’s disgusting. Besides, if you think she’s so hot, why haven’t you made a move on her?” he asked. “It’s not like you’re getting laid either, Tony.”

A strange expression flickered in Tony’s eyes, and he shifted uncomfortably.

“Oh my god! You are!” McGee accused. “You are getting laid. Who is she, Tony?”

“None of your business,” Tony growled. “Now are you going to get the new bottle of whisky or am I?”

McGee got up, staggered over to the bar, found another bottle of bourbon and staggered back with it. He dropped down onto the couch, opened the bottle, and took a long drink from it. It wasn’t anywhere near as fiery as the other one, he thought hazily, or maybe the back of his throat had given in and was just going with it.

“How the hell did you even find time to meet anyone?” he asked. “You’re always here, or else getting drunk somewhere – or chasing down bad guys and beating their brains out with your fists. Did someone take pity on you or something?”

“What’s with the pity theme?” Tony growled.

“Only way I can see you getting laid,” McGee grinned down at him. Tony’s shoulders hunched and he reached up and grabbed the bottle out of McGee’s hand.

“Yeah, well, now I think about it there might have been some pity involved. They sure as hell had little enough reason to want to go there otherwise.”

“*They*?” McGee queried incredulously. “There’s been more than one?”

“Just a figure of speech,” Tony muttered. “Anyway, we’re not talking about me – we’re talking about you and the delectable Fe-lee-cee-tee.” He strung out her name unnecessarily,

the way he always used to do with Ziva. “She has the right background for you, McGee. She’s smart – she talks all that computer geek stuff that you talk – and she went to Harvard. And she’s classy; did you know that her friends call her Flick? Man, I swear Carter mocked her about that for three months solid when he found out. Flick?” He laughed out loud. “Like she’s a pony or something – a thoroughbred maybe?” He grinned up at McGee. “You like her, don’t you?”

“It doesn’t matter if I do or not,” McGee replied, taking the bottle back. “Rule number twelve remember?”

“Never eat beans on a stakeout?” Tony frowned, looking confused. McGee slapped the back of his head.

“Gibbs’s rules – not DiNozzo’s!” he grinned. “Rule number twelve – never date a co-worker. And in my case, as I’m director, asking her out could constitute sexual harassment.”

Tony sighed, loudly. “McGee – if you live by the rules you’ll die without getting laid ever again and that, my friend, is something I’m not gonna let happen. Hey – what about SECNAV? She’s kind of sexy in a weird, scary way – and we all know you like weird and scary.”

“Do not!” McGee protested hotly. He knew they had to both be very, very drunk because they hadn’t talked this way in years, and although he suspected they were a bit too old for it, it felt kind of nice. Like the past few years hadn’t happened and they were younger, less world-weary versions of themselves. “You’re the one who likes weird and scary, Tony, not me.”

Tony grinned up at him. “Yeah. You could be right,” he said.

McGee was sure that he replied, and that Tony said something back, but he was equally sure that they were making less and less sense, and possibly even talking total gibberish. At some point he fell asleep, sprawled out on the couch.

He woke several hours later, his face squished against the side of the couch, and stared at the familiar and yet unfamiliar-from-this-angle fabric for several minutes, wondering why he had such a terrible headache. Then he remembered, and came to with a groan. He glanced around and saw Tony, lying on his back on the floor beside the couch, his hand wrapped around the half-empty bottle of bourbon. His mouth was open and he was snoring loudly. McGee poked him with his finger.

“Shut up,” he said. He glanced at his watch to find that it was 5am. His assistant, Gary, who always got in very early, would arrive within the next hour or two, and he really didn’t want him to find his boss in this kind of a state. “Wake up, Tony,” he said, sitting up, his head thundering in protest.

“Whaaa?” Tony sat up without so much as a groan, but then his body was more used to handling a hangover.

"It's 5am and you stink." McGee wrinkled up his nose. "Go home, clean up, and come back. Then we'll review Carter's interrogation notes together."

"I already did," Tony said.

"And?"

"And he did okay but I know I can do better if you just shut me in a room with Stackton."

"We tried that yesterday," McGee told him. "Look, I'm going home to take a shower. You do the same – are you sober enough yet to drive?" He asked suspiciously. "Hell – am I? I'll call us both a couple of drivers." He got up, and then let out an involuntary moan as a wave of nausea shot through him. He sat back down again, and swallowed down a heave.

"Wuss. That'll teach you to drink with the big boys," Tony said, getting to his feet effortlessly and pulling McGee to his. McGee groaned, and stumbled over to his desk in search of the Advil. He held the packet up to Tony who just grinned and shook his head.

"I'll see you back here at seven, Probie," Tony said, in a loud and unnaturally cheerful voice as he headed for the door. McGee winced, the noise assaulting him in his current fragile state. He swallowed the Advil with a sigh, and then called for a driver to take him home.

Part 2 by Xanthe

His driver dropped him off at his Georgetown townhouse and he was grateful to stand under the hot water in his shower, allowing it to soak and soothe away the night's excesses. By the time he'd finished up and cleaned his teeth the Advil had kicked in and he was feeling more human. He pulled a clean suit out of his closet and had just finished dressing when his cell phone rang. He suspected it was Gary, calling him to ask where he was and did he know there was a broken glass and suspicious wall stain in his office, so he pulled it out with a grimace.

"Gary – I know about..." he began, only to find himself interrupted by Tony's terse, worried voice.

"Tim – it's Louis and Gibbs," he said. "They're gone."

"What do you mean, gone?" McGee asked blankly, trying to figure out what Tony was telling him.

"Gone – Louis's bed is mussed up, but Gibbs never went to bed last night by the look of it and..."

"Maybe they just got up early and went for a walk?" McGee suggested.

"I've found a pool of blood in Louis's bedroom," Tony hissed urgently, sounding as if he was going to throw up. "Tim, I think someone's taken them."

"Who would want to kidnap Louis and Gibbs?" McGee asked, reaching for his badge and gun and running for the door.

"Jonssen of course," Tony replied angrily. "He knows we're onto something with Stackton and he's trying to scare us off."

"Tony – just stay there. I've got the car outside. I'm leaving right now. I'll be with you as soon as I can," McGee told him, and then he ended the call and started dialling all the people he'd need.

His heart was racing but he tried to think about it logically. If Louis and Gibbs had been kidnapped then Tony was right – Jonssen was first on the list – but McGee had worked with Gibbs for too long to just go with what was obvious. They had to explore other possibilities. Even so, this moved Stackton up the urgency list. He put in a call to Carter and told him to get Stackton back into the interrogation room immediately and start working on him. Then he called security and doubled the detail on their suspect.

"Are you expecting someone to try and break him out, sir?" the security chief asked, in a puzzled tone.

"No, I'm expecting someone to try and kill him," he said grimly.

“Any idea who?”

“Yes – Agent DiNozzo. Do NOT allow him anywhere near that prisoner unless I’m with him.”

Right now, Stackton was the only lead they had on Jonssen and McGee knew enough about Tony to suspect that he’d be physically incapable of doing anything except beat the man to a pulp if he thought he’d had anything to do with this kidnapping – and that wouldn’t get Louis and Gibbs back. McGee ran out of the car the minute they pulled up outside Tony’s house in Vienna. Tony had bought the place with Abby when they got married; it was a nice house, three bedrooms, a yard for Louis to play in, and a large garage – where Gibbs was building boat number five or whatever number they were up to now. This boat was a big one though – bigger than any of the others, and he’d been working on it ever since he’d moved in. McGee had often wondered if they’d ever get to see this one actually sail anywhere. There was at least the possibility because Gibbs would be able to get the damn thing out of the garage, something that would have been a physical impossibility with all those boats he’d built in his basement.

McGee remembered what Gibbs had said about Tony inheriting a fortune from his father and wondered why he’d never moved anywhere bigger – the Vienna house was nice but it wasn’t anything fancy. Then again, Tony hadn’t been interested in anything except his revenge since Abby died so house-hunting probably hadn’t even crossed his mind.

The front door was open so McGee pushed his way inside to find Tony pacing up and down in the hallway anxiously, waiting for him.

“McGee – you have to let me question Stackton,” he said, grabbing McGee’s arm the minute he stepped through the door.

“Hang on just a minute, Tony,” McGee told him, putting a hand on his shoulder and squeezing hard, trying to calm him. “I’ve called in a team of agents – let’s treat this as a crime scene and learn what we can here first before chasing off in what might be the wrong direction.”

“Oh, come on, McGee!” Tony roared. “We pull in Stackton for questioning and the same night Gibbs and Louis get kidnapped! I *know* Gibbs beat the same lesson into you as he did to me – we don’t believe in coincidences.”

“No, we don’t – but we don’t have enough facts yet to know that’s what this is and I wouldn’t be doing my job properly if I didn’t investigate the crime scene thoroughly before running off on a hunch – Gibbs also beat that lesson into me, same as he did to you.”

Tony glared at him, and then glanced over his shoulder as three NCIS vans pulled up outside.

“See you brought the cavalry with you,” he murmured.

“Of course – this is Gibbs and Louis we’re talking about,” McGee told him, still gripping

Tony's shoulder firmly. "I'll throw every resource NCIS has at it. What I won't do is chase after a hunch without doing a proper investigation first. Got it, Tony?"

Tony didn't look happy about it but he nodded, stiffly. "Got it."

McGee let go of him and turned to brief Morris and put her in charge of his teams, and then he turned back to Tony.

"Okay – talk me through what happened when you got home, Tony," he said, in a soothing voice.

Tony glared at him. "Christ, McGee – don't use that stupid tone of voice with me. We're just wasting time with this. I've already figured out what happened here – what we need to do is get back to NCIS and start putting some pressure on Stackton."

"*We* don't need to do anything. *I* am the senior investigating agent here – not you," McGee told him. "In fact you're not investigating anything – you're a witness."

"And a suspect?" Tony growled. "Come on, Tim – you and I both know that you rule out close family members first."

"Tony I know you didn't do this," McGee told him gently. "But I also know that you're in no fit shape to head up the investigation, either. Now I can assign someone else if you'd prefer, but I'd rather do it myself."

"No." Tony shook his head. "Nobody else. You're the only one I trust to do this right, McGee."

"Then talk me through what happened when you got home this morning," McGee coaxed.

Tony nodded, his jaw tightening. "Okay. It was about 5.30. Gibbs usually gets up early but not that early..."

"What time?" McGee interrupted. "What time does he usually get up?"

"Around six. And he usually gets Louis up around seven if he hasn't already started charging around the house by then. So, it was around 5.30, and I didn't want to wake them so I went up to the bathroom, took a shower, shaved, cleaned my teeth and then I went and got dressed."

McGee glanced at him. It was rare these days that Tony wore one of those snappy suits he used to live in. Nowadays his usual work uniform was jeans and a shirt and that was what he was wearing now, together with a pair of heavy duty boots. His hair was washed, and he had shaved and smelled a hell of a lot better now than he had a couple of hours ago so his story panned out so far. Despite what he'd said to Tony, as an experienced investigator McGee couldn't ignore the fact that in any normal investigation of this kind Tony would be their number one suspect; Tony was right about that much at least.

“Go on.” McGee nodded.

“I went down to the kitchen to eat something, and then I thought it was kind of weird that Gibbs wasn’t up so I went back upstairs.”

“Show me,” McGee said.

Tony nodded, and McGee followed him up the stairs. He peered into the bathroom, and saw a sodden towel on the floor and the clothes Tony had been wearing the previous day hanging out of the laundry hamper in the corner.

“So then what?” McGee asked. “You went to check on Gibbs?”

McGee started moving down the hallway towards the spare room; he opened the door and then glanced back at Tony, who was still standing outside the bathroom, an uncertain look on his face.

“Tony? You came in here to check on Gibbs?” McGee questioned. He’d hadn’t been upstairs in this house very often but he’d occasionally read Louis a bedtime story on the evenings when he’d dropped by to see the little boy, so he knew the general layout of the house, and where the main bedroom, spare bedroom and Louis’s room were.

McGee glanced into the spare room. It looked kind of un-lived in, and there was a pile of clean laundry on the bed, along with some of Louis’s toys and books. McGee frowned. Something about this didn’t feel right.

He glanced back at Tony to find him still hesitating by the bathroom door, a glimmer of uncertainty flickering in his eyes, as if he had something to hide. McGee wondered what the hell that was about. What could there possibly be that Tony didn’t want McGee to find out? Surely he hadn’t really had anything to do with the disappearance of his son?

McGee dismissed that thought immediately. Apart from anything else he doubted that Tony would have had the time, after leaving him at NCIS, to come home, do something to Louis and Gibbs, and then take a shower, get shaved and call him, even if he had a motive for hurting either of them, which McGee was sure he didn’t. He knew Tony could get into some pretty fierce rages these days but Gibbs could always talk him down from them, and even at his worst McGee didn’t think it was even remotely possible that Tony either could or would hurt their ex-boss or his own little boy. So what else did Tony have to hide?

“Tony?” he asked again, still standing in the spare room doorway.

“Gibbs doesn’t sleep in there,” Tony said finally. “He sleeps in here.” He opened the door to the main bedroom and McGee walked back down the hallway and stepped inside. Now **this** room looked lived in. The bed was still made, so Tony was probably right about it not having been slept in.

“Does Gibbs make the bed as soon as he gets up?” he asked. Tony shook his head.

“Not usually – which was why I thought it was weird that it hasn’t been slept in.”

McGee glanced around the room. It had a feel of Gibbs to it. There was a newspaper on one of the nightstands and a couple of books – thrillers by the look of them, with big titles in silver lettering. They were the kind of books he’d once written, a lifetime ago, before life got too busy, too sad and too complicated and his creative spirit just curled up and died. There was also a handful of loose change, a pair of glasses, and a child’s sippy cup. That side of the room looked neat and tidy but the other half was a mess.

On the other nightstand stood a clock radio, a half-eaten bag of popcorn, and a stack of DVDs, with titles ranging from Shrek, Monsters Inc, and The Barnaby Twins to Casablanca, North by Northwest and The Bourne Paradox. Around the far side of the bed were some discarded clothes, several pairs of boots and sneakers, a stack of old magazines and, for some mysterious reason, a squished and completely unusable basketball.

Opposite the bed was a large screen TV, fixed to the wall – no mean feat considering how huge it was, but then McGee guessed that had been an easy enough job for someone like Gibbs. Beneath that was a cupboard containing a DVD player and a download hub.

“So Gibbs wasn’t here...which already made me feel uneasy,” Tony said. “I thought maybe he could have snuck out while I was in the shower – but why? I already knew he wasn’t in the spare room because I’d got changed in there – we kind of use it to store the clean laundry. So...”

“Hang on – if you use the spare room for the laundry then where do you sleep?” McGee frowned. “On the couch?”

Tony made a face at him, as if he was really slow not to have figured this out already.

“No – I sleep in here. With Gibbs,” Tony said, and then he leaned back against the wall and gazed at McGee steadily, daring him to say something. McGee dared.

“In here? With Gibbs?” However hard he tried he couldn’t quite put that information together in a way that made any kind of sense.

“In here. With Gibbs,” Tony repeated firmly. “When I’m not drunk. When I am, I sleep on your office couch or in a motel. Or sometimes in the garage, under that damn boat Gibbs is building - although he doesn’t know that I do that.”

McGee was still hung up on the “In here. With Gibbs” part.

“You sleep in the same bed?” he asked, and even then his mind still refused to accept the most obvious reason for such an arrangement. “Why?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Because we’re together, McGee, and so we can have sex, obviously,”

he replied. "Why the hell else?"

"You have sex? With Gibbs?" McGee was aware that he kept asking really inane questions, but he just couldn't get his head around this.

"Yes, McGee. I do. We do," Tony said slowly, as if he was talking to a child Louis's age.

"Look, my kid and my - what do you want to call it? - partner, boyfriend, lover, whatever, although I'm pretty sure he'd hate all those terms - are missing, so could we get over your homophobic freakout and start looking for them?"

"I'm not having a homophobic freakout!" McGee protested. "I'm just trying to...you and Gibbs?"

He shook his head and glanced around again, suddenly realising why half the room was ex-Marine tidy while the other half was DiNozzo messy. Those DVD titles and the popcorn made sense as well, as did the enormous TV screen - since when had Gibbs ever been particularly into watching movies?

"Since when?" McGee asked.

"Is it relevant to the investigation?" Tony glowered.

"It might be." McGee shrugged. Tony glared at him, and then hunched his shoulders.

"Since the first anniversary of Abby's death," he muttered. "I was feeling pretty low that day and drank myself into the ground. He yelled at me - told me never to come home drunk like that again because he never wanted Louis to see me that way. I threw up all over myself - and him." Tony winced. "He cleaned me up, put me to bed, and the next day, when I was sober, we did some talking - and in my case some crying. I was in a bad way - I was falling apart and he put me back together the best way he knew how. And he's stuck around ever since to make sure I stay that way. Even if he knows I'm just held together with band-aids and string."

McGee shook his head, feeling an irrational surge of anger. "How the hell do you do it, Tony?" he asked. "You had Ziva and Abby, and now Gibbs."

"I never 'had' Ziva," Tony growled. "We were just friends."

"Oh." McGee wasn't sure why but that surprised him. "I always thought you and she..."

"No." Tony shook his head. "Hell, that would have been a disaster. If we'd ever slept together - which, admittedly, would have been totally hot - we'd have had to kill each other afterwards."

"But Gibbs, Tony?" McGee felt oddly affronted, as if Tony and Gibbs had got together just to spite him. "Were you thinking of working your way through the entire team?"

“You’re jealous that I never got around to you?” Tony raised an eyebrow. “Not that you’re not cute but...”

“No! I just...why you? What is it about *you* that’s so damn irresistible that first Abby fell for it and then Gibbs, of all people? I mean, why YOU for god’s sake?” McGee snapped irritably. “I suppose I can just about understand why Abby chose you but Gibbs.” He shook his head. “How did *you* end up with Gibbs?”

“What – you wanted Gibbs too?” Tony’s raised eyebrow crawled into his hairline.

“Well, no, obviously,” McGee sighed. “But since when have either of you been gay?”

“Are you kidding? I’ve had the hots for Gibbs since I first joined his team,” Tony replied. “Sure, I slept with a lot of women, but I also slept with a lot of men – I just didn’t talk about it. I like sex, McGee. Hell, I *need* sex – always have. I need it to function, and I’ve never been that fussy about the gender of the people I sleep with although I’m not stupid enough to broadcast that fact. I never thought anything would happen with Gibbs until it did – there could never have been another woman for me after Abby in any case. There couldn’t even have been a guy unless it was Gibbs. Maybe he knew that, and maybe he knew how much I needed to be touched. Either way, he made it happen, not me – I was too fucked up to make anything happen.”

“And Gibbs? He’s gay?” There was absolutely no way in which that phrase fitted into McGee’s worldview.

“Well gee, considering he’s had four wives I’d assume that he’s bi too, McGee,” Tony said sarcastically.

“You’d assume? You don’t know? I mean, you haven’t talked about it?” McGee frowned. Tony rolled his eyes.

“We’re guys, Tim. We don’t talk about stuff like that. I assume he’s been with men before because he sure as hell knows what he’s doing in bed but no, I never asked him who he’d been with before me because I don’t really care.” Tony shrugged. “Now, can we move on with this?”

His jaw tightened and McGee nodded. Unlike Tony, he *did* think this kind of background was relevant – it was certainly a line of questioning Gibbs would have pursued – but he understood Tony’s sense of urgency. He would have to file this away and come to terms with it later, when they got Louis and Gibbs back – because they WOULD get them back. McGee was determined about that.

“Okay. Go on.”

“I had a feeling something was wrong so I checked in the nightstand drawer for Gibbs’s gun. He keeps the drawer locked, so Louis can’t get at it.” Tony gestured with his head. “The gun’s still there if you want to take a look. So I was running now, calling their names. I ran

out of the room, down the hallway..."

McGee followed him as Tony went to Louis's room. He knew this room well; it was decorated in giant cartoons which Abby had painted on the walls in bright colours.

McGee stopped in the doorway. The rest of the house seemed untouched but there were definite signs of a struggle in here. A rocking chair was over-turned, and...and his stomach heaved as he saw a small pool of blood on the floor. Next to the upturned chair, lying half open, was a similar looking book to those he'd seen on Gibbs's nightstand back in the main bedroom. A child's night lamp was still alight on the nightstand, as was a small reading lamp on a table by the upturned chair. Whatever had happened here had clearly taken place during the hours of darkness.

"Louis has a vivid imagination," Tony said quietly. "And sometimes he can't sleep. Gibbs comes in here and sits in the rocking chair and reads his book for half an hour or so while Louis drops off to sleep. Gibbs is the monster-scarer, according to Louis, and Gibbs always promised him that no monster would ever get past him to get to Louis."

"Looks like one did last night," McGee muttered, glancing around.

"Yeah - but not without a fight," Tony replied darkly. "Look - I was thinking this through while I waited for you to get here and here's how I think it went. It was maybe around 7pm - I'd spent the afternoon with them and we'd eaten dinner. Then I headed off out. Gibbs gave Louis his bath and put him to bed, same as always. Then he sat down on the rocking chair with his book the way he often does if Louis asks him to stay for awhile. He doesn't do it every night, just when Louis asks. Louis has a spidey-sense for monsters and he always knows when they're on the prowl and he needs Gibbs to stay and scare them away. So Louis is maybe asleep, or nearly asleep, and Gibbs hears a noise outside, on the stairs. He doesn't have his gun - that's locked away in his room - so he gets up quietly, opens the door, and finds someone just outside the room."

"Just one person?" McGee asked. Tony nodded.

"Yes - more than one and he might not have been able to put up such a good fight. So he sees this guy in the hallway and sees immediately that this guy has a gun. So Gibbs tries to shut the door on him but the intruder has the element of surprise and he shoots at Gibbs as Gibbs closes the door - just one shot but Gibbs is winged."

Tony pointed at the small pool of blood on the floor, and then moved his arm in a circle to a small indentation in the wall behind him.

"Bullet is still in there - we need to get it to forensics immediately. So, Gibbs has been hurt but I'm thinking not too badly - maybe a flesh wound in his arm - something that bleeds but isn't so bad that he can't fight back. I don't think this guy intended to kill him in any case - just make him easier to order around."

"So you think Gibbs is still alive?" McGee asked quietly. Tony met his gaze, both of them

going very still, and then nodded.

“He’s alive. There’s not enough blood loss for the shot to have killed him – plus, you know, he’s Gibbs. It’d take a silver bullet and a stake through the heart to kill him and even then I wouldn’t bet on him staying dead.” Tony managed a wry, faded grin and McGee gave a little grunt of acknowledgement.

“Okay – now Gibbs has been hurt but there’s no way he’s going to let some psycho anywhere near Louis if he can help it, so he gets up again just as the gunman comes through the door.”

Tony pointed at the boot print in the blood stain on the floor. “That’s Gibbs’s boot print – I’m sure of that,” he said.

McGee accepted that without question. Being able to tell the kind of shoe or boot a print was made from was one of Tony’s special, if somewhat peculiar, talents.

“He puts up a good fight and maybe the gunman doesn’t want to make more noise than he already has in case the neighbours come running, or maybe the plan is to take Gibbs alive so he doesn’t want to shoot him again. Whatever – by now Louis is obviously awake and Gibbs is hampered by needing to protect him – and this guy has a gun too so it’s not a fair fight. There’s some kind of a struggle because the chair has been knocked over but at some point Gibbs goes down again and Louis...” Tony’s voice went a little hoarse. “Instead of doing the sensible thing and running out of there while the fight is going on, the brave little guy goes over to Gibbs to help him. Look.”

Tony pointed at the small child’s footprint in the blood. “Gibbs is too concerned for Louis’s safety to do more than go along with whatever this guy has planned at this point. So he picks Louis up – probably at gunpoint.”

“How do you know he picks Louis up?” McGee frowned.

“No more of Louis’s footprints,” Tony pointed out. “Not on the floor anyway – but there’s this...” He gestured to a mark on the door, half-way up. “You can get your teams onto that but I think that was made by the side of Louis’s foot brushing against the door as Gibbs carried him out. They walk downstairs...see, you can just about make out the faint outline of the blood on Gibbs’s right boot as he walks.” McGee followed Tony out of the room, along the hallway and down the stairs.

“Gibbs opens the front door.” Tony gestured with his head at a slight bloodstain on the door handle. “Presumably because this guy is behind him with a gun held to his head. They go outside, and...I’m not sure about this but I think the guy has a car out here. He gets Gibbs to open the trunk and he makes Louis and Gibbs get inside. Maybe he ties Gibbs’s hands behind his back – I don’t know.”

“Why do you think he has a car?” McGee asked.

“Well, it was dark but even so he had to have something parked close to the house – right up here on the driveway – or else someone would have seen a man holding a gun on a blood-stained guy carrying a small child and reported it – wouldn’t they?”

“Probably.” McGee nodded, thinking Tony seemed to have it all about right. He wasn’t McGee’s most senior agent for nothing – he had years of experience of crime scene investigations behind him and he’d solved almost as many hard cases in his time as Gibbs. They were now standing outside the half-open garage door. “Did you check in there?”

“Yeah – that’s why it’s open. They’re not in there and there’s no blood in there either,” Tony said tightly. McGee could only imagine what it must have been like for him to open that door – if the gunman had wanted Louis and Gibbs dead then that was the most likely place for him to have dumped their bodies.

“How did the gunman get into the house in the first place?” McGee asked, examining the front door. “No sign of forced entry.”

“You know Gibbs – he doesn’t always remember to lock the front door when he’s in the house,” Tony said. “He does at least lock it before going to bed most times but he was hours away from going to bed when this happened.”

McGee sighed – that sounded like Gibbs. He doubted the man would lock the door at all if it wasn’t for the fact that Louis lived here too.

“Okay – I’ll get the teams testing the blood and sweeping the place for prints,” McGee said, beckoning Agent Morris over. He filled her in quickly and she frowned.

“How do you know it was Mr. Gibbs’s blood, sir?” she asked.

“We don’t,” McGee replied. “We’re just hoping it is,” he added grimly.

“Hoping?” She raised a surprised eyebrow.

“Because if it isn’t Gibbs’s blood then it’s probably Louis’s and none of us want to think about that possibility,” McGee growled at her, watching her eyes darken with anxiety as he spoke. Everyone at NCIS adored Louis – he was like his mother, and had the ability to charm people with his happy nature and good heart wherever he went.

At that moment Ducky’s ancient roadster drew up and the elderly doctor got out and hurried over to McGee.

“I got here as soon as I could,” he said. “What do we know?” McGee filled him in. When he’d finished, Ducky glanced around. “Any suspects?”

“Well there’s the obvious one – Jonssen. Tony’s convinced it’s him but...” McGee paused, and shook his head.

"Maybe it's a little *too* obvious?" Ducky asked.

"Yeah. The other thing I thought...you know we were talking in the restaurant yesterday and Gibbs said we had to rein Tony in...you don't think...he wouldn't stage anything like this, would he?" McGee asked. Ducky looked horrified.

"No," he said. "Absolutely not! My dear boy, what were you thinking?"

"That's he's staged things before without telling us," McGee replied grimly, remembering a couple of ops Gibbs had sent them on where he hadn't been entirely up front with them.

"Timothy this is completely different!" Ducky remonstrated. "Besides, Gibbs, better than anyone, knows just what a powder keg Anthony is. There's no way he'd risk sending him over the edge by doing something like this. He simply wouldn't."

"Thank you," McGee said, relieved. "I didn't think so but I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't consider it as a possibility."

"Well you can rule it out," Ducky said firmly. "Now, what do you want me to do, my dear boy?"

"Go keep an eye on Tony," McGee said. "I'm going to lead the investigation and I don't want to worry about him going off somewhere on his own and doing something stupid. Here..." He pulled a little device out of his pocket, no bigger than a dime, that Morris had given him earlier. "Get this on him. It's a GPS locator. If he does go off the grid then he knows I'll trace his cell phone so he'll turn it off. If we get this on him then at least we'll be able to track him without him knowing. You can get it on him without him noticing can't you?"

"Of course." Ducky grinned, and took the device. McGee turned to go but Ducky put a hand on his arm and pulled him back. "You will find them, Timothy," he said. "I have every faith in you."

McGee felt a bit better knowing that. He wasn't used to cases being this personal. He loved all these people and the knowledge that if he made a wrong turn he might lose any of them weighed heavily on him, making his gut churn. It wasn't just Gibbs and Louis he had to worry about – he knew that. If anything happened to either one of them, or, god forbid, both of them, then there was no way Tony was coming back from that. He'd come back from too much already and there were no reserves left in him for that kind of a journey. If they lost Gibbs and Louis then they'd lose Tony too.

"Thanks, Ducky," McGee said, with a tight smile.

His cell phone rang and he pulled it out and walked over to the garage to answer it, away from the melee, so he could hear.

"Sir – it's Carter."

“What have you got for me, Carter?” he asked tersely, glancing into the open garage door. The boat Gibbs was building was a beauty – and nearly finished too by the look of her. There was just one section that needed varnishing, and, inevitably, she didn’t yet have a name. McGee wondered what Gibbs intended to call this one.

“I’ve been leaning on Stackton for the past hour and he’s scared – very scared,” Carter said. “He knows something – he’s hiding something – but I’m not sure this is what he’s hiding, sir.”

“What do you mean?” McGee frowned. He wandered into the garage and reached out a hand to touch the shiny, varnished wood.

“Well, I told him we knew what Jonssen was up to – and he clammed up on me just like he did yesterday – but when I later mentioned about Gibbs and the little kid, well, it was almost like he was relieved – and kind of surprised. I’m not sure, but I think he thought we were onto something else – not this.”

“You **think**?” McGee demanded, in his best Gibbs voice. “I need more than just your damn thoughts, Carter. I need to know if we follow up Jonssen or we look for someone else. Gibbs and Louis don’t have the time for us to get this wrong. So do you think this is Jonssen’s work or not?”

Carter hesitated. “I’m not sure, sir,” he muttered.

“Not good enough!” McGee growled. “What does your gut say, Agent Carter? Just tell me what your gut says.”

He heard Carter take a deep breath. “My gut tells me that Jonssen didn’t do this, sir. But he’s done something else – something Stackton knows about but doesn’t want us to find out.”

“Okay. Good,” McGee said. “You go back in there and find out exactly what it is Stackton doesn’t want us to find out and I’ll chase up other leads. If anything changes, if you have **any** new leads for me, you call me straight away – understood?”

“Yes sir.”

McGee cut the connection and turned around, to find Tony gazing at him from the garage door.

“Any news?”

“It’s not Jonssen,” McGee replied, striding past him on his way back out.

“What? Don’t be a damned idiot, McGee!” Tony roared, grabbing his shoulder and pulling him back. “Of course it’s Jonssen!”

“Tony – this is my call and I say it isn’t,” McGee snapped, brushing Tony’s hand off his shoulder. “I’m not ruling it out for good – I’m just saying I don’t think it’s him so I’m not throwing all our resources at it and ignoring other avenues of investigation.”

“*What* other avenues of investigation?” Tony asked incredulously. “Who the hell *else* would want to kidnap Louis and Gibbs? Jonssen knows I have a personal vendetta against him, he knows I have enough on him to haul his sorry ass in for questioning the minute I can find out where the hell he is, and he’s taunting me. He’s smarting because I pulled in Stackton and he wants to scare me away.”

“I know – it does all sound very logical,” McGee said quietly. “But it’s just a little too neat for a man who hasn’t even set foot in the country, as far as we know, in three years. How did he even know you’d arrested Stackton? And if he DID know, how did he manage to get someone out to your house to kidnap Louis and Gibbs so fast?”

“He’s a wealthy man. He has resources,” Tony muttered darkly.

“Maybe – and maybe he did do this, but if so, for what reason? What does he hope to gain by it? He must know we’d chase after Louis and Gibbs – and that eventually we’d trace their kidnapping back to him. One thing we’ve always known about Jonssen is that he’s cautious where his own personal freedom is concerned and does everything he can to protect it. Would he risk this over Stackton? A man who might or might not talk? Wouldn’t it be better if he just waited it out to see if Stackton *does* talk?”

“Depends what Stackton is hiding,” Tony growled.

“Tony – can you think of anyone else who might have a vendetta against you?” McGee asked. Tony’s face split into a dark grin.

“A couple of thousand,” he said. “Where shall I start?”

McGee sighed, and then a thought occurred to him. “Gibbs told me you came into some money a couple of years ago,” he said. “Could this be a ransom demand?”

“If so, they’ve forgotten to actually *make* the demand,” Tony pointed out.

“But you’re good for it if someone does?” McGee asked. Tony shrugged.

“Are you asking me how much I’m worth, McGee?”

“Yes I am. Money is the most likely motive in my view.”

“Nobody apart from Gibbs knows how much I’m worth,” Tony argued. “I don’t live anywhere ostentatious, and I still go to work every day. There’s no reason for anyone to assume I have any money.”

“But your father was a well-known, wealthy businessman, and you’re his only child. It might

not be too hard to figure out,” McGee said. “How much did he leave you, Tony?”

“A hundred.” Tony shrugged.

“A hundred thousand? That’s not enough to…”

“A hundred million,” Tony interrupted.

“What?” McGee was aghast. “And you still think Jonsen is more likely than a kidnapping when you’re sitting on that kind of money?”

“It’s probably more now. I haven’t touched any of it.” Tony shrugged again. “Or at least not much of it. I don’t care about the money.”

McGee thought that was another thing that had changed; Tony had always kind of liked money, back when he hadn’t had that much of it.

“Tony – you have to at least consider that having that kind of money does make kidnapping for ransom a viable possibility.”

“Okay. Maybe.” Tony shrugged.

“Have you checked your cell phone? Has anyone tried to call you and make a demand?”

“Yes I’ve checked and nobody has called.” Tony got his phone out of his pocket and waved it at McGee, and that gave McGee another thought.

“Did you try Gibbs’s cell phone?” he asked.

“Well duh – why didn’t I think of that, Mr Director, sir,” Tony growled sarcastically. “Yes, I tried Gibbs’s cell phone. No reply.”

“Would he have had it on him if he was just in the house reading?” McGee frowned. “Did you find it anywhere in the house?”

“No – but I already called Banks and asked him to do a GPS trace on it and nothing showed up so it’s either switched off or…”

“It’s here,” Morris said, coming towards them, holding up the phone. The front of it was smashed in. “We just found it in on the sidewalk.”

“Then our gunman must have taken it off Gibbs before putting him in the trunk and threw it away hard enough to smash it,” Tony said. He reached out a hand but unlike Morris he wasn’t wearing gloves so he stopped before touching it.

“Get it bagged and sent to forensics immediately – there might be prints on it,” McGee said to Morris. She nodded and hurried away.

“McGee – we need to hurry this along,” Tony said urgently. “It’s been over twelve hours already. Christ, if only I hadn’t gone out drinking last night. If only I’d come back home instead...” He ran his hands through his hair, leaving it standing up in messy points.

“You didn’t know,” McGee said shortly, turning away.

“Hey.” Tony grabbed his arm. “Are you judging me, Probie?”

“Yes, Tony – I am,” McGee snapped. “If you weren’t always just one step away from total self-destruction and we weren’t always rushing around after you trying not to let it happen then...” he paused, and sighed. “No...I’m sorry – this isn’t your fault. You didn’t know that some psycho was going to break into your house and do this.”

“But you think I’m a lousy father, right? A dad who gets drunk and isn’t around to protect his son when he needs him.”

“No – I know you love Louis but I think you’re always so busy mourning what you lost that you’ve forgotten what you’ve still *got*,” McGee said tersely.

He pulled away from Tony, and went back into the garage to put some distance between them. Tony didn’t get the message and followed him in there.

“Don’t shut me out, Tim,” he said quietly. “I might have been a lousy dad and a crap boyfriend but I need to be in on this. I need to help find them.” His voice broke slightly as he said that, and McGee felt a wave of sympathy for him. This was always the problem with Tony – it was just impossible to stay mad at him for long.

McGee stood next to Gibbs’s work bench and glanced at it. All his tools were neatly locked away, out of the reach of small hands, and even the inevitable stash of bourbon was stored high up, on a shelf that Louis would never be able to get to.

There was a sheaf of papers on the worktop, so McGee thought it probably doubled as Gibbs’s desk and general work area. He could see some bank statements and utility bills stacked there, awaiting payment. McGee brushed his hand over them and then paused as something caught his eye.

It was a bright yellow piece of paper with ugly black writing on it, crude but eye-catching.

“I know what you are”, was all it said. McGee frowned, wondering what the hell that meant. He rummaged through the stack of papers and found another yellow piece of paper with the same lettering on it – and just one word: “Faggots”. One more said, “You’ll burn in hell”.

McGee held up the pieces of paper to Tony. “Have you seen these?” he asked. Tony took them with a frown, shaking his head.

“No. This is all Gibbs’s stuff – and he never showed these to me,” he said. Then he looked

up. “Why wouldn’t he have shown these to me?” he asked. McGee knew why, and it must have showed in his eyes.

“I was too caught up in Jonssen,” Tony said, his jaw tightening.

“Yeah – maybe he mentioned them to you but you weren’t listening. That happens whenever you think you’ve got a lead on Jonssen,” McGee said quietly. “But, more likely, he thought he could take care of it himself – if there was anything to take care of. The notes might have been recent – if he’d received them in the last couple of days then there’s no way he’d have showed them to you. You’ve been all over the place.”

Tony’s jaw tightened again, and he nodded. McGee thought that maybe it was about time he started seeing himself the way they all saw him – a wild, loose cannon, flailing ever more spectacularly out of control, and neglecting those closest to him in the process – hurting them even, although McGee was sure that wasn’t the intention. It was the end result though.

“How would anyone know?” Tony asked, looking closely at the yellow paper. “Even you didn’t know about me and Gibbs and you know us better than anyone. How would anyone know we were together? We don’t go out as a couple, and Gibbs could easily be here looking after Louis as his uncle or grandfather or something – why would anyone assume anything different?”

McGee remembered the way Gibbs had put his arm around Tony’s shoulder at the restaurant yesterday, and kissed his forehead. It had been surprising because of the personalities of both men – Gibbs in particular - but it hadn’t been overtly romantic or sexual in nature. Anyone watching it could have taken Gibbs to be Tony’s older brother – or, at a stretch, his father, and McGee had never seen them give any outward sign of a deeper closeness over the past three years. However, remembering them at the restaurant made another thought occur to him.

“Louis,” he said suddenly. Tony looked confused. “Yesterday at the restaurant, Louis said some stuff about you and Gibbs that made it sound like you were a couple. Me and Ducky both noticed it. You and Gibbs kiss around him, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Tony said cautiously. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing. I’m just saying – Louis wouldn’t think twice about mentioning it to other people. Plus – he must know you share a bed, right?”

“Yeah.” Tony nodded. “Every Saturday night we all watch movies together in our bed, with popcorn. Gibbs calls it movie night and makes me promise it’s the one night of the week I’ll stay home. Louis loves movie night – at least there’s something of me in him.”

“I don’t suppose that he thinks that you and Gibbs sharing a bed is a secret,” McGee pointed out. “So he wouldn’t think anything of talking about it.”

“It’s not a secret,” Tony said.

McGee put his head on one side and gazed at him. “You and Gibbs have been together for three years and I never knew about it,” he pointed out.

“It’s not a secret, it’s just not...” Tony paused and sighed. “You know Gibbs – he’s the most private man in the world. How long had we been working with him before we found out about Shannon and Kelly? I know he’s not ashamed of me, or us, or what we do in bed – he just can’t stand anyone knowing his business. And as for me...I suppose it just wasn’t...important?” He winced as he said that. “I don’t mean the relationship isn’t important to me because it is, but...”

“But you never really even think about it because you’re too busy thinking about getting your revenge on Jonsen?” McGee suggested. He didn’t doubt that Gibbs and Louis were important to Tony – vital to him even - but he did wonder whether Tony was so blinded by his desire for revenge that he’d failed to realise just how much he needed them – and just how little he showed them that.

Tony’s eyes darkened. “Something like that, yeah,” he muttered.

“Agent Morris!” McGee went to the garage door and she came running over. He handed her the yellow notes. “Get what you can from these,” he said. She frowned as she read them.

“You think this is some kind of a homophobic hate crime?” she asked, glancing up at McGee, and then, more surreptitiously, at Tony.

“It’s possible – so we need to put it on the list,” McGee said.

“But why would anyone think Agent DiNozzo and Mr. Gibbs are a couple?” Morris asked, frowning.

“Because we are,” Tony said tersely. Her eyes flickered in surprise but she covered it well and just nodded.

“Who are Louis’s friends?” McGee asked Tony. “We need to find out who he might have talked to when their parents were around.”

“I don’t know,” Tony said, his shoulders stiffening. McGee glared at him.

“You don’t know who his friends are?”

“No.” Tony shook his head.

“I know one boy he mentioned yesterday – Nathan – Louis said he spent some time at his house. Morris, find out who he is. Also...Louis goes to daycare a couple of mornings a week doesn't he?”

Tony nodded, still looking angry and defensive about not knowing who Louis’s friends were.

“Which daycare does he go to? We can ask around and find out who knew him and who he played with.”

“I don’t know,” Tony said again, his forehead furrowing angrily.

“You don’t know which daycare your son goes to?” Agent Morris said, without thinking, making notes on her PDA, and then she looked up, embarrassed. “Uh...I noticed a calendar in the kitchen that I think mentioned something about daycare. I’ll go check it out,” she said hurriedly, running off.

McGee looked at Tony, who was shaking his head.

“Christ I’m fucking useless,” he snapped. “I just...I left all that stuff to Gibbs. He took care of it.”

“You don’t have the luxury of self-pity right now, Tony,” McGee told him sharply. “You need to focus.”

“I know.” Tony nodded. “Okay – what else?”

“Well, we have three viable routes of investigation: a kidnapping for ransom, a hate crime, and Jonssen.”

“Why would whoever was sending us these notes want to kidnap Louis and Gibbs?” Tony asked, puzzled. “It doesn’t make sense. I think that’s the least likely of the three.”

“But still viable so we follow it up,” McGee said firmly. “Gibbs beat that into us too.”

“Yeah. It’s amazing that either of us is still alive with all that beating going on,” Tony said with a faded grin. It was just a figure of speech but accurate in the sense that those lessons had been hard learned, and had required many slaps upside the head in the learning.

“And in turn you’ve done a good job of beating it into your team,” McGee pointed out, because Tony’s team were at least as in awe of him as he and Tony had been of Gibbs in their time. “That’s why they’re such a good team.”

“Not as good as we were,” Tony said. “You, me, Gibbs, Ziva, Abby, Ducky – we were the best. Numero Uno. The A Team.”

“Your team are pretty good too, when you give them the chance,” McGee pointed out. At that moment Agent Morris came running back.

“I just spoke to the daycare. The little boy Louis talked about was Nathan Glover. I’ve got some other names too but listen to this – Nathan was taken out of daycare last month really suddenly – no warning. His mom just took him out. Word on the grapevine is that she ran off with Nathan and the dad was pretty mad when he found out. He’s a violent kind of guy

so the courts granted custody of Nathan to his wife and she took the child out of state. The dad doesn't know where they went and it's tearing him apart."

"Louis did say that Nathan's mom and dad argued the whole time," McGee mused.

"Yeah but this is the best bit; Nathan's mom had a lover – that's who she ran off with."

"So?" Tony frowned.

"The lover wasn't a guy – it was another woman," Morris said.

"Address?" McGee said, running after Tony as he took off out of the garage and across to his car at a fast sprint. Morris ran after them both. They got into Tony's car and McGee yelled to a surprised Ducky that he was now in charge of the crime scene and to make sure everything was taken back to NCIS and processed immediately. "Get Banks on the phone and tell him to find out everything he can about Glover," McGee ordered to Morris over his shoulder as Tony flipped them sharply around a bend, almost toppling the car in the process.

The Glover house was only a few blocks away. There was no reply when they knocked on the door. Tony drew his gun and pointed it at the lock, but McGee pushed his hand away.

"Don't be an idiot, Probie," Tony hissed. "We both know we don't have time to wait for a warrant and I'm not going to spend five minutes picking the damn lock when I can just shoot it off."

"I know." McGee nodded. "Stand back," he said, drawing his own gun and pointing it at the lock on the front door. Tony raised an eyebrow.

"Breaking the rules, Director?" he asked.

"Director's prerogative – but if we're going to break the rules I'm going to be the one doing it and I'll take the blame for it," McGee said tersely. He blew the lock off the door and Tony pushed the broken door to one side and strode into the house, gun drawn.

The place seemed like a normal suburban house. There were some child's toys still in there, but it had only been a month since Nathan's mom had taken him away so that was to be expected. They moved swiftly around the place, guns drawn and raised, covering each other as they entered each room. The place was a mess, with empty beer cans and pizza boxes everywhere, but they found nothing more sinister than that.

"Maybe we got this wrong," McGee sighed.

"Wait – there's a basement." Tony pointed at a door tucked almost out of sight at the end of the hallway, the one place they hadn't yet looked. "Like Gibbs's old place – where he built all those boats he never intended to sail."

They moved toward the door, moving cautiously but fast, in sync with each other, each knowing what move the other would make. It had been a long time since he'd worked out in the field with Tony and McGee realised just how much he'd missed it. They made a good team; long years of working together and their own personal friendship had meshed them into a perfect working unit. Tony was right – they had been the best. They still were.

They got to the door and Tony tried it with his hand to find that it was locked. He stood back and McGee ran forward and slammed his foot into it, putting all his pent-up, nervous anxiety behind the kick; he was gratified when the door splintered and swung open. He stepped inside and then paused.

“Oh my god,” he breathed.

“What is it?” Tony pushed past him, and then stopped. “Oh shit,” he muttered, gazing around.

The basement area was a shrine. One entire wall was decorated with pictures of a little blond boy. Whoever had been with him in some of the pictures had clearly been cut out, savagely, with a knife rather than a pair of scissors, McGee thought.

“I’ve seen this kid around my house. It must be Nathan,” Tony muttered. “And I’m guessing it’s his mom who’s been cut out of the photographs.”

McGee walked down the stairs, into the basement, and then his blood turned cold as he saw a stack of yellow paper piled up on a workbench shoved against the far wall. He pointed at it and Morris nodded.

“Looks like the same paper those notes were written on,” McGee said. “We need to get it to forensics to confirm that. Morris get an NCIS van over here.” She nodded and began talking into her cell phone.

“Doesn’t prove anything though,” Tony said. “Just because Glover wrote the notes doesn’t mean that he kidnapped my family.”

That was the first time he’d used the word ‘family’. McGee suspected it was the first time he’d ever used it about Louis and Gibbs but that was exactly what they were to him and he was pleased that Tony was finally waking up to that fact.

“No...but this might,” Morris said softly, pointing to a box of newspaper clippings she had found. “Glover was cutting out anything to do with gays - gay rights, gay marriage, and these...” She pointed at another box of papers, with an expression of distaste. “There are brochures from far-right crazy organisations,” she said, flicking through them. “They think gays should be strung up and left out to die, and given who Glover’s wife ran off with, I’d guess those were views he had a lot of sympathy with.”

“I still don’t understand why he’d kidnap Louis and Gibbs,” Tony muttered, rifling through

the material. "Fuck, this stuff is insane." He held up a pamphlet with the lurid title: "Corrupting America's Youth". "Oh shit," he said as he looked through the rest of the papers. "Most of this stuff is about how gay couples shouldn't be allowed to look after kids – which must be his personal issue at the moment, after what happened with his wife. This one thinks all children should be forcibly removed from any kind of gay parenting environment. I can see why he'd be all over that idea."

"He was already angry, and he's been getting angrier since his wife left him," McGee said, glancing around. "He's been reading this material, brooding on his son – the courts think his son is better off living with a lesbian couple than with him, and that makes him feel impotent, emasculated – just like he feels about the fact that his wife left him for her female lover in the first place."

McGee paced around, trying to get into Glover's head and figure out his thought process. "So he's stoking himself up, getting more and more upset about it, and he remembers something Louis said about you and Gibbs, so he starts sending those notes...and it feels good. It feels like he has some control back in his life. He can't find his little boy, but he can do this. Now he has a target, someone to focus on...he's taking his revenge on a group of people who he thinks have hurt him just by existing. And you and Gibbs – and even Louis - represent a whole group of people to him – you're not individuals any more."

"That means he's dehumanised you," Morris said. "And that's making it a hell of a lot easier for a man – a *father* - to take a little boy hostage. I don't like where this is going."

"But even so, at the moment it's just a revenge fantasy - something must have pushed him over the edge," Tony said. "What the hell made him snap? What was the trigger? What made him go over to my house last night, shoot Gibbs, and take off with him and Louis in his car?"

"The gay marriage thing," McGee said, clicking his fingers.

"What gay marriage thing?" Tony frowned, and McGee remembered he'd been too drunk yesterday, and too caught up in Jonssen, to pay any attention to what was going on in the rest of the world, even if he was remotely interested in this particular piece of news - which McGee guessed he probably wasn't. He couldn't exactly see either Tony or Gibbs as gay rights activists, or the kind of people who were hankering to get married; Gibbs had a positive antipathy towards marriage in any case, which was hardly surprising given his track record.

"I saw it on the news yesterday – gay marriage is now legal in Virginia," McGee told Tony. "It just got passed. Glover must have seen it too and it sent him into some kind of a frenzy. He's a psycho, he's furious, and he wants revenge on someone..."

"No," Morris interrupted. "That's not it. Or at least – that's only partly it. He wants revenge, yes, but he also wants someone to listen to him because he doesn't feel that anyone cares about him. Nobody cares about his feelings, or his loss, or about how unfair it is – how plain *wrong* it is that the law has given custody of *his* son to a lesbian mother and her lover

rather than to a solid upstanding citizen like him – because that’s how he sees himself. He wants people to hear him, to understand...”

“Oh shit. He’s going to make a big statement,” Tony said, straightening up from where he’d been crouching, looking through the material. “He’s going to do something big, something people will have to listen to...” His jaw locked into a tight line. “He’s going to kill them,” he said quietly. “He’s going to kill Louis and Gibbs and then he’s going to kill himself. That’s his statement.”

“I think DiNozzo’s right. Glover is determined that he *will* be heard – any way he can,” Morris said. “Even if it means dying in the process. This is his way of getting everyone’s attention.”

“But to kill a child – a child the same age as his own son...” McGee shook his head. “Would he really do that?”

“Yes,” Tony said, in a hard tone of voice. “Read some of this shit, McGee.” He shoved a pamphlet at him. “He’d view it as liberating Louis – he honestly thinks death is better than living with me and Gibbs, with us...corrupting him.” His jaw tightened again, so hard and so taut that McGee thought it looked as if it might snap. “We have to find them, McGee – we have to find them before that happens,” he said urgently.

“We will, Tony,” McGee replied. “We will. Morris, get Banks on the phone – let’s see if we can figure out where Glover has taken them.”

She speed dialled and then put the phone on speaker so they could all hear.

“Banks, this is Director McGee – what do you have on Glover?” he asked tersely.

“Sir...I haven’t had long to do much digging but...” McGee could hear Banks’s fingers typing fast in the background.

“You’ve had long enough to find something!” McGee snapped. “Come on – do your damn job!”

“Yes, sir.” Banks sounded petrified of him, McGee thought, and he was surprised by how much that pleased him. “His name is Paul Glover, he’s forty, and he’s currently unemployed, but he used to be in the Marine Corps.”

McGee and Tony exchanged glances.

“Explains how he got in there and managed to take Gibbs down. Nobody but a marine would be able to do that,” Tony commented. “And if it had been a fair fight, without Louis around, then Gibbs would have kicked his ass – I’m sure about that.”

“Maybe – this guy is twenty years younger than Gibbs though,” McGee pointed out.

"Yeah – but Gibbs is Gibbs," Tony reminded him.

"Agreed." McGee nodded, because there was no arguing with that. He'd never seen Gibbs beaten in a fight – ever. "What else do you have on him, Banks? Why did he leave the Corps?"

"General discharge – not an honourable discharge," Banks replied and then there was a long pause.

"Details!" McGee snapped.

"Just getting them, sir...oh...okay, nothing too specific but it seems he was a little over-zealous in his treatment of prisoners, and he had a habit of losing it on the battlefield and going on the rampage. His CO tried to contain him but in the end he was too dangerous to keep around."

"I know the feeling," McGee muttered, glancing at Tony, who gave him a surprised look in return. Maybe he didn't even realise how much of a pain in the butt he was.

"He has a fascination with weaponry and a couple of assault charges on his record," Banks added. "Oh...and there's a history of domestic violence against the wife. She's taken out an injunction against him to prevent him from coming within ten miles of her or the child – and she's asked for her current address not to be released to him."

"That explains his frustration," Morris said. "He can't get at them – his real targets – but he could get to Louis and Gibbs."

"You said a fascination with weaponry?" Tony asked.

"Yes," Banks replied. "Guns, knives, explosives – his CO said he was borderline obsessive about it – and that also made him raise some questions about Glover's mental stability."

"Anything else, Banks?" McGee demanded irritably. "Anything that might actually help us figure out where this guy is?"

"Uh...no...um...I mean, but I can keep looking..."

"Do it," McGee snapped, and then he severed the connection with an angry flick of his hand.

"Being a bit hard on the poor probie there weren't you, Director?" Tony said softly.

"He annoys me," McGee replied, remembering how the previous day Banks had sat back and let Carter and Morris deal with Tony on their own, rather than taking his share of their boss's anger.

"He's okay," Tony said quietly. "He's young. He's still learning."

Morris rolled her eyes. "He always cuts the probie more slack than the rest of us," she muttered to McGee.

"Hey – he's just a probie," Tony said with a shrug. "And you know me - I've always had a soft spot for probies," he added, with a hint of a grin in McGee's direction.

McGee snorted, but that did make him think that maybe he'd been a bit hard on Banks. There was just something about the kid – he was so young and so painfully eager a lot of the time – maybe he just reminded him too much of the way he'd once been. At that moment Banks called back.

"I've found something!" he said. "Glover has a cabin."

"Where?" McGee looked at Tony – this might be their first real lead on where Glover had taken Gibbs and Louis.

"Big Stone Gap. It's, uh, quite a long drive from your current location," Banks said. "I'm sending the details over to Morris's cell right now."

"Big Stone Gap? He'll be there by now," Tony said, running for the stairs. "We're hours behind him."

"Wait...Tony – I'm going to call in a helicopter to take us there," McGee said.

"You can do that?" Tony frowned.

"No – but I can call in a favour from a friend who can," McGee replied.

"You have those kinds of friends?" Tony raised an eyebrow. "See, I knew I should have taken the job as Director."

"Again with the not being asked thing, Tony!" McGee said, but he shot him a tight grin anyway, knowing that Tony was using banter to handle the situation because right now he was going crazy inside.

McGee put in his call and they went back outside to get into Tony's car and drive the short distance to where they could pick up the helicopter. Outside, an NCIS van was just pulling up – and, a second later, a car screeched to a halt behind it and Agent Carter got out and ran towards them.

"Sir, Agent DiNozzo – I have something," he said breathlessly.

McGee figured it must be important as he'd driven out here to tell them in person.

"Is this about Louis and Gibbs?" Tony demanded. "Are we on the wrong track?" He glanced at McGee. "Does Jonssen have them after all?"

“No – it’s not about that. It’s Jonssen – he’s here.”

Tony went very still and McGee gave a mental sigh. Any mention of Jonssen and Tony gave his usual Pavlovian response.

“Where?” Tony asked, his eyes darkening.

“I’ve been working on Stackton and he finally let something slip. He didn’t mean to but I found out he knows that Jonssen’s mother’s ill.”

“Jonssen’s mother’s ill?” McGee asked, looking at Tony in surprise.

“Yeah. She’s got terminal cancer,” Tony replied impatiently. “Nobody knows how long she’s got left but it can’t be long.”

“And when the hell were you going to tell me this?” McGee demanded.

Tony shot him a hard look. “When you needed to know.”

“So you’ve had someone watching her in case Jonssen came to say goodbye? For how long?” McGee asked.

Tony’s jaw twitched. “Six months,” he muttered.

“Six months? You’ve been watching her for six months? How the hell...? An undercover operation like that, around the clock, would cost NCIS a fortune but all your agents are accounted for and you haven’t submitted any additional expenses to me,” McGee said.

“I paid someone,” Tony snapped. “Privately. I knew you wouldn’t sanction an expensive long-term op like this but I have the cash lying around so I used it. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

McGee's eyes narrowed. "When all this is over, you and I are going to have a long talk about your methods, Special Agent DiNozzo."

"When all this is over I'll be happy to, Director McGee," Tony replied grimly. "Go on, Carter."

Carter nodded. “There was something about the expression in Stackton’s eyes – just a flash but I knew this was the thing he was hiding. So I called that guy you’ve been paying to keep an eye on Jonssen’s mother...”

“Hang on – *you* knew about this guy?” McGee asked. Carter grimaced.

“Yes, sir.”

“And you didn’t think of mentioning to me that your boss was running his own secret undercover op all this time?” McGee demanded.

“Uh...” Carter gave Tony an agonised look.

“Give him a break – you’d have covered for Gibbs over something like this if he’d asked you,” Tony said. “Carter – stop worrying that McGee will fire you because if you don’t tell me what the hell is going on I’ll shoot you and then you won’t have to worry about your job.”

Carter winced. “I couldn’t reach the guy on the phone so I went over to his apartment.”

“Was he there?” McGee asked.

“No,” Tony said, shaking his head. “Or at least he was – but he was dead, wasn’t he, Carter?”

“Yes – I found the body. He hasn’t been dead long. A couple of days - no more. Professional hit. One shot, clean between the eyes.”

“Stackton killed him,” McGee said.

“Ya think, McGee?” Tony growled. “Yes, Stackton killed him. I knew that son of a bitch was hiding something – and Jonssen wasn’t paying him all that money for nothing. Jonssen’s mother went into a hospice a month ago so she must be near the end. Jonssen found out she was being watched and sent Stackton to kill the guy I was paying to do the watching, which means...”

“That Jonssen is back in the country and wants to visit his mom before she dies. He might even be there right now,” Carter said. “He knows it won’t be long before you find out about your watcher being killed – he has to get in and out of there before that happens.”

“How did Jonssen get back into the country without me knowing about it?” Tony asked, frowning.

“Well, like you said, he’s a wealthy man – he has resources,” McGee told him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Morris answer her cell phone.

“Unless...this thing with Gibbs and Louis – are we sure we have the right guy?” Tony asked. “Is it Glover – or is it Jonssen, trying to keep me distracted?”

“I think the two are completely unrelated,” McGee said firmly.

“A coincidence?” Tony raised a disbelieving eyebrow.

“No. Just bad timing. My gut tells me that Glover is our guy. What does yours tell you?” McGee asked. He knew this was pivotal – Louis and Gibbs’s lives were at stake – they couldn’t afford to get this wrong. Tony stared at him, his eyes savagely dark. McGee saw him struggling with himself, *wanting* it to be Jonssen, but eventually he sighed and shook

his head.

“My gut says it’s Glover too,” he said eventually. McGee gave him a curt nod, surprised but pleased because where Jonssen was concerned Tony’s gut wasn’t always very reliable.

“It is Glover,” Morris interjected, pointing to her cell phone. “That was Banks. He says that a guy has been calling the local newsrooms saying he’s got two hostages, a man and a child, and he wants to make a statement. They dismissed him as a psycho initially but he’s persistent. He’s asked for camera crews – the whole works. Says he’s going to make the entire country hear what he has to say. It’s Glover, sir – and the place he wants the camera crews to go to is the cabin.”

“That’s our answer then,” McGee said tersely. “Morris – get me a news blackout on this. I don’t want the media anywhere near this. Tell them he’s a crank – someone we know about. Tell them he’s always making these kinds of calls and there’s no story there.”

“On it, Boss!” she said, turning away.

McGee turned back to Tony, who was talking to Carter in fast, urgent tones. McGee could see that familiar darkness in Tony’s eyes, now that Jonssen was within reach. This man that he’d hunted so desperately for four years, this man who had killed Abby and destroyed Tony’s life, was back. And this time they could probably link him to the murder of Tony’s undercover operative, and, if they finally had a chance to interrogate him, a whole lot of other crimes as well – god knows Tony had a dossier three feet thick on Jonssen. As McGee watched Tony he had a sudden flare of suspicion; he could see what was going through Tony’s mind but he couldn’t actually **believe** that he was really going to do it.

“Tony!” McGee said sharply. He grabbed Tony’s arm and pulled him away, up the driveway, out of earshot. “I don’t damn well believe you,” he said in a low, angry tone. “You are not seriously going to chase after Jonssen when Gibbs and Louis are being held hostage out there by some madman!”

Tony gazed at him darkly, his eyes a black pit of obsessive revenge, bleak and savage. Tony’s revenge was so close that he could almost smell it, and McGee could see just how badly he wanted it.

“Damn it, Tony,” McGee said in a low voice. “You don’t deserve Louis or Gibbs –either of them. You don’t deserve any of us. Hell, you’ve been with Gibbs for three years now – that’s longer than you were with Abby. It’s longer than you’ve ever been with anyone. I don’t pretend to know or understand what’s between you and Gibbs but you’ve got someone in your life now who clearly loves and cares about you, and you’ve got the sweetest kid in the world, a little boy everyone adores, and you keep chasing after the past, after Abby and after Jonssen. Well Abby wouldn’t care about Jonssen! She’d care about Gibbs, and about Louis, and, poor deluded girl that she was, she’d care about you and what you’ve been doing to yourself these past few years. She’d care about the depression, and the drinking, and the anger, and the obsessive desire for revenge! And let me tell you this – no matter how much she loved you, she’d put a bullet through you herself if she knew that you were

going to chase after the guy who killed her instead of going to rescue her son.”

“Are you finished?” Tony asked grimly. “Thank you, Director. Your opinion of me has been duly noted. Now, I have to go.”

He turned on his heel and walked back towards Carter with fast, angry strides. McGee watched him go in disbelief, and then hurried after him. This was insanity! He had to stop it. If they got Louis home alive then he didn’t want to be the one to tell him that his father had opted to chase after his own revenge instead of rescuing his son. McGee doubted that even Gibbs would stick around Tony after this – it was just too big and too unforgiveable.

“Carter – take whoever you need and go to the hospice. Do NOT go alone,” McGee heard Tony say, and he felt a wave of relief flood through him. Maybe Tony hadn’t totally lost touch with his priorities after all. “Keep in touch – let me know what goes down.”

Carter nodded eagerly, looking delighted to be trusted with this mission, knowing how close it was to his boss’s heart.

“And Carter – bring him down,” Tony ordered grimly. “Get Jonssen, and bring him back to NCIS for me – alive.” Carter nodded and ran back to his car.

Tony turned and saw McGee. “I didn’t even think about it,” he snapped.

“Yes you did,” McGee replied. “For a moment you did.”

Tony stared at him, and then nodded. “You’re right – I did,” he said softly. “But just for a split second and I knew I wouldn’t do it. I’m not that far gone, Tim, and you’re right – this is Louis and Gibbs. You think I’d walk away and leave them with some psycho just for the sake of my own revenge?”

“You itch to go after Jonssen. He’s so close you can almost taste it,” McGee pointed out.

“Yes. That’s true.” Tony nodded. “But the living are more important than the dead.”

“I’m glad you finally realise that,” McGee muttered, “because it’s what I’ve been trying to tell you for years.”

“Yeah, Probie. I know.” Tony shook his head. “Now let’s get moving. Morris – you’re with us.”

The cabin turned out to be little more than a hut on the side of a hill. McGee set up base in a neighbouring cabin, further down the hill, and began assembling the teams he knew he'd need to handle this. Tony paced around like a caged tiger the entire time, his large frame moving around restlessly.

“Morris – keep those cameras out,” McGee ordered, noticing that despite their “no media”

embargo, a couple of camera crews had decided to investigate anyway.

Tony came over. "Have you got eyes and ears in the damn cabin yet, McGee?" he asked for the hundredth time. McGee nodded at the bank of screens his technical unit had set up; they were still displaying snow at the moment.

"I've got a team on it, Tony. You know how these things work. We have to take it slow and quiet getting a camera through the wall so Glover doesn't hear us. The minute we get something in there, you'll see it."

"It's been hours. Glover has to be getting restless. He wants his news teams," Tony muttered, still pacing.

"If that's what he wants, then that's what we'll give him," McGee replied. "But not yet. First we find out all we can about the layout of that place, and where he's got Louis and Gibbs – then I go in there and talk to him."

"Why you?" Tony asked.

"Because I'm in charge," McGee replied tersely. Tony's jaw tightened.

"I've handled plenty of hostage negotiations," he pointed out. "I know how to work them."

"So have I and ditto," McGee said.

"I'm good," Tony pressed.

"I know – but how many of those previous negotiations were for your son and your... well, whatever Gibbs is to you?" McGee asked. "This can't be you, Tony – it has to be someone with a clear head – no personal involvement."

"You have a personal involvement too," Tony pointed out. McGee stood there for a moment, and then nodded.

"I know," he said softly. "But I can keep a clear head – you can't."

Tony conceded the point with a grunt, and then glanced out of the open door. "Damn it – more news crews have just arrived," he said. "Why can't they keep the hell away?"

"Because they know there's a story here," McGee replied sensibly.

"Gibbs will go crazy if they make *him* the story," Tony muttered.

"You know, if he gets out of there alive then I really don't give a damn how pissed off about it he is," McGee said. Tony's jaw tightened again, and McGee could have kicked himself. He hadn't meant to be insensitive; he was still trying to get his head around the fact Tony and Gibbs were in a relationship and had forgotten that he wasn't just talking to Tony about

their ex-boss – he was talking to him about someone he was sleeping with, someone he loved. McGee wished he hadn't just raised the possibility that Gibbs might *not* make it out alive.

At that moment, several large, black vans showed up, with "FBI" written on the side. Tony glanced at McGee who glanced back at him, both men surprised. A tall, graceful black man got out of the lead van and walked over to them.

"Agent Sacks?" Tony frowned, going to greet the man. "I didn't know we were expecting the FBI."

"Neither did I," McGee said.

"Heard about your problem – thought you could use a little help," Sacks told them. "And that's Assistant Director Sacks to you, Special Agent DiNozzo."

Tony grinned. "FBI must be desperate for directors," he said. "Just like NCIS." He cast a glance at McGee who rolled his eyes at him.

"Remind me again why you didn't make it past Special Agent?" Sacks asked. "Oh yeah – I remember – it must be the amount of times they had to send me over to investigate you over the years."

"You never made anything stick," Tony grinned.

"Only because you're one hell of a lucky bastard, DiNozzo," Sacks retorted.

"Seriously," Tony said quietly. "Thanks for showing up today. I'm grateful, Ron."

"FBI, NCIS – whatever – when push comes to shove these are *our* people," Sacks replied firmly. "And nobody hurts our people. We Feds have to stick together. Now, Director McGee, you're in charge - where do you want us?"

McGee was glad they weren't going to have a pissing contest about who was going to run this operation – it was hard enough fending off Tony, without taking on the FBI as well.

"Well, we've been having problems keeping the media at bay," he said. Sacks nodded.

"On it!" He strode back to his vans and barked out some orders.

"Seeing you with him reminds me of how Fornell and Gibbs used to be with each other," McGee murmured to Tony. Then his attention was drawn to the screens they had set up as one of them flickered into life.

"We have a visual inside the cabin, sir!" one of his technical agents told him. Tony was there in an instant, gazing intently at the picture as if his life depended on it.

The cabin consisted mainly of one big room with a door leading to a tiny bathroom to one side. It was sparsely furnished. They could just about make out a galley kitchen and...

"There!" Tony prodded his finger at the screen, pointing at what looked like a bundle of rags leaning against the far wall of the cabin. McGee nodded.

"Get us in closer," he ordered. The technical unit set about working on it. The spy cameras they had these days were sophisticated, and the cabin was made of wood so it hadn't been too difficult to get one of them positioned in the wall. Now one of his technicians moved it around and refocused to get a better visual. The picture zoomed, went further out of focus and then snapped back into focus, and McGee found himself looking at two faces he knew very well.

Gibbs was lying back against the wall. There was a dark stain on his shirt, and McGee felt two surges of relief both for the fact that he was still alive, and that it hadn't been Louis's blood they'd found back in the house. Gibbs could handle a gunshot wound – god knows he'd had enough in his time. His arms were tied behind his back, and his legs were tied together. There were several dark bruises on his jaw and he had a cut above one eye. Louis was nestled against him, a tiny figure beside him. McGee's relief that the child was unharmed was swallowed immediately by a wave of anger.

"Fuck it – he's got Louis tied up too," Tony growled, his words echoing McGee's thoughts. It was so wrong to see a small boy tied like that, hands behind his back, feet together. McGee felt Tony's entire body stiffen beside him, suffused with a raw fury. The little boy wasn't moving much but he was at least still alive. He was dressed in a pair of Spider-man pyjamas, nothing on his feet, and he was shivering as he pressed against Gibbs. Gibbs was doing his best to shield the boy and keep him warm with his own body heat, while at the same time he was warily watching someone else, who moved in and out of camera shot.

"Get us a visual on the bastard," Tony said. There was a pause, and then the camera closed in on a tall, broad man, with a shaven head. He was moving around the cabin, working on something, busy laying...

"Explosives," McGee muttered.

"Lots of them," Tony said, pointing at the screen, where McGee could see that Glover was busy rigging up the entire cabin with enough C4 to sink a ship. "At least now we know what he's going to do." McGee glanced at him. "He's going to make his statement to the media, and then he's going to blow that entire cabin and everyone in it to kingdom come to drive the point home," Tony told him.

"Over my dead body," McGee replied.

"You have a plan?" Tony asked, never taking his eyes off the screen, where the camera was now focussed back on Gibbs and Louis again. Gibbs was talking to Louis in what looked like calming tones, trying to keep the boy still.

"Yeah. I have a plan." McGee turned to the technical unit. "Can you get us audio?" he asked.

"Just coming through now," came back the reply, and a second later Louis's voice sounded in the room.

"My feet are cold," he said. His voice was so familiar and sounded so close that McGee wanted to reach out and scoop him up.

"I know, Lou. Don't think about it. Think about something else," Gibbs replied softly, still watching their captor warily as he worked. "Think about something nice. How about that puppy you saw at the mall last week?"

"She was very soft," Louis said in a tremulous voice. "She licked my nose. She liked me."

"I bet she did," Gibbs replied.

"Could we get a puppy?" Louis asked.

Tony gave a little grunt of amusement. "God, not that again," he muttered.

"Sure," Gibbs said. "We'll get you a puppy."

"Daddy said I couldn't have a puppy," Louis pointed out.

McGee glanced at Tony. "What? So I'm not a dog person," Tony said with a defensive shrug.

"Your dad will let you have a puppy if I tell him to," Gibbs said tersely. McGee had no doubt at all that that was true. He still couldn't completely get his head around the idea of how Tony and Gibbs's relationship worked, but he suspected that if anyone had the ultimate say in what went on in the Gibbs/DiNozzo household it was Gibbs.

Gibbs glanced around the cabin and then paused, and moved his head so that he was looking straight at the camera.

"I used to have a dog once," he said firmly. "Just one dog – no more than one, but he was from a dangerous breed. Unstable. It helped to talk to him when he was barking at me though – I could sometimes calm him down that way. But sometimes the slightest thing would set him off and he'd go really crazy; when he did, nothing seemed to get through to him. You'd look in his eyes and know he'd do whatever he was planning – that dog didn't bluff."

"He's talking to us," Tony said. "He's seen the camera."

"Yeah." McGee nodded, because Gibbs's powers of observation were the sharpest of anyone he'd ever known. There was no way they'd have got that camera in there without him seeing it. "He's giving us intel on Glover."

"Can we go home now?" Louis asked. "I don't like it here."

"I know, Lou," Gibbs said softly, moving his head down so that he could kiss Louis's hair. "We'll go home soon."

"When?"

"When your dad gets here," Gibbs replied, looking up, straight at the camera again. Tony's hands curled into fists.

"Are you sure Daddy is coming?" Louis asked.

"Yes I am. I told you he was, didn't I?" Gibbs replied.

"Just...sometimes he says he's gonna come and do stuff with us and he doesn't," Louis said. Tony's eyes flashed and McGee winced. That had to have hurt.

"He'll come this time," Gibbs said firmly. "I promise. He just needs some time to find us."

"Are we lost then?" Louis asked, and the kid sounded petrified. "Is that why he can't find us?" McGee remembered Louis's story about being lost in the mall that time; it was one of the child's worst fears.

"No," Gibbs told him. "We're not lost. How can you be lost when I'm here with you, huh Louis?"

That seemed to satisfy Louis and he rested his head against Gibbs's chest.

"My wrists hurt," he whispered, and Tony muttered something angrily under his breath, his fists furling and unfurling in rage.

"I know," Gibbs replied soothingly. "Won't be much longer now though, Louis."

"I'm scared of Nathan's dad," Louis said softly. "I'm scared he's going to hit you again, Boss."

"It's okay – it doesn't hurt, Lou. Look, if he gets angry again, I want you to just roll out of the way and let him hit me, okay?" Gibbs said. "Don't try and help me like you did last time because you could get hurt."

"But I don't like him hitting you..." Louis began.

"That's an order, Louis," Gibbs told him sternly. "You remember what I told you about following orders?" Louis nodded unhappily. "You remember I said that that's what good marines do – they follow orders, even when they're not happy about it."

"Okay," Louis whispered. He moved his head and must have jolted Gibbs's wounded arm because he took a sharp intake of breath. "You need a band-aid on your arm, Boss," Louis

said.

“Yeah. I know,” Gibbs said. “Don’t worry – your dad will bring a whole box of them when he shows up.”

“Why’s he always late?” Louis said, gazing over towards the door as if he expected Tony to just walk right in.

“Well you know your dad, he’s kind of busy,” Gibbs said wearily.

“Why?” Louis asked.

“He’s got important stuff to do,” Gibbs replied vaguely.

“What stuff?” Louis asked.

“Damned if I know,” Gibbs muttered, glaring at the camera. “So what are you going to call this puppy, Louis?” he asked, in what was clearly a blatant attempt to change the subject.

“Beanie,” Louis said promptly, without even thinking about it.

“Interesting name,” Gibbs said, shifting slightly and peering to his right. “You know, I think if we’re going to get a puppy it should be soon – really soon - because otherwise it might be too late, and the shop will have sold out.”

Tony turned to McGee. “He’s right. We know enough. We have to move,” he said.

“Hang on – I’m still setting something up,” McGee said, turning back to his technical unit to see where they were at with it. At that moment Sacks and Morris both returned to the cabin.

“You got visual?” Sacks said, looking at the screen, and then a little vein in his forehead pulsed angrily when he saw Louis and Gibbs. “Bastard,” he muttered. “Nobody should do that to a little kid. You okay, DiNozzo?”

Tony didn’t say a word – the expression on his face said it all. McGee finished briefing his technical team, and then took off his jacket and threw it onto a nearby chair and ripped off his tie. He reached for a Kevlar vest from a stack on the floor and put it on. Morris and Sacks followed suit while Tony stayed, watching the screen darkly, an unfathomable expression in his green eyes. There was a sudden movement on the screen and Glover came into view again. He loomed over Gibbs.

“Tell the kid to shut up,” he hissed.

“He’s just a kid,” Gibbs replied. “And he’s scared – he’s talking because he’s scared.”

“Shut him up or I’ll shut him up for you,” Glover snapped. Louis looked petrified, and he

buried his face as far under Gibbs's arm as it would go.

"What's the plan, Glover?" Gibbs asked quietly. "You've done a good job with the explosives – what happens next?"

Glover moved his hand and there was a cracking sound as the butt end of a pistol slammed into Gibbs's jaw. Tony winced. Louis let out a little sob, and Glover's hand went back again. Gibbs pushed Louis away from him with his body, and twisted to one side to draw Glover's attention away from the child and towards him.

"You disgust me," Glover hissed at Gibbs, and then he delivered another blow to Gibbs's jaw, making his head slam back and hit the wall behind him. "Scum like you shouldn't be allowed near kids. Scum like you shouldn't pretend to be normal, or to try and do the things that normal people do. You shouldn't be allowed to marry, and look after kids, and walk around as if it's okay to be what you are. The law shouldn't give you rights and allow scum like you to corrupt our kids. You make me sick."

Gibbs didn't say a word. He just rested his head back against the wall and gazed at the man from one open and one half-closed eye. Louis was scrunched into a little ball beside him, his knees drawn up to his chest and his head resting on them, his eyes tightly shut, his entire body shaking. The brave little kid was following orders, McGee thought to himself, just like they all did whenever Gibbs handed them out.

"I told you that you'd burn," Glover said. "I sent a note, warning you. Now I'm going to make that happen – and the world is going to watch."

Then suddenly he turned, and looked straight at the camera.

"I know you're watching," he said. "Now get me my news crew up here – because there's a lot I want to say, and if you don't send them up right now I'll put a bullet through the kid's kneecap. You've got five minutes."

Glover moved away again and Tony turned, and grabbed a Kevlar vest from the pile. He pulled it on, his eyes as dark as McGee had ever seen them. Then he undid his shirt sleeves and pushed them up his arms. McGee saw the long, familiar ridge of twisted scarring on his left arm and wondered what Tony was thinking now, with Gibbs and Louis trapped in a cabin that had just become a giant bomb. He hoped that Tony wasn't thinking about Ziva and what had happened to her.

"So what's the plan, McGee?" Tony asked, in a low, dark tone.

"He wanted a news crew – let's give him one," McGee said. "Morris, Sacks – go borrow a couple of cameras from those news crews out there."

"I don't think they'll like that, sir," Morris said.

"I don't care!" McGee growled. "Do it!"

Sacks and Morris disappeared and McGee turned to Tony.

"I'm going in there with Sacks and Morris," he said. "They're going to be the news crew he asked for." McGee grabbed a small, hand-held monitor from his technical unit so that he could view the interior of the cabin as they approached it.

"I'm coming with you," Tony said grimly. McGee looked at him for a long moment, and then nodded. There wasn't any point in telling Tony he had to stay behind – he wouldn't do it, and in all honesty McGee didn't blame him.

"Okay – but stand behind me, and I'm doing all the talking – understand?"

Tony's eyes flickered evasively but he nodded. "Whatever, McGee. Let's just get up there."

Sacks and Morris reappeared with cameras and McGee filled them in on the plan, and then they walked slowly up the hillside to the cabin. From the outside it looked so peaceful, just a little wooden cabin in the middle of nowhere, but McGee could see the SWAT team hidden in trees all around the place. Glover had boarded up all the windows in the cabin though, so unless he was stupid enough to stand in the open doorway McGee doubted the SWAT teams would be much use.

McGee stopped several yards away from the door and then raised his megaphone.

"Mr. Glover – my name is Timothy McGee and I'm here to help you. You called for a news crew; I have them here for you," he said.

He glanced at his hand-held monitor and saw Glover pull on a piece of cord. The door swung open, and McGee could just about make out the dark interior.

"No shot," the captain of the SWAT team confirmed in his earpiece.

"Send them in," Glover shouted. "I'm ready. By the way – I'm sure you already know this place is wired to explode at the press of a button. Well, I have the button right here."

He held up his hand and McGee glanced at the monitor again and saw he was holding a box with a single green button on it. He looked at Tony.

"Not a dead man's switch," Tony mouthed, but even so, that wasn't a great deal of comfort. Even if they got a shot at him it'd have to be a damned good one to make it worth the risk of his finger hitting that button and the entire place going up in a big ball of flame.

"Okay – look, we just want you to have a chance to tell us what's upset you," McGee said loudly, in his most soothing voice. "We know there's a lot you want to say and this is your chance to say it. There's no need for anyone to get hurt – the world is watching you right now. Everyone is watching you and listening to you – you don't need to hurt anyone to get

people to listen. They're already listening."

"Send in the news crew," Glover yelled.

McGee glanced at Morris and Sacks. They could all be walking to their deaths – for all he knew, Glover could just press that button the minute they got in there, but Morris and Sacks didn't hesitate. They all walked slowly into the cabin, Tony bringing up the rear.

Once inside, McGee didn't allow himself the luxury of glancing over to the far wall, where he knew Gibbs and Louis were huddled. Instead, he made eye contact with Glover as soon as he got in there, trying to build some kind of rapport with the man. Glover had a gun in one hand and the detonator in the other. Morris swung her camera around as if she was a pro, looking every inch the seasoned newshound.

"You don't have to do this, Paul," McGee said softly. "We know you're angry about your little boy. We've found Nathan – he's waiting down the hillside for you. If you want, we could go down there and see him right now."

"I don't believe you," Glover replied, stony-faced. "See, I asked if I could visit him but they said I couldn't. They said I wasn't allowed near him, like I'm more of a danger to my boy than those filthy cunts who stole him from me. When I think he has to live with that...he has to see them kiss and touch and they tell him that's *normal*...it makes me fucking sick."

"It's not right," McGee told him. "I agree. It's not right. It's not fair. But your argument isn't with that little kid over there – let him go, Paul. Let Louis go."

"The world should know how wrong it is," Glover continued. "I have to tell everyone that it's wrong."

"You are. That's what you're doing right now – telling the world," McGee said. "That's what these news crews are here for. They're telling everyone."

"I want to see it," Glover said. "On the TV. Show me." He pointed at the TV sitting in the corner of the room. "Turn it on. I want to see it," he said.

Tony took a sharp intake of breath but McGee just walked over there and turned it on. Immediately an image flashed up of the outside of the cabin. An attractive female reporter was standing there talking, saying that they were now receiving footage from inside the cabin, and then feed from Morris's camera began playing. McGee shot Tony a little look – he'd trained the NCIS technical unit himself, and he *knew* they were the best; he hadn't given them much time but he had never doubted they'd pull this off.

"See," McGee said, turning back to Glover. "The whole world is watching. You can say whatever you like."

He saw Tony glance over at where Gibbs and Louis were sitting, in the far corner, slumped against the wall, and he hoped he wasn't going to do anything stupid.

Glover tucked his gun into his thigh holster, but his grip on the detonator didn't falter.

"Give me the mike," he said, gesturing at the large black microphone Sacks was holding. Sacks moved towards him, clearly trying to get within combat range, but Glover wasn't an idiot. "Roll it on the floor!" he ordered. Sacks paused, and then crouched down and did as he was told. Glover picked it up and then looked straight into Morris's camera and began talking. He talked fast, and was so enraged that he didn't make a lot of sense.

"They say it's normal but it isn't. You know it isn't. America knows it isn't," Glover was saying. Tony glanced at McGee, and then at Gibbs. "It's sick and it's disgusting. These people are corrupting our little kids, and we're letting them. Passing laws saying they can marry, like they're normal people when they aren't. They're filth, and they want to screw around with our kids...Someone has to stand up and say it how it is and I look around and people aren't listening. People aren't *listening* to us. They're not listening to *me*."

"I am," Tony said suddenly. McGee glared at him but Tony ignored him and stepped forward, holding up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I'm listening, Paul, and you're right. You know me, don't you? I'm Louis's dad – I'm the person you really want, not Louis. He's just an innocent little kid. He's like Nathan – just a child. You don't want to hurt him – you want to hurt me."

Glover stared at him, his eyes flashing angrily.

"When you went to my house last night you really wanted me and Gibbs – you didn't want Louis. You just took him because I wasn't there, didn't you?" Tony said softly. "I know you didn't mean to take him, because I know you're a dad and you wouldn't hurt a kid."

McGee saw the faint little glimmer of uncertainty in Glover's eyes. He was pretty sure that Glover *had* intended to take Louis but he could also see that Tony was giving him an out here.

"It's me and Gibbs who should burn. You're right. We're the ones who should suffer – not Louis," Tony said softly. "Why don't you take me instead of him, Paul? I'll be your hostage. It's me and Gibbs you want, not Louis. We're the ones you want to punish, not him. Let him go, Paul. Just let me go over there and get him. I'll give him to McGee and he can take him out of here but I'll stay as your new hostage. Then you can do whatever you want to me and Gibbs."

McGee could see the uncertainty in Glover's eyes. He'd meant to do this, had psyched himself up to it and had known exactly how he intended to play it, but now Tony was confusing him.

"Let me just go over there..." Tony said, taking a step towards where Louis and Gibbs were sitting. "You'll still have two hostages – me and Gibbs – but let Louis go. He's just a kid. Like Nathan."

That seemed to swing it for Glover, and he gave a curt nod. "Okay – you can take the kid – but you stay here. When this place goes up, you're going up with it," he growled.

"That's fine. I deserve that. This is my fault," Tony said softly, moving silently but fast towards the far wall. He got there, grabbed Louis, and walked swiftly back. He shoved Louis into McGee's arms. "Go, take him – quickly, Tim. Go out and don't come back," Tony said urgently.

McGee stared at him. Tony and Gibbs were his team, his family – he couldn't just leave them here to die. If he didn't though, Louis might die too, and Tony had just bought Louis's life with his own.

"Tim, you're my best friend. With me and Gibbs gone you're the only person I trust to take good care of him," Tony said fiercely. "He's yours now – go. Go!" he barked.

McGee knew he had no choice – he turned and ran out of the door, desperate to get Louis to safety, half expecting Glover to press that button and for the cabin to blow up behind him before he got Louis out. He ran a little way down the hill with the child, and met the paramedic team waiting on standby down there, with Ducky hovering anxiously beside them. McGee didn't have a clue how and when Ducky had got there but he was glad to see their old friend. Ducky took Louis out of his arms, and McGee pulled his knife out of his sock holster and cut the ropes around Louis's wrists and ankles. The little boy threw his arms around him and clung on tight the minute he was free.

"Uncle Tim, there's a bad man and he hurt Boss," he said, his little body trembling against McGee's.

"I know, Louis, but it's okay. It's okay," he soothed.

"It's not! Boss was bleeding worse than anything I've ever seen, even when I had that nosebleed that time," Louis told him. "And the man kept hitting him, and Daddy is in there now and..."

"Ssh...it's okay..." McGee said soothingly, feeling Louis's breathing hitch as his body shook even more. "I know, I know."

He glanced back at the cabin in an agony of indecision. Tony had told him not to go back, and it was true that if that place went up in smoke that Louis would lose both his parents and that would make McGee and Ducky all he had left. All the same, McGee didn't think he could just leave them there. He had to DO something.

"Louis – I need you to go to Ducky now – okay?" he said. The little boy was so traumatised and clinging onto him so tightly that it was all McGee could do to let go of him, but Ducky reached out his arms and Louis saw a familiar face and allowed Ducky to pluck him away.

McGee took out the handheld monitor from his pocket and looked at it. Glover was pointing his gun at Tony, forcing him back against the wall, next to Gibbs. Tim turned, and ran back

up the hill, listening to Glover talk via his earpiece as he went.

“You two – leave now. I’ve said what I have to say,” Glover commanded Morris and Sacks. “Go outside and film this place getting blown sky high. I told them they’d burn but they didn’t pay me any attention. Nobody ever paid me any attention – well now they’ll have to.”

McGee glanced at the hand-held monitor as he drew close. He could see Sacks backing out of there and watched, in slow motion, as Morris turned as if to follow him, and then she moved fast, so fast she was a blur, and her gun was in her hand when it hadn’t been a moment before, and she threw the camera sideways at the same time as she fired her gun. McGee sprinted the final couple of steps towards the cabin, knowing that if Morris had missed then Glover would be right on the brink of pressing that button and the whole place would go up, taking all of them with it...

McGee heard a crash inside and he ran into the cabin to find Glover lying flat on his back on the floor with a hole in his head, eyes wide open in death, the detonator still held loosely in his hand. McGee crouched down beside him and removed the detonator from his fingers, then barked into his wire to his explosives unit to get up to the place and make it safe.

“Get out,” he ordered Morris and Sacks. “Just in case this place still blows. We don’t know how he rigged it.”

McGee ran quickly over to the far wall, where Tony had pulled a knife from his sock holster and had cut through the ropes around Gibbs’s wrists and was busy sawing away at the ones around his legs.

McGee crouched beside Gibbs. “You okay?” he asked anxiously. Gibbs nodded.

“I’ve had worse,” he growled.

“We’ve got a paramedic team outside waiting,” McGee told him.

“Louis?” Gibbs asked.

“He’s fine. Ducky’s looking after him.”

“I told you not to come back, McGee,” Tony snapped at him.

“I know.” McGee shrugged. “I’m sorry. It was instinct. You’re still my team, even after all this time.”

Tony finished cutting through the ropes around Gibbs’s ankles and then picked up his good arm, slung it around his shoulder, and helped him to his feet. McGee had rarely seen Gibbs show pain but he did see a little flicker of a grimace pass across his face as Tony pulled him up. Tony clearly saw it too, because he wrapped an arm around Gibbs’s waist, and held him tight as he swayed on his feet.

“Uh, McGee knows,” he said, in an apologetic tone. “About us.”

“I figure the whole damn world knows about us now,” Gibbs muttered, glancing at the TV set.

“Uh – no actually. Just the people in this room and in the cabin down the hillside,” McGee said. “That wasn’t a real news broadcast – Glover just thought it was. I had my technical team patch it in using a...well, you don’t need to know how of course,” he said hurriedly, seeing the look Gibbs was giving him. “Just that nobody saw it – it wasn’t a real broadcast. It was just for Glover’s benefit.”

“Way to go, McGeek,” Tony grinned at him as he half-carried Gibbs out of the cabin. “You had me fooled.”

“Of course that’s not hard,” Gibbs commented. Tony grinned at him too, and then, much to McGee’s surprise, pressed a kiss against the side of Gibbs’s face.

“I love you too, Boss,” he said. Gibbs rolled his eyes, but McGee noticed that the hand he had wrapped around Tony’s shoulder squeezed, gently, in response.

“You did good in there,” Gibbs said wearily. “Both of you.”

“Worth an ‘attaboy’?” Tony asked cheekily. Gibbs grinned, and moved his hand to stroke the back of Tony’s head.

“Attaboy,” he murmured, and Tony gave an absurdly wide smile, lapping up the petting. McGee remembered what he’d said about needing to be touched, and it suddenly occurred to him how very tactile Tony was. He’d never thought about it before, but seeing Gibbs and Tony standing in front of him like this he had a sudden flash of insight into how it worked between them – maybe how it had always worked. All those head slaps Gibbs had been giving Tony for so many years served the dual purpose of slapping some good sense into him and giving him the physical contact he craved so much. No wonder Tony always seemed to do his best to provoke Gibbs into delivering them.

They got outside and a team of paramedics rushed forward and took Gibbs away from Tony, and put him on a gurney. A second later there was a little cry and a blur of blue and red dashed past McGee and straight into Tony’s arms and settled there, clinging on tight. Tony put his arms around Louis and held him as if he’d never let him go, kissing his hair and face repeatedly.

“Boss said you’d come for us,” Louis said. “He said you would and you did, and there was a bad man who hurt Boss – his arm was bleeding and he said it didn’t hurt but I knew it did and we were locked in the trunk of a car and Boss said to go to sleep but I couldn’t so we sang songs and he made up stories and he said you’d come and I thought maybe you wouldn’t but then you did and the bad man put rope around my hands and it hurt, Daddy.”

Louis paused for a moment in his stream of consciousness talk to hold up one arm, which

bore a little white bandage around the wrist. Tony kissed it, over and over again.

“I’m sorry, Lou. I’m so, so sorry,” he said. “I called Uncle Tim as soon as I knew you were missing and we didn’t stop looking for you until we found you.”

“We weren’t lost though,” Louis told him, urgently, as if this was very important. “Boss said we weren’t lost because he was with me and he knew where we were and that you knew too and would come and get us so we weren’t really lost.”

“No, just missing – not lost,” Tony said, kissing Louis’s cheek. “Not really lost.”

“Is Boss okay?” Louis looked around anxiously.

“He’s fine. He’ll get a bandage just like yours and he’ll be okay,” Tony told him.

“I was scared. Boss said it was okay to be scared but I was really scared,” Louis said.

“I know. Me too.” Tony rested his forehead against Louis’s and held him quietly, rocking him in his arms for a long, heartfelt moment. “I couldn’t lose you, Lou,” he said, in a choked tone. “I love you, Louis,” he whispered. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too, Daddy,” Louis told him, and then he pulled back and looked at his father. “Boss says I can have a puppy,” he added. Tony laughed out loud.

“Yeah, you can have a puppy, Lou,” he sighed. “Now, shall we go and see Boss?”

Louis nodded eagerly and McGee followed them over to the ambulance. The paramedics had cut Gibbs’s shirt off him and bandaged his wounded arm and he looked a little better – his face was a little less grey than it had been although his jaw was badly bruised and cut in places. Ducky was standing beside him, rolling his eyes in exasperation – an emotion that seemed to be shared by the equally frustrated-looking paramedic who was busy placing Gibbs’s bandaged arm in a sling.

“They want to take me to the damn hospital,” Gibbs grumbled.

“Yeah, good luck with that,” Tony said to the paramedic.

“I think you should go,” McGee said. Gibbs glared at him. “You were shot – you’ll need more than just patching up,” McGee pointed out. “And he hit you with his gun a few times as well – we should make sure he didn’t break any bones.”

“The gunshot is a flesh wound,” Gibbs said irritably. “It looks worse than it is, and trust me, McGee, I’d KNOW if I’d broken any bones.”

“You really are the most exasperating patient, Jethro,” Ducky remonstrated with a heavy sigh. “It’s always the same. I don’t know why I even dared to think it might be different this time around.”

“Only way they’ll get me into a hospital bed again is if I’m unconscious,” Gibbs growled. “Can’t stand the damn food in those places, either.”

“I’ll get you some painkillers,” the paramedic sighed. “The heavy-duty kind. You’ll need them.”

“Waste of time. He won’t take them,” Tony said with a shrug. “He’ll be fine. Let him come home with us.” He gave Gibbs a hard look. “Ducky can keep an eye on you but if at any time he says you need to go to the hospital then I’ll drive you there myself. Oh, and if the only way you’ll go is unconscious, well, I’m sure I can arrange that.” Gibbs glared at him and Tony raised an eyebrow, daring him to protest, and then, much to McGee’s surprise, Gibbs sighed and looked down in capitulation. Tony grinned.

“Are you okay now, Boss?” Louis asked, looking torn between wanting to be wrapped around Gibbs and wanting to stay wrapped around Tony.

“I’m fine, Louis,” Gibbs told him, with a little smile.

“Why did that man want to hurt you and Daddy?” Louis asked.

“Why do you ask so many questions?” Tony said, tickling Louis and making him giggle.

“Because I want to know the answers!” Louis replied sensibly, still giggling. “Why did he take us, Boss? Why did he bring us out here? Why did he let me go and keep you and Daddy? Why was he making a bomb? Why didn’t he like us?”

“It wasn’t you he didn’t like, Louis – it was me and Boss,” Tony told him.

“But why?” Louis insisted.

“Because he was mixed up in his head,” Gibbs replied. “He thought your dad and I wanted to get married and it upset him.”

“You and Daddy are getting married?” Louis’s eyes widened excitedly. Gibbs sighed.

“No – that’s just what he thought and that’s why he was mad at us.”

“Why would that make him mad?” Louis asked, confused.

“Well, that’s a good question,” Tony said with a shrug.

“Why aren’t you getting married?” Louis asked, continuing his run of incessant questions. McGee almost laughed out loud at the look on Gibbs’s face – until he saw the musing look on Tony’s.

“Well, that’s another good question,” Tony said thoughtfully. “Why don’t we, Boss?” He

glanced at Gibbs, and his eyes were alive and dancing in a way that McGee hadn't seen them in a very long time.

"Tony..." Gibbs said in a warning tone. "If I was standing up right now and could reach then I'd slap the back of your head."

"Aw – you wanted me to be more romantic about it? You should have said!" Tony grinned. He got down on one knee, so that he was level with Gibbs on the gurney, Louis still in his arms.

"Leroy Jethro Gibbs – will you marry me?" he said. "I love you, and, as McGee pointed out, you're the longest relationship I've ever had. Admittedly I haven't been the best boyfriend in the world but it'll be different going forward, I promise. McGee has been making me see myself in a different way these past couple of days, and, well, nearly losing you and Louis has sure as hell made me re-examine my priorities. So...marry me. Please."

Louis was grinning, looking from Gibbs to Tony and back again excitedly. Gibbs was glaring at Tony so hard that McGee wondered if Tony had a death wish kneeling so close to him, and definitely within slapping distance.

"Come on! I know you've never been that great at the whole marriage thing but hey - fifth time lucky?" Tony grinned. Gibbs *did* slap him for that. Tony laughed. "Was that a yes?"

"Say yes, Boss!" Louis urged excitedly.

"This isn't fair," Gibbs growled.

"I know!" Tony grinned. "But hey, if I have to put up with a dog in the house for the next god knows how many years, the least you can do is wear my damn ring on your finger."

"You're crazy," Gibbs muttered. Tony's grin widened.

"I know that too. C'mon – don't make me beg. Marry me!"

McGee could see Gibbs was weakening. "You and Tony do make a fine couple," he said, adding his two cents. Now Gibbs glared at him. "And he is loaded," he added. "So you could always marry him for his money if nothing else."

"Gee, thanks, McGee," Tony pouted. "Also, I'm good-looking, charming and great fun to be with. Okay, so not so much lately, but I can be again – I promise. Probie – didn't you say I had three months vacation time stacked up?"

"I did, Tony." McGee nodded.

"Well I'm taking them – all three months, starting right now," Tony said. "I've missed out on a lot these past few years – I have some catching up to do. Also, it'll give us a chance to plan our wedding." He winked at Gibbs.

"I haven't said yes yet," Gibbs growled.

"You will," Tony said confidently.

"I'm used to being the one doing the asking," Gibbs pointed out.

"So ask." Tony shrugged.

Gibbs thought about it for a moment, and then looked at Louis who was gazing at him with shining eyes, and then, finally, he heaved a big sigh and gave in.

"Tony," Gibbs began. "Will you...?"

"Yes," Tony said quickly. "There see – that was painless." He leaned forward, and kissed Gibbs on the mouth before he could say anything else.

McGee thought he should be shocked or surprised or something to see his old boss and his old friend locked in such an intimate embrace but oddly it seemed like the most normal thing in the world. In fact, it seemed so normal that he wondered how he'd never realised they were in a relationship before. It all seemed so incredibly obvious now – and kind of *right*. There was an easy back and forth between them, and a banter that only people who loved each other exchanged. Gibbs had stuck by Tony when the going was tough, and McGee had a feeling that Tony knew exactly how lucky he'd been to find someone who'd do that. He couldn't have been easy to live with these past few years, but Gibbs, of all people, knew what it'd been like for him, and had loved him during the dark, bleak times, when he didn't love himself.

He looked at them for a moment, feeling a sudden pang of loneliness as he watched Tony and Gibbs kiss and Louis scramble from one lap to the other, happy to be part of the moment. It might be unconventional but these three were a family, and while he didn't begrudge them their happiness he did long for his own happy ending.

He tore his eyes away and glanced over at Ducky, who seemed to be taking this new development as much in his stride as McGee. All McGee could see in Ducky's eyes was a sense of satisfaction and a little glow of happy approval.

McGee moved away to ensure that the clear-up operation was moving along efficiently. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Tony and Gibbs chatting while Louis nestled in Gibbs's lap, and then Tony got up and went over to talk to A.D. Sacks.

McGee turned and almost bumped into Morris.

"I just heard from Carter," she said, holding up her cell phone.

"Shit – I'd forgotten all about Jonssen," McGee said, beckoning Tony over.

“It’s Carter,” Morris told Tony when he loped over to them. “He just called. About Jonsen.”

Tony went very still and McGee sighed, wondering if he’d really meant it about taking three months off – it didn’t seem likely if they had Jonsen sitting in their interrogation room.

“Jonsen was a no-show at the hospice,” Morris said. “No sign that he’d been there, either – Carter talked to all the nurses. And there’s not much chance of him showing up now because it’s too late – his mother died earlier today.”

That muscle in Tony’s jaw twitched and McGee held his breath, waiting for the familiar darkness to flood into his eyes the way it always did when a lead on Jonsen went bad. This time, though, it didn’t happen. He just nodded.

“Okay. I think I’ve wasted enough of my life – and enough of Louis’s life – chasing after him. If the bastard ever comes near me I’ll go after him, but I’m not chasing him any more. It’s over,” he said quietly. McGee felt a mixture of surprise and relief.

“You mean that, Tony?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Tony said softly. “You were right, Tim. I was too busy mourning what I’d lost to notice what I’d still got. And what I’ve got is something pretty damn good – I just didn’t realise that until I almost lost it too.”

Tony glanced back at where Gibbs was still sitting on the gurney, his bandaged arm in a sling, his other arm around Louis who was talking away to him while Gibbs nodded patiently, listening to every word the little boy was saying.

Tony turned back, and looked at McGee. “Thank you for helping me bring them home safely, Tim,” he said softly. “And now I’m going to do something for you.” He glanced at Morris. “Well done, Agent Morris,” he told her. “You did a great job in there.”

“Uh...thank you, sir,” Morris said, looking startled. Tony gave out praise about as often as Gibbs, McGee thought – in other words, not very often. No wonder she was surprised.

“I mean it. You could have just got out of there and let him blow the place – and us – to kingdom come, but you took a shot at him, knowing that if you missed he’d press the button and you’d go up with the rest of us. That took guts – and also, it was a damn good shot. I’m glad I insisted on you all taking those regular lessons on the range,” Tony grinned. McGee smiled; Tony had been just as insistent as Gibbs had always been about his team being able to shoot fast and accurately, and, like Gibbs, he’d been right.

“You’re a damn fine agent, Morris,” Tony said and her face split into an ear to ear grin. “You’re also fired,” he told her, and the grin faded immediately.

“What?” she said, looking from Tony to McGee, aghast, but McGee had no idea what Tony was up to. “Director McGee?” she said angrily. “He can’t fire me for doing a good job!”

“Of course he can’t,” McGee told her soothingly. “In fact he can’t actually fire you, period – I’m the only one who can do that. Tony, what the hell are you playing at? She’s the best agent you’ve got!”

“I agree,” Tony said, nodding. “You’re an exceptional agent, Morris, and you deserve to be out in the field. That’s why I brought you with us today – not Carter, not Banks, or any of the others, but you. This was my family in danger – and you were the only one I trusted to do the right thing out here.”

“So why the hell are you talking about firing her?” McGee frowned.

“Because she was right to complain about me,” Tony replied with a shrug. “I’m just surprised it took you so long, Morris. You’re right – I often don’t select you for the more dangerous field work and that’s not a reflection on you or your capabilities, it’s just that I don’t want to lose another Kate, or Ziva, or even Abby. And you deserve better, frankly.”

“You can’t fire me because of your own damn issues!” Morris said hotly.

“I agree,” Tony grinned. “And McGee’s right – I can’t *actually* fire you, and he sure as hell won’t. I was just trying to get your attention. You see, I just had a word with Assistant Director Sacks over there, and he was pretty damn impressed with you today and says that if you ever want to leave NCIS then there’s a job waiting for you at the FBI.”

“Leave NCIS?” Morris glanced at McGee, an anxious look in her eyes, and then looked back at Tony. “Why would I want to leave?”

“Well, Sacks can offer you a promotion – more money, a chance to lead your own team, and work out in the field. Although I hear your new boss is a complete bastard so that might take some getting used to.” He grinned at her. She gazed back at him, her face still shocked, unable to take this in.

“I don’t want to leave,” she said, glancing at McGee again. “I have a lot of loyalty to NCIS, and particularly to Director McGee.”

“Yeah...about that,” Tony said. “McGee is totally in love with you but he won’t ask you out while you’re one of his agents for some blah blah reason to do with rules and sexual harassment or something – I wasn’t really listening and you know how he likes to go on and on - so if you do take the job with the FBI then he’ll be able to ask you out on a hot date. Or you can stay at NCIS and just gaze at him longingly whenever he walks past because it’s never gonna happen while you still work for him.”

McGee felt his mouth open like a goldfish, and his face flush from his neck all the way up to the tips of his ears. Morris was looking equally flustered.

“What...I don’t...I do NOT *gaze*...” she floundered.

“Yeah, you really do,” Tony told her. “Think about it. I’ve done my bit to help the cause of

true love between geeks. The rest is up to you two now.”

“Tony!” McGee yelled hotly, but Tony had already turned and begun striding away. “I WILL kill you!” McGee promised. Tony waved a nonchalant hand in the air.

“You’re welcome, Probie!” he shouted over his shoulder.

McGee turned back to Morris, to find her staring at him.

“You’re totally in love with me?” she asked.

“Uh...no,” he said. “Well maybe. A bit. Well, quite a lot actually, but don’t worry, it’s fine, I...”

He didn’t get a chance to finish that sentence because she flung herself at him and kissed him, hard, on the mouth. She tasted warm and sweet and soft and, once he’d got over the shock, he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her back.

“That hot date – make it tonight,” she told him when she finally released him. He stared at her, feeling giddy. “You have no idea how long I’ve waited – I’m not waiting another second,” she said.

“Uh...how long?” he asked curiously. “Have you waited that is?”

“Three years – since the day I joined NCIS and DiNozzo yelled at me all day long and you were the only one who was kind to me. I have this, well, kind of unrequited love habit and my friends have all been saying this is typical of me and that it’s such a cliché to have a crush on your boss, but I knew it was more than that even if you didn’t seem aware I existed.”

“Oh, I knew you existed,” McGee told her, grabbing her hand and holding it tight. “I definitely knew you existed, Felicity. Three years though?”

“I know!” She flushed and shook her head. “You always seemed so lost and lonely and I wanted to stand on my desk and shout at you to get your attention but you never seemed to be looking so I just sat there and stewed in my unrequited love, the way I always do.”

“Not unrequited,” he said, aware of feeling something that he hadn’t felt in a very long time – so long, in fact, that it took him a moment to figure out what it was. Hope. It was hope. Hope that after all the sadness of the past, there might actually be some kind of happiness in the future. “Uh, does this mean you’re accepting the FBI job?” he asked her anxiously.

“I’ll talk to A.D. Sacks – see if I like the sound of it, and then I’ll decide,” she told him. “I always thought DiNozzo was such a bastard.” She shook her head. “Maybe I was wrong and he isn’t a *total* bastard.”

“Yeah.” McGee grinned back at her. “Like I said, Felicity, he’s a good man – and a good friend.” He put his hand in his pant pocket to find his cell phone and frowned as his fingers

made contact with a small, round piece of metal. He drew it out and shook his head when he saw it was the GPS locator he'd given to Ducky to plant on Tony. Tony must have found it and planted it on McGee instead. "And he's also really, really annoying," McGee added, rolling his eyes at Tony's retreating back.

~*~

McGee stood next to Ducky and watched Louis trying to loosen his tie. The boy wasn't used to wearing a formal suit, but, like his father, he looked fantastic in one. Tony was wearing a smart new suit as well, in soft, expensive grey flannel, and he looked just as good as his son. The two months Tony had taken off work so far had been good for him, as had giving up his blind obsession with chasing after Jonsen. He looked relaxed for the first time in years. McGee knew he'd faced up to his alcohol problem and hadn't touched a drink in the past eight weeks. He also knew that it hadn't been easy for him, and he'd had days when he'd occasionally struggled with it. Gibbs had been there with him every step of the way. He'd given up alcohol himself to make it easier on Tony, and had been both tough and loving with Tony while he fought his addiction. Now Tony was eating well and no longer drinking excessively or working himself to the bone and McGee thought that he honestly looked ten years younger as a result.

Gibbs was also wearing a suit – dark, navy blue in his case, with a white shirt and a vivid blue silk tie that matched the colour of his eyes. McGee suspected Tony had been the one who'd selected the outfits for the wedding – Gibbs had never been very interested in clothes. Neither had Tony for the past few years, but now it seemed that his old interests were slowly resurfacing.

Ducky and McGee were the only witnesses – Ducky as Gibbs's best man and McGee as Tony's – Gibbs had refused to let anyone else attend, apart from Louis, obviously. McGee suspected that Ducky was wiping a surreptitious tear away as the two men pushed rings onto each other's fingers and exchanged vows. Gibbs's vow was short and to the point; Tony's was much longer and surprisingly sincere and poignant. McGee thought that they were both perfect for the occasion.

The woman officiating smiled and said they could kiss. Gibbs looked as if he'd rather be eaten by a shark than kiss in front of witnesses but Tony wasn't taking no for an answer and grabbed him, and Gibbs submitted without further protest to having his mouth thoroughly explored by Tony's tongue. McGee noticed that Tony's hand was cupping Gibbs's ass cheekily but Gibbs didn't seem to mind – his own hand was pressed firmly in the small of Tony's back, keeping him close.

Louis rushed around them, zooming through the room like a miniature dynamo, happy and excited by the occasion. He had suffered some nightmares after his ordeal initially, but Gibbs had refused, point blank, to take him to a shrink.

"What he needs is his parents, and some time, love and reassurance – not some idiot asking him a load of damn fool questions," he had snapped, and Tony had agreed with him. McGee thought he was probably right about that because the boy had bounced back and looked

the happiest he'd ever seen him. He loved the sheer amount of time his father was spending with him every day, and seemed closer to Tony and less in awe of him than before. McGee knew that Gibbs and Tony took it in turns to read to the child at bedtime each night, and then sit with him while he dropped off to sleep – he wasn't ready to go to sleep alone yet.

"I have two monster-scarers now, Uncle Tim!" Louis had told him excitedly when he'd dropped by to visit one evening. They were in the process of buying a new house so they could all have a fresh start; Tony had his eye on some big place out in Alexandria although Gibbs thought it was too fancy and preferred a smaller place in Arlington. McGee suspected Gibbs would win that one.

Tony finally relinquished his hold on Gibbs and held out his hand to Louis who took it happily, and they all went off to the marina for the wedding breakfast – which was in fact a hamper packed with champagne and sandwiches.

Felicity Morris was waiting for them there, sitting on a bench beside the hamper, holding Beanie's lead. Beanie was a huge, excitable golden retriever. She adored Gibbs, who seemed to be training her with effortless efficiency, had already won over Tony by snuggling up to him whenever she sensed he was down, and treated Louis like a fellow puppy - and best friend.

Felicity let Beanie off her lead and the puppy ran over to greet Louis, dashing around with excited enthusiasm as if she'd been separated from him for weeks instead of a couple of hours. Louis ran over the grass with her, around and around, the two of them jumping and playing, Louis giggling and Beanie wagging her tail so fiercely that McGee was surprised she didn't knock Louis over.

Felicity got up, came over to him, and kissed him on the lips. McGee wrapped an arm around her waist and kissed her back. They'd been dating for two months and had been inseparable in that time. He hadn't known a relationship this *easy*. They never stopped talking and laughing and after all the years of sorrow and loneliness that was such a relief.

"Is it time?" Louis shouted running over to the sleek boat that was waiting for them, bobbing on the water.

"It's time!" Tony said, grabbing him and throwing him in the air. Louis giggled. It was such a happy, familiar sound that it made McGee smile. Felicity squeezed his hand.

"Okay – let's go," Gibbs said.

"Wait!" Tony pulled a piece of paper out of his jacket pocket. "This is a momentous occasion, Boss. Someone should say a few words."

"Oh god," Gibbs sighed. Tony grinned at him.

"Probie – get out the champagne!" Tony ordered. McGee opened the hamper and poured a glass of champagne for himself, Felicity and Ducky, some fizzy water for Gibbs and Tony,

some orange juice for Louis, and a bowl of water for Beanie.

“Friends!” Tony announced, holding up his glass. McGee rolled his eyes. “This here – this boat, is the fifth boat my, uh, husband has built, but the first one ever to float on, you know, actual water. We’re all relieved and hope this means he won’t feel the need to build any more because frankly, it’s kind of a weird hobby. “He ducked instinctively, waiting for the head slap but Gibbs just gave him a good-natured kind of glare. “Okay, my good people – all aboard. I give you a toast. Here’s to the Abigail.”

Tony gazed at Gibbs as he said that and Gibbs gazed back, and McGee felt a lump rise in the back of his throat. He saw the boat’s name, Abigail, written in neat black letters on her brown varnished surface; it was a lovely touch.

“To the Abigail,” they all said, holding up their glasses in a toast, and then sipping their drinks.

“You sure she won’t sink?” McGee overheard Tony whisper to Gibbs as they all climbed onboard. Gibbs *did* slap the back of his head for that.

McGee sat down at the side, with one arm around Felicity as Gibbs took them out onto the open water. Felicity’s dark hair blew into his face as the wind whipped up around them. Ducky grinned at them, shading his eyes from the sun as he looked out over the glistening water.

Beanie slumped down at McGee’s feet, nose on her front paws, looking suddenly exhausted, although her golden tail was still full of life and continued thumping energetically on the floor of the boat.

Gibbs stood beside Louis, showing him how to sail the boat, one arm wrapped around the small boy as he instructed him how to move the rudder, the sun glinting off Gibbs’s new gold wedding ring as he moved his hand. Tony came over and stood beside them both. He was wearing a matching gold ring and he wrapped his arm around Gibbs and kissed his cheek, and then crouched down and kissed Louis’s cheek too.

McGee wasn’t sure when he’d last been this happy but he thought it had probably been a very long time ago. Now though, as he sat here on this sunny day, with the blue sky above him and the people he loved most in the world around him, he thought that maybe, after all they’d been through, everything was finally going to be okay.

The End

Chapter End Notes:

Friendly feedback always adored

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters and settings are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. No money is being made from this work. No copyright infringement is intended.