

You'll Never Leave Completely

Author: CK

Category: Drama, Angst, Romance

Rating: R / P16, but it might increase later!

Spoiler: Judgment Day 1 (& 2)

Contents: There were some things concerning Judgment Day I just didn't understand - why Jen had been in L.A. without Jethro for example. And if it would have changed anything if he had been there...

Disclaimer: Nothing mine; otherwise I wouldn't write stories, but scripts...

A/N: I just can't get over JD and Jen's death... the simple reason is that some facts about Jen's death remind me of something that had happened in my life a few years ago. It has never stopped bothering me, and JD brought it all back. Writing seems to be the only way to be able to cope with it.

The idea might be not a new one, but I had to write it down nevertheless.

Thanks for Beta reading, Verity! :)

Chapter 1 - Leaving

"We shouldn't have come here," Jethro Gibbs repeated for what seemed like the hundredth time to her.

"You already said that," Jenny Shepard commented, peeved; when had he become so... she didn't even find the words for it. He has been complaining for hours now, nearly since they had arrived.

"Because it's still my opinion. This has to be a trap, Jen. And we're alone. You don't know how many of them we'll have to face. When we're outnumbered, we'll have to fight a losing battle."

"That optimistic. I'm really impressed, Jethro. Now stop this," she paused for a moment, searching for an appropriate word, "whining of yours; you act like a child, not like the agent I've always thought is the best I know, and that once taught me."

"You mean the same agent that also has been teaching you that you shouldn't jump head over heels into an obviously very dangerous situation? Especially not when you're the Director of a Federal Agency? You know, I'm here to protect you-"

"Fine. Protect and shut your mouth, you're getting on my nerves," she interrupted him, groaning theatrically.

"-and not to watch you being killed by some murderous mob," he continued, unperturbed by her words.

"You seem to have very less faith in your teaching skills," she replied with a shake of her head. She was getting bored; after hours of waiting in this shabby, old building, still nothing had happened. She, too, was wondering if it was making sense, sitting here and waiting for the people who wanted to see them dead; but then, she preferred

knowing that she would be confronted by those people when she was prepared for. Suddenly she listened attentively.

"I'm just careful-" Gibbs began, but was silenced by a hand sign from her he immediately understood.

"They're coming," she whispered. They provided cover behind the stacked tables and chairs, prepared to respond the gun fire that was going to come. Heavy steps could be heard from the outside of the diner, making Jen's heartbeat race. Although she had been an agent for years and often enough had gotten in such situations, she still hated them - and feared them. Knowing that the one person she trusted with her life was by her side now helped a lot, but that didn't mean the fear would go away.

She had wanted to wish him good luck, though she wasn't sure that these would have been the right words to say, but she never got the chance to find out anyway when just at that moment, the doors burst open and five men entered the building, their weapons ready to open fire on their aims.

It was quick and - horrible. Gibbs and Shepard managed to shoot down three of the men in fractions of seconds, although their shields of tables got perforated badly. But none of them noticed the man that sneaked behind them, for they lost track for a blink of an eye when the fifth of the men emerged to be very tenacious and skilful in shooting and hiding away in just the right moments.

Moreover, both of them had taken the first bruises and wounds from flying wood and projectiles, every little pain caused by these distracting them for valuable moments. It took Jethro a moment too long to realize that someone was behind him, and when he turned around, the assassin had already fired.

It was like he could see it coming. The bullet raced through the air, coming closer and closer and he nearly thought he would be able to grab it, but before he could even move his hand, the bullet already forced its way into his body; even though he had tried to turn away, it broke through his clothes, his skin and beyond, and sent every nerve to alert mode. He was sure he felt it crash into his ribs, then bouncing back and, judging by breathtaking pain he felt, he was sure it had hit his lungs. He heard Jen calling his name, he heard a few more shots, and a body sagging to the ground, just as his did. Not a second later Jenny was at his side.

"Don't you dare leave me like this, Jethro!" she called out, pressing her hands to his wound. Blood spilled out from under her hands and wouldn't stop; it already pooled around the right side of his torso. His face contorted with pain, he coughed weakly, and managed to cover Shepard's hands with one of his own.

"Jen," was the last word that fell from his lips; then his eyes closed.

"No! Stay with me! Come on, Jethro, please..."

It was then when another shot broke the silence.

When they had arrived at the diner, they had been immediately received by Director Vance, who had stepped out of the building with his face dead serious just as their car had stopped.

"What happened?" Tony asked without greeting, getting out of the car, and walking up to him.

"I'm sorry, Agent DiNozzo. They're dead," Vance simply answered, stepping aside to let the agent and Ziva enter the Diner. But Tony frowned, standing completely motionless.

"Who's dead?" he then asked, slowly and carefully, already fearing the answer.

"Director Shepard and Agent Gibbs." With this, Vance left for his car.

Both Ziva and Tony were staring at the now empty spot the Assistant Director had been standing in, their heads spinning. It took them a few seconds to regain their consciousness; but finally, they entered the Diner, hesitating and fearing what was expecting them.

They never noticed the starting helicopter not more than a mile away.

"Oh, Abby, would you please be quite for a moment," Tim McGee sighed and pushed his colleague and friend, Abby Scuito, carefully aside when again she invaded his personal space, making it impossible for him to work.

"But I want to know why they haven't called yet! There has to be a reason!" she insisted, looking defiantly at him. "Come on, McGee, you're not curious?"

"Everything alright?" they suddenly heard a well-known voice from behind them.

"Yep," the young agent answered, before adding, "apart from Abby just having a nervous breakdown." Medical examiner Donald Mallard smirked, giving McGee a slight slap on the shoulder. He wanted to reply something when his cell phone ringed.

"Mallard," he answered it, then listening intently, turning and walking away a few steps from Abby and McGee, who's hearts were misgiving them. "And who... were they... yes... I understand... I assume... I will do that... thank you." Ducky's voice had become weaker with every word and after he had put away the phone, he had to catch his breath; he felt like he'd been running a marathon

Taking another deep breath, he turned and walked back to Abby and McGee, resisting the urge to stumble backwards when he saw their faces which spoke of a knowledge that he still had to equip them with.

"Who?" McGee asked, although he hated to ask a question that wasn't going to be answered with "Everything fine, no need to worry". Ducky momentarily closed his eyes; he didn't trust his voice for the next words.

"Jenny and Jethro."

The piercing scream from Abby could be heard throughout the whole Headquarters' building.

Chapter 2 - Aftermath

The diner was empty, except for the shed blood, the destroyed furniture, and the little cards that informed which pool of blood belonged to whom. It seemed so unreal and yet so cruel; small white cards in this red liquid that was slowly getting dark, drying and leaving an obvious mark on the ground.

Tony and Ziva were fighting hard against the queasy feeling they had from the moment they saw the two cards that said so much though only "Shepard" and "Gibbs" was written on them. They still tried to realize what had happened; that two people they cared so much for were dead. Just gone; just not there anymore. It was so hard to believe that they weren't even able to cry; they knew what had happened, but they couldn't *believe* it, not matter what they saw.

The oppressive silence in the diner clang in the young agents' ears, but they didn't have the hearts to make any sound to chase away the silence. Vance had left them behind to investigate, yet they didn't know what to do. They had done it so many times, always knowing exactly what to do after they had arrived at a crime scene, but now, with these victims, their minds were blank.

When Ziva knelt down in front of the two pools of blood on the ground that were marked with their leaders' names, Tony allowed himself to close his eyes momentarily; his lungs hurt from breathing like they showed solidarity with their deceased friends, and didn't want to work as they should; the air of death and loss that was hanging heavily in the diner made him sick.

Ziva, however, was speaking silent prayers for the lost ones, ignoring her own sickness and every thought that would make her break down. Maybe they had a job to do, but right at this moment, even though she was the always strong soldier, the Mossad officer that had already seen so much sorrow in her life, she wouldn't be able to act like she and Tony, too, were expected to. At least the Assistant Director, Leon Vance, seemed to expect it.

The Israeli woman looked up when her partner stepped beside her, first staring to the ground, then meeting her eyes. He could see the pain that was mirrored in hers from his own and somehow, it made him feel better, barely mentionable, but at least he knew for sure that he wasn't alone with his feelings.

With meeting Tony's eyes, Ziva felt her power to resist all these feelings that were about to consume her vanish, leaving her heart and soul naked and vulnerable.

"I want to go home, Tony," she suddenly whispered, her voice like her eyes full of tears, and at the moment she had said those words, Tony knew that his colleague and friend had given up all resistance to the truth before them; given up every hope that might have been there at any point; maybe was breaking down, like he was about to.

He pulled her up to him and into a comforting embrace; comforting for him and hopefully for her, too.

"We will go home, Ziva," he said, his voice weak and yet speaking with determination, "But we owe them to make of their final way a peaceful one; one that won't be accompanied by any open questions." He felt relieved when Ziva nodded.

"You're right," she answered and carefully freed herself from his embrace, adding, "let's get back to work." It was the tone of voice in these last words that told him that she was ready to do everything that would be necessary to solve this case.

And that she wouldn't let any other possible assassins forget what they or their fellows had done.

"Will he...?" she asked, her voice weak, her heart full of fear and sorrow.

"I think he'll make it," the doctor answered briefly, pushing her aside, showing her that he needed the space to work; to help his patient live.

Jenny Shepard sat down and tried to stay calm. After the incident in the Diner, after Gibbs had been shot, they had been brought to a small airport by a helicopter. There a charter plane had been waiting for them, with a medical team on board that now was taking care of her partner. She was surprised how much equipment they had brought with them; enough to help the obviously dangerously wounded Gibbs only a hospital would have been able to do better.

"Director Shepard?" a voice suddenly startled her and she looked up to the woman that had just spoken to her. Jenny only nodded, her mind still caught up in the memories and pictures of the last minutes in the Diner. "I want to inform you about our destination. We're going to bring you back to Washington; there is a plane waiting for you that will bring you to Europe."

Jenny nodded again, only then realizing what the words of the unknown woman meant.

"Europe? Wh... why, by all means, Europe?!" she wanted to know, confused, the feeling of being delivered up consuming her. There was and would be no way to reject because she wouldn't leave without Jethro.

"This was arranged by Director Vance. He is now the Director of NCIS, because you two are officially dead. You have an assignment in Europe; in Germany, to be exact. You will get informed as soon as you are on the plane to your new destination. At least I can tell you, it is for your own safety and - it will be an undercover assignment as soon as Agent Gibbs has recovered."

"Undercover in Germany?" Jen echoed when memories flooded her mind.

"No, let me! I don't want to hear it, McGee! Just leave me alone," Abby protested, hitting her colleague when he tried to pull her into his arms.

"Abby, please, you can't... Come on, you can't hide away in your lab. Don't do that, Abbs," McGee tried desperately, but only earned himself another death glare from the young woman.

"Only Gibbs is allowed to call me Abbs," she hissed, making McGee step back for a second.

"But Gibbs is-," he began, not really thinking about his words at this moment, and was stopped by something he definitely wasn't prepared for - a slap in the face from Abby. Shocked, he stared at her, momentarily intending to leave, but then, he knew that she needed him now more than ever.

They were still staring at each other wordlessly when Ducky entered the lab minutes later.

"Abby? Timothy?" he asked, slightly confused by the two of them standing there like statues. They didn't show any reaction; only when Ducky tipped McGee lightly on the shoulder, Abby whispered, "I won't let him tell me what I have to think."

Ducky needn't to ask what Abby was speaking of; of course she wasn't able to accept the fact that Jenny and Jethro, the two persons she had always called "Mommy" and "Daddy", were dead. Giving Abby no chance to resist or fight against it, he took her into his arms, holding her close as she began to cry; sobbing so hard that her whole body was shaking badly and she nearly wasn't able to stand anymore.

McGee couldn't hide the tears that were now rolling down his cheeks; his heart broke when Abby managed to say "Why them?" between her sobs.

"Shh, my dear," Ducky tried to calm her down, stroking her hair and holding her even closer.

"They can't be dead... they can't be dead," Abby repeated over and over again, like a mantra that would be able to bring back the beloved ones, and her desperate pleading brought Ducky to the edge of tears. He wanted to be strong, he wanted to stand the pain that was eating him up inside, because he knew Abby and Tim needed him now; but he was only human and losing two of his dearest friends at the same time was just too much to take, even for him.

"When will Tony and Ziva be back?" McGee silently asked after a while, staring out of the lab window, still only seeing his boss and the Director in front of him; and though he knew these images weren't real, they somewhat soothed him.

"I think it will be as soon as they've finished the investigation. Unfortunately, Director Vance has signed them to investigate although they're personally connected to... the victims," Ducky explained, not really fond of using 'victims' to describe about whom he was speaking, but then, he couldn't bring himself to say the names,

acknowledging that it was really them. He was still caught in the moment when he was told on the phone that Jenny and Jethro were dead.

"I wish there was something we could do," the young agent thought aloud; he wanted to help his colleagues, to do anything that wouldn't give him the feeling that he was going crazy because of only sitting around.

"I'm sure there's something we can do," Abby suddenly said, and after she had left Ducky's embrace, she grabbed her bag and ran out.

Chapter 3 - Back From L.A.

Tony and Ziva had spent the flight back to Washington in complete silence, each of them lost in their own thoughts. Somehow they had managed to investigate in a professional manner like they were used to doing. But it had been really hard, not to think of the people who had died there, and what all this meant.

They had taken the first flight that had been available, and it was relief to be finally back in the NCIS headquarters, although it was like coming home after the death of a family member - everything reminded them of the lost ones.

They resisted the urge to look up to the catwalk like Gibbs had often done; but they couldn't stop themselves from staring at the deserted desk of their boss.

"It's unbelievable," Tony whispered, saying what everyone was thinking. He felt the sickness coming back and forced himself to look away; instead he watched Ducky entering the office. McGee was talking silently to Ziva when Tony realized that someone was missing.

"Where's Abby?" he asked, his look wandering from Ducky to his young colleague and back.

"I don't know; she said that we can do something to help you and ran out of her lab, leaving us no chance to follow. She just vanished," McGee explained while working on his PC.

"Why didn't you track down her mobile?" Tony wondered, eying him somewhat reproachful.

"Yeah, thank you Tony, would've done it, but that would've got me only one place in result - her lab."

"So you sit here and... why aren't you out searching for her?!"

"Because Director Vance told us to stay here; that there would be no need to search Abby," Dr. Mallard answered for McGee.

"What? Who does he think he is?"

"At the moment, standing behind you," a very unfamiliar and cold voice told him and Tony turned so fast that he nearly fell over.

"Sir," he acknowledged the man in front of him.

"Agent DiNozzo. I want you and your team in my office in ten minutes. Hope that's enough time for you to... compare your notes," Vance told the Senior Agent, giving him a critical glance; then he turned and walked back towards the stairs.

"Yea, Sir, of course." Tony tried hard to suppress the upcoming rage that this man caused in him; how could someone be so heartless? When his eyes met Ziva's, he knew that wasn't the only one with these thoughts; only

Ziva was ready to really follow this man and do whatever she now was thinking and what definitely was not *nice*. Carefully, Tony laid a hand on David's arm. "He isn't worth the trouble," he told her, his voice low, and as much as she wanted to punch the indifference out of this man, she knew it was better to keep her feet still and wait.

"He's awake," the doctor she still hadn't been introduced told her, waking Jen from the twilight sleep she had fallen to due to the exhaustion the last few hours had brought to her. She had been fighting against the sleepiness, but since they had changed for the plane that was going to bring them to Europe, and that was a really comfortable vessel, she finally had given in.

"How is he?" Shepard asked, shifting off the tiredness.

"He is more than lucky I would say; obviously the bullet only grazed him, though it hit one of his ribs before it left his body; a little bone fragment found its way into the right lobe of his lung. We were able to remove the fragment and take care of the wound. He will be fine," the man explained, an encouraging smile showing on his face.

"But he has lost so much blood," she thought aloud, while the news lifted a weight off her shoulders.

"It was not as bad as we had been afraid of. I think it was around one and a half pints; it could have been worse. Just make sure he rests the next weeks. And he shouldn't drink any coffee for at least four days."

"I will pay special attention to that," she smiled. "Thank you, Doctor..."

"Bellman; sorry I didn't introduce myself earlier."

"Well, you helped Agent Gibbs, so I think I can forgive you for that," she replied, winking at him. "May I see him?"

"Of course. He's already inquired after you." Jenny followed the doctor into another section of the airplane where the small infirmary was placed. Gibbs smiled up at her when she stepped beside his bed.

"Hey, you gave me a real scare," she said, her voice gentle.

"You know, I like this dramatic act," he grinned, though his voice was barely a whisper and he obviously had some problems breathing. For a moment, his face showed the pain speaking had caused; his wound hurt with every breath he took.

"You shouldn't talk too much, Agent Gibbs; you're lungs are still weak; they and your body need to regain their strength," Doctor Bellman, who was in a small area next to the "sick room", pointed out.

"I will take care of that, too, Doctor," Jen answered for her partner, earning herself a death glare that made her grin. With a mischievous gleam in her eyes, she added, "You can call me Nurse Jenny."

As much as Gibbs wanted to continue killing *Nurse Jenny* with his glare, he couldn't help but smile. It was good to see her as happy and relieved as she was, because judging from his experience, this wouldn't last long. Not in their life.

"How did we escape?" he finally asked a question he maybe should have waited with, but he needed to know, and though he had some idea what the answer to his question would be, something told him that there was much more to learn of what had happened and would happen now.

"Mike Franks showed up, shot the last of the men, the one who regained consciousness again and tried to shoot me. Then he left as fast as he had come," Jenny explained, her hand gently stroking his hair and cheeks.

"Had called him before we left for the diner," he simply replied. It had been his famous gut telling him that calling Mike might be a good idea; and of course his old friend had had just the right timing. He made a mental note to thank Mike later when they were back. By the way... "When will we be back?"

He knew something was really wrong when Jen's facial expression turned deadly serious. His brows furrowed when he waited for her answer.

"They're not going to send us back to Washington, at least not to let us stay there. Jethro... they're going to send us to Europe. We have a new undercover assignment."

Chapter 4 - Searching

"Cynthia," Tony greeted the young assistant of Director Shepard silently when they arrived in the outer office of the director's office, "How are you?" Tony's voice was full of sympathy for the woman who obviously had a hard time to cope with the latest events. Her eyes reddened; her face mirroring what the team was feeling.

"I miss her. Still can't believe it," Cynthia admitted frankly; then she took a shaky breath, and informed Vance about the arriving of the team.

Tony and Ziva both shot her an encouraging glance before they vanished in the Director's office. They knew that Shepard and her assistant had been very close; as close as two people in their positions could get. Some would say they had been friends in a special way, Cynthia always prudent and more than helpful, and Jenny a very generous boss.

The first thing they noticed was the changes in the decoration. The office now missed the warm and homelike look it used to have when it was still Director Shepard's office. Instead, everything was arranged straight and somewhat cold. But they had no chance to give the decoration any further thoughts when Vance began to speak immediately.

"Agent DiNozzo. Some people recommended me to make you a team leader. So I'll give you this position of the new leader of Agent Gibbs' team; but only on trial, you'll have to prove your leading agent's abilities. And attune yourself to Miss David leaving us soon." He turned to Ziva, who frowned at Vance's words. "Miss David, your liaison assignment will end in a few weeks; five to be exact. Get yourself prepared for returning to Israel."

"Sir... may I ask why I shall return?"

"Because your services here are not longer needed. Moreover, Mossad asked me to send you back; probably you'll get a new assignment." Vance stopped for a moment, noting down something, then he looked up again. "The funeral service for Director Shepard and Agent Gibbs will take place tomorrow afternoon. You can go home; you have the time off until after the funeral. You are dismissed," he ended, but when they left he shouted after them, "And find Miss Scuito!"

"You're not serious," Gibbs stated like he wanted his words to be true more than anything else. He didn't want to trust his ears. Europe? Again? And again *undercover*? This had to be some kind of bad joke. Really, really bad joke. Not that he couldn't bear the thought of being undercover with Jen, again; at least it had been a great period of time all these years ago, though it hadn't ended well. But that wasn't important anymore now. He had his team and his job back home in Washington; he had his life - or what was left of it - there.

"I'm so sorry, Jethro. I already had a heated discussion with the persons responsible, but for some reason, there is no way to cancel this mission, or to cancel it *for us*. They want us to do it. We'll get briefed as soon as you're well again and the assignment starts. Until then, we'll live in a house somewhere in Germany; I don't know yet where

exactly it will be, but they assured me that we won't have to worry about anything. Right, and you'll be taken care of in this house, not in a hospital."

Gibbs closed his eyes, letting the new information sink in. Everything was arranged; they hadn't even made any attempt to ask or to warn them; no, they had practically kidnapped them; bringing them away from the Diner and directly flying them to Europe, never giving them the chance to object. If he hadn't been so weak, he would have showed them what he thought of this behavior.

"Stop musing, Jethro. You have to mend first; than we'll find a way to return as soon as possible," Jenny's calm voice broke through his thoughts, making him open his eyes, and looking up at her who's head was right above his. Gently, she pressed a kiss on his forehead. "You should sleep now. We'll arrive in a few hours and you'll need your strength. So, please, do me favor and rest," she added, knowing all too well that sleeping was the last thing he wanted to do now, with such a great amount of thoughts on his mind. But she was hoping that calling on his rationality would have some effect.

"One last thing, Jenny - do the others know about us traveling to Europe?" He could see his partner searching for the right words and he already knew that he again wouldn't like what she was going to say.

"They think... they were informed that we're dead. Officially, we got killed in a car accident, that's the version for the press; for the others, we both lost our lives in the gunfight in the diner. Only one person at NCIS knows the truth - new Director Vance. He has also been the one to inform your team."

"But Ducky...," he began, leaving the sentence unfinished when he saw Jenny nodding.

If this hadn't been so serious, she would have smiled; she had asked exactly the same questions when she had been talking to this woman who had introduced herself as Carla Elliott.

"He was told that this is not his responsibility because he is personally involved. They let Tony and Ziva survey the crime scene because they arrived right after Vance and his team; but they had only been allowed to take some photos to let Abby reconstruct the course of events. No samples, no pieces of evidence. They should be back in Washington by now. The... funeral service for..." she told him; then a lump in her throat made her stop momentarily before she ended, "us will be tomorrow." During her last words, a sick feeling formed in her stomach and she could tell that she shared it with Jethro. Thinking and speaking about the own funeral while you were still alive was more than horrible.

Jethro didn't reply to this; his eyes showed her acknowledgement, then he followed her request and tried to catch some sleep; still in his dreams haunted by the imagination of his own funeral although he was alive.

"So you really think she's here?" Tim asked, staring at the house in front of them.

"There is no other place left, McGee. At least none I would happen to know. But if you have any idea, just tell me," DiNozzo responded; he himself hated the idea of going into this house, looking for their friend inside a building that belonged to their former boss; the one of whom they didn't want to be remembered this way at the moment. Inside, memories were awaiting them, waiting to cut deep into their hearts again.

"We owe it to her to be there for her," Ziva quietly mentioned and earned agreeing nods from her companions.

Hesitantly, they stepped through the always open front door of Jethro Gibbs' house. Even those first steps were hard to bear; no one of them was looking forward to opening the basement door. Nevertheless, McGee laid his hand on the door handle and carefully pushed it down so the door swung open slowly.

It was dark in there, not even a single dim light shining from below, and they guessed that they had been wrong, that Abby hadn't fled to this house. They were about to leave after making sure that their young colleague wasn't in the basement when some strange noises stopped them.

"Upstairs," Tony whispered, pulled out his gun, and went ahead of the others, tiptoeing to the stairs that led to the upper floor, then taking carefully every single step. Ziva and McGee mimicked his motions, while Ducky stayed behind, keeping an eye on the front door.

They weren't sure what they had expected to be confronted with, but the last thing on their list had been Abby sitting on the floor of Gibbs' study among an enormous pile of papers, books, notepads and something that looked like photo boxes. She had her back turned towards the door and didn't even notice the others, but was completely focused on the pictures in her hands, studying them thoroughly.

Ducky, who had been called upstairs by McGee, carefully stepped into the room, trying not to step on any of the things covering up the floor.

"Abigail?" he said in a low and calm voice; he didn't want to startle her. When she didn't show any reaction, he risked to take another few steps towards her, till he was beside her where he sat down. He reached for the pictures, taking them from Abby, and looked over them. It didn't take him very long to recognize them. In one for him unusual open moment Jethro had once showed Ducky some of these photos - from his time undercover with Jenny. They looked so happy, so easy-going, like no one would have been ever able to do them and their love any harm. He knew that Jethro had been far from being so happy with even one of his ex-wives, and though his friend had never said a word about it, he also knew that Jenny has always been a very special person to him.

"They had been in love." It wasn't a question; Abby's words were a clear statement. Ducky saw some tears falling down, wetting a piece of paper lying in her lap, and laid an arm around her shoulders.

"Yes," he simply answered. With a short glance to the others behind them, Tony, Ziva and McGee, too, stepped into the room, and made some room on the floor to sit down. For a few minutes, they just stared at the photos now lying in the middle of the small circle they were sitting in.

Somewhere in the back of Tony's mind the inappropriate thought that he could have won a lot of bets formed, but he pushed it away, for a moment wanting to head-slap himself. He once had been told that every little decision in your life would be able to change everything. What if he would have pushed a bit more? Would it have changed anything? For some reason, he was sure that the relationship of these two had been a strictly professional one in the last three years. But what would have been if it hadn't been only professional?

Would they have spent the time in the hotel in L.A. or would they have gone to the diner nonetheless?

Chapter 5 - Memories

DiNozzo was completely caught up in his musings about any possibilities that could have changed what had happened in the last hours. Something that would have prevented the death of their bosses and friends. Not that it would undo their death, but somehow, it was good to think about it, to keep his mind busy with some theories; to forget the reality in some way, and what he had seen in the diner.

Remembering the little moments he had the chance to observe, the moments that had made him so sure that Jenny and Gibbs hadn't always been only colleagues

"Abigail, why are you here?" Ducky's voice finally brought Tony back from his musings and made him turn his attention to Abby.

"I was searching for anything that would tell me where they are," the young woman replied. Tony frowned.

"Who are you talking about?"

"Gibbs and Director Shepard." The others exchanged worried glances.

"But Abby... they...," Ziva began, but stopped herself and searching for the right words, and then she continued, "What do you think you'll find here?"

"I know they're not dead. So there has to be some hint anywhere that will tell me where they are!" she exclaimed passionately, making the others wince due to her loud voice. "Gibbs is the best agent I know and Director Shepard was taught by him, so it isn't possible that they've died in a gunfight!"

"Abby... please, you should accept that-," McGee dared to try again talking to her after the events in the lab a few hours earlier, but was interrupted by her.

"No! And McGee, I already told you; do *not* tell me what I have to think!" She jumped up and again ran out, but this time the others followed and were able to catch up with her.

"Please, Abby, listen to reason!" McGee pleaded when he grabbed her arms and forced her to look at him. "I know it's hard; it is for each one of us. I don't want to hurt you and I don't want to tell you what you should think, but I won't watch you crucifying yourself either."

"But... the Director promised me to find happiness with the man she loves," Abby suddenly stated, and was met by four very confused looking faces. Imagining Abby and the Director having some kind of private talk seemed a bit strange to every one of them, but then, Abby had always admired Jenny and the Director obviously had really liked the crazy little forensic specialist, so maybe *girl talk* wasn't so far from being unusual...

"It has been during the dog case. I made her promise me that she won't wait till it's too late; that she would be happy with the man she loves. And I wanted her to say so because I felt it would be Gibbs." Her words made everyone else gasp; followed by a somewhat relieved sigh when she continued, "I never said a name, but I'm sure she knew whom I was talking about. I was hoping that she would clear things up, whatever had happened between her and Gibbs."

"Oh Abigail, but you cannot force such things." Ducky went to her and hugged her.

"Why not, Ducky? They could have been a happy little family. They are perfect for each other. They... they were..." She looked directly into the older man's eyes. "But now they'll never... They're gone, gone forever, aren't they?" Ducky knew that this was only one short moment of clarity; she was acknowledging the reality for now, but from his experience of the states and phases of mourning he knew that it wouldn't last very long till she was denying it again. Abby was more than anyone else of them affected by the death of Jenny and Jethro.

"Yes, Dear, I'm afraid they are. They are."

And with Abby starting to cry, again sobbing heartbreakingly, tears were rolling down everyone's cheeks.

Jenny was still fondling and petting the dog named "Jethro" - what a unique choice of name, it crossed her mind -, now sitting beside him on the floor, when Abby, who was sitting on the other side of the dog, again rose to speak.

"You know, this whole 'you have to accept the reality'-thing, someone said something similar to me a few years ago when one of my friends was dying," she began, remembering. "We weren't that close, but nevertheless it really bothered me and I didn't want to accept it, because he still looked completely healthy and all. So how has it to be for

those who had to watch their beloved ones die slowly? Every day they have to live with the thought that a person they love is going to die and they can't do anything against it," she told Jenny, petting the dog gently. "And what I hate even more is that often the younger ones of such people had waited to be happy because they had thought that there is so much time left for them."

"That's what we all do, Abby. Nowadays, you have to decide between your job and a family. There is either career or husband, wife and children. At least for people like us who have a job that requires a 24/7 standby. I wouldn't want to do that to my family, leaving them alone on weekends or maybe holidays. I'd rather live alone," Jenny answered. She understood Abby better than the young woman would have guessed; she knew just too well what it meant to decide against being happy with someone you love deeply. But she also knew that sometimes, decisions have to be made, decisions that would hurt oneself and the other, but also those that were made to avoid dead ends. And judging from the today's situation she was in, it definitely had been the better decision all these years ago. At least if she didn't ask her heart and the walls it had built around itself since then.

Abby, on the other hand, wasn't going to be pleased by this

"Director...promise me something?"

"What, Abby?"

"Well, you know... I really like you... and... I hope you don't mind me saying that, but I want you to find happiness with the man you love, whether there is the job or career or whatever. You deserve to be happy. And to be loved."

Jenny Shepard was really touched by Abby's words, but they also made her sad. This young woman was so full of hopes and dreams, even though not many people would think of her in that way in the first place. But she cared for those she loved and she wasn't afraid to tell them of her feelings - something Jenny really admired and something she herself never had been able to do; not even with her own parents.

"Director?"

"Abby, I don't know-"

"But I know. You only have this one life. Don't make yourself regret your decisions when you're too old to change anything."

"Okay, I promise. But I won't change my life within the next few days."

"That's okay, as long as it happens within the next two weeks," Abby replied and managed a small smile, which was responded by Jenny.

After a few minutes sitting in comfortable silence, the red-haired woman added silently, "Promise me something, too, Abby? If anything ever happens to me... will you take care of... this one special man?"

"I will. You can count on me. But to be honest, I don't want to take care of him. It's your task and you should do it till you both are old and grey and... well, you know," the younger woman answered, and now her smile reached her eyes; even though she still was a bit chagrined, it felt good to know that two of the people she loved most in her life were going to be happy.

That she was going to get her Happy Ever After.

Chapter 6 - Europe Again

Around eight hours later, Shepard and Gibbs were raised out of their sleep by Carla Elliott.

"We'll be in approach for our destination in ten minutes. Miss Shepard, please get yourself prepared for the landing." Jenny noticed the change in address; so now they definitely weren't Director and Agent anymore, as Elliott's next words proved. "Mister Gibbs, your bed is already secured; the landing will be no problem for you. I'll come back to you both as soon as we are on the ground." With this, she left, probably to take a seat herself, as Jenny guessed.

"So, here we are now. In Germany. That's more than strange," Jethro stated, saying aloud what his partner was thinking. Jen remained silent; she just didn't know about what to think about first. There were so many questions she would have wanted to ask, but she knew she wouldn't get any answer at the moment.

To avoid attracting attention, they landed on a normal airport amidst the city. Nevertheless, they didn't need to check out and they didn't come in touch with any of the ground staff. They transported Gibbs together with his bed out of the plane and directly into a car that looked like a light commercial vehicle; white and without any window in the rear; but to Jenny's surprise, inside it looked like an ambulance. They even had a comfortable chair for her.

She hated not being able to see anything of the outside world. At least she wanted to know where they were, how it looked here, what was expecting them. They had put them into a cage, a box, and she didn't even know why, because - shouldn't they work here at any one time? Of course it was much better to be in an inconspicuous vehicle, maybe one that could be found anywhere on the streets of this city. And one without windows so no one would be able to look inside.

Not that the explanations she was giving herself made her feel better, but it helped her to get rid of the dull feeling she had since the approach. She didn't know where it came from; maybe she was getting something like Jethro's *famous gut* as well. She felt kidnapped, like she simply wasn't allowed to know where they had been brought to. In some way, it reminded her of the day she had been kidnapped around two years ago. Although she knew that, this time, no one intended to hurt them, she still missed any peace of mind.

Jethro, on his part, had his eyes closed and seemed to sleep; only that Shepard was sure that he was wide awake. A Jethro Gibbs wouldn't sleep in such a situation, in spite of his condition and the fact that the doctor more or less had ordered him to sleep. She knew he shared her feelings and qualms; he always did. And now, with them undercover again, knowing nobody around, not even knowing the language of the country they had been brought to, and being dependant on the other, these common feelings would be even more complex.

The drive had lasted about an hour, Jenny guessed; over the years, she had been developing a good sense of time. When the car finally stopped and the engine went out, she felt somehow relieved. The fresh warm air of May welcomed her when she got out of the vehicle. Surrounding her was a forest; in front of her lay a lake amidst the wood. Looking around, she at last realized that she was standing just a few feet away from a building.

"That's yours now," a by now familiar voice belonging to Carla explained. "You'll live here as long as your assignment lasts. You'll find everything you need here; but if you should feel the need of anything, you just have to inform us and we'll get it for you. We will also help you with the local background; someday, you'll, for example, get everything of daily need yourself."

Jenny only nodded, thoroughly examining the house in front of her. Their residence was a small and charming house, but obviously somewhere out in the middle of nowhere.

Carla Elliott, as she could read Jenny's mind, continued, "You're here on the outskirts of Potsdam, a small town in the south-west of Berlin, which is the German capital, as you might know. We chose this place for tactical reasons

and because there are no neighbors for a few miles around, no one to ask questions you wouldn't want to answer; no one who can get distrustful. And don't worry, we didn't build the house, it has been here for a long time, so the people that might pass this place are used to it standing there."

Again, Jenny didn't say anything, but kept on looking around, memorizing as many details as possible. It was good to know that they were secluded out here, but that also meant that no one was going to notice if anything happened here. They were going to spend a long time here, she guessed, nearly feared, and she didn't want anything happen by chance that she or Jethro wouldn't be able to foresee and get themselves prepared for.

"You'll get your instructions as soon as Mister Gibbs has recovered. The Doctor Bellman said it will take around four weeks to get him back on duty. We will have the doctor check up on him every day in the first week and every two or three days in the following weeks. You should pay attention that Gibbs won't overstrain himself; maybe he should stay in bed or at least anywhere sitting the next days. I don't think he'll need pain killers; but he can tell the doctor anytime if there are any problems."

"Miss Elliott, allow me one question - why aren't we called by our titles anymore? I mean, of course I'm not the NCIS Director, Vance will be now, though I hope this absence from my position won't last long. But what about *Agent Gibbs*?"

"Well... this might sound macabre, but as you know, officially, you two are dead. Or your old identities are. With your assignment here, you'll get new ones. Of course, in fact, you're alive, but your old lives don't exist any longer for you. Maybe you'll return one day, as *Director Jennifer Shepard* and *Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs*. But at the moment, you're nameless until you'll get your new identities. I think this will happen this afternoon. I know, this situation might be really unpleasant, and I ask you to trust me; us," the woman explained, and when she noticed that Jenny wasn't going to answer anything, she pointed to the house. "If you don't mind, I'll show you your new home now."

It was a cold comfort, but at least the house was one Jenny could imagine living in. They had already brought Gibbs to his room, or the room they had declared to be his, though he had protested as much as he and his lungs had been able to.

The house reminded her a bit of a mountain shelter, only that this one here was much bigger and much more comfortable. Everything looked country-style; the inner walls were faced with wood; the floor was made of stone; big blocks of an irregular cut. Stepping through the entrance, one was standing in the living room area; a very big room that made up nearly the whole lower part of the house. There was a sitting area in front of a big fireplace. A huge carpet looking very soft and thick was lying in the middle of the couch and the armchairs standing around the fireplace.

Across this sitting area, next to a window, was a dining table and only a few steps away from it the entrance to the kitchen. Carla had assured Jenny that, in the early days of their time here, someone would take care of their fridge. But they had to cook alone; a thought that made Jenny really pity Jethro because as long as he was forced to stay in bed or at least forbidden to work in any way, he would be also forced to eat what she was cooking. She! The reason she never cooked wasn't just her lack of time.

Attentive she followed Carla upstairs. The upper floor was kind of connected with the lower because it was open; this meant that one was standing on an inner balcony as soon as one reached the top of the stairs. The mentioned balcony allowed a look to the living room; the area around the fireplace and the dining table. The kitchen was right below the gallery and the rooms that could be approached from it, as were another two rooms she hadn't been introduced to yet, but she guessed that it were the bathroom and a storeroom or something similar.

The two rooms on the upper part of the house were both bedrooms; one for Jethro - the one where he was already in - and one for Jenny. Pleased she discovered that the bed in her room was as big as her own bed at home; at least she would have the comfort of being stretched out on a kind sized bed.

Also upstairs was also a small restroom; but Jenny was more curious about the bathroom downstairs.

Forgetting for a moment the situation they were in, she could have squealed happily when she saw the big tub. There was nothing better than a hot bath in the evening; it always helped her to clear her mind and find some peace and rest after a stressful day.

While Jenny was inspecting the house, Jethro finally had given in and was now, as a good patient, lying in his bed. Only sleep wouldn't come to him. His gaze wandered around the room; when they had brought him into the house he had already noticed the rustic style; the wood on the walls and the stone on the floor; and he was sure he was going to like their residence, although he would have preferred being at home. Complaining wouldn't help them so he thought they should make the best out of their situation and try to find a way to return without the people they'd brought them here. Assignment or not, they hadn't been asked and he simply hated being forced to do something or to go somewhere.

Waiting wasn't exactly his biggest strength, and he really tried his best to stay in bed and to not jump up; he felt like a tiger in a cage and if being alone in a foreign land wasn't bad enough, being tied to a bed made it even worse. Of course he had Jenny, and he was thankful to be here with her, but it didn't change their situation. He was sure that they weren't allowed to contact the team in Washington; for them, they were dead. He didn't want to imagine how they were feeling now; but he felt bad for causing them this emotional trouble, even if it wasn't exactly his and Jen's fault.

Looking out of the window, he noticed the sun shining, the sunrays breaking through the treetops, and the leaves, moved by the wind, made thousands of little sparkles of the light. It was a peaceful and very beautiful picture and yet it seemed like it was sneering at him, at them, and their situation. Suddenly he felt enraged; he wanted to tell these people what exactly he was thinking of this whole plan and assignment that wasn't one already. No one had told them what they would have to do as soon as he was fit enough for service, but something told him he wasn't going to like it.

Someone coming up the stairs made him turn his head back to the door that was across from the window, and curiously he waited, the words for one of the people he wanted to cut down to size formed in his mind. But the person stepping into the room was his partner.

"They're gone. We're alone now, Jethro," she informed him, taking place on the chair that was standing next to his bed, facing him. Gently she took his hand and squeezed it, knowing that he shared the anger she was feeling. But because it was nothing that would help him to recover, she needed him and his thoughts to be positive.

"When will they return? To check up on us?" he asked, grumbling, making a face.

"Tomorrow around noon, maybe afternoon. Carla Elliott, the woman who is responsible for us and every concern we might have, as she told me, said there's a lot to do for them because there are still some things they need to organize. Originally we should get new identities this afternoon, but something went wrong. Now we'll get the documents with all details tomorrow." Jen couldn't resist smiling a bit when she heard him sighing. "Let's not talk about it anymore now. I'd like to have a quiet afternoon and evening."

He didn't comment on her words, but instead only nodded; then he looked at her pleadingly, and asked, "How about a 'Welcome Coffee'?". Seeing her facial expression, he instantly knew that this really wasn't going to be his lucky day.

"Sorry, Jethro. No coffee for at least four days; medical instruction. It wouldn't be good for your health."

"Going four days without coffee isn't good for anyone's health - anyone near me," he griped, making Jen chuckle slightly. Gently she kissed his temple.

"I'm sure you'll survive it. I'll forego coffee, too; so there will be no smell of fresh brewed coffee. You won't complain and I'll show solidarity. Deal?"

"Deal," he agreed, yet he still didn't look happy, giving Jen a hard time suppressing her laughter. This was going to be a very *amusing* time...

Chapter 7 - The Last Honor

It wasn't her body language that said nothing but 'I'm doing my job'. It wasn't her face, so perfectly motionless, like nothing special, let alone life-changing, had happened. It wasn't her voice that sounded steady and sure, like her face with no hint of emotion in it. But it was her eyes which made his heart break; the expression in them a mixture of sadness, loneliness and desperation, something he had never expected to see in her eyes.

Tony knew that Ziva had found a home in Washington; he knew that, to her, the team was like a family, as it was for all of them, though she would never have admitted it openly. She was a soldier, one that was used to being alone, and yet she needed people she could trust; people to greet her warmly and give her the feeling of being secure.

He had assured her that they would find a way to return her from Israel soon. He had told her that she should trust them. But she had only nodded; a vague gesture, showing him that she had heard him, but nothing more.

Now they were sitting on the cemetery among all the people who wanted to give Jenny Shepard and Jethro Gibbs their last honor. Another place, another situation, but again, when he took her hand, trying to comfort her in the only possible way he could think of in this moment, she again only nodded. Though her body language spoke of clear professionalism, in her mind she still was somewhere far away, caught up in her own thoughts, still trying to realize what the events of the past two days meant.

It wasn't the lack of experience with the death of people she liked, but it was a lack of experience with the death of two people who had gotten murdered in a fight they barely had a chance to win. It was a difference now because it had been friends; it had been people she had loved as those, as family maybe, perhaps a bit like parents as Abby had them always declared to be. Back in Israel, she had her family, but this one here in Washington was so different, and she had learned to love them, all of them.

She had known that she would be sent back to Israel at any time, but she had never guessed that it would be after the loss of two people she cared for so much, after an event that made her need her friends more than ever. All this felt so unreal; she wanted to get up from her seat and leave, because it was like a bad dream and maybe ignoring it would wake her up.

The funeral speech made her sick; officially, Jenny and Jethro had died in a car accident, driving back from the funeral service to their hotel in Los Angeles. Of course they needed some cause of death that hadn't something to do with terrorists and gunfights, an official version they could present to the press. No one of the agents or other employees who knew the truth was allowed to talk about what had really happened. They had been more or less instructed to forget. *Forget the reality*. If only it would be so simple; simple as waking up from a nightmare that wasn't one, but this was *reality*.

A short glance to Tony next to her assured her that she wasn't the only one who found this situation distasteful; though her partner had now tried for hours to give her some comfort, he nevertheless was pale and looked disgusted.

Tony silently wished to hold a speech that would be more suitable for his two bosses; for these two special people he had had the chance to meet. He was thankful for all those years with Gibbs, and for the last three years with Jenny as Director, even though there had been problems, especially concerning his undercover assignment and the story around Jeanne. But now, with Jenny and Gibbs dead, this whole being angry thing seemed so childish and unimportant to him that he wanted to kick himself for being so stupid.

Sometimes, he was kind of jealous of Abby. She was able to love unquestioningly; she could love even those who had hurt her; she could forgive, and he wished he had the same gift. Being able to forgive wasn't something that came naturally to someone; you had to have a big heart, one filled with happiness and joy, with some childish light heartedness.

Looking at Abby now, he was afraid that the young woman would maybe lose these attitudes; she looked so bad, so devastated, and this time, Tony wasn't so sure that she would recover. She sat there, glassy-eyed and absent-minded, wearing barely any make-up and very simple, one would even say conservative clothes. From time to time, a single tear would find its way out of her eyes, rolling down her cheek. It seemed like she hadn't the strength to cry anymore; her silent tears the only visible sign of her mourning that must have been so much deeper than that of the others.

In Abby's mind, no clear thought could be formed. She didn't know what to think, what to do, where to go, to whom to talk to. Of course, there were her friends; she had Tony and Ducky and McGee, even Ziva, and they all were there for her; they had assured her of that and she knew it. But the most important person was missing. The one who had always had an open ear for her, the one person that had given her the feeling of a true family.

She wanted to be comforted by his embrace, his silence that had always said so much. But instead, she was sitting at a funeral service that was being held for him.

Moreover, with him she had lost another person who had become a part of her little family; a woman she maybe had a deeper relationship to than her own mother. Although there had been problems between her and Jenny in the beginning, she soon had come to value her. The woman who wasn't so much older than herself, and yet so respectable and successful; the one who had once offered Abby to come to her house whenever she needed advice or someone to talk to. The one who had been a mother, a sister and a friend to her at the same time.

Abby knew that the others had no idea of how close she had been with Jenny. She didn't exactly know why, but they had their friendship kept a secret, although it hadn't been done consciously. But then, like she hadn't been able to understand it herself, no one could have understood why the minutes, sometimes even hours Jenny had spent in her lab had changed her and her life so much.

There had been someone to talk to, someone to trust, a woman she could have a girl talk with; something she had been missing since Kate's death. Of course it had needed some time to get her and Jenny so close for talking about private things, but she had liked the constant development in their friendship.

She knew people wouldn't believe it, but deep inside, the tough Goth she pretended to be was only a girl, too, a person who needed someone to talk to, someone to hug her and tell her everything would be fine. Gibbs had been the one who had always known and accepted it, who had taken care of her without asking questions. And with Jenny it had been the same during the last two years, ever since the Michael incident and Gibbs' coma.

The two men sitting next to her, McGee on the right, Ducky on the left tried their best to support her; to tell her that there were people who were there for her. And though she knew it without needing them to tell her so, she also knew that no one of them would be able to give her strength; on the one hand because, in this situation,

nothing and nobody would be able to help, and on the other hand, she could nearly feel the sadness they had in them.

Ducky, sitting as straight as Ziva, but unlike her failing to hide his emotions that were all available to read on his face now, did his best to avoid any tears falling from his eyes. He hadn't cried often in his life; not because he thought men weren't allowed to cry, but because he had always been a positive person, even in the worst situations. Yet now, this one was about a friend, a very good friend, maybe his best friend, and about a much adored woman he had loved as a friend, too, since they'd met all those years ago.

What was bothering him was not only that both had lost their lives being so young, having so much left to do, to experience, and so many people to meet and help. It was also that he knew they hadn't been completely happy in the end. He wasn't one to intervene, and he even tried to avoid gossip, although he had to admit that it was sometimes interesting. But he was neither stupid nor blind and he had once seen Jenny and Jethro how they had been during their relationship; more easy-going, more open-hearted, more laughing.

He really had wished for them to get that back, although he somehow knew that it hadn't ended well all those years ago. Nevertheless, he had seen the looks, the knowing glances that had assured each other that they understood what the other was saying and thinking. He had seen the longing in Jethro's eyes when Jenny once had come down the stairs in her ball gown, back then when he had been the Director's escort to the Marine Birthday Ball. And he had seen the glances speaking of care and gentleness Jethro had given Jen in the last few months, and that often had Ducky made ask himself if there maybe could be a second chance for them, if they hadn't it taken already.

Now there was no second chance anymore, there was only a Goodbye. The last thing he could hope for was that Jen and Jethro also had had the chance to tell each other goodbye. Whatever was going to happen to your soul after your death, Ducky was sure that it was haunted by some missed chances.

Thoughtfully, the older man let his gaze drift to the person sitting at Abby's other side. He would have never guessed that McGee could be so supporting in such a situation. He could tell that it was heart-breaking for McGee as well, but nevertheless, he showed no signs of *weakness*, of breaking down and giving up. Not that Ducky would really think of it as weakness.

Of course Ducky couldn't know it, but Timothy McGee was not as strong as he pretended to be. He only pushed every possible thought away. Every thought telling him the truth, telling him about the reality. He knew that Tony was doing it, too; he could tell from his friend's behavior and eyes. He could tell that Ziva and Ducky needed much self control to stay as motionless as possible. And he could tell that Abby was at the end of her tether.

For her, it was like losing her parents. McGee wished so badly that he could take some of her pain away from her, to cope with it for her, but the only thing he could do was try to show her that he was someone she could rely on him, that he would never leave her alone. He hadn't taken her words which in any other situation would have been hurting, serious, and he wasn't going to leave her only because she told him to.

Moreover, concentrating on Abby and blocking out the reality helped him not to get overwhelmed by the fact that his mentor and the woman he had admired very much were just... gone. His own mourning wasn't important now; only Abby was it.

At funerals of colleagues, people often said that it had been an honor working with the deceased, and in most cases it was only an empty phrase. People said it because it was just usually said. McGee didn't like that, and he wouldn't do it. But this time, he really could tell that it had been an honor, no, more than that, to work with Gibbs and Shepard. He knew he had been lucky that he had gotten the chance to become a member of Gibbs' team.

Maybe for him it had been a bit like for Abby; he had found a second father in his boss that had always been strict, but also caring. He knew that Gibbs had been someone to rely on, no matter what happened. He remembered the case when he had shot another agent, and how his boss had forced him to not give up. He still knew all these

moments when Gibbs had, directly or indirectly, told him just to go on. He had made of him, the shy and inexperienced MIT graduate, a reliable, self-confident, even brave agent.

He wouldn't claim that Jenny had been a mother to him as she had been to Abby. Maybe he was the one of the team that had the least among of contact with her. He knew now that Gibbs' had been her lover and Tony her special undercover agent; that Ziva had been a good friend and Abby a daughter or little sister. Ducky had obviously known her nearly as long as Gibbs had. And he, McGee? McGee sighed. They all had been close to Jenny in some way. And maybe this was the reason that he was able to support Abby; that he could all this, as sad as it was, push away a bit more easily.

It was Ducky and Abby to stand up and receive the flags that were folded to triangles. Because there were no relatives for either Jenny or Jethro, it had been arranged to give the flags to the two persons who were the closest the deceased had to relatives. Abby had been like a daughter to Gibbs, everyone knew that, and it, too, was no secret that Ducky, Gibbs and Shepard had been close friends to each other.

The people around them gasped when Abby staggered and had to be caught and steadied by Tony who had jumped up due to quick-thinking. With an idle glance she took the flag that was given to her, as did Ducky, before they went back to their seats. The young woman clung to the cloth in her hands till the end of the ceremony, not moving, not even blinking.

"I'll take her home," McGee told the others when they had finally left the cemetery, and his friends nodded.

"Call me if you or Abby need any help," Ducky responded, patting the young man lightly on the shoulder. Tim only nodded and left, an arm around Abby, worried watched by the others.

"Can I take you two home?" Tony then asked Ziva and Ducky.

"Thank you, Antony, but I'm here with my own car. Try to get some rest now; I don't think working for Director Vance will be easy." With that and a weak smile, the older man left.

"I'd like to take your offer, Tony. I don't feel like walking back home." DiNozzo acknowledged Ziva's words by nodding, then laid a hand on her small of her back, guiding her to his car.

Chapter 8 - Back To Normality

Slowly, Ziva was getting used to the silence. The silence in the car when they drove to Tony's house. The silence in the apartment when they had finally arrived. They didn't even change a word when Tony offered her something to drink. Normally, she would have liked communicating without words. It was good to have partners, friends, who understood you without the need to say anything. But this time, the silence wasn't good or comfortable. It was only the appalled, stunned loss of words, of their voice in some way.

They sat on his couch for half an eternity, staring into the void her own souls and hearts were feeling right now, hearing nothing around them, not even *seeing* anything. Lost in thoughts, they were somewhere between the moment when they had stepped into the Diner, and the funeral service.

Everything was different now, but they knew that the new director wouldn't give them the chance to get accustomed to the situation, and the fact that their team was falling apart. Maybe they could manage to avoid Ziva getting sent back to Israel. But soon Ducky was going to go on pension and McGee would get a promotion. And Abby... not that Abby wasn't already devastated; Vance would force her to dress normal, to act normal, and to work normal. Whatever normal meant. He would destroy her. And no one would be able to do anything against it.

Ziva, for her part, couldn't decide if she liked or hated the idea of returning home. She loved her homeland, but now that she had found a home and friends here, she didn't want to go. Home is where the heart is, that's what Jenny once had said to her. Jenny. Another reason to stay. She couldn't just leave her friends behind. She needed them, and she knew they needed her. They needed each other to cope with what had happened. She couldn't just let Tony blame himself for what had happened, and she couldn't let Abby lose... herself.

And Gibbs... She owed it to him to take care of his team. She had learned so much from him and she knew that without him, she would have had returned to Israel a long time ago, because she wouldn't have been able to find a place within the team and this country. It had been Jenny who had made her member of the team, but it had been Gibbs who had finally invited her to be part of the family.

A family she had learned to love, maybe even more than her own.

When she looked beside her, she discovered that Tony had fallen asleep. He looked tired and exhausted, in more than one way. She wanted to do something for him, anything; she wanted to take at least a part of the weight off his shoulders. But then, she felt helpless, knowing that she could only see him through when he had to deal with his burden. Carefully she laid a blanket over him and turned to leave when his hand caught hers.

"Please, stay," he whispered, with his eyes still closed. She hesitated for a moment, but then sat down beside him again, leaned against him, and with her head on his shoulder and her hand entwined with his, she, too, closed her eyes. Together, they fell into a dreamless slumber.

"Are you tired?"

"A bit. Doesn't mean I can't..."

"Jethro," Jen warned, looking sternly at him, "you'll stay in bed. Have I made myself clear? And I'll make you some tea."

"Why can't I just sit on the couch? The fireplace will do me good," he tried, and put on his most convincing expression.

"Nope, you'll stay here, at least for today, or more for tonight."

"And what about me and showering? I'm not fit for good society now!" he complained. *Not to talk of the fact that the infusion with saline solution he probably had gotten was taking effect now.* Not that he was going to mention it. Not yet.

The red-haired woman only shook her head.

"Good society? Jethro, we're out in the no-where..."

"You are here. And you are the Director."

"Not anymore," she replied quietly, ignoring the lump in her throat, before continuing, "Alright, Jethro, suggestion: you'll be a good patient," she suppressed a grin when she heard him groan at her words, "and I'll go downstairs and take a shower. After that, I'll try to figure out how to get you clean without getting you hurt even more."

It wasn't that he had any choice. So he just agreed, but not without showing her how discontented he was. Unfortunately for him, her only response was a giggle when she left the room. She wanted to get him something to drink first before she would take the shower. But when she came back around ten minutes later with the teapot, he was fast asleep.

Well, guess I can take a bath then, she mused and smiled slightly. She wouldn't wake him; she knew he needed the rest. The shower or whatever they would do to wash him was nothing that would run away.

She sat down the tea onto the nightstand, and left on tiptoes.

Some minutes later, she glided into the bathtub - and soon she felt alive again. Finally, she could wash away the last days, the events in the Diner, the fact that she and Jethro had nearly died. That she had nearly lost him. And that they were now in Europe again, for a yet unknown undercover assignment. They had been practically thrown into an unfamiliar country, into unfamiliar surroundings; all strange, all... cold.

Fortunately, her bath was anything but cold. It helped her to push away the unpleasant thoughts for now and just relax. She knew there were hard times to come, but she didn't want to think about it at the moment.

While Jen was lost in her wellness bubble bath, Jethro had only taken a little nap; he had decided to close his eyes for a few minutes till Jen would be back with the tea and hadn't intended to fall asleep, but his body had had other plans. When he woke up half an hour later, he noticed the teapot and a cup already standing on his nightstand. Disappointed he realized that he had missed Jen coming back - he had hoped to talk her into taking him downstairs with her.

Besides, he now felt the strong need to follow the call of nature. Forbidden or not, he simply had to get up to go and find the bathroom. Staying in bed and waiting was out of question since he felt like he was going to burst at every minute. And from what Jenny had said, he guessed that he would find his destination downstairs.

While Jethro was carefully walking downstairs, Jenny was completely lost to the sensations the bath was giving her. The perfect form of the bathtub that seemed to cradle her body; the foam that was caressing her skin; the few candles that were enriched with perfume oils, their sweet scent carrying away her mind and senses. She wanted to hold this moment and never let it go again.

She hadn't counted on Jethro, who suddenly practically stumbled into the room, only to stop dead in his tracks when he realized in which situation he was. They looked at each other for endless moments, before Jethro found his voice again.

"Needed to use the bathroom," he explained still paralyzed, eyes wide. Not that he hadn't seen her naked before - though he couldn't see much due to all the foam - but he had never before gotten the chance to get a picture of her lounging in the bathtub.

"There's... a restroom... upstairs, next... to your... room," she stuttered, though she had no idea what made her feel like a schoolgirl that had just been caught naked by a boy. The boy she adored.

He was gone before she could give it any further thought. She heard him walking upstairs again, as she heard him wandering from one room to another up there. She sighed and let herself fall back into the water after she had sat up a bit when he had come in.

That was going to be an interesting time shouldn't they manage to deal with this unresolved tension between them...

An hour later, Jenny still hadn't come to his room again. He had returned to bed and waited, but she had never showed up. He wasn't stupid, he knew that there was this unspoken attraction; it had always been there. The situation an hour ago hadn't made it much better. But he also knew that now wasn't the best time to deal with it, or maybe *solve* it.

He sighed. However, he needed to see her. And so he got up, took a deep breath - as far as it was possible with his injury - and opened his room's door.

When he stepped out of his room, he spotted her immediately. She was standing in front of one of the windows of the living room, wrapped up in a bathrobe that was far too big for her. Silently he watched her from the gallery. Had the sun been shining only around half an hour ago, the outside world was grey now, and it was raining. Lost in thoughts Jen seemed to be hypnotized by the little droplets hitting the window glass.

Carefully he walked down the stairs and stepped beside her. She acknowledged him with a short glance.

"You should be in bed."

"What are you thinking about?" he responded, ignoring her words.

"The team. I can't imagine how it is for them, thinking that we are dead. I wish I could tell them that we are still alive."

"We'll find a way to contact them, trust me," he assured her, although he had barely any idea how to keep the promise.

"How, Jethro? We have no mobile and no computer. The house is observed and we are not allowed to leave it yet. We don't even have money. Tell me if you have an idea what else we could do and I'll try it. But I don't think that there's any way to contact them at the moment." She seemed to be very desperate, something he wasn't used to with her. As long as he had known her, she had never lost hope. But he understood her well – their own people had imprisoned them. They were in a strange country, a strange house and the people who meant most to them thought they were dead.

"We *will* find a way," he repeated, with a strong voice that somehow made her feel better; more confident. "I will not let them think that we're dead." It was the fierceness in his words that led her to believe him. She wanted to believe it. But she also knew that at the moment, their chances were quite bad.

"Let not talk about it now. It was a hard day - or maybe a few hard days," she sighed; she had lost her sense of time due to the traveling through the time zones, "let's go to bed."

"Haven't heard those words in a while," he tried a joke and she smiled slightly, but said nothing. Instead, she took his arm and helped him walk upstairs and back to his room.