

The First Collar by Xanthe



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Story Notes:

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Part One by Xanthe

Tony took the original tapes to his bank and locked them up in a safety deposit box.

When he returned home, he glanced around the apartment looking for somewhere to hide the backup disk he'd made. His gaze fell on his extensive DVD collection, and he knelt down beside it, looking for the right one. He saw the box set of *Subs and the City* that his top before last had given him, presumably under the assumption that *all* subs liked the show. Tony had cringed at the gift and never even opened it. Now he did. He removed the disk from the middle DVD in the set and threw it into the trash with a disdainful flick of his fingers. He replaced it with the copied disk and returned the DVD to the shelf, under a pile of others.

So that was it. That was how his job at Baltimore PD ended – in one great big fat lie.

"Never trust a top," he said bitterly, remembering the words he'd learned at his mother's knee. "Never gone wrong yet by following that advice, Mom." He picked up the half-empty bottle of beer on his coffee table and raised it ironically in the air, saluting his dead mother. "Thanks, Mom."

He noticed the stained letter that had been lying beneath the bottle, picked it up, and read it through again. No regular police department had been interested in him with his job record. He had very much doubted that a federal agency would be interested, either, but he'd sent his resume off to a bunch of them all the same. The only one prepared to even offer him an interview was NCIS.

NCIS. *Naval Criminal Investigative Service.*

"What the hell do I know about boats?" Tony muttered to himself, throwing the letter back onto the table. The interview was the next day, and as it was the only interview he'd been offered he supposed he should make an effort to go to it. His heart wasn't in it though. He was a good investigator; that wasn't false pride – he knew that he was. So how come he always ended up with his bare ass raised, looking at the floor in some workplace discipline room or other and taking his licks without making a sound? He tried to keep out of trouble, God knows, but somehow he never managed it.

Until Baltimore. He'd really thought he'd got it nailed there. He had worked hard, kept his head down, and he had been delighted when that strategy had paid off. Dana Morley had requested his transfer onto her team in Homicide, and it had looked, for a while, as if he'd managed to turn his life around. He'd been surprised when she seduced him two days into his new job, but hey, he was a red-blooded sub, and she was one hell of a top. It had been a good ride – until he realized she'd set him up from the beginning. She'd chosen him to be her fall guy, figuring that someone as screwed up as Tony DiNozzo would be easy to play.

She'd been wrong about that.

"Not a complete idiot," he muttered to himself.

So he had one job interview and enough money to pay the rent for a month. After that, he was screwed. A hell of a lot was riding on that interview tomorrow.

"No pressure then."

He threw the letter back onto the table and got to his feet with a grin. When the going got tough, what else was there for a tough sub to do but go clubbing?

He pulled on his usual clubbing outfit of tight black jeans and a dark green shirt, smoothed some product onto his hair to make it look dark and spiky, shouldered himself into his black leather jacket, and headed off out into the night.

The club was called *Anon* – it was a place Tony came back to every so often, when he was in the mood for something dark and, well, anonymous.

It was a cold, wet night, and the club wasn't exactly heaving with people. Tony took a seat in the corner and nursed his drink for an hour, just watching. He saw various people hooking up, going furtively into the back room for a play session, or upstairs if they wanted a room for the night.

Tops paraded around trying so hard to look dangerous that it made Tony laugh. If you had to try then you weren't doing it right. The subs were just as bad – he watched them pretending to wilt, just for the thrill of it. You could project whatever fantasies you wanted onto a complete stranger, after all, just as long as they gave you what you craved.

Tony knew what he craved – and he knew who would give it to him too. He'd been watching one guy for the past twenty minutes and knew he'd found his mark. The top he had his eye on was tall, broad-shouldered, and good-looking in a vacuous kind of way. He clearly wasn't the brightest button in the box, but then Tony didn't need bright. He just needed someone he could manipulate into giving him the kind of hard, brutally punishing sex he wanted right now.

He got up and made his way across the bar. A woman stopped him halfway.

"Hey, sweetie! You looking for someone to drag into the back room?" she asked, trailing one finger down his leather jacket. Tony didn't even crack a smile. He never understood how anyone couldn't tell the difference between a top and a sub without obvious visual clues. He knew immediately he met a person. Hell – he could tell just by looking.

"Yeah, but not you," he snapped at her. She jumped away as if stung, and he felt bad for a moment. He didn't usually take his sour moods out on the people around him. He flashed her his subbiest smile. It wasn't her fault she was in the wrong place at the wrong time and was too drunk to know she'd tried to pick up a fellow sub. "Sorry, sweetheart – wrong

orientation," he told her in a sweeter voice.

She smiled back at him. "Oh man...I'm sorry..." She had the grace to look embarrassed by her faux pas. Nobody liked being mistaken for something they weren't. "It's the leather jacket, hon...and you sure looked topky, the way you were walking, all moody and dark and all. You sure you don't swing both ways? I wouldn't mind bedding a switch tonight."

"Not a switch. Sub all the way," he told her. "Right down to my bones," he muttered to himself as he continued on his path, tracking down his prey with deadly intent.

Good-looking-guy, or GLG as Tony had christened him in his head, was still standing by the bar, glancing around, trying to look cool and stern. Tony would have laughed if he wasn't so intent on getting laid tonight.

"You looking for someone?" he asked, sliding right up close to the guy, getting in his personal space.

GLG gave him a gruff, nonchalant look, but Tony didn't miss the way his eyes flickered over his body with an assessing gaze. Tony tried not to roll his eyes.

"Yeah. I'm looking for someone willing to get down on their knees and suck my dick tonight," GLG growled.

"Aw, you're the sweet-talking type." Tony grinned.

GLG looked confused. Clearly the art of conversation was not one he'd ever studied.

"Like to say what I mean – and mean what I say," he said gruffly. "Some subs don't like that, but what the fuck are you doing in a place like this if you don't wanna get laid?"

"Good point," Tony conceded. "Well, you can stop looking. You've found someone very willing to get down on his knees and suck your dick tonight, sir."

The 'sir' worked like a charm, and GLG's face split into a wide grin. Tony suppressed the inner sigh. He wished tops weren't so easy to play. True, most weren't *this* easy, but Tony had never yet met one who made it feel real.

"I play rough, boy," GLG warned.

"Good – that's what I'm looking for," Tony replied.

GLG leered at him and reached down to squeeze Tony's cock through his pants, as if he owned it. Tony was already half hard and the action made all his blood rush south.

"Want to take my ass into the back room so you can fuck it?" Tony asked, watching GLG's pupils dilate at the words.

"Nah." GLG waved a hand at the barman and slammed some cash down on the bar. "Gonna take my time with you, submissive. Wanna fuck you all night long." He leaned forward and spoke directly into Tony's ear. "Gonna make you scream, boy." He picked up the key the barman had left for him. "Room 19 – my lucky number. Coming, boy?"

He put a big hand on the back of Tony's neck and began steering him towards the stairs. Tony went easily. Usually a quick fuck in the back room was enough for him when he was in this kind of mood, but if this guy wanted to pay for all the facilities of a room for the night then he wasn't going to argue.

Room 19 was much like all the other rooms at *Anon*; seedy red furnishings, a spanking bench, and a variety of implements in their wrappers because you'd have to be really desperate to play with second hand stuff. The implements were locked away in a rack – you had to insert cash to buy any of them. In one corner was a big bed; its iron headboard came complete with attached cuffs.

"So..." GLG put an arm around him and pulled him close, fondling his ass. "What's your name, boy?"

"My name is 'boy', sir. What's yours?" Tony said. He wasn't giving this guy the privilege of calling him by his actual name when he topped him.

GLG laughed. "You can call me Jake – or 'sir'. I can see you've got a smart mouth on you, boy. I might need to gag you."

"Gagging's fine." Tony shrugged. He couldn't care less about that. "No bondage though."

Jake pouted. "Aw. But you'd look good in chains."

"I do look very good in chains, but you aren't going to see it," Tony snapped. Then he winced inwardly; this was not the best way to manipulate this guy into giving him what he wanted. "Hey...I just don't know you very well. I leave the chains for the second date." Tony gave a wink. "You can do a whole load of other things to me if you want though, sir," he whispered throatily. "You can spank me, clamp me, plug me, have me suck you, fuck me...whatever. But no bondage, that's all. Anything else is fine."

A little gleam crept into Jake's eyes. "Anything?"

Tony gave an internal sigh, wondering what kind of shit he was going to get asked to do tonight. "Within reason," he replied, warily.

"Would you wear my collar for the night?" Jake asked. Tony stared at him. "Temporary collar – just for a few hours?" Jake added. "Wouldn't hurt, would it?"

It wasn't a completely unusual request, but it wasn't customary on a one night stand. Had this guy recently loved and lost a sub, Tony wondered, or – worse – had his sub died maybe? Or perhaps the poor guy was just a hopeless romantic at heart.

"Sorry, buddy," he said quietly. He'd never worn a top's collar in his life, not even a temporary one for a one night stand, and he didn't intend to start now. He'd never met a top who was worthy of *owning* him, and had never met one who he was prepared to really submit to, either. He just fooled them enough that they gave him what he needed and then he left.

Jake looked annoyed. "It's just a collar," he said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out the soft, leather collar. It was pretty – nice quality and just a little worn around the edges. Tony wondered who it had belonged to, or whether this guy just used it on all his conquests. Maybe it made him feel like a big bad top, the kind who *could* actually collar and keep a sub.

"Sorry," Tony said. "Just...see, when – if – I ever wear a top's collar it'll mean something. And this..." he waved his hand around the seedy room "is just a one night stand."

Jake glared at him and then nodded, reluctantly. "I get it," he muttered. "Don't meet many subs like you. Kinda traditional, aren't you?"

Tony gave a wry shake of his head. "Maybe." He had no intention of discussing his morals with this guy. "Now..." he sank to his knees and placed his hands on Jake's fly, "Shall we get on with the fucking?" He grinned up at Jake. "You look like a big, strong top. A sub like me would be lucky to suck your dick."

"Sounds good." Jake gave a little jerk of his head, giving Tony permission.

"My safe word's lemming," Tony said.

"Okay." Jake shrugged.

Tony doubted that he'd need it because he was going to be the one manipulating this scene, but he always played safe with strangers. Years of watching his father's subs emerge from one bad scene after another had taught him what not to do. He'd never had to use his safe word in a scene yet though – he was always the one in charge, so it had never been necessary.

Tony opened Jake's fly and enjoyed the sight of the hard cock that sprang out. It wasn't the biggest or prettiest he'd seen, but he didn't care about that right now. Jake put his hand in Tony's hair and pulled his head close, thrusting his hips forward at the same time.

"Gonna fuck your mouth, boy. Gonna use you like the subby whore you are," he muttered throatily.

Tony switched off, going into his own little world. Sometimes he wondered if these tops had any idea how stupid they sounded. Real dominance came from within, but these wannabes wore it like a cloak, as if it was something you could put on and take off at will. Tony longed to meet one who actually made him feel something – and whose feet weren't made of clay.

All the movies had got it wrong, he thought, as he sucked dutifully on this stranger's cock. They sold the myth that there were tops out there who inhabited their top space effortlessly, and who knew how to make a sub really experience their own submission, but Tony had never met one. Most of them could feign it well enough for him to get off, if he let himself go with it, but not one of them had ever made him feel he was doing anything more than play at it.

Maybe he played too well. Maybe if he wasn't so good at acting it they'd be forced to really make an effort to get into his head and take him down. As it was, he usually had to take himself down.

Not that he found that too hard. He had a good sexual imagination, and he could pretend he was on his knees in front of some powerful master or stern mistress, their devoted submissive, prostrate in front of them.

Jake came in his mouth with a grunt of pleasure, and Tony swallowed down his come without tasting it.

"Good boy," Jake whispered hoarsely. "Now get your ass undressed. I wanna see what my boy looks like naked."

Tony got to his feet and obeyed, slowly. The room was dark, and if he let his eyes glaze over enough, and the alcohol he'd consumed take effect, then he could dream he was undressing for that powerful, commanding top of his fantasies.

He didn't know what that top looked like, and it wasn't important. Looks, gender – none of that mattered. What was important was that they were a top to their bones, the way that he was a sub to his. They would see into him, right into his soul, and know him for who he really was. And he would offer up every single part of himself to them, keeping nothing back. They would have his love, devotion and submission because they deserved it, because they'd earned it, and because he trusted them with this precious gift.

"You're being a romantic idiot. Remember what I told you – never trust a top, Tony!" His mother's voice resounded in his head in her sophisticated, amused tones, but that didn't stop him wanting it all the same. He wanted it so much that he ached from wanting it.

Jake sat down on the side of the bed and watched as Tony finished undressing. Tony knew that it would take Jake a while to get hard again; he figured his top for the night would spend some time playing with him, doing a scene, before fucking his ass.

Tony posed submissively, showing off his body to best effect. He slid his hand over his hard cock, milking it gently until the tip glistened with a droplet of pre-come.

"I can't come yet," he whispered silkily. "I can't come until you give me permission, sir. My body belongs to you tonight."

"That's right, boy," Jake muttered, watching Tony greedily, his tongue darting out to sweep his lips in anticipation.

Tony gave a little whimper and removed his hands from his cock. "I want to come, sir. I want it so much. But I can't until you let me."

"Yeah," Jake grunted. "You belong to me, boy. I'll say when you get to come."

They were the same old words, and Tony was practically having to feed him the lines; no wonder it was so hard to feel the truth of them. Tony turned to give Jake a full view of his ass. He wiggled his hips, planted his feet wide apart, and then slowly bent over, making sure Jake got a good look at the dark hole between his butt cheeks.

He stayed that way for a while and then slowly stood up again.

"You're a slut, boy," Jake said.

"I can be, sir," Tony replied. "Or if you prefer I can be a shy virgin. I can be whatever you want me to be."

"Shy virgin? You?" Jake looked amused.

Tony looked down, then up again through his eyelashes. "I'm scared, sir. I've never been fucked before." He feigned a little tremble. "I don't know how it'd feel to have a big, hard cock pounding in my tight little hole, sir," he whispered tremulously.

Jake blinked. "Poor little virgin boy, are you?" he whispered.

Tony grinned. He could see that he'd hit the right note here. Poor Jake-the-fake; he was a top who lacked anything by way of natural authority and needed a collar or a virgin to make him feel big and powerful.

"Yes, sir," he replied, placing his hands modestly over his cock.

"Move your hands away, boy," Jake ordered. "That belongs to me now, and I want to look at it."

"Please, sir..." Tony began.

Jake got up and finally became more than just a bystander in the scene. He came over to where Tony was standing and pulled his hands away from his cock. Then he reached down and squeezed it – hard.

Tony inhaled sharply. "Sir!" he gasped. "Nobody's ever touched me there before."

"Feels good huh?" Jake asked, grinning at him.

"Yes, sir." Tony nuzzled at Jake's jaw.

Jake began to slide his hand up and down Tony's hard cock. "Feels better than when you do it yourself, huh?" Jake asked, wetting his lips with his tongue again. Tony grinned into Jake's neck. Oh, he could play this game *so* much better.

"I wouldn't know, sir," he whispered anxiously. "I'm from a strict Lenkan sect. As soon as my orientation was known I was forbidden to touch my genitals. My hands were tied to my belt during the day and my bed at night. I even had to use the bathroom sitting down."

Lenkan submissives were taken into strict training the minute they reached puberty and tales of their sexual compliance were legendary. Tony had never yet met a top who didn't salivate at the thought of some poor, touch-deprived Lenkan sub being sexually awakened by his first dominant.

Jake was looking at him with dark-eyed lust.

"I was taught that my body belonged to the dominant who would one day claim me and must be kept pure for his use," Tony continued, watching in amusement as Jake reacted to the fantasy he was spinning. "I wasn't allowed to pollute my body by touching it. It belongs to you, sir," Tony said, lowering his head in total submission and glancing up at Jake through his eyelashes again.

He could feel Jake's cock starting to harden again, pressing into his naked skin.

"Oh...that feels so big," he whispered. "I don't think I'll be able to take it, sir. The priests said that the first time will hurt, especially if I'm claimed by a powerful, strong top such as yourself." He fluttered his eyelashes. "The kind of top who will use me brutally and show me no mercy," he spelled out, hoping that Jake was at least bright enough to catch on. "I'm so scared." Okay, so he hadn't sounded very convincing as he said that, but Jake didn't appear to notice.

"You should be scared, boy. I'm gonna fuck that tight little virgin hole until you scream," Jake told him. Then he pulled him close and kissed him hard. Tony wasn't wild about kissing his one night stands, but he endured it.

Jake groped Tony's naked bottom, slipping his fingers clumsily into Tony's hole.

Tony pushed him away. "Please don't, sir," he begged.

"Are you refusing me, boy?"

"I'm sorry, sir! Please don't punish me!"

Jake's eyes gleamed; Tony wondered if he even knew that the sub was the one inventing this entire scene. It was like leading a big, stupid bull by the nose.

"You deserve to be punished for pushing me away, you submissive slut. I'm gonna to spank your ass 'til it burns. Then I'm gonna fuck it until you beg for mercy."

Jake took hold of Tony's arm and pulled him over his knee. Tony went easily. Now **this** was what he wanted. Jake rained down spansks on Tony's upturned ass – they were firm enough and acted as a good warm up, but Tony wanted more.

"That hurts so much! Please don't use your belt!" he cried.

On cue, Jake pushed him off his knee and undid his belt. Tony pretended to try and run away, and Jake grabbed him and thrust him face down onto the bed. Tony raised his ass helpfully. Jake held him in place, one arm thrust behind his back, and then Tony felt the pleasing thwack of leather on his bare bottom.

Dana had known how to hand out a good spanking, but hers had always been accompanied by mind fucks, and sometimes Tony had come away feeling more confused than satisfied. This was a much simpler spanking. Jake wasn't a man with any finesse; he just whaled away on Tony's ass, and that was precisely what Tony wanted tonight.

Tony allowed the spanking to continue until the endorphins started to flow, and then he wriggled. "Please don't fuck me, sir. My ass is on fire!"

He threw off Jake's arm and began to crawl across the bed. Jake grabbed him and pulled him back. Tony allowed himself to be held down while he heard Jake fumble for the lube on the nightstand. Tony closed his eyes and counted to ten, trying not to struggle too hard in case he actually got away.

Eventually Jake located the lube and got some on his fingers. He spread Tony's burning ass cheeks and began lubing and stretching him, all the time muttering things like "yeah...good...tight...yeah..." which didn't take the scene anywhere very interesting.

Tony pushed back, testing Jake's strength. Jake was a big guy – tall and solid – but Tony knew that he could take him any time. He might look tough, but Tony suspected he worked a desk by day. Maybe he did something in IT. He sure as hell wasn't a match for a street smart cop who had been in his fair share of fights. *Ex-cop*, a little voice in his head whispered, and Tony felt a switch flicking in his head. He needed this to be darker, to really take him out of himself.

He pushed Jake off with total ease and turned over.

"Think you can take me?" he asked, changing the scene effortlessly. "Think you can really **dominate** me, Jake?"

Jake looked confused, but his cock was ramrod hard, poking through his open fly, so Tony guessed he wasn't thinking very clearly right now.

"Yeah," he muttered throatily. "Open your damn legs for me, boy."

"Make me," Tony taunted. He wanted to feel the power play, wanted to force this top to at least make an attempt at dominating him, rather than letting Tony call all the shots.

Jake didn't seem to sense the challenge – maybe he thought they were still playing the naïve little virgin boy game. He gave a dull kind of growl and launched himself at Tony.

He was at least nice and solid, and he seemed to find Tony's struggles arousing. Tony allowed the sensation of being pinned to take him down. If he didn't struggle too hard, he could pretend this guy really was dominating him. He closed his eyes and went to that happy place in his head, where the top of his dreams took him down, effortlessly, and Tony was helpless in his embrace. This fantasy top knew how to touch him, tease him, and torment him until Tony was a mass of quivering, submissive pleasure.

He needed to believe in that fantasy. He didn't want to have it ruined by opening his eyes and seeing Jake-the-fake pounding away on top of him, so he dislodged Jake and turned over. He got onto his knees and grabbed the headboard of the bed, pushing his ass out. He yelled as Jake pulled his butt cheeks apart and entered him, forcefully. At least here Jake's lack of finesse was a positive advantage. Tony grunted with pleasure as Jake thrust into him in a fury of frenzied lust.

Jake took his time, ramming his hard cock into Tony's hole repeatedly, and Tony flung his head back and gazed at the ceiling. Christ, this was fucked up. A one night stand in a seedy room above a seedy bar. Had it really come to this? Yet he relished each brutal thrust. He needed this. He needed to forget his whole fucked up, sorry excuse for a life.

He didn't want to think about Dana Morley and how she'd suckered him in and set him up. He didn't want to think about how his career was on the rocks and how he'd never once found a top to love and believe in. He didn't want to think about his screwed up relationship with his father, or the fact he'd have to go knocking on the old man's door looking for a handout if he couldn't find a way to pay the rent in a month's time. He didn't want to think about going to a stupid, pointless interview tomorrow for a job he knew he'd never get.

He only wanted to think about the hard cock pounding away in his hole. It helped.

He heard Jake come with a heavy, gasping cry of pleasure. Tony reached down, took his own cock in his hand, and brought himself off too. It was a little thing, but he was a sub to his bones, and he never allowed himself to come before his top; it was a courtesy he always paid them, however useless they might be.

Jake withdrew and fell down on the bed beside him. Tony sank down too, feeling utterly exhausted. Jake reached out and wrapped an arm around him. Tony considered shrugging it off, but in the end he closed his eyes and pretended it belonged to the strong, commanding fantasy top of his dreams instead.

And they both fell asleep.

~*~

Gibbs finished sanding down the part of the boat he had been working on all evening and then stepped back and admired his work. She was coming along nicely, and he felt calmer for spending some time with her.

His cell phone rang, and he answered it.

"Jethro – are you working on that boat?" Ducky – and there was a chiding tone in his voice.

"Yeah, Duck." Gibbs smoothed some sawdust from the prow with the sleeve of his sweatshirt.

"It's almost midnight."

"Uh-huh. Your point?"

"That you should go to bed, Jethro."

"My sub giving me orders?" Gibbs grinned to himself.

*"No, your *doctor* is giving you orders,"* Ducky retorted. *"You're more likely to take them from him than from your sub."*

Gibbs laughed. "You know me too well. Why the concern for my welfare, Duck?"

An exasperated sigh assaulted his eardrum. *"You really can be maddening, Jethro. Look, I know you're acting like you don't care, but losing Stan hurt – you can't deny that. You've been moping around for weeks."*

Gibbs leaned back against the boat, feeling suddenly winded. He'd liked Stan, and they'd worked well together, but it had been time for Stan to move on. He hadn't needed Gibbs or his collar anymore. Stan might have had a drinking problem when Gibbs first collared him, but he'd fought that and more than overcome it; he hadn't touched a drop of liquor in a couple of years now.

"Jethro – are you still there?"

"Yeah." He gazed at the sawdust on the hem of his sweater sleeve. "It's fine, Duck. I'm fine. Stan did the right thing."

"Doesn't mean it doesn't hurt, all the same," Ducky said softly.

"Yeah. It hurts," Gibbs acknowledged. "Just got him trained up the way I like 'em and now he's up and left and some bastard skipper on a ship somewhere will get the benefit of all my hard work, leaving me to start all over again with some green young newbie. Damn it – I'm

getting too old for this." He thumped his fist uselessly against the side of his boat.

"How are the interviews going?"

"Badly."

"Because they aren't Stan?" Ducky asked perceptively. Gibbs sighed again. *"Jethro..."* Ducky's tone was full of warning. *"I know how you hate change, but you need help. You've been run ragged for weeks, and Pacci has to return to his own team soon. You can't keep him on loan indefinitely. In my view, Director Morrow should give you more staff – you do the work of three agents all by yourself, and I've always thought that yours is a four agent team."*

"He's offered, Duck," Gibbs said ruefully. There was a moment of stunned silence.

"Only you could be so pig-headed as to refuse!" Ducky scolded.

Gibbs grinned. "Guilty as charged. I'm not against it in principle, Duck. Just don't want people slowing me down. If I come across the right recruits, I'll hire 'em. In the meantime..."

"In the meantime you have to hire a replacement for Stan at the very minimum," Ducky said sternly. *"Have you really seen no promising candidates at all, Jethro?"*

"Nope." Gibbs shrugged, thinking of the past two days he'd spent cooped up in an interview room with one bright-eyed candidate after another. They'd all had very good resumes and all had been young and eager.

"What's been the problem?"

Gibbs glanced at the boat, wondering if he was done for the night. He decided that he was and threw the sander back into the workbench drawer.

"Jethro? What has been the problem with the candidates you've interviewed so far?"

"Didn't feel right, Duck. In my gut."

He held the phone away from his ear as Ducky let loose an outpouring of very British sounding invective.

"You done?" Gibbs asked, when Ducky finally ran out of steam. "There were some words in there that even I don't know, Duck, and I'm a Marine." He grinned. "Thought I knew how to cuss in most languages under the sun!"

"You have a thing or two to learn yet, my boy, and I know you set great store by that gut of yours but these are job applicants, not murderers. All you need to do is pick the best qualified, or the one who seems the brightest."

"Gotta work with 'em, Duck. Gotta put a lot of myself into trainin' them. They have to feel right. And..." Gibbs paused. "Have to like 'em, Duck."

"You didn't like any of those you interviewed?"

"Nope. There was nothing there, y'know? Nothing to connect with – nothing that felt right in my...gut."

Ducky's sigh was heavy and audible. *"Well, I wouldn't presume to tell you how to do your job, Jethro, and I know how much you hate interviewing, but you do have to choose one of these poor unfortunates to be your next field agent."*

"Maybe."

"Jethro..."

"No, listen, Duck – I'm not gonna pick the wrong person just because they're all that's available. I'll work on my own when Pacci goes back to his team if need be. I'll do what it takes. But I'd rather work all hours by myself than take on someone who isn't gonna work out. And trust me, I'll know if they're gonna work out or not."

"Very well. I've long since stopped trying to talk sense into that thick skull of yours."

"Nah – you haven't. You keep trying." Gibbs grinned.

"You're right, old friend, I do. Tomorrow is your last day of interviewing I believe – tell me that you at least have some promising candidates lined up."

Gibbs sighed. "Not really – couple of probies fresh out of FLETC and an old pro from the FBI who looks like he'll irritate the hell out of me. Oh, and a screwed up troublemaker from Baltimore PD who moves on every couple of years and spends most of his time in the discipline room. Must have the hide of a rhino by now – and he's only a kid."

"Anyone under a forty is a kid to you. How old is he?"

"Thirty. Like I said – a kid."

"Well, I hope for your sake that at least one of them is acceptable to that gut of yours. Now, it's late, and you should go to bed. I trust you're finished with your boat for the evening?"

"Almost."

"Jethro!"

Gibbs winced at his sub's tone of voice. "Okay, Ducky. I'm almost done, and then I promise I'll go to bed."

"I suppose that'll have to do. You're not invincible you know, Jethro – and I do worry about you, my friend."

"Don't. I'm fine. But I appreciate the concern, Duck. I'll see you tomorrow."

He ended the call and put the cell phone back in his pocket. He had finished for the night, but he was ornery enough not to want to give his sub the final word on the subject, even if Ducky was a pretty unusual kind of sub. So he got out the sander he'd put away and spent another five minutes on the boat, just for the sake of his own toppy stubbornness. And then, finally, he finished up and went upstairs to his bedroom.

The resumes for the following day were on his nightstand. He recalled the conversation with Ducky and fished out the one for the screwed up kid from Baltimore. He looked through it again, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Why the hell did you agree to interview this one?" he asked himself.

He remembered that he'd almost thrown it on the 'reject' pile but something had made him stop. Maybe it was the flashes of sheer brilliance he'd seen in between all the screw-ups. Or maybe it was because he had a feeling that what he really needed on his team was a cop. Not a fresh-faced kid straight out of FLETC, and not a seasoned old hand from another agency.

He wanted someone young enough to train but old enough to have some experience under their belt. His own experience was in the military; he'd had no formal investigative training when he joined NCIS, and he was aware how long it had taken him to acquire it. He wanted someone who complemented his own skill set, and this kid ticked all the boxes. That's why he'd asked to interview him – that and a feeling in his gut. Of all the interviews tomorrow, this was the only one he was actually looking forward to.

It would be interesting, if nothing else.

~*~

Tony woke blearily, wondering where the hell he was. He felt rough hands on his ass cheeks and sighed, remembering.

"Fuck off," he grumbled into his pillow, refusing to move his legs to give his top for the night access.

"Hey – I paid for the goddamn room. Could'a had you for free in the back room like the little slut you are, but I paid. So I want more than just one fuck outta you."

"Two – I gave you a blow job."

"Fuck you. I'm hard, you're here, and I paid for the damn room. Now open your fucking

legs," Jake growled. "You're a sub, aren't you? It's what you're *for*."

Tony almost laughed out loud, but he was too tired and soul-weary to care. He considered saying his safe word, but he had a feeling his top for the night wouldn't take a safe word for an answer and then things might get ugly. It was the middle of the night, he was tired, and he wanted to sleep. And besides, Jake-the-fake was right – he *had* paid for the room, and for that reason alone Tony felt some vague sense of obligation. It wasn't as if he cared.

"Okay, but try not to wake me – shouldn't be too hard from what I remember about the size of your dick," he threw insultingly over his shoulder.

He thumped his head back down on the pillow and moved his leg so that Jake could have access to his ass. Jake grabbed his hip for leverage, pulled Tony's buttocks apart, and entered him without bothering with lube – probably as punishment for that last comment. Tony gave a little growl of annoyance. It was sore and rough, but then again he'd told Jake he wanted rough back in the bar, so he couldn't complain. He was getting what he'd asked for, and Tony wasn't the kind of sub who changed his mind and then called foul on a top.

Jake's breath was hot and irritating on the back of his neck. Tony wanted to put his fist through the man's front teeth but decided to just lie there and take it. He closed his eyes. Jake was right; he was a whore. Jake had bought him for the price of the damn room, and he'd gone along with it because he'd been so desperate to be taken down tonight.

He'd wanted to forget – no, he'd wanted to *pretend* – and it had even worked for a while. Now though, he was just left feeling dirty.

"Fucking subs – you're all the same. It's always about you, and what you fucking want. I'm the fucking top – subs like you need to learn who's boss," Jake said as he began thrusting into Tony.

"Yeah, you just keep talking yourself up, big man. Maybe one day you'll find someone who believes it," Tony snapped.

"Fucking submissive whore," Jake taunted, panting and heaving behind him. "Fucking piece of subby shit. Feel my cock up your ass, boy? I'm the one in charge here. I'm the fucking top in the room. You're just the piece of shit I'm using. Should be grateful anyone wants you. You're a worthless piece of submissive scum. This is the only use for subby whores like you."

The more he talked the more turned on he seemed to get, and the more enthusiastically he pounded into Tony's ass. Tony tuned it out. Tops were all the same. It was pointless expecting anything different; his mom had been right.

"Who's the fucking top, huh?" Jake screeched into Tony's ear as he came, deep in Tony's ass. "Who owns your ass now huh, boy?"

"Not you, that's for fucking sure," Tony muttered into his pillow.

Jake didn't appear to hear him. He withdrew, turned over, and a few seconds later Tony heard him snoring. Tony stared into space, feeling the come dripping out of his ass and down his thigh. Was this rock bottom, he wondered? Or did his sorry, fucked up excuse for a life still have some way to go before it bottomed out completely?

He closed his eyes wearily and fell asleep again.

~*~

Gibbs got into work early the next morning, in a foul mood. All these interviews were giving him a permanent headache. He knew it was a necessary evil but even so, that didn't mean he had to like it.

He threw the resume folders down on his desk and flicked through them again. The guy from the FBI was due in first and then one of the FLETC kids. The cop from Baltimore, Anthony something, was third on the list; he was due in at 10.

A shadow fell over his desk, and he glanced up and then stiffened and got to his feet.

"Good morning, sir." He nodded respectfully at Director Morrow. The director was twelve years his senior and one of the best commanding officers Gibbs had ever worked under.

"Morning, Jethro. Still ploughing your way through the unfortunate victims, I see?"

Morrow jerked his head in the direction of the resumes. Gibbs grinned at him and rubbed his chin ruefully. He liked and respected Morrow – the two of them had an excellent working relationship and were friends outside work. They often went out for a drink or meal, and Morrow occasionally asked Gibbs along to one of his card games with SecNav and various other high-powered people.

"Yeah." Gibbs winced. "I'd apologise for the complaints some of the rejects made, but..."

"You never apologise – sign of weakness. I understand." Morrow chuckled. "And on this occasion I forgive you, Jethro, seeing as how I know you're overworked, understaffed, and not a patient man at the best of times!"

"Stan's shoes are hard to fill," Gibbs said wistfully.

"Agent Burley is turning out to be an excellent agent afloat," Morrow reminded him. "And you, Jethro, need to get your head out of your ass and start building a real team here." He beckoned Gibbs forward and put a hand on his shoulder. "You're the one I have ear-marked to lead this entire division, Jethro. I want you to build us a major crimes unit that won't have Metro pissing themselves laughing every time we show up and try to take over a case. Understood?"

"Yes, sir." Gibbs nodded, proud of the trust Morrow was placing in him.

"You can do it, Jethro. I have absolute faith in you – even if Jess is convinced you're going to drive me into an early grave." He grinned.

Jessica Morrow was a kindergarten teacher, a tiny woman with a big heart and a will of iron – and it was clear that Morrow adored her. Morrow was one of those subs who flew high at work and commanded everyone's absolute respect, but Gibbs suspected he was a complete pussycat at home. What impressed him about the man was that he never responded to Gibbs as a sub to a top. It was always about the work – and Gibbs never crossed that line. He'd seen some tops try – and seen Morrow chew them up and spit them out as easy as breathing. Morrow was the kind of sub any top screwed with at their peril – and Gibbs liked that about him.

Gibbs had always had a soft spot for subs that needed rescuing, but he was equally fond of the kind of tough sub who could get in his face and go toe to toe with him if he needed it. A good commanding officer had to have that ability – and some of the very best commanding officers Gibbs had served under had been subs; subs like Morrow and his former CO in the Corps, Colonel Ryan.

"I'll try not to, Tom," he said with a rueful little smile. "Agency needs you."

"And you – but not as a one-man band, Jethro. You need a good team around you – start off by finding the right second in command; someone young and bright, someone you trust with your life and who will always have your six, and then build from there. I'll give you the resources you need – but you have to find the right people."

"I will, sir."

Gibbs felt encouraged by the conversation. Morrow was relatively new to the job, but he had big ambitions for the Agency and wanted to make it much more professional. The bad old days, when Mike Franks could make up the law as he went along according to his own sense of right and wrong, were on their way out. Gibbs had resisted at first, but he had come around when he saw how good Morrow was at his job and the exciting plans he had for the Agency. Morrow had taken the time and trouble to get to know Gibbs as a man and not just a subordinate, and he'd been at pains to communicate his vision of the agency to Gibbs. As a result, Gibbs had enormous respect for the new director; he also happened to like the man.

"Good." Morrow nodded at him and then left.

Gibbs watched him go and then picked up the resume for his first interviewee with only a little sigh. He liked the vision Morrow had outlined; his own team, with a second in command he could rely on. He'd find the right person – his gut was convinced of that.

~*~

Tony woke up with a start. There were thick drapes over the window, and he had no idea what time it was. He peered at his watch, trying to make out what it said in the gloom.

8:45. Shit! He was due in that interview in just over an hour. He slid out of the bed and grabbed his pants, berating himself for being such an idiot as to get himself into this situation.

"Story of your life, DiNozzo," he muttered, yanking on his pants and then sitting down on the side of the bed to pull on his socks and shoes. He didn't have time to go home and get changed into a more suitable outfit for a job interview. Hell, he didn't even have time to take a shower, and he must stink of sex and liquor.

He got up, zipped his fly, and then reached for his shirt.

"Hey." A hand fastened around his wrist. "Where you going, boy?" Jake asked. His hair was sticking up on end, and for a good-looking man he had an ugly leer on his face.

"Work," Tony said tersely. "It's late. Don't you have some place to be too?"

"Nope. Work shifts." Jake grinned at him. "Come back to bed. Room's paid for until noon, and I wanna get my money's worth."

"Oh, just piss off," Tony growled, looking around for his jacket.

Jake's expression darkened. "Hey, don't fucking talk to me like that," he snapped, getting up.

He had undressed at some point in the night and was naked – and, Tony noticed, his cock was half hard. He had a nicely toned body, but what Tony had wanted last night was a world away from what he wanted this morning.

Tony shouldered himself into his shirt, saw his jacket lying on the floor, and reached down to pick it up. An arm went around his waist, and he felt Jake's now very hard cock digging into his ass.

"You had a good time last night, boy," Jake crooned into Tony's ear. "I know you did. You like it rough. You want another taste of my dick in your ass."

"No, I really don't," Tony said. "It wasn't that great last night, and now I've seen your dick while stone cold sober, I can honestly say I'm not tempted."

"You playing the coy virgin again?" Jake seemed confused. He slid his hand down the front of Tony's pants and made a grab for his cock. Tony grasped Jake's hand in a steely grip before it got there.

"No, I'm really not," Tony said in a cold tone. "I'm not playing a scene with you, Jake. That

was last night, and I gave you everything you wanted, even when it did fuck all for me. Now it's morning, and I'm not your boy anymore, and I'm sure as hell not going to have sex with you again. Here, let me spell it out for you: '*Lemming*'."

Jake didn't seem to even register that, as Tony had suspected he wouldn't. Tony wondered if he even remembered that was his safe word.

"Fuck you – get your ass in the air, submissive, I want another fuck outta you," Jake growled.

Tony rarely lost his temper – whenever he got really angry his fury was always ice cold.

He turned, slowly, wondering if Jake had any idea how far he'd pushed him. Jake was about his height, and he didn't back down – he just moved a step closer, all toppy bluster without substance. Tony had the grim satisfaction of knowing that Jake didn't have a damn clue just how much danger he was in right now.

"I said my safe word, now please be polite enough to shut the fuck up," Tony told him in an even tone.

"Your safe word? What kind of a wuss are you? You need a big bad top to handle you, that it?" Jake taunted. "You want me to dominate you like I did last night? You want me to *force* you, boy?"

Tony reached out, grabbed Jake's arm, twisted it up his back, and pushed him face down onto the bed. It all happened in the space of seconds, and Jake gave a surprised little squawk at finding himself so comprehensively and easily overpowered. Tony leaned over him.

"For the record, you didn't come close to dominating me last night, Jake. I just let you think you did. Now, last night was last night, and I said I wanted it rough so I can see why you're a little confused. But this morning it's a whole new ball game, and I really have to get somewhere. So just leave me be and this can end nicely. You really won't like me when I'm angry."

He chuckled to himself and eased up the pressure on Jake's arm. "You ever watch that show as a kid, Jake? *The Incredible Hulk*? About the sub who turns big and green whenever he gets angry and nobody can top him, not even the toppest tops in the world? Used to love it." Tony eased up some more, and, finding Jake compliant, relaxed completely and released him.

Jake turned, rubbing his arm resentfully. "What kind of a freaking weirdo, are you?"

"I often ask myself that same question." Tony smiled pleasantly. He reached for his jacket again and shouldered himself into it. "Thanks, Jake – it's been a blast." He turned to go.

"Fucking little subby whore," Jake hissed behind him.

Tony paused, stiffening, his hand on the door handle. He should walk away, he really should. He was going to be late for this damn interview already, and it wasn't worth it.

He heard movement behind him and felt Jake's hand on his shoulder, spinning him around. Jake grabbed a fistful of his hair and pushed his head against the wall, brandishing the collar he'd asked Tony to wear the previous night.

"You'll wear this when I fuck you, slut," he spat. "You'll wear it and call me 'master', and I'll whip your ass good then fuck you into the mattress – and *then* I'll let you go."

He released Tony fractionally, but only to try and wrap the collar around his neck. Tony grabbed his wrist firmly, and Jake let out a startled shout of pain. Tony pushed Jake back towards the bed.

"Oh, Jake," he said, shaking his head sadly. "Jake, Jake, Jake. When are you going to learn that if you want people to take you seriously as a top, you have to really feel it? In here." He put his free hand on Jake's chest, over his heart. "You can't just say the words and expect the subs to fall at your feet – although I suspect that with your looks that's how you've got by all this time."

He reached the bed and pushed Jake down onto it. He pinned him there with one hand and slammed Jake's arm over his head with the other, pushing it effortlessly into one of the cuffs attached to the headboard. He snapped the cuff shut with a grim, satisfied smile.

Jake cursed him and began pulling on the cuff. Tony smiled and took hold of Jake's other arm. He could tell the guy wasn't used to being overpowered by the look of angry surprise on his face as Tony slowly pushed that arm over his head and into a cuff too. Tony locked it shut around Jake's wrist and then drew back and surveyed his captive with a look of appreciation.

"See, I'm not a top – never saw the appeal," he said, surveying the naked, bound man appreciatively. "But I have to admit this isn't a bad sight. You look damn good in chains, Jake."

"Fuck you, you fucking whore! Let me go!"

"Ah, sadly I can't do that." Tony did up the buttons on his shirt, which was hanging open. "But they come around and check the rooms at noon, so they'll set you free then. The wait will do you good. Allow you to cool down." He patted Jake's cheek cheerfully. "Oh...one last thing." He got out his wallet, opened it, and pulled out his last few dollar bills. "This is for the room." He threw them down onto Jake's naked body. "Hmmm, which one of us does that make the whore now, Jake?" He gave a little laugh.

Jake tugged on the cuffs frantically, looking at him as if he wanted to kill him.

Tony smiled down on him. "So long, Jake. Remember – it's not the words that make the top – it's the power behind them; and you don't have any."

He strode over to the door and left, without looking back.

He got down to the street and then realized that grand gestures were all very well, but now he didn't have enough money to pay for a cab. He glanced at his watch again and his heart sank. Was there even any point trying to get there? He was never going to make it in time and besides, there was no way in hell he was going to get this job anyway.

Then he thought of having to go to his father and ask for a handout, and he steeled himself. He might be a hopeless screw-up, but he'd turn up for this damn job interview if it was the last thing he did.

End Part One

Part Two by Xanthe

The guy from the FBI was in his mid-fifties. He was a big, pompous top with a patronizing smile. Gibbs's gut screamed its dislike the minute he walked into the interrogation room. The nice lady from HR hadn't been keen on his choice of interview venue, but Gibbs had pointed out that he was used to working in here. Besides, this way she got to watch from the observation room next door because there was no way in hell he was going to tolerate her sitting in the same room with him while he conducted the interview. Maureen might be nice, but it took a strong sub to stand up to Leroy Jethro Gibbs when he was intent on getting his own way, and she'd caved.

"Agent Gibbs – I'm Special Agent Tyler Reynolds, FBI."

Gibbs was treated to a sweaty, meaty handshake. He noticed that Reynolds had given himself his full title, but truncated Gibbs's down to basics. This told him pretty much all he needed to know about the man. He considered ending the interview there and then, but Maureen had been tearing her hair out from having to work with him for the past couple of days, and he felt a vague pang of conscience about that.

"Agent Reynolds. Any reason why you want to leave the FBI?" he asked politely.

Reynolds gave him a self-satisfied smirk, sat back in his chair, placed his hands on his large belly, and looked at Gibbs as if he was some green young sub about to benefit from the wisdom of a sage old top.

"Well, the FBI is a fine organization, but I wanted to give a less well known agency the benefit of my many years experience," he said.

Gibbs stared at him. Reynolds gave him a queasy smile and reached into the briefcase resting beside his chair.

"I've taken the liberty of reviewing some of your more recent cases, Gibbs," he said, hauling out a massive handful of folders and thumping them down on the desk. "And I think you can learn a lot from me."

"Is that so?" Gibbs smiled his most dangerous smile.

"Oh yes. I noticed several areas where you went wrong. I don't blame you of course; I don't suppose procedures at NCIS are as tight as they are at the FBI." He opened up the first file.

"You're right. They aren't. That's what allows me to do this for example." Gibbs got up, grabbed the guy by the lapels of his jacket, hauled him out of his seat, and shoved him unceremoniously towards the door.

"Hey! What the hell are you doing?"

"The FBI can't afford to lose you, Reynolds." Gibbs told him. "Good man like you. You're

probably the only thing keeping that agency afloat right now.”

He went back to the table, grabbed the folders, stuffed them into the briefcase, and slapped it against Reynolds’s chest. Maureen rushed out of the observation room making noises, swooped on Reynolds, and ushered him off down the hallway.

“Does this mean I didn't get the job?” Reynolds asked in a confused tone.

The nice lady from HR turned to look over her shoulder, shooting Gibbs a really not very nice glare. Gibbs gave a little bark of laughter and glanced at his watch. Four minutes – that was a new record. Whistling, he returned to the squad room.

Maureen scuttled over to his desk fifteen minutes later and glowered down at him.

“Agent Gibbs, may I remind you that *you* chose these candidates to interview. We did our best to source you the best possible selection.”

“Aw, pipe down, Maureen.” He grinned at her. “There's no way you’d have hired that gasbag, either. No point wasting my time, yours, *and* his by going through the motions.”

“There are ways of doing these things...” Maureen began.

He interrupted her. “My second in command we’re hiring – my way of doin’ things.” She gave a heavy sigh. “Aw – c’mon. Look on the bright side.” Gibbs grinned – and Maureen raised a suspicious eyebrow. “You stand to win Pacci's pool on the shortest interview I’d do. That one with Reynolds was four minutes.”

She glared at him some more and then her face broke into a quick grin. “I know. Nobody else bet as low as I did – then again, none of them have actually seen your interview techniques.” He laughed out loud, and she shook her head ruefully. “Next one is called Clara Rowland,” she reminded him. “I’ll call you when she arrives.”

He sighed. “Are there no good people out there?” he lamented.

“If there are, you’ll just frighten them away,” she shot back over her shoulder as she left.

~*~

Tony ran for ten minutes to get to the nearest metro station, bought a ticket, hurled himself down the escalator, and threw himself on a train just as the doors were closing. He sat down and glanced at his watch again. He was out of breath, sweaty, and there was no way he was going to get to the Navy Yard even remotely on time.

He knew he should just give up, but hell, this was the only appointment on his calendar for the next...well, forever, and he was damned if he was going to give up on it.

Besides, there was something else, something he couldn't put his finger on – a feeling, a sensation in his stomach – just *something* that insisted he get there, no matter how late he was or how messy he looked. It was like he was on a rollercoaster and couldn't get off. He *had* to attend this interview like it was a fixed moment in time – completely and utterly unavoidable.

"You really have been watching too many crappy sci-fi movies, Anthony," he muttered to himself.

~*~

"Your next interviewee is here, Agent Gibbs," Maureen informed him over the phone. Gibbs made his way to the interrogation room, and Maureen met him outside. "She seems nice!" Maureen announced brightly. Gibbs crossed his fingers behind his back and opened the door.

An exquisitely dressed submissive was sitting at the table. She had long brown hair neatly tied back in an elegant hairstyle that involved some kind of elaborate braiding. Gibbs vaguely remembered Shannon doing something similar to Kelly's hair one summer. Around her neck was a dainty pink collar decorated with little diamantes, and from that hung a huge, heart-shaped silver pendant. Gibbs tried not to recoil; everyone had different tastes, but no sub of his would ever go out wearing such an embarrassing collar.

"I'm Agent Gibbs – and you must be Clara Rowland," he said, holding out his hand. She looked at it, and then at him, and made a little simpering gesture.

"Oh, I can't shake your hand – my top doesn't allow me to have skin-on-skin physical contact with any person except her," she explained.

"Okay." He took a seat. "Might make law enforcement a bit difficult, dontcha think?"

Clara gave him a perky smile. "I got the best grades of any graduate at FLETC," she deflected admirably.

"I just bet you did," Gibbs muttered, opening the folder containing her resume.

"Oh..."

He looked up. Clara smiled apologetically.

"Is this it?" Clara asked. "Is it just going to be the two of us? Alone? In here?"

"You have a problem with that?"

"Yes, I'm afraid I do. I just assumed that there would be someone else in the room. That nice lady, Maureen, maybe? Only my top doesn't allow me to be on my own in a room with any

other top except herself unless there's another collared submissive present to act as chaperone."

"Right." Gibbs got up and walked towards the door.

"Are you going to get Maureen?" Clara asked with another perky little smile.

"Nope." Gibbs shook his head. "We're done here. Thanks for coming along, Ms. Rowland."

"But you haven't interviewed me yet!"

"I tried." Gibbs shrugged. "That nice lady, Maureen, will see you out."

The observation room door opened, and Maureen made her weary way down the hallway.

"That wasn't even three minutes!" she hissed at him as she passed by.

"Good. Gives me time to get some real work done before the next one shows up."

~*~

Tony reached the Navy Yard at 10:17 – out of breath, sweaty, and dishevelled. A nice lady called Maureen came to collect him from reception.

"You're Anthony DiNozzo?" She looked him up and down, a worried frown creasing her forehead. He was acutely aware that he was wearing his clubbing clothes and hadn't showered or shaved this morning. He didn't even want to think about the patch of dried come on the back of his thigh that he longed to scratch away.

"Yes. Sorry I'm late." He gave her his second most charming smile – no point wasting the blinding one he used on tops; submissives were much more discerning in his view. "My taxi driver got lost," he lied.

"Really?" She looked politely sceptical. "Well...come with me. This way."

She led him through a myriad of hallways and paused outside a doorway.

"Could I...would it be okay if I used the restroom?" he asked. At least that'd give him a chance to splash some water on his face and under his armpits and tidy up his hair. She glanced at her watch.

"I'm sorry – we're on a tight schedule, and you really are very late. Wait here." She opened the door to a small room with a large mirror on one wall. Tony had been in enough interrogation rooms to know exactly what kind of a room he was in. "I'll see if Agent Gibbs will still agree to interview you," she said doubtfully, glancing pointedly at her watch.

Tony sighed and took a seat opposite the mirror. Shit, he looked bad! He ran his hands through his hair trying to tease some semblance of order back into it, but there was no point. He had a day's growth of stubble on his chin, his shirt was crumpled from lying on the floor all night, and he reeked of liquor and sex.

Agent Gibbs...he knew of the guy by reputation, and he'd done some digging around when he'd first found out he had an interview here. Apparently Gibbs's last second had recently left to take up an assignment as an agent afloat – and nobody blamed him because Gibbs had the reputation of being a terrifying boss. Rumour had it that the guy was a hard-ass, one of those tops that even other tops talked of in tones of terror.

Tony grinned at himself in the mirror and smoothed his hands over his hair several times. He'd never yet met a top who scared him. Tops were all the same – they were all fakes, just like Jake. They might act the act, but underneath they all had feet of clay.

Thinking of Jake made him feel irritable about Gibbs. Just what the hell was wrong with tops anyway? He had no intention of being intimidated by the famously intimidating Agent Gibbs. There was no top in the world with the power to intimidate Tony DiNozzo. He'd play Gibbs like he'd played Jake last night; flash him a smile, appeal to his toppy instincts, and let it go from there.

Or...that woman in the bar last night had thought he was a top – he did occasionally get mistaken for a top because of the way he dressed and moved. Maybe he should pretend to be a top in this interview – perhaps Gibbs would respond better to having a beta top to his alpha. Maybe he'd be flattered if Tony let him out-top him. Could be a good game if nothing else; it wasn't as if he stood a chance of actually *getting* this job.

“Okay, Agent Gibbs – bring it on,” he told his reflection, smoothing his hair down one last time. “I'm ready for you.”

~*~

Gibbs made his way irritably from his desk to the interrogation room. He'd almost decided not to interview this loser who didn't know that the first rule of going to a job interview was that you showed up on time, but the first two had been busts, so he forced himself to go through the motions. Mainly he just liked the idea of giving this idiot a hard time for turning up so late.

“Gotta take your pleasures where you can find 'em,” he muttered to himself.

He met Maureen outside the interrogation room. She had a strange look on her face.

“Umm,” she said.

“What?” He glared at her.

“Uh...” She gave him an assessing look. “No – I think I’ll just let you find out for yourself.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Find out what?”

“I think this one might break the record,” she whispered. “I’m giving it thirty seconds, and I’m actually being generous there.”

He shot her a little grin. “That bad, huh?”

“Worse! Don’t go in there until I’m in the observation room; I want to savour every single second of this!” She gave a decidedly unprofessional little giggle and ran off up the hallway into the next door room.

Gibbs rolled his eyes and waited until she was in situ, then steeled himself and opened the door.

The man sitting at the table looked up at him, and Gibbs looked back – and his gut flipped in a way it had only done once before, many years ago, when he’d been sitting at a train station and looked up to see a beautiful young submissive called Shannon Fielding.

The two men stared at each other. Time seemed to slow down, and Gibbs felt as if he’d been robbed of the power of speech. There was an aura of electricity in the air, and he felt a shiver creep slowly down his spine.

Then the moment passed and time sped up again. Gibbs looked the kid up and down. He was a mess; there was no other way of describing it. Nobody in their right mind turned up to a job interview looking like this. He was wearing a black leather jacket over a crumpled dark green shirt – no tie – and a pair of tight-fitting black jeans that left nothing to the imagination. Jeans! Not even suit pants. His hair was a mess, he hadn’t bothered to shave and – not to put too fine a point on it – he stank. He smelled like he’d come straight from a bar, and he looked like he was dressed to seduce rather than get a job.

The kid sat back in his chair, legs open, looking insolent. The body language was world-weary and couldn’t-care-less, but the eyes...the eyes told a different story. There was a sense of desolation in them, combined with something desperately eager to please. This kid was *lost*, and Gibbs felt something old in his blood respond to that knowledge.

“Anthony DiNozzo?” Gibbs strode over to the table. The kid didn’t even get up; he just glanced at Gibbs with an insouciant grin. Gibbs found the palm of his hand itching to do something – he wasn’t sure what, but it was positively tingling.

“Yeah, that’s me,” the kid drawled.

“I’m Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs.”

The kid gave a little laugh. “Really? You’re kidding me. That’s your actual name?”

That tingling in his palm was so acute he had to rub it; had he been bitten by something?

DiNozzo offered up his own hand in a casual handshake. Gibbs clasped that strong, slender hand firmly in his own and now, damn it, he was *sure* that he'd been bitten by something. It felt like an almost visible spark flashed between the two of them; sharp, clear, electric and so powerful it hurt – but in a good way.

DiNozzo clearly felt it too, judging by the shocked expression in his green eyes. Gibbs drew his hand away wondering what the hell was going on here. He took a deep intake of breath – and scented something on DiNozzo's body that caused an involuntary growl to rise in his throat: the kid had been fucked recently and the stench of it was still on his body – and for some reason that made Gibbs feel furious.

DiNozzo looked startled by the growl. "Something wrong, Agent Gibbs?" he asked, in that same lazy drawl.

Yeah, something was very wrong – Gibbs could feel it in his gut. He just didn't know what. "You mean apart from the fact that you've wasted my valuable time by turning up for your job interview twenty minutes late, looking like you've just stepped out of a dungeon?" he snapped.

DiNozzo's eyes widened and for just a moment he looked ashamed – and then the mask was back in place, and he gave a casual shrug.

"Seventeen," he said.

Gibbs raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"Seventeen minutes late – not twenty," DiNozzo said, looking for all the world like a naughty sub desperately seeking a strong top to reel him back in before he went too far and self-destructed.

Gibbs leaned back in his chair. Most tops would have seen red and bawled the kid out for that kind of cheek, but he wasn't most tops. He followed his gut and treated each sub differently, according to what felt right.

"Think there's a sub alive who can play those games with me, son?" he asked quietly.

DiNozzo looked surprised that he hadn't yelled at him; had the kid been longing for a confrontation that much?

"How d'you know I'm a sub?" he muttered resentfully, glaring at Gibbs.

Gibbs stared at him in complete surprise and then burst out laughing. He shook his head ruefully...and then stopped as DiNozzo continued to glare at him.

"Seriously?" Gibbs raised an amused eyebrow. He always knew – he could tell just by

looking at someone what their orientation was. It surprised him that so many people had to ask or rely on visual clues. Couldn't they *feel* it? Yeah, this kid might be as surly as the most irascible top, but he was a sub through and through; Gibbs could feel it.

DiNozzo glared at him some more and then looked away. "No. Just...sometimes people get it wrong."

"Not me." Gibbs opened the kid's file and glanced at it. "You get it wrong though, son; plenty of times judging by your job record. Want to tell me about it?"

"Tell you about what?" DiNozzo asked sullenly.

"All these screw-ups. All the black marks on your file. Or maybe you get off on taking licks in a workplace punishment room in front of your co-workers. That it? You the kind of sub who enjoys that kinda thing?"

DiNozzo's eyes flashed miserably, and Gibbs almost wished he hadn't said that. He'd expected the kid to lose his temper, but, once again, he surprised him.

"No," DiNozzo said quietly. "I don't enjoy it. I hate it. I just...can't seem to stop getting into trouble. I try hard. Really hard." He glanced up at Gibbs, and Gibbs knew instinctively that he wasn't playing him; he meant it.

"So what goes wrong?" Gibbs asked, responding to the kid's obvious honesty.

DiNozzo gave him a bright, charming smile. "Guess most folk just don't appreciate my natural brilliance!" he proclaimed, suddenly changing from vulnerable submissive to arrogant smartass in an instant. It was so sudden that it almost wrong-footed Gibbs – but not quite. This boy was a challenge, but it was a challenge he didn't think he could resist. Hell, he *relished* it – he hadn't felt so alive in years.

"Natural brilliance...hmm...I can see some instances of that in your file," he said, watching as DiNozzo looked confused by his response. Once again, the kid had been expecting the slap-down, and Gibbs hadn't delivered it. "That's why I agreed to interview you."

"It is? I did wonder." Now DiNozzo looked insecure again. "I mean...I know my file doesn't look the best, but I'm hard worker."

"I can see that." Gibbs nodded.

"I can work *really* hard – in all kinds of ways. Give me the *job*, and I'll return the favour, if you get my meaning." DiNozzo had changed again and was now licking his full lower lip suggestively. Christ, the kid was like quicksilver!

Gibbs wondered what the hell Maureen was making of this, and he considered bringing the interview to an immediate halt – but something in his gut stopped him. This was a sub responding to him as a *top*, not as a future boss, and somehow he couldn't help

responding back in kind.

This might be a job interview, but it was the most sexually charged situation he could remember being in for many years. There was just something about this boy that was exhilarating. Gibbs was used to dominating subs – and most tops – easily in everyday life, and sometimes even getting a frisson of sexual energy from it, but this was different. This went deeper. This felt personal. This was a sub who needed a strong hand and was practically begging him to provide it.

"Oh, I'm sure you give great blowjobs, boy, but that won't win you *this* job," he said with a wry chuckle.

DiNozzo had the grace to look ashamed – and also a little surprised. "Works on most tops," he muttered.

"Try it on me again, and I'll throw your sorry ass straight out onto the street," Gibbs snapped.

DiNozzo stared at him and then gave a contrite nod. "Sorry. That was...that was a shitty thing to do."

Again his honesty was disarming. "Never apologise," Gibbs told him firmly. "Sign of weakness."

"Uh. Okay." DiNozzo bit on his lip, clearly trying to process the fact that subby apologies didn't work on this particular top, any more than sexual invitations.

Gibbs decided it was time to cut through all the crap. "So, you've been fired from or had to leave five different jobs in the past eight years. Tell me why I should take a chance on you, DiNozzo?"

The smartass was back again, quick as a flash. "Well, I don't know, Agent Gibbs, but I hear your last agent just shipped out, so maybe you should hire me because you're as desperate as I am right now," DiNozzo drawled.

Gibbs laughed out loud. "Oh, son," he said, shaking his head. "Nobody is as desperate as you are right now."

The sudden flash of devastating vulnerability in DiNozzo's eyes almost took his breath away.

DiNozzo looked down. There was a long silence. Then he looked up again.

"I'm loyal," he said quietly. "I'll always have your six, and I'll always do my best. I might..." he hesitated, and made a little face. "I might screw up, and I know I'll goof off, and my smart mouth always gets me into trouble. None of that is gonna change. But I...I'll never betray you...and if you don't betray me, then you won't find a more loyal second anywhere – and I mean *anywhere*. I'll work my ass off for you, Agent Gibbs, and I'll always have your six, no

matter what. Just don't...don't let me down."

Gibbs stared at him in silence. DiNozzo stared back, looking nothing like the sullen kid, sexually provocative sub, or the teasing smartass now. He just looked like...what he was, and what Gibbs had known him to be from the minute he first laid eyes on him: desperate, and so very anxious to please. Gibbs's instinct for subs who needed saving kicked in, big time, and he knew it was too late to turn back now.

"Someone has," Gibbs said quietly. "Who was it?"

DiNozzo laughed out loud, and, quick as a flash, the mask was back in place again. He glanced up at Gibbs through his eyelashes. "Oh, too many people to mention. Too many *tops* to mention, sir, starting with my own father and then a whole long line of 'em stretching right up to..." He stopped. "Never mind; it doesn't matter."

"Does to me," Gibbs said firmly.

DiNozzo shook his head. "Let's just say that I have a habit of taking one for the team, and not all those black marks on my file were deserved," he said. Then he grinned. "But plenty were. If you hire me, I won't change. I'll end up in the NCIS discipline room over and over again, same as I do anywhere I go. That's the honest truth. You shouldn't hire me, sir. I'm trouble."

"Oh, I already know that, son," Gibbs chuckled. "And don't call me 'sir' – can't stand it." DiNozzo seemed surprised – maybe all the tops he knew were flattered by the title, but Gibbs hated it. "You can call me Gibbs, or you can call me 'Boss'," Gibbs said firmly.

"Boss?" DiNozzo looked startled.

"Yeah – you're hired, DiNozzo. Oh – and for the record? No member of my team *ever* ends up in the workplace discipline room – got it?"

"Uh...okay." DiNozzo still looked startled by hearing he'd got the job.

"You finished at Baltimore PD?" Gibbs asked briskly.

"What? Um...yes..."

"Good. You can start right away then."

"Don't I have to do any training on being a federal agent first?"

"Oh, I'll give you all the training you need, son. I can't hang around waiting for you to take some class first. I want you to start now."

"Now? You mean, right now? Right this minute?"

"Yeah. You have a problem with that? See, as you so kindly pointed out, my last agent recently shipped out, so I'm short-handed and could use the help."

"Um...but...just...I'm not really dressed for..." DiNozzo gestured at his clothes.

Gibbs laughed out loud. "Yeah, and you're not dressed for a job interview, either, but you showed up looking that way anyway. You chose to wear it – you can live with it for the rest of the day 'til I say you go home."

DiNozzo nodded. "You mean it?" he asked, and Gibbs didn't miss the hopeful little glint in those lonely eyes. "You're really hiring me? I mean...why? I'm a mess. You can see that. Anyone can."

"Yeah. You are." Gibbs shrugged. "And I don't tolerate messes on my team, DiNozzo, so you'd better shape up or ship out. In the meantime, I liked what you had to say about loyalty and teamwork, so you're hired."

He got up and held out his hand. DiNozzo got to his feet too, looking almost shy. Gibbs felt his gut clench; this boy was a constant surprise to him. He'd always keep him on his toes, and Gibbs relished the challenge.

DiNozzo grasped his hand and there it was again, that spark of electricity. DiNozzo blinked and released his hand, as if he'd been stung.

"Of course, you'll live to regret it," the kid said, with a broad grin. "Probably the worst mistake you'll ever make...Boss."

Gibbs glared at him – and that tingling in his palm was back again. "You got a top, boy?" he asked.

"What?" DiNozzo frowned. "No. Not at the moment. Why?"

"Just wanted to make sure I didn't have to ask anyone's permission to do this." Gibbs reached out and slapped the back of the kid's head and the tingling in his hand went away, just like that. DiNozzo made a high-pitched squeaking sound that was incredibly satisfying and put up a hand to rub at the spot where Gibbs had just slapped.

Gibbs grinned. "Welcome to the team, DiNozzo."

~*~

Tony followed Agent Gibbs out into the hallway, his heart pounding. In fact, his heart hadn't stopped pounding since the moment Gibbs had walked into the interrogation room. He had no idea why. He'd never felt this way around a top before – in fact he didn't even know **what** exactly he was feeling. He'd never fallen for a top in his life, so it couldn't be that, but the palms of his hands were sweaty, and it felt like there was a whole swarm of

butterflies fluttering around in his stomach.

Maybe it was just the adrenaline surge of running to get here and then – by some miracle he still didn't understand – actually getting the job. None of that explained the weird spark of electricity he had felt both times he'd shaken Gibbs's hand though. That was just freaky. Maybe his clothes were covered in static from that seedy room he'd stayed in last night. He couldn't think of any other explanation.

He leaned against the wall as that nice lady from HR, Maureen, stepped out of a room and walked purposefully towards Gibbs. She smiled pleasantly at Tony, said a polite "excuse us, Mr. DiNozzo", and ushered Gibbs a few steps down the hallway.

"This one?" she asked incredulously. "I spend days with you, standing by while you chew up and spit out every single candidate under the sun, and **this** is the one you chose?"

"Yup." Gibbs shrugged.

"May I ask why?"

Tony glared at her; maybe Maureen wasn't as nice as she seemed.

"My second, my choice; and he's my choice," Gibbs said firmly.

Tony allowed his gaze to wander absently over Gibbs's body, the way he did with any good-looking top – and Gibbs sure as hell was a good-looking top. He was maybe ten or twelve years older than Tony and about the same height. He had silver hair and the most vivid, intelligent, downright scary blue eyes Tony had ever seen. His body was hard and full of a powerful dominant energy; this was a top who inhabited his top space completely, even outside of the bedroom. It was intriguing. Tony didn't think he'd ever met a top so completely and utterly **dominant** before.

Gibbs was wearing a plain black shirt over a white tee shirt and black pants and his clothes looked cheap and unimpressive. It was as if he wasn't even making an effort to be overtly toppy, but then when you carried yourself like that then you didn't need a costume to tell the world what you were; it was evident in every hard line of Gibbs's body.

"Nothing to do with the fact he's a good-looking sub who offered you sexual favours in the interview if you gave him the job?" Maureen asked quietly.

The atmosphere suddenly changed, and Tony had a sense of imminent danger – and for once it wasn't headed his way.

Gibbs's blue eyes were suddenly icy. "I like you, Maureen, so I'll pretend you didn't say that," he growled.

Maureen gazed at him thoughtfully, and then she softened. "Hey – don't get on your high horse. If something comes up, I need to have your back covered on this. I can make a note

to the effect that we discussed that aspect of the interview and agreed –”

“Do what the hell you like,” Gibbs snapped. “You know I don’t give a damn about any of that HR crap, Maureen.”

“But if DiNozzo doesn’t work out...”

“He will,” Gibbs told her firmly.

Tony felt surprised by the man’s faith in him. It wasn’t a faith he shared. Why on earth did this man – this *top* – believe in him when he’d done nothing but screw up since the minute he’d arrived? Hell, he’d been screwing up his entire life. Much as he wanted to believe that was going to change, he wasn’t exactly holding his breath.

“DiNozzo!” Gibbs jerked his head. “With me. I’m gonna show you around. Maureen – have his badge ready for me by the time I’m done.”

“Yes, Agent Gibbs,” Maureen said smartly. She shot Tony a look of frank disbelief, and he shot her back his biggest, most cheeky grin. Her eyes narrowed. Gibbs clicked his fingers, and Tony winked smugly at Maureen and then snapped to attention and ran after Gibbs. Gibbs’s hand shot out the second Tony was within range and delivered another stinging slap to the back of his head.

“Don’t,” Gibbs said.

“What?” Tony asked innocently, rubbing the sting away. Gibbs raised an eyebrow. Tony grinned. “Yes, Boss. Sorry, Boss!”

They arrived in a large, orange room. “This is your desk.” Gibbs pointed.

“Where do you sit?” Tony asked, glancing around.

“Here – diagonally opposite. So I can keep an eye on you,” Gibbs told him pointedly.

Tony didn’t have time to take in much about where he’d be working because Gibbs was striding off again. They got into an elevator and went down a few floors.

“This is Autopsy,” Gibbs told him, striding out of the elevator and through some glass doors, with Tony hard on his heels.

A diminutive older man glanced up from where he was standing, up to his elbows in a dead body. He was wearing a plain black collar that was just visible above his buttoned up shirt and bow tie.

“Jethro!” he exclaimed. “Have you finished interviewing this morning’s poor unfortunates?”

“Yup, I have, Ducky – and I’ve hired my new second. Anthony DiNozzo – meet Dr. Donald

Mallard.” Gibbs put an affectionate hand on the man’s shoulder and squeezed. Tony frowned – Mallard was clearly someone’s collared sub, and Gibbs was acting extremely casually around him.

“Your new second...you should have said...and here’s me...” Mallard peeled off his bloodied latex gloves eagerly. “Well, well, come here now, Agent DiNozzo.” He beckoned. “Let me see you!”

Mallard glanced up at Tony owlishly through his spectacles, and Tony winced. He didn’t miss the look of intense disapproval in the doctor’s eyes as he took in his appearance.

“I...uh...should probably explain about the...” Tony gestured with his hand in the direction of his clothes and mussed up hair.

Gibbs leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Yeah, go ahead, DiNozzo. Explain. This should be good.”

“Uh...I, well, I didn’t think Gibbs would actually *hire* me,” Tony said, and even to his own ears that sounded feeble. “And, you see, I went out last night and there was this...” He thought about the events of the previous night and then shook his head. “Nope. I really don’t have a good explanation,” he sighed. “Nice to meet you all the same, Dr. Mallard.” He held out his hand hopefully.

Mallard shook it, still gazing at Tony intently. “I’m very pleased to meet you, Agent DiNozzo,” he said politely.

“Please – call me Tony.” Tony shot Mallard his most dazzling smile. Gibbs snorted.

“Well, we’ll see,” Mallard said kindly. “Maybe I’ll get around to calling you Anthony one day. In time. When I’ve got to know you a little bit better and have become accustomed to having you around.” He turned back to Gibbs. “A word, Jethro, if I may?”

He took hold of Gibbs’s arm with an easy familiarity and led him a little way away. Tony leaned towards them, trying to overhear what they said.

“Jethro – I thought you told me that you wouldn’t settle for anyone who didn’t feel right!”

“Yup.” Gibbs nodded.

“Then why on earth...?”

“Does feel right.” Gibbs shrugged. “In my gut, Duck.”

“Ah – your famous gut.” Mallard put his head on one side. “And is it always right, Jethro?”

“I trust it, Duck. 100 per cent.”

“Well, I don’t presume to tell you your job, but I do hope you’re right. He’s nothing at all like Stan.”

Tony felt his stomach flip. Who the hell was *Stan*?

“Stan’s gone, Ducky – and you’re the one who told me I had to get on with replacing him. Well, I have.”

Ah, so Stan was his predecessor, the agent who had shipped out a few weeks ago. Mallard glanced over at Tony who immediately feigned an intense interest in the dead body lying on the autopsy table.

“Well you’re right about one thing, Jethro,” Mallard said, so softly that Tony had to strain to hear him.

“What’s that, Ducky?”

“He *is* a child.” Mallard chuckled. “Oh dear, first Abby, and now this young lad. How old I suddenly feel!”

Gibbs laughed. “You’ll never be old, Duck. That enquiring mind of yours keeps you forever young.” He took hold of Mallard’s head, tilted it towards him, and bestowed a fond kiss on it.

Mallard smiled up at him with clear affection, and Tony felt his stomach flip again. Was Gibbs this man’s top?

Mallard turned and walked back to Tony. He stood in front of him and gave him a warm, genuine smile. “Tony you say? That might take some getting used to, but if Gibbs thinks you’re right for the job then you are, my dear boy. Now, I insist that you call me Ducky.”

“Ducky. Okay.” Tony smiled – a relieved, honest smile this time. This man was obviously important to Gibbs, and he wanted his respect.

“I’m very pleased to see that you’re not one of those young people who faints at the sight of a cadaver in mid-autopsy,” Ducky said approvingly, glancing at the dead body on the table.

“Me? No.” Tony shook his head. “I’ve seen plenty of blood, guts and gore during my time as a cop, Ducky, and plenty of dead bodies too. One is pretty much like another.”

“Oh no!” Ducky looked shocked. “That, my dear boy, is where you are wrong – very wrong indeed. But never mind, I’m sure I’ll educate you in time.” He patted Tony’s arm reassuringly.

Gibbs gave another little jerk of his head. “C’mon, DiNozzo. There’s more to show you. See ya later, Duck.”

Ducky waved an absent hand in the air as he returned to his corpse. "So sorry to keep you waiting, Petty Officer Turner," Tony overhead him say as he left Autopsy.

"Is he talking to that dead body?" Tony whispered as he followed Gibbs into the elevator.

"What does it look like?" Gibbs replied, and Tony had no idea what that was supposed to mean, so he asked the question that had really been bothering him instead.

"Is Dr. Mallard your sub?"

Gibbs banged his hand on the elevator control panel and it lurched into motion.

"Is he?" Tony asked. "Only he's wearing a collar, and you kissed him, so..."

"So?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

"I'm just confused... 'cause you don't seem like the kind of top who'd be with someone with that kind of dynamic."

Gibbs's raised eyebrow practically disappeared into his hairline.

Tony winced. "Uh...I mean...not that I know you very well, just that you seem like an extreme kind of top, and I'd have thought you'd be with an extreme kind of sub, not someone...with blurred edges, if you understand me."

"Blurred edges?"

"Dr. Mallard is a switch," Tony stated bluntly. "I'm pretty sure of it. And I'm not usually wrong about this kind of thing. In fact, I don't think I've ever been wrong about it."

Gibbs looked at him sharply. "I'm not goin' to talk to you about Ducky's dynamic, DiNozzo – that's private – but you're right about one thing; he does wear my collar."

Tony's stomach flipped again, and he *really* wished it would stop doing that. What the hell did it matter to him if some top he'd only just met already had a collared sub?

At that moment the elevator doors opened, and Gibbs strode out. Tony followed him, scurrying to keep up. They walked into a laboratory and a beautiful young woman, with black hair worn in pigtails, let out a squeal and threw herself at Gibbs. Tony stepped back in alarm.

"Gibbs!" she exclaimed, hugging Gibbs manically. "I haven't seen you in ages!"

"I took you to lunch yesterday, Abby," Gibbs told her, pushing her back and gazing at her sternly. Tony was surprised to see that she also was wearing a plain black collar – and some pretty weird looking clothes. She was rocking a sort of Gothic tough sub look combined with

the softness of baby doll chic. It sort of worked – on her.

“You only stayed for half an hour! You said you had to do another one of those stupid interviews.” Abby pouted. “Oh! Did you finish them? Did you find someone?” Her mood changed again. “I miss Stan,” she said mournfully.

Tony was starting to hate this Stan person.

“I know.” Gibbs pulled her forward and planted a kiss on *her* forehead too. Tony felt that familiar flip in his stomach again. “But yes, I have finished the interviews – and I’d like you to meet my new second. Abigail Sciuto – this is Tony DiNozzo.” He beckoned Tony forward.

Abby looked him up and then looked him down – and then she wrinkled her nose. She looked over towards Gibbs and made some gestures with her hands, gesticulating wildly. Tony had no idea what she was saying, but it obviously wasn't complimentary.

“Are you talking about me behind my back? Or...in front of my back...or...oh you know what I mean.” Tony gestured with his own hands. “Are you *signing* about me?”

“Yes, she is, and she knows it’s rude.” Gibbs gave Abby’s ass a firm swat.

“Ow!” She glared at him, and he raised an eyebrow at her. She sighed and looked at Tony again. “Sorry...Terry,” she muttered gracelessly.

“Tony,” he corrected.

She looked up at him from sparkling, mischievous green eyes. “Tony. Let’s see how long you last here,” she said ominously.

Tony laughed out loud. Oh *this* was the kind of sub he could get along with.

“Abby,” Gibbs said warningly. She pressed a kiss to Gibbs’s cheek, but Tony could see it would take more than that to charm *this* particular top. “I’ll speak to you later,” Gibbs told her.

She grinned. “Looking forward to it, Bossman!” she said, firing off a mock salute in his direction.

Gibbs rolled his eyes and walked back towards the elevator.

“Wanna place a bet?” Tony asked in an undertone as soon as the boss was out of earshot. “About how long I last here? Twenty bucks says I’ll make it to the end of the week.”

“Oh – twenty says you won’t even make it to the end of the day,” Abby retorted.

He grinned and held out his hand. “Shake on it.” She did, and then stuck out her tongue at him.

“DiNozzo!” Gibbs bellowed from the elevator door.

“On it, Boss!” Tony gave Abby a wink and then made a run for it.

He got there and sidled in sideways just as the doors closed – Gibbs made no effort to hold the elevator for him, and Tony was starting to get a good idea of just what kind of a man his new boss was.

“So...Abby wears your collar too, huh?” Tony said.

“Yup.”

“Is it obligatory? Everyone on your team has to wear your collar?” Tony asked.

Gibbs turned to give him a hard glare. “Nope.”

“Right. Good. ‘Cause I’ve never worn any top’s collar in my life, not even for the hell of it, and I’m not going to start now,” Tony said defiantly.

“Wasn’t offering,” Gibbs snapped.

“Just saying.”

They were silent for a moment.

“So this Stan person – did he...?” Tony began. Gibbs raised an eyebrow. Tony took his life into his hands: “Did he wear your collar too?”

“Yup.”

“Right.” Tony stared at the numbers above the elevator door for a moment and then risked glancing at Gibbs again. “So what’s the deal, Gibbs? D’you have some kind of weird collaring fetish or what?”

The hand was so fast he barely saw it. Next thing he knew it had connected firmly with the back of his head.

“Ow!” He put up a hand and rubbed.

“You ask too many questions, DiNozzo,” Gibbs told him cheerfully. The elevator door opened, and Gibbs strode out into yet another hallway. Tony followed on behind, still rubbing his head.

“Damn it, I’m gonna get brain damage working here,” he muttered, loud enough to be overheard by his new boss. He saw the little grin creasing at the corners of Gibbs’s mouth and felt a sudden surge of warmth inside. He could end up craving the sight of that smile –

especially if he'd been the cause of it.

"This is the gym," Gibbs said, striding through a large room with exercise mats and a boxing ring.

Nobody was in there – Tony supposed it was the wrong time of day for anyone to be using it.

"And this..." Gibbs pushed open a door, "is the subs' locker room."

He put a hand on Tony's neck and propelled him into the empty room. "And over here..." he pushed Tony over to one side, "are the showers. And you are going to take one."

He picked up a clean towel from a pile in the corner and threw it at Tony. Tony stared at him.

"You have ten minutes and then I want you back in the squad room," Gibbs ordered. Tony stared at him some more. "And don't ever come to work stinking of the top who fucked you the night before again, DiNozzo. I find it..." Gibbs paused, his hands curling into tight fists at his side. He looked as if he was trying to find the right word. "Irritating," he said eventually.

"Right," Tony said softly. "Understood." He wasn't sure why Gibbs was so mad exactly, but he was embarrassed enough about turning up to the interview looking like this to understand the sentiment, even if not the reason behind it.

"Good. Let's call it rule number 24, shall we?" Gibbs said.

Tony frowned. "What? I mean...uh, okay, but...there are rules?"

Gibbs nodded firmly. "Oh yeah, DiNozzo. There are rules – my rules – and you'll learn them and learn them well."

"What are the previous 23 rules?"

"You'll find out when you break 'em." Gibbs turned to go.

"Hey!" Tony called him back. "Sure you don't wanna stay and watch?" Tony jerked his head in the direction of the shower and gave a little wink.

Gibbs rolled his eyes. "You already got the job, DiNozzo."

"Oh, I know." Tony grinned. "I just like to flirt."

"Ya think, DiNozzo?" Gibbs shook his head ruefully.

"You'll get used to it," Tony said cheerfully. Then his smile faded. "There is one more thing," he said. Gibbs raised an eyebrow. "You didn't show me the workplace discipline room on

your tour, and I'll need to know where that is, trust me."

Gibbs's hand was as fast as it had been all morning – and it connected with the back of his head with a resounding thunk.

"Ow! Damn it...am I never gonna see one of those coming?" Tony rubbed his head again.

"I told you in your interview – nobody on my team ever ends up in a workplace discipline room," Gibbs said firmly.

"You can say it all you like, but that doesn't change the reality of what's likely to happen," Tony shot back.

Gibbs moved in close, so close their bodies were almost touching. Tony found himself looking into a pair of forceful blue eyes. "You'll listen to me, you'll learn from me, and you'll obey my rules – and you will *not* go ass up in the discipline room in front of your co-workers."

Gibbs made a tiny gesture of distaste with his jaw, and Tony got the distinct impression that this particular top didn't approve of workplace discipline rooms – which was weird, because he sure as hell seemed to approve of workplace *discipline*, judging by the way he kept handing out the head-slaps.

"You have some kind of moral objection to workplace discipline rooms?" Tony asked.

Gibbs shook his head. "I don't care one way or the other – but I *do* care about the people on my team, and I'd be doing my job wrong if you ended up taking public licks."

"You hand them out privately – that it? Bet that seemingly nice but actually quite mean lady in HR doesn't approve of that," Tony said, studying the man. He was intrigued by Gibbs; he'd never met a top like him.

"No, I don't hand 'em out privately – not to anyone other than my collared subs at least," Gibbs told him. "Now – are we done?"

"Nope." Tony grinned. Gibbs raised a dangerous eyebrow. "The head-slaps – are they just some 'first day on the job' type thing you always do with new people, or are you going to be handing them out a lot?" Tony asked.

"No idea." Gibbs shrugged. Now it was Tony's turn to raise an eyebrow. "Never head-slapped anyone before; it's new. Just felt right, dealing with you, DiNozzo." Gibbs grinned. "So yeah – I think they're here to stay."

"Right. Fine. Just so I know." Tony glanced at him through his eyelashes and Gibbs glanced back. Then they both gave conspiratorial little grins, and Tony felt happier than he'd done in a long time.

Gibbs turned away. "Ten minutes, DiNozzo, and then I want you at your desk and ready to work."

End Of Part Two

Part Three by Xanthe

It was late by the time Gibbs got home. He'd kept the new kid hard at it and had only let him go when he was sure that DiNozzo had learned the basics. Gibbs had covered the finer points of filing by leaving a stack of it on DiNozzo's desk and not letting him have lunch until he'd completed it to his satisfaction. Then he'd given him two hours to read the NCIS handbook from cover to cover, after which he'd fired off a series of test questions. The penalty for a wrong answer was a head-slap, and once he realized that DiNozzo proved to be a quick study. He was clearly quick at thinking on his feet and just as quick at making smart-assed replies – to his cost at times, but much to Gibbs's amusement.

Gibbs suspected his new recruit was nursing a bad headache after his first day at work, but the kid had also looked a hundred times happier when he'd left the building than when he'd arrived.

Gibbs couldn't remember the last time he'd had such a satisfying day at work himself. He whistled to himself as he found some leftover take out in the fridge and heated it up. He wasn't sure why he was in such a good mood – he just knew that for the first time in a long time he felt cheerful. His gut also seemed pretty happy with the decision he'd taken to hire Tony DiNozzo. The kid was clearly trouble, and Gibbs was sure the way ahead would be rocky at times, but it felt right despite that.

He went upstairs to his bedroom and changed into a pair of sweats ready to spend the evening working on his boat. However, for some reason he hesitated before going back downstairs, and he found himself glancing in the direction of his nightstand instead.

He sat down on the side of the bed and opened his nightstand drawer. Inside was a little black box, and he took it out and held it for a moment. He hadn't gotten this box out in a long time, and he had no idea why he was getting it out now. Then he recalled how his gut had flipped when he'd first met DiNozzo, reminding him of...the first time he'd met a beautiful young submissive called Shannon Fielding.

Gibbs closed his eyes. He had seen her before, in the clothes store near his fathers' shop back in Stillwater. She'd been dressing one of the shop window models, and he'd been drawn to her.

Then he'd seen her again, when he'd got into a stupid fight with a couple of other tops. He often gotten into fights with other tops back then. They took exception to his extremely topmy way of moving and talking. They viewed him as a challenge, perhaps because they thought he was the kind of top who would take their subs away from them – if they had any. Neither of those two boneheads he'd been fighting back then even had a sub, but they'd picked a fight with him all the same.

He'd been too much of a hothead back then, before the Corps, to know how to walk away from trouble. Hell, he'd embraced trouble! He found it easier to talk with his fists. He'd lost count of the number of whippings he'd taken, both at school and from one of his fathers, because he couldn't keep his temper or back down from a fight. He'd learned though,

eventually, the hard way. The Corps was good at teaching those kinds of lessons.

Gibbs remembered how he'd fought those two tops, taken a few punches in the process, and then stormed off...brushing past a beautiful, red-haired sub as she came over to see what the commotion was all about. His entire body had tingled as he walked past her. Then a few days later he'd been waiting to catch a train and looked up to find her standing there, looking down on him.

"What were you and those tops fighting about?" she asked.

He wasn't sure words would actually come out of his mouth for him to make a coherent reply. "I don't even remember," he said at last, feeling like an idiot. He'd felt overwhelmed around some subs before, but never like this. His throat was dry and the palms of his hands were sweating.

"You should stop," she advised. His fathers and his school principal had been telling him the same thing for years, and he never took any notice, but when she said it somehow it made sense. He didn't know how to tell her that though, so he said nothing.

"Are you waiting for the train too?" she asked.

He nodded. "We could sit together?" he ventured shyly.

"I don't know...it's a long ride." But she had. She'd sat with him the entire way, and they'd talked. He'd never been that great at talking to anyone before but talking was easy with Shannon.

He'd known instinctively that somehow his dynamic and hers fit together. She was tough and feisty; she'd call him on any crap and make him into the top he had the potential to be. As he talked to her, all he could think about was how beautiful it would be to hold her in his arms and find the submission inside her. He could take her there, to that beautiful place, he was sure of it. He longed to be the top who did that for her. He wanted to be the one who took her down and gave her that part of herself. And in the process he'd open up a part of his own self, one he'd never shared with anyone.

She seemed to like what she saw of him, and by the time their train journey together ended he'd been bold enough to slide his hand around her wrist and hold it gently captive. And she'd let him. She'd even smiled at him.

There had been obstacles; ones he hadn't foreseen. Shannon came from a well-to-do family, and she had an over-protective dominant mother; very over-protective and very dominant. Joanne Fielding had made his life difficult from the start. The minute she first set eyes on him her lips had thinned, and she'd responded to him as so many tops did – as a threat.

"Oh, now I understand what all the fuss is about," she said, glaring at him as he stood there in his Marine uniform, trying his best to look like the kind of responsible top any parent would be glad their child had brought home. "Now I can see why you turned her head. Well,

let me tell you something, boy – my daughter is talented. She's going to be a fashion designer. She's not going to get trapped into taking the collar of some penniless shopkeeper's son from a place like Backwater." He knew she'd got the name wrong on purpose. "If you think a *soldier* is good enough for my beautiful girl, then you have another think coming."

Gibbs stared her down. "It's Stillwater," he growled. "And I'm a Marine, Ma'am, not a *soldier*. I also take a lot of pride in where I was born, who my parents are, and who I am."

Joanne didn't take kindly to being answered back, but she did at least recognize a formidable opponent when she saw one.

"I can't stop my daughter seeing you – Shannon is far too headstrong for that. But if you lay a finger on her before she's collared, then I swear it'll be the last thing you do."

"I wouldn't touch any sub I hadn't collared!" Gibbs flung back, and that was true. He'd had some sexual play at high school, but he'd never truly dominated or had full sex with anyone. He wasn't the kind of top who slept with a sub unless he'd collared them; he was old-fashioned that way.

Gibbs opened up the little box and looked at the collar inside. Things had been different in those days, but the world had changed. Now you could buy a hooker for the night for the price of a collar. He'd seen them on street corners; world-weary subs twirling collars on their fingers, leaning in to car windows and offering to submit to any top who wanted them – for a price. It was the same for tops – he saw them hawking themselves too, offering their particular skill with a whip or whatever in exchange for cash from some wealthy sub who wanted their domination on their terms and to order. It always made his stomach clench. He had such an instinctive feeling for how important sexual dynamic was – he hated seeing people so far gone that they didn't understand what a true connection between a dominant and submissive should be.

He was reminded, with a jolt, of DiNozzo giving him that defiant look in the elevator earlier, as he told him he'd never worn a top's collar in his life. That clearly didn't stop him sleeping around, but Gibbs had felt a surge of respect for the sub as he said that. DiNozzo seemed to attach the same significance to collars that Gibbs did, and he liked that about his new recruit.

Gibbs took Shannon's collar out of the box and allowed it to slip through his fingers. He had saved and saved to be able to afford something this beautiful. Joanne's disdain of his lowly origins had stung – and he'd worked as hard as he could to be worthy of Shannon. They'd dated for three years before he'd been in a position to offer her his collar. Three years of kissing, and petting, and wanting so much to take her in his arms and truly explore her.

"Three years of very cold showers," he muttered to himself as he looked at the collar in his hand.

The night he'd finally collared her had been a cold one. Snow had been falling all evening,

but she'd travelled up from college to meet him anyway. They'd had dinner, and she'd talked about her forthcoming graduation. Joanne had been right about one thing – Shannon was definitely talented. Plenty of people were interested in offering her all kinds of glamorous jobs.

Sometimes he wondered why she stayed with him when she had so many wealthy, good looking, exotic tops forever asking her out. Yet she never gave him any reason to be jealous. Her dynamic and his – they just fit together; they both knew that, even before they slept together. They were both virgins, both wanting it to be *right* when they finally came together, and both of them knowing that would only happen when Shannon was wearing his collar.

The snow had prevented her from going home that night, so he'd taken her back to his small, cold apartment. He'd made some coffee and brought it over to where she was sitting on a cushion in front of the small gas heater, trying to get warm.

He had no idea if she'd accept his collar. Maybe now that she was so close to graduating she'd change her mind. Maybe now wasn't the right time. Maybe he should wait. But he couldn't wait; he wanted her so much, and hadn't he waited for long enough to be sure that this was right for both of them? He wanted her to be *his*, for everyone to see. He wanted the entire world to know that this feisty, gorgeous, intelligent, talented sub had allowed *him* to collar her. He knew his heart would burst with pride if she thought he was worthy of her submission.

He sat down beside her in front of the heater and handed her the mug of coffee.

"No chance of you getting home in this weather," he said, gesturing with his head at the window. "Might be snowed in for days."

"I'll tell my mom you slept on the floor and allowed me to have the bed, like the gentleman you are!" She laughed.

"Doesn't have to be that way," he said softly.

She looked up, a surprised expression in her eyes. "Jethro, I know you've been patient, but I'm not the kind of sub who..."

"I know," he interrupted her. "And I'm not the kind of top who'd ask. No...see, I was thinking...I..."

He never had been good with words. He decided to show her instead. He reached into his pocket and drew out the black box, then handed it to her wordlessly. She took it, looking puzzled.

"You bought me a gift?" she asked, laughing a little.

He shook his head.

Frowning, she opened up the box and gazed at the elegant golden collar inside it. It was customary for a young sub to wear their top's collar for a few months, with the expectation that marriage would follow. The collaring time was supposed to help them see if their dynamics were compatible.

Gibbs didn't have a lot of time for all the rituals and customs. For him, the collar was the important thing. He fully expected to marry Shannon in due course, making vows in front of their friends and family, but the collaring was the important part – and that was a private matter, between him and her. Nothing to do with his folks or hers. It was just for the two of them; a dominant and the submissive he'd been courting for so long.

Would she allow him to place a collar around her beautiful neck? Was he good enough? Was he, Leroy Jethro Gibbs, *top* enough to collar and keep a sub? Or was he just fooling himself? He wasn't sure as he watched the expressions flit across her face. He couldn't tell what she was thinking. If she turned him down, he knew there was no coming back. If she turned him down it would mean that she saw no future in their relationship, and it would come to an inevitable and swift end. Tonight. He would win her or lose her this very night.

Shannon looked at him, her eyes shining. He reached out and stroked a gentle finger over her neck.

"Will you do me the honour of allowing me to collar you, Shannon?" he asked softly. "I wouldn't ask you to give up your career – you know that. But I'm gonna be posted to California soon...and I want to take you with me, as my collared submissive. Look, Shannon – Paris, Milan – all that your mom wanted you to have – I can't give you that. I can only give you this." He nodded his head at the box she was holding. Now that he said it out loud, it didn't sound nearly good enough compensation for what she'd lose, and he steeled himself for her inevitable rejection.

She slipped her fingers into the box and took out the collar. "It's beautiful. How on earth could you afford something like this?"

"Doin' without," he muttered bashfully, remembering all the missed meals and patched up clothes; the freezing winters when he refused to turn on the gas heater; and all the extra jobs he'd managed to fit in wherever he could around his Marine Corps duties.

She gazed at him, her eyes clear and bright. "Yes. Of course. That's so you." She looked back at the collar and saw the engraving on it for the first time. She held it up close to read it and her mouth formed a silent "oh". She looked at him again. " *Soul meets soul on lover's lips?*"

"Did I get it right?" he asked anxiously. "I'm not good with all that poetry stuff you like so much, but that quote felt right, in my gut."

"It's my favourite," she said softly. "And it's perfect, Jethro."

Even so, he knew she wouldn't accept his collar out of sentiment. If she saw no future for

them, she'd tell him so. She got up onto her knees and took hold of his hand. She placed the collar on his palm and closed his fingers loosely around it. So that was it. She was returning it to him. She didn't want it. He gazed sightlessly at the golden collar in the palm of his hand, gleaming through his half-closed fingers.

"Jethro."

He looked up, to find her gathering her long red hair in her hands and pulling it away from her neck.

"The honour would be all mine," she said softly, offering her neck to him.

Gibbs snapped the box shut. Why was he thinking about this now, for God's sake? It had been years ago. He gazed down on the box in his hands, remembering Shannon's bright green eyes – and saw Tony DiNozzo's instead; a different shade of green but just as vivid. Why had he reacted so strongly to DiNozzo when he first met him? And why had meeting him reminded him so much of Shannon? Tony was nothing like Shannon. Tony was reckless, dangerous and damaged. He was a lost soul, and Shannon had been stable, grounded, and sensible.

Then Gibbs realized what it was they shared; it was that sense of mischief twinkling in their eyes and the ability to make him laugh, despite himself. Even when he was in his toppest head-space, Shannon could coax a smile from him. It was the same with Tony. Despite knowing him for less than a day, Gibbs was aware that he simply liked being around Tony.

Was it possible there could be something between him and Tony? The spark had certainly been there, but was he seriously thinking what it would be like to take that boy to his bed and find the submissive inside him? Tony wouldn't be an easy conquest, Gibbs was sure of that. He had a wall around his heart that would be hard to penetrate. Gibbs longed to peel away the layers and find the sweet submission inside. That was another thing Tony shared with Shannon – an essential sweetness – and she, like him, had always been so very eager to please.

Gibbs allowed himself to wonder what it would feel like to take hold of that boy and kiss him. To take him in his arms, take him right down, and find what was inside. The top in him was intrigued by the thought of such a conquest; it made his blood surge.

At that moment his phone rang – not his cell, but the house phone. He picked up the handset on the nightstand and answered it.

"You lousy, good for nothing shit," a familiar voice slurred at him.

He sighed. *"Joanne, you're drunk."*

"Yeah, and you're a bastard, but at least tomorrow I'll be sober." She laughed at her own joke.

He could have put the handset down. He knew he should, but he never did, whenever she called him this way, drunk and abusive. He could hear the pain in her voice, and he understood it all too well. Joanne's submissive had walked out on her when Shannon was just a baby, and Joanne had raised Shannon alone. He and Joanne were the only ones in the world who understood what it had been like to love Shannon. They might never have seen eye to eye, but they knew each other's pain.

"You know what today is, Jethro?" Joanne asked.

It was always a day, an anniversary of some kind, whenever she rang in a drunken stupor like this. He preferred not to notice the special days, but she seemed obsessed by them, living her life from one significant date to another: Shannon's and Kelly's birthdays; the date he'd married Shannon; the date she'd graduated...and the date her daughter and granddaughter had both died. Joanne remembered them all and lived through a special kind of pain on each and every one.

"Don't do this, Joanne," he told her gently.

"It's the day my baby first met you! The day you bewitched her and took her from me! I will hate this day forever," she raged.

Gibbs thought back – it wasn't the day he and Shannon had first laid eyes on each other, but it was, he realized, the anniversary of that day on the train station when they'd first talked. Strange that he should meet Tony twenty-five years to the day after he first met Shannon.

"She was my baby!" Joanne wailed down the phone at him. *"She was my baby, Jethro, and you took her away, and she died..."* Her voice rose in pitch and turned into a long, sad wail. *"If she'd never met you, she wouldn't have died. She'd have had the life I wanted for her..."*

"She had the life she wanted for herself, Joanne," he said tiredly. "I didn't know." How could he have known what would happen? How could he have known how it would all end? How could he have known that when he'd first offered her his collar on that snowy night all those years ago?

"You're not sorry." Joanne's voice turned hard and bitter. *"After she died you just moved on and found yourself another sub. When my sub left me, I never replaced her. I loved her too much – but you, you selfish bastard, you just kept on ruining lives. First one marriage, then another, and then another...how many subs' lives have you ruined, Jethro?"*

He stared down at the box in his hands. She was right about that. After Shannon's death he'd been in such a dark place. He'd been so numb, he couldn't feel anything. Even his usual sure instincts as a top had deserted him.

He'd married subs who reminded him of Shannon; red haired women whom he could pretend were her, even though they were nothing like her. Their dynamics hadn't remotely fitted with his, but just as long as he could see red hair and touch warm, pale breasts, he'd been able to fool himself.

It couldn't last though. He'd barely been in any of those relationships, and Joanne was right; he'd hurt those subs by collaring and marrying them. There had been three, in quick succession, before he'd finally woken up to himself and the damage he was doing. He could still remember the expression in his last wife's eyes as she walked away from him. Stephanie had been a good person, but he'd never really loved her, and she knew it. Seeing that expression in Stephanie's eyes had been his wake-up call, a warning of what he was in danger of turning into, and it had been the kick up the ass he needed.

He still felt ashamed of himself. He had always been so protective of the subs in his life – he loved to take care of them and keep them safe. It shocked him to think that he'd hurt his three subsequent spouses so badly as a result of his own grief and pain.

"I didn't mean to ruin anyone's life, Joanne," he said wearily.

"Yes, but you did. First Shannon, then those poor, stupid subs you married, and me! You ruined my life too, Jethro. I'll never forgive you...she was my baby. My baby!" Her words were almost incoherent now, which meant she was close to passing out.

"You go lie down now, Joanne," he told her. "Just sleep it off."

"I hate you," she whispered.

"I know and that's fine. You need someone to hate."

"I loved them. I loved those beautiful girls so much." Her voice was ravaged by grief.

"I know, Joanne. Me too."

For all that they had locked horns during Shannon's lifetime, they had always had a grudging respect for each other, and he had grown to love her over time for her devotion to her daughter and grand-daughter. She had softened towards him too, recognising in him someone who loved Shannon and Kelly with the same fierce, protective passion as herself. Even now, despite the savagery of her recriminations, he still felt an underlying fondness for her that he knew was reciprocated. This was just the liquor talking, as always.

"Go to bed now. Close your eyes. Go to sleep, Joanne," he said softly.

He hung up, reached for his cell phone, and put in a call to Joanne's neighbour. They'd done this many times before; she had a key and would go in there and make sure that Joanne was okay. Gibbs wondered how Joanne never noticed the meek little submissive who lived in the apartment below and clearly worshipped the ground she walked on. Then again, Joanne was too wrapped up in her grief to notice much at all. And maybe she was right in not wanting to get involved with another submissive. At least she wasn't hurting anyone but herself by being unable to let go of the past – unlike him.

He finished his call and then put the box containing Shannon's collar back in the drawer. He

had done her memory a disservice by refusing to embrace the full extent of his grief. Until he did, he could never find the room in his heart to truly love another submissive.

He was a man of extremes, he knew that. He felt passionately and deeply, and his heart had been broken when his wife and child had been killed. He didn't view himself as a coward, but he had been, in a way, hiding behind his new subs instead of accepting that the one he really wanted was lost to him forever.

She was gone. She wouldn't be coming back, and he had to come to terms with that. He couldn't go around screwing up other subs' lives because he wouldn't face up to that truth.

And Tony DiNozzo's life had been screwed up enough. The last thing that poor kid needed was Gibbs coming along and damaging him even more.

That really would be unforgivable.

~*~

Tony got up early for his second day in his new job. He took a long, hot shower, made sure his hair was clean and nicely styled, and then opened his closet and considered what to wear. He wasn't sure if jeans were acceptable office wear; they had been at Baltimore PD, but turning up in his tight clubbing jeans for an interview had clearly been a bad idea. He had more everyday jeans, but he wasn't sure that would strike the right note after yesterday. And God knows, after such a terrible first impression he had some ground to make up where his personal appearance was concerned.

Finally, he decided to go the whole way and be damned. He reached for his finest three piece suit in shiny grey, his most expensive shirt, and his purple and grey silk tie. He'd make them forget about yesterday if it was the last thing he did.

He breezed into the office half an hour early and settled at his desk to continue the work Gibbs had given him the night before. The boss arrived ten minutes later, took one look at him, and grunted.

"Goin' somewhere fancy, DiNozzo?"

"Just here, Boss!" Tony gave a bright grin.

"Y'know, I think you might be the death of me," Gibbs said, shaking his head ruefully as he looked Tony up and down.

"I hope not, Boss," Tony said, alarmed.

Gibbs gave a little chuckle and went over to his own desk. Tony grinned – he had made the boss smile! It was such a good feeling.

He worked for an hour and then made an excuse to leave his desk so that he could sidle down to Abby's lab. He had some unfinished business with that subby little minx!

He strode out of the elevator and was about to walk into the forensics lab when he overheard her talking on her cell phone. He leaned against the door, arms crossed over his chest, listening.

"Fine. No...that's fine. Whatever," she said, in a grouchy tone. "No, it doesn't matter. No, I said it's fine." She slammed the cell phone shut.

"Bad news?" he asked, and she twirled around in surprise. He grinned at her, and her eyes narrowed in response.

"What are you doing here?" she said in an annoyed tone.

"Came to collect my twenty bucks, because, as you can see, I'm still on the payroll." He gave an even bigger grin.

"Really? That's just so hinky." She glared at him but reached into her purse anyway.

"Why don't we make it a rolling bet?" he suggested, walking over to her work station. "If I'm still here at the end of the week, you owe me forty. If I'm not, you get to keep your twenty and take one of mine."

She stared at him. "Okay," she said at last. "But there's no way you'll still be here then. I'm amazed Gibbs tolerated having you around all of yesterday. The bossman doesn't suffer fools gladly."

"Ouch." Tony winced. "You think I'm a fool, Abigail?"

"If the shoe fits..." She gave him a sweet little grin.

"Oh...I like you!" he announced happily.

"Well I don't like you!"

"Aw, you're just freaked out because you recognize a kindred spirit when you see one"

"WHAT?" She looked like she was about to explode. "You and I are nothing alike!"

"Yeah, we are. We both like mischief," he told her with a wink. He poked around at some of the interesting devices on her work station, and she slapped his fingers away.

"Mischief's one thing, but you – you're *naughty*," she said, accurately. "And you're trouble. And you're the kind of sub who leads other subs astray and before they know it they're ass up over their top's knees taking a spanking, and I do NOT like being spanked!"

"Really? I do. Well, I do if the top's hot." Tony grinned. "So what *do* you like, Ms. Sciuto, if spanking's not your thing?" He glanced at her, taking in the tight belt, the big black boots, and the trailing silver chains around her hips. "Bondage?" he asked, with a raised eyebrow. She glared at him. "Ropes, chains, that kind of thing? Being tied down, nice and tight, struggling to get free but hoping you can't?" He leaned in and whispered in her ear. "Being at the mercy of some big, bad top who can play with helpless little you to their heart's content without you being able to do a thing about it?"

She let out a little moan, and he knew he'd got her dynamic figured out; he was usually pretty good at that.

"Hmm, surprising." He rocked back on his heels.

"What's surprising?" She snapped back into reality and gave him another hearty glare.

"Just can't see Gibbs being all that into bondage. He'd expect a sub to submit without having to tie them up to make it happen. He'd insist they submit just because he said so – no ropes required. Not that I've got his dynamic completely figured out yet – which is strange because usually it doesn't take me this long – but I've never met anyone who maintains this level of toppiness outside of the bedroom. It's intriguing."

"You are just *nosy*," she accused.

"I am, yes," he admitted cheerfully, with a smug smile.

"I hate you!" she fumed.

"I know. Why *is* that? I mean, I know I made a bad first impression yesterday, but hey, I'm fun! And you like fun. You're definitely a kindred spirit, like I said. So you *should* like me." He frowned. "Is it my dress sense?"

She looked him up and down and snorted. "Well, at least you don't look like you came straight from some top's bed today."

"That's fair comment," he sighed, wincing at the memory of that night spent with Jake-the-fake. "Is it because of Stan?" he asked.

She went quiet and gazed moodily at her computer screen.

"Ah. That's it. What was so special about Stan? Did you and he make out for Gibbs? Is that how it works, the multiple collaring thing? Do you all share a bed together, or does Gibbs take you home one at a time to fuck you?"

She slapped him. Hard. Across the cheek.

"Ow. I did not see that coming," he mused, rubbing his cheek to massage out the sting.

"It's none of your business! And Stan was a dear, sweet, gentle soul who would never ask such personal questions!"

"Sweet? Gentle?" Tony frowned. "How on earth did he survive all that time with Gibbs then?"

"Shut up and go away."

"Aw. Look, it's just my way. I talk about sex a lot! I can't help myself." Tony gave her his most charming smile. "Forgive me?" he wheedled.

"No. Now leave."

"I just want to be friends." He spread his arms helplessly.

She drew herself up to her full height – which was really pretty tall. "You and I will never, ever be friends," she told him confidently.

"Wanna bet on that?" He winked – and then he ducked just in case she was in the mood to hand out more slaps.

She raised her hand threateningly. "Go!"

"I can't believe how often I get slapped working here," he mused ruefully.

"I can't believe you're not used to it," she retorted.

"I'm really not. Now, discipline, yeah. I've lost count of the number of times I've been sent to various workplace discipline rooms to take licks – which, incidentally, I do not enjoy. But slapping? Not so much."

"Maybe they fire you instead? I hear you never stay anywhere very long."

That barb hit home. He felt his good mood evaporate as he remembered the circumstances of leaving his last job. He hunched his shoulders. "Yeah. Well. Whatever."

She didn't crow at him for having found a weakness – instead she looked puzzled and even a little bit sorry for him. At that moment her cell phone rang, and she picked it up eagerly.

"Gibbs? Yes. Okay. I'll tell him." She ended the call and shot Tony a triumphant look.

"Bossman says if you're not upstairs in two minutes you're fired."

Tony gave a theatrical grimace. "How did he know I was here?"

Abby grinned. "Oh, didn't you know? The bossman knows *everything*. You will never have another secret in your life, ever again. Be afraid, DiNozzo – be very afraid."

"You're enjoying this." He made a run for the door, aware that the seconds were ticking.

"Don't hurry!" she called after him. "I'm looking forward to collecting my twenty bucks!"

Tony made it upstairs in record quick time – deciding to take the stairs instead of the elevator just in case. He got to the squad room just in time to see Gibbs sweeping past him.

"Nice of you to join me, DiNozzo. Get your gear. Oh – and in future, I'll let you know when you can take a break."

"You will?" Tony grabbed his gun and badge and trotted along after his boss.

Gibbs got into the elevator, and Tony trailed in behind him. Gibbs slapped the back of his head. "Yes. So next time ask. Don't sneak off and think I won't notice because I *always* notice."

"Yes, Boss. Thank you, Boss," Tony sighed. "I guess I'm just gonna have to get used to being slapped all the time around here."

Gibbs glanced at him and his gaze lingered for a moment on the warm spot on Tony's cheek where Abby had hit him. Gibbs grinned. "Abby socked you one?"

"Yeah. She doesn't like me. And also..." Tony winced and rubbed his cheek. "I might have said something inappropriate."

"You? Seems hard to believe." Gibbs shook his head and that grin was back on the corners of his mouth again.

Tony grinned too; God he loved it when he made Gibbs smile. "So where are we going, Boss?" Tony asked as they headed out of the elevator and into the parking garage.

"Possible lead on a gang that steals antiquities from war zones; going to check out a warehouse near the docks."

They got into a car, and Tony clung on for dear life as Gibbs high-tailed them towards the docks.

"Uh, can I drive next time, Boss?" he asked when they arrived. Gibbs turned to glare at him "Or not," Tony said hastily.

They got out of the car, and Gibbs drew his gun. Tony did the same, and they walked cautiously into the warehouse. It wasn't locked, which was strange, but there was nobody inside. There were several dozen crates though. Gibbs went over to one of them and peered at it. Then he re-holstered his gun and began pulling the crate open.

"Don't we need a warrant for that?" Tony asked, putting his own gun away.

Gibbs shrugged. "Nah – we're just taking a peek." He glanced at Tony and grinned, and Tony grinned back.

"I like the way your mind works, Boss. I'll go check the perimeter – see if anyone's around."

He went outside and walked around to the rear of the warehouse – and that was when he saw the back entrance. He opened the door, peered inside, and saw three guys sneaking up behind Gibb – and one of them was carrying a crowbar.

"Boss!" he yelled, and he threw himself into the warehouse, drawing his gun again.

One of the guys turned and lunged at him, knocking the gun straight out of his hand; it slid away under one of the crates. Tony ducked a punch and landed one back, watching out of the corner of his eye as the other two guys descended on Gibbs. The guy with the crowbar whacked Gibbs across the shoulders, but Gibbs got in a punch to the guy's midriff that made him gasp and double up.

Tony fought his own opponent hard, finally managing to dispatch him head first into one of the crates. He went down with a groan and didn't get up again. Tony turned and ran over to where Gibbs was struggling with his assailants. Tony gave a whistle of appreciation as Gibbs kneed one of them in the balls and then rammed his elbow into the other one's eye.

"You fight dirty, Boss! I like that!" he said, before his legs were taken out from under him by a flying tackle from the now one-eyed man.

One-eye grabbed a fistful of his hair and banged Tony's head back on the ground.

"Aw, what's a pretty little sub like you doing out without a leash?" One-eye taunted.

"Fuck you." Tony slammed his knee up between the man's legs and watched with pleasure as his face turned red, and he fell back. Tony got to his feet just in time to see that his original opponent, the one he'd slammed headfirst into the crate, was now back up again and creeping up on Gibbs with the crowbar.

"BOSS!" He threw himself at the guy and received a glancing blow on his jaw with the crowbar for his trouble. He fell to the floor with a thud, but he'd given Gibbs a chance to dispatch his other opponent and take care of the one with the crowbar. He watched as Gibbs knelt down and handcuffed his assailant and then glanced over at Tony.

"You okay?"

"Yeah...just..." Tony rubbed his jaw and his hand came away bloody. "Ow," he said mournfully.

Gibbs took Tony's handcuffs from his jacket pocket and went and cuffed the other two men to each other. Then he pulled out his cell phone and called for backup. Finally, he came over and looked down at where Tony was still lying on the warehouse floor.

"Lying down on the job? What did I tell you about taking breaks without permission, DiNozzo?" He grinned and held out his hand.

Tony took it, not even reacting to the by now familiar tingling sensation he got whenever Gibbs touched him. "Thanks, Boss."

Tony got up and was about to grab one of their prisoners and haul him out of the warehouse when Gibbs pulled him back. His boss put a gentle hand on his jaw and turned his face towards the light from the open door. "Bet that hurt," he said, examining Tony's cut jaw intently.

"That? Hah! Even Abby hits harder than that." Tony grinned in response.

Gibbs gave a wry chuckle and then patted Tony's cheek lightly. "Get Ducky to take a look at it when we get back - and, DiNozzo? That was good work."

Tony felt a warm sensation settle in the pit of his belly, and he knew, in that instant, that he would go anywhere and do anything to earn this man's praise.

"Well, I told you I'd always have your six, Boss," he muttered, feeling suddenly almost shy.

"Yeah – and I believed ya. That's why I hired you, DiNozzo."

They returned to the Navy Yard, and Gibbs handed their captives to Pacci for processing. Then he turned to Tony. "Ducky. Now," he ordered.

Tony fingered his wounded jaw gingerly and wiped away yet more blood – it was still flowing freely. "If I'm not so pretty anymore I'm blaming you," he told Gibbs.

"Aw – you still have that nice, round, bubble butt to entice the tops, DiNozzo, so don't worry about it," Gibbs replied with a grin. Tony felt another surge of warmth in his belly; Gibbs had noticed his ass!

He followed Gibbs into the elevator. "So we aren't going to interrogate the bad guys straight away?" he asked, surprised.

"They can wait. Pacci needs to take details and get us some IDs on them; I don't like doing interrogations without doin' some groundwork first. Gives us time to get you cleaned up."

They went down to Ducky's lair, and the doctor scurried over to them.

"Agent Pacci told me there had been an altercation, so I was expecting a visit, Jethro. What on earth happened?"

He took hold of Gibbs's hand and examined his bruised knuckles.

"I'm fine – it's DiNozzo who got a smack on the jaw from a crowbar," Gibbs told the doctor. "Guy who hit him must have known about that smart mouth of his and figured it might be a way to shut him up." He quirked a little grin in Tony's direction.

"My dear boy – that really does look nasty." Ducky ushered Tony over to an autopsy table and sat him down on it. Then he went and got a bowl of water and a sterile swab and came back. He held Tony's face and dabbed at the wound.

"Ow," Tony said. Ducky smiled and held him firmly in place, and Tony got a very clear sense of the top inside the switch.

"You really should learn to duck, DiNozzo," Gibbs said, standing and watching. Tony noticed the tension in his body and the way his eyes followed every move Ducky made as the doctor tended to his injury. What was *that* about?

"Ah, Agent DiNozzo, were you too slow?" Ducky chuckled.

"No – just distracted by saving Gibbs's ass," Tony shot back.

Ducky laughed out loud and even Gibbs gave a little chuckle. "Did he really, Jethro?" Ducky asked over his shoulder.

"He was...useful to have around," Gibbs replied.

Ducky gave a little whistle and stepped back. "Well, my dear Anthony, that's high praise indeed from our lord and master."

"Not *my* master, Ducky," Tony muttered softly. Then he frowned. "You called me Anthony!"

"And you took a blow meant for Jethro, if I'm not mistaken," Ducky said quietly. He ruffled Tony's hair gently. "I think I just became accustomed to having you around, Anthony."

Tony grinned from ear to ear, and he didn't even care how much that hurt his jaw.

"Talking of Jethro – when you're done with me you might want to check out his shoulder," he told Ducky as the doctor leaned over him to dress the cut on his jaw. Ducky raised an enquiring eyebrow. "He might not want you knowing it, but he took a pretty hard blow from that crowbar too," Tony said smugly.

Gibbs gave him a death glare that Tony cheerfully ignored. Ducky finished with Tony and stood back.

"Is that so, Jethro?" he asked, in a steely tone. Tony grinned happily at Gibbs's discomfort.

"S'nothing," Gibbs replied brusquely.

"Shirt off please," Ducky ordered.

Gibbs shot Tony a look that would have felled most subs. Tony just continued to grin – a grin that turned into an appreciative stare as Gibbs removed his shirt. The man was buff! He had square, toned shoulders and very defined musculature. There was also the clear red bruise on his shoulder where the crowbar had hit him. Ducky made a "tutting" sound and began examining the injury.

Tony glanced down and saw that his shirt and jacket were splattered with his own blood. "Damn it! This is my best suit! And blood never comes out," he said mournfully.

"It is a tad fancy for hunting down criminals, Anthony," Ducky said, as he manipulated Gibbs's wounded shoulder.

"I know, but after yesterday I was... you know..." Tony flushed.

"Yeah – we know. You were trying too hard, DiNozzo. Ease up," Gibbs advised.

Ducky patted Gibbs's arm. "There's no serious damage, Jethro, so we're done, but you..."

He was interrupted by a squealing sound from over by the door and then a blur of red and black ran into the room.

"Gibbs! Pacci said you'd been hurt! Are you okay?" Abby looked at the discoloured water in the bowl from where Ducky had washed Tony's jaw wound. "Oh my God! There's blood! You're not okay!"

She wrapped her arms around Gibbs and held him tight.

"I'm fine, Abby. The blood's DiNozzo's," Gibbs told her. "He took a blow from a crowbar meant for me."

"He did?" Abby released him and turned to look at Tony, her head flung back, her eyes intent.

Tony leaned back cautiously, remembering what a fast right hand she had. Then she flung herself at him and enveloped him in a bone-crushing hug.

"Tony!" she exclaimed "I'm so glad you're okay! But a bad guy hurt you!" She pulled back and touched his injured jaw gently with her fingers.

"Uh...does this mean we're friends now?" Tony asked. "Or do I still need to duck whenever I'm around you?"

"Of *course* we're friends, Tony! You saved Gibbs's life!"

"Uh, well, I wouldn't say *that* exactly..." Tony began, but Abby wasn't listening.

"I need to find out all about you, Mister! So you are coming out with me tonight," she told him firmly.

"I am?" Tony glanced at Gibbs over Abby's shoulder to find him chuckling softly.

"Yes! I won't take no for an answer. I have tickets to see *The Phantom of the Opera* – and you are coming with me!"

Tony shuddered. "Uh, I really hate musical theatre, Abs."

She ignored him. "We'll leave work early. Have something to eat. Talk. That's okay isn't it, Bossman?" she threw over her shoulder.

"That's fine by me, Abs," Gibbs told her, pressing a little kiss to the top of her head.

"But we'll be really busy interrogating the bad guys, won't we, Boss?" Tony said desperately. "*It's musical theatre!*" he mouthed at Gibbs over Abby's shoulder.

Gibbs grinned at him. "Nah. It's fine, DiNozzo. Go ahead. Leave early. You deserve it."

"Yes, Boss." Tony shot him a vicious glare.

Gibbs grinned and then reached for his shirt and shouldered himself into it with a wince.

"No need to cover up on my account," Tony said, with a suggestive little pout.

Gibbs rolled his eyes. "I'd slap your head if it wasn't for that jaw injury – which, incidentally, doesn't seem to slow down your smart mouth any." He made a move towards the door and then stopped. "Oh, DiNozzo...you remember that guy who took you down back at the warehouse?" he asked, in a conversational tone.

"Yeah," Tony said cautiously, sensing some impending punch-line that he wasn't going to like.

Gibbs grinned. "Well, somehow, and I don't know how, he seemed to know that you're a sub. Weird huh? When you're so difficult to read." He laughed at his own joke while Tony glared at him.

"Tony thinks people can't tell he's a sub?" Abby wrinkled up her nose and then laughed out loud. "Seriously, DiNozzo?"

"That does sound a little far-fetched, Anthony," Ducky chimed in, patting his arm affectionately. "People really can't tell? With you?" He looked gently amused.

"Well, no. It was just something I said to Gibbs...and there have been times...just a few times when...oh what the hell," Tony sighed. "Okay! You win! I'm a sub to my bones, and it's

obvious, and I'm proud of it! There – happy now?"

They all laughed and suddenly, for the first time in his life, he felt as if he had a family.

Part Four by Xanthe

Gibbs watched Abby and Tony leave for the evening with a little smile. For all his protests, Gibbs got the feeling that Tony was secretly pleased to have been invited out for an evening with Abby. He was certainly pleased himself – Tony was a damaged sub with secrets. He needed to feel he belonged somewhere, and he needed people he liked and trusted around him if he was going to do his best work – and give Gibbs more than a tiny glimpse of the sub he really was, under the masks he wore.

Gibbs returned to writing up his report on the men they'd arrested earlier. He did the paperwork dutifully for a couple of hours before a shadow fell across his desk.

"Jethro – you know what they say about all work and no play." He looked up to find Director Morrow looking down on him, a benign smile on his face.

"Just finishing up, Director."

"Good work today. You did well."

Morrow was an excellent leader – he always knew to give praise when it was deserved – although Gibbs knew he also didn't back down from handing out a kick up the ass when it was required too.

"DiNozzo was a great help," he said.

"Looks like you chose well in him. Not that I doubted you for a second."

Gibbs glanced at his boss suspiciously, but Morrow seemed to mean it.

Gibbs gave a little laugh. "Well, you're the only one who didn't then," he said wryly. "Even my own subs thought I'd gone crazy."

"I trust you. You know your own mind, you know what you want, and you won't settle for anything less. I admire that."

Gibbs thought about the three subs he'd married after Shannon, and how he'd settled for less there. "Yeah, well, it's a lesson I learned the hard way," he said quietly.

Morrow smiled at him. He was one of those wise subs who seemed to understand people innately and know how to get the best from them. He had a quiet, understated, but firm authority, and was a lot toppier than most tops Gibbs knew.

"Come on – you've done enough work for one day. Let's go for a drink, Jethro," Morrow suggested.

Gibbs grinned. "You sure, Tom? 'Cause last time we went out I drank you under the table, and Jessica looked like she was gonna have my ass when she came to pick you up."

“Ah, I rather fear it was *my* ass she had,” Morrow said ruefully. “And I know better than to get into a drinking contest with a battle-hardened Marine ever again. I learned *my* lesson the hard way too, believe me!”

Gibbs laughed and grabbed his jacket. He enjoyed Morrow’s company, and they always had a good time together after hours. Morrow kept things fairly formal in the office, but he knew how to let his hair down off the job. Gibbs counted him as a good friend, and he respected the man.

~*~

Tony emerged from the theatre with an unspoken prayer of gratitude that it was over. Abby clutched his arm, still humming *The Music of the Night*.

“Oh, that was so great!” She sighed happily. “Wasn’t it, Tony?”

“Uh...” He paused, searching for the right words so as not to offend her. She grinned up at him sappily. “Oh don’t tell me our Goth Goddess is a *romantic*,” Tony teased.

“Oh no! But this was like a great big Goth orgy!” she exclaimed. “All the candles, and the opera, and the people in masks, and the chandelier!”

“Chandeliers are Goth?” Tony asked doubtfully. She punched his arm. “Ow,” he said reflexively, but he felt a little stab of warmth that she was treating him like an old friend now, rather than an enemy.

“Of course chandeliers are Goth! The whole thing was epically Goth!”

“You mean all the cloak-swishing and the underground dungeon stuff? Well, I guess I can see it.”

“I don’t want to go home yet! I want to talk! Let’s go to a bar,” she suggested. “Do you know any around here?” She glanced around.

“Well...there’s a place a couple of blocks away that I go to a lot.”

“Cool!”

Tony led the way, and Abby paused outside the entrance with a little laugh.

“*Tough Sub?*” She raised an eyebrow. “You hang out in a place called *Tough Sub?*”

“It’s what I am.” He grinned and opened the door for her.

“Well, that’s true.” She patted his injured jaw very gently. “I guess you are.”

She sat down, and he bought drinks for them both and joined her.

“So, if it’s not a great big ode to Goth excess, tell me what **you** think, *Phantom* was all about?” she asked.

“Oh c’mon!” he laughed. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“Uh...no...tell me.” She put her hand on her chin and gazed at him expectantly.

“It’s the age-old theme of the innocent sub caught between the good top and the bad top,” he told her.

“Oh boy! This is going to be good. Go on.” She grinned at him.

“Okay, so you have poor little Christie, the cute subby boy with long brown ringlets, waiting for his first sexual experience. Then you have the big, bad top who is preying on him – luring him down into his dungeon to have his wicked way with him. Then there’s the **good** top, the Countess Rula – all blonde and swishy and together. No way **she** would ever ignore a sub’s safe word.”

“She was very dashing.” Abby sighed happily. “I loved her boots!”

“What you loved was the bit where the phantom tied her up – does a bit of top-on-top bondage do it for you, Abs?” He gave her a sly grin.

“No!” she replied hotly. “Although the stuff with the ropes was totally sexy!”

“Knew it.” He winked at her.

“See, I thought it was all about the poor phantom’s terrible life, and how he got so horribly disfigured, and how people were mean to him because of it and how that caused him to go a bit hinky.”

“Oh that’s just a metaphor,” Tony said blithely, taking a sip of his drink.

“Really?” She raised a sceptical eyebrow.

“Oh yes. The whole disfigurement thing is a metaphor for the darkness of his toppy dynamic. He’s so sleek and gorgeous when he’s wearing his mask. He’s so toppy and powerful and sexually dangerous. He’s what every sub is attracted to in a way, isn’t he?”

“Well...” Abby paused.

“Oh come on! Tell me, if you had the choice, would you go for a one night stand with the darkly dangerous and sexy phantom in his dungeon, or a nice night being tickled and teased by the countess in her playroom?”

“Uh...” Abby flushed.

Tony put his glass down with a triumphant flourish. “Exactly! We all would. Even though we know it’s bad for us and bad things will happen as a result.”

“But Christie was in love with Rula!”

“Oh, Christie wanted his night of dark passion with the phantom, same as we all do!” Tony grinned. “And that’s the point of the disfigurement metaphor. The phantom seems all sexy and sleek with his mask on – but once he’s got you tied up in his dungeon the mask comes off, and you see the ugly face of the abusive top beneath. And it’s not sexy anymore – it’s just scary. And *that* is when you wished you’d gone home with safe old Rula to her playroom instead!”

Abby laughed out loud. “Oh, you’re good at this!”

“I am! I do it a lot.”

“You like musical theatre?”

“Uh...not really – but I love the movies. I’m always analyzing them.”

She smiled at him. “Cool. Maybe we can go together sometime? To the movies?”

“I’d love that – does Gibbs let you out much though?”

She shook her head. “It’s not like that, Tony. Between Gibbs and me. It’s not...it’s not a traditional kind of collaring.”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“We don’t sleep together. It’s not that kind of arrangement. He made that clear when he offered me his collar.”

“He doesn’t sleep with you? What’s wrong with the man? You’re gorgeous!”

Abby gave a little smile and gently touched Tony’s hand. “Thanks – but it’s fine. It’s not what wearing Gibbs’s collar is about. See, I have – had – a habit of getting involved with really bad tops. Psycho tops.”

“You feel sorry for them,” Tony said quietly. “Just like you felt sorry for the phantom.”

“Yeah.” Abby sighed. “I get suckered in. I want to take care of them and help get them straightened out. I can see the good in them even when nobody else can.”

“That’s because you’ve got a big heart,” Tony told her. She gave him a surprised look.

“Might have only known you a couple of days, but I know that.”

“You’re not what I thought you were,” she said. “You’re...kinda nice. Like the phantom in reverse.”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

She gazed at him thoughtfully. “You wear a mask to hide that you’re nice, Tony. You’d rather people thought you weren’t. You don’t want them to see the nice guy underneath; you want them to think that you’re an idiot, or a sleaze, or both – but you’re not.”

“Well, I kind of am.” He grinned at her.

“No.” She shook her head. “You’re 100 per cent rock solid inside, Tony. Gibbs knew it when he first saw you – just took me a little longer to figure it out.”

Tony took another sip of his drink to help swallow down the lump that had suddenly formed in his throat.

“Why, Tony? What happened to you?”

He gave a wry smile. “Nothing very interesting, Abs.”

“I don’t believe that. Tell me about yourself.” She ran her finger around the rim of her glass, looking at him with genuinely interested eyes.

“What’s to tell?”

“Tell me about your family,” Abby said insistently.

“My family. Okay then.” Tony took a deep breath. “Well, my mom was a beautiful sub. All the tops were in love with her.”

“And you were too,” Abby said accurately.

“Yes, and I was too. She was one of those kinds of subs, you know, the ones that everyone is captivated by. She was Helen of Troy, Princess Diana, and James Dean all rolled up into one. Subs and tops alike fell under her spell. She was **that** kind of sub.”

“Oh yeah.” Abby nodded. “I know the type.”

“And people used to say I was just like her. Well, my dad used to say it,” Tony said bitterly.

“What happened to her?”

“She died in a car crash when I was eleven.”

“On, Tony! I’m sorry.” Abby covered his hand with hers.

“While out on a date with one of her lovers,” Tony continued. Abby made a scared little face. “When my dad found out, he went kinda crazy. Her death combined with the knowledge of her betrayal – he found it hard to deal with both at once. He drank a lot, told me what a worthless little shit I was, dragged me around several hotels, dumped me in various boarding schools, got married again – several times – and more or less cut me out of his life for the crime of reminding him too much of her.”

“I’m sorry, Tony.” Abby’s fingers were warm on his hand.

“Don’t be. It was a valuable lesson to me in life; never, ever trust a top.” Tony gave a tight little grin.

“You don’t believe that.”

“Oh, but I do. It’s the one thing my mother taught me, and my father did a damn good job of proving the point. Never trust a top. They’ll always let you down in the end.”

“Gibbs will never let me down,” Abby said firmly. “They’re not all bad, Tony. They aren’t all like the phantom – plenty of them are like Rula. And you’re just like all those people who turned the phantom hinky in the first place – you’re guilty of projecting ugliness onto all tops without taking the time to look inside and see who they really are.”

“And you’re one of those sappy subs who thinks an abusive top can be cured by the love of a good sub, despite all the evidence to the contrary,” he retorted.

Abby tilted her head up defiantly. “No!”

He smiled at her gently. “Come on, Abby. Gibbs collared you to keep you safe from the kind of tops you usually fall for. You said so yourself. You might find Rula’s boots sexy, but you’d choose the phantom over her any time.”

“And so would you!” she accused.

“I know.” He winked. “Difference is, I’d use him to get what I want and then be gone by morning. You’d stick around to try and save him, and he’d end up destroying you in the process.”

She gave a little laugh. “Well, you might be right there,” she sighed.

“So how does it work with Gibbs? The collar I mean?” Tony nodded his head at the strip of leather around her neck.

“Well, we’re kind of new to it – he didn’t collar me very long ago. But the way it seems to work is that I’m his sub, so I have to ask his permission for some things. Not many – I mean, he isn’t interested in controlling my life. But I do have to take any prospective top to meet

him before I'm allowed to date them."

"Yikes – it's amazing you get to date *any* tops then!" Tony grinned. "He's kinda scary, Abby!"

"I know, but he's fair – and he cares about me."

"Does he spank you?"

She shook her head. "Oh – I mean he can, if he wants to – he made that clear! But I'm not a trouble-magnet like you, Tony! I don't want him to ever be disappointed in me enough to punish me. That would break my heart!"

"So it's more about guidance – grounding?" Tony raised an eyebrow at her, and she nodded. "For Ducky too? And Stan?"

"I don't know about Ducky." She looked thoughtful. "He collared Ducky years ago, but they don't live together, and I don't get the feeling there's anything sexual between them. Maybe there was once...I don't know. But I think Gibbs got Ducky out of a bad situation. I don't know the details, but he's very protective of Ducky."

"Seems to me like he's protective of you both."

Abby flushed. "Well, he's Gibbs – he's kind of that way about all subs – but we wear his collars, so yes. He is very protective of us."

Tony wondered what it would be like to have Gibbs be protective of *him*. Then he remembered how tense Gibbs had been when Ducky had dressed his wound earlier, and he felt that warm glow settle in his stomach again; maybe Gibbs was already protective of him.

"And Stan?" Tony prompted. "Why did Gibbs collar Stan?"

"I probably shouldn't tell you this..." Abby made a little face. "Might get a swat from Gibbs if he ever finds out, but Stan had a drinking problem. He was the nicest guy you could hope to meet, but when he drank he was useless. Gibbs offered him the collar to see if it'd help."

"And did it?" Tony raised an eyebrow.

Abby nodded. "Yes. I think Gibbs handed out a few tough spankings to him along the way though."

"And that helped pull him around?"

"No. I think Stan just needed someone in his life to give a damn if he drank or not. Gibbs was that person. Eventually Stan licked the problem – and it was time for him to move on." She looked sad. "I understand why he left, but I miss him, Tony. That's why I was kinda mean to you."

“Well, I’m kind of an ass, so I probably deserved it.” He grinned at her. “Did Stan give Gibbs his collar back when he left?” He was intrigued by Gibbs and how he operated. He’d never come across a top like him.

“Yes. I think it was tough on them both, but it was necessary. Gibbs gave Stan affection and protection, but he never offered him his heart or any intimacy of that kind. We all knew that wasn’t an option.”

“But supposing Gibbs wants to give that to some lucky sub in the future?” Tony raised an eyebrow. “Won’t it be awkward for him, having a couple of other collared subs around?”

“I don’t think he’s planning on doing that.” Abby shrugged. “He’s been married three times, and it never worked out. I get the feeling that he’s dead set against doing it again.”

“But the man must need sex!” Tony exclaimed. “Doesn’t everyone?”

“Only with the right person,” Abby said softly. “Some people are prepared to wait, Tony. They’ll wait a lifetime if need be. I think Gibbs is one of those people.”

“Well, I couldn’t do it!” Tony laughed. “It all sounds far too hopelessly romantic to me. Wait a lifetime in the hope of finding someone who is just right for you? What a load of crap! You might as well be having some fun in the meantime.”

Abby was silent for awhile, still tracing her fingertip around her glass. Then she looked up at him.

“Have you ever been in love, Tony?” she asked unexpectedly. “I mean, really in love?”

He felt cold and hard inside. “No.”

“Maybe when you’ve felt that way, you’ll understand,” she said. “I think it’s possible to wait for the right person, if you feel strongly enough, because nobody else will *do*. Nobody else is right, and you know it, and you can’t lie to yourself even though you want to.”

She looked straight at him, and he felt like she was reading his soul.

“I don’t want to fall in love like that, Abby. That sounds like a good way to get your heart broken. You’ve had your heart broken, haven’t you?”

“Yes.” She sighed. “Many times.”

“You have to use and abuse tops before they do it to you.”

“That sounds kind of lonely.”

“At least you don’t get hurt that way.” He grinned and then felt his grin fade. “Look, I can

see the appeal of the big, bad tops, the ones who break your heart, but it's not worth it, Abby. I'll never let myself be vulnerable around a top. When I was a kid..."

He paused. She was still looking at him with those big, sympathetic eyes.

"When I was a kid, my dad used to bring subs back to our hotel suite and fuck them while I lay in the next room. I could hear every single thing that went on. He was often so drunk that he passed out afterwards. I used to creep into the room and untie the subs – my dad was big on bondage. If I hadn't, they'd be lying there for hours until he woke up. I used to give them a lecture on safe sex on their way out. I was twelve." Tony shrugged. "No top does anything to me that I'm not in control of, Abby."

"But isn't that part of the thrill?" she asked. "What I love most is not being in control, Tony."

"I wouldn't know," he said firmly.

"You never wanted to let go – not even for a little while?" Her green eyes were curious.

"Never met a top yet who made it feel real enough," he replied. "I always have to pretend."

Her eyes widened, and she squeezed his hand. "Tony, I'm sorry."

He was surprised that he'd opened up to her like this. He'd never reveal any of this stuff to a top of course, but there weren't any other subs he'd talk to like this, either. There was just something about her; he liked her so much and had since the minute he first met her.

"I was right you know," he told her. She raised an eyebrow. "About us – we were definitely meant to be friends." She gave a little smile. "Who bailed on you tonight, Abby?" he asked quietly.

"What?"

"You didn't just happen to have a spare ticket to see an expensive, sold-out show in your pocket. And you were in a pretty bad mood with someone on the phone this morning; so who bailed on you?"

"Just some good-for-nothing, lousy top I was dating." She sighed.

"Gibbs let you date such a person?" Tony raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, he told me this one was no good. He said I wouldn't get my heart broken, but I'd be let down in the end – and he was right. He lets me make my own mistakes though. He won't let me date psychos, but apart from that he just gives me his honest opinion on them and leaves me to it."

"And is he able to accurately identify the psychos on first meeting?" Tony asked.

“Oh yeah! He’s got a gift that way! One of them had barely said ‘hello’ before Gibbs was throwing her outta the house and telling her that if she came within a mile of me it’d be the last thing she ever did.” She grinned.

“That I can believe!” He grinned back. “Hey – do you want another drink?”

“It’s my turn. I’ll get these!”

She went over to the bar, and he sat there, staring into space, mulling over their conversation. Abby was gone a while, and eventually Tony glanced over towards the bar to see where she was – and stiffened. She was being sweet-talked by a top - and not just any top. She was being sweet-talked by exactly the kind of top she loved so much; the dangerous kind that she’d want to save but who would only end up breaking her heart. Tony knew this for a fact, because the top who was sliding his hand around her wrist was Jake, his own conquest of a couple of nights ago.

Tony got up and went over to the bar. He grabbed Jake’s arm before the man was even aware he was there and removed his hand from Abby’s wrist.

“Hey – can’t you see the sub’s collared?” He jerked his head in the direction of Abby’s neck.

“Tony!” Abby said, in a shocked voice.

“Oh, it’s you.” Jake pulled himself up and looked Tony straight in the eye. The atmosphere in the bar changed, and Tony saw a couple of guys move forward so they were standing shoulder to shoulder with Jake – clearly the bastard actually had some friends.

“Yeah. It’s me. How are you doing, Jake? I see you managed to finally get free of those cuffs I put you in.” Tony gestured towards Jake’s wrists. “Did it feel good, being all helpless on the bed and at my mercy like that? Did you enjoy it?” He gave a lascivious wink.

Jake’s face reddened, and he looked like he was going to explode. Tony guessed he hadn’t told his friends that his one night stand sub had tied him up; it was too humiliating.

“You fucking bastard!” Jake took a step forward, but Tony didn’t take a step back.

“What’s the problem, Jake. You’re in a bar called *Tough Sub*, so isn't that what you’re looking for? Subs who don’t take any shit? Did I leave you enough money for your services the other night by the way?” He grinned.

Jake took a swing at him, which Tony effortlessly side-stepped. He slammed Jake forward onto the bar and shoved his arm up his back.

“Don’t talk to my friend again,” he hissed in Jake’s ear. “She’s not your type. Don’t touch her again, don't go talk to her again, don't even look at her again, or you'll answer to me.”

The barman was gesturing frantically to security to come over and handle the altercation,

and Jake's friends were also looking antsy, as if they were about to intervene. Tony released Jake, and he straightened up quickly, looking furious. There wasn't anything he could do with security already starting to shove their way through the crowded bar towards them though.

Tony grinned. "Nice running into you, Jake," he said smoothly.

"You'd better hope you don't run into me ever again, shit head," Jake growled, rubbing his sore arm and glaring at Tony resentfully. "Because if we do, I promise I'll get even with you, you fucking asshole."

"Aw, I'm missing you already, Jake. Come on, Abby. Let's go." Tony grabbed Abby's arm and led her out of the bar.

"Tony! What the hell was that about?" she demanded when they got outside.

"That was about what we've been talking about all evening," he replied moodily. "Jake in there is a phantom, Abby. He's drop dead gorgeous, and he's sexy, and he can act the part of the big bad top, but what's underneath is ugly. Trust me – I've been there."

"He looked really mad, Tony. You must have really pissed him off."

"He's all talk," Tony snorted, walking off down the road. "Like I said, it's an act. Jake-the-fake."

"How did you get involved with him?" Abby asked, trotting along behind.

Tony sighed and glanced at her over his shoulder. "One night stand. Club called *Anon*. Night before my interview at NCIS. It ended badly. Jake isn't someone who takes no for an answer – that's why I warned him away. I didn't want him hurting you."

She caught up with him and tucked her hand through his arm. "I thought I'd got lucky. He seemed really sexy."

"You mean scary and dangerous?" He looked down at her. "That's the language they use for seduction, Abs – the phantoms of the world. How does the music go? *Touch me, trust me, savour each sensation! Let the dream begin, let your darker side give in...?*" He raised an eyebrow.

She grinned at him. "*Open up your mind, let your fantasies unwind, in this darkness that you know you cannot fight...* You could be right, Tony. And hey!" She bashed him on the arm. "I thought you were asleep during that bit! Were you just pretending, Mister?"

He laughed out loud – she had a knack for being able to cajole him out of a bad mood.

"Oh, okay, it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be and who doesn't love a good tale about a subby virgin and a sexy dom villain?"

She laughed too, and he made a swishing motion with his invisible cape.

"C'mon, let's get going – I think the music of this particular night is over now, my sweet, innocent little Abby."

"Sweet and innocent? Not since 10th grade, DiNozzo!" she said throatily, and they walked off up the street together, laughing their heads off.

~*~

"So, DiNozzo is working out well," Morrow said conversationally, sipping on his coke while Gibbs knocked back his third whisky of the evening.

"It's only been a couple of days, but the kid's got promise," Gibbs said, watching Morrow thoughtfully. His boss rarely did or said anything without a reason.

"Why did you choose him, as a matter of interest, Jethro?"

"My gut." Gibbs grunted. Morrow raised an eyebrow. "And...he's got the skill set I need, Tom. He's got street smarts, and I need someone with inspiration – someone who sees the clues and can make the right deductive leaps. You want me to head up Major Crimes when Lewis retires – and if I'm gonna do that then I need someone with solid police experience. DiNozzo has that."

"And a rap sheet as long as your arm," Morrow pointed out.

"Yeah, but he's got a streak of brilliance that his previous bosses never tapped into. I think that's why he always got into so much trouble – he was bored, and he wasn't handled right. Sure, he needs guidance, but I can give him that."

"Well he's clearly a handful, Jethro, but if anyone can handle him, it's you." Morrow smiled. "So, do you intend to collar him?"

Gibbs looked up sharply. So that was the purpose behind this thread of their conversation. He knew it hadn't been just idle curiosity on Morrow's part.

"Wasn't plannin' on it," he said, wondering why his gut twisted when he said that. "Why?"

"You do seem to like having the people on your team wear your collars, Jethro."

"You have a problem with that, Tom?"

Morrow shook his head. "As a matter of fact, I think it works rather well for you – and for them. I'm just curious as to why you do it. It's a lot to take on – and you make yourself vulnerable for any misdemeanours they commit."

"Ever see 'em commit any?"

"No. True." Morrow gave a little chuckle. "All the more reason not to collar DiNozzo I think! You might find that one harder to keep out of trouble."

Gibbs grunted and took a sip of his drink.

"Why do you do it, Jethro?" Morrow asked quietly. "I've often wondered. Most dominants are satisfied with one collared sub but not you. I know you have an unusual relationship with them, so I'm sure it isn't about sex."

Gibbs stared into his drink. If it had been anyone else but Morrow asking he'd have told them to piss off, but he knew Morrow was genuinely concerned about him, and he respected the man. They were silent for a while as Gibbs considered the honest answer to that question.

"Atonement," Gibbs said at last. He looked up; Morrow was gazing at him steadily.

"Atonement?" Morrow frowned. "Atoning for what, Jethro? You're a good man – I've seen that. What can you possibly have to atone for?"

"I let down two people I loved, Tom; I wasn't there for them when they needed me most. Then I screwed up three other people tryin' to run from the hurt. I'm not a bad top, but I feel like I was for awhile. I didn't live up to the standards I set for myself."

"You're being too hard on yourself."

"No." Gibbs shook his head. "I screwed up – I wouldn't let a sub of mine get away with excuses, so I'm sure as hell not gonna ease up on myself. I hurt some people – people who didn't deserve it. Couple of 'em hate my guts as a result, and I don't blame them. I want to remind myself of the top I once knew myself to be. I want to take myself out of the equation and just be there for the people who need me. It doesn't have to be easy – it just has to be right."

He looked up again to find Morrow's eyes sympathetic.

"I want to believe in that side of myself again, Tom," Gibbs said quietly.

"You are a better man and a better top than you believe yourself to be, Jethro."

"Nah. You think I'm a dinosaur, a relic from days gone past. An old-fashioned chauvinist who thinks subs need to be protected and taken care of," Gibbs grunted.

"No." Morrow shook his head and then laughed. "Well, maybe a little. You did open the door for me when we came in."

"Top in me can't help responding to the sub in you, even when I tell myself not to." Gibbs shrugged. "I'm never gonna be one of these modern tops. I am what I am."

"And nobody is seeking to change you. Besides, I view it more as chivalry than chauvinism."

Gibbs grinned. "If I didn't know you better, I'd think you were flirting with me, Tom."

Morrow laughed. "Jessica would have my ass if I even thought about it. Oh – there was something I wanted to talk to you about, Jethro. I should have mentioned it earlier, back at the office, as it's work-related."

Gibbs leaned forward.

"My counterpart at the FBI has informed me about an ongoing operation they're conducting into an organised crime syndicate. They're running an undercover sting. They have several agents in place, and they now believe some high-ranking members of the Navy might be involved. There's a defence contract up for bid and a lot of money changing hands in the background."

"They want our help?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

Morrow shook his head. "The opposite; they want us to stay out of it. They've been working on this for two years, and they think they're near the end. They don't want us getting wind of the corruption and wading in there all guns blazing and screwing up their op. This goes a lot further than the Navy contract, and they've thrown a lot of manpower at it."

"Fine by me." Gibbs shrugged. "I don't like the feebies, but I'll keep us out of it if anything goes down."

"Good. I'll get Cynthia to email you all the details tomorrow – the main player is Admiral Hansen. Ah...looks like my ride is here!" Morrow looked over at the door and his whole face lit up. Gibbs turned and saw the petite redhead who'd collared Morrow. Jessica was pretty and feisty and reminded him just a bit too much of Shannon. He swallowed down the last drop of his whisky.

"Hey! How are you doing?" Jessica dropped a little kiss on Morrow's head and then sat down opposite Gibbs. "Jethro – if you've got my husband drunk again..."

Gibbs grinned and spread his hands. "I haven't, Jess, I promise! Tom's been a good boy." He winked at Morrow who laughed out loud.

"You're a bad influence, Leroy Jethro Gibbs!" Jessica chided. "Last time he went out drinking with you he threw up all night."

"That was probably just a reaction to the lousy company and tasteless jokes," Gibbs replied, deadpan.

"You could be right there!" Morrow laughed. "How are you, sweetheart?" He put his arm gently around his wife, looking at her with frank adoration. Their dynamic was so strong, so easy, and so effortless that it was clear as day to Gibbs. Morrow served, and Jessica ruled with an iron fist in a velvet glove. They had been married for years, and their dynamics fitted together perfectly.

Gibbs felt as if someone had stabbed him in the gut; it had been like that with him and Shannon. That perfect fit. The perfect fit he couldn't expect to find with anyone else.

"I'm fine, honey." Jessica pressed a kiss to Morrow's cheek. They weren't a sappy couple – they were just...comfortable. "But you've been working too hard. I'm glad you came out with Jethro tonight to unwind."

"I thought you didn't approve of me," Gibbs said.

"I don't – on principle!" she laughed, and he laughed with her. They were good friends, and he liked them very much. She glanced at the empty glass in front of him. "Now, I see you've been drinking even if Tom hasn't. Why don't I give you a ride home and save you the taxi fare?"

"That's very kind of you, Jess, thanks." Gibbs nodded.

"Not at all. I tell myself I shouldn't be fond of a bastard like you, but somehow I can't help myself." She got up, took a leash out of her purse, and clipped it to her husband's collar, casually, with the ease of long practice. It was just a little, everyday kind of gesture, but Gibbs felt a stab of grief so savage that it robbed him of breath.

"You okay, Jethro?" Morrow asked.

"Me? Yeah. Sure. Just...maybe I drank more than I thought. Need to sleep it off," Gibbs muttered.

"Just as long as you don't turn up late for work tomorrow."

Gibbs managed a wry grin. "Wouldn't do that. Boss is a hardass."

"Good - because I don't like the idea of DiNozzo wandering around unsupervised in the squad room!" Morrow laughed. "Who knows what havoc he'd cause!"

They were still joking and laughing as they dropped him home. Gibbs waved goodbye and went into his house. He closed the door and the smile immediately faded from his face. He crouched down, his back to the door, and tried to remember how to breathe.

It hurt. It hurt so much, seeing that happy couple, with their easy dynamic and clear love for each other. What was happening to him? Shannon had been dead for ten years. Why was this hurting so much now?

DiNozzo.

He wasn't sure why, but somehow he knew that Tony DiNozzo was the catalyst for these emotions. When he closed his eyes he could see Tony's face. He could picture that big, bright smile and the dazzling white teeth that never quite managed to distract Gibbs from the troubled look in the kid's green eyes.

Tony's dynamic was so strong that he could smell it. He itched to take that boy down and see how well their dynamics fit together. He had a feeling that somehow, against all probability, they were a match. Tony was like the flip side of himself, just as Shannon had been, and yet in a totally different way.

He felt that sharp stab of pain again when he thought about her. His lost sub. His beautiful lost sub, whom he longed to touch again, to see again, and to speak to again so much that it physically hurt. And wasn't that the point?

He'd been numb inside for years. After her death he'd been in such a dark place that the only person who had been able to reach even a little way inside had been Ducky. He'd walled himself up and taken those other subs as spouses, and yet he'd been frozen inside. He'd felt nothing for them. He'd had no awareness of their dynamic or his own. Him, Leroy Jethro Gibbs, who had always been so sure of himself and who could read people like a book – and yet he'd been lost to himself.

He knew now what he had to do. He couldn't keep avoiding the pain anymore. He couldn't keep shoving it down into the cold, dark pit in his belly. If he didn't let himself feel it then he'd never be able to move on.

He walked slowly up the stairs, along the hallway, and into his guest room. There was a stack of boxes piled up in the corner, full of their stuff; Shannon's stuff, Kelly's stuff. He could never bring himself to throw it out, but he couldn't have it around either. So he'd packed it away in this room the day after their funerals and had never looked at it since. Various wives had tried to persuade him to part with it, but he'd always stubbornly refused.

He'd been hanging onto Shannon and Kelly even while keeping them to one side, in some walled off part of his heart that he refused to ever visit. Now he knew he had to. He had to force himself. He had to face this, once and for all.

He went over to the boxes and opened the top one. It was full of Kelly's clothes and his heart stopped for a moment as he saw the sparkly silver belt she'd loved so much. She'd been a sub in the making, his little girl, even though she hadn't known it. He'd sensed it though, the way he could always sense what people were. Abby reminded him so much of Kelly, with her love of big boots, tight belts, and trailing silver chains.

He saw the pink tee shirt Kelly had loved so much, with the rainbow motif on the front. He picked it up and held it against his face. Any scent of her was long gone, and he was grateful for that; he didn't think he'd be able to take it.

He opened another box and found one of Shannon's sweaters – the old, comfortable one she wore when sitting by the fire on cold winter nights. He loved to remember her sitting by the fire, the way she'd been on the night he collared her.

He pressed the sweater to his face and breathed it in, and this time he detected the faintest hint of her scent – just a trace of the perfume she wore, the one he always grumbled about having to buy for her on her birthday because it cost a fortune for what was, as he always said, 'fancy- smelling water'.

That old, remembered scent was enough to drive him over the edge. Memories came flooding back – of days spent laughing and fighting, and nights spent making love. Of her looking up at him with complete submission in her eyes as he made her take that same journey every single time, down into herself, to find the surrender she wanted to give him. That surrender, when it came, always gave her such pleasure, and he loved being the one who could give her that.

He didn't cry – he keened.

His body convulsed, his gut ached, and he keened out his pain, all the time clutching her sweater to his chest. It made him feel raw, exposed, and helpless, and he didn't like any of those feelings, but he made himself experience them.

For the first time since their deaths he allowed himself to really *feel* it, not to push it down, or soldier on, or any of those things he had been doing for so long. He allowed the pain to rip through him and tear him apart. It was so savage that he wasn't sure he'd survive it. He had always known it would hurt this much – wasn't that why he'd always tried to control it? Now he didn't want to control it anymore. Now he wanted to let it consume him.

He was a top, yes, but he had been a husband too, and a father. Those parts of him took over, and his entire body screamed out their grief. He let the pain in, welcoming it, allowing it to do whatever it wanted with him. He, who was so unused to submitting to anything or anyone, finally allowed himself to submit to this.

The grief took him. The grief owned him. The grief was his master. He was nothing but the willing submissive, offering himself up to it.

He surrendered, completely and wholly, without condition.

When he came to, some time later, he felt empty. This was just the beginning, he knew that. True healing would take a lot longer – but at least he'd made a start.

He put Shannon's sweater back in the box and his eye fell on a framed photograph. He pulled it out and looked at it. He remembered taking it the day Shannon had brought Kelly home from the hospital. She had been planned, and wanted, and loved, right from the start; and she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

Shannon was holding Kelly in her arms in the photograph and smiling down on her newborn

child, looking like the happiest person alive. He had felt that way too. He had been aware of the weight of his responsibilities, as a top with a family to protect, as a husband, and as a father, but he had relished them. He was going to be good at this! He was going to love it.

And he had failed. They had been killed, and he hadn't been there to protect them. That was the pain he would have to bear his entire life and maybe it was a wound that would never heal.

He took the photograph with him when he left the room. He went into his bedroom and placed the photo on the nightstand. All these years he'd been hiding them from himself, fearful that he couldn't handle what was in those boxes. Now the time had come to let it out. He would look at his dead wife and child every morning when he woke up and every night before he fell asleep, and he would make himself take that pain, the way he'd make a sub take something that hurt but was good for them anyway.

He was Leroy Jethro Gibbs. He had been a husband and father. He was a top.

He would find himself again.

End of Part Four

Part Five by Xanthe

Tony's first week in his new job went by in a flash. They were on weekend duty, so by the end of Sunday he'd worked a full five days, and he'd loved every minute of it.

He returned to his desk after a visit to the restroom at the end of the day to find a little wooden box waiting for him. It was about six inches long and fashioned in the shape of a coffin. His name was inscribed on the front in Gothic lettering.

"Yikes." Tony stared at it, reluctant to pick it up. "It's a coffin," he said blankly.

Gibbs glanced over. "Yup. Abby just left it there."

Tony grimaced. "Why? Did I do something to upset her? I mean, apart from that whole thing with the ink earlier, because I really didn't know that..."

"It's a gift," Gibbs interrupted. "Not a trick."

"You sure?" Tony peered at the box suspiciously.

Gibbs grinned. "Oh yeah. I'm sure. Abby only gives one of her coffins to someone she really likes."

"Phew." Tony sat down at his desk and pulled the little box towards him. "It **is** kind of cute. I think. If you ignore, you know, the fact that it's a miniature coffin. With my name on it." He continued to gaze at it suspiciously.

"Just open it, DiNozzo!" Gibbs growled. "It won't bite."

"You don't know that," Tony muttered, but he reached out a cautious finger and flicked the coffin open anyway. Inside, lying in the coffin, was a tiny doll dressed just like Abby, in red pants and a black tee shirt with a skeleton on the front. Clutched in her tiny fingers were two \$20 bills. Tony laughed and pulled them free – and that was when he saw the note stuck to them.

"Congratulations on making it to the end of the week. Hope you stay forever, Tony!"

He glanced up and saw Abby hiding behind the screen at the end of Gibbs's desk.

"Thank you," he said softly. "Me too."

"Looks like the drinks are on you, DiNozzo," Gibbs said, nodding at the money in Tony's hand.

"You bet!" Tony got up and was immediately enveloped in a warm Abby hug. When she released him, he saw Ducky standing behind her, hand outstretched.

"An excellent first week, Anthony." Ducky beamed at him, and Tony shook his hand enthusiastically.

When Ducky released him, Gibbs walked over. Tony hesitated. Was this another handshake moment? Gibbs didn't look like the kind of man who did hugs. Gibbs grinned at him – then raised his hand, fast as ever, and deposited a slap on the back of Tony's head.

"Yeah – you didn't screw up too badly this week, DiNozzo, so I'm keeping ya around," Gibbs said, and Tony grinned back at him goofily, feeling as happy as he could ever remember.

Tony grabbed his jacket and bag and turned back – just in time to see Gibbs taking two leashes out of his pocket and fastening one to Abby's collar and the other to Ducky's. Tony wasn't prepared for his reaction; his stomach flipped, his heart raced, and he felt a pang of something he struggled to identify. Then he realized what it was: envy.

He pushed the emotion away. Why the hell would he be envious of subs being leashed? He saw it every day – out on the streets, in buses, on the metro, in bars, in stores, at work...what was different about this?

Gibbs.

Gibbs was the difference. It was the fact that Gibbs was the one doing the leashing. *C'mon! You've never wanted to be collared, let alone leashed,* Tony chided himself, but the feeling didn't go away for some time.

They went to a bar near the Navy Yard. Tony was loud and obnoxious and told risqué jokes that made Ducky raise his eyebrows, Gibbs snort with laughter, and Abby bash him repeatedly on the arm. He didn't mind – he knew that somehow, underneath it all, they **got** him, the way most people didn't.

He liked watching Gibbs laugh. Gibbs didn't say much and most of what he did say was gruff and to the point, but Tony found it fascinating just watching the man outside of their work environment. He wasn't sure why he was so fascinated by Gibbs, but there was something about him that spoke to something deep inside Tony, no matter how much he tried to ignore it.

When they parted for the night a couple of hours later, Tony wandered home in a haze of happiness. He'd survived the first week, and it was the best first week he'd ever had, in any job.

He climbed the stairs to his apartment, whistling to himself, and was so lost in happy thoughts that he almost tripped over the man sitting on the top step, right outside his apartment.

"Billy?" Tony blinked. "Billy? What the hell are you doing here?"

His ex-partner from Baltimore PD glanced up at him, looking pale and anxious. "Waiting for

you."

"Why?" Tony asked coldly. "I've got nothing to say to you, Billy. You and Dana used me. You chewed me up and spat me out. I'd have been fired – and probably bearing the scars from a bullwhipping right now if I hadn't taken the precaution of making those tapes."

"I know and that's why I'm here," Billy said miserably. "I'm sorry, Tony. I honestly am."

Tony wanted to believe him; he'd always liked Billy during their time working together. He'd been shocked when he found out that Billy and Dana had been an item long before he arrived on the scene and had continued their relationship even while Dana had been fucking him.

"I don't understand why you let her use you like that," Tony said tightly. "Why, Billy? Why did you let her sleep with me when you were in a relationship with her? How could you stand by and let that happen?"

"You don't understand," Billy replied wretchedly. Billy had always had the look of a beaten puppy, but at this moment in time he looked so pathetic that Tony couldn't help himself. With a sigh, he fished his keys out of his jacket pocket.

"Okay. Come inside – you can try to explain it to me, but I don't think I'll ever get it."

He opened the door and let Billy inside. His old partner sat down on the couch, looking hunched and unhappy. Tony leaned against the wall, alert, watching him.

"I'm sorry about what we did to you, Tony," Billy said quietly. "You didn't deserve that. But you have to know it wasn't my idea."

Tony snorted. "Well duh. I know that. It was clearly Dana's idea. Why do you stay with her, Billy? She's poison."

"I know." Billy wrapped his arms around his body. "But I love her, Tony." He looked up at Tony despairingly.

Tony sighed. "Idiot. What did I tell you about falling in love?"

Billy gave a weak little grin. "Not to," he replied. "I haven't forgotten all your many lessons on the subject, Tony. I don't know what it is about Dana. I know she's using me half the time, and I tell myself I have to leave, I have to get out, but then all she has to do is smile and crook her finger at me, and I go back for more."

"Stupid dumb sub." Tony gave a wry shake of his head.

"Yeah. Always have been." Billy grinned. "Always will be I guess."

There was a long silence.

"So why are you here?" Tony asked eventually. "Not just to tell me you're sorry; I don't believe that."

"No – to warn you." Billy looked anxious, and Tony felt his gut clench. It had been such a good week; he didn't want anything to spoil it now.

"Warn me about what?"

Billy bit on his lip. "There's going to be an investigation," he said nervously. "They think someone in the department is dirty. Internal Affairs have gotten involved."

Tony rocked back on his heels. "So?" he asked cautiously.

"So...I'm just saying. They're bound to look into the events surrounding Warren's death, and if they do then you'll be called in to testify.

"Dana had better hope I'm not," Tony snapped. "I still have those tapes remember, Billy."

He took care not to let his gaze flicker over to his DVD collection, where the backup disk was still hidden in its *Subs and the City* box set. He wasn't a rookie who'd give away that kind of clue.

"If she tries to pin Warren's death on me, I'll make sure those tapes reach Internal Affairs. I covered myself there." *Thanks Mom*, he said silently in his head. *Never trust a top...*

Dana was a top of enormous personal charm, beauty and charisma. She'd tried to dazzle him like she dazzled Billy, but she hadn't done her research properly. She didn't know that Anthony DiNozzo had never trusted any top enough to let them close. That was how he'd survived all this time. It might be lonely, but at least it was safe.

"Have you still got the tapes?" Billy asked. "Do you have them in a safe place?"

Tony grinned. "Why? Did she send you here to ask about them?"

"No! She doesn't even know I'm here!" Billy protested.

Tony shook his head. "Oh, Billy, you're a terrible liar. Dana knows. She sent you. She's not quite sure what I've got, and she thought she'd send you to find out how much damage limitation she's got to do."

Billy gazed at him glumly. "She's..." He slumped. "I'm sorry, Tony," he said softly. "Look...just take care of yourself, okay? This could all get very ugly."

"Not for me," Tony said tightly. "Maybe for her or for you, but don't drag me into this. I didn't do anything wrong."

"Warren died..." Billy began.

"I know!" Tony snapped. He wished he could find a way to silence the voice he often heard in his nightmares. *"DiNozzo, you gotta send help...they're onto me...they're coming for me. You gotta get me out of here...please! You promised you'd keep me safe, buddy! You *promised*."*

"And if IA get suspicious..." Billy shrugged.

"It wasn't my fault," Tony said firmly. "I didn't know. Dana told me..." He shook his head. "She's a bitch, Billy, and she's almost certainly the dirty cop they're looking for – I just don't have enough proof. I do have enough to cast some doubt though – and definitely enough to cover my own ass. Tell her that, Billy. Go back and tell her that."

"Don't try and cross her, Tony," Billy warned him. "She won't hesitate to take you down if you do."

Tony shook his head. "And this is the love of your life? It's not me you should be worrying about, it's you. Leave her, Billy, before she screws up your life the way she did mine."

Billy stood up. "I wish I could, Tony," he said sadly. "I wish I knew how."

Tony sighed. "Good luck then, buddy. You're going to need it."

Billy gave a rueful little smile and walked over to the door. "You're looking good, Tony," he said. "You look happy. Don't think I've ever seen you that way. New job must be working out for you."

"It is. I've moved on. I've put Dana and what happened to Warren behind me. You should do the same." Tony opened the door and watched Billy sidle out.

"So long then, DiNozzo," Billy muttered as he left. "Watch your back."

"Always do, Billy. Always have," Tony replied. He shut the door behind his old partner and locked it. "Always had to. Nobody else is going to do it for me," he muttered to himself.

He went over to his DVD collection and frantically fished out the *Subs and the City* box set. He opened it and his heart skipped a beat as he looked inside – but the disk was still there. He put the disk in his PC and opened up the files to check, but everything was fine. He replaced the disk back in the DVD box and returned it to the shelf.

Then he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the small wooden coffin with his name engraved on it. He traced the engraving gently with his fingertip, smiling to himself. He went into his bedroom and placed it on the nightstand.

"I've moved on," he said softly to himself. "And everything's going to be fine."

~*~

Gibbs was surprised by how easily Tony fit in. From the moment he arrived, it felt like he'd been there forever. Somehow, in only two weeks, he'd become so accustomed to Tony standing in the elevator beside him, Tony having his six, and Tony sitting across from him at the office, that he could hardly remember a time when Tony hadn't been there.

It was a good feeling, knowing he had a second in command he could trust. The top in him was also delighted by how willing to learn and eager to please Tony was. Tony happily worked the same long, gruelling hours that he did, without a hint of complaint, and he did a good job too. His reports were terrible, but a day spent rewriting the same one seven times seemed to give him an inkling of what his new boss required.

In fact, it was all so easy that Gibbs should have realized it was too good to last.

~*~

Tony sat with his feet up on his desk, playing Tetris on his computer. Gibbs was in a meeting with the Director – their regular weekly run-through of current ops and threat assessments – and Tony was taking advantage of his boss's absence. He had a webcam link to Abby's lab playing constantly in one corner of his screen and an IM box in another. A line of typing popped up in the box.

"I know you're not working."

He glanced at the webcam box and saw Abby winking at him. *"How can you tell?"* he typed back with a grin.

"You have your feet up on the desk! Gibbs is in with the director, isn't he?"

"Yup!"

"If he comes back, and you don't have that info he asked for..."

"I'll have it! I always do." He winked at her. *"You have to learn to work smarter, not harder, Abs!"*

"Right now you're not working at all!"

"True!"

His cell phone rang, and he picked it up. *"Hello...is that Tony?"* a shaky, elderly voice asked.

He frowned. *"Yeah...who is this?"*

"It's me, dear. Mary. Mary Ellison. Your neighbour."

"Mary? Oh, Mrs. Ellison! Sorry – couldn't place your voice. Is there a problem? Are you okay?"

She was the frail old lady who lived along the hallway from him. She sometimes asked him to change the light bulbs in her apartment or fix anything that got broken. Tony wasn't great with handyman jobs, but he always did his best to help her. She was a nice old lady, and she always made him coffee and offered him cookies when he helped out.

"I'm fine, dear. Did you know that you left your apartment door open when you left this morning?"

Tony sat up and removed his feet from the desk. "No. I'm pretty sure I locked it behind me, same as always."

"Oh...just...there was some noise earlier, and I thought maybe you hadn't gone to work today. I know you have a new job and your shift pattern has changed, so I didn't think anything of it until later when I went past and saw the door was ajar. I wasn't sure what to do, but you gave me your cell phone number last year, and I thought..."

"I'll come check it out. No need to worry about it anymore. Thanks, Mrs. Ellison."

A message from Abby popped up in his IM box: *"Tony – you okay? You look freaked out. What's going on?"* but he ignored it. He got up and grabbed his jacket, his heart pounding in. Christ, he should have seen this coming; it was so damned inevitable.

He got home as fast as he could and found the door to his apartment ajar as Mrs. Ellison had said. He drew his gun, nudged the door open cautiously with his foot, and then edged inside...and stopped.

His apartment had been trashed. The place was a mess. The couch had been upturned and there were clothes, books, magazines and papers everywhere. Whoever had been here had turned it inside out to find what they were looking for.

And he knew what that was. He holstered his gun and went over to the pile of DVDs lying on the floor in one corner of his living room. The box-set for *Subs and the City* was lying face down. He picked it up and pulled out the middle DVD case, already knowing what he'd find.

It was empty.

He looked around and saw that his PC was missing too. He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and called his bank.

"I want to check on a safety deposit box," he told them, and then he gave them the details and waited impatiently for them to track it down. What was taking so long? He glanced around the apartment. It had been completely trashed; it'd take days to get it straight again.

Someone from the bank came back on the line.

"Hello? Mr. DiNozzo? Uh...the contents of your safety deposit box were taken by the police earlier today as part of an investigation."

"What?" He gazed sightlessly at the overturned couch.

"They had a warrant, sir. We checked it very carefully."

Of course they had a warrant. Damn it! He'd been an idiot. Dana was a cop – of course she'd been able to get a warrant without any trouble at all. She'd outplayed him.

He closed his cell phone, sat down on the floor beside his upturned couch, and gazed at the wreckage of his life.

"Oh shit. They're gonna crucify me." He thought he'd been so smart, but Dana Morley had been smarter. "Never trust a top," he said bitterly. "Sorry, Mom. Screwed up. Let this top get one over on me. Damn it – I should have *known* she'd do this. Why didn't I make more backup copies?"

Even if he had, he knew it wouldn't have been enough. She'd have found some way to get her hands on them.

At that moment the door was pushed open, and he looked up, reaching for his gun, only to see Mrs. Ellison standing there, leaning heavily on her walking cane.

"Tony dear, is that you...? Oh my." She looked around the trashed apartment, shaking her head. "Oh, my dear, I'm so sorry. You've had burglars." She gave a little shiver. "It seems that nowhere is safe these days. And to think I was just along the hallway." Her faded grey eyes were watery. "It makes you scared to be in your own home."

"Don't be scared, Mrs. Ellison." He got to his feet wearily. "This wasn't a standard burglary, so don't worry about anyone breaking into your place."

"What do you mean it wasn't a standard burglary?" She was trembling a little, so he put his arm around her and squeezed gently.

"Well, look – they didn't take my home cinema, did they?" He gave her a reassuring smile and pointed to the wall where his giant plasma screen was hanging. "I still have my surround sound and state of the art DVD player. They didn't want my stuff, Mrs. Ellison. They wanted something else."

"What, dear?" She blinked at him, looking confused.

"Doesn't matter." He shook his head. "Let me walk you back to your apartment."

He settled her back in and then returned to his own apartment and went cautiously into the

bedroom. It was in just as much of a mess as everywhere else. He saw the little wooden coffin Abby had made for him lying on the floor and his heart sank. *No. Not that...*

He picked it up and turned it over in his hand to find that the lid had been torn off and crushed; the little Abby doll inside had been stamped on and crushed into the carpet. He picked up the Abby doll and put it on the nightstand – at least it was still in one piece.

He sat down on the side of the bed and held the broken coffin in his hands. The lid was cracked along his name, the *Tony* torn in two.

"Bastards. Fucking bastards."

He didn't even have the energy to be angry. He felt too numb for that. Was this rock bottom? It sure as hell felt like it. His whole life was now in a worse mess than his apartment, and he had nobody to turn to.

The sound of his phone ringing made him jump. He answered it numbly.

"DiNozzo?" Gibbs's voice – and he sounded mad. *"I thought I made it clear you need permission to take a break."*

"You did, Boss," Tony replied quietly.

"Then get your ass back to your desk and get back to work!"

"Yes, Boss."

Why not? It wasn't as if there was anything he could do here except tidy up.

~*~

Gibbs stormed back up to his meeting with Morrow in a foul mood. He'd checked through the paperwork on DiNozzo's desk, and the information he needed was only half done. It would take him some time to complete it. Damn DiNozzo for letting him down like this! He stuck his head around the door.

"Director? That info you requested is taking longer than I thought. I'll get back to you in an hour if that's okay."

He saw Morrow's forehead wrinkle up in a gesture of annoyance. "I told SecNav we'd speak to him in MTAC in an hour."

"I'll get it done in forty-five minutes then – I'll make sure you're fully briefed before we go into MTAC."

"What's the matter – DiNozzo can't put together a simple background check?" Morrow

glanced over at him.

Gibbs felt his jaw tighten. "Somethin' like that, yeah," he growled.

Morrow turned back to his work and waved Gibbs away with his hand. They were working on a difficult project, and SecNav was breathing down their necks about it, scrutinising every move they made. Gibbs knew that Morrow was feeling the heat every bit as much as he was – probably more as he was higher up the food chain. Now was not the time for screw-ups.

Gibbs stomped back down the stairs in time to see Tony emerge from the elevator.

Gibbs strode over to him, feeling furious. "Where the hell have you been, DiNozzo?"

Tony bit on his lip, as if considering his answer, gazing at Gibbs with a hesitant expression in his eyes.

"Well?" Gibbs demanded angrily. "You knew I needed that work done by eleven."

Tony gazed at him mulishly, and Gibbs was so livid he couldn't even bring himself to head-slap him. "I repeat – where the hell have you been?"

Tony's eyes darkened, and he shrugged like a surly teenager, seemingly having no answer. Gibbs gave up – he didn't have time for this. "I'm seeing the Director in forty-five minutes – I'll do half, you do the other half, and we'd better damn well get it done in time, or I'll have your goddamn ass. Here." He slammed a file down on Tony's desk.

~*~

Tony sat down at his desk, feeling numb. He turned himself to the task at hand, unable to bring himself to look at Gibbs. He had considered telling Gibbs about the break-in at his apartment, but his boss was so angry that Tony didn't think he'd be interested in anything he had to say right now. Gibbs's fury was palpable, and Tony could feel it radiating across the room towards him.

That was tops for you. They either screwed you over, or they treated you like shit. Besides, if he told him about the break-in then he'd have to tell him why, and he wasn't prepared to do that. He didn't trust Gibbs enough to do that. He knew better than to trust a top – they always let you down in the end. His trashed apartment was proof of that.

He got the work done just in time and handed it silently to Gibbs who took it with a glare and without a 'thank you' – not that Tony was expecting one.

Gibbs gathered up the paperwork and then got up and slammed the dispatch cell phone down on Tony's desk. "Keep an eye on that – and do NOT leave your work station," Gibbs ordered. Then he strode off in the direction of MTAC.

Tony sat back in his chair, trying to process what had happened. Dana had the tapes and backup disk, so he had no leverage over her now, which meant she could say what the hell she liked to that inquiry and pin anything she wanted on him.

If he was found guilty he'd face the bullwhip for sure, and maybe even a prison sentence.

Abby's face popped up on the webcam screen, and she grinned at him and made a silly face. He smiled absently.

"You okay, Mister?" she typed. "You look really shaken up! You get bad news?"

He closed the IM box and the webcam screen too. He wasn't going to drag her into this. He had a tendency to destroy everything he touched, and he wasn't going to do that to Abby.

Maybe he could cut some kind of a deal with Dana. He might not have the tapes, but he knew their contents. If he spilled everything he knew to the investigators, and if they believed him over Dana, then there was still a chance he might be able to keep his job here. But would Gibbs stand by him? Why the hell should he? He'd only been here for two weeks; the man barely knew him.

The dispatch cell phone that Gibbs had left on his desk rang, and he picked it up. He wrote down the details with a frown; this looked serious.

He went upstairs to MTAC and poked his head around the door. Gibbs and Morrow were standing in front of a big screen, talking to someone Tony recognized as SecNav.

"Uh, Boss?" Tony whispered.

Gibbs turned sharply, glared at him, and then he strode over to the door, grabbed Tony's arm, and pushed him out into the hallway.

"Never interrupt me in MTAC unless it's important!"

"Sorry, Boss, but I think it *is* important, and I didn't know what else to do. Dispatch called – there's been a report of a disturbance at an admiral's house."

"Where are Lewis and Pacci?" Gibbs glanced over the railing at the squad room below.

"Out at a crime scene, Boss." Tony shrugged helplessly. "Should I go and check it out?"

"What are the details?"

"It's Admiral Hansen. Apparently the neighbour saw some guys going in there twenty minutes ago. Could be a break-in. Do you want me to go and investigate? I could pull a couple of agents out of the general pool to go with me."

"Hansen?" Gibbs frowned.

"Yeah." Tony showed him the address he'd written down.

Gibbs's jaw tightened. "No. Leave it," he said firmly.

"Uh, Boss – I don't know if you know this, but I did a brief search, and Admiral Hansen has access to a lot of sensitive material. He's on the defence contract team. If someone's breaking into his house..."

"I said leave it." Gibbs glared at him. "Leave it to me, DiNozzo. I'll handle it as soon as we've finished with SecNav."

"But that could be another hour and this sounded kind of urgent."

"Go back to your desk and get on with your work," Gibbs told him brusquely. Then he turned and went back into MTAC.

Tony walked slowly back down the stairs. *"Leave it to me..."* Dana had told him the exact same thing. He'd taped the conversation; it had been on the tapes she'd stolen from him.

"But Warren says he's in trouble. He thinks they're coming to kill him."

"Leave it to me, Tony," she'd purred down the phone at him. *"We need you where you are. Stay there and leave it to me. I'll handle it."*

And she hadn't. She hadn't done anything, and two hours later Warren had been found beaten to death. It had been a brutal murder, and the poor man must have suffered an agonising death. Warren had trusted him with his life; Warren had called him and begged him to help. He'd placed his life in Tony's hands, and Tony had let him down.

"Tops are all the same, Tony," his mom had told him when he was just a toddler playing at her feet. He remembered how much he loved the scent she always wore. She pulled him up onto her knee and kissed his cheek. Her hair was so soft against his face *"You can never trust them. You must always stay one step ahead and outwit them before they destroy you. Remember that, my darling boy. Remember."*

Tony remembered. He always would. For all he knew, he was being set up all over again – by Gibbs this time, instead of Dana. At the very best Gibbs didn't trust him to take care of this. Well, that worked both ways. Gibbs might not trust him, but he sure as hell didn't trust Gibbs, either. He didn't trust **any** top.

He grabbed his jacket, picked up his badge and gun, and pulled a couple of agents out of the general pool to accompany him.

Dana Morley might have screwed him over, but he'd be damned if he'd allow Gibbs to do the same. He wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

~*~

The meeting with SecNav had been tense, and Gibbs was glad when it was over, and Morrow dismissed him. He went back to the squad room – to find, yet again, that DiNozzo was missing. Where the hell did he keep going? If he'd met some top and was sneaking out for sex...Gibbs felt his stomach clench angrily at that thought. If that was the case, the kid wouldn't be able to see straight by the time he finished with him.

Gibbs strode angrily down to Abby's lab. She gave him a beaming smile, looking as happy to see him as always.

"Gibbs! I was just thinking – "

"Is Tony here?" he interrupted, although a quick glance around the lab showed that his errant agent was nowhere to be seen.

"Tony? No. Why?" Abby looked startled.

"Have you seen him at all today?"

"Not in person." She shook her head. "I mean, I saw him on the webcam..." She waved her hand at the little device on top of her computer monitor. "Is he okay? Because he looked really upset earlier."

"Upset?"

"Yeah – he was talking to me...Well, we were IMing...Uh, that's Instant Messaging...Um...Which is...Okay, you don't need to know that. Anyway, he was chatting to me and then he got a call on his cell, and he went really pale and took off. When he got back he looked even worse – like his world had come to an end, and every time I asked him if he was okay he didn't reply."

Like his world had come to an end. Gibbs had been so angry with Tony that he hadn't thought he might have a genuine reason for leaving.

"Did you ask him what's going on?" Abby asked.

"Yeah." Gibbs scratched his jaw thoughtfully.

"And?"

Gibbs felt his jaw tighten under his fingers. "He didn't reply." Then again, he'd been so furious with Tony that he couldn't really blame him for that. Damn it – had *he* screwed up here and not DiNozzo?

Abby looked worried. "Something's hinky, Gibbs. I know it."

"I'll find him. I'll fix it. Don't worry, Abs."

He pressed a kiss to her cheek and returned to the squad room. He had just sat down at his desk when the phone rang. He answered it and heard a furious voice that he recognized as belonging to Agent Fornell at the FBI. Fornell was an old adversary and occasional friend – and a top he respected, even if he had married one of Gibbs's ex-spouses.

Fornell was so furious that it took Gibbs a few minutes to figure out what the man was saying. When realization did creep in, Gibbs could hardly believe what he was hearing.

"DiNozzo did *what*?"

~*~

Tony stood beside the car like a naughty kid outside the principal's office, awaiting his fate. He was used to the feeling; he'd spent half his schooldays leaning against various walls outside various principal's offices. He used to plant his weight on one foot and tap the other foot impatiently on the wall behind him, dreading the moment he'd be called in but wanting it to happen all the same, just so he could get it over with. Now he leaned against the car, one foot tapping against the tyre behind him, waiting.

A few yards away, Fornell was busy yelling at Gibbs, and Gibbs...Well, to say his boss didn't look happy was an understatement. Gibbs was not a man who could be out-topped, and he clearly didn't like the way Fornell was talking to him right now. He made a few terse interjections but Fornell was on a roll and for the most part Gibbs was just letting him rant.

Tony wrapped his arms around his body, hugging himself. Gibbs had dismissed the agents from the general pool the minute he'd arrived, and they'd high-tailed it away without looking back, leaving Tony to face the music alone.

"Two years work ruined because your stupid dumb agent bumbled in here! Now everyone within a five mile radius knows the FBI has been tailing Hansen, thanks to Agent Useless over there."

"This part of the op is over yes, Tobias," Gibbs replied reasonably. "But you might be able to salvage the rest of it."

"You don't understand. Hansen was the best lead we had on this case, and now he's been exposed. We were going to use him to trace back to the big guys, but they won't touch him now they know we're onto him. All that work ruined because of your idiot agent."

Tony winced. Fornell was a powerful top, although nowhere near in the same league as Gibbs. This was ugly, and it was all his fault. Then again, wasn't everything? His father had certainly thought so.

"The only reason you're still standing is because you've got every right to be angry, Tobias. But we're done now," Gibbs growled. "Go salvage what you can of your op; I'll deal with my agent."

"You'd better damn well deal with him. You'd better tan his hide so hard and for so long that he won't sit comfortably for months."

Gibbs's jaw tightened. "We're done here," he said quietly.

Tony winced again. Bad enough that he was likely to face the bullwhip at the Baltimore inquiry, but it looked like he was going to get his ass tanned even sooner than that. He'd been expecting it though. In fact, it was the best case scenario. The worst case scenario was that Gibbs demanded his badge and gun and slung him out the door. Maybe he'd been wrong before; maybe **this** was rock bottom.

"I'll be speaking to your director about this, Jethro!" Fornell fumed.

"Go ahead, Tobias." Gibbs turned on his heel and marched over to the car. "Get in," he ordered Tony tersely.

Tony did as he was told and sat gazing out of the window for the most torturous twenty minutes of his life as Gibbs drove them back to the Navy Yard in complete silence. Tony cast several sideways glances at his boss, but he didn't dare speak; this was so very bad.

Gibbs parked the car, and they both got out. Gibbs gestured to Tony to follow him, which Tony did, again in complete silence. His smart mouth had deserted him for once; he couldn't joke his way out of this one. This was fast turning out to be the worst day of his entire life.

He followed Gibbs down some stairs and along a hallway he'd never been in before. They stopped outside a door at the end, and Gibbs opened it. He put a hand on Tony's shoulder, and even now, even in this most miserable of circumstances, Tony felt that little spark of electricity he always felt when Gibbs touched him, and he was warmed by it.

Gibbs ushered him inside and flicked on the light. Tony wasn't surprised to find himself in a discipline room. It was pretty much like the discipline rooms you found in most workplaces: functional, with apparatus and implements at one end and chairs at the other for witnesses. It didn't look as if it was used very often.

"You were wrong, huh?" he said, breaking the silence for the first time. Gibbs shut the door behind them and turned to Tony with a raised eyebrow. "You said I wouldn't need to know where this place was. I told you I would."

"Two weeks a record for you?" Gibbs asked quietly.

Tony bit on his lip. "No," he muttered. "One place I worked it only took me four hours."

"Figures. Sit." Gibbs put a hand on his shoulder and pushed him down onto a nearby chair.

Tony sat.

"This the lecture part?" He glanced up to find Gibbs gazing at him intently. "You can skip it if you want. I know I screwed up badly here. I mean, I know the routine. I know you have to read me my rights and go through the paperwork. Just give me the damn form to sign – I accept the punishment."

Gibbs sat down opposite him, his expression thoughtful. "Why did you disobey my order, Tony?"

Tony blinked. He'd expected Gibbs to be angrier than this somehow. "It's what I do." He shrugged. "I screw up. I told you that when you hired me."

"Must have been a reason," Gibbs said, his steely blue eyes boring holes into Tony.

"Not really. I just...I was pissed off that you didn't trust me enough to investigate a simple break-in. I mean, I've worked homicide, for God's sake! Thought I'd show you I could handle it. Didn't realize I was blundering into an FBI op." He winced. "I'm not surprised Fornell was so angry. I'd have been angry too if it was my op."

"Yeah. Me too. I knew about the Hansen op – I'd been copied in on it. That's why I told you to let me handle it."

Tony gave a bitter little laugh. "Yeah. Let you handle it. I get it. What can I say? I was an idiot. As usual. Punish me; I deserve it."

"Hmm." Gibbs gazed at him so hard it was like he was trying to look into Tony's soul. Tony shifted uncomfortably. "Anything else you want to tell me?" Gibbs asked quietly.

Tony wanted to look anywhere except into those stern blue eyes, but he couldn't tear his gaze away. He remembered being asked the same question at one of the boarding schools his father had dumped him in. A new, young principal had tried to befriend him and understand why he got into so much trouble. Tony hadn't had any answers for him. What could he say? That he missed his mom more than he could say? That he also missed being able to even talk about her with the one person who had loved her as much as he had because that person refused to hear her name mentioned? That he loved his father, however much they argued, and that the only time he got to see him was when the school called him down to talk about Tony's behaviour? No. Tony couldn't see the point of admitting any of that. It wasn't as if the principal could change anything. Talking wouldn't help; his mother would still be dead, and he and his father still wouldn't get along.

Now Gibbs was asking him something similar, and again, what was the point? He didn't want this man's pity. He didn't want to tell him how he'd been set up and used by Dana Morley and now his whole life was now on the verge of ruin as a result. Besides, there was no reason why Gibbs would believe him. It was just more evidence of what a screw-up Tony was, and he so desperately didn't want to lose this job. It was the best thing that had happened to him in years. There was still a chance the Baltimore thing wouldn't blow up,

and he could hang on in here.

"Tony?" Gibbs prompted quietly. His eyes were sincere, and Tony wanted to trust him, but a lifetime of not trusting tops was engrained in him.

"Nah." He shook his head. "There's nothing else. I'm just a screw-up. Let's get on with the punishment."

~*~

Gibbs rested his elbows on his knees and gazed at Tony thoughtfully. Tony gazed back at him from haunted green eyes. Gibbs had conducted enough interrogations to know that he wasn't hearing the whole truth – and also to know that he wasn't going to get it, either. Whatever had happened to Tony in his life had caused him to learn not to trust people – especially tops – and whatever was happening to him right now was clearly so big it was in danger of consuming him completely.

Gibbs continued staring at Tony thoughtfully. He remembered the look in Tony's eyes when he'd returned from his unauthorized break earlier. He'd been pale and clearly shaken, and Gibbs had gone over him like a steam roller instead of listening to him. Gibbs knew that his own actions were at least partly to blame for this current situation.

The look in Tony's eyes right now reminded him of the way his first ex-wife had once looked at him. She'd screwed up, and he'd spanked her, and later he'd found out that she hadn't even done what he'd spanked her for. She hadn't told him so though. She'd just taken the punishment in silence, and he hadn't realized anything was wrong because he wasn't interested in her enough. He hadn't had that sensitivity to her needs as a sub that he'd always had with Shannon, and they'd divorced soon after. If only he'd learned his lesson then, but he hadn't. He'd kept on making the same mistake, over and over again.

Atonement.

That's what he'd said to Tom Morrow, and he'd meant it.

He got to his feet. Tony stood too, looking pale but determined. Gibbs remembered what Tony had said about how he hated taking licks in the workplace discipline room, and he felt a little surge of respect for the kid. For all his flaws Tony was brave, and he'd take whatever Gibbs handed out without a murmur. Gibbs had no doubt about that.

Gibbs put a hand on Tony's shoulder and opened the door. "With me," he said curtly, pushing Tony out of the discipline room.

"Where are we going?" Tony asked anxiously. "Please, Boss." For the first time, Gibbs saw real fear in Tony's eyes. "Please don't fire me," he said. "Please."

"I said, with me." Gibbs pushed him along the hallway, up a flight of stairs, and then into an

interrogation room. Tony looked around nervously.

"Why here? Are you going to punish me in here? Or interrogate me?" He gave a scared laugh.

Gibbs shook his head. "I want you to stay here until I come to get you. You are not to leave this room – understood?"

"Not really."

Gibbs glared at him.

"I'll stay here," Tony said quietly. "Until you come and get me."

"Good. Now give me your cell phone." Gibbs held out his hand. There was a question in Tony's eyes, but Gibbs was pleased that he didn't hesitate. He reached into his jacket pocket, took out the phone, and handed it to Gibbs.

"Now wait here. I mean it. You leave, and we're done. Understood?"

Tony's eyes were wide, but he nodded.

Gibbs left the room and went into the observation room next door. He stood there for a second, watching Tony pace nervously around the room. Gibbs opened up the cell phone and flicked through the 'calls received' list. There had only been two today, and one was from him.

He re-dialled the other number and a few seconds later it was answered by a shaky, elderly voice. He hadn't expected that.

"Ma'am, this is Agent Gibbs from NCIS. I'm calling about Tony DiNozzo."

"You're calling about Tony? Is this about the burglary at his apartment this morning?"

Gibbs frowned. "Yes Ma'am," he replied, trying to make sense of this new information.

"Is Tony okay?" the old lady asked. "He looked so upset this morning, and I'm not surprised. His apartment was in such a mess. You should see it! It'll take days for him to set it right. He said it wasn't a burglary, but I think he was just trying to comfort me because I was a little scared."

Next door, Tony glanced at himself in the mirror and began smoothing his hair down repetitively.

"It's true they didn't take his lovely TV. He was so excited when he bought that – he invited me in and showed me how it all worked. I didn't really understand, but he was very happy about it, so I'm pleased they didn't take that. He said they were looking for something, but I

don't know what he meant by that. Young people these days lead such complicated lives."

"Did he call the police, Ma'am?"

"I thought you were the police, dear," she said, sounding confused. "Nobody has come to take fingerprints and so on like you see on the TV. I was expecting someone, but I'm sure you're busy."

"Yes, Ma'am. Thank you, Ma'am." He thought he'd probably got everything he needed from her, and he finished the call.

Then he stood there, gazing at Tony. Tony gazed back at him, oblivious, through the mirror.

"Just what kind of trouble are you in, DiNozzo?" Gibbs mused softly.

He studied Tony for a long time, trying to listen to what his gut was telling him. Somehow, he knew that whatever he did next would shape the future of his life.

He just had to decide what it should be.

End of Part Five

Chapter End Notes:

Friendly feedback always adored

Part Six by Xanthe

Tony gazed at himself in the mirror and dabbed at his hair with his hand, the way he always did when he was anxious. He wished Gibbs would just get it the hell over with and punish him. He deserved it, and Gibbs knew he deserved it. He'd disobeyed a direct order and ruined a massive undercover operation as a result.

"Could you be any more of an idiot, DiNozzo?" he asked himself.

He glanced around the room. Just two weeks ago he'd sat in here in his clubbing clothes, stinking of liquor and sex, with dried come on the back of his thighs, and somehow Gibbs had seen something in him worth hiring. Well, the boss had to be regretting that decision now – big time.

Maybe Gibbs was deciding whether to punish him or fire him. That would make sense. Tony's gut clenched anxiously. He loved it here. It was the only job he'd ever had where he felt that he fit in. This felt like home, and it had been a long time since he'd had a home. He'd rather take dozens of hard licks on his bare ass than be sent away.

Maybe Gibbs was going to go to the director to ask if he could take care of the punishment privately, rather than in the discipline room. Technically, anyone could witness a workplace punishment, unless the director ordered otherwise. Mostly, only the official witness from HR attended, but sometimes he'd taken his licks in front of a room full of people. He annoyed enough of his co-workers that some of them wanted to enjoy seeing him receive his comeuppance. He never gave them the satisfaction of hearing him express so much as a whimper of pain though. He'd only give his top that pleasure; in public he remained silent, even when it nearly killed him.

The worst he'd ever had was at Peoria, when he'd pissed off the Captain and taken twenty with the strap in front of a jeering crowd. He'd left soon after. It was hard to come back from that and the pain and humiliation of the event still lingered.

This would be even worse than that though. A screw-up this big meant either dismissal, or maybe as many as thirty with the strap. If it was the strap then he'd take it. He'd bear it somehow. He hoped Gibbs would do it. He didn't want that nice lady, Maureen, from HR handing it out. Maybe she wasn't in charge of discipline though. Maybe someone else in HR had that responsibility.

"I hope it's Gibbs and not HR," he said out loud, staring at himself glumly in the mirror. "Don't care how many licks I have to take as long as it's him who hands them out and not anyone else."

~*~

Gibbs gave a little grunt at Tony's words. They didn't help him make up his mind – he already knew what he was going to do – but they did confirm that he'd made the right

decision.

He put Tony's cell phone back in his pocket and was about to walk towards to the door when it opened, and Cynthia, Morrow's secretary, glanced inside.

"Oh, there you are, Agent Gibbs. Director Morrow is looking for you."

Gibbs had been expecting that, but he felt his gut clenching uncomfortably anyway. He didn't like what he was about to do to Tom Morrow, but he knew that wasn't going to stop him doing it.

"I'm not surprised," he said. "Director of the FBI been on the phone?"

"Oh, boy yes!" Cynthia made a face. "I could hear the bellowing in the next door office. I take it something bad has happened?"

"Yeah." Gibbs glanced at Tony again and then nodded. He'd made the right decision; he was sure of it.

Gibbs followed Cynthia out of the observation room and up to the director's office.

Morrow was sitting in his chair, fingers steepled together, looking royally pissed off. Morrow wasn't the kind of man who ranted and raved; he was calm, reflective, and made of pure steel beneath the genteel exterior.

He glanced up as Gibbs came into the room. Cynthia shut the door behind them, leaving them alone together.

"You've heard what happened, Jethro?" Morrow asked quietly.

Gibbs nodded. "Yeah. Spoke to Fornell about it."

"The director of the FBI is baying for blood, and I'm more than happy to give it to him. I want DiNozzo punished; thirty with the strap. I've already spoken to HR. Maureen will bring up the forms to be signed and then you can haul his ass down to the discipline room and take care of it."

"Can't do that, Director." Gibbs shrugged.

Morrow looked at him, a question in his eyes. "I know you've made it one of your rules that nobody on your team takes discipline room punishment, but this is one rule you'll have to break, Jethro. DiNozzo will take his licks in the discipline room, same as anyone else. I'm not letting you handle this privately if that's what you're going to ask."

"I'm not." Gibbs shook his head. "I can't do it because it wasn't his fault."

Morrow's eyes narrowed. "Then who the hell's fault was it?"

"Mine," Gibbs replied.

There was a long silence. Morrow stared at him. Gibbs stared back.

"Yours?" Morrow sounded frankly unbelieving. "How?" He sat back in his chair, his index finger idly tapping against his cheek.

"Forgot," Gibbs said tightly. "When DiNozzo called me out of MTAC, I still had my head in the meeting with SecNav. He said he'd had a message from Dispatch about a possible break-in at Admiral Hansen's house, so I told him to go pull a couple of agents out of the pool and check it out. I didn't register Hansen's name."

"You didn't register Hansen's name?" Morrow repeated in a dangerous tone.

"Nope. I sent DiNozzo there. Wasn't his fault. He didn't know."

Morrow stared at him for a long time. "Why are you doing this, Jethro?" he asked at last.

"Doing what, Director?"

"Lying to me."

Morrow was one of those perceptive leaders who could read everyone in his employ like a book. He knew how to motivate people and how to get the best out of them – and he definitely knew when they were lying. Gibbs was sorry to have to do this to him. The man had his utmost respect but more than that he was a friend, and he didn't deserve this. Gibbs had made his choice though, and he was sticking to it. Protecting Tony was more important than his friendship with Morrow right now. He didn't know why, he just knew that was the case – he felt it in his gut.

"Not lying, sir."

"We both know you are."

They stared at each other some more; a powerful top and a powerful sub, both of them at the top of their game. Gibbs knew he'd win in the end; he always did.

"Where is DiNozzo?" Morrow asked.

Gibbs shrugged. "Don't know, sir."

"You don't know?"

Gibbs shook his head. He couldn't allow Morrow to call Tony up here. There was no way Tony would lie to save his own ass – on the contrary, he'd no doubt be all too eager to offer it up.

Morrow sat back in his chair. "You're playing a dangerous game, Jethro,"

"Not playing at all, sir," Gibbs replied. "I screwed up. I sent DiNozzo out for a couple of hours to get him out of the firing line – I knew he'd be blamed, and it wasn't his fault."

"And you're sticking to that, are you?"

"Yup." Gibbs nodded.

"The FBI wants my assurance that the matter has been dealt with," Morrow said slowly.

"Yes, sir. I'll bet they do."

"Which means someone has to be punished."

Gibbs gave a wry grin. "Yes, sir. I know."

"Do you really want to make me do this, Jethro?" Morrow asked.

Gibbs shook his head ruefully. "Honestly, Tom? No. I really don't, but I don't see you have a choice."

"You mean you've boxed me very effectively into a corner."

Gibbs felt a pang of sympathy for the man's dilemma, but he wasn't going to give in. He knew he was doing the right thing.

"That's just the way it is, Tom," he said quietly.

Morrow glared at him. "You really are a bastard."

Gibbs gave a twisted little smile. "Yeah. I know."

There was a long silence.

Then, eventually, Morrow cleared his throat. "All right - but not in public. The entire Navy Yard will grind to a halt if people know the legendary Leroy Jethro Gibbs is taking licks downstairs. We'll do it here, in private. Just the one witness."

He slammed his hand down on his intercom. "Cynthia – get Maureen from HR up here – and tell her to make a detour to the discipline room on her way and bring the strap with her."

He cut off Cynthia's startled response and got up.

"I won't forget this, Jethro," he said, taking off his jacket. "I don't like having my hand forced, and I definitely do not like being lied to and played by someone I count as a friend."

"If it's any consolation, you are gonna get a chance to take it out on my ass, Tom," Gibbs pointed out.

"It's not. I don't like operating this way." Morrow removed his cuff links and placed them carefully on the table. "Well, maybe it's some consolation, you ornery bastard."

Gibbs grinned. "See, that's the spirit."

He watched as Morrow rolled up his shirt sleeves, as meticulous as always, taking his time. Damn it, this was going to hurt. He hoped DiNozzo was worth it – but he knew, instinctively, that he was.

Maureen arrived a few seconds later, and Morrow gestured that she place the strap on the conference table in the centre of the room. She did so and then placed the paperwork on Morrow's desk before turning to go.

"Stay," Morrow ordered. "We need a witness."

She looked startled and glanced from Morrow to Gibbs and back again before realization showed on her face.

"You're disciplining Agent Gibbs?" she asked incredulously, as if her worldview didn't allow for such a thing.

"He's giving me no choice," Morrow replied tightly.

"But...I thought the strap was for Agent DiNozzo. Rumours have been flying around the building for the past hour. I knew he'd be trouble, but Agent Gibbs insisted on hiring him and..." She trailed off. "It's not for Agent DiNozzo?"

Morrow shook his head.

"It was my screw-up, Maureen," Gibbs told her gently.

"But...the director can't punish *you*," she said, her mouth opening and closing in shock.

Gibbs shrugged. "I'm subject to the same rules as everyone else here."

"The FBI is baying for retribution," Morrow said tersely. "And Gibbs has volunteered his ass to take it."

"But if it's not his fault then you can't let him take it!" Maureen protested.

Gibbs was flattered that she saw him as so much the top that he could do no wrong in her eyes and sorry that she was going to have to witness this. That realization suddenly clearly occurred to her too, and she paled.

"I can't do this!"

"Someone has to do it," Gibbs said implacably. "I'd prefer it to be you, Maureen." He gave her his most encouraging smile and saw her resolve strengthen. Poor woman — none of this was her fault. Gibbs turned back to Morrow. "Where do you want me, sir?"

"Don't try and take charge, Gibbs," Morrow growled at him. "This is my show, even if you do seem to have effectively stage-managed the whole event for me."

He filled in the paperwork with several sharp, stabbing flourishes of his pen and then slammed it down on the desk in front of Gibbs. "Sign," he ordered.

Gibbs did as he was told. Morrow had written in the number of licks he'd be getting — thirty with the strap. He hadn't taken that many since he was a teenager, but he could handle it. It had been a long time since he'd taken discipline, but Mike Franks had been a hard taskmaster, and he'd handed out a couple of punishments to Gibbs when he was a probie. Well deserved punishments too, looking back. Both he and Franks were old-school tops and that meant they occasionally locked horns. Gibbs was used to the chain of command though; he'd had it drummed into him very effectively at boot camp back in his Marine Corps days and it wasn't a lesson he'd ever forgotten.

He didn't forget it now, either. He might not like this, but it was necessary. He stood there obediently, waiting for Morrow's orders.

Morrow picked up the strap and gestured to the table. "Over there," he said grimly.

Gibbs moved his hand to his belt. He didn't need to be told the punishment would take place on bare skin. As a society, they didn't have a great taboo about nudity. Some tops displayed their subs in a permanently nude state, and Gibbs was used to casual nudity on the streets, and in bars and cafes, as well as at private dinner parties.

His own partial nudity didn't bother him, either. He was a Marine. It might not be easy to go ass up in front of two submissives, but his own pride wasn't the issue here.

Atonement.

He pushed his pants and underwear down and leaned over the conference table. He deliberately didn't look at Maureen's stricken face. This wasn't about her — she was just caught in the crossfire. He'd find a way to mend his relationship with Morrow though; he owed the man that.

He felt Morrow's hand on the small of his back, pressing him down further. He fought down the tippy pride that hated being made to submit. This was his choice; he had to bear everything that came with it and bear it willingly.

He knew Morrow was forcing him to submit fully to his discipline, reminding him exactly

who was in charge here. He'd do the same if it were him. Morrow kept pushing him until his torso was flat against the table. Gibbs angled his head to one side, grasped the edges of the table in his hands, and found the acceptance he needed to comply with Morrow's demands. He was offering himself up to this freely and of his own volition. He had to find the strength to make the sacrifice and not resent it. There was no point doing this if he took it out on Morrow or DiNozzo later.

Atonement.

No pain would ever be enough to atone for not being there when Shannon and Kelly had needed him most, but he thought of the three ex-wives whose lives he'd screwed up. He remembered the sad look in Stephanie's eyes when she'd handed him back his collar. She had been a good woman – she'd deserved better. He hadn't been a very good husband to her or to the two other Shannon look-alikes who'd come before her.

Then he thought of Joanne and her never-ending pain. He wasn't responsible for that, but he hadn't always been very patient with her; he'd only learned that in the last few years and it wasn't something that came easy to him.

He felt the cool leather strap resting on his skin and braced himself for what was coming next.

He thought of Tony, returning to the squad room after someone had broken into his apartment and violated it. He thought of Tony standing downstairs while he yelled at him, being too resentful, or afraid, or too full of distrust to tell him what had happened.

Something was going on with Tony. He'd known that the minute he met him, and the top in him wanted to reach out to the sub in Tony and help him. He'd felt the exact same way about Ducky, and then Stan and Abby too before he'd collared them.

Was that what he was intending to do? Collar Tony? Was that why he was doing this? No. He wouldn't buy Tony's neck with this. He would give it to Tony as a gift, without strings attached.

Morrow was making him wait a long time for the first stroke. Gibbs had no doubt at all that his boss was doing it on purpose, and he forced himself to accept that he had no control over this. He was in Morrow's hands now. He could only submit and endure.

He heard Morrow's arm move and then there was a whistling sound, a rush of air, and the first stroke landed. It hurt like hell, and Gibbs could feel all of Morrow's pent-up anger in it. Morrow was furious with him for making him do this, and he was going to make every single stroke count. Gibbs hadn't expected anything less. There was an agonising wait for the next lash but when it fell it was as painful as the first.

Morrow's strokes were slow, measured and forceful; typical of the man handing them out. Gibbs kept his eyes open throughout, gazing sightlessly at the wooden surface area of the desk under his nose and the wall to one side. He didn't make a sound – not so much as a

grunt from the force of the blows. He wouldn't make this harder on either Maureen or Morrow than it had to be, and besides, he had his toppy pride to consider.

Thirty strokes with a thick, hard, workplace strap was a lot. It wasn't a punishment he'd hand out to any of his own subs lightly – probably not at all. Yet he didn't regret his decision. Apart from anything else, he thought tops should know what it felt like occasionally. They shouldn't hand it out unless they could also take it, and they should always be aware of the process of undergoing punishment, in order to gauge what was appropriate for their own subs. A little reminder of the reality of taking a hard punishment would do him no harm and would only hone his own instincts as a top even more.

He welcomed that knowledge as Morrow strapped him ferociously. He could feel the marks being placed on his skin and the heat and pain building up in his ass. Morrow was taking a methodical approach and laying on the strokes in a pattern, one under the other, before returning to the top again.

Gibbs tried to analyse the effect this had, so he'd remember when using it on a sub. It was less intense than taking a stroke on the same place, over and over again, but it spread the pain out until the entire surface area of his ass felt like it was burning up.

Fifteen. He was only halfway through. He'd taken bullets and blows, but offering yourself up for punishment was its own kind of discipline. There was the constant struggle not to move away, or stand up, or avoid the strokes in some way.

Twenty. Ten more to go. Morrow was now laying down stripes on areas that had already had two before, and Gibbs was acutely aware of how much more that hurt. The pain had built in such a way that there was no respite even between strokes. Gibbs dug deep, determined to neither express nor show how much it hurt. He suspected Morrow would have liked that, because he knew from handing out punishments himself how cathartic it felt, but the top in him refused to give his boss that.

Atonement.

He felt a little wave of euphoria that he didn't think was anything to do with the endorphins flooding through his body. By offering himself up in Tony's place, he had found some little part of the top inside who had been lost to him since Shannon's death. He knew it would be a slow process and that he couldn't hope to put all the pieces of himself back together in one go, but he was aware that by taking this punishment for Tony he'd made some progress.

Thirty.

The relentless sound of leather on skin stopped but the fiery pain remained, radiating out in agonising waves from his ass.

"Get up," Morrow ordered. He sounded grim, but Gibbs didn't blame him for that.

Gibbs got up slowly, with great control, and rearranged his clothing. Maureen was standing with one hand on the door, looking like a frightened rabbit. He managed to shoot her what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

"Here." Morrow crossed the room and handed Maureen the strap and the paper Gibbs had sighed. "See that's faxed to the Director of the FBI immediately," Morrow ordered. Maureen nodded. Gibbs saw that her hand was shaking where she was holding the piece of paper. "You can go," Morrow told her shortly, and she ran out of the door the second the words left his mouth.

Gibbs did up his belt and turned to see Morrow rolling down his shirt sleeves.

"You can go too," Morrow told him curtly.

Gibbs nodded and walked towards the door. He had his fingers on the handle when Morrow spoke quietly behind him.

"Was it worth it?"

Gibbs paused and then turned back. "Yes."

"What is DiNozzo to you? A sub in distress? I know you can't resist those."

Gibbs laughed out loud. "Oh, I'm not that easily played."

Morrow gazed at him steadily and then sighed. "No. No you're not, Jethro. But what makes you so sure DiNozzo was worth the price you just paid."

"My gut," Gibbs replied.

"Ah, the famous Gibbs gut. And is it always right?"

"When I listen to it, yes. When I don't let ego get in the way." Gibbs gave a tight little smile.

"And what does your gut say about what you just did to me and our friendship?" Morrow asked quietly.

Gibbs saw the dejected look in the other man's eyes. He felt betrayed – and with good reason. He walked back over to where Morrow was standing and took a deep breath.

"Tom – I'm sorry," he said softly, putting every ounce of sincerity he possessed into the word he so rarely ever spoke.

Morrow's eyes flickered in acknowledgement. "Careful, Jethro - that's a sign of weakness."

"Not between friends," Gibbs replied.

Morrow stared at him for a long time – and then he broke. "Come here, you bastard." He wrapped an arm around Gibbs's shoulder and pulled him in for a brief hug. "You ever do anything like that to me again, and I'll fire your ass, not tan it," Morrow growled into his ear. Gibbs grinned and patted his friend's back, glad they weren't going to part on bad terms. Morrow released him. "Seriously, what is it with DiNozzo? What do you see in him that makes you feel this strongly about protecting him?"

Gibbs shrugged. "Something in his eyes."

Morrow snorted. "Oh, and you can always tell what's going on in a sub's head by what's in their eyes, can you? No wait – you're the great Leroy Jethro Gibbs – of course you can."

Gibbs laughed out loud. "I can tell what's going on in yours right now, Tom."

"Really?" Morrow raised a challenging eyebrow.

"Yeah – you're thinking I'm so damn annoying you'd like to throw me back over that table and give me another thirty."

It was Morrow turn to laugh out loud. "Don't tempt me, Jethro. Go – go on! Get out of here before I do just that."

Gibbs didn't need telling twice. He walked out of the room, head held high, after one of the most painful and humiliating experiences of his life. Every single step sent waves of fiery pain radiating out from his punished ass but nobody watching would have known.

He was Leroy Jethro Gibbs. He was a Marine. He was a top. He had his pride. And he'd be damned if he let anyone know just how much he was hurting right now.

~*~

As the minutes ticked by, Tony became more and more apprehensive. He wanted to get up, yank open the door, and walk out, and several times he stood up and tried to do just that – but something always stopped him.

He wondered where the hell Gibbs was and what fate was being decided for him. Finally, after a long, excruciating wait, the door opened, and Gibbs walked into the room. Tony stood up.

"Have you been to see the director?" he asked anxiously.

Gibbs glared at him. He seemed a little red in the face and there were little droplets of sweat beading his hairline. "Where the hell else do you think I've been all this time, DiNozzo?"

"I thought so. Is he mad? What did he say? Is he firing me?"

Gibbs ignored him. He grabbed hold of Tony's hand and placed his cell phone in it. Tony shoved the phone into his pocket.

"You are firing me, aren't you? Do you want my badge and gun?"

"No, I'm not firing you, DiNozzo, but let's get one thing straight." Gibbs leaned in, so close that Tony could feel the heat radiating off him. "You ever – and I mean *ever* disobey me again, then you'll be outta here before you draw another breath. Got it?"

"Yes, Boss," Tony said, relief flooding through him at the news he wasn't going to be fired. "Sorry, Boss," he added contritely.

"Never apologise," Gibbs told him.

"Sign of weakness. I know." Tony sighed. "But I screwed up, Boss, and I *am* sorry."

Gibbs gave a little grunt. "Good. You should be. And yes, you did screw up, DiNozzo, and boy, when you screw up, do you *ever* screw up. That's over now though. You won't screw up like that again."

"How do you know that?" Tony asked. "I mean, I'm me – it's bound to happen again."

Gibbs gave him a glare so intense that Tony took a step back in alarm.

"Oh, I know you'll make mistakes, and I'll kick your ass for every single one, believe me, but you won't ever screw up like that again."

He said it with such total and utter confidence that Tony almost believed it could be true.

"I won't?" he asked uncertainly.

Gibbs shook his head firmly. "No. You won't."

"Because you say so?" Tony raised an eyebrow.

Gibbs nodded curtly. "Now you're starting to get it, DiNozzo."

"It's that simple?"

"Yes. It's that simple. You screwed up but you learned from this. You learned that you're part of my team, and I stand by my team even when they screw up. And you learned that I'm your goddamn boss and your ass is mine. So from now on, you don't so much as piss without my say so."

"Yes, Boss," Tony said quietly. He felt a glow of warmth at the knowledge that Gibbs must have argued his case with the director. Gibbs must see something in him if he was prepared

to fight for him.

“Good. Now come with me.”

Tony trailed along behind Gibbs. He was aware of people scuttling away from them and casting worried glances in their direction. It looked like word of what he’d done had got around. It always happened, wherever he went. He made some monumental screw-up and got a bad reputation. He was always the bad boy – had been at school, at college, and in every place he’d ever worked. He wouldn’t mind if he enjoyed the role more, but he honestly didn’t.

They got back to the squad room, and Gibbs grabbed a box of files from behind his desk and dumped it on Tony's. "Background checks. Get to work on them."

Tony stared at him. "I don't understand." Gibbs raised an eyebrow. "Uh...I mean, I'll get on them, Boss, but aren't you punishing me at all? I mean, I thought we'd be going back to the discipline room for sure."

"I thought I told you, DiNozzo – nobody on my team ends up in the discipline room."

"Yes, Boss. But..."

Gibbs silenced him with a glare. "It's finished, DiNozzo. The matter is closed. You screwed up, but you won't disobey my orders again. Let's move on."

"Like that? No punishment?" Tony couldn't believe what he was hearing. He was never this lucky, and this had been one monumental screw-up on his part. Hell, even he thought he deserved to be punished for it.

"No punishment," Gibbs confirmed. "'Cept this." He reached out and slapped the back of Tony's head – hard. Tony gave a little squeak of surprise and then his belly flooded with the warm feeling he always got whenever Gibbs head-slapped him. "Now, I gave you some work to do – so do it."

"Yes, Boss." Tony sat down, feeling bewildered but relieved. He had no idea what had just happened, but he wasn't going to turn down the free pass he'd somehow been given.

He watched Gibbs out of the corner of his eye as his boss worked for the rest of the day. Gibbs seemed tired, and he was slower than usual, but he didn't sit down once. He also didn't let up on him – he kept Tony at it until late and only allowed him to leave when he'd completed all the work in the box.

Tony dreaded going home, so he was almost sorry when Gibbs finally dismissed him. He let himself into his apartment building with a sinking heart, knowing the mess that awaited him in his apartment.

He stopped to collect his mail and began sorting through it as he walked up the stairs. Most

of it looked like bills...but there was one official-looking white envelope. He opened it and stopped to read the letter as he stood on the stairs.

Dear Mr. DiNozzo,

You are hereby called to present yourself before the inquiry panel investigating various irregularities within Baltimore PD. Please ensure...

He skimmed through the rest, his heart beating fast. No wonder Dana had chosen today to steal the tapes from him. Things were moving far faster than he had anticipated. He was being called to testify in five days time; he had less than a week.

The letter warned that he might be required to attend more than one session of the inquiry. He knew there was no way Gibbs would give him the time off unless he told his boss what was going on. And if he told Gibbs what was going on then there was no way Gibbs would want to keep him on his team, so he was doomed either way.

He stuffed the letter into his pocket and went back down the stairs. He drove back to the Navy Yard, sat down at his desk, and typed up his letter of resignation. It was ironic that it should come to this, so soon after his relief at not being fired, but it wasn't an irony he was in the mood to appreciate right now.

He'd leave on his own terms though. Maybe he'd go on the run. That seemed to be all that was left to him now. His apartment was trashed and his career was in tatters. All that was facing him was Dana Morley's final coup de grace, and he was damned if he'd give her the satisfaction of delivering it. Better to go renegade now and see how far away he could get before they eventually caught up with him.

He stuffed the letter in an envelope and went downstairs to HR to deliver it.

He had thought that everyone would have gone home, but the door was ajar and a light was on in the HR office. Tony knocked on the door and poked his head around it. Maureen was sitting at her desk, tapping away on her keyboard. She glanced up, and her lips thinned in distaste when she saw him. He didn't know why she disliked him so much, but he was used to people not getting him, so he ignored it.

"Uh...didn't realize anyone would still be here. I came to deliver this." He put the letter on her desk. She glanced at it coolly. "It's my letter of resignation," he told her. Her eyes widened in an expression of disbelief, and she looked like she was about to explode. "What? I thought you'd be pleased!" he protested. "You've hated me since the minute Gibbs hired me and now I'm going, so you can stop acting like I'm a nasty smell you've got caught up your nose."

"You really are an ungrateful little shit," she snapped.

He stared at her, aghast. What the hell had he done to deserve **that**? "I'm many things, but ungrateful? I don't think so. I'm damn grateful for the opportunity Gibbs gave me here,

but I'm only going to cause trouble for him so it's best I move on before I drag him or anyone else into my problems."

"Fine." She grabbed the letter and threw it into her in-tray. "Go. Run out like you always do. I've seen your resume remember, DiNozzo. What's the longest you've ever stayed anywhere? Two years?"

He gave a little grunt, feeling winded. "About that," he agreed.

"So the two weeks you've spent here will be the shortest," she snapped. "You must be proud of yourself."

"What the hell does it matter to you? It's my life," he snapped back. "And you don't have a clue what –"

"No, *you* don't have a clue," she interrupted angrily. "When I think of what Gibbs did for you today, and you have the cheek to stand here and..." She trailed off, looking annoyed with herself.

"What Gibbs did for me? What did Gibbs do for me today, Maureen?" Tony asked, surprised.

"Nothing. It doesn't matter. Go home, DiNozzo. I'll make sure your resignation is processed tomorrow. I presume you aren't working out your notice? I mean, that's why you've crept down here tonight, isn't it? So you don't have to face Gibbs tomorrow and explain yourself to him. Were you even planning on telling him? Or were you just going to run out?"

Tony shook his head. "You don't know the full story, Maureen. It's better this way, believe me."

It was. It was better for all of them if he left without saying goodbye. He couldn't face Abby's tears, or Ducky's disappointment – and most of all he couldn't face Gibbs's disgust.

"I told Gibbs he shouldn't hire me, and I was right. You were there; you heard me."

"Yes, I was there, and I told him he shouldn't have hired you, either, but he did. Now go, DiNozzo. It's fine. I'll take care of it; I'll tell Gibbs tomorrow as you're not sub enough to face him."

That stung! Tony glanced at his letter of resignation in her in-tray, where she'd thrown it, and he caught sight of a document underneath. It was a standard punishment form – he knew them well enough as he'd signed plenty of them. What caught his eye was the name on it.

Leroy Jethro Gibbs.

His chest felt suddenly tight. "What did you mean, Maureen?" he asked quietly. "What did

you mean when you said Gibbs did something for me?"

She pursed her lips tightly together. "I can't tell you. It's confidential."

Tony remembered the little beads of sweat on Gibbs's forehead earlier, and how he hadn't sat down for the rest of the day. He'd been moving more slowly than usual too; he was usually such an energetic guy.

"What happened in the director's office?" he pressed. "What did Gibbs do?"

She shook her head mutely, and he did the only thing he could in the circumstances; he reached into her in-tray and pulled out the punishment form.

"You can't read that – it's confidential!" she protested, but he ignored her as he scanned the document quickly.

Thirty? Gibbs had taken thirty strokes of the strap for him? But why? It made no sense. He'd given Gibbs no explanation for his disobedience and provided him with no reason to protect him in this way. Gibbs hadn't even tried to use this as leverage against him; he hadn't come back down after and told Tony what he'd done. He hadn't held it over his head and tried to make Tony feel guilty and obligated. He hadn't even mentioned it. What the hell was going on?

Tony scanned the punishment form again – maybe he'd got this wrong, maybe it wasn't Gibbs who'd taken the strapping...but no: Gibbs's details were at the top of the form – Gibbs's name in full, his job title, and his home address. And there was Gibbs's familiar scrawled signature at the bottom of the form, confirming that he accepted the punishment.

Tony felt dazed. He put the form back in Maureen's in-tray and took his letter of resignation out.

"I might need to reconsider this," he told her, slipping it into his pocket.

"You do that," she said tightly.

"I didn't know." He shook his head. "And I don't understand. Why did he do it, Maureen?"

She shrugged. "He's Gibbs."

She said it like that explained everything, but he still didn't understand. So Gibbs was a good investigator, a powerful top, and scary as all hell, but that didn't explain why he'd lie to protect Tony's ass, take a whipping for it, and not want anything in return. Tops always wanted something in return, even if it was just sex, and Gibbs had never shown the slightest interest in claiming sexual favours from him.

He left the room without saying another word. He got into his car and drove off, trying to figure out what this was about, but it just went around and around in circles in his head. It

didn't add up. It made no sense.

He drove around for a little while, trying to avoid the obvious, but in the end, he knew there was only one way to find the answer.

He turned his car around and headed for Gibbs's house.

~*~

Gibbs went upstairs when he got home and changed out of his work clothes. He went into the bathroom and glanced over his shoulder to take a look at the damage in the mirror. It was bad. The skin was purple and bruised, and he could see the outline of several strap marks, raised at the edges in a darker shade of purple. Sitting would be extremely painful for the next couple of days and to be avoided whenever possible.

Gibbs never liked leaving marks on his submissives unless he thought they needed it; some subs enjoyed having the marks to look at, like they were a badge of honour. Shannon had always enjoyed that, but then he'd mostly only given her pleasure spankings. There had rarely been any need for punishment, and it wasn't really a part of their dynamic. He could only remember it happening on a couple of occasions, and it had been tough on both of them. Other subs needed marks simply to focus their minds on the punishment for a few hours after – or even a couple of days; his 2nd ex-wife had been like that.

Gibbs liked seeing his marks on his subs, but he preferred bite marks to strap marks. He did like seeing the imprint of his hand for a few hours after a spanking, but a strap mark never did much for him. He knew how to mark his subs in ways most designed to achieve what he wanted for them, but he rarely ever left marks that lasted more than a day or so, unless a sub really needed grounding or had behaved spectacularly badly.

His own ass would be marked for days; he could see that. But then this had been a formal punishment, in the workplace, not a private matter between top and sub. When he punished his subs he could use his own discretion; Tom Morrow had been constrained by legalities and the necessity of making this a punishment that would satisfy even the FBI. Gibbs gave a wry grunt; he was pretty sure the FBI would be satisfied to hear that Leroy Jethro Gibbs of all people had taken the rap for today's failure.

Gossip like this would spread like wildfire and had no doubt gone all around NCIS, the FBI, and all the other federal agencies by now. Gibbs didn't give a damn about that. He'd made the decision and stood by it, and if anyone at the FBI or anywhere else wanted to make something of it, he wouldn't have any trouble making them regret it.

Gibbs found some cream he'd used on his subs in the past and applied it to his own ass. It hurt like crazy, but he was Marine enough to suck it up and do what had to be done.

He changed into some loose sweats and went down to his basement to work on his boat. He needed the rhythm of spending time on the boat tonight. It had been one hell of a day, and

he needed to touch base with himself, calm himself, and lose himself in the grain of the wood.

He clambered onto the prow of the boat and began sanding her down. He was in too much pain to manage anything more complicated than sanding tonight, but there were always areas that benefited from some sanding, and he'd been neglecting it of late.

He got into a smooth, steady rhythm, and felt the pressures of the day start to lift. He was worried about DiNozzo. The kid was clearly struggling with something, but Gibbs knew instinctively that the newest sub in his life was half-feral. It was as if he'd been tame once, but had been kicked so often and so hard that he didn't trust anyone anymore. He'd rub up against your legs and charm you with his good looks and bright eyes. He'd even roll over, show you his belly, and invite you to give it a rub – but woe betide you if you took him up on the invitation, because Gibbs had no doubt that you'd feel his teeth sinking into your hand the minute you did.

He didn't know why Tony had such a big issue with trusting tops, but instinctively he knew the best way to deal with it was to be consistent, to show Tony he could handle him, and not to pressure him into anything. If Tony felt he'd been cornered then he was likely to claw his way out and run away into the night, never to be seen again – and that thought made Gibbs's gut clench. He didn't want that to happen to Tony. There was something in the kid; something brilliant and beautiful, something kind and loyal and brave, but Tony tried so hard to hide it. Gibbs had no idea why, but he hoped to find out, one day.

He wouldn't force it though. He would be patient and allow Tony to come to him.

~*~

Tony pulled up outside Gibbs's house and sat there for a moment, looking at the front door. Then, finally, he shook himself. There was no point sitting out here; he had to go in there, face this, and find out why Gibbs had done what he'd done.

"If he thinks he can buy me," he muttered resentfully to himself. "If he thinks he can use this to manipulate me and put a collar around my neck..."

His stomach flipped at that thought, and he had no idea why. He pushed the feeling down. If Gibbs had wanted to manipulate him, he could easily have done so by now. There was no reason to wait but instead he'd remained mute on the subject. Also, Maureen had looked genuinely mortified about betraying the confidence of her job and allowing him to find out that Gibbs had taken that strapping for him.

Tony stood outside the front door, hesitating. He'd never been here before. Finally, he knocked and then waited. There was no movement inside the house. The hall light was on, but he couldn't hear anyone inside. He knocked again, but again there was no reply. Tony put his hand on the door handle, and, much to his surprise, it turned and the door opened.

Tony paused; this was weird. Did Gibbs know that he'd left the place unlocked? He drew his gun and edged cautiously into the house; maybe his boss was in trouble.

He hesitated in the hallway, trying to get his bearings, and heard a faint noise coming from below; must be a basement. He edged along the hallway to a door at the far end and placed his hand silently on it.

"It's open!" a voice called out before he had a chance to turn the handle; Gibbs's voice.

Tony put his gun back in its holster, took a deep breath, and then pushed the door open, wondering what on earth he'd find behind it.

He stood there for a moment, gazing down into the main body of the basement. A flight of stairs was in front of him and...of all the things he might have expected Gibbs to keep in his basement, a half-built boat really wasn't one of them.

Gibbs looked up. "See you let yourself in, DiNozzo."

"Sorry...door was open."

"Always is," Gibbs replied with a shrug.

He was wearing a pair of loose grey sweats which was sensible in the circumstances; Tony often did the same after a hard punishment. He looked at the man intently, but Gibbs showed absolutely no sign of having taken thirty hard licks from the strap earlier in the day. He was clambering over the prow of the boat, sanding it deftly, looking completely comfortable. Damn it, the man wasn't even wincing!

Tony knew from his own experience how much a formal punishment from a workplace strap hurt. He'd taken a few licks in his time and spent the evening after lying face down on his couch with an ice-pack on his ass. He envied Gibbs his sheer willpower in not giving in to the pain.

"You comin' down, or are you gonna stand up there all night?" Gibbs asked, not even looking up from his work.

Tony walked slowly down the stairs and then stopped a few steps from the bottom and sat down, unsure where to begin. He'd been thinking about how to handle this, but now he was here all he could do was blurt it out.

"I know," he said.

Gibbs glanced up, one eyebrow raised. "You know what, DiNozzo?"

"I know, Gibbs!" Tony said angrily, not in a mood to be jerked around tonight. "I know what you did today. I went back to the office...I saw...I found out..." He paused; he didn't want to get Maureen into trouble. "I saw the punishment form with your name on it," he said

quietly.

“Uh-huh.” Gibbs went back to his sanding as if nothing had happened.

“That’s it? That’s all you have to say? Christ, Gibbs – you took thirty strokes of the strap for me. You lied for me! You covered for me! And then you didn’t say a damn word to me, so I didn’t even know you’d done it. It makes no sense. Why would you do that? Why?”

Gibbs put down his sander and slowly clambered off the boat. He walked over to where Tony was sitting and stood in front of him.

“Why?” Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, damn it! Why?”

Gibbs gazed at him thoughtfully. “Seems to me that you’ve been punished a lot in your life, Tony, and not always for things that were your fault. You said so in your job interview.”

“What the hell does that matter? This **was** my fault. You know it, and I know it. I deserved those thirty licks today.”

Gibbs made an impatient motion with his head. “Sometimes you’ve taken punishments you didn’t deserve because you’re trying to fit in and make friends. Maybe it’s a trick you picked up at school. I saw on your resume that you moved around a lot and went to several different boarding schools; must have been hard to keep picking yourself up and making new friends.”

“It was fine. I was used to it,” Tony muttered. “It has absolutely nothing to do with what we’re talking about.”

Gibbs grinned at him. “Okay. Then you took a few undeserved punishments in various jobs too – you took the blame for things that weren’t always your fault, hoping it’d get people to like you, show them that you were a team player.”

Tony glared at him. “I **am** a team player. I always have been.”

“I know.” Gibbs shrugged. “And as you said at your job interview, sometimes – and far too often I suspect – you take one for the team.”

“So?” Tony asked, still feeling confused.

Gibbs leaned towards him, so that he was suddenly very close indeed. “So I thought that maybe it was time the team took one for you, DiNozzo,” he said softly.

Tony stared at him. Gibbs seemed a little blurry, like he was looking at him through water. Tony brushed his hand across his eyes and was surprised when it came away wet. He swallowed hard and looked down at his feet, blinking rapidly.

He heard Gibbs move away and go back over to his boat and then a gentle rasping sound as he resumed sanding again. Tony leaned his head against the banister, closed his eyes, and allowed the sound to wash over him. There was something so rhythmically soothing about it. He stayed that way for a long time, not speaking.

Finally, after about half an hour, he opened his eyes, stood up, and reached into his pocket for the letter from Internal Affairs that he'd received in the mail earlier.

He went over to where Gibbs was working on the boat and silently handed him the letter.

End Part Six

Chapter End Notes:

Friendly feedback always adored

Part Seven by Xanthe

Gibbs felt a sense of satisfaction as he took the letter and opened it. He read it through and then glanced up at Tony. The kid looked pale and shaken, but there was a glimmer of something in his eyes that Gibbs had never seen before. Hope maybe? Or maybe it was just a glint of fledgling trust in those green depths.

“Why does Internal Affairs want to talk to you, Tony?”

Tony sighed. “It’s a long story.”

“I’m not goin’ anywhere.”

“Okay, but it’ll take a while. You might want to sit down.”

“I don’t think so,” Gibbs growled.

“Oh. Right. Yeah.” Tony made a face. “Sorry. Man, thirty with the strap! That has to be hurting.”

Gibbs slapped the back of his head. “Ya think, DiNozzo?”

Tony grinned and looked happier than he’d done all day. “Okay...so I worked my ass off at Baltimore PD, and one day the chief detective in homicide, Dana Morley, asked me to be on her team. I was flattered.” He paused and glanced at Gibbs. “Dana’s one of those tops any sub would be flattered to be noticed by. She’s beautiful – tall, long dark hair, deep brown eyes, amazing body, and she oozed this dangerous, sensual kind of toppiness. It was like you knew she’d be bad for you, but you couldn’t help wanting to go there anyway.”

“Oh yeah.” Gibbs nodded. “I know the kind.”

“Well...I’d only been in the department a few days when she made a pass at me. Before long she was topping me on a regular basis.”

Gibbs ignored the clenching feeling he got in his gut when he thought of Tony in another top’s bed and made an impatient movement with his head that Tony should continue.

“What I didn’t know was that she was also in a serious relationship with my partner, Billy Reid.”

“They setting you up for something?” Gibbs asked quietly.

Tony’s eyes flashed. “Yes – but obviously I didn’t know that then. Something didn’t feel right though. It turns out they’d targeted me on purpose because of my record for screwing up. The department was investigating a drug cartel – a very wealthy and sophisticated gang who had committed a few murders as object lessons to anyone who crossed them. We managed to get one of our guys into the gang – undercover. His name was Doug Warren.”

Tony paused and wrapped his arms around his body. Gibbs knew instinctively that this next bit was going to be tough for him.

“I was appointed as Warren’s handler. Warren was a good cop, and he did a good job for us. Too good – it cost him his life.”

Gibbs raised an eyebrow. “Someone in the department was dirty.”

“Yeah – and they couldn’t afford for Warren to bring the cartel down when they were taking such big payoffs to turn a blind eye. Warren got too close, and one day he called me and said they were onto him. He begged me to pull him out, and I told him we’d send our people over to extract him. I told him to hang on; I said we’d be there soon, and that he’d be safe.” Tony’s voice cracked.

Gibbs stayed silent; there was nothing he could say that would make this any easier.

“So, I told Dana – I called her and asked her to give the order to extract him, and she told me she’d take care of it. I asked if I could go – I liked Doug, and he knew me. I thought it was my duty to be part of the extraction team, but she wouldn’t let me. She said she’d handle it. She ordered me not to go.”

Just like today. He’d ordered Tony to stay behind, but Tony hadn’t trusted him enough to obey the order – and now he knew why.

Tony took a deep breath. “She didn’t do it, Gibbs. She didn’t send anyone. They found Doug’s body a few hours later – he’d been beaten so badly I hardly recognized him. It was a horrible death.”

“And Dana tried to pin the blame on you,” Gibbs said slowly.

“Yeah.” Tony gave a bitter laugh. “Well, everyone knew what a screw-up I was, after all. Wouldn’t be hard to convince them that I’d screwed up handling Doug – that way it just looked like incompetence, no whistles got blown, and Dana and Billy got to keep their little deal with the drug cartel.”

“So how come this isn’t in your file?” Gibbs asked. “How come you resigned and weren’t fired?”

Tony’s face twisted into a little grin. “Well, I learned at my mom’s knee that you can’t trust a top, Gibbs, no offence.” He made an apologetic movement with his hands. Gibbs grunted. “And there was something about Dana – something that made me uneasy, even while I was under her spell. So I’d been taping some of our conversations, just in case. Something felt...hinky.” He smiled at his use of Abby’s word.

Gibbs nodded approvingly. “You should always trust your gut, Tony.”

“So, when Dana tried to pin the blame on me, I told her about the tapes I’d made.”

Gibbs sighed. “And I guess she wasn’t happy that she’d been played.”

“Nope.” Tony shook his head. “I told her I’d resign – no way was I going to let her fire me for something I hadn’t done. I don’t know how she fudged it with her superiors. I just walked out of there and took my tapes with me. I made a back up and stored both in what I thought were safe places, in case she came after me.”

“Didn’t you go to her bosses?” Gibbs demanded. “Turn her in? Tell them what you knew?”

“Oh, I tried, believe me. I wanted justice for Doug as much as anything else. But Dana has some kind of a hold over the big boss over there – I don’t know what it is, but he shut me out. I couldn’t even get access to him, and it was made very clear to me that I should move on and keep my mouth shut. I think...it’s possible she might even have considered having me killed or killing me herself, but it was too messy and would have drawn too much attention to herself and the department.”

Gibbs felt a pang of pity for the man in front of him. He’d been lied to, abused, betrayed, and then slung out with threats resounding in his ears and no place to turn. No wonder he’d turned up at his job interview looking such a mess. The top in him was responding to Tony’s obvious need for protection, but he fought it down. He might have won a little piece of Tony’s trust, but he had a long way to go yet before he could rub this sub’s metaphorical belly without getting his fingers bitten.

“I made a backup disk, and I stored the original tapes in a safety deposit box with my bank. I hid the disk in my apartment.”

Ah, so now the break-in earlier today made total sense. Gibbs rocked back on his heels and gave a thoughtful nod.

“And this morning Dana took out a warrant and cleared out the safety deposit box. When I went out on that unauthorized break earlier today, it was because my neighbour had called to tell me my apartment had been broken into. When I got home, I found it had been trashed and the backup disk was gone too.” Tony leaned back against the wall, looking defeated. “Then when I got back this evening I found that letter.” He nodded to the letter in Gibbs’s hand. “Seemed like the whole world was against me, Gibbs. I actually went back to NCIS to resign.” He gave a bitter little laugh. “Thought I might as well go on the run.”

“You’re not doing that,” Gibbs said firmly.

Tony gave him a surprised look. “I don’t know what else to do, Boss.” He spread his hands helplessly. “Dana has the only evidence that will save me, and it’s pretty clear she’s not just going to pin Doug’s murder on me, but also the corruption in the department. She wants me to go down for all her dirty work, and I don’t have anything to defend me or anyone on my side.”

Gibbs slapped the back of his head, and Tony gave a little squawk of surprise. "Sure you do," Gibbs growled.

Tony's eyes lit up, and a shy, genuine smile spread across his face. "You'll help me?" he asked. "You believe me?" he added, sounding more uncertain.

"I believe you, Tony, yes," Gibbs said firmly.

"But what can I do? She holds all the cards," Tony said helplessly.

"Hmm. You say she stole this evidence from you?"

"Yeah." Tony shrugged. "It's gone."

"Nah. It's just been moved somewhere else."

"What are you thinking?" Tony looked intrigued.

"Well, she stole it from you – so I suggest we go steal it back." Gibbs grinned.

"We?" Tony raised an eyebrow. "I wouldn't ask you to get involved in this, Boss. I won't drag you down with me."

Gibbs laughed out loud. "Oh, DiNozzo, it's far too late for that. You're one of us now; you're on my team, and I never leave anyone behind. Semper fi, Tony."

~*~

Gibbs grabbed his jacket which was lying on the workbench. "C'mon, DiNozzo. We have some burglarizing to do," he said, jogging up the stairs.

"Now? We're going to steal the tapes back now?" Tony asked in surprise, following Gibbs up the stairs all the same. He could hardly believe the man's stamina – after the whipping he'd endured today, Gibbs should be taking it easy, but instead he looked positively energised.

"Well yeah, DiNozzo. Longer she has them, more likely she is to destroy them – if she hasn't already."

"And if she has?" Tony asked quietly.

Gibbs paused at the top of the stairs and glanced down at him. "Then we'll think of something else. Now c'mon – get your ass in gear. Let's go to your place first and then decide where to go from there."

Tony's heart sank as Gibbs parked the car outside his apartment. He hated the thought of going back in there, knowing the mess that awaited him. He sat there, unmoving, gazing up

at his dark apartment window. Gibbs glanced at him, one eyebrow raised, and Tony sighed.

"Never really had a home until I moved here, Boss. First place I ever really settled. Might not be much, but I love this place. Hate what they did to it."

Gibbs nodded, and Tony thought he saw a glimmer of understanding in his blue eyes. As a Marine, Gibbs must have moved around a lot. Maybe he understood what it felt like to finally settle somewhere. Tony gathered himself together and got out of the car.

They went up to his apartment, and Tony unlocked the door and opened it, then flicked on the light. The place was just as he'd left it; in fact it looked even worse at night.

Gibbs gave a low whistle. "They really turned you over, DiNozzo."

"Well, I guess they didn't know how many backup copies I'd made." Tony shrugged. "So they had to be thorough." He turned to see Gibbs opening his cell phone. "Who are you calling?"

"Abby and Ducky. We need their help."

"No." Tony put his hand over Gibbs's and closed the phone. "No, Gibbs. It's bad enough that I've dragged you into this; I don't want to get them involved too."

"They'll kick my ass far worse than Morrow did if I hold out on them," Gibbs told him firmly. "They like you, Tony. They'll want to help."

"No." Tony shook his head firmly.

"You think I'd ask my collared subs to get into anything they shouldn't?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow. "I wouldn't do that, Tony. You know that about me."

Tony gazed at him uncertainly. "You're a top..."

"Yeah, and I know what a low opinion you have of us, but you need help, Tony, and you have to learn how to accept it when it's freely given."

"Yeah. Right. You ever learn how to do that?" Tony raised a sceptical eyebrow.

Gibbs gave a wry grunt. "Didn't say it was easy, DiNozzo. Look – I wouldn't do anything to hurt Ducky or Abby. They're my collared subs, and I will always protect them."

There was such sincerity in his eyes. Tony *wanted* to believe in a top who wouldn't ever sell out his subs, but it was hard. Finally, he gave a little nod. "Okay – call them. But they'd better not get hurt in all this, Gibbs."

Gibbs glared at him. "My subs trust me, DiNozzo. I won't abuse that trust. Ever. Got that?"

"If you say so." Tony shrugged.

Gibbs made the calls and then turned back to Tony. "Okay – my guess is that Morley got the warrant and went to the bank, while Reid came here and turned over your place. They had to work simultaneously to avoid alerting you to what was going down."

Tony felt a jolt of sadness at the thought that Billy had done this to his apartment, and yet he couldn't fault Gibbs's logic. "Yes," he agreed quietly. "Sounds about right."

"So they've had them all day..."

"She's probably destroyed them already," Tony said glumly.

"Not necessarily. From what you've told me about her, she'll have wanted to listen to them first – to find out precisely what you have on her. She'll want to know what you might bring up at that inquiry next week. You might not have the evidence anymore, but you still know what went down. Is that likely?"

Tony shrugged. "I suppose."

"Don't suppose; be **sure**," Gibbs snapped. "You knew the woman – what's your view on her?"

"Yes. That sounds possible."

"Good. Now, where is she most likely to be this evening? At home? With Reid? Out somewhere?"

"How should I know?" Tony asked helplessly.

"DiNozzo!" Gibbs got in his face, blue eyes blazing. "Get your game face on! We don't have time for you to go into a funk. Now you know her, and you know Reid – what are they up to right now? Think!"

There was something energizing about Gibbs when he was like this – he was a powerful top, and Tony found himself responding to that side of him. He thought back to his time with Dana, remembering her scent and the way she used to stand by his desk and rest her hand on his shoulder, fingers digging in just a little too hard to be comfortable. He clicked his fingers in the air.

"Oh, I know where she is tonight!" he said, inspiration coming to him. "She'll be on a high. She's had a successful day, she's outwitted me, she's made a power play and won – and that'll have got her excited. There's this club called *Xtreme*. Every time she made an arrest, or had a really good day at work that involved her getting one over on someone, or even just when she had an excess of nervous energy making her antsy, she used to go *Xtreme* and watch the floor shows."

"Floor shows?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow. "What kind of floor shows?" Tony flushed and

looked down at his own shoes. "Tony? What kind of floor shows?" Gibbs demanded.

"Cruelty," Tony muttered. He glanced up and met Gibbs's angry blue eyes. "She was into cruelty, Gibbs. She liked watching extreme cruelty acts. Got her revved up. Afterwards she'd go home and take it out on Billy. He enjoyed it, I think. I don't know. I do know he used to come to work the next day covered in bruises and cigarette burns."

Gibbs's mouth was quirked in an expression of disgust. "Does she take a sub with her when she goes to watch these 'floor shows'?" he asked, every syllable tinged with distaste. "Or is it a solitary pursuit?"

"I don't know. I think it depends on her mood. She took me once." Tony wrapped his arms around his body and glanced away from Gibbs again, unable to meet his disgusted gaze.

"You like that kind of thing?" Gibbs growled, and the anger in his voice was almost tangible. "Extreme cruelty do it for you, DiNozzo?"

"No," Tony replied quietly, looking back again. "I ran out halfway through and puked up into the gutter outside."

"You say she topped you – she ever try any of that shit on you?"

Tony shook his head. "No. I think she knew not to push me too far. She was grooming me to be her patsy, remember – she didn't want to frighten me away. She knew cruelty wasn't my thing – I wasn't like Billy. Also..." He flushed again. Gibbs raised an eyebrow. "Also, I have a real thing about safe sex. I don't like being helpless around tops, Gibbs. I never let myself get into a situation where she could really hurt me – I've never let any top do that. She went further than I liked a couple of times, but she backed off when I made it clear I'd walk out rather than take it."

Gibbs gave a grunt, and Tony saw a look of grudging respect in his eyes. "At least you have some good sense," he muttered.

Tony shrugged. "Look, I like a bit of pain play just fine – hell, if it's done right then I love it!" He saw Gibbs's eyes flash in response to that admission. "But I'd never been to a cruelty club before, and I had no idea what went on there. I thought it'd be hot, but it went way beyond anything I've done, or I'd want to do. There was no sense of..." He struggled for the word. "Connection? Affection? I don't know. But I do know it scared me. That wasn't pain play – that was torture, plain and simple, and there's a big difference."

"I agree." Gibbs gave a curt nod. "So, did Morley take Billy to these floor shows?"

"I don't know – I didn't even know they were sleeping together until after it all went down. Then I put two and two together and realized that she was the top who had been putting all those marks on him."

"What time do these floor shows start and how long do they last?" Gibbs demanded.

"About eleven - and they go on all night. If she's working tomorrow she might only go to the first one. Each one lasts about an hour – that's usually all the sub can stand without needing hospitalization," Tony said quietly. A vein in Gibbs's neck pulsed violently, and Tony got the feeling his boss really hated cruel sex.

Cruelty clubs were the dark underbelly of their culture. Many people disliked and disapproved of them, and there had been an unsuccessful movement to get them banned a few years ago. In the end, as long as they were licensed and the participants signed to say that all activities were consensual, the law left them alone. Tony didn't understand the appeal, but he did know that some subs got turned on by that kind of extreme cruelty – it wasn't just tops who got off on it.

Gibbs glanced at his watch. "It's ten-thirty now, so we don't have long if we're going to go to her place looking for the tapes. Do you think she'd keep them at her place? Or should we be looking someplace else?"

"Her house. Definitely. She wouldn't want to risk them falling into the wrong hands. That's if she hasn't destroyed them already." Tony sighed – that seemed the most likely possibility to him.

Gibbs slapped the back of his head. "No negative thinking. We'll deal with that if it happens. In the meantime, we go in there expecting to find them."

"Yes, Boss." Tony managed a weary smile. He liked the way his head always felt after Gibbs had slapped him; sore but warm. He wondered, almost reflexively, what it would be like to take a spanking from the man. Painful – he had no doubt about that – but also good too, he felt sure. He knew it would make him feel safe and grounded, and he also knew that he'd enjoy it. Well, why not? Gibbs was a good-looking top with a powerful dynamic; what red-blooded sub wouldn't wonder what it felt like to go over his knee and take some nice hard swats from his hand?

"Where is this *Xtreme* place, and how far is it from Morley's house?" Gibbs's asked.

"*Xtreme's* in DC – Dana lives in Baltimore."

"Any reason you didn't rent an apartment in Baltimore when you worked there?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

Tony shrugged. "I've always wanted to live in DC. Besides, it has more of my kind of clubs." Tony gave a grin. "And the commute wasn't too bad. Much better now I'm at the Navy Yard though!"

At that moment he heard footsteps in the hallway, and Abby and Ducky entered his apartment. They paused, looking around in surprise, and then Abby ran up to him and enveloped him in a warm hug. He held on to her tightly, surprised by how good it felt to have people in his life who gave a damn about him.

"Tony! I'm so sorry. Gibbs said you'd been burglarized, but I had no idea it was like *this*." Abby glanced around the wreckage of his apartment.

"Thanks, Abs."

"My poor boy. This really is most unfortunate." Ducky patted him sympathetically on the shoulder.

"What do you want us to do, Bossman?" Abby asked, saluting Gibbs enthusiastically. "Sweep the place for prints? Take crime scene photos?"

Gibbs gave a little grin. "No need, Abs. We already have a pretty good idea who did this. Me and Tony are going to take care of it. I want you and Ducky to start clearing up." He glanced around the trashed apartment.

Tony winced. "Hey, there's no need – I mean it's my place – my responsibility."

"Nonsense." Ducky blinked at him owlishly from behind his glasses. "We'd be delighted to restore a little order, wouldn't we, Abby?"

"Sure!" Abby gave him a bright grin.

Tony gazed at them blindly. First Gibbs took that whipping for him, and now Abby and Ducky were going to spend half the night cleaning his apartment? Why? He didn't deserve this.

"Come on, Tony." Gibbs slapped a hand on his shoulder. "We need to get moving. We don't have much time."

~*~

It was nearly eleven when they drove slowly by *Xtreme*. Tony peered out of the window as they made a tour of the club's parking lot.

"There." He pointed. "That's her car."

"Good. That means we have at least an hour before she gets home."

Gibbs watched as a tall, dark, exotically handsome top dressed in a long leather coat got out of his car. His two submissives followed; they were a beautiful matching pair, one male, one female, and both were nude. Their bodies had been waxed, including their scalps, leaving them devoid of all body hair, and they had matching brandings on their bodies as well as a multitude of different piercings. The top attached nipple leashes to them both, and they followed him obediently into the club.

"Christ, it's too damn cold to be out without clothes tonight. Poor bastards," Gibbs muttered.

"Least of their problems if their top gets off on what happens in that club," Tony replied. "Hopefully it's their thing too – no reason why they'd be involved with that kind of a top if not, I guess."

"Yeah." Gibbs bit back his growl of irritation. His understanding of what it was to be a top was all about loving, respecting and protecting his subs. Some people might find that chauvinistic, but he'd take it over these cruelty freaks any day. Then again, some subs seemed to crave the kind of painful degradation that he knew he could never deliver. It tore him up a little even thinking about it.

He glanced at the sub sitting beside him, who seemed to have suffered more than most at the hands of tops who didn't get it right. Tony looked pale but determined, and Gibbs knew he'd kill Dana Morley where she stood rather than let her get her claws into Tony again. He had no doubt that she was planning for Tony to take the rap for her own crimes, but he wouldn't let that happen. He didn't know how he'd stop it, but he'd find a way somehow.

Gibbs drove them to Morley's house. It was dark and looked empty. He parked around the back, and then he and Tony got quietly out of the car and climbed over the fence. His sore ass didn't make breaking into a house his activity of choice this evening, but he sucked it up and got on with it. He was a Marine; he'd had worse.

He pulled on a pair of latex gloves, and Tony did the same. The back door was locked, but Gibbs easily picked it.

"Alarm?" he mouthed to Tony. Tony shook his head, so Gibbs opened the door, and they went inside.

They moved silently through the place, using flashlights rather than turning on the house lights. They went methodically but quickly, taking care not to leave any evidence they'd been there. Gibbs was struck by how easily he and Tony worked together – they seemed to understand each raised eyebrow and nod of the head without the need for words. They worked their way through the downstairs rooms swiftly but efficiently and then walked silently up the stairs.

Gibbs paused outside a door at the top and glanced at Tony.

"Torture chamber," Tony said softly.

Gibbs had no idea why anyone needed a special room for sex, but plenty of tops liked to have a dungeon, or playroom, or sanctum, or torture chamber – usually you could tell the kind of top they were from the name they gave the room, so he wasn't surprised to learn what Morley called hers.

The door was unlocked; Gibbs stepped quietly inside and shone his flashlight around the

dark room. What he saw made his gut churn uneasily. This wasn't a room that contained an ounce of sensuality; the walls were plain white, and all the equipment in it was black. Everything looked both expensive and painful. There was no sense of joy or mutual pleasure here; this room was about inflicting pain – pure and simple. He already had a healthy hatred of Dana Morley but seeing her torture chamber gave him an unpleasant insight into how her particular dynamic worked – and he didn't like it.

"She bring you in here?" he asked Tony, looking at the exquisitely tooled manacles hanging from one wall.

"No." Tony shook his head. "Always wondered what it was like, but she kept it locked when I was around. She made out that a session in here was this big reward that she'd grant me one day if I impressed her enough, but I can see now that she never intended for me to step foot inside this room. She knew I'd see into her soul too clearly if I ever did."

He looked dejected, and Gibbs realized just how much all this must hurt. Tony, who prided himself on having safe sex, on not trusting tops, and on always protecting himself, had been suckered by one of the worst.

"She must be a good actress," Gibbs grunted.

"Oh yeah. She is."

Tony opened a door at the far end of the room, and Gibbs caught a brief glimpse of a bathroom. He went over to a row of cupboards and looked inside to find rows of neatly ordered sex toys, chains, whips and other items. Everything was clean and expensive, but something about just how neatly it was arranged revolted him. Dana Morley had a tidy mind, clearly, but there was something almost fetishistic of and by itself in the way she liked to keep her torture chamber so spotless.

He heard Tony behind him.

"Bathroom's clean. At least this place is easy to search – nothing's out of place," Tony said.

"Yeah. It's creepy." Gibbs shut the cupboard and moved along to a door at the other end of the room – one that was slightly ajar. He pushed it open and found himself looking into a dressing room filled with costumes hanging from rails. They were all neatly labelled and there was a mirror at one end of the room. Shoes and accessories were stored in boxes on the floor and on a shelf above.

Tony stepped inside and began searching through the clothes and shoes. Gibbs glanced at his watch; damn it, they were running out of time.

At that moment he heard a car door slam and the sound of a key turning in the front door. Too late. He saw Tony look up, an expression of panic in his eyes.

"Ssh." Gibbs put his finger over his mouth and pushed the door to.

"Close it!" Tony said.

Gibbs shook his head. "It wasn't closed when we arrived – if she comes in here then she'll notice. This is a top who likes to have total control over both her subs and her environment."

They turned off their flashlights and waited in breathless silence as they heard footsteps on the stairs and the sound of voices.

"...that it was good tonight," a woman's voice was saying, "The waxed submissives cried very prettily. The female was bleeding quite freely by the end; I liked that."

Gibbs stiffened, and Tony made an agonized face at him. They were face to face in the small dressing room, crushed up against various dresses.

"Are we using the torture chamber tonight, Mistress?" a man's voice asked. Gibbs presumed it was Billy and one glance at Tony confirmed that.

"Of course. You did well today, Billy – you deserve a reward." Gibbs heard a throaty, sexy little laugh. "Would you like me to make you bleed, Billy?"

"If you want me to bleed for you then I'm happy to do so, Mistress," came back the reply. "I'm yours to command."

"Yes, you are, and I do want to see you bleed tonight."

The door to the outer room opened and the light came on suddenly, making Gibbs blink. It was entirely possible that she'd want to dress up for whatever activity she had planned, in which case they'd be discovered. Although Gibbs had no compunction about going head to head with this woman if that happened, it wasn't ideal. There was a good chance someone might get hurt, and he didn't think Morley would think twice about killing them both if she got the chance and claiming it was self-defence.

On the other hand it was late, and if she was due at work the next day then it was possible she would just do whatever she wanted to her hapless submissive and then they'd both go to bed – giving him and Tony a chance to escape unnoticed.

"Remove your clothes. Give me a blank canvas to work on," Morley said, and she suddenly came into view through the slightly ajar door. Tony was right; she *was* beautiful. Her long dark hair was spread out over her shoulders like a cloak, and her brown eyes were so dark as to be almost black. Her skin was pale as marble, and she was tall, slender and imposing.

"Tonight will be good," she purred, and Gibbs watched her place her purse on the dresser. "Do you have the disk?" she asked.

"Yes, Mistress," came back Billy's reply – although Gibbs still hadn't seen Tony's ex-partner.

"Good. Give it to me." She held out her hand imperiously and a second later twirled the disk on one long, slender, finger. Gibbs had no doubt at all that it was the backup copy Tony had made of the incriminating tapes.

She opened a drawer in the dresser, took out a pair of scissors, and cut the disk into several little pieces before dropping them disdainfully into the trash basket beside the dresser.

Gibbs was pressed up so close to Tony that he could almost hear his heart thudding as the disk was destroyed. He shook his head warningly, and Tony nodded and visibly tried to control his distressed breathing.

"What a fantastic day," Morley purred, loosening her cardigan and allowing it to drop to the floor; no doubt Billy would pick it up later.

She was wearing a sheer, cream-coloured blouse with nothing underneath and her breasts were clearly visible through the fabric. Her thighs were encased in a tight black skirt, and she was wearing shiny black boots with sharp stiletto point heels with a steel tip. Gibbs could totally understand the sexual allure of a top this commanding – but he could also see the hard, brittle edge to her dynamic.

"Lie on the floor. I'm going to hurt you," Morley ordered. "You can beg and scream all you like, but if you move away, or try to resist me, I'll hurt you more, and you won't be rewarded later. Understood?"

"Yes, Mistress."

Gibbs heard a sound, and then he saw Billy for the first time. He was a very good-looking sub, with thick brown hair and a nicely toned body. He lay down on the floor on his back at her feet, arms and legs stretched out as if he knew how this routine went. His cock was wavering hopefully at half-mast.

Morley grinned down at him. "Oh, it's going to be good hurting you tonight. I feel so alive!"

She opened her purse, and Tony gasped as she removed something from it. Gibbs quickly put his hand over Tony's mouth to silence him, while Tony gazed at him from wide, startled eyes. Gibbs glanced back at the scene in the room – and now he understood Tony's reaction. Morley was holding two cassette tapes in her hands – presumably the original tapes Tony had made of their conversations. No wonder they hadn't been able to find them in their search; she'd been carrying them around with her. He had no doubt that she'd also listened to their contents at some point during the day.

She placed the tapes on the floor between Billy's open legs.

"Poor dear Tony," she said, with a little laugh. "He always was such a loser. I can't believe he thought he could outwit *me*. Me!" She gave a derisive snort. "He's just a sub – he shouldn't have tried to play against a top like me. Subs are only good for one thing. You

know what? I'm going to imagine you're him tonight, Billy. I think I'll enjoy that."

Tony's eyes were dark and frantic, and Gibbs felt a pang of sympathy for him; this was going to be ugly.

"Tony dearest, you defied me, and you're going to have to pay for your impudence," Morley purred at Billy. "Listen to this sound, Tony, and hear how much damage one tiny pointed heel can do...then think about how it'll feel on your bare skin."

Billy moaned and shook on the floor in front of her; Gibbs didn't know whether the sub was dreading or looking forward to those heels digging into his skin, but he almost hoped it was the former. Billy had sold Tony out, and as far as Gibbs was concerned he didn't deserve any sympathy.

Morley stepped forward and there was a loud cracking sound as she ground the sharp heel of her boot into the tape on the floor – then she took another step and stamped her heel straight into the other tape.

Tony made a tiny little sound in the back of his throat, and Gibbs pressed his hand even more firmly over Tony's mouth, unsure what he'd do if he released him. He pushed himself against Tony, hoping that the feel of his body would reassure and ground him.

Tony gazed back at him defiantly, and Gibbs could see that he wanted to shove him aside, stride into that room next door, and kill Dana Morley where she stood.

He wrapped his fingers around Tony's wrist warningly. It was what courting teenagers did when they were trying out their dynamics, seeing if they fitted with that of their date, and Tony glared at him, clearly resenting the move. Gibbs tightened his fingers and got a sudden, vivid sense of Tony's dynamic; it was all about wanting to submit, but it was hard-edged too. Tony would force a top to take him there and *make* him submit. He wouldn't give his submission away easily. He'd want to know you were worthy of it first – and that was such an exhilarating thought to a top like Gibbs. Gibbs loved power play – it was a huge part of his own dynamic, and he could sense it was the same for Tony too.

Tony was fighting him right now, fighting a silent battle over staying here or storming out there, and Gibbs knew it was a battle he couldn't allow Tony to win. He pushed in harder, forcing his will on Tony. He didn't break subs – he had no interest in that – he bent them to his will, taking them slowly down. His grasp on Tony's wrist was as strong and unyielding as any manacle, and he didn't let up the pressure for a moment. His body was just as forceful, keeping Tony pinned in place, and his hand was pressed flat over Tony's mouth, effectively gagging him.

It shouldn't have been a sexual moment and yet it was. It made Gibbs's blood pound with some toppy instinct he couldn't suppress. Tony was gazing up at him, his expressive eyes betraying his feelings all too clearly. He didn't want to surrender, and yet he did too, and he was fighting it. It was the age old dance a top and sub went through before the top finally imposed his will and took his sexual pleasure in his vanquished conquest, as was his right.

Tony's body was firm and ripe beneath his, and Gibbs longed to push him down and make him submit to his dominance. He opened Tony's legs with his knee and forced their groins together, feeling Tony's hardness against his own. Tony gave a silent little moan and then Gibbs felt it – that glorious moment of surrender.

Tony's body suddenly went limp and compliant, and he knew that if he wanted to, he could strip Tony bare and drive his hard cock into him right here and now, without meeting any resistance. He could make Tony whimper and shiver with sexual pleasure, completely in his thrall, his willing submissive.

He had no intention of doing anything of the kind, but he enjoyed watching Tony welcome him in even closer, their bodies now completely entwined as they stood leaning against the dressing room wall. Tony's eyes were dark with arousal, and he looked utterly beautiful in his moment of surrender. Gibbs studied Tony's full lower lip, longing to claim it with his mouth and kiss Tony hard. Tony's tongue slid out and wetted it enticingly, and it was all Gibbs could do to resist.

The moment was interrupted by a loud squeal of pain. Gibbs glanced into the next door room, and saw Morley plant her steel-tipped heel on one of Billy's nipples and step down hard, driving the whole weight of her body into him. He squealed again, imploring her to stop. She didn't. In fact his squealing seemed to excite her and she stamped down hard, making him scream in genuine agony.

Gibbs felt Tony's body shaking, and he turned back to look at him. Tony was clearly distressed by the scene, and Gibbs calmed him by stroking his wrist gently with his thumb. He was astonished when it worked instantly, and Tony's tremors subsided.

"That's it – scream, Tony, you little wimp!" Morley crowed ecstatically in her torture chamber next door. "I love hearing you scream. Does it hurt, Tony? Does it?"

"Yes! Yes, it hurts!" Billy gasped.

"Good. How about this, Tony? Does this hurt too?" She slowly and deliberately ground her heel in hard, and Billy screamed again.

"Yes – that hurts too! Please...please...oh God! Please...!" His screams rose in pitch with each word he uttered.

"You lost, Tony, and I won!" she said triumphantly. "I hope you're learning your lesson. I'll teach a sub like you to mess with a top like me. How does **this** feel? Hmm? And this?" She twisted the heel of her boot with each question.

Tony was completely limp beneath Gibbs, looking wiped out. Gibbs was holding him up as much as holding him still now. He ached for him having to witness the gruesome spectacle being played out in the other room. He couldn't imagine how Tony must be feeling hearing Morley's taunting words and her continued use of his name and knowing that she was

imagining inflicting this kind of savage torture on him. Gibbs kept stroking Tony's wrist soothingly, trying to comfort him in some small way.

Then, thankfully, it was over, and Morley stepped away the screaming submissive beneath her.

"Good. That was good," she crooned. "You bleed so beautifully. I love watching you suffer." Her pale skin was flushed with pleasure, so Gibbs could believe that. "I'm very wet now...I'm going to bed. Clean up in here and then you can crawl in under the sheets and finish the job with that talented tongue of yours. If you can make me come more than three times then I'll let you sleep in the bed tonight. If not, you can sleep on the floor like the dog you are."

"Mistress...will you allow me come tonight?" Billy panted, sliding onto his side and then getting up onto all fours.

Morley laughed out loud. "If you want to bring yourself off later I don't care – I won't be touching that filthy cock of yours though. It makes me feel ill just looking at it."

She grabbed her purse and swept out of the room, her heels making little clickety sounds on the wooden flooring.

Gibbs watched as Billy wiped some blood from his chest and then crawled across the floor to the mangled remains of the tapes. He gathered them up and threw them in the trash, then picked up Morley's cardigan and finally got to his feet and padded silently out of the room, turning off the light on his way out.

Then and only then did Gibbs think it was safe to finally release his grasp on Tony. He went slowly, gradually releasing the pressure, and only when he was sure that Tony was able to stand did he let him go.

Tony didn't move. He just stood there, leaning back against the wall.

"And I thought it couldn't get any worse," he whispered.

Gibbs gave a little grunt. "Don't give up, DiNozzo. I'm not done with that woman yet."

"She destroyed the disk and the tapes, Gibbs, in case you didn't notice," Tony said despondently. "They're gone. We've got nothing."

Gibbs reached out and gave Tony's head a firm slap. "What did I tell you about negative thinking?"

Tony shook his head. "She mashed the tapes to smithereens, Gibbs. Not even you can put them back together."

"Me? No. But Abby is pretty good at this kind of thing." Gibbs grinned at him and patted his jaw. "C'mon, DiNozzo. You saw what that creature thinks of you. You wanna fight back,

don't you?"

"Tired of fighting, Boss," Tony said, with a ghost of a smile. "Always seem to lose."

"Well that's 'cause you didn't have me on your side before," Gibbs said firmly. "I'm going to get those tapes out of the trash, and then you and I are going to go downstairs very quietly and let ourselves out the same way as we got in. Understand?"

"Yes, Boss." Tony surprised him by suddenly giving him a bright, hopeful smile. "You really think Abby can put that tape back together?"

"We'll see, DiNozzo. Even if she can't, I'm not done with Dana Morley," he said grimly. "Not after what I saw tonight."

End of Part Seven

Chapter End Notes:

Friendly feedback always adored

Part Eight by Xanthe

Tony was silent on the drive home. He sat back in his seat, still reeling from what had happened – but it wasn't Dana Morley's ugly little scene with Billy that he was replaying over and over again in his mind. No, what he couldn't stop thinking about was the feel of Gibbs's body pressed up against his own, the sensation of Gibbs's fingers wrapped tightly around his wrist, and the press of his hand over his mouth.

Back there, in that dressing room, his body had done something it had never done before; it had submitted willingly to a top, of its own volition, without him having to pretend. He remembered the heady sensation of surrender and how it had gone straight to his cock. His stomach fluttered as he re-lived that particular moment. It had been thrilling – he had never experienced true submission before and had always envied subs who had. He'd only ever played at it, never trusting any top enough to take him there, or thinking them worthy enough of the honour of his true surrender. What made Gibbs so different?

Tony shot a sideways glance at the man beside him. Was it because Gibbs had taken that beating for him? No other top had done anything that romantic for him. Or was it what Gibbs had said earlier, about protecting his collared subs? Did he really believe Gibbs was a top who could actually be trusted? His mom would have said that there was no such thing.

Or was it that the man was such an enigma to him? He had two collared subs, neither of whom had been collared in the conventional sense, and he didn't seem to want to sleep with either of them. Had he really collared them, as Abby seemed to think, for *their* sake and not his own? Tony didn't have any answers, but the questions puzzled him.

They arrived back at Tony's apartment in the early hours of the morning – to find it looking considerably better than when they'd left it.

Abby and Ducky were sitting on his couch, which had been returned to its original position, and the mess had at least been tidied into some semblance of order.

"Gibbs! Tony! Are you okay? Did you get into a fight?" Abby asked, throwing herself at both of them the minute they walked through the door.

"No, Abby, we did not get into a fight," Gibbs said, with a wry little grin. "Why?"

"Well, you're walking kind of stiffly, and Tony looks like he's seen a ghost," she said, standing back and eyeing them both critically.

"It's been a tough day, Abby," Gibbs said shortly. He fished the remains of the tapes out of his pocket and handed them to her. "Here – see what you can do with these tomorrow."

Abby looked at the mangled plastic and tape in her hands with a frown. "You do know I'm not a miracle worker, right, Gibbs?"

"Since when?" Gibbs pressed a kiss to her cheek. "Just see what you can retrieve for us,

Abby – anything is better than nothing."

She nodded and placed the tapes in her purse. Then she took hold of Tony's hand and led him into the bedroom. He looked around in surprise; the room was pretty much back to normal – in fact it was tidier than he usually left it.

"We thought we'd concentrate mainly on one room, and as you'd need to be sleeping in here tonight, this was it," Abby told him.

"Thank you." He wrapped an arm around her shoulder and leaned against her.

She glanced up at him. "I thought I'd stay over tonight," she said quietly.

"No need. I mean...I'm a big boy. I'm not scared the bad guys will come back."

"I know. But it's late, and I'm tired, and you have a big enough bed." She grinned as she looked at the enormous bed in the centre of the room.

Tony grinned too. "Well, I am a young, single sub." He winked at her. "Never know how many tops I might want to invite back for a night of passion."

"Yeah – but I thought you'd have manacles attached to the headboard and dozens of sex toys hidden in a big box under the bed. I was kinda disappointed, DiNozzo," she chided.

He laughed. "Bondage is your thing, not mine, Abs. I'm never comfortable with people tying me up unless I know them really well – and to be honest I never usually stay with one top long enough to get to know them *that* well. As for the sex toys..." he grinned. "I have had some favourites in my time but usually..." He paused. Usually he went out to clubs and had sex there – but it sounded so sordid he didn't want to tell her that. He'd thrown out his old sex toys when he moved here and it had been so long since he'd last brought a date home that he hadn't bothered buying any new ones.

"Usually?" Abby raised an eyebrow.

"It doesn't matter. Look, it's late, and I'm beat. I'll just go say goodbye to Gibbs and Ducky, and then we can go to bed. Together." He leered at her suggestively, and she bashed him on the arm before disappearing into the bathroom.

Tony returned to the living room to find Ducky and Gibbs having an altercation in low voices.

"You don't fool me, Jethro. Abby was right just now – you are moving much more slowly than usual."

Gibbs shrugged. "I'm tired. And I'm getting old."

Ducky shook his head reprovingly. "Jethro – there have been rumours flying around the

Navy Yard all day..."

"Aw, don't tell me you pay attention to office gossip, Duck?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

"Actually, I have rather a penchant for office gossip, Jethro – particularly as I know I'm more likely to hear something there than have my own top tell me about it himself."

"And just what is office gossip saying about me?" Gibbs looked supremely pissed off to be the object of gossip.

"That you took twenty with the strap from Morrow, which means you have to be hurting right now. I have some of my special ointment, and I don't care one whit about your toppy pride – I want to see the damage, and I want to make sure it heals properly."

"Ducky, there's no need. Stop worrying and leave me alone," Gibbs said tersely.

"You're wrong, Ducky," Tony said, behind them.

Ducky and Gibbs both turned to look at him.

"Really?" Ducky looked confused. "Are you sure, Anthony? Because I have it on very good authority that Jethro took a strapping today."

"He did, but it was thirty strokes, not twenty." Gibbs shot him one of his death glares.

"What? Wasn't it you who said something earlier about accepting help when it's given? Let Ducky check you out. Please." Tony added that final plea in a softer tone. He knew Gibbs was as tough as nails, but the man had taken that whipping for him, so he felt responsible for the pain he had to in right now.

"Oh, he'll let me check him out," Ducky said firmly, and once again Tony caught a glimpse of Ducky's toppy side. It was none of his business whether Gibbs's collared *sub* was actually a switch, but the subject did fascinate him. He had no intention of asking such a personal question though – he didn't know Ducky well enough yet. "Thank you, Anthony, for telling me the truth when my stubborn, pig-headed top would not." Ducky glared at Gibbs who gave a grunt in response.

"Fine. Whatever. Now it's late, and I want everyone in on time tomorrow. We have a lot of work to do in the next few days," Gibbs said, reaching into his pocket and getting out his leashes. He clipped one onto Ducky's collar and then looked around. "Abby!"

"Abby's staying here tonight," Tony told him. "She's in the bathroom."

Gibbs gave another grunt, and Tony couldn't tell if he was pleased or annoyed by that news.

"Don't stay up all night talking," was all he said. Tony grinned, but Gibbs glared at him. "I mean it – I've never known two people who jabber on as much as you two. If you do stay up all night talking, I still expect a full day's work from you tomorrow and no excuses about

being tired."

"Understood, Boss!" Tony fired off a mock salute that was just like the one Abby was always giving Gibbs. Gibbs slapped his head, and Tony's grin widened as he felt that familiar warmth flood into his belly in response.

They left, and Tony returned to his bedroom.

Abby emerged from the bathroom a few seconds later. "You got a tee shirt I can wear to bed? I'm gonna take a shower," she said.

Tony threw her a tee shirt and watched as she undid her pigtails, shaking her hair free, and then unbuckled her collar and placed it on the nightstand. Then she disappeared into the bathroom again.

Tony picked up the collar she'd left behind. It was just plain black leather – nothing fancy but comfortable, with a nice soft lining. It was still warm from where she'd been wearing it. He wondered what it would feel like to wear a collar like this. He'd never wanted to be collared – no, that wasn't true – he'd never met a top whose collar he could imagine accepting. He'd never agreed to wear one even for play.

He pressed the warm leather to his throat and closed his eyes, imagining Gibbs's blunt fingers strapping it in place. How would that feel? Could he allow a top to do that to him, even if it was just the kind of collaring that Gibbs had done to Abby and Ducky? What would it feel like to walk on the man's leash? He was jolted out of this train of thought by the sound of the bathroom door opening, and he put the collar down quickly as Abby returned to the room, drying her wet hair with a towel.

Abby sat down on the bed beside him, wearing just his tee shirt which was two sizes too big for her and a pair of panties. She picked up the collar, wrapped it around her throat, and buckled it in place.

"What's it like?" Tony asked. Abby raised an eyebrow. "Wearing Gibbs's collar? What's that like?"

Abby smiled. "It's two things. It's wonderful because it's Gibbs's collar, and because of what it stands for. I know that he gave me the collar because he loves me, and I know that he'll always protect me and keep me safe."

"And the second thing?"

Her smile faded. "It's sad too – because I know it's not a romantic collar and because I know he's lonely, and I wish I could do something to help him, but I can't because I'm not what he needs."

"He's lonely?" Tony asked, startled.

"Yes. I don't know what happened to him, but something did, something bad, and that's why he won't take another sub to his bed."

"What kind of something bad?"

"I don't know. Ducky does, but he won't say. He just kind of hints. I assumed it was something to do with the fact that none of his marriages worked out, but I don't know for sure, and I won't pry."

"Can you settle for just this?" Tony asked, touching the collar with his finger.

"It's not forever, Tony, but it works for me for now. I'll find the right top for me one day." She grabbed his hand with her own. "And so will you," she said firmly.

"Who says I'm looking?" He laughed.

"I think you are. If not looking then...at least hoping." She pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Now don't tell me you're one of those pervy subs who is into sub on sub sex – because if you are, there's no way I'm getting into bed with you."

Tony laughed. "No, Abby, I'm not one of those subs. I like my tops to top me – and so do you. You're hot – but we have no dynamic together. Besides, like I said, I'm really not all that into bondage." He winked at her.

"Well, you have trust issues, so I'm hardly surprised." She slid into the bed, smiling at him fondly.

Tony went into the bathroom and got ready for bed, undressing down to his boxers and a tee shirt. Then he went back into his bedroom, got into the bed beside her, and turned off the light.

She snuggled up to him immediately, and he put his arms around her and inhaled the scent of her hair. Abby's dynamic was so clear to him. It wasn't anything that turned him on, and he knew she felt the same way about him. She was beautiful, but they were both subs – who would go on top? Who would dominate whom? You could go through the mechanics of it – like those subs who performed with each other for a top to watch – but the payoff wasn't there. It was without meaning or excitement.

"Tony..." Abby said quietly, resting her chin on his chest.

"Mmm?" He looked down on her.

"If Gibbs offered you his collar – same way he did to me and Ducky, same conditions – would you accept it?"

Tony felt his heart thud in his chest. Did he want that? Could he handle wearing a top's collar at all, let alone one that didn't entitle him to any sex? Just two days ago he'd have

known the answer to that question, without any shadow of a doubt, but now? After what had happened today?

"I don't know, Abby," he replied honestly. "But I don't think he would offer me his collar."

"Why not?" Her eyes glimmered in the darkness.

"Because I'm such a screw-up, and if I wore his collar then he'd have responsibility for me – legally as well as emotionally. I'm always one smart-assed comment or dumb fuck-up away from a whipping, and you know what he's like – he'd never let me take licks in the discipline room." After today, he knew that for sure. "So he'd have to take them for me. What top would want to take that on without even the prospect of some hot sex to offset all the punishments?" He grinned down at her to find her looking up at him with a serious expression on her face.

"I think he'd find a way of handling you," she said quietly. "He's good at that – knowing how to handle us all in our own different ways and give us what we need to keep us safe and happy. And I don't think you'd fuck up nearly so often if he was around, and you wore his collar, Tony. I think you only fuck up because you don't have anyone in your life who cares – including you. If you knew what was at stake, I don't think you'd do anything stupid precisely because you *know* how it feels for him to take a punishment that's rightfully yours."

He stiffened. "You know about what happened today?"

Abby nodded. "That he took the licks meant for you? Yes, I know."

"You didn't say anything. I mean, you didn't leap on him and commiserate with him about it," Tony said, surprised.

"He has his pride, Tony," Abby told him firmly. "I might be giddy sometimes, but I'd never do anything to dent that. He did something beautiful for you today – but he'd hate for anyone to notice it or comment on it. That's not his style."

Tony ran his fingers gently through her long, dark hair. "Is he the real deal, Abby? I mean, is he really that kind of top? The kind who really would stand by a sub, no matter what?"

"Yes." She said it simply and without any shadow of doubt. "I mean, he's not perfect. He's stubborn, and secretive, and he can be really scary – but he's the real deal, Tony. Believe me, he really is."

Tony hugged her close and kissed her forehead. "Talking of scary – he said we weren't to stay up all night talking."

She laughed. "He's got a point. We've gotta be at work in a few hours!" She moved her head so it was resting on her own pillow and not his chest. "Good night, Tony."

"Night, Abs."

He closed his eyes and immediately he was back in that dressing room, with Gibbs's body pressed against his own. He was sure he'd felt Gibbs's erection digging into him, and the thought that Gibbs was as aroused by his dynamic as he was by Gibbs's intrigued and excited him.

He knew nothing could come of it because he didn't trust tops, and Gibbs didn't want a sub in his bed. But that didn't stop him thinking about how fantastic it had felt to surrender to a top for the first time in his life.

He went to sleep, his wrist still tingling from the memory of Gibbs grasping it in his fingers and holding him in place.

~*~

Gibbs ignored the looks he got as he walked into work the next day. He wasn't surprised that the news he'd taken a whipping had spread like wildfire. Morrow might have been able to keep it quiet within NCIS, but Gibbs was sure the FBI was shouting the news triumphantly from the rooftops and gossip travelled fast between federal agencies – especially spectacular gossip like this.

All the scared looks being shot his way irritated the hell out of him though, and he was in a foul mood by the time he reached his desk and very purposefully sat down without so much as a wince. Let the gossips talk about *that*.

Tony was already sitting at his desk. He looked tired but a hell of a lot better than he had the previous day.

“DiNozzo – I want you to run a search on some bank accounts for me,” he ordered across the squad room.

“Yes, Boss.” Tony sat with his hands ready at the keyboard awaiting further orders.

“Might take awhile. I want you to track down any accounts that exist in this name, anywhere in the world.”

“Yes, Boss. What's the name, Boss?”

“Anthony DiNozzo,” Gibbs shot back.

Tony's head jerked up in surprise. “Me? You're looking for bank accounts in my name?”

“Yup. Dana Morley isn't an idiot, Tony. There's no way she's going into that hearing with just one phone conversation to hold against you. She's going to try and pin a hell of a lot more on you than that. And my guess is she's taken out an account in your name somewhere and has deposited a large amount of cash in there to convince the inquiry that you're on the

take.”

Tony’s mouth opened and closed like a goldfish. “I guess I didn’t think of that, Boss.”

“Yeah, well, we gotta start thinking like Morley if we’re going to stand a chance against her. So start looking.”

“Yes, Boss.” Tony put his head down and began working, looking subdued.

Gibbs studied him while he worked. Last night had to have been hard on him – watching Morley enact her victory fantasy with Billy while using Tony’s name. It was one thing to know you’d been screwed over by two people you’d once counted on to have your six and another to have the evidence of it rubbed in your face.

Morrow distracted him from his thoughts by sweeping into the squad room bearing two cups of coffee.

“Jethro.” He handed him one of the cups, and Gibbs took it in surprise; Morrow had never bought him coffee before.

“Uh...thanks, sir,” he said, his raised eyebrow questioning the gesture.

Morrow jerked his head. “Take a walk with me, Jethro,” he said, his eyes making it clear that this was an order, not a suggestion. “And bring the coffee with you.”

Gibbs got up and followed Morrow up the stairs to the empty landing above. Morrow very deliberately rested his arms on the railings and glanced down at the bustling squad room below. Gibbs followed his cue and did the same. Morrow took a casual sip of his coffee, looking completely at ease.

“So, how are those threat assessments coming along, Jethro?” he asked, in a loud, conversational tone of voice.

Gibbs frowned; they didn’t normally drink coffee and chat in this ostentatious way. “They’re coming along fine, Director. They’re not due in for another couple of weeks though.”

Morrow gave a loud and entirely unnecessary chuckle. “Yes, I know that.” He grinned at Gibbs benignly. “Drink your damn coffee, Jethro, and for God’s sake look happy,” he added in an undertone.

“Happy? You want me to look happy?” Gibbs raised an incredulous eyebrow but took a sip of his coffee all the same.

“Yes – I know it doesn’t come easy to you but make an effort. Oh and don’t go expecting coffee every day. I didn’t buy it for you out of the goodness of my heart.”

It was Gibbs’s turn to chuckle. “Yeah. I figured. So what’s going on? Why are we doing this?”

“Because the rumour mill has been working overtime, and it seems that everyone in the Navy Yard knows what went down between us yesterday. So we have to put on a good show to make them realize that it’s business as usual. Dad and Daddy may have had an argument, but the world hasn’t come to an end even if Dad *did* have to punish Daddy for being a stubborn, manipulative bastard.”

Gibbs gave a loud laugh, full of admiration for Morrow’s strategy. Half the people in the squad room downstairs were casting surreptitious glances in their direction so it was clearly working. Gibbs could feel the strained atmosphere in the building begin to relax a fraction.

“Didn’t realize that us getting along was so important to the smooth running of the place,” he muttered.

Morrow gave another hearty and entirely false laugh. “Are you kidding? You’re the most famous top in the building, and I’m the sub who runs the damn place. Half of them are wondering how I managed to take a strap to your ass and survive and the other half...”

“Are wishing they had the whole thing on film?” Gibbs raised an eyebrow, and this time Morrow’s laugh was entirely genuine.

“Something like that. One thing I do know is that they’re worried about how things will be between us going forward. They like strong leadership, and you and I together have provided that. Their worldview doesn’t allow for you of all people to have taken a whipping. You *scare* people, Jethro.”

Gibbs grunted. “They’re pretty wary of you too, Tom – and with good reason; you can wield a strap as hard as any top I’ve ever met.” He gave a loud guffaw and noticed the tension in the squad room go down by yet another notch.

“It was entirely my pleasure.” Morrow nodded his head up and down vigorously, a bright smile plastered on his face. “How is your ass by the way?” Morrow added conversationally.

“Hurts like hell.”

“Good.” Morrow smiled at him pleasantly.

“Are we done yet?” Gibbs asked out of the corner of his mouth.

Morrow glanced around the room and seemed satisfied that their little charade had paid off. “Yes. We’re done.”

“Thank God for that.” Gibbs gave another loud laugh and slapped Morrow on the arm.

Morrow gave a hearty chuckle in response. “Glad to hear it, Jethro. Good work. Carry on.” He nodded at Gibbs and then turned to leave. “You owe me for the coffee by the way,” he added in an undertone.

Gibbs grinned. "Understood."

They parted, and Gibbs jogged back down to his desk, still smiling at the conversation. It had certainly done the trick; people weren't shooting him those scared little glances any more.

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It took Tony two days to track down the bank account. He was half hoping that Gibbs was wrong, and it didn't exist – that Dana had just wanted the tapes back to protect herself and wasn't planning on pinning anything more on him. That forlorn hope disappeared when he discovered an account with \$100,000 in his name.

"Boss!" He called Gibbs over and showed him the evidence. "What do we do now?" Tony asked.

Gibbs grinned. "We transfer the money back where it came from of course."

"How? I mean, I know it's in my name, but I don't have access to it, or passwords, or anything."

"Abby will figure out a way," Gibbs said confidently. "This shows Morley means business, Tony. She's gunning for you, and she's prepared to lose \$100,000 to cover her ass. That's a hell of a lot of money, so I'm guessing she has a hell of a lot to hide."

"Yeah – and it seems that I'm her designated fall guy. Go me!" Tony gave his cheesiest smile to cover up how much it hurt.

Gibbs seemed to see right through it. He put a hand on Tony's shoulder and squeezed. "C'mon. Let's get down to Abby's lab and see how she's doing with those tapes."

Abby twirled around as they entered her lab, a frown on her face. "Gibbs! You're early! I haven't finished with the tapes yet."

"Not here about the tapes, Abby." Gibbs filled her in on the bank account. "Can you reverse the transaction?" he asked. "Send the money back to where it came from? Won't be an account in her name – she's far too smart for that – but at least it gets it out of Tony's name."

"No problem. Might take a while to hack the account, but I can do it. You want it done now?" Her fingers were poised over the keyboard.

"Hell no!" Gibbs shook his head. "We don't want Morley knowing we're onto her yet – she'd have too much time to plan something else. I'll tell you when, Abs. Now how's the work on the tapes going?"

Abby sighed, and Tony's heart sank. "It's not good news I'm afraid, Tony." She gave him an apologetic smile. "I've done my best, but all I'm going to be able to get off them are fragments. The quality isn't great, either – it won't be good enough to pass as evidence in an inquiry."

"Thanks for trying anyway, Abby," Tony told her. "Promise me you'll come visit me in prison!" The big, cheesy smile didn't work on her, either. She just wrapped her arms around him and gave him a warm hug.

"It won't come to that, DiNozzo," Gibbs told him sharply as she released him.

Tony shook his head. "Look, I appreciate all you've done for me – both of you – but without the evidence from the tapes, it's just going to come down to my word against hers – and who is the inquiry going to believe? Even without the bank account, they're going to believe Dana Morley's testimony over a screw-up like me any day. They'll take one look at my job history and come to their own conclusions."

"I'll be a character witness for you," Gibbs told him.

Tony gave a tired smile. "You've known me less than three weeks, Gibbs, so I don't think that'll carry much weight with the inquiry. Thanks anyway, but no. I'm going down for this."

The stinging slap to the back of his head took him by surprise.

"Ow. I'm never gonna see those coming, am I?" he said, rubbing his head ruefully.

"You might one day if you get your head out of your ass, DiNozzo," Gibbs replied. "I'm not done here. There are three things I hate in this world, and abusive tops and dirty cops are at the top of the list – and Dana Morley is both of those. There's no way I'm letting her get away with this."

"You said three things." Tony raised an intrigued eyebrow.

Gibbs grinned. "Yeah, I did, didn't I?" And then, infuriatingly, he walked out of the room.

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Gibbs sat back in his chair and gazed at DiNozzo across the squad room. They'd spent the past few days scrabbling around to get something on Morley, but there wasn't enough time, and she'd covered her tracks well. Tony was due to give evidence at the inquiry tomorrow, and he looked resigned to his fate. All they could hope to do was refute anything Morley tried to pin on Tony; a lot would depend on how Tony performed tomorrow.

Gibbs pressed rewind on the disk in the little CD player Abby had given to him. He'd been listening to the fragments she'd managed to pull off the mangled tapes over and over again for the past couple of days, searching for clues as to what made Dana Morley tick.

There wasn't much and most of it was disjointed. The part where Tony informed her about Doug Warren's phone call, and she told him she'd take care of it was too fuzzy to be coherent. You could just about make out what was being said, but not with 100% conviction. There was no way an inquiry would accept it as evidence. Most of what was on the disk were recordings Tony had made of his conversations with Morley – but there was also some audio from various meetings he'd attended and some general background chatter. Gibbs tried to hone in on it, searching for anything that would be helpful.

"Boss?"

Gibbs removed the headphones and glanced at Tony who was standing in front of his desk.

"I've finished preparing my testimony for tomorrow. Can I go home now? I figure it's gonna be my last night there, so I'd like to...you know, appreciate it." Tony gave a wan smile.

Gibbs nodded. "Sure – go home, Tony. I'll come pick you up tomorrow morning and take you to the inquiry."

"Is Director Morrow okay with that?"

"Yeah. He's fine with it."

In fact, Morrow had given him a look that said he wasn't remotely surprised Tony was mixed up in something like this, shaken his head, and told Gibbs he was crazy to get involved. Gibbs had retorted that he'd take it as a vacation day if necessary, but he was going to be at that hearing for Tony. Morrow had told him that his weakness for subs in distress would be the death of him one day, but he'd give Gibbs leave to attend anyway.

"Okay. Good. Thanks. Uh, Boss – if they arrest me tomorrow..." Tony bit on his lip. Gibbs glared at him. "Look, there's every chance they will arrest me, and if they do...could you...would you explain everything to my father? Would you tell him that I was set up – that I didn't do anything wrong? He might believe it if you tell him."

Gibbs felt another pang of pity for the kid standing in front of his desk. "You think he won't believe it if you tell him yourself?"

Tony snorted. "Hell no! He's usually only too happy to believe the worst of me. He always said I'd end up on the receiving end of a judicial bullwhip one day. Guess he might be right about that."

Gibbs grunted; if Tony was found guilty of negligence in respect of Warren's murder then it was likely he'd face the bullwhip. If Morley succeeded in pinning the corruption on him too then he'd get a prison sentence as well as the bullwhip.

Gibbs's gut clenched at the thought of Tony stripped to the waist, being strung up to a whipping post and his skin being sliced open with a bullwhip. A judicial bullwhip

intentionally left scars that never went away, and he hated to think of Tony's skin being marked forever in that way.

"If it comes to it then I'll tell him, but it won't, Tony," he said firmly. "You didn't do anything wrong. Just tell the truth tomorrow."

"Yes, Boss," Tony said quietly, but Gibbs could see the dejection in his eyes.

He watched Tony leave, noting his slumped shoulders and the heavy drag of his footsteps. He remembered the bright-eyed, smart-mouthed agent he'd worked with during Tony's first two weeks at NCIS. Gibbs had looked forward to coming into work just to be with that Tony – to see his wide grin and the sparkle of mischief in his green eyes. Gibbs wanted that Tony back, and he'd be damned if he let that kid go down for crimes he hadn't committed.

How far was he prepared to go to save Tony from that fate though? Even as he asked that question, he knew the answer. He'd go all the way for the sub who'd just walked out of here looking so defeated. There was no way he'd let Tony face the bullwhip. He'd strap a collar around Tony's neck and take the punishment himself if need be, but he wouldn't stand by and watch Tony be thrown to the wolves. Some old, toppy instinct, deep within his soul, refused to countenance it.

"We've been on the defensive too damn long," Gibbs murmured to himself. "Time to go on the attack." He picked up his phone and called Abby in her lab. "Reverse the transaction and close that account in Tony's name," he told her. "Text me on my cell when it's done."

"*Sure thing, Bossman!*" He could almost *hear* the salute. "*Where are you going, Gibbs?*"

"Oh, I'm going to make a power play," he replied tightly.

He knew what the end game was here, and the likely result, but he didn't give a damn about that. This was about saving Tony's neck and if that meant someone else had to go down, then so be it.

He went home, took a shower, and washed and dried his hair. Then he opened his closet and looked inside. It had been years since he'd made any real effort with his appearance, but there had been a time, back when Shannon was alive, when he had enjoyed dressing up, if only to please her when they went out somewhere.

He pulled out some clothes that he hadn't worn in a long time; a black silk shirt, plain black chinos, a black jacket, and a black belt with a shiny silver buckle. He wore his shiniest black shoes and slapped on some cologne. He didn't usually make an effort to look this toppy – he didn't have to – but tonight he wanted the image to bring out and reinforce his natural dominance as much as possible. Tonight, both image and substance would be important if he was going to accomplish his mission.

He got in his car and drove to *Xtreme*. He had a hunch that Dana Morley would be there tonight. She'd be jittery ahead of Tony's big day in front of the inquiry tomorrow, and she'd

want something to take the edge off her mood.

The club was bustling when he got there. He opened the door forcefully, walked inside, and then stood there, silent and brooding. He projected all his innate dominance outwards, inhabiting his top space completely. The sound in the bar faltered as people looked his way and stopped talking. There was a noticeable lull in the conversation and only when he knew he'd been noticed by every single person in the club did he move again.

He could feel the eyes of all the tops in the room following him warily – and the subs eyeing him with hungry yearning. He had learned over the years to keep the more extreme traits of his dominance hidden so as not to cause unnecessary confrontations with other tops. He preferred not to get into fights wherever he went as he'd done as an angry teenager. It was tiring and stupid – as his fathers had pointed out on many occasions, although he hadn't listened back then.

Now he wanted to anger the other tops in the room. He needed them to notice him and fear him. So he unleashed the full force of his dominant energy and went fully into his top space, in a way he rarely permitted himself to do and never in public.

It worked. The crowds parted before him as he strode towards the bar. Other tops shrank away from him, careful not to meet his eye or offer him a challenge, and subs wilted before him. He ignored them all. He ignored the line of people at the bar too. He raised his hand and the barman came to him instantly, serving him ahead of all those who had been there before him. He ordered a bourbon and then leaned against the bar and surveyed the room.

There was a raised stage at one end, with curtains, and he guessed that was where the floorshows took place. Several tables and chairs were arranged around the stage area – and there she was, just as he'd expected.

Dana Morley was wearing a pair of tight black leather pants and an equally tight black leather waistcoat with nothing underneath. Her long dark hair was loose over her shoulders and her face was made up exquisitely, her eyes dark and dramatic, her lips painted a sultry red. A thin rattan cane was dangling from her fingers.

Until he'd arrived, she'd been the strongest top in the room. Now he was here nobody had eyes for her anymore, and he could feel her resentment boring into him from where she was sitting. On the floor beside her was a naked, female submissive. Gibbs wasn't surprised; Billy hadn't worn a collar, and he doubted Morley gave a damn about being exclusive to one sub. He also wasn't surprised by how pretty the sub was – he had a feeling Morley only took the most attractive subs to her bed. Subs like this one kneeling here, and Billy – and Tony.

This sub kneeling at Morley's feet had long blonde hair, soft pale skin, and large, round breasts. Her breasts were covered in a number of angry red welts which were clearly fresh – no doubt caused by the cane in Morley's hand. The sub was panting pathetically – Morley had attached a pair of vicious steel clamps to her nipples and fastened a chain to them. Morley's hand was wrapped in the chain and every now and then she jerked on it savagely, making the submissive squeal in pain.

Those clamps were dangerous; Gibbs knew the kind, and he'd never use them on any sub of his. A little pain was one thing, plenty of subs enjoyed that, but those clamps were like steel traps, and the more Morley tugged on them the tighter they fastened around the sub's nipples. If Morley made the sub wear them for too long she could cause permanent damage to her.

Gibbs picked up his drink and walked across the room to where Morley was sitting. He sat down at her table without asking her permission. Morley glared at him.

"This table is taken," she hissed.

"It is now," he replied, taking a sip of his bourbon.

He leaned back in his chair and opened his legs wide, dominating the room through body language alone. He looked down on the sub kneeling at Morley's feet and gave the woman a knowing, tippy smile. She leaned towards him, drawn to him, as subs so often were. Morley gave a vicious tug on her chain, and the submissive cried out in pain and moved back towards her mistress again. Gibbs gave an amused grunt.

The curtains opened and a big, bearded top appeared onstage. A naked, blindfolded, male submissive was standing there, bent over a wooden frame. He had been tied in place, his legs wide open, his anus obscenely exposed to the audience. A little frisson of anticipation rippled around the room. Gibbs watched Morley lick her lips and lean forward.

A rack full of the most unpleasant implements was positioned beside the frame. Gibbs had no doubt the submissive onstage would be screaming in agony before long. There was no eroticism here and no sense of mutual pleasure, either. This was torture and brutality, plain and simple. It set his teeth on edge.

Gibbs looked down at the sub kneeling beside Morley. Even without talking to her he could sense the damage in her psyche. All the people here tonight were damaged in some way, their dynamics twisted grotesquely out of shape. He knew that most of them hadn't started out this way; life had done this to them.

He thought of Tony – he was damaged too, but he'd struggled to hold it together despite that. He hadn't allowed his self-esteem to drop so low that it warped his dynamic into something ugly, like so many of the subs here. He'd fought to keep himself safe – maybe too safe, because he let nothing and nobody in to keep himself from getting hurt. Maybe there was no happy medium. Maybe, in order not to end up like this woman kneeling here, Tony had been forced to close himself off and refuse to trust any top who crossed his path.

Gibbs felt sorry for them all, for not knowing the kind of beauty that could exist in the true union of a dominant and submissive. He thought of his own two fathers, and of Tom and Jessica, and then he thought of himself and Shannon and his chest felt tight. He dismissed the memory – he didn't have the luxury of those thoughts tonight; he had a job to do here.

The bearded top onstage took a dildo from the rack of implements and held it aloft. It was covered in thick, harsh bristles. Gibbs winced; he didn't want to watch this. Morley did though. She leaned forward eagerly, her dark hair falling across her face like a shadow.

Gibbs allowed the screams of the submissive onstage to wash over him. He gazed at the sub at Morley's feet until she felt the weight of his stare and glanced up at him. He smiled at her, and she smiled back, tentatively, casting a furtive glance at her mistress to make sure she wasn't being watched.

Gibbs leaned back and glanced around the room. He knew he could take any top here and claim any sub he wanted – and the other tops in the room all knew it too. Half of them were watching the floorshow, but the other half were watching him, their hands tightly wrapped in their subs' leashes.

Gibbs glanced back at Morley. Her tongue was wetting her lower lip as she watched the floor show avidly.

"You like this stuff?" Gibbs asked, glancing at the stage.

She shot him a sideways look. "Don't you? I like hearing subs scream."

"Hmmm." Gibbs gazed at her speculatively.

"Subs enjoy pain." Morley gave a disinterested shrug. "They get off on it."

"Not all subs. They're all different – they're all people. Some love pain, some hate it."

"Well this one loves it – don't you, Kara?" Morley raised her cane and brought it down on Kara's breasts with a flick of her wrist. Kara gasped. Morley grinned and glanced at Gibbs who gazed back impassively. "Do you have a problem with pain play?" she demanded.

Gibbs shook his head. "Nope."

He recalled the first year after he'd collared Shannon and how they'd explored their sexuality and found their limits. Shannon had enjoyed a little pain play, if he judged it right, and he'd sure as hell enjoyed feeling her wriggle and whimper under his ruthless caresses. He'd seen how high she could get on the endorphin rush, and he loved the way she'd nestle into his arms afterwards and allow him to take care of her. It had been enjoyable and satisfying for them both.

"I love it," Gibbs told Morley. "If I'm connected to the sub and can feel their response, if we're both in the moment, and if they're enjoying the surrender. Pain can enhance the intensity if it's done right, and if it's what we both want. Do you know what she wants?" He glanced at Kara.

"She's a pain slut. She wants to be hurt," Morley replied dismissively.

"No – she'll take being hurt because she wants to be loved, and she seeks out the strongest tops because they make her feel safe – even if they also hurt her. Sounds illogical but that's how she is. That's her particular dynamic. Did you take the time to find out what her dynamic is?"

Morley gave him a cool look. "This is a cruelty club – if you don't like it then why the hell did you come here? I'm not doing anything illegal. I found her here; she said I could do what I liked to her. I'm taking her up on that."

Gibbs gazed at her, intrigued. He had always hated abusive tops. He loved and protected his subs, and he could never understand tops who didn't feel the same way.

"Do you even like subs?" he asked, leaning forward and looking into her cold, dark eyes. They flickered in distaste, and he knew that she didn't. She hated them. He had no idea why, but her sense of disgust was tangible. She didn't just hate subs, she loathed them, and she wanted to hurt them as much as possible. That wasn't in Gibbs's understanding of what it was to be a top. He might be strict and demanding with his subs, and he might dispense some hard discipline, but he loved them. Maybe he loved them too much. He knew he'd die for them if necessary; he would have willingly sacrificed his own life to save Shannon's.

"What the fuck does it matter who I like?" Morley gazed at him imperiously. "What the hell is your problem with me?"

"My problem with you is that you get it so very wrong," he said quietly. "And it taints the rest of us."

"Oh, I get it. You're one of those fucked up dominants who's ashamed of his own sadism," Morley sneered.

He laughed out loud. "Hardly. And there's a big difference between being sexually dominant and being a psychopath."

His cell phone buzzed. He opened it and looked at the text message. It was from Abby, confirming that she'd transferred the money back to where it had come from – an account in a name he hadn't heard of, although he had no doubt at all that it belonged to Dana Morley. Tracing it wouldn't do any good – Gibbs knew that Morley was too smart to have left a trail of breadcrumbs back to her door.

He looked up to find Morley watching him from those cold, dark eyes.

He smiled at her. "You made a mistake," he told her.

She glared at him. "What the fuck are you talking about? And who the hell are you?"

"My name is Leroy Jethro Gibbs. You don't know me, but I know you."

"Is that so?" She arched an eyebrow.

“Oh yes. I know that you’re here tonight because you can’t sleep. And you can’t sleep because you’re too full of adrenaline about the evidence you plan to give at an IA inquiry tomorrow. I know that you think you’ve covered all your bases, but I also know that you’ve made one mistake and that as a result of that mistake your entire plan is going to fall apart.”

Her eyes flashed, and he knew he had her wrong-footed. He saw her trying to piece the parts of this puzzle together without giving anything away.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said coldly.

He shrugged. “Okay.” He took a sip of his drink, looking like he didn’t give a damn.

He watched out of the corner of his eye as she struggled with herself – and her need to know won out against her desire not to give him the satisfaction of asking.

“What do you think you know?” she hissed.

“I know about the \$100,000 you deposited in a bank account to make it look like a bribe. You should check on that by the way if you were counting on bringing it up as evidence at the inquiry tomorrow. That account might not be there anymore.”

She looked like an angry snake, poised to strike, wanting to kill him where he sat. He smiled at her, completely unfazed by her anger.

“Who did you say you were?” she demanded.

“Leroy Jethro Gibbs. And you are Dana Morley.”

Her eyes narrowed. “And that’s it? That’s the mistake you think I made? Some crap about a bank account?”

He laughed out loud. “Oh no – that’s not the mistake you made.” He leaned forward and beckoned her close. She struggled with it but again was unable to resist, and she leaned her head towards his.

“The mistake you made was in thinking that Tony DiNozzo has no friends,” he told her. She sat back, a shocked look on her face. “He does,” Gibbs said firmly. “I’m one of them, and I should warn you that you’ve pissed me off, Dana Morley. So I’d be very careful what you tell that inquiry tomorrow if I were you, because I’ll be there, watching you. If Tony goes down, I will unleash a world of hurt on you. I promise you that.”

She got up so quickly that she knocked over her own drink. He sat back, smiling at her serenely. She tugged frantically on her sub’s leash.

“With me, Kara!” she hissed.

Kara looked up at her and then looked at Gibbs. Gibbs shook his head. He could have any sub in this room, and he decided that he wanted this one.

“Kara will be staying with me,” he said firmly. “I’m taking her off you.” He clicked his fingers, and Kara moved quickly to kneel by his side, while Morley stared at them both with a look of disbelief. “Aw – don’t look so surprised. Kara always wants to be with the most powerful top in the room, Dana. You know that.” Gibbs leaned over and removed the leash from Morley’s nerveless fingers. “Go home, Dana. Go home and check on that fake account you set up in Tony’s name and then rethink your strategy for tomorrow. I’ll see you there.”

Morley’s eyes glittered dangerously. “You don’t want me as your enemy, Gibbs.”

Gibbs laughed out loud. “I sure as hell wouldn’t want you as my friend. But you’ve got it the wrong way around, Dana – it’s *me* you don’t want as an enemy, and it’s already too late for that. You made yourself my enemy the second you tried to set up Tony DiNozzo to take the rap for your own crimes.”

She grabbed her purse, turned on her heel, and left without another word. A low buzz went around the room as people saw that she’d been forced to relinquish her sub to another, stronger top. Gibbs could feel the sting of her public humiliation as she stormed out. Nobody was looking at the floorshow now – all eyes were on Gibbs, and he knew it would remain that way until he left.

He turned to Kara. “Do you see the difference?” he asked, placing gentle fingers on the steel clamps cutting into her nipples. He could see the blood around the jaws of those steel traps and it angered him. “Do you see the difference between a powerful top and an abusive one?” he asked her.

She gazed up at him from wide blue eyes, and he knew that she didn’t. She couldn’t – she was too badly damaged for that. She wasn’t like Abby, who knew the difference but got involved with the wrong tops because she felt sorry for them and thought she could change them. Kara was like a beaten dog who thought the beatings were a sign of affection and craved them for that reason.

He smiled down at her gently. “Hush now, little one,” he said softly, and at the same time he removed the clamps. He heard her whimper as the blood rushed into the abused flesh, hurting her. He stroked her hair until her whimpering stopped. She leaned against him, her eyes glowing in worship.

“I can’t save you, Kara,” he told her. “I wish I could. Do you have any clothes here?” She didn’t say a word. He wondered if she was mute, and then he realized. “You have permission to speak, Kara.”

“My clothes are in a locker out back,” she told him in a soft, little-girl voice.

“Go get them then come back here. I won’t fuck you, Kara, but I will take you home.”

She looked confused but nodded anyway. She went and got her clothes and returned to his table dressed in a pair of tight white jeans and a pretty floral blouse. She was in her early twenties, but she looked like a child. His gut clenched as he thought of Kelly – there was no way he'd have allowed her to end up in a place like this.

He got up and held out his hand. She clung onto it, and he led her out of the club. The crowd parted, silently, to let them through, and they were almost at the door when a tall, hawk-nosed top stepped in front of him. He looked angry, perhaps affronted that Gibbs had walked in here, ruined their evening's entertainment, and publicly humiliated one of their own.

Gibbs glared at him. "Don't fuck with me. You won't win, and I'm not in a mood to play games. I'm leaving and taking this sub with me. She's been through enough tonight."

The top licked his lips nervously. He clearly wanted to take Gibbs on, but now that they were face to face, he wasn't so sure he stood a chance. Gibbs just stood there, unmoving, staring the man out. Finally, the other top gave a growl of annoyance and backed down, disappearing back into the crowd.

There was complete silence as Gibbs walked the rest of the way out, Kara clinging on behind him.

He drove her home and then walked her to her apartment door.

"Come in – please!" she begged in her childlike voice. "You can hurt me as much as you like. I won't mind. You can do what you want to me."

"No." He put his hands on her shoulders and looked into her empty blue eyes. "Don't go back to that club, Kara. Don't go with another top like Dana Morley. There are plenty of good ones out there who'll give you a little pain if that's what you want, without being cruel."

She shrugged. "I like it cruel."

"I know." He kissed her forehead and then turned and left. There was nothing he could do for her. He knew that. He'd met her kind before, and she was too far gone to be saved. She had victim written all over her. It was subs like her who occasionally turned up in Ducky's autopsy suite.

He couldn't save a sub like Kara, but he could save someone else, someone who could benefit from what he had to give.

He could still save Tony DiNozzo.

End Of Part Eight

Chapter End Notes:

Friendly feedback always adored

Part Nine by Xanthe

Tony got dressed in his best suit and took one last look around his apartment before he left. It was his word against Dana's – and he knew from experience just how good she was at twisting things. He had no doubt that he wouldn't be coming back here for a long time. As soon as the inquiry heard what she had to say, he'd be arrested.

He was glad Gibbs was going to be there, by his side. He was allowed to take a legal representative or supporter into the inquiry, and Gibbs had promised to be there with him throughout.

Tony went down the stairs slowly, devoid of his usual energy and bounce. He got into Gibbs's waiting car, glanced at his boss – and did a double take.

"Wow, you're looking hot, Boss," he said, taking in the smart cut of Gibbs's plain black suit. Gibbs was also wearing an expensive looking black shirt and a black tie – everything was unrelentingly monotone, and it gave him a hard, lean, completely dominant look. Tony had never seen him in an outfit like this before and it was all he could do not to drool. "Not that you don't always look hot...just you look extra hot today, and usually you don't dress to look so hot...in fact I just assumed you had some weird obsession with Sears menswear –"

He was stopped by a firm slap to the back of his head and that made him feel a hell of a lot better.

"Yes, Boss. Sorry, Boss. Thank you, Boss. I tend to babble when I'm nervous." He sat back in his seat with a sigh.

"Don't be nervous," Gibbs told him firmly. "Just go in there, hold your head high, and tell the truth."

"Easy for you to say," Tony muttered. They were silent for awhile as Gibbs drove. "You ever seen anyone bullwhipped, Boss?" Tony asked eventually.

"That playin' on your mind?" Gibbs glanced at him.

"No. Yeah. All the time." Tony shot his boss a weak smile.

"Don't think about it. Won't happen," Gibbs assured him.

"I'm not sure it's even the pain that scares me. It's more the shame of it," Tony explained. "See, I admit I've always been kinda naughty, Boss. That's who I am – the smart mouth, the goofing off, the doing and saying things I really shouldn't. But I'm not...I've never been..."

"Bad," Gibbs finished for him. "I know that, Tony. You're not bad, or malicious, or corrupt. You're a good kid, underneath. I've always known that."

"You have?" Tony glanced at him, surprised.

Gibbs flashed him one of those smiles that warmed him from the inside out. "Sure – knew it the minute I first met you. Why d'you think I hired you?"

"Still not really sure, Boss," Tony replied. "Thought maybe it was my smile." He gave Gibbs a big grin to illustrate the point.

Gibbs grunted. "If you thought that, then think again, DiNozzo. Wasn't the offer of a blowjob, either," he added slyly.

Tony had the grace to flush. "Don't remind me about that. Please," he implored.

Gibbs's expression turned serious. "Don't tell a single lie in that inquiry today, Tony. Just stick to the truth."

"What about the bank account she set up in my name? Do I tell them about that?"

Gibbs shook his head. "Nope. Abby looked but there's nothing linking that account back to her. She hid her tracks too well. Don't throw out any accusations you can't substantiate."

"I've got nothing on her then."

"You won't need anything," Gibbs told him firmly.

Tony looked at him suspiciously. There was something about him – something he couldn't put his finger on. "You did something," he said slowly. "What did you do, Gibbs?"

"Something that means she won't dare go after you, Tony. Trust me?" Tony stared at him. Gibbs gave a rueful smile. "Okay, I know that's asking too much. Believe me then, if you can't trust me?"

Tony nodded. "I can do that."

Gibbs parked the car. "I'd like you to be able to trust me one day, Tony," he said quietly.

Tony stared moodily out of the car window. "Yeah. I'd like that too, Gibbs. And maybe I will. One day."

The inquiry was taking place in a big conference room in the Baltimore PD. Tony hated being back in this place again, and he especially hated the accusatory glares he got from his former co-workers. They were sure that he was the one who'd accepted bribes to stand back and allow Doug Warren be beaten to death and now IA was sniffing around their department as a result. He could sense the animosity in the way they looked at him and the unfairness rankled with him. He'd liked Doug Warren, and he'd tried his best to save the man. None of this was his damn fault!

He was grateful to have Gibbs walking beside him. His boss was always highly dominant but

now he seemed to have unleashed some extreme facet of that dominance and was projecting it at anyone who so much as glanced at Tony. It worked; people gave them a wide berth, unwilling to provoke the wrath of a top as focussed and protective as Gibbs was right now.

Tony got a little glimpse into how Abby and Ducky must feel when they were out with Gibbs. He suddenly wished that he was wearing Gibbs's collar and walking on the end of Gibbs's leash, because he knew that nothing and nobody could ever hurt him if he had that protection. He'd never needed protection before; he could always take care of himself. Yet now he found himself yearning for it. For the first time in his life, he wanted to wear a top's collar.

He stiffened as he caught a glimpse of Dana Morley's sleek dark hair. She was standing next to Billy, both of them dressed up for the occasion, just as he was. Billy scrubbed up well – he usually looked scruffy, like a cute but neglected puppy, but today he'd shaved off his stubble, tamed his unruly dark hair, and was wearing a navy blue suit. He had always been a handsome guy, but he looked stunning right now. Dana was in a tight black pant suit, with a glacier-blue blouse underneath. She looked beautiful, and she was exuding her usual air of cool, focussed power.

She glanced up as he and Gibbs walked towards them, and Tony saw her eyes flash as her gaze fell on Gibbs. She recognised him – Tony was certain of that – but there was some other emotion in her cold, dark eyes that he couldn't place. He thought at first that it was anger, but as they drew closer he realised, with shock, that it looked more like fear. Tony had never known Dana Morley to be afraid of anyone. Was it possible that she feared Gibbs, and if so, why?

Tony glanced at Gibbs to find that his boss had dialled up the dominance a notch, if that was even possible. And then Tony suddenly knew why Dana was so afraid; in a showdown between her and Gibbs, she knew that Gibbs would win. So *that* was what Gibbs had meant by saying she wouldn't 'dare' go after him.

Gibbs put his hand on Tony's shoulder, making it very clear that Tony was under his protection, and Dana's eyes flashed again. Tony wondered what it was like for her to know that she wasn't the strongest top in the room now that Gibbs was here, and he relished her obvious discomfort; she wasn't used to feeling like this.

"Tony – how are you?" she asked, her lips stretching into a smile that went nowhere near her eyes. So this was how she wanted to play this – all nicey-nice. He could do that.

He smiled back, baring his teeth in distaste. "I'm fine, Dana. I have a great new job. Allow me to introduce my boss – this is Leroy Jethro Gibbs. He's a senior field agent at NCIS. Gibbs, this is my former boss at Baltimore PD – Dana Morley."

He could tell by the way the air suddenly sparked with tension that these two had already met. Damn it, what had Gibbs *done*?

Gibbs gave a brutally dominant smile and held out his hand. Dana looked at it like it was poison but shook it anyway.

It was like a cobra facing off against a wolf, and everyone in the room looked nervous about the outcome.

~*~

The inquiry was a grindingly dull affair, as Gibbs had known it would be. The team from Internal Affairs sat at one end of the room, with their tape recorders and boxes of files, going through testimonies and statements.

Those called to give evidence sat at a table facing them. Everyone else sat on chairs at the other end of the room, watching. It might not have the formality of a courthouse, but everyone knew the inquiry had the power to order an arrest if they had reason to believe laws had been broken.

Tony was called to give his evidence, and he got up, looking pale. Gibbs grabbed his wrist and held it tight, squeezing for just a second, and that seemed to steady him. He nodded, took a deep breath, and then went and took his seat at the table – alone.

Gibbs was proud of him. He answered every question slowly and clearly. He didn't make any inappropriate comments or stupid jokes to deflect his nervousness, the way he so often did. If you didn't know his job history you'd find him impressive.

The lead investigator got into his stride and pushed toward the reason why they were here.

"According to Doug Warren's cell phone records, he made a call to you at 11:15 am on the day he was murdered. What was the substance of that call?"

"Doug asked for help. He said he thought his cover was blown, and he needed to be extracted. He was scared," Tony answered.

"What did you say to him?"

"I told him to hang on in there. I said we'd send help straight away."

"So why didn't you do that?" the investigator asked. "Why wasn't help sent, as he'd requested?"

"I don't know," Tony said quietly. "I did as he asked. I immediately told my boss – Dana Morley – about Doug's phone call. I even asked if I could be part of the back up team going to extract him. Doug was a good cop. I liked him. I'd been his handler for several months. I wanted to help him."

"So you're saying you *did* pass the message onto your boss?" The investigator raised a

sceptical eyebrow.

Gibbs could see Tony's courage faltering. If Morley said he hadn't, it would come down to his word against hers, and they didn't have the tapes to back up Tony's side of the story.

Tony didn't crumble though. He did as Gibbs had asked; he held his head high and told the truth.

"Yes. I passed the message on to my boss."

"And what did she say?"

"She said that she'd take care of it. She denied my request to be part of the extraction team. She said I was needed more where I was."

A low buzz of conversation went around the room. Everyone knew that this was at the heart of the whole inquiry. Either Tony or Morley had to be dirty – one or the other of them had sold Doug Warren out, and Tony's evidence had sounded both confident and plausible.

Gibbs glanced across at Morley and saw the brittle glint in her eyes. Then he glanced at Billy and saw him fidgeting anxiously in his seat beside Morley. Gibbs was no fool. He had always known that someone would go down for this. Tony's neck could be saved – but at a price. It was a price that Gibbs was perfectly willing to pay, but he had a suspicion that Tony might not thank him for it.

Tony's moment in the spotlight came to an end. He was dismissed, and he got up and walked back to his seat.

"Good work, DiNozzo," Gibbs told him softly as he sat down beside him. He felt Tony relax at the words of praise.

Dana Morley was called up to the table next. She looked cool, powerful, and self-assured.

"DiNozzo says that he told you about Doug Warren's call," the investigator said.

"That's right, yes," she replied, flicking a strand of her long dark hair over her shoulder.

Another little buzz went around the room. Tony turned to look at Gibbs, an expression of surprise on his face that she'd admitted that. Gibbs wasn't surprised though. He'd taken Dana Morley's options away, and he had a good idea how this was going to play out.

"So why didn't you send anyone to help Doug Warren?" the investigator asked.

"I did." Morley looked downcast but serene. She gave a sad little smile. "I sent my best detective to handle the situation."

"Your best detective?" The investigator raised an eyebrow.

“Yes.” Morley nodded. “I sent Detective William Reid.”

Billy stood up on the other side of the room, looking shaken. “That’s a lie, Dana! That’s not what happened. That’s not what you said! You said that it was DiNozzo – you said that he’d go down for this. Dana – what’s going on?”

Tony seemed dazed as he looked from Morley to Billy and back again. “I’m with Billy,” he muttered to Gibbs. “What the hell *is* going on?”

“Well, someone had to take the blame,” Gibbs replied in an undertone. “And it was never gonna be Morley.”

“I didn’t want to believe that Reid was the dirty cop within the department,” Morley continued, looking completely unruffled. “But I did some digging, and I found a bank account in his name, with \$100,000 deposited in it. There’s no way Detective Reid makes that kind of money.” She placed a set of papers in front of the IA officers. “It’s all in there – a complete dossier of his activities – dates, times, the amount of the bribes, and so on. I was onto him some time ago, but I wanted to get clear evidence first. I didn’t want him wriggling out of this.”

All hell broke loose in the room. Gibbs shook his head; he had to give the woman credit for a job well done.

“Fucking hell,” Tony said under his breath. “Oh shit...” He looked at Billy, who was yelling and screaming as he was arrested. Then he looked at Gibbs. “Oh God, Gibbs, what have you done?”

~*~

Tony ran out of the room, trying to make sense of what had just happened. He ran down the stairs and out of the building. He was halfway across the parking lot when Gibbs caught up with him.

“Shit! You knew...you knew this would happen!” Tony accused, pacing around like a caged tiger.

Gibbs’s jaw tightened. He looked like he’d been carved of granite. “Well, like I said, there was no way Morley was going to go down for this, Tony.”

“You went to see her last night, didn’t you?” Tony tried to piece the final parts of the puzzle together.

“Yeah, I went to see her last night. See, thing is, Tony, Morley needed an easy victim, and she thought that was you. I convinced her it wasn’t.”

"What the hell did you say to her to make her afraid of you?"

Gibbs shrugged. "I just made it clear that if she went gunning for you then she'd be taking on me. She's a smart woman, and she didn't want to risk tangling with me. She's also smart enough to have had a back-up plan all this time."

"Billy was her back-up plan?"

"Yeah. My guess is that she set up that bank account in Reid's name weeks ago, just in case she didn't manage to get those tapes back from you. She always intended to pin this on either you or him. I made sure he looked like the safer option."

"But that means she gets away with it! Christ, Gibbs! Can't you see that?"

"She won't get away with anything, Tony. I was just buying more time," Gibbs told him firmly. "First I had to get you out of the firing line."

"And you didn't give a damn who else got in the way instead!"

"No." Gibbs looked implacable. "I knew she'd pin it on Reid. It was inevitable. And you know what? I don't give a damn, Tony. That bastard broke into your apartment and trashed it. He stole that disk from you. Hell, he betrayed you in the first place back when you were his partner. Reid and Morley set you up at the very beginning. You heard him in there – he was shocked she hadn't pinned this on you, the way they'd planned. He was complicit with her every step of the way, and he's as guilty as she is. So do I care that he's gone down for it? No, I damn well don't. He's a dirty cop, Tony, and I despise him just as much as I despise her."

"So the sub goes down, and the top walks free – as per fucking usual," Tony said bitterly. "And you wonder why the hell I don't trust you, Gibbs. Any of you! You're all the damn same."

He turned to walk away, but Gibbs grabbed hold of his arm and swung him back. Tony found himself looking into a pair of fierce blue eyes.

"Sometimes, you have to make tough decisions to protect the innocent. You might not like the alternative, but I was never going to let you take one single stroke of the bullwhip, Tony. Not ever. Nobody was going to lay a finger on you. You're..." He paused, breathing heavily.

"I'm what? Yours? Is that it? But I'm not, Gibbs. Look – see." Tony pointed at the empty space around his neck. "I'm not yours. I'm not your sub."

He almost choked as he said that because it actually hurt. He saw the look in Gibbs's eyes and remembered what he'd said about Abby and Ducky, and how he would always protect his subs. Dear God, what would it feel like to be under this man's protection? Wasn't he already finding out?

"If this had panned out differently, if they'd sentenced me to the bullwhip..." Tony began.

"I'd have put a collar on you and taken it myself, yes," Gibbs said quietly.

Tony stared at him. "I wouldn't have let you do that."

"I would have found a way to convince you."

"I have never worn a top's collar – any top's collar. I can't...I don't...I *won't* trust a top," Tony said, wrenching his arm free. "Not any top. Not even you, Gibbs. I'll never be that person."

"I didn't do this to win your trust, DiNozzo. I did it because you're innocent of this crime so it was the right thing to do," Gibbs said angrily. "As for Dana Morley – I haven't finished with her yet. If you think I'd let Billy Reid take all the blame for this and let her walk free then you don't know me very well."

Tony had a sudden sense of the steel at Gibbs's core. That aura of extreme dominance that Gibbs had been projecting all day, in everything from his clothes to his attitude, wasn't just for display. He was every inch the ruthless, predatory wolf that Tony had glimpsed earlier, and he wouldn't think twice about savaging anyone who threatened a member of his pack. Was that what Tony was now? A member of Gibbs's pack?

"Today was about clearing your name, the only way I could, but I will take her down, Tony. I promise you that," Gibbs told him, his eyes searing in their sincerity.

"I don't know whether to be grateful to you or spit in your face," Tony said. "I don't know what the hell to think."

Nobody had ever done anything like this for him and he half wanted to throw his arms around his boss's neck and half wanted to run a mile from how big and scary this had become. He'd never had anyone on his side before – not like this. He'd always been alone, and he'd been prepared to face this alone too. He hadn't expected to be rescued. Nobody ever rescued him but himself.

He had to get away. He had to go and figure this out in his head. He didn't know how to be looked after, cared for, and protected. He'd never experienced it before.

He turned and ran.

~*~

"Problem?" a voice behind Gibbs asked as Tony disappeared into the distance.

Gibbs turned to find Dana Morley standing behind him, a savage smile on her face.

"Aw, don't tell me the little subby boy didn't appreciate your kind gesture?" she purred. "That's Tony for you though – he's a slippery shit. Just when you think you know him he does something that makes you realise that you don't know him at all, and he just slides through your fingers."

"Oh, I think I know Tony better than you ever did," Gibbs told her. "Well done by the way. Your performance back there was exemplary – and just what I expected."

Her eyes narrowed. "You've made an enemy of me, Gibbs. You should watch out."

Gibbs laughed out loud and watched her jaw tighten in annoyance. "It's the other way around, Morley," he told her. "I'm not done with you yet."

He walked past her on his way back to his car.

"What did Tony promise you in exchange for your help?" she asked in a taunting tone. He paused, his back towards her. "He's good in bed, I'll give him that. Then again, he's had plenty of experience. There can't be a top within fifty miles that hasn't had a good time with – or in – Tony."

Gibbs turned, feeling his gut clench angrily at the thought of any other top getting their hands on Tony.

"Is that it? Did he promise to get down on his knees, call you 'Master', and suck your dick?" Morley raised an eyebrow. "Or do you have some special kink he promised to enact for you? Maybe you wanted him to submit to something truly perverse."

Gibbs laughed again. "Oh, I'm not the one with the 'special' kinks, Morley. As for Tony's sexual favours – do you seriously think there's a sub anywhere that I have to *bribe* to get on their knees for me? Have you forgotten last night already? Kara was a sweet little thing – thanks for finding her for me. Now, the trash-talking has been fun, but I have work to do."

He turned and left, smiling grimly to himself as he went. Dana Morley was so fucked. She might not know it yet, but he did. He would find a way to bring her down if it was the last damn thing he did.

He returned to the office and sat down at his desk. He put on his headphones and listened to the disk Abby had given to him of what she'd managed to pull off those mangled tapes.

He listened to the disk in the car as he drove home. When he got home, he changed into his sweats, went down to the basement, put on the headphones again, and listened as he worked on the boat.

It was gone midnight when he heard it. He replayed it to be sure. Then again. And again.

Then he smiled. "Gotcha."

~*~

Tony didn't get much sleep that night. He sat in his apartment, looking at the crushed up little coffin box Abby had made for him. What happened next? Where the hell did he go from here? He was safe from Dana Morley, but was he safe from Leroy Jethro Gibbs? What made him want to run away from Gibbs as much as he wanted to run *to* the man? He felt restless, scared, and unsettled, and he didn't even know why.

Gibbs hadn't asked anything of him. He hadn't offered him anything, either. He hadn't got out a collar and said it was the price for his help. Hell, he hadn't set a price on his help at all; he'd just given it.

Tony couldn't get the image of Billy's pale face out of his mind. If only Gibbs had come to him, explained what he was going to do, and told him what the likely outcome would be. Then Tony could have told him that the price was too high to pay. But would he have done that? If Gibbs had given him the choice, would he have chosen to go to jail rather than allow Billy to go down? Billy had been his friend. His partner. They'd spent long nights working together out there on the streets, watching each other's backs. But Gibbs was right – Billy was as corrupt as Dana and had sold him out just as much as she had. Tony wanted to put all the blame on her because she was a top, but Billy had been almost as bad.

Tony threw the little crushed up coffin into the trash. No, if Gibbs had come to him and asked him, then he knew he'd have let Gibbs do what he had to do – and been crucified by the guilt afterwards.

Gibbs had even saved him from that, the bastard.

~*~

Gibbs returned to the office and spent all night digging into files. He compiled a little dossier that would be more than enough to pique the FBI's interest, and when morning came he called Tobias Fornell.

Fornell showed up an hour later, looking irritated with himself for being so curious about what Gibbs had for him. Gibbs took him into a conference room.

"So, how's your ass? Sitting comfortably yet?" Fornell taunted.

Gibbs laughed. "Oh, you had your pound of flesh from me, Tobias. Don't push it."

"Still can't believe you took the rap for that idiot sub on your team." Fornell shook his head. "You're going soft in your old age, Jethro."

Gibbs threw the dossier on the table. "You shouldn't be blaming Tony – you should be thanking him. If it wasn't for him I wouldn't have found this, and you wouldn't be about to

make the arrest of your career.”

Fornell looked at him questioningly. Gibbs put the disk into the CD player and pressed the 'play' button.

“What the hell is this?” Fornell frowned.

“Shut up and listen,” Gibbs ordered.

There was some static, some background noise, the sound of people working, phones ringing, and there – so easily missed in the general chatter of the office – was a woman’s voice, speaking in an undertone.

“Leave it to me. I’ll deal with Hansen.”

Gibbs turned it off.

Fornell raised an eyebrow. “This is supposed to mean something to me?”

“Oh yes.” Gibbs grinned. “Your missing link, between Admiral Hansen and the people who were paying him, is a Baltimore PD detective called Dana Morley. She’s a dirty cop with her fingers in a lot of pies – and she’s undoubtedly in the pay of the organised crime syndicate you’re trying to bring down.”

"You got all this from the fuzzy conversation on that disk?" Fornell waved his hand in the direction of the CD player. "You sure about this?"

Gibbs opened the dossier and shoved it across the table at Fornell. "Yup. I did some digging to confirm what I heard on the disk, and I’ve come up with enough for you to bring her in for questioning. The rest is up to you, Tobias. My bet is she’ll take a deal and spill the names of every single one of her contacts in that syndicate.”

Fornell flicked through the dossier, his eyes lighting up as he saw the paper trail Gibbs had provided for him. It was only a start, but Gibbs knew Fornell was like a dog with a bone when he got hold of something – he never let it go. He’d find the rest, and he’d take Dana Morley down.

“You might want to hurry, Tobias. Morley’s recently been under investigation by Internal Affairs. She wriggled her way out of that one, but she’s probably busy hiding her tracks right now. She might even be considering cutting her losses and shipping out before she gets found out.”

“Oh, I’m on it, Jethro,” Fornell told him, standing up. “When DiNozzo screwed up our op with Hansen, I was so pissed off – two years work down the drain, just like that. But now...well, now we’re even, old friend.”

“Oh no.” Gibbs shook his head. “We were even the minute Tom Morrow’s strap hit my ass,

Tobias. No, now you owe me, old friend.”

Fornell sighed. “And I’m sure you’ll call in the debt one day, Jethro.”

“You can count on it. And if I ever get the chance to put in a call to the director of your agency, asking for your ass on a platter...”

“You’ll leap at it. Yeah. I know. I’ll just have to watch my step. Christ, I pity poor Morrow dealing with a bastard like you. I bet he enjoyed every single one of those thirty swats.”

“Not as much as I’ll enjoy it when it’s you on the receiving end, Tobias.” Fornell glared at him, and Gibbs grinned. “Hey, you married one of my ex-spouses – did you expect me to make kissy faces at ya?”

Fornell pouted. “Aw, and here was I thinking you were gonna ask me to share your plate.”

The two tops looked at each other and then burst out laughing.

~*~

Tony didn’t go into work the day after the inquiry. He didn’t answer his cell phone, either, although that didn’t stop Abby calling and leaving several messages. Even Ducky called a couple of times. Gibbs only called once. His message was short and to the point: *“You’ve got one day, DiNozzo, and then I’ll fire your ass.”*

At least that was clear, and it gave him some breathing space while he tried to figure out what to do next. He was free. He no longer had the threat of Dana Morley, or the bullwhip, or a prison sentence hanging over his head. He had a good job with people who cared about him. Why then, was he thinking of jacking it all in and moving on again? What was he so scared of?

Tony got up and grabbed his jacket. He’d had enough of thinking. Besides, when the going got tough, what else was there for a tough sub to do but go clubbing?

It’d been weeks since he last got laid. Work had got in the way, then Dana Morley, and after Jake-the-fake he hadn’t exactly been in the mood to go out trawling for a top. Now he needed the distraction of sex. He needed to feel his body being worked on by a pair of firm, ruthless hands. He needed to be taken down, so he could escape from being Tony DiNozzo just for a couple of hours, and be some top’s easy lay for the night instead.

Maybe this time he wouldn’t have to pretend. Maybe this time he’d meet someone who could make it feel real.

He ignored the tiny voice in his head that said he’d already met that person, and that his name was Leroy Jethro Gibbs.

End Part Nine

Chapter End Notes:

Friendly feedback always adored

Part Ten by Xanthe

Gibbs hoped that Tony would choose to return, but he knew what the young sub needed right now was some time to figure out where his future lay. If he figured out that he could trust Gibbs then he'd come back. If not, then Gibbs knew he'd lose this one. It hurt, but he knew he'd done all he could. Meanwhile, there was another relationship that it **was** in his power to fix.

He jogged up the stairs to the director's office, knocked on the door, and then poked his head around it. "Hey, Tom – are you and Jess free for dinner tonight?"

Morrow looked up. "Why? Planning another manipulation, Jethro?"

Gibbs sighed. "No. Just wanted to spend some time with good friends – and also to explain what's been going on with DiNozzo now that the whole thing's over."

"Is it over?" Morrow raised an eyebrow.

Gibbs rubbed a hand over his chin and heard the soft rasp of his stubble. "Well, almost," he admitted wryly. "What do you say? Have dinner with me – both of you. My treat."

"You bet it is. You owe me."

Gibbs grinned. "I know. For the coffee."

He beat a hasty retreat before Morrow could find anything to throw at him.

~*~

Tony decided to go to *Anon*. He hadn't been back there since the whole fiasco with Jake, and he was in the mood for rough sex with a stranger tonight.

It was still relatively early when he got there, and there wasn't a hell of a lot of choice which was disappointing. Tony sat down at the bar and let his gaze drift over the available candidates; none of them exactly looked like his type.

His eye fell on a short, plump woman with spiky blonde hair. She had clear grey eyes and a commanding air, but she didn't project an aura of great toppiness. In fact, she seemed diffident and lacking in confidence. She wasn't his normal type – she was too safe – but beggars couldn't be choosers, so he decided to approach her.

"Is this seat taken?" He gestured at the chair opposite hers.

She glanced up at him. "Oh fuck no," she sighed.

"Hey – what did I do?" He raised his arms in a gesture of surprise. "I just asked if the seat

was taken.”

“There are dozens of empty seats in the room.” She glanced around pointedly.

“I know. I wanted to sit with you.” He gave her his most charming smile.

She sighed again. “Yeah. That’s the problem. I’ve known too many subs like you. Good-looking, confident, teasing –and every single one a heart-breaking shit. I broke up with one just like you a few weeks ago.”

“Really?” Tony sat down anyway. “Wanna talk about it?”

“Not really.” She took a sip of her drink. “Subs are all the same. You take what you want and then move on.”

“Hmmm. See, my issue is with tops.”

“Really?” She sat back in her chair and gestured to him to elaborate.

“Yeah. You always win, no matter what. Somehow the deck is always stacked in your favour, and it’s always the subs who get crushed underfoot.”

“Not in my experience.” She snorted. “I’ve always loved my subs, always taken good care of them and treated them with respect. I give them anything they ask for...and when they’re done taking, they just walk out and move on – taking one last thing with them.”

“What’s that?”

“A piece of my heart.”

They gazed at each other, and Tony had an odd sensation of looking at his own mirror image.

“Tony.” He held out his hand.

“Stacy.” She took it and shook. “So you hate tops as much as I hate subs, huh?” She grinned at him.

“It’s not hate so much – just can’t trust you. Any of you.” Tony shrugged.

Stacy shook her head. “Don’t talk to me about trust. I have never once cheated on a sub or ignored a safe word. But I’ve been manipulated, lied to, cheated on...you name it, I’ve had it happen to me. Some subs are like emotional black holes. They suck you in with their endless dramas, and before you know it you find yourself lending them money, bailing them out of trouble, and picking them up in the middle of the night when their date dumped them even though they dumped *you* years ago.”

“Maybe you should tell them to fuck off,” Tony suggested.

“Strangely I find they ignore me when I do,” Stacy shot back pointedly. “Like the sub who sat at my table even when I made it clear I wasn’t interested.”

Tony grinned. “Ouch. Well, maybe you’re sending out mixed messages. You are in a bar called ‘Anon’ and it pretty much only exists for one purpose, Stacy.”

“I know. I was just hoping to find a plain, ordinary sub, if they exist. I’m done with the ones like you.”

“Ones like me?” Tony raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah – the pretty ones with the flashing eyes. The ones nobody can take their eyes off. The ones with charm and charisma who can have any top in the room – and they know it. That’s you, sweetheart. That’s why you strode over here, so full of yourself. I saw you. You walked in here, took a look around, and realised nobody in here was good enough for you. Then you saw me. You thought I’d be good for an hour’s fun until someone more your type showed up.”

Tony stared at her. “I guess I never saw it that way.”

“Yeah, well, too hyped up on your own damn drama I expect, to think anyone else might have a life, or, you know, feelings that can be hurt. Subs like you made my life a misery at high school, flirting with me just to make the other tops jealous and then dumping me the minute someone more high status came along. I thought all that would change as I got older, but you know what? It didn’t.”

“It’s not like all tops are victims and all subs are bastards,” Tony told her. “Never heard of abusive tops, Stacy?”

She rolled her eyes. “Plenty of times. It’s all you subs can bleat on about. And most tops are too damn proud to say that they’ve been involved with abusive subs, so that story doesn’t get told as often.” She leaned forward. “My last sub cleaned out my bank account when he left. One before that was cheating on me with three different tops, but she still expects me to drop everything and come running every time she calls. One before that stalked me for six months trying to make me collar him; used to send me creepy poems about sharing a plate.” She shuddered.

Tony gave a little laugh. “Okay, I give you that. Abusive subs definitely exist.”

He raised his glass to her, and she met it with her own. The glasses chinked as they knocked them together.

“So, it seems we have a lot in common,” Tony said.

“You think?” Stacy raised an eyebrow. “Seems to me like we have nothing at all in

common.”

“Nah.” Tony grinned. “We both have trust issues. You don’t trust me, I don’t trust you. It could be the basis for a beautiful friendship.”

“Or a whole world of hurt.” She made a face at him, and they both laughed out loud. “So tell me your story then. What got you so fucked up?” she asked.

“Hmm. Where do I start? Okay, the last top I slept with ignored my safe word and called me a whore. The one before that fucked me over, made me lose my job, had someone break into my apartment, and then tried to get me put away for a crime I didn’t commit.”

Stacy whistled. “Bad stuff, Tony, but you know – dramatic.” She pulled a face. “Never met a sub yet who didn’t like the drama, even if they pretend to hate it.”

“Oh I don’t like the drama at all,” Tony assured her. “I hate the fucking drama.”

“Then why do you keep going after the kind of tops who’ll give you trouble, rather than the ones who’ll make you happy?” she asked him quietly.

“What?” He gulped down his drink.

“You heard me. You might not like the drama, but you go back for a reason, and I think I know what that reason is.”

“Really? You’ve known me less than an hour, and you know what makes me tick?”

“Yeah.” She leaned forward. “You want them all to let you down, Tony. It fits your worldview and stops you having to step outside your comfort zone. You only sleep with bastards so you can turn around later and say ‘all tops are bastards!’ But the truth is that you only go after the ones you know will hurt you. Then you can crawl back into yourself, hating tops, blaming them, not trusting them, when all the time you’re ignoring the good ones out here.”

“Ones like you?”

“Yeah, ones like me. The safe, steady, boring types. The ones who’ll come out in the middle of the night and pick you up because we can’t stop wanting to protect you, even when you don’t belong to us anymore.”

“Hmm.” Tony nodded thoughtfully. “Reminds me of a conversation I had with a friend of mine a few weeks ago; The Phantom versus the Countess Rula.” Stacy raised an eyebrow. Tony grinned. “It’d take too long to explain. But I don’t know if you’re right. I met a top recently...” he paused. Stacy smiled encouragingly. “He’s...different,” Tony said.

“Not a bastard then?”

“Oh, he’s a bastard,” Tony chuckled. “He’s definitely a bastard, but he’s also...he did some stuff for me. He kind of saved my life in a way. He saved me from going to jail or facing the bullwhip for sure. And he took a beating for me. Yet he doesn’t want anything in return. I can’t get my head around that. Why did he do it?”

“Is that why you’re thinking of running out on him?” Stacy asked.

“What?” Tony glared at her.

“That’s what you’re doing, isn’t it? Thinking of running out on him? He scares you, so you want to run as far away as possible.”

Tony gazed at her over the rim of his glass. She was right. She did know him. All too well it seemed. “Maybe,” he conceded. “I have been wondering whether to throw in my job, get out of town, and go somewhere else.”

“Like I said – run away,” Stacy snorted. “Coward.”

“Ouch. Again.” He chewed on his lip thoughtfully. “You could be right. Maybe Gibbs freaks me out so much because he’s the real deal. He’s the phantom and the Countess Rula rolled into one. He’s got all the scary sexual danger of the phantom, combined with the whole ‘I’ll keep you safe’ thing Rula had going on.” He laughed out loud. “Man, if he was here right now he’d slap me silly for saying that.”

“I like the sound of him.” Stacy smiled.

Tony smiled back at her. “And I like you. Hey – want to get a room for a few hours?”

She raised an eyebrow. “I would have thought something rough and dirty in the back room was more what you were looking for tonight. You came here to forget, didn’t you?”

“Didn’t you?” he shot back.

She laughed. “Touché. And yes. I did. A room you say?”

“Why not? I’m a sub, you’re a top – and I like you. See – there – that’s me stepping out of my comfort zone, isn’t it? Trying to bed one of the nice tops? You should give me points for at least trying to break the pattern.”

“And you think I should break out of my pattern by bedding precisely the kind of sub who always ends up hurting me?” She raised a cynical eyebrow.

“It’s just sex. I’m not gonna start stalking you for a collar – that much at least I can promise.” He laughed. “Also – I’m pretty. And I’m obedient in the bedroom. Well, kinda.” He winked.

“You like being taken down?”

“Yes. You don’t like taking a sub down?”

“I prefer something less...dramatic.” She smiled. “Something a bit more gentle. You up for that?”

“I usually like it rough when I want to be taken out of myself.”

“Maybe you need to stop looking to escape and turn and face yourself instead.”

“Does the psychoanalysis have to accompany the hot sex or could we skip it?” Tony raised an eyebrow.

She laughed. “Okay, heartbreaker, I’ll give it a try. What are you into?”

She took his wrist in her hand and squeezed gently. It felt nice – too nice. It wasn’t what he was used to. She didn’t have Jake’s leaden, brutish, sexual energy, or Dana’s exquisitely cruel sense of power. Her touch didn’t send sparks shooting up his arm or make his body spontaneously surrender, like with Gibbs. It just felt...nice.

He sensed her dynamic from her touch. She’d tie a sub up and gently caress his body. She’d do anything for her sub, wining and dining him before carefully taking him to orgasm. She’d want the best for him, and she’d lose herself somewhere in the process. She was just too nice. He couldn’t get away from the word. That was what she was, no matter how tough she tried to talk. But maybe nice was what he needed right now.

“I’m into most things,” he told her. “I won’t be tied – not even by you, however kind and responsible you seem.”

“I didn’t think for a second you would, Mr. Trust Issues.”

“You can gag me if I’m annoying you though.” He grinned. “Oh, and my safe word is lemming.”

She raised an eyebrow. He sighed. “It’s meaningless. My safe word says nothing about me. I chose it on purpose for that reason.”

“If you say so.”

“You can spank me as hard as you like – well, I prefer moderate, but I can take heavy. You can clamp me wherever you like. You can fuck me with a strap-on, or have me fuck you to order – I’m good at holding on for as long as it pleases my top, and I can get hard again quickly if you want to use me again. I also have a very agile tongue, if you’d prefer me to serve you that way.” He licked his lips suggestively, and she laughed again.

“I don’t want to do a heavy scene with you, Tony. I’d rather ask you to hold still and then ride you. How does that sound?”

“Well, kinda tame to be honest, but I’m up for it. I’ll pay for the room,” he said firmly,

moving his wrist out of the gentle circle of her hand and standing up.

He remembered what had happened with Jake, and he didn't intend to make that mistake again. He'd ended up feeling like a whore, as if he'd been bought and paid for, and he didn't want to hurt Stacy by turning mean on her. She was too...nice.

~*~

Gibbs glanced up as Tom and Jessica Morrow walked into the restaurant. He studied them for a moment; Morrow was leashed, and he was walking in perfect step with Jessica, their bodies at ease with each other. They walked like a good top and sub should walk – like they belonged together.

They saw him and came over to the table. Morrow was relaxed enough, but Jessica gave him an icy smile.

“Jethro.” Even her greeting sounded frosty.

Gibbs winced. “Jessica. I can see Tom’s told you everything.”

“Of course. I can’t believe you put him in such an unpleasant position, Jethro.”

“The position was a hell of a lot more unpleasant for me, believe me,” he said wryly.

Her eyes flashed. “At least you chose to put yourself there.”

“I know, I know,” he sighed. “C’mon, sit down. Let me explain.”

They sat down and took a look at the menu. Morrow whistled. “Pricey place, Jethro. I must be paying you too much.”

“Well, like you said, I owe you.”

Morrow grinned. “The coffee wasn’t this expensive, Jethro.”

“No, but our friendship is worth a hell of a lot more than the price of a cup of coffee, Tom.”

Morrow nodded thoughtfully.

Jessica pursed her lips together, looking less convinced. “You’re the one that needs reminding of that, Jethro, not Tom.”

“I don’t blame you for feeling that way.” She was Morrow’s top, and Gibbs’s actions had hurt her husband, so she was wary of him right now. She just wanted to protect her sub. He felt the same way about Abby and Ducky...and Tony. He pushed that thought away; as Tony had so clearly reminded him yesterday, he was not Gibbs’s sub.

“Let me explain what happened and then see what you think,” Gibbs told her.

She gave him a curt nod, and he started at the beginning and told them both everything that had been happening with Tony DiNozzo.

~*~

Tony went over to the bar and paid for a room, taking the key the barman handed to him. He winced as he saw the room number: 19. Just his luck; it was the same room he'd shared with Jake.

Stacy bought a bottle of wine, and Tony raised an eyebrow.

“What? You have a problem with a little romance?” she asked.

“No – just as long as we're both clear this isn't going anywhere,” he told her firmly. “I'm just here for the sex, and you're not going to get hurt. Yes?”

“Yes.” She took two glasses from the barman and followed him up the stairs.

He opened the door – it looked exactly the same as it had the last time he was here. His heart sank a little; it was such a nasty place.

“Seedy,” Stacy said, glancing around.

“Yeah. Sordid.” He sighed. “Only alternative is me taking you back to my place, or you taking me back to your place, and I guess neither of us trusts each other enough for that.”

“Nope.” She put the glasses down on the table and poured wine into them. “I wish there were candles,” she said, glancing around the room.

“What did I say about romance?” he chided. She handed him a glass of wine, and he sipped it. “Mmm – nice stuff. Expensive.”

“Well, you know me – only the best for a sub of mine, even if he is only a one night stand.”

She took a sip from her own glass and then replaced it on the table. He put his down beside it, and Stacy grabbed his wrist and pulled him close. He towered over her, but he liked her forthright style.

“So you say you have an agile tongue, huh?” She pulled his head down and kissed his lips. Her mouth was soft and gentle, and he returned the kiss in the same way.

She drew back. “Kneel down, submissive,” she ordered.

Tony sank to his knees obediently. She put a hand in his hair, drew his head back, and traced a finger down his exposed throat.

“You really are far too pretty,” she murmured.

She slid her fingers into his shirt, unbuttoning it, and he held position, head still forced back. He liked her – she was subtle, but she had some power there even if she wasn’t as confident about wielding it as she should be.

She undid his shirt and pulled it off his shoulders.

“Mmmm...” She gently ran her fingers over his chest and toyed with one of his nipples. He shivered. “Stand up.” He got to his feet immediately, and she undid his pants and let them fall to the floor. He was naked underneath and that made her smile. “You always go commando?”

“Yup! Like to think of myself being available for a top to use if they’re in the mood.” He grinned at her cheekily.

“You’re beautiful – like a thoroughbred racehorse. All long, lean lines...” She traced a hand over his flank. “What the hell are you doing here with me?” she asked, and her voice was suddenly tight and uncertain. “I bet you usually only bed good-looking tops, Tony. This must be a come down for you.”

“No, not at all.” He gathered her up in his arms and kissed her forehead gently. “You’re nicer than anyone I’ve ever slept with, Stacy. I like you.”

“But I’m not turning you on.” She slid her hand down and fondled his flaccid cock gently.

“Well, we’re only just getting started! And you’re not naked yet!”

She bit on her lip, and he could see the worry in her eyes. She didn’t have any confidence about her own body after seeing his. She simply didn’t think she was in his league.

“You’re right,” he said softly, stroking her spiky blonde hair. “I do always choose the bastards to stay inside my comfort zone. Now I’m choosing you. I’m choosing *you*, Stacy. Show me the difference.”

She gave him a little smile. “Okay, submissive. Let me see what you’ve got. Bend over.”

He bent elegantly from the waist, giving her a full view of his ass. She ran her hand over it and then spanked out a gentle beat. She warmed him up and then ordered him to lie on his back on the bed. He did as he’d been told, watching eagerly as she pulled her sweater over her head and undid her bra. She had sweetly plump breasts and her body was soft and curvy, the flesh pink and dimpled.

“I know I’m fat,” she said, climbing onto the bed.

"Some of the sexiest tops I've known were a hell of a lot fatter than you." He grinned.

"Charmer." She grasped his arms and pushed them above his head. "Keep them there. Don't break position without permission."

"Yes...uh...what do you want me to call you? Mistress?"

"Stacy," she replied. "Let's not pretend we're something to each other that we're not."

She was nothing like Dana. She didn't have a perfect body. She didn't have an aura of total control. Her body was warm, earthy and pleasant. She felt...real.

She put him in the position she wanted and then began tracing her fingers over his body. She sucked on his nipples, holding him down while she teased them with her tongue. She was commanding but gentle. Her dominance was sweet but sincere.

Tony closed his eyes and remembered being in that dressing room with Gibbs pressing against him. He remembered the touch of Gibbs's fingers on his wrist and the way his body had voluntarily surrendered – something it had never done before. What would it feel like to be lying here with Gibbs working on him, instead of this nice, gentle top? How would it feel to be the focus of all Gibbs's powerful, dominant energy?

"Give it up for me, Tony," Stacy whispered as she worked on him. "Give it all up. Come on...that's it...good submissive. Surrender to me."

He opened his eyes and watched her playing with him. She was a good top – efficient and purposeful. She was taking her time, talking to him, trying to get him in the mood. He loved her for it and wanted so much to please her...but his body, it seemed, did not.

"I can't ride you if you won't get hard. Get hard for me, submissive," she ordered.

He tried, but nothing happened; his cock remained resolutely flaccid. "Maybe I'm more screwed up than I thought," he told her, shame-faced. "I'm sorry. You're so beautiful too. I want to be turned on."

"Beautiful? Me?" She gave a derisory little snort.

"Yes." He broke position and grabbed her face in his hands. "I want to...but...I don't know what's wrong with me. It isn't you, trust me. I can get hard if someone brushes up against me in the wrong way, or says my name in a certain tone of voice. I know I like you, and I definitely like what you're doing to me."

"Hmmm." She nestled down beside him and took him in her arms. "I don't think you and me were meant to be, Tony," she sighed.

He burrowed his face in her neck. "Damn it, what's wrong with me?" he asked in despair.

Sex always worked for him – he always got hard when a top ordered him.

“I think I know.”

He leaned back and gazed at her.

“Have you ever been in love, Tony?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Never.”

“Well, I think you are now,” she told him.

He shook his head, confused. “You’re nice, Stacy, and I know you’re one hell of a romantic, but we’ve only just met.”

She laughed out loud. “Not with me, idiot.” She stroked his hair gently. “With this Gibbs person you were talking about. I think you’re in love with him, Tony. And I don’t think I’m the only romantic in the room. I think that’s what you are too, deep inside.”

“Me?” He gave her an incredulous look. “A romantic?”

“Well you were the one who said how much we have in common. You don’t trust tops, and I don’t trust subs – but isn’t that only because we want to love them and don’t want our hearts to get broken? I think this Gibbs person found a way into your heart, no matter how hard you tried to protect it. And you are a romantic, Tony – when you’re in love with one person you can’t make love to another, no matter how hard you try.”

“I’m not in love with Gibbs.” Tony sat up, feeling angry.

“Why does the idea upset you so much?”

“Because I don’t do love. I never have. I’m not in love with Gibbs,” he repeated firmly.

“No, you don’t *want* to be in love with Gibbs – and that’s something else entirely.”

He ran his hands through his hair. “No. I mean I *can’t* be in love with Gibbs.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s...he’s not available. He’s all closed off. He won’t take a sub to his bed, and I have way too much pride to beg.”

“Maybe that’s for the best?” Stacy suggested. He looked at her. “Well, you do seem to be pretty screwed up, and you told me yourself that you look to escape in sex. Maybe what you need right now is just to get to know the guy more? Without the pressure of sex? Maybe what you need right now, more than sex, more than anything else, is to just learn how to trust him?”

"I don't trust tops," Tony told her automatically.

"I know. I don't trust subs either." She smiled at him. "But I want to – and you want to as well, Tony. Why not give it a try with this guy? If you can learn to trust him, maybe the sex will come later? When he's ready – and when you are too. Maybe you've always given it away too easily in the past. Maybe you need to stop doing that and try something else instead."

"You really are a romantic." He gave a little laugh.

"Takes one to know one." She got up, retrieved their wine glasses and then returned to the bed and gave his glass to him. "If you do what you always do, you get what you always get, Tony."

"That's very profound, Stacy." He took a sip of his wine and grinned at her over the rim of the glass.

She shook her head. "You don't have to be on the run your entire life, Tony. You can choose to stop and listen to your heart. You can choose to trust a top for once. You can choose love."

"And you don't have to answer the phone in the middle of the night when she calls you to come pick her up," he told her softly.

"No. No, I don't. We can both change, Tony. I'm sure of it."

"Maybe."

"How did you know?" Stacy asked quietly. "About her. How did you know?"

"How did I know that she was the one who broke your heart? I just knew. You told me about all the others – the one who cleared out your bank account, and the one who stalked you and sent you all the really bad poetry. But you kept coming back to her – the one who calls you in the middle of the night to go pick her up. She's the only one you really care about. You hate yourself for going, but you can't resist because you love her, even though you know she's just using you."

"Yes. I know. Look, I'll choose to stop loving her if you choose to start trusting him," she said. "Maybe that way we can both make things change."

"I don't know that I can do that."

"Me neither!" She laughed out loud, and he joined in.

They stayed there together, sipping their wine, holding each other, for a long time. Then, finally, he got up and got dressed. She lay there, on the bed, naked, watching him. When he

was done he went over there and knelt down beside her.

"Thank you, Stacy," he said softly. He kissed her gently on the mouth and then stepped back. "You really are very beautiful."

"Idiot," she replied, smiling.

"Yeah, that's me." He smiled back, and then he turned and left the room.

~*~

"Well, that's confirmed one thing for me." Morrow sat back in his chair as Gibbs finished telling his story. Gibbs arched an eyebrow. "DiNozzo is a trouble magnet, just like I knew he would be the minute you hired him," Morrow said.

Gibbs sighed. "Maybe. But none of this was the kid's fault. He was innocent in all this, and he got thoroughly screwed over."

"I agree," Jessica said, surprising him. "And you did the right thing, Jethro, much as it pains me to say it." She glanced at her husband and then back at Gibbs.

Morrow nodded. "Jess is right. I don't like the way you went about it, and next time I'd prefer it if you included me in your thought process, Jethro, but I'm glad you helped DiNozzo out."

"So are you going to collar him?" Jessica asked.

Gibbs nearly choked on the mouthful of food he was chewing. He reached for his glass of water, coughing heartily. "What?" he growled.

"Well, you do have an unorthodox approach to collaring subs, Jethro." She shrugged. "And although I've never understood what you get out of it, it does seem to work. For you and for them."

"Tony's a tough kid. He's survived on his own for a long time. I don't think he's in any hurry to take a top's collar," Gibbs told her, with a firm shake of his head.

"Shame," Morrow murmured. "Because, to be frank with you, Jethro, the only way I think you'll get him to calm him down and stay out of trouble is if you put your collar on him, with all the conditions that come with it. At least that way he'll have some discipline in his life."

"And someone to call him on his crap," Jessica added. "Because although he might disobey his boss, I suspect he'd think twice about disobeying his top."

"Especially knowing you'll tan his ass for him if he does." Morrow grinned.

“He’s a handful of course,” Jessica said, taking a sip of her wine. “And as you won’t allow any subs of yours to take public discipline, you’ll have to work hard to make sure he doesn’t screw up so spectacularly that you have to step in and take a punishment for him.”

“Because next time I might not be so kind as to allow it to be private,” Morrow said. “Mind you, it’d be interesting to see if anyone turned up to see you taking public licks, Jethro. My guess is the NCIS discipline room would either be packed to the rafters or completely deserted.”

“It would depend on whether or not curiosity won out over sheer terror I suppose!” Jessica laughed.

Gibbs stared at them both. They gave him sweet smiles in response.

“You **want** me to collar DiNozzo?” he asked incredulously. “I’ve known him for less than three weeks!”

Morrow shrugged. “I don’t think it’s a question of want, Jethro. It’s more that there’s a certain kind of inevitability to it.”

“You do have a habit of collaring the people on your team, Jethro,” Jessica pointed out.

“Only if it’s what they want and if I think they need it!” Gibbs protested.

“I doubt there’s anyone in the entire world who needs it more than Tony DiNozzo.” Morrow gave a wry chuckle. “Honestly, Jethro, there’s no way you’ll be able to stand having that kid on your team and not being able to spank his ass regularly without jumping through HR hoops to do it. If you collar him then you’ll be able to spank him at your own discretion whenever you think he needs it. Don’t tell me your hands aren’t itching to buckle a collar around his neck right now.”

Gibbs glared at him but his fingers were twitching all the same. Morrow burst out laughing, and Jessica joined in.

“We know you too well, my friend,” Morrow said.

~*~

Tony pushed his way through the crowds in the bar on his way out of *Anon*. The place had been deserted a couple of hours ago but now it was heaving.

He gave up trying to shove his way through the throng and made for the back door that led out onto the alley instead, knowing it would be quieter.

The cool night air hit him after the stuffy atmosphere in the club, and he took a few deep breaths, relieved to be out of there. He leaned back against the outside wall of the club and

closed his eyes, going over his conversation with Stacy endlessly in his mind.

In love? With Gibbs? No, that was insane. He didn't know what love was. He had no idea what it even felt like. He remembered the warm feeling he got in his belly whenever Gibbs slapped the back of his head and how sparks flew between them whenever they touched. Was that love? Did Gibbs feel it too? He remembered the way his body had once submitted to Gibbs of its own volition, as if he wasn't even in control of it. Was *that* love? He didn't have a clue.

He opened his eyes, pushed away from the wall, and began walking down the alley towards the parking lot, still lost in thought.

If it was love, then what the hell did he do about it? Gibbs didn't seem interested in taking any subs to his bed, so there didn't seem to be much future for it. Should Tony go to him? Confess to this new emotion that he didn't even understand? Or should he do what Stacy had advised and just learn to trust the man first, without sex getting in the way?

He heard footsteps ahead and looked up – and his heart sank. Jake was standing in front of him, hands on hips, blocking the exit to the alley.

"Well, if it isn't Tony. I thought I saw you leaving the bar in a hurry."

"Fuck off, Jake. I'm not in the mood for you tonight."

"That's a shame because I'm in the mood for taking down a smart-mouthed sub and showing him who's boss."

"Yeah, well, you tried that a couple of times as I recall, and whaddya know? I kicked your ass, so I guess that makes me boss," Tony snapped.

Jake's smile didn't falter. Tony started to feel uneasy.

"Look, I don't want any trouble," Tony said quickly. "You've tried to fight me twice, and you lost both times. Do you really want more of the same?"

"What I want is to teach you a lesson you won't forget in a hurry," Jake replied. He walked towards Tony, slowly and threateningly. "You humiliated me, you bastard."

"Well, you pissed me off," Tony snapped.

Jake ignored him. "And now, it's time for me to return the favour. I enjoy humiliating subs, especially mouthy ones like you who need to learn their place."

"My place?" Tony was feeling more and more apprehensive about this. Jake was far too cocky for someone whose ass he'd kicked twice now. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the reason for Jake's confidence; two of his friends were standing behind Tony, blocking the alley's other exit. *Oh shit.*

One against three – Tony was a scrappy fighter, but he had a feeling he'd be taking a beating tonight.

He made a run for it, diving back towards the club's door – only to find that it couldn't be opened from the outside. Thwarted, he turned back to find Jake walking menacingly towards him, a nasty leer on his face.

"Your place, Tony. I'm going to show you exactly what your place is tonight."

Jake nodded to his two friends, and they made a grab for him. Tony managed to swing a few good punches, but three against one weren't good odds, and he didn't have his badge or his gun on him.

A punch sent him crashing into the wall, winding him, and his assailants closed in. One of the men caught hold of his arms and immobilised them behind his back, while the other grabbed a fistful of his hair. Then he was pushed down onto his knees.

"That's right." Jake stopped in front of him. Tony's head was pulled back, forcing him to look up at Jake. "This is your place, Tony," Jake said triumphantly. "This where you belong, you subby sack of shit: on your knees and in the gutter."

"Don't do this, Jake," Tony said quietly. "Let me go."

Jake swung out a backhand, and Tony went flying sideways. He could taste the tang of fresh blood from his split lip as he was hauled back into position.

"I'm not going to let you go until you've paid me back for what you did," Jake hissed. "I was tied up in that room for hours because of you, and I don't appreciate being humiliated in front of my friends."

"Oh, you didn't need me to humiliate you," Tony replied, unable to help himself. "You can do it all by yourself."

"Is that so?" Jake's eyes glinted in the dark alley. "Well tonight you're gonna know what it feels like to be humiliated, Tony."

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the collar he'd tried to persuade Tony to wear the first time they'd met.

Tony shook his head, feeling himself start to shake. "No. Don't do this, Jake. Please."

"I like it when you beg, Tony. It's a good sound." Jake gave him a vicious smile.

"There's a law against it, Jake," Tony said desperately as Jake began unbuckling the collar. His stomach churned at the thought of being forced to wear it. He had never worn a top's collar in his life. He'd never wanted to. There was only one top in the world whose collar

he'd wear, and it sure as hell wasn't Jake. "If you force a collar on an unwilling sub then you're breaking the law, Jake. You know that."

"Aw...I'm breaking the law." Jake made a face. "You know what? I can live with that, Tony. Just like you're gonna live with this."

He nodded to his friends, and Tony felt the fist in his hair tighten, drawing his head back even more, exposing his throat.

"No...no...NO!"

Tony screamed out his anger and sense of violation as Jake reached out towards him. A collar was important. It was about so many things that Tony held dear to his heart, even though he professed not to believe in any of them. He thought of all the many people he'd slept with, and how he'd never, ever agreed to wear their collars. God, Stacy was right; he was a stupid fucking romantic, but it mattered. Damn it...it mattered.

He struggled with all his might as Jake strapped that hated strip of leather around his neck. It hurt. It hurt deep inside in a way he couldn't even begin to process. He sobbed as the buckle was pulled tight – tighter than was comfortable. It felt hard, restrictive and unwanted. He was not owned by this man. He did not agree to this. He did not submit. This could not be happening to him.

"Aw – now that looks pretty." Jake took a step back and admired the collar that was now buckled tight around Tony's throat. "See that collar, Tony? That says you're mine now. You're my collared sub, and you belong to me."

"The collar doesn't mean shit. You put it on me by force. I'm not yours. I don't belong to you," Tony choked. He thought he was going to suffocate. The collar was like a fist closing around his windpipe, and it was going to strangle the life out of him.

"Collar round your neck says you do." Jake gave a smug smile.

"Can't," Tony spat. "Can't belong to you."

"You saying I'm not good enough for you?" Jake backhanded him again, and Tony's head snapped back and then flopped forwards. He gazed at the ground, breathing heavily, his arms still immobilised behind his back. A hard hand was pressing on his shoulder, keeping him on his knees.

"Can't belong to you." He looked up at Jake. "Can't belong to you because I belong to someone else." It was the truth he'd been trying to deny when he walked out of the club, but now, kneeling here, wearing another top's collar, he knew it wasn't a truth he could deny anymore.

"Then that someone else shoulda put a collar on you, so I knew you were claimed," Jake taunted. "'Cause it seems to me that you're just an un-collared sub looking for a top to show

you who's boss.”

“Boss.” Tony hung his head, still struggling to breathe. “Yes. Boss.” He laughed out loud and a few drops of blood from his split lip dripped onto the ground. “You’re not my boss, Jake. The collar means nothing. I repudiate your collar. I hate your fucking collar!”

“Too bad. You’re gonna wear it while I fuck that pretty mouth of yours.”

Tony looked up angrily. “You put your stinking cock in my mouth and that’s the last thing you’ll ever do with it.”

“Aw – is that any way to talk to your top?” Jake slapped him again, hard, and his head went sideways. He was hauled back into position, arms pinned behind his back, head pulled back by the hair.

“I’m not asking for a blow job,” Jake told him with a vicious grin. “No – you’re my collared sub, so I’m gonna use your mouth the way I want, and you’re gonna take it. And here’s why.”

He nodded, and Tony felt one of his captors move. Then he felt the sharp point of a knife digging into the side of his neck.

“If you try and stop me, or if you try and bite down while I fuck your mouth, then Mark here will slit your throat. Understand that, submissive? You’re collared, boy. I *own* you, and I’m gonna enjoy this.”

Jake opened his fly and eased out his hard cock, fondling it obscenely. Tony tried to decide whether it would be better to have his throat cut rather than suffer this humiliation but in the end he knew he had no choice. He was all out of options.

“Open your mouth,” Jake ordered.

Tony glared up at him mutely. The knife was jabbed into his skin, cutting him, and he felt warm blood flowing down his neck. He opened his mouth.

Jake grabbed hold of his head and thrust in so hard that he made Tony gag as his cock hit the back of his throat.

“That’s good, that’s what you’re for, you piece of subby shit. This is all you’re good for. Take it, take it, take it, you fucking whore.” Jake repeated the words over and over again as he thrust into Tony’s mouth.

Tony couldn’t blank out any of it; not the constant feeling of choking, or the restrictive tightness of the unwanted collar around his neck. Not the sharp point of the knife digging into his skin, or the prickling sensation of Jake's pubic hair against his face as he thrust in. It was all too vivid and real. He gagged at the taste of Jake’s dick in his mouth and flinched from the hard slap of his balls against his chin.

His soul rebelled against what was being done to him. This wasn't who he was! He was always so careful about having safe sex. He always took care of himself and did a damn good job of it too. This couldn't be happening to him. He couldn't be kneeling here, in this dark alley, being made to take this agonising humiliation...and yet he was.

Tony felt like he was suffocating. The collar around his throat was choking him even as Jake's cock did the same thing, ramming into his mouth and blocking his airway.

This bastard was violating him in every way, and Tony raged inside. Nobody collared him. Nobody. He didn't belong to Jake. There was only one person in the whole damn world he belonged to and that was Gibbs.

He knew that, deep inside. He'd known it, on some level, from the moment he first met the man. He'd just been struggling to come to terms with it. He had never submitted to anyone except Gibbs, and he knew now that he never would.

His jaw ached and his lips were sore and swollen. His arms hurt where they were twisted up behind his back and his knees ached from kneeling on the hard ground. He closed his eyes and lived through the nightmare of what was being done to him, reminding himself over and over again that he belonged to Gibbs. It was the only way he could get through it.

He felt Jake convulse and then felt his come gushing out down his throat. Jake withdrew and ejaculated again - on Tony's face and leather jacket this time.

Then he held his spent dick in front of Tony's face. "Lick me clean," he ordered.

"Bite me," Tony replied.

His hair was grabbed again and his head pushed forwards in the direction of Jake's dick. He felt a wave of nausea, and he began to retch. Jake moved his dick away fast.

"You fucking animal! Don't you dare throw up on me!"

The man holding Tony released him, and Tony went down on all fours and retched again, his stomach heaving. He glanced up to see Jake tucking his dick back in his pants. Jake looked down on him with a triumphant grin.

"Well, it's been fun, Tony. You can keep the collar; it looks good on you."

He laughed and his friends joined in, looking down on him as they high-fived, savouring their victory. They were still laughing as they ran off down the alley and disappeared from sight.

Tony reached up to pull the collar from his neck. His fingers were shaking so much that he couldn't get purchase on the buckle, and he sobbed as he struggled with it. He finally managed to wrench it free and threw the hated thing on the ground. He was hit by another wave of nausea and crouched over the collar and threw up Jake's ejaculate onto it.

Tasting Jake's semen coming back up made him feel even more nauseous. His stomach cramped, and he vomited the wine he'd drunk earlier and then the meal he'd eaten several hours ago.

He heaved his guts out, kneeling in that alley on all fours. Then he stared down at his own vomit which was spewed all over the hated collar lying on the ground in front of him.

So this was rock bottom. He couldn't go any lower. Everything else – all that had happened with his father, with his screwed up job history, with all the many mistakes he'd made in his life, and with Dana Morley – all of it had been leading to this one ultimate low point. This was definitely rock bottom.

He didn't know what to do. Everything hurt so much, including his pride. He managed to drag himself to his feet, holding onto the wall beside him, and then he slowly staggered down the alley, still holding on.

He found his way to his car somehow, got inside, and locked the door. Then he rested his head on the steering wheel and tried to calm himself down.

Where should he go? Should he go to the police? His stomach roiled at that thought. He didn't want to do that. Maybe he should go home, take a bath, curl up in bed and try to forget...but he didn't want to be alone.

He wanted to go somewhere safe and be taken care of for once in his damn life, and he hated himself for feeling that way. He had always been able to take care of himself. Always. He'd had to. Nobody else ever had. He could do it now too. All he had to do was go home, crawl into bed, and pull the blanket over his head...but he couldn't. He wanted someone...he **needed** someone to hold him. He longed to feel strong arms around his body, holding him tight and comforting him, keeping him safe. He couldn't keep doing this alone. What was it Gibbs had said? He had to learn to accept help when it was given. Asking for it was harder though; much harder.

He could go back to *Anon* and seek out Stacy if she was still there – but he wouldn't do that to her. He almost laughed out loud at the thought of giving her precisely the 'fucking drama' she hated so much.

There was Abby. She'd welcome him in...and he'd break her heart if he showed up on her doorstep looking like this. He didn't have a clue where Ducky lived, and he knew he couldn't face the genial doctor in any case.

It didn't matter anyway, because there was only one place he wanted to go, only one person he'd allow to see him in this condition, and only one man's arms he wanted to feel around him.

End of Part Ten

Chapter End Notes:

Friendly feedback always adored

Part Eleven by Xanthe

It was late when Gibbs got home. He went up to his bedroom, sat down on the side of the bed, picked up the photo on the nightstand, and traced the outline of Shannon's face with his fingertip.

"They're nice – Tom and Jess. You'd like them, Shannon. They're how you and I would have been if you were still here."

He sat there, allowing himself to feel the pain. She wasn't here. She never would be here again and acknowledging that hurt like hell. He wondered if the pain would ever go away, or if his new strategy of allowing himself to actually feel it would one day kill him. Seeing Tom and Jessica together always made him feel this way; he loved being with them but afterwards he couldn't help thinking about what he'd once had with Shannon.

He knew he couldn't go to bed feeling like this. Somehow, he had to learn how to accommodate the pain without denying its existence. Denial had only got him lost, and it had been a long road back. He got changed into sweats and jogged down to the basement.

Working on the boat helped him work through the pain. It cleared his mind and allowed him to process his emotions.

He imagined Shannon watching him as he worked on the boat. He wondered what she would have thought of his recent showdown with Dana Morley. He hoped that she'd have been proud of him. He thought she would. Shannon had a fiery temper, and she'd have hated Morley as much as he did. He wondered if she'd have liked Tony. Probably. Shannon had been a good judge of character, and she'd have seen through Tony's masks to the brave, big-hearted, if troubled sub inside.

He hoped Tony would return to work and wondered how he'd handle him if he did. Tom Morrow might be right about Tony needing his collar, but the kid was like a stray cat – you could entice it into the house with food, and it might even let you stroke it, but he doubted it'd let you put a collar on it.

Slowly, the familiar sensation of working on the boat soothed him. He spent a peaceful hour smoothing and sanding when a sudden loud knocking sound upstairs cut through the silence with stark urgency.

Gibbs glanced at his watch; it was far too late for this to be anything other than job related – or bad news. He ran quickly up the stairs and along the hallway to the front door.

"It's open," he called before he got there, but he couldn't see anyone through the glass section of the door. He wondered if it was kids, knocking and running away, although none of the kids on his street had ever dared play that game on him before. They knew the consequences wouldn't be worth the thrill of the dare.

He opened the door – there was nobody standing there, but there was someone crouched

on the doorstep. Tony. He had one arm clasped across his belly, and he looked like he was going to throw up – he already had judging by the state of his clothes. For one brief second Gibbs wondered if he was drunk – and then he saw the bruises on Tony's jaw and the cuts on his mouth.

Gibbs didn't say a word. He took hold of Tony's arm, slung it over his shoulder, and hauled Tony up. Then he walked him into the house, kicking the door shut behind them. He took Tony into the living room and deposited him on the couch.

Christ, he was a mess! Gibbs sat down on the coffee table in front of him. "Where does it hurt?" he asked quietly.

"Everywhere," Tony muttered. "Pride mostly though I think," he added, in a self-deprecating tone.

Gibbs reached out and touched a gentle hand to Tony's jaw, moving it sideways so that he could examine it in the light. Tony's lips were chapped, swollen and torn, bleeding in places. His jaw was peppered with bruises and there was some kind of dried bodily fluid on his face and jacket. Gibbs jaw tightened; he could make a good guess at what had happened here.

"Tony – is it just your face, or are you hurt anywhere else?" he asked. Tony didn't reply. He looked guilty, as if he was ashamed of himself. "Tony – I need to know if I should call Ducky or take you to the ER," Gibbs said firmly.

Tony shook his head. "It's just my face. I'm fine."

"I don't like the way you're holding yourself." Tony had one arm wrapped across his own body and was almost bent double.

"Just trying not to throw up again," Tony said. He looked up for the first time, and Gibbs saw the bloody cut on his throat and the dark red banded mark around his neck. It looked like someone had tried to garrotte him.

"Stay there – I'll go get something to clean you up," Gibbs said curtly.

He went into the kitchen, got a bowl of water, a towel, and his medical kit, and took them back into the living room.

Tony looked uncomfortable and even more ashamed than before, as if he wanted the couch to open up and swallow him. "Sorry," he muttered. "Shouldn't have come here."

Gibbs tapped him lightly on the head. "Don't be an idiot. Here is exactly where you should have come." Much to his surprise the tap, or maybe the words, seemed to help. Tony's body relaxed a fraction, and he gave a wan, faded smile.

Gibbs sat down on the coffee table and dipped a cotton ball into the water – and then hesitated. "If you intend to report this, then I shouldn't clean you up, Tony. There's evidence

here."

Tony gave a tight little laugh. "Not gonna report it."

"You should."

"No." Tony shook his head vehemently.

Gibbs decided not to argue with him on the subject. There was still plenty of evidence on Tony's clothes if he changed his mind. He cleaned up the cuts on Tony's face and gently wiped the dried, encrusted remains of the bodily fluid – either vomit or semen or both – from the corners of Tony's mouth. Then he leaned back.

"Tony – who did this to you?" he asked quietly.

"Doesn't matter. I kind of deserved it."

Gibbs felt his jaw tighten. "You know there's no way in hell I'll let you get away with that answer, don't you?"

Slowly, hesitantly, Tony raised his face to meet Gibbs's hard gaze. "Yes," he said quietly. "I figured."

"So what happened?"

"I screwed up." Tony shrugged. Gibbs sat back and waited. When nothing more was forthcoming he tapped Tony's knee. Tony nodded and continued. "There was this top." He paused again.

"Anyone I know?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

Tony shook his head vehemently. "No. Oh God no. He was just this one night stand – a really crappy one night stand. I pissed him off a few weeks ago and then ran into him a couple of days later and pissed him off again."

"Pissed him off how?" Gibbs demanded.

"Humiliated him." Tony grimaced. "I behaved like a shit to be honest. I knew what I was doing – I hated the guy, so I enjoyed baiting him. Then tonight, he caught me on my own in a dark alley – and he had some friends with him. Three against one. Got in a few punches before..." He trailed off, swallowing hard.

"What did they do?" Gibbs fought down his own anger.

"Forced me onto my knees. Slapped me around a bit. And then..." Tony reached up and touched his neck, breathing heavily. "Oh shit," he whispered.

He clutched his stomach again, and Gibbs grabbed him, ran him into the kitchen and shoved him over the sink. Tony threw up into it, although mostly he just brought up yellow bile; there didn't seem to be anything else left in him.

Gibbs got a bottle of water out of the cupboard and unscrewed the cap. When Tony was done throwing up Gibbs handed him the bottle silently, and Tony took several grateful gulps. He looked at Gibbs with dark, haunted eyes.

"He put his collar on me, Boss," he said, his voice hitching as he spoke. "On me. He put his collar on *me*." He sounded as if he couldn't believe it. "Then he fucked my mouth while his buddies held me in place with my arms shoved up my back. One of them held a knife to my throat to keep me from biting the bastard's dick off. Afterwards they ran away, and I took off that damn collar and threw up onto it in the alley. "

Gibbs went very still. Legally, collaring an unwilling sub was almost as serious an offence as sexual assault; the emotional fallout for a sub could be severe and long-lasting. Gibbs knew Tony's views on being collared and was all too well aware of how devastated he must be right now.

"You know who this bastard is?"

"Yeah." Tony nodded.

"You gonna tell me?"

"No."

"I thought you'd say that." Gibbs rocked back on his heels and gazed at Tony. He looked terrible; his face was white as chalk, his hair was sticking up all over the place, and his clothes were stained with vomit and semen. Now was not the time to press him further on the identity of his assailant. "Come with me," he said firmly.

"Boss?" Tony's head jerked up.

Gibbs gestured towards the stairs. "You need a shower and a change of clothes. You'll stay here tonight."

He watched the play of emotions on Tony's face and it reminded him of that stray cat again. He'd managed to entice Tony into the house, but he was still too freaked out and feral to accept the comfort he so clearly needed right now.

"No. I'll go home," Tony said. "I shouldn't have come here in the first place." He started walking towards the door.

"DiNozzo!" Gibbs rapped out. Tony hesitated and then turned back. "You don't wanna be arguing with me tonight," Gibbs told him in his most authoritative tone of voice. He knew that what the sub in Tony needed right now was for the top in him to be in charge. "Now

follow me."

He walked out of the room and up the stairs without looking back to see if Tony was following. He went into the bathroom, took a clean towel out of the cupboard, and hung it on the radiator to warm. He straightened up to find Tony hovering skittishly in the doorway, watching him. Gibbs turned on the shower.

"Your clothes stink," Gibbs said in a low, calm tone, taking care not to make any sudden, jerky movements. "I'll get you some sweats while you take a shower. Take as long as you want in here."

He left the room and went into his bedroom to get a clean pair of sweatpants and a tee shirt. He put them down on the bed and then stood there, allowing the rage to course through him. He wanted to pound his fist into the wall, or yell, but he wasn't going to do that with Tony so near in case it spooked him. Tony had come here, to him, despite the fact that he didn't trust tops. That was a massive step for him, and Gibbs knew that it wouldn't take much to frighten him away again. He wasn't going to risk that happening.

He got control of himself and then waited until he heard the shower being turned off before returning to the bathroom with the clean clothes. He knocked on the door and opened it to find Tony standing there with the towel wrapped around his waist. Gibbs handed him the sweatpants and tee shirt.

Then he went and retrieved a new toothbrush from the bathroom cupboard and placed it by the sink, next to the toothpaste. "Here. I figure you might want to clean your teeth as you've been throwing up."

He gathered up Tony's soiled clothes, took them downstairs, and put them in a trash sack. When he turned around he was surprised to find Tony standing behind him, dressed in the sweatpants and tee shirt. His hair was wet and the bruises on his face stood out in livid contrast to the pallor of his skin. Gibbs noticed more bruises on his wrists from where his arms had been held behind his back. He fought down another wave of fury; his anger wouldn't help Tony right now.

Standing there, with bare feet and big eyes, Tony looked like a lost, scared child, and Gibbs wanted to hold him like he'd held Kelly when she'd woken up screaming from a nightmare.

"Always swore I'd never let a top hurt me, Boss," Tony whispered.

"Yeah. I know."

"So why do I keep letting it happen? First Dana and now him. Why do I keep putting myself in that position?" He looked broken.

Gibbs shrugged. "Damned if I know, Tony."

Tony bit down on his lip and a droplet of blood welled up in one of the cuts. "I think I've

screwed up your evening enough. I'll go now." He stood there, swaying uncertainly.

Gibbs knew he didn't want to go. "Why did you come here, Tony?" he asked gently.

Tony looked down at the ground and then back up at him. "Didn't know where else to go, Boss."

"That all?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow. "What did you want from me, Tony?"

"Just...I dunno." Tony shrugged.

"I think you do."

Tony wrapped his arms around his own body and hugged himself tightly, answering Gibbs's question as clearly as if he'd spoken the words out loud.

"Come here, Tony." Gibbs held out a hand. Tony's eyes were an agony of uncertainty. Gibbs gazed at him steadily, willing him forwards. Tony took one faltering step towards him and then another - and then he stopped.

"I can take care of myself," he said.

"Yeah. I know." Gibbs stayed very still. He didn't want to spook Tony right now, or make him feel like he'd been backed into a corner. If he did that, Tony would turn around and run out of here, and he'd never see him again.

Tony took another step towards him. He was close enough to touch now. Gibbs waited some more. Tony shuffled forwards, one more step, and his eyes were full of such pathetic need that Gibbs couldn't hold back anymore. He reached out, wrapped his arm around Tony's shoulders, and drew him in the rest of the way.

Tony buried his face in the side of Gibbs's neck, trembling violently. Gibbs folded his arms tightly around Tony's shaking body and pulled him in close, freely offering him the hug he refused to ask for. Tony's body was stiff and resistant. He bunched his hands in the hem of Gibbs's sweater and stood there, fighting it.

"It's okay, Tony. I've got you," Gibbs told him.

Tony made a low choking sound in the back of his throat and stamped his bare feet on the floor. Gibbs could sense the struggle inside him. He stroked the hair on the back of Tony's head and just stood there, holding his stiff body, while Tony fought a vicious, silent battle with himself. Gibbs knew how much Tony wanted to give in and accept the comfort of the hug, but he also knew how hard it was for him too.

They seemed to stand there forever, Tony's fists wrapped in Gibbs's sweater, his head buried in the side of Gibbs's neck, his chest heaving as he tried not to give in. Gibbs knew all about this kind of pain. He'd fought against it himself, and he knew that you had to give in

eventually, even if in his case it had taken him ten years to do it. How long had it taken Tony to get to this point, he wondered? Maybe it had taken him his whole life, in which case it was hardly surprising he was struggling with it so much right now.

"I know how much it cost you to come here tonight, Tony," he said softly, gently rubbing Tony's back.

"Got my pride, Gibbs," Tony muttered into his neck. Then he gave a bitter little laugh. "Well, I used to have my pride anyway. Think I lost it out there tonight, in that alley, wearing that bastard's collar."

"Fuck it, DiNozzo, your pride's safe with me. I won't tell," Gibbs growled.

Tony gave a sound that started out like a laugh and then morphed into a low, choking sob. Then, finally, something seemed to break inside him, and he released his grip on Gibbs's sweater and slid his arms around Gibbs's back. His body relaxed, and he nestled in close, finally accepting the comfort Gibbs was offering. Gibbs rocked him in his arms, stroking his back, and Tony held on like a drowning man clinging to a life-raft.

Gibbs was very aware of the honour he was being paid. This sub in his arms had never trusted a top in his entire life, but he had chosen to come here tonight – to him. Gibbs tightened his grasp, relishing the way Tony's body melted into his, as if it belonged there.

He had finally won this sub's trust, and he made a silent vow that he would never betray it.

Gibbs hugged Tony for a very long time, until the trembling in his body had subsided and his breathing had calmed, and then he gently pushed him away. Tony looked dazed, like he wasn't entirely sure what was going on. He also looked completely exhausted, as if the events of the past few weeks had finally caught up with him.

Gibbs took him by the hand and led him up the stairs. He took him into the guest room and guided him into the bed.

"Uh..." Tony looked up at him from confused green eyes. "You want anything from me, Boss?" he asked.

Gibbs cuffed the back of his head lightly. "Not all help comes with strings attached, Tony."

Tony gave him a heart-stopping, completely unguarded smile, and Gibbs knew he was getting a rare glimpse at the sub buried deep behind Tony's many masks.

"No, Boss. Sorry, Boss. Oh, and sorry for apologising, Boss," he mumbled.

Gibbs laughed. He pulled the blankets up over him and then leaned down and kissed his dark hair. "Go to sleep, Tony," he said softly. "You're safe here."

Tony gave a hazy smile and then rolled onto his side and closed his eyes. He was asleep in

seconds. Gibbs looked down on him, smiling to himself, and then he quietly left the room.

He went along to his own bedroom and opened a drawer in his closet. Inside were several black leather collars. They weren't anything fancy, but they were functional and comfortable, with a padded velvet lining; Gibbs wouldn't allow any sub of his to wear a collar that chafed. There was only so much wear you could get out of a collar though, and Ducky and Abby both needed regular replacements, so he'd picked up a handful in a sale in Walmart a few weeks ago.

Gibbs took one out and placed it on the nightstand, next to the photograph of Shannon and Kelly.

~*~

Tony lay in bed watching the sunlight streaming around the edges of the drapes. Downstairs, he could hear Gibbs moving around, and he could smell the enticing scent of coffee. He glanced at the clock on the nightstand; it was nearly noon, which meant he'd slept for hours.

He ached, his jaw was sore, and his lips were cracked and painful, but he felt at peace. It was as if he'd fought some kind of battle with himself and either lost or won – he wasn't sure which – he was just grateful the war was over.

He rolled onto his side and cautiously got out of the bed – his knees and arms ached from last night and his face felt sore but apart from that he was fine. He went over to the drapes and opened them, allowing the sunlight to flood the bedroom. In the daylight, he saw several boxes stacked up along one wall of the room. Curious, he went over to them.

One of them was open, and he could see a sweater inside. He pulled it out – it clearly belonged to a woman judging by the size and style. Beneath it, he found a silver belt that was so small it had to belong to a child. Tony frowned; Abby had said Gibbs had been married several times, but she'd never mentioned him having any children.

Tony peered into the box again and found a framed photograph of a woman with long red hair and mischievous green eyes. She was very pretty and there was an elegant gold collar around her neck. There was another photo underneath; Tony tugged it out from under a book and saw that same vivacious looking woman. This time she wasn't alone. Gibbs was with her – only he wasn't a Gibbs Tony knew. He was maybe a decade younger but the difference wasn't his age. It was something else.

Tony studied the photo, trying to figure out what it was – and then it struck him: this Gibbs looked happy. And it wasn't that the man he had come to know these past three weeks didn't smile occasionally and even laugh – it was just that he always looked as if he was carrying some kind of burden. There was a quality of grief to him, as if he nursed some deep, private sadness that never went away.

Tony gazed at the photo, wondering what had happened in the past ten or so years to give Gibbs that burden of sadness. Maybe this woman was the reason why Gibbs refused to take subs to his bed now. There was a mystery here, and the naturally nosy part of him longed to find out what it was. But last night Gibbs had been there for him when he needed him most, and Tony wasn't about to repay that kindness by digging into this box and disturbing memories that Gibbs had clearly wanted packed away.

Tony put everything back into the box and closed it again. Then he went along the hallway to the bathroom. He looked at himself in the mirror as he washed his hands and winced; his face was bruised and his lips badly split in places. There was a red line around his neck from where Jake had buckled his collar too tight. Tony wished that line wasn't visible; he hated it for reminding him of that nightmare.

He turned away from his reflection and went downstairs, lured by the smell of coffee. He found Gibbs sitting at the kitchen table, the day's papers spread out around him, a plate of bacon and eggs in front of him and a mug of coffee in his hand.

Gibbs glanced up and smiled. "How you doing?"

"I'm fine. Aren't we...?" Tony paused, bemused. "It's late – aren't we due at work?"

Gibbs shook his head. "We've got the day off. I called in and told the director we wouldn't be in today."

"Sorry. Again." Tony sighed.

Gibbs pushed a chair away from the table with his boot. "Sit," he ordered.

Tony did as he was told. Gibbs poured him a mug of coffee from the pot on the table. Tony inhaled deeply and then took a sip and almost choked on it. Damn, Gibbs liked his coffee strong!

"Want something to eat?" Gibbs asked. Tony was aware that his belly was painfully empty after last night's vomiting. He nodded, and Gibbs went and piled up a plate with bacon and eggs that were warming in the pan. He returned to the table and placed the plate in front of him. Tony wondered, for one brief moment, what it would be like to share a plate with this man, but then he shoved the thought back down again. Since when had he been the kind of sub who harboured secret fantasies about sharing a plate with a top?

Tony found that he was starving, and he shovelled the food into his mouth as fast as he could. Gibbs watched him eat without saying a word. When he had finished his breakfast, Gibbs handed him a folded section of his newspaper.

"What's this?" Tony raised an eyebrow.

"Something you need to read." Gibbs nodded his head at the paper.

Tony looked down with a frown and found a small item, two thirds of the way down the page, that Gibbs had marked with an asterisk.

"Baltimore PD detective arrested in corruption probe." Tony glanced up questioningly. Gibbs nodded at him to continue. *"Baltimore PD detective Dana Morley was arrested by the FBI yesterday on suspected corruption charges. She was recently the subject of an Internal Affairs inquiry into the murder of undercover police officer, Doug Warren. FBI agent Tobias Fornell says they have strong evidence linking her to an organised crime syndicate he has been investigating for the past two years."*

Tony looked up again, his jaw dropping open in surprise. "You did this?"

Gibbs shrugged. "Said I'd take her down."

"Yeah, but I thought it was just..."

"Empty talk?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow. "Tippy posturing?"

"Something like that. I didn't think you meant it. Even if you did, I had no idea it'd be this fast." Tony gave a little whistle of appreciation. "How the hell did you do it?"

"I spent some time listening to those tapes you made. I found something linking her to Hansen, so I did some digging and then handed the whole thing over to Fornell. Killed two birds with one stone – took Morley down and now Fornell owes me – and I love it when Fornell owes me." He gave a smug kind of grin, and Tony laughed out loud.

"Thank you," he said, handing the paper back to Gibbs.

"I keep my word, Tony."

"Yes. I know that now."

Gibbs got up and retrieved a trash sack from a cupboard.

"You have a decision to make," he said, opening up the sack so Tony could take a look inside. Tony saw his soiled clothes from the previous night and swallowed down the bitter bile that rose in the back of his throat.

"Not gonna puke again, are you?" Gibbs asked.

Tony shook his head. "Not this time."

"This is your choice, Tony. If you want to go to the police then I'll come with you, and we can take the clothes along as evidence. If not, we can take them outside and burn 'em. I doubt you'll want to wear them again."

"No." Tony shuddered.

"So what's it to be?"

Tony sighed. "Gibbs – I don't do relationships. I pick up tops in clubs and half the time I don't even bother to ask their names. I've slept with so many tops I can't even begin to remember them all. Sometimes I like it rough. Sometimes I like it painful. Sometimes I like to be held down and fucked so hard that I forget my own name. If I take this to the police, all this will come out in court. Nobody will believe that what happened to me in that alley last night wasn't a sex game."

Gibbs didn't look happy about it, but Tony could tell that he understood and respected his decision.

"You like living that kind of life, Tony?"

Tony stared at him morosely. "No. I hate it. I'm tired of it, Gibbs. Beyond tired. I just can't seem to stop myself."

"Want some help?" Gibbs asked quietly.

"Help?" Tony frowned. "What kind of help?"

Gibbs reached into his pocket and pulled something out. He threw it into the air, and Tony caught it – and his breath caught in his throat.

It was a collar.

It was plain black leather with a soft, velvet lining, very like the ones Abby and Ducky wore.

"It's yours if you want it, and if you think it'll help," Gibbs told him. "Your choice, Tony. I know how you feel about being collared. Might not be what you want."

Tony looked down, caressing the smooth leather of the collar with his thumb. He felt hot tears pricking behind his eyes and blinked them away. He looked up again to find Gibbs gazing at him intently.

"There are conditions," Gibbs said.

"Yes. I thought there would be." Tony managed a wan smile.

"It's not a traditional kind of collar. You know the deal I have with Abby and Ducky – I can only offer you the same deal; nothing more, nothing less. I don't have anything else to give." He said that flatly, and when Tony looked up he saw that burden of grief sitting on Gibbs's shoulders like a shroud.

"If I accept it, I'll be your submissive?" Tony asked.

"Yup." Gibbs nodded. "Same as Abby and Ducky. You'll walk on my leash, and you'll be subject to my discipline. You'll take any punishments I hand out: No HR, no NCIS, no paperwork – it'll be between me and you, and if I want to spank you, I will."

Tony's stomach flipped.

"I won't just punish you for work screw-ups but for personal screw-ups too. If you wear my collar, you'll submit to any punishments I see fit to hand out. No questions. No refusals. And absolutely no arguing about it," Gibbs said firmly. "I know that's asking a lot of you, so you'll have to think about whether you trust me."

Tony gave a wry little snort and shook his head.

"Yeah. I know." Gibbs gave a little laugh. "Trust isn't your strong suit – which is why you need to be sure about this. You've only known me for three weeks, but you've seen enough in that time to have an idea of the kind of a top I am. I'm fair, I'll respect you, and I'll always have your best interests at heart. But I'm strict, no doubt about that, and when I punish, I punish hard."

"Yeah. I figured." Tony continued to caress the black leather collar with his thumb. It was soft, shiny, and smooth. He could smell the new-leather tang even without holding it up to his nose.

"I take good care of all my subs," Gibbs continued. "You'll be able to rely on me 100%, but I won't sleep with you."

Tony felt his heart sink.

"Be very clear on this, Tony. I'm not asking for full body rights over you, and I won't be requesting any kind of sexual favours."

"Even if they're freely offered?" Tony gave a cheeky smile.

Gibbs glared at him. "No. It's not part of this deal."

"Pity." Tony made a face.

Gibbs shook his head. "Maybe you need to rethink your whole approach to sex because from what I can see, it doesn't seem to be working for you."

"Yeah. I met someone last night who said the same thing."

"Maybe you should listen."

"Maybe." Tony shrugged. "So, how's the collar supposed to help me exactly, Gibbs?"

"It'll give you someone to belong to while you figure yourself out – someone who cares

what you do and whether you screw up. It'll give you discipline and grounding. It'll make you accountable to someone outside of yourself – someone with the authority to question your decisions and point out where you're going wrong."

"Sounds restrictive." Tony gazed down at the collar.

Gibbs nodded. "It is. It has to be, if it's going to be any use to you. If you wear my collar then I'll ask you deeply personal questions and expect honest answers. If you lie to me – and you really don't want to do that – then I will blister your ass so hard you'll regret it for the rest of your life."

Tony winced. "Any other conditions?" he asked.

"Yes. If you want to sleep with a top you'll ask my permission."

"Every time?" Tony thought of all many one night stands he'd had. "That'll put a serious crimp in my style, Boss."

"Yeah – that's the point. You take sex pretty casually, Tony, and you said yourself that you're tired of it. If you have to ask my permission first, it'll focus you on what you really want and what you're intending to get out of it. Hell, I'm not likely to refuse permission without good reason – I don't want that kind of control over you – I will point out any downsides I see though."

Tony twisted the collar around in his fingers. He wanted it. God, he wanted it so badly. But did he want the conditions that came with it?

"So what are the upsides to wearing your collar?"

Gibbs grunted. "Oh, I think you already know those, Tony. No sub of mine ever takes public discipline, so if I have to take it for you then I will. You might like to bear that in mind whenever you're thinking of doing something really stupid."

Tony was aghast. "I can't let you take another whipping for me, Boss! That was bad enough first time around."

"Then it might be a good way of keeping your behaviour in check." Gibbs shrugged. "Knowing I'm the one who'll take a whipping for the consequences of your actions – not you. Might make you think twice."

"But I'm...well, I'm kinda naughty, Boss. Are you sure you want to offer this to me?" Tony held up the collar. "You're taking a hell of a risk – or at least your butt is."

Gibbs laughed. "Tony, if I have to take another whipping for you, then I promise that your butt will feel it too next time – privately."

Tony had no doubt that Gibbs's spankings would hurt just as much, if not more, than

anything he'd receive in the workplace discipline room, or even in the courthouse. Tony liked a certain degree of pain as part of sex when he was in the right mood, but he wasn't very keen on it as punishment. He gazed at Gibbs's square, blunt hands. What would those feel like spanking his bare ass he wondered? He gave an involuntary shiver, imagining how exquisitely terrifying and yet curiously enjoyable it would feel to be swung over Gibbs's knee for a good, hard, hand spanking.

"What kind of things will you spank me for?"

Gibbs shook his head. "That's up to me. If you wear my collar then I'll spank you at my discretion – because you screwed up, or simply because I think you need it."

"That's not very reassuring."

"It's how it is." Gibbs gave a shrug. "I'm not saying this will be easy, Tony. I'm just trying to give you a realistic picture of how it'll be."

Tony continued to stroke the leather collar, wondering what it would feel like around his neck. Would it make him feel like he was choking, as Jake's collar had?

"I will always be there for you, Tony. I'll never let you down. In return I expect your complete obedience. I know I already have your loyalty, and I hope you know you have mine," Gibbs told him.

Tony nodded thoughtfully. "What happens if it doesn't work out, Gibbs?"

Gibbs shrugged. "Then you can repudiate the collar, same as any normal collar. You should be very sure about it if you do that though because I'm unlikely to let you have it back again. So you should take some time to think about it."

"I don't need time," Tony said, without hesitation. He held up the collar.

"Not for you, huh?" Gibbs gave a wry smile. "Thought you might feel that way."

"You're wrong." Tony got down on his knees in front of Gibbs. They still hurt from last night, but he ignored the soreness. He looked up to find Gibbs looking down on him with a startled but satisfied expression on his face. "Collar me, Boss. I know I'll screw up, and I'm pretty sure your right arm will get tired of having me around, but I'm not happy. I want something to change. And I trust you."

The words came out without any hesitation at all, and he saw Gibbs's eyes flash in response to the admission.

"Yeah, I know, I know." Tony gave a wry smile. "I haven't changed my opinion of tops, Boss, I still don't trust them – but I do trust you."

Gibbs gave an amused snort. "You might also find you hate me sometimes," he said,

unbuckling the collar in his hands.

"I do sometimes anyway," Tony replied, with a grin.

Gibbs slapped the back of his head, and Tony laughed out loud, feeling his belly flood with warmth the way it always did when Gibbs slapped him.

Gibbs placed warm, gentle fingers on his neck. "Sure?"

"Sure," Tony said firmly. What did he have to lose?

Gibbs examined his neck. "Skin's bruised, so I'll buckle it loosely – you can tighten it when you heal."

Tony lifted his head so that Gibbs could fasten the collar around his neck. It wasn't such a big deal – like Gibbs said, if it didn't work out he could repudiate it. Hell, it probably wouldn't change his life much at all. It was just a strip of leather. What difference would it really make? So it would give Gibbs more of a say in his life and the right to punish him – so what? That wasn't likely to be much of an issue. He could take any spankings that came his way. It wasn't like Gibbs was asking him to commit to a sexual relationship – he knew he wasn't ready for anything like that. No, this was a collar of convenience – that was all. It wouldn't change anything.

He was wrong.

He was completely and utterly wrong, and he knew that the instant Gibbs buckled the collar in place. It changed **everything**.

This collar wasn't just a strip of leather – it was so much more. It was a lifeline, a promise, and a symbol of respect. It was a statement of intent, a caress, and a solemn vow between a top and his submissive. It was about protection, service and love. It spoke to the inner sub deep inside Tony that he rarely let anyone see.

This collar wasn't something to be taken lightly or repudiated on a whim. This collar had meaning and suddenly, too late, he found that he was old-fashioned and romantic to his core. He could never sleep with another top while he wore this collar. It simply wasn't possible.

He belonged to Gibbs and for as long as he wore this man's collar no other top would ever touch him.

"You okay?" Gibbs asked, looking down on him. Tony wondered if this moment could possibly mean as much to Gibbs as it did to him. The man had two other collared subs after all. "Regretting it already?" Gibbs looked like he wasn't sure if Tony was going to make a run for it.

"No." Tony shook his head firmly. "Just thinking how different it feels to last night."

Gibbs's eyes darkened. "Yeah, well, it should. Anyone who collars an unwilling sub deserves to be bullwhipped."

He leaned forward, took Tony's head in his hands, tipped it up, and pressed a firm kiss to Tony's forehead. Tony closed his eyes and surrendered willingly to the loving caress. He felt as if he'd been delivered up into safety after years of danger.

"You're mine now," Gibbs said, drawing back and looking down on him, his hands still pressed against the sides of Tony's face. "Thank you for wearing my collar, Tony. I'll take damn good care of you, I promise you that."

He took a step backwards, and Tony got up. He was acutely aware of the collar around his neck and how his life had changed. He was a collared sub now. He belonged to someone. The collar created a bond between himself and this man here. Gibbs was no longer just his boss, or some stranger he'd met a few weeks ago. He was his top and that had profound implications for Tony.

Gibbs picked up the sack with his clothes in it and gestured to Tony to follow him outside.

They went into the back yard, and Gibbs threw the contents of the sack onto the ground.

"Leather jacket looks expensive," Gibbs commented, touching it with his boot. "Sure you want to burn that? You could get it dry cleaned."

"No." Tony shook his head. "Burn it. Burn all of it, even the shoes. I don't want any of this stuff anymore."

Gibbs's blue eyes were inscrutable, but Tony knew that he somehow understood. This wasn't about a set of clothes – it was about saying goodbye to the past and making a fresh start. The collar he was wearing marked the change between the old Tony and the new. He had been given a second chance, and he was going to grab it with both hands.

Gibbs got the lighter fluid from the barbecue and sprinkled some on the pile of clothes. Then he lit a match and tossed it onto them.

He took a step back, and the two men stood there, side by side, watching Tony's past go up in flames.

End Of Part Eleven

Chapter End Notes:

Friendly feedback always adored

Part Twelve by Xanthe

Gibbs watched, with Tony by his side, until the flames died down and all that was left was a set of charred, smoking remains. Then he put a hand on Tony's shoulder – and smiled as Tony jumped, startled by the touch. His new sub would have to get used to being touched by his top. Gibbs had a suspicion that Tony badly needed to be touched – not in a sexual way, but in a way that made it clear that he belonged to someone and that someone had the right to care for him. Tony's response to that hug the previous night made Gibbs suspect that nobody had cared for this kid in a very long time.

Now he made a vow to touch Tony as often as possible to remind him he wasn't alone anymore. He thought about how Tony had always given those goofy grins when he slapped his head and knew that maintaining a physical presence around Tony was going to be imperative if he was going to straighten out his new sub. He wasn't going to be sleeping with Tony, so he had to find other ways to keep him grounded.

He guided Tony back into the house, pushed him down onto a chair at the kitchen table, and took a seat opposite him.

"Right – now I want the name of the man who attacked you last night," he said firmly.

Tony's eyes flashed. "I told you I don't want to go to the police. I don't want a court case..." he began. Gibbs held up his hand.

"I know that, and I respect it. That's why we burned the clothes. But you must have known that regardless of your decision not to bring charges, I wouldn't let any top get away with collaring an unwilling sub and then sexually assaulting him."

Tony gave an unhappy shrug.

"His name, Tony," Gibbs said relentlessly. "And then the full story, so I can decide what to do next. And be honest – remember what I said about lying to me. I also won't tolerate withholding."

Tony bit down on his torn lower lip and a droplet of blood oozed up in the cut.

Gibbs reached out and touched his lip gently. "Don't do that. Just tell me the truth. You're my sub now, Tony; you wear my collar and that comes with obligations."

Tony gave a shaky little laugh. "I don't come out of this story very well, Gibbs. Might be the shortest collaring in history."

"I don't give up on my subs that easily." Gibbs shook his head. "Nothing you tell me will make me change my mind about having collared you. I know you come with a messed up past – that was kind of the point in putting my collar on you."

Tony nodded but there was a trace of doubt in his eyes all the same.

“The truth, Tony – now,” Gibbs said briskly, before Tony could drown in that doubt.

“Okay...his name is Jake, and I met him three weeks ago at a club called *Anon*.”

“*Anon*?” Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah. It’s the kind of place you go to if you’re looking for some anonymous sex. They have a back room for that.” Tony grimaced, looking ashamed, and Gibbs wondered just what kind of a life this kid had led that he went to clubs like that looking for sex with strangers. “They also have some rooms you can rent for the night. It was soon after I left Baltimore PD. I’d made those tapes, and...well, I guess I was feeling angry.” Tony paused and looked at Gibbs.

“So you went there looking for angry sex?”

“Yeah. See, I can’t completely blame Jake. He said he liked it rough, and I said that was what I wanted too. He rented a room for the night – you have to pay upfront, and although I’d gone there looking for quick down and dirty sex in the back room, I didn’t mind spending the night with him. He was hot.” Tony grimaced again, and Gibbs suspected that now he was saying it all out loud he realised just how screwed up it all sounded. “So we had sex. He was useless.”

Gibbs gave a little snort. “In what way?”

“No imagination, no real sense of dynamic, just another wannabe top who thinks it’s enough to order you around without making you **feel** it. I had to do all the work for him.”

Gibbs was intrigued by Tony’s insights into sex. He wondered if anyone had ever made Tony ‘feel’ it. Something about Tony’s desperate attempts to lose himself in sex made him suspect that Tony had never really connected with a top sexually. Sheer quantity was never going to make up for quality, but had Tony figured that out yet?

“Anyway, he was a shit. It wasn’t too bad at first but later he wouldn’t let me leave, and he ignored my safe word.”

Gibbs had never given any of his subs safe words because he never played a scene – if a sub started screaming and saying “no!” then that’d be enough to stop him in a heartbeat. He prided himself on knowing precisely the effect he was having on his subs, and he had only ever slept with people he was in a serious relationship with.

If you didn’t know a sub, or if you wanted to role-play a certain kind of non-consensual scene, then Gibbs could totally see the necessity for it, but he never role-played. Listening to a sub’s safe word in a one night stand situation like this seemed absolutely imperative to him, and Jake’s refusal to take his sub’s needs into account angered him.

“What did you do?” he asked.

Tony shrugged. "I got into a fight with him – and won. Well, what else could I do? I was late for a certain job interview, Boss." He shot Gibbs a self-deprecating smile, and Gibbs gave an amused grunt as that little piece of the Tony jigsaw puzzle fell into place. "I...uh, ended up shoving him onto the bed and um...cuffing him there." He winced and looked up at Gibbs, clearly expecting a reaction.

"I can see how that might have pissed him off," Gibbs commented neutrally.

"Yeah. That might not be the worst part though. The worst part might have been me throwing money at him to pay for the room. He kept calling me a whore and it annoyed me. I might be an easy lay, but I'm not a whore. Anyway, that meant I didn't have any cash to pay for a taxi, so I had to get the metro...which was why I showed up for so late for the job interview, Boss."

"At least that all makes sense now." Gibbs nodded to him to continue.

"I humiliated Jake badly – it had to have been a few hours before anyone freed him from the cuffs. And then, a couple of nights later, I was out with Abby at a different bar, and I saw him trying to pick her up."

Gibbs felt his jaw tightening in anger. "He went after Abby?"

"Yeah – and knowing what I did about the guy, what could I do but step in?" Tony shrugged. "Okay, admittedly I did it in kind of a confrontational way – and he ended up face down on the bar with his arm shoved up his back. He had a couple of his friends with him, and I...uh, well, I might have mentioned how I'd humiliated him the previous time by tying him up. And uh, I might have implied that he'd enjoyed it. I might also have given his friends the impression that I'd paid him for the fuck. So, I guess he pretty much hated me by this point."

"Ya think, DiNozzo?" Gibbs shook his head wryly. "You did the right thing protecting Abby though. If anything had happened to her then he'd have received a hell of a lot worse from me than being humiliated in front of his friends."

"He didn't get to her, Boss, so it's okay. But I fucked him off big time, so when he caught sight of me leaving *Anon* last night he must have seen his chance to get even – and he took it."

"And that's everything?" Gibbs asked.

Tony nodded. "Yeah, that's everything – the crappy lifestyle of Anthony D. DiNozzo in all its sordid detail." His face was flushed with shame.

"Okay. We're done then." Gibbs got up.

"No lecture?" Tony glanced up at him, looking surprised.

"No – that all happened before you were my sub. Now you are, so it'll be different. I don't

give a damn who you sleep with Tony, as long as you keep yourself safe. And getting into meaningless fights with tops who've pissed you off is not a great way of doing that."

"Yeah. I know." Tony sighed.

"Come on – I want to show you something."

Gibbs took Tony down into the basement.

"It's a boat. I know that. I've already seen it," Tony said, reaching out a finger to touch the half finished boat.

Gibbs slapped his hand away. "It's not the boat I'm showing you."

Tony glanced around the basement with a bemused look on his face. Gibbs slapped the back of his head.

"It's nothing like that. It's something else. Something you need to learn."

He got out his work tools and showed Tony how to prepare the wood. Then he had Tony fit a plank in place. Finally, he stood behind his new sub and showed him how to sand down the area he'd been working on.

"Slowly...follow the grain of the wood. You need to really feel what you're working on," Gibbs advised, covering Tony's hands with his own and pressing up close behind him.

He felt Tony go still beneath him, and he sensed that same surrender he'd felt back in Dana Morley's dressing room. He smiled to himself; this sub was such a constant source of surprise. Tony was so complicated, mixed up, and damaged – and yet so perfectly in touch with his own submissive side. There was something very beautiful about that. Gibbs couldn't understand why all the many tops Tony had been with had never been able to tap into that side of this sub.

"So what am I learning?" Tony asked quietly as they worked.

"You tell me." Gibbs continued to move Tony's hands over the wood, pressing against him the entire time, their hands moving together as they sanded down the boat.

"To look inside for contentment instead of outside in meaningless sexual encounters? To take pride in building something from scratch? To lose myself in a hobby other than sex? To – ow! – watch out for splinters?"

Tony turned his head, a grin on his face.

Gibbs grunted. "Nothing can stop the hurting, Tony. Throwing it at random tops who've pissed you off won't solve a damn thing though. You have to learn to live with it. You have to find a way to learn to live with yourself."

“That what you’ve done?” Tony stopped sanding and turned around. His gaze was questioning.

“Working the boat is a place where I can just be. You need to find your own place, Tony – somewhere you can go to find peace. Sex doesn't seem to have worked out for you as that place.” Gibbs took the sander from Tony’s hand. “Okay – lesson over for the day. Go back to your place and get changed for an evening out. I’ll pick you up at nine.”

“Evening out where?”

Gibbs grinned. “Clubbing.”

Tony raised an eyebrow, but Gibbs refused to elaborate.

“Uh...we burnt my shoes.” Tony looked down at his bare feet.

“There’s a pair of my boots in the kitchen by the back door – might not be your size, but they’ll get you home.”

Tony nodded and ran off up the stairs, and Gibbs turned back to his boat. Learning to live with yourself – it sounded so easy. What he hadn’t told Tony was how much he struggled with it – every single day.

~*~

Tony went into the kitchen and saw the boots lying on the doormat. Beside them was a pair of Gibbs’s shoes – they had mud around the rim and were scuffed. Gibbs had clearly left them out intending to clean them.

Tony reached up and touched his new collar. He didn’t have the words to tell Gibbs how grateful he was to him for taking a chance on him, but he did know a way he could show it.

Tony searched in the cupboard under the sink and found a shoe cleaning kit. It was all Marine-tidy – he’d have expected no less.

He picked up the shoes, sat down at the kitchen table, and removed the mud from the soles, knocking it out onto the newspaper. Then he began polishing them. He had hated polishing shoes at the military academy his father had dumped him in. His housemaster hadn’t been happy unless he could see his own face reflected in their shine, and Tony had taken licks on several occasions for not giving a damn about how shiny his shoes were and saying so. This was different. These were his top’s shoes, and he wanted them to sparkle as if they were new.

You need to find your own place, Tony. Somewhere you can go to find peace...

This was one place he could find peace, by offering up this small service to a top he respected and trusted. This was who he was, deep in his core, and this was the sub he had always tried so hard to hide beneath his many masks.

He couldn't let any top see this side of himself, because he knew they'd trample over it and take it for granted, instead of seeing that he was offering them his very soul. Then, when they got bored with him, they'd toss him aside, and he wasn't sure he could bear that. Better to always stay hidden. Better never to let any top glimpse the sub he truly was, deep inside.

Tony lost himself in the task, polishing his new top's shoes with all the devotion he could put into the task. When he was done he tidied up, put the shoe cleaning kit back in the cupboard, and placed the shoes back on the mat where he'd found them.

Then he got down on his knees and pressed a kiss to the toe of each shiny shoe.

"I love you," he whispered.

~*~

Gibbs got dressed in the same outfit he'd worn to *Xtreme*. He laughed when he realised that he hadn't worn these kinds of overtly toppy clothes in years. Yet since Tony DiNozzo had come along this was the third time in as many weeks that he'd had occasion to dress up and explore this side of himself again. He liked the way the clothes felt and resolved not to go back to his old style of dressing. He was rediscovering a side of himself that he'd buried years ago, and it felt good.

"You must be laughing at me right now," he told Shannon's photograph. "Feeling good about wearing some damn clothes."

He could almost hear the sound her laughter and imagined her making a joke at his expense, mocking him. He remembered their first weekend together after he collared her, and how he'd refused to allow her to get dressed. They'd made love over and over again, and each time he'd asked for her complete submission and each time she'd given it.

She was a sub – being submissive during sex gave her pleasure the same way being dominant gave him pleasure. Yet he never mistook that gift as being his to take. It wasn't. It was always hers to give, and she always gave it so willingly. He never took that for granted. He also never made the mistake of thinking it meant she was anything less than his equal. She could get in his face like nobody else when he was being pig-headed, and she knew how to laugh at him and – more importantly – how to get him to laugh at himself. Damn it, he missed her so much.

He opened his nightstand drawer and took out her bloodstained collar.

"Collared another sub today, Shannon," he told her. He imagined that she was in the room,

trailing one hand lazily over his shoulders as he looked at her collar. “He’s...different. It felt different collaring him to how it did with Abby, or Ducky, or Stan. I don’t know why. He’s pretty mixed up though – gonna be a challenge.”

“Well, you always did enjoy a challenge, Jethro. Remember how you took on my mom?”

“Yeah.” He gave a little chuckle. “I guess if I could handle the mighty Joanne, I can handle Tony DiNozzo, huh?”

He closed the box, replaced it in the nightstand drawer, and then looked around for his shoes. He remembered that they were downstairs – he hadn’t had a chance to clean them after their last outing. Never mind – they’d do for tonight.

He went downstairs into the kitchen and stopped when he saw the clean, gleaming shoes waiting for him on the mat. They had been polished until they sparkled – he’d never seen such shiny shoes. He shook his head, laughing softly to himself as he picked them up and put them on.

“Tony DiNozzo – I hope you never stop surprising me.”

He was about to leave the house when he paused and turned back. He went over to his work jacket hanging from the banister and pulled a pair of latex gloves and an evidence bag out of one of the pockets and took them with him. Then he paused again. There was something else he was going to need this evening – he went back upstairs to his bedroom to get it.

Gibbs pulled up outside Tony’s apartment building half an hour later and watched his new sub emerge from the building. Tony was dressed in a pair of tight indigo jeans, a crimson shirt, and a brown suede jacket – he looked good, but the best thing about his appearance was the collar around his neck. Gibbs liked seeing it there.

Tony got into the car and gave him an appreciative look. “Looking hot again, Boss. So, where are we going?”

“Depends.” Gibbs shrugged. “Where do you think Jake is most likely to be tonight?”

“I figured that might be where we were headed,” Tony said with a little sigh. “Okay, I’ve seen him in two places – one of them is *Anon*, and the other is a bar called *Tough Sub*.”

“You go to a bar called *Tough Sub*?” Gibbs raised an amused eyebrow. “Oh, what the hell am I saying? Of course you do. Who even knew these places existed? *Anon*, *Xtreme*, *Tough Sub*...” He shook his head.

“Aw, you’ve led a sheltered life, Boss,” Tony said with a broad grin.

Gibbs slapped the back of his head for that. “Okay – which one are we headed to?”

"Anon," Tony said. "I think that's the kind of place Jake likes best. He might like his sex rough, but I don't think he **really** likes his subs all that tough."

Anon was a dive – Gibbs could feel that the minute he walked in. The place was a cattle market – people clearly only went there for one thing. The place was heaving, and every now and then some top would break out from the crowd and lead a sub through a doorway out back. He saw couples returning too, hair mussed up, doing up their pants or shirts on their way back in.

"This is not a nice place," he told Tony.

"Yeah, I know." Tony sighed.

"Any sign of Jake?" Gibbs glanced around the packed room.

"Nope. He could be out back – or he might not be here tonight."

"We'll hang around and see. Go to the bar and buy me a drink."

"What kind of drink? Beer? Whisky? You look like a bourbon kind of guy to me."

Gibbs glared at him. "I'm driving, and this is business – not pleasure. So get me a coke."

"Yes, Boss. Where are you going, Boss?"

"To look for something Jake left behind last time he was here," Gibbs muttered grimly.

He shoved his way through the crowds to the back exit and pushed open the door. He found himself in a dark, unlit alley, just as Tony had described it.

There were no guarantees that what he was looking for would still be here, but he doubted anyone cleared up this alley very often, judging by the discarded condoms and stink of urine. He walked along the alley until he found what he was looking for. He wasn't surprised to find that it was exactly as Tony had described it; he knew his sub hadn't lied to him.

Gibbs gave a grim smile and pulled the latex gloves and evidence bag out of his pocket. He snapped on the gloves, pushed his fingers into the pile of vomit on the ground, and retrieved the sodden collar that was lying underneath. He placed it in the evidence bag and then scooped up some of the cold, stinking vomit for good measure and put that in the evidence bag too. Finally he sealed up the bag, removed the gloves, and tossed them onto what was left of the vomit. He put the evidence bag in his pocket and walked back towards the door – only to find that it couldn't be opened from the outside. He'd have to go back to the front entrance and push his way through the crowd and into the club all over again.

~*~

Tony bought two cokes and stood at the bar, waiting for Gibbs to return. He wondered where the hell his boss had gone and what exactly he was intending to do if Jake did show up this evening. A voice behind him broke into his thoughts.

“Well, if it isn’t Tony. I must say I’m surprised to see you here. Thought you might have learned your lesson last night – or maybe you want another taste of my dick. Is that it, Tony? You enjoyed it so much that you came back for more?”

Tony stiffened, and then, very slowly, he turned.

Jake was standing there with his two friends from the previous night, looking very smug and full of himself.

“Oh lookie!” Jake grinned and pointed at Tony's neck. “You liked wearing my collar so much that you went out and bought one of your own! Aw, poor ickle sub.”

“I didn’t buy the collar, Jake. It was given to me,” Tony told him evenly. Damn it, where was Gibbs?

“Oh that’s fast work, Tony. Last night you were wearing my collar and sucking my dick, and tonight you’ve miraculously found yourself a new top!” Jake crowed in disbelief. “You’re such a slut. I bet you can’t keep track of all the tops you’ve gone down on your knees for.”

“I told you last night that I already belong to someone, but you didn’t want to listen,” Tony snapped, trying not to let Jake provoke him.

“You’re a lying sack of shit, Tony.” Jake shook his head in mock disapproval. “I think we’re gonna have to go out back and teach you another lesson. Maybe this time I’ll let my friends have a go in you while I watch.”

“You don’t wanna do that, Jake,” Tony replied tightly.

Jake laughed. “Who’s gonna stop me? Your mystery top? Don’t see ‘em around anywhere.”

“Oh, I’m right behind you,” Gibbs said, suddenly emerging out of nowhere. Tony grinned at him over Jake's shoulder, and Jake whirled around. “You must be Jake,” Gibbs said smoothly. “Tony has told me all about you.”

Tony noticed Jake’s two friends taking a step back – and then another – as they sized Gibbs up. Tony wasn’t surprised; Gibbs looked magnificent. He always carried himself in a tippy way, but Tony realised that he’d only seen a fraction of the man’s true dominant energy before. It was as if Gibbs had been keeping it muted, in case it freaked people out. Now he let it shine and its power was dazzling.

Jake looked Gibbs up and down and clearly came to the same conclusion as his friends – but he didn’t have the luxury of being able to take a step back because Gibbs had him backed up

against the bar.

“Who the hell are you?” Jake demanded, pulling himself up straight in what looked like a desperate attempt to hold his own against Gibbs. Tony almost laughed out loud. Nobody out-topped Gibbs. He doubted it was even possible.

“Who the hell am I? Oh, I’ll tell you who I am.” Gibbs reached out, grabbed hold of Jake’s shirt, and pulled him forwards. Jake gave a startled cry and put up his hands to protect himself. Gibbs slapped the side of his head, and Jake gave up all pretence at resistance and went with him.

Gibbs pulled Jake into the centre of the room and stood there, in total silence. He had such presence, and was emitting so much powerful dominant energy, that slowly, one by one, people turned to look at him.

Tony watched, mesmerised, as the entire club fell silent around them. Now everyone was looking at Gibbs – and the hapless Jake.

“Jake here asked me who I am, and I’m going to tell him, but first I’m going to tell you who he is,” Gibbs told the packed bar. “See, Jake is the kind of top who puts his collar on an unwilling sub.”

A low, disapproving murmur went around the club.

“Fuck you!” Jake tried to push his way out of Gibbs’s grasp.

Gibbs pulled him back and slapped him again – harder this time. Tony grinned, enjoying every second of the payback.

“Stay still, Jake – if I have to hit you again it’ll be a punch not a slap,” Gibbs told him. “Take it like a top and remember – don’t hand it out if you can’t take it back.”

Jake turned and looked, imploringly, at his friends, but they avoided his gaze. They were clearly unwilling to take on Gibbs, and Tony didn’t blame them. Gibbs was emanating so much powerful dominant energy that he was as scary as hell. You’d have to be an idiot to take him on.

Gibbs looked around the crowded club. “Last night, Jake put his collar on an unwilling sub, and then he committed a serious sexual assault. I could have had him up on charges, but I thought I’d settle for letting you know what kind of a top he is. I wouldn’t advise any of you to play with him.”

“He’s lying! He’s fucking lying!” Jake yelled, struggling to get away again. Gibbs released his hold on Jake’s shirt and then delivered a firm upper cut to his jaw. There was a loud cracking sound, and Jake went down like a ton of bricks. He lay on his back on the floor, blinking up at Gibbs in shock, nursing his jaw; Tony had a suspicion that it might be broken.

"I did warn you, Jake. Now, you asked me who I am, so let me tell you. My name is Leroy Jethro Gibbs. I'm a federal agent, and, more importantly, I'm Tony DiNozzo's top. He wears my collar – willingly because, unlike you, I'm not the kind of top who collars an unwilling sub. Talking of which – I have something that belongs to you."

He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out an evidence bag, opened it, and dropped a familiar, vomit-stained collar on Jake's chest. Tony grinned – so that had been what Gibbs was up to when he'd disappeared earlier. Tony watched as Gibbs squeezed the bag, depositing a copious amount of Tony's vomit from the night before on top of Jake.

Gibbs threw the evidence bag down on top of the pile of vomit and the sodden collar lying on Jake's chest. "Damn, that stinks – just like the top it belongs to," Gibbs growled.

Tony laughed out loud at the coup de grace. Gibbs glanced around the shocked, silent room.

"One more thing." Gibbs went over to Tony and put a hand on his shoulder. "This sub here is called Tony DiNozzo. He's a federal agent too, and he belongs to me. This collar around his neck is mine, just like his ass. Mess with him, and you mess with me. If anyone lays a finger on him, ever again, I promise you that I will come after you."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a leash, and Tony felt his heart skip a beat. He stood very still as Gibbs clipped the leash to the front of his collar. He was leashed. For the first time in his life he had been leashed by a top.

Then, without saying another word, Gibbs turned and began walking towards the door. Tony followed on behind, trying to keep pace. He had no idea how to walk to heel, but he guessed he'd have to learn pretty fast because Gibbs clearly wasn't going to be giving lessons. The crowd parted silently in front of them as they went, making a path for them.

Tony didn't care about Jake anymore, or the payback Gibbs had just delivered. All he cared about was the fact that he was walking out of this place on the end of Gibbs's leash.

And it felt so damn good.

~*~

Gibbs walked into work the next morning with a cup of coffee in his hand and a spring in his step, only to be assaulted by Abby the minute he got to his desk.

She threw herself at Gibbs and hugged him tight, then released him and looked around the room. "Where's Tony? Where is he? I'm so excited! Where is he?" She hopped around like a rabbit on speed.

"He'll be here soon I expect, Abby. If he's not, I'll have his ass." Gibbs glanced at his watch. Tony wasn't late yet, but he would be if he didn't show up in the next few minutes.

"I'm so happy! I am so happy you collared him! It's what I wanted to happen!" She zoomed off around the room at top speed. Gibbs rolled his eyes. He'd called her and Ducky yesterday to tell them about their new 'subling', as Abby had termed it. Abby had been thrilled, and Ducky had been quietly supportive of his decision.

Morrow came down the stairs, looking startled by all the commotion.

"Something going on that I should know about?" he asked Gibbs when he reached his desk.

"As a matter of fact, yes." Gibbs stood up.

"Hmm..." Morrow gazed at him. "You're looking different, Jethro. I like the new clothes."

"They're old clothes – I just decided to start wearing 'em again," Gibbs replied with a shrug.

"As if you didn't scare people enough before – now I can see the stairwells will be filled with people too terrified to ride in the elevator with you. Ah well, it'll do them good to get the exercise, I suppose!"

At that moment the elevator door pinged, and Tony stepped into the squad room.

Morrow took one look at the collar around his neck and then looked back at Gibbs, rolling his eyes.

Gibbs spread his arms helplessly. "Don't say it, Tom."

"Oh, but I have to." Morrow leaned in. "I told you so." He winked. "I knew you wouldn't be able to resist, Jethro."

Abby let out a loud scream and threw herself at Tony, almost knocking him over backwards. The entire squad room came to a standstill and watched him lift her off her feet and carry her the rest of the way to his desk. She was babbling the entire time.

"Oh this is SO cool...now when we go out together you'll be on the end of Gibbs's leash too – I always hated it before because you looked so left out, but now you're one of us!"

She reached out and touched his collar fondly. Then she ran her fingers over Tony's bruised face, looking a lot less happy.

"Tony...I hate that someone did this to you. Gibbs told me something bad had happened to you, but he wouldn't say what."

"It's fine. It doesn't hurt. I don't want to talk about it – I want to talk about my new collar! Looks good on me, huh?" Tony gave a grin that stretched from ear to ear. He looked almost as hyper as Abby was right now. "Oh man, you and I are going to have so much fun together now, Abby." He gave her a sly wink, and Gibbs winced.

"Oh dear, you really are going to have your hands full, Jethro. Are you sure this was a wise move?" Morrow asked, an entirely smug smile on his face.

"I can handle DiNozzo," Gibbs said firmly.

"Are you sure? Because that particular sub is trouble."

"Hey - I seem to remember that you and Jess *wanted* me to collar him," Gibbs pointed out.

"Oh yes, we did!" Morrow laughed. "If nothing else it's going to be fun watching the world's strongest top and the world's naughtiest sub trying to outplay each other."

"I don't play, Tom."

"You might like to tell DiNozzo that then, before that gleam in his eye gets any brighter." Morrow grinned. "Oh this is going to be interesting. Like having a ringside seat at one of those ridiculous reality TV shows." He moved his hand like a title across a screen. "*When subs and tops go to war there can be only one winner,*" he intoned in a deep voice.

Gibbs had to laugh at that. "You really think anyone would bet against me, Tom?"

Morrow shook his head ruefully. "No-one would dare, Jethro – and I don't think it'll be a war, either. I think you know exactly how to keep that boy under control – and I think he's going to enjoy finding out just how far he can push you."

"Oh, I think Tony already knows what lines not to cross."

Morrow nodded, his face becoming thoughtful. "Seriously, Jethro – you did a good thing, but you'll need to watch this one. I never, ever want the director of the FBI to call me baying for his blood again. Understood?"

"Understood, Director." Gibbs gave a firm nod.

He glanced over to where Tony and Abby were busy psyching each other up into ever greater heights of hysteria. Morrow was right; Tony was going to require a firm hand at all times. Gibbs already knew that though. He'd been mulling it over in the night, and he thought he knew a way of keeping Tony grounded, focussed, and obedient.

Tony needed someone to be invested in his life, or he wouldn't be. If he knew that Gibbs was serious about his role as Tony's top, then Gibbs was sure his sub would respond accordingly. Tony had the makings of the best young agent Gibbs had ever worked with – and it was his job to ensure that Tony fulfilled that potential and didn't screw up along the way. He needed Gibbs to keep him on track.

Gibbs opened his desk drawer, retrieved an item from inside, and put it in his pocket. Then he went over to his two subs.

“Time you were both working,” he said, cutting through their excited chatter.

“Yes, Bossman!” Abby stood up straight and gave him an extravagant salute. He swatted her ass as she bounced cheerfully away, and she glanced back over her shoulder and stuck her tongue out at him. Gibbs rolled his eyes.

“Do not lead her astray, DiNozzo,” he told Tony firmly.

Tony looked at him with wide, innocent eyes. “Me, Boss? Would I?”

“Yes.” Gibbs glared at him.

Tony winced. “Yes, Boss. Sorry, Boss.”

“Don’t apologise,” Gibbs said automatically.

“Right, sign of weakness.” Tony grinned at him. “Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask, Boss, is the not saying sorry thing one of the rules? Or is it just a general guideline? If it is one of the rules, what number is it? Also, does it apply to not saying sorry to the director too? Or how about SecNav? Because it seems to me that saying sorry to SecNav if I ever screw up in front of him might actually be a good thing, like a thing that might help me keep my job, and that he might view it as a sign of...I dunno...politeness rather than weakness. In fact, he might...”

Gibbs sighed. He could see that his new sub needed grounding or he’d end up doing something very stupid indeed before the day was out.

“Tony!” he barked.

Tony blinked. “Boss?”

“With me.”

He put a hand on Tony’s shoulder and felt Tony immediately settling down under his touch. He had already discovered that touch was the key to handling Tony. He just had to find a way to always be touching him, even when he was nowhere near him – and he thought he knew how to do just that.

~*~

Tony trotted up the stairs beside Gibbs, talking constantly and making jokes that were, even by his standards, pretty stupid. He was so excited to be back at work, wearing his top’s collar for everyone to see that he was Gibbs’s sub. He could, at last, put the past few weeks behind him. It was over! No more Dana Morley hanging over him. No more Jake. No more bad sex in dirty bars. This collar around his neck, which should have been so restrictive, had somehow freed him. He felt like he was walking on air right now.

"In here." Gibbs pushed him into the conference room.

"What's going on, Boss? Have we got a case? Hey, have you told Maureen in HR that I'm your sub now? 'Cause there'll be papers to sign – next of kin stuff, that kind of thing."

"I'll take care of the paperwork. I've got an appointment with Maureen at eleven."

"You have? Cool! Can I come? Only last time I saw her she gave me a hard time, and I want to see her face when she realises that you collared me because I think she'll look pissed as hell and..."

He trailed off as Gibbs took a leather strap out of his pocket and placed it on the table.

"Uh, that doesn't look good, Boss."

"Depends on your definition of good." Gibbs smiled at him. Tony didn't think it was an entirely comforting smile.

"Are you going to spank me, Boss?" Tony asked, glancing at the strap again.

"Yes."

Tony felt his stomach flip. "Did I screw up?"

"No." Gibbs shook his head.

"Then why...?"

"Do I need a reason to spank my collared sub?" Gibbs demanded.

Tony thought about it. Gibbs was correct; he could spank Tony whenever he liked. It was his right as Tony's top, for as long as Tony wore his collar. Tony had known that submitting willingly to Gibbs's discipline was part of the deal when Gibbs had given him the collar, and now he suddenly realised what this was about.

Gibbs's collar wasn't a fashion statement, or something for him and Abby to bond over, or a status symbol for him to show off around the Navy Yard. It was a hell of a lot more important than that, and Gibbs wanted to remind him of that fact. Gibbs wanted to show him who he was, what was required of him, and who had authority over him now. His life had changed, and Gibbs was making it damn clear that he'd better get used to that fact.

"Where do you want me, Boss?" Tony asked quietly, wanting to show Gibbs that he understood, and that he was willing to submit to his new top without question.

"Bend over the table." Gibbs gestured towards it.

Tony undid his belt and pants. He didn't need to be told that the spanking would take place on his bare skin. It was hardly the first time he'd been ass up in front of a top, but while his own nudity didn't bother him, the formal conference room setting made it a little unnerving. The fact it was *Gibbs* who was seeing his bare ass also gave him mixed feelings. The flirty sub inside hoped that Gibbs would enjoy the view of his naked ass, but he knew this wasn't about flirting. Tony slid his pants down his thighs until they were pooled around his ankles, and then he bent over the table.

Gibbs tapped his legs, and Tony widened them. Gibbs pressed a firm hand into the small of his back, and Tony flattened himself against the table. He knew that he was being told, in no uncertain terms, to present himself for discipline in the most submissive way possible, and he filed that away for future reference. He wasn't surprised that Gibbs was insisting on his total submission; that was precisely what this was about, and Gibbs was hardly the kind of top who'd settle for anything less.

Tony angled his head sideways and gripped the edges of the table with his hands.

"Ready?" Gibbs asked, picking up the strap.

"Yes, Boss," Tony replied promptly.

He closed his eyes and the next second he heard a whistling sound and then felt a blaze of red heat across his buttocks.

"Shit!" he yelped. Two more strokes fell on his ass, both of them equally hard. Then silence. Tony looked up. Was that it? Just three? It felt more like a very concentrated head-slap than discipline.

Gibbs looked approving. "You can get up, Tony. We're done for today."

For today? What the hell did that mean?

"Uh, how often are you gonna...?" Tony got up, gingerly, and pulled his pants back up again.

Gibbs gave him a speculative look. "Every day."

"Every day?" Tony was aghast. "You're going to spank me every damn day?"

"You have a problem with that?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

Tony stood there, thinking about it. His ass hurt – damn it, he hated that strap already, and he'd only taken three swats from it. They hadn't been harsh swats though – they'd been firm enough to show Gibbs meant business, but they wouldn't cause him any problem sitting down or doing his work, and he was getting a little endorphin rush from them already. Gibbs was still standing there, watching him, looking like he was judging Tony's reaction. Was this a test?

Tony reached up and touched his collar, understanding. Gibbs wanted to remind him, every day, that he was no longer a free agent. He was a collared sub now. Gibbs wanted him to know, every day, that he belonged to him, and to demand, every day, that Tony submit to his authority and discipline. Tony had no doubt at all that it wouldn't be easy, but if Gibbs was prepared to put the time into it on a daily basis, then that at least showed how committed he was to being Tony's top and playing a substantial role in his life.

Tony felt the warmth from the spanking start to flow into his belly, much like he felt after a head-slap.

"No, I don't have a problem with it," he said quietly.

"Good." Gibbs reached out, pulled him close, and kissed his forehead. Tony glowed at the loving physical contact. Then Gibbs released him. "Now get to work," he ordered, no longer the stern, loving top, but now the hard taskmaster of a boss again.

"Yes, Boss!" Tony left the conference room feeling much calmer and less jittery than when he'd entered it. He'd wanted some discipline in his life and someone in his life who would give him the grounding and support he needed, and now he had exactly that.

He walked back to his desk and sat down carefully. His ass gave a little twinge on contact with his chair, but it wasn't too bad.

He caught sight of the little parcel on his desk, wrapped in black tissue paper, and he glanced over at Gibbs.

"Do you know what this is, Boss?"

"Nope." Gibbs shook his head. "Doubt it'll bite though, DiNozzo."

Tony unwrapped it gingerly – and found a little wooden coffin inside. It had his name etched on the lid. He looked up and saw Abby standing over to one side, watching him.

"Well, the one I gave you before got all smushed up in the burglary, so I wanted to make you another one," she said.

He swallowed down the lump in his throat. "Thank you," he said softly.

"Open it!" she urged, and he did as she ordered and laughed at what he found inside. "I didn't do an Abby doll this time," she said, coming over to him. "I thought you might like a Tony doll instead!"

The little doll inside was wearing a brown suede jacket, a green shirt, and a pair of dark blue denim jeans – and around its neck was a tiny, black leather collar.

"Thank you, Abby," he said again, his voice hitching slightly as he spoke.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tight. "It's great having you onboard, Tony. Just don't do anything stupid, okay?" She leaned forward and whispered in his ear. "Like fall in love with Gibbs!"

He gave a little laugh, and she released him and then disappeared back to her lab.

Tony glanced over at where Gibbs was working. He could see that his top was wearing the shiny black shoes he'd polished for him and his heart skipped a beat.

Too late for that, Abby.

Gibbs had been very clear about the conditions of taking his collar, and Tony respected them. Knowing himself as he did, he doubted he was ready for the kind of commitment that came from a real, loving relationship with a top in any case. He'd never had a role model to show him how it was done before. All he'd ever seen as a kid were manipulative or abusive relationships and those had been the kind he'd fallen into as an adult too. He didn't know how the good ones worked – but now, for the first time, he was at least prepared to believe that they existed.

He worked hard all day, wanting to impress his new top, and was rewarded at the end of the day by a "good work, DiNozzo" from Gibbs that made him glow with pride.

After work, Ducky and Abby came up to the squad room, and Gibbs clipped a leash to each of his subs' collars and took them out for a meal to celebrate Tony's new status.

Gibbs had chosen an Italian restaurant in his honour, and as he sat down Tony felt the slight sting from the strapping Gibbs had given him earlier in the day, and he gave a little smile. He saw Gibbs glance over at him and catch the smile – and Gibbs's mouth quirked up at the corners in recognition of what had prompted it. It was their own intimate secret and even hours later it was as if he could still feel Gibbs's hand on his back and the sting of his strap on his bare skin. It felt good, like it did whenever Gibbs slapped his head or touched him in some other way. It made him feel calm, grounded and happy. Tony didn't think he'd mind being spanked daily if it made him feel like this.

He watched Gibbs ordering a drink, studying the man intently until he became aware of Abby's eyes on him. Damn it, if he kept looking at Gibbs like a lovesick teenager then it would be obvious to everyone that he was in love with the man, and he wasn't going to lay that on Gibbs. Not after all Gibbs had done for him. He wasn't going to be able to stop looking though, so he needed to find a way to hide his true feelings.

"Hey, Abs!" he called out, in a loud voice. "Don't you think the bossman is looking hot in those clothes?"

"Tony!" she scolded, as Gibbs turned to glare at him.

"What?" Tony grinned. "You know me – I always have an eye for the hottest tops in the room! And you don't measure up too badly, Boss – although that redhead over there is

serious competition for you.” He pointed to a man with short, spiky red hair seated at the table by the door, having an intimate dinner with his blond submissive.

“Tony does make a good point about your apparel, Jethro,” Ducky said with a chuckle. “You know, you really must give me the number of your tailor, my dear boy.”

Gibbs rolled his eyes, but Tony could see he was enjoying himself. Abby turned to say something to Gibbs, and Tony fell silent. Danger averted. Clearly nobody was going to notice him gazing lovingly at Gibbs as long as he made a point of flirting with every other top around, including Gibbs, at every available opportunity. Hiding in plain sight – people would expect the inveterate flirt to flirt. Nobody would know it was only for real when he flirted with Gibbs.

Maybe one day Gibbs would change his mind about taking another sub to his bed, and when he did, Tony would be here, waiting. He wasn’t in any hurry. He was happier now than he’d ever been before, and he was content to just go with the flow and enjoy whatever this new phase of his life brought.

Tony sat back and watched Ducky telling a story, and Gibbs raising a disbelieving eyebrow, and Abby interrupting to tease Ducky. And as he watched his family laughing, arguing and chatting, he felt something he’d never felt before.

He felt like he belonged.

The End

Chapter End Notes:

For those who want to know what happens when Tony gets his *second* collar, here's a link to **[Hiding in Plain Sight](#)**

Friendly feedback always adored

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