

Frozen by Xanthe



Story archived: <http://www.xanthe.org/frozen/>

Story Notes:

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Here is this year's Xanthe Christmas fic offering. It's long, snowy, angsty and schmoopy, and it is my Christmas present to all you kind people who have left me so much lovely feedback to my stories during the year. Thank you so much!

Extract: He places a finger against Tony's neck and feels a faint, erratic pulse. Then he hears a rattling sound and watches as Tony struggles to take a breath; his lungs must be giving up. His chest falls, and there's a long pause – too long – before it rises again.

A rasping sound fills the air as Tony tries to take another breath...and fails. His chest stays still. Unmoving.

"Tony?" Gibbs searches for a pulse again but finds none. "Tony!"

He spends his first Christmas after leaving NCIS alone.

It's mid-October when he buys the old hunting cabin, high up on the mountain. He moves in with just a rucksack full of clothes, a photo of Shannon and Kelly, and a few books.

At the base of the mountain is a supply store for hikers, hunters and campers, but it also serves as the local store for the residents of the mountain; it seems to sell just about everything.

He stocks up on what he needs, loads it into his truck, and drives back up the mountain to his new home.

The place is basic – one bedroom, a big living room, a bathroom, and a small kitchen. There's a large storeroom outside, and he has his own generator.

He's just finished carefully storing away all the lumber he bought when he hears a truck pulling up outside. He straightens, frowning. One of the reasons he bought this place, so high up on the mountain, was because he specifically didn't want any visitors.

He goes outside to find a woman jumping out of a big silver truck. She slams the door shut loudly, turns, and sees him.

"Hey there!" She's got a Southern accent and bright green eyes. "I'm Emmylou Jacobsen. I live beneath you all the way down there." She points back down the mountain. "So I guess I'm your closest neighbour!"

"Gibbs," he growls, taking the hand she's offering and giving it one terse pump of greeting.

She's about five foot two, mid forties, with long red hair tied behind her head in a no-nonsense ponytail.

"That it? You got a first name?"

Great. Just what he needs – a feisty, petite redhead living nearby; he's all too aware of his track record with that particular species.

"Jethro."

She laughs. "Well, I can see why you'd wanna keep that quiet, Jethro."

He instinctively likes her. She's warm and strong, and he can tell just by looking at her that she's got balls of steel.

"I stopped by for coffee. Being neighbourly." She glances into the storeroom and surveys the lumber.

"Or nosy," he grunts.

She laughs again. "That too!" She pushes past him and walks into his house without being invited. He should mind, but somehow he doesn't. He's always been a sucker for women who take no shit from him.

She goes into his kitchen and finds two mugs. She pours them both a cup of coffee from the permanent brew he keeps going.

"Make yourself at home," he mutters caustically as she hands him a cup of the strong, steaming coffee

She shrugs. "Look, sweetheart, I've lived on this mountain for ten years. I know that if you wait for an invite from the strong, silent types this place attracts then you'll be stone cold in your grave before you set one foot inside anyone's house. I just like to cut the crap and get to the point."

"Which is?" He raises an eyebrow.

"Winter. You ready for it? 'Cause once the big snows come you'll be stuck up here all alone for a couple of months, maybe more, depending on how bad the winter is this year."

"I'm counting on it."

She nods. "I thought so – but I had to put my mind at rest by asking. I'd worry about you all alone up here, being a newcomer and all, if I hadn't asked."

He finally gives her a smile, and she does a double take. "Wow, aren't you a handsome fella when you're not being grouchy!"

That even makes him laugh, and she laughs with him.

"I've got enough food to last me six months if need be, and I can hunt if I'm getting low," he tells her.

"You a good shot?" She quirks an enquiring eyebrow, and he gives an amused grunt.

"I get by."

She grins. "'Get by' he says! Your name is Leroy Jethro Gibbs, and you worked for years as a federal agent in some place with a lot of initials instead of a name, and before that you were

a sniper in the Marines. I guess you're also a master of understatement."

It's his turn to quirk an enquiring eyebrow now.

"Like you said, I'm nosy. And I like to know who my neighbours are. Up here, you need to know you can rely on folk in an emergency." She gives him an assessing look. "And I think I can rely on you, Jethro."

"You can." He gives her a nod and then moves in fast, taking her by surprise. "But I came up here for peace and quiet. Don't like the idea of anyone knowing my business. Understand?"

She holds his stare, not looking the least bit intimidated. "Look, I'm nosy but I'm not a blabbermouth. I won't tell a soul who you are, or what you were, if that's how you want it."

"It is."

"It's none of my business why you're here, anyway," she says. "Hell, I know the kinds of people who come and live high up on the mountain - we're all running away from something, aren't we? Hiding ourselves away up here, out of sight!"

Is that what he's doing? Running away? Maybe it is. He's never viewed himself as a coward, but a lot has changed in the last year.

"I just want to make sure you can handle the winter," she continues. "Have you got a satellite phone? When the weather's bad, communications often go down."

"Yup." He nods his head in the direction of the phone.

"Good. Canned food? Warm clothes? Your generator in good working order?"

"Yup to all of that."

"Know how to ski in case it snows so much you can't walk around?"

"Yup."

"Fine...then I've only got one more question."

He quirks an eyebrow again.

"What the hell are you planning on doing alone up here all damn winter?"

He gives a wry little smile. "I'll be fine."

She nods, thoughtfully. "You know, honey, I believe you."

She pushes past him out of the kitchen and walks into the living room...and then stops.

"Wow...you sure do like travelling light!" she exclaims, gazing around the empty room. "Don't you have any furniture?" She glances into the bedroom, which is also completely empty – he's laid out his bedroll on a rug on the floor, just like the old days, back in the Marines. At some point he intends to buy a mattress, but he hasn't gotten around to it yet.

"Nope." He shakes his head.

"I hate to think of you up here all alone without even a chair to sit on!" she exclaims.

He leans against the wall. "Well, you asked me what I was going to do all winter."

She opens her mouth in surprise, and he nods in the direction of the outside store where the lumber is.

"Oh! You're going to make your own furniture?" She looks flabbergasted. "All of it? By hand?"

"Like you said, I could be stuck up here all alone for a couple of months." He shrugs. "So there'll be plenty of time."

"I'm impressed. I like a man who's good with his hands!" She's flirting with him shamelessly now, but he likes her enough not to mind. "At least you've got some rugs even if they are the ugliest rugs I ever saw," she comments, glancing at the rugs he picked up cheap. They'll do the job – he didn't need them to be pretty. "You'd freeze to death on just bare boards when it gets really cold."

She sees the picture of Shannon and Kelly, standing on the floor next to his bed, and she goes over to it and picks it up.

"What a darling little girl! Is she your daughter?"

"Yeah." He can feel his throat constrict, the way it always does when he thinks about Kelly.

"She's a little beauty. Where does she live now? Will she be coming to visit?"

"No." He takes the picture firmly from her hands and puts it back where it was.

She glances at him, a shrewd look in her green eyes. "Does she live with her mom? Did you guys get divorced? Is that why you've come out here all alone?"

"No."

"Oh." There's something about her expression that makes him think that's what happened to her – a bad divorce that sent her running all the way to this place. With that accent, she sure as hell isn't local. "Well, maybe your little girl will come and visit in the spring." She pats his arm.

"Unlikely," he growls. "She's been dead for twenty years."

He doesn't relish the look of shock in her eyes, but he's glad it's out in the open if they're going to be neighbours. It's not information he usually shares, but he's different now.

"Looks like your research on me wasn't thorough enough," he adds, and it comes out more bitterly than he intended.

"Jethro, I'm sorry. Really, I only asked the realtor about your name and your job and any scraps of gossip he had about you. I never..."

She looks at a loss for words, and he's sure that's something she's not used to. He remembers telling the realtor some basic information about himself when the sale was going through and making some small talk about hunting and his days in the Marines. Emmylou hasn't dug more deeply than that.

"It's okay. It was a long time ago."

"And your wife?" she asks softly, glancing at Shannon in the photograph.

"Died in the same...car wreck." There's no way he's going to tell her about Hernandez and that their deaths weren't an accident.

"That's terrible. I'm so sorry." She pats his arm again. "Now look, Jethro, if you need anything, anything at all, then you just holler. I'm some ways down the road but you can't miss me – my house is painted blue!"

He nods, remembering the blue house he passes on his drive up and down the mountain.

"You're the farthest up this old beast of a mountain," she says. "That damn road out there is too steep and too narrow and when the really big snows come, it's impassable. I won't be able to reach you, but we can email and..."

"No computer," he says gruffly.

"On my! You really are a dinosaur!" She shakes her head in disapproval, and it reminds him suddenly and vividly of McGee. He turns away, swallowing hard.

"Never liked the damn things," he mutters. His hands are shaking a little, and he hopes she'll go soon.

"Oh, you just need to be shown how to use one properly."

"No, I damn well don't," he growls. His hands are shaking harder now, and he needs her to leave. "Look, I didn't ask you to come here, nosing around. I came up here to get away from that kind of crap."

She looks at him for a long moment, and he knows she's seen his shaking hands. He struggles to control himself and not give in to it.

She nods. "You're right. I've overstayed my welcome. I like plain talkers, Jethro; you and I will get along just fine."

She leans forward and presses a little kiss to the side of his face. It's far too familiar, far too soon for that kind of gesture, but somehow it warms him a little. He knows she has a good heart; she means well.

"I'll visit again soon. And if you want to call on me, you know where I am."

She casts another little glance at the photograph of Shannon and Kelly and then turns and leaves.

He's glad when she's gone, and he can stop trying to control it. Controlling it doesn't work, but he hates surrendering to it all the same.

He waits until he hears her truck pulling away, and then he allows the shaking to consume him. Sometimes he's not sure what sets it off. It can be the smallest thing – or nothing he can identify at all. This time he knows it was thinking about McGee. It was only a brief moment, but it brought back memories.

The waves of anxiety sweep through his body, making him sweat. He can feel the moisture dripping down his face, hanging on the edge of his unshaven jaw and then falling onto his shirt.

He gets down on his knees and wraps his arms across his belly, his entire body shaking, and that's when the flashback starts.

He's in the elevator, coffee in his hand. It's late evening, and he's returning from a meeting at Quantico. Now he's back at the Navy Yard, riding the elevator up to the squad room like he's done a thousand times before.

The explosion is like nothing he's heard in his life, not even when he was blown up in Kuwait. The metal walls of the elevator take most of the shock, but he's blown backwards. His coffee spills out everywhere, scalding his hand, and he comes to rest on his back against the far wall. He's lucky that the elevator took the brunt of the blast – and that its cable held firm, instead of sending him hurtling to his death.

He hears the sound of the explosion over and over again, reverberating through his head in the immediate aftermath. Everything has gone dark...and for a long moment there's silence, made all the more shocking by the huge bang that preceded it. And then it's broken by a sound he'll never forget: a scream of agony.

The shaking subsides. Gibbs crouches there for a long time, breathing heavily, waiting for it

to pass completely. He has no control over the flashbacks; they seem entirely random. One minute he can be pouring himself a mug of coffee, and the next he's on his knees on the floor, sobbing like a baby.

He hates the feeling of weakness he gets after one of these episodes. He sits down, back against the wall, and wipes a hand across his face. It comes away covered in the sweat that's pouring off him. He's still shaking a little, but he hauls himself to his feet and forces himself to walk out to the storeroom. He won't let this beat him. It might have him by the balls right now, but it won't win.

He grabs some lumber and takes it back into the cabin. Then he goes and gets his toolkit.

Working wood always did calm him. It's the best thing he can do to get his head straight again.

He thinks about what to work on first and decides, after his conversation with Emmylou, that the bed is his most pressing need.

He thought up a design a week ago and drew a rough pencil sketch on the back of an envelope. He retrieves it now and studies it. Then he turns back to the wood and strokes it with his fingers; he's starting to feel better already.

It makes a change to be working on something other than a boat. He likes it. Emmylou stops by occasionally over the next few weeks to check on his progress, and it reminds him of all the unexpected visits he used to get in his basement from various members of his team while he was working on one of his boats down there. He enjoys breaking off to have a mug of coffee with her. He doesn't feel lonely but all the same, some human contact is nice.

The snows come, not so heavy that the road is impassable, but he can see how it gets that way. Gibbs likes the way the snow blankets the ground, making everything seem muffled and even quieter than usual.

He finishes the bed on Christmas Eve. It's big and solid, and he's given it the kind of fancy details he never really bothered with when he was building boats. He's carved little oak leaves and acorns into the headboard, and finds he likes them more than he'd expected.

Emmylou arrives just as he finishes assembling it in the bedroom.

"Looks good. When you said you were gonna hand-make all your furniture, I admit I was sceptical." She grins at him.

"Oh ye of little faith."

She helps him haul his new mattress onto the bed, and then he sits down, testing it out. It feels sturdy and well made, and he's proud of it.

Emmylou sits down beside him and gives the bed an approving pat. "You did good, Jethro!"

Only one thing though..."

"What?" He's pretty sure that the bed is as damn near perfect as can be.

"It's a mighty big bed for one person. Were you expecting company up here, Jethro? Have you got some fancy woman you never told me about?"

Her green eyes are flashing with laughter. He doesn't want to remember another pair of green eyes that always flashed with laughter. His mood changes, becoming sullen, and he gets up and looks out of the window.

"Snow's getting heavy," he says.

"Yeah – right on time. Usually gets this way around Christmas. It's not so bad where I live, further down the mountain. The road's better down there so we usually only get cut off once or twice in the winter, but up here..." Emmylou gets up and glances out of the window too. "I guess I'd better be going home, or you'll be stuck with me all winter."

She gives a rueful smile that suggests she wouldn't mind that and presses a kiss to his cheek, the way she always does when she says goodbye. She gently brushes the hair away from his forehead and traces the scar there with her fingertips. He lets her. He isn't sure why.

"Merry Christmas, Jethro. You enjoy the winter, y'hear?" she says softly. "I'll see you again in a couple of months."

She goes over to the door, then pauses and looks back. "That is one mighty fine bed you've built there!" she says, and then she's gone.

He piles the bedding onto the new bed and sleeps in it that night for the first time.

There's a storm during the night and outside the wind blows through the trees, making all kinds of strange sounds. Maybe that's why he wakes up at just gone 3 a.m., covered in sweat, panting hard.

He's back in the elevator, listening to the sound of someone screaming in pain, coming from the direction of the squad room. He knows immediately that a bomb has exploded, and his first concern is to see if he can help the other survivors.

He checks himself out, but he seems to have got off relatively lightly. He can feel blood running down his face from a gash in his forehead, but it isn't life threatening. The screaming from the squad room continues, slicing through the air with pained intensity...and then suddenly it stops.

He hauls himself through the service hatch in the elevator ceiling and from there he's able to drag himself into the squad room.

There are no lights and the place is in darkness. He wonders if any of his people were still at

their desks when the bomb went off. They were wrapping up a case so they might have gone home...but he does always insist that they file their paperwork before clocking off, so it's possible they were still finishing up their reports. He hopes they're gone. He hopes this is the one time they didn't stay late to keep him off their backs, and that they've left the building.

He fleetingly considers the reasons why the bomb went off so late – it would have caught more people if whoever had planted it had set it to detonate during the morning work hours. Maybe they had. Maybe it failed to go off then. Or maybe someone else was the target...wasn't Vance due to have a meeting with SecNav and the Director of Homeland Security this evening? That meeting had been scheduled to take place at the Pentagon, but had been switched just a couple of days ago to the Navy Yard. Who knew about that switch?

The investigator in him is curious, but he doesn't have time to think that through because he needs to find out if any of his team has been hurt. There is a bank of acrid smoke in the building, chokingly thick. He gets down on his belly and crawls in the direction of his desk. He can feel the hot air burning in his lungs, making it hard to breathe.

He comes across something lying in his path. It's a body. He pauses...it could be one of his people. He places a finger on its neck. No pulse. Dead.

He has to know if it's one of his team. The body is face down, but he can just about make out that it's a man...in a suit. Could be either McGee or...

Tony.

He isn't prepared for the stabbing sensation he feels in his gut when he thinks it might be Tony. It can't be Tony. Not after all this time. Not after working together, side by side, for so many years. Not Tony. Anyone but Tony. He knows that they're all his team, and he should care about them all equally, but the truth is that he doesn't. It's not a truth you discover until a moment like this.

He forces himself to heave the body onto its back and peer at its face in the darkness.

It's not Tony. It isn't McGee, either, but he can't think beyond Not Tony. The relief is palpable.

He can hear the rasping sound of his own laboured breathing. He lies in the bed, gazing sightlessly at the ceiling, waiting for the after-effects of the flashback to pass. When the worst of it is over, he goes to the bathroom and grabs a towel to wipe the sweat off his body. Then he gets himself a mug of coffee and pauses to look out of the window. The storm is in full force, and it's blowing up a gale out there.

He climbs back into bed, grabs one of the books beside it, puts his glasses on, and starts reading.

It takes a couple of hours before he feels calm enough to sleep again. He wishes he could force his body to obey him, the way he has for so many years, but that's changed now, like

so many things.

It's dawn on Christmas morning when he finally gets to sleep again.

The storm is still blowing when he wakes up a few hours later. He pulls on his bathrobe and walks into the living room. He throws a couple of logs onto the fire to get it going, relishing the solitude.

"You have a lot of issues to work through," that damn idiot of a shrink told him a few months ago, but he prefers to think of it as listening to his gut. And his gut told him he needed to go to ground and find a place where he could have complete peace and quiet. That's sure as hell what he's got up here.

It's a strange kind of Christmas Day, but then Christmas always was a difficult time of year for him. He glances at the photo of Shannon and Kelly and smiles at them.

"Semper fi," he says to the photograph, and they smile back at him, caught forever in that one moment in the past, in their back yard at Alexandria. Shannon has her arms around Kelly, and they're always smiling, forever young and happy.

He spends that first Christmas after leaving NCIS all alone in his cabin high up in the mountains, and when the thaw comes, it brings Emmylou with it.

"You survived then?" She sticks her head around the door and then whistles as she surveys the living room, which is now filled with a small couch, a dining table, and two dining chairs. "Wow, you did have a good winter!" She steps inside and goes over to the dining table. "Two chairs?" She raises an eyebrow.

"Well, you never know when someone is going to stop by." He kisses her cheek, genuinely happy to see her after the months of solitude, and she smiles a bright, happy smile.

"It's a good thing I bought us both a belated Christmas dinner then!" She points to the basket she's carrying with a wink.

She's brought a side of beef that makes his mouth water just looking at it. She bustles around the kitchen, talking to him, telling him all about her winter. He stands there, leaning against the wall, letting her chatter wash over him.

When the beef is done she removes it from the oven, and the aroma of roasting meat fills the room. Suddenly, without any warning, he's back in the past again.

He pushes the corpse out of the way and crawls over to where he's sure Tony's desk should be. It's been blown completely away – he can dimly see it sticking out of the broken window to the left of where Tony usually sits.

"Tony?" he calls, his voice sounding croaky in the smoke-filled room.

Silence.

"Tony – you here?" he asks again, louder this time. He hears movement and makes for a bank of rubble and the remains of the filing cabinet that used to stand beside Tony's desk.

There's a body there, half sticking out of the rubble, legs trapped. As he watches, the body moves. He crawls over there as quickly as he can.

"Tony?" He traces his fingers over a torn shirt, and hears a low, gasping moan of pain.

"Boss?" The sound is so faint he can barely make it out, but there's no mistaking the voice.

"Tony!"

His eyes are becoming accustomed to the dark, or maybe the smoke is clearing a little. He can just about make out Tony's smoke-blackened face through the gloom. He leans in close, trying to assess the situation and find out how badly Tony is injured.

"How ya doing, DiNozzo? Where does it hurt?"

"Everywhere?" There's a hint of a twisted little smile on Tony's lips. Gibbs glances at Tony's legs – they're completely trapped beneath the rubble – it'll take more than just him to haul Tony out.

"Who else was in here with you when the bomb went off?" Gibbs asks.

"Bomb...that what it was?" Tony's eyes are hazy and unfocussed.

Gibbs grabs his chin. "Stay with me, DiNozzo. Who else was here? Ziva? McGee?"

Tony's tiny shake of his head is almost imperceptible. "Gone..." His lips are so dry and cracked that the word barely emerges. "Home."

"You should have gone too, DiNozzo. What the hell were you playing at, staying so late?"

Tony gives a rasping little laugh and a bubble appears on his lips. "Report to finish...Boss. You'd have had...my ass... if I'd left before...it was done."

Tony's right about that. Gibbs tries to figure out where the worst of his injuries are but it's too damn dark, and Tony is barely conscious enough to be much help.

He leans forward, checking down Tony's body for any obvious signs of bleeding. He can smell something...something almost familiar, like roasting meat...and then he sees Tony's hand and arm, burnt red and black...

Gibbs comes to, to find Emmylou still talking away. The smell of roasting meat fills his nostrils, and he doesn't have time to make an excuse. He runs outside and gets there just in

time before throwing up, spectacularly, all over the slushy remains of the snow in his yard.

"Hey...my cooking's never had this effect on anyone before," a voice behind him says, and he can feel Emmylou stroking his back comfortingly as he hurls again.

He doesn't know why it's affected him so much this time. He's cooked meat for himself plenty of times without this happening.

When he's done throwing up, he straightens, pushes her away, and walks unsteadily back into the cabin. He goes into the bathroom, shuts the door firmly behind him, and then goes over to the basin and splashes cold water on his face. He's still shaking, and he doesn't want to go out there again yet. He spends some time brushing his teeth, willing his body to quit letting him down.

Finally he's composed enough to go back out into the living room. He sits down on the couch, and Emmylou sits down beside him, not saying a word.

He doesn't exactly know how it happens, but one minute she's leaning towards him, and the next she's kissing him. He doesn't push her away. Maybe it's easier than explaining anything, or maybe he figures it was always going to happen, so they might as well get it out of the way.

Whatever the reason, he finds himself kissing her back. He pushes her back onto the couch, his fingers sliding under her sweater. She laughs into the kiss and puts her hand in the centre of his chest, shoving him away.

"Now hold your horses, cowboy! If this is going where I think it's going, then I am not making out on a couch like a teenager. No offence, Jethro, but you made this couch too small for that!"

That's fine by him. He's never liked making love anywhere but in a bed anyway. She gets up and pulls him into the bedroom, and the next couple of hours are lost in the blessed distraction of skin on skin.

He loses himself in the familiarity of a curtain of red hair sweeping across his face as he makes love to her. He knows that he's just looking for a way to regain some trust in his own body, and that she's...convenient. He'd feel bad about it, but he knows she's using him too, in her own way.

Making love is something he was always good at, and he starts to feel better as he brings them both to climax. In this, at least, he knows that his body won't let him down.

Later, she wraps herself up in his bathrobe, and they eat the dinner that's now gone cold but tastes good all the same.

When she leaves, he sees the hopeful glow in her eyes that he's seen countless times before, and he hates the fact that he already knows how this will end when it's only just got

started.

Spring and summer on the mountain are beautiful. He often goes out walking. He swims, naked, in the deep, clear lake nearby. The water is freezing cold, even in mid-summer, but he likes how invigorated it makes him feel. Sometimes he hunts, but he always eats what he kills. He's never understood those who only do it for sport.

The mountain is busy in the summer. Tourists, campers, hikers, hunters...he can't go for a walk without bumping into someone out there. He misses the solitude of the winter months, but he's polite enough to the people he encounters. He's not yet ready to face the world again, but he finds that he doesn't mind human company as much as he thought he would. He likes hanging out at the store too, talking to the old guys who can be found perpetually playing chess on the porch, and to Max, the owner.

He sees Emmylou occasionally. Sometimes she comes over to his place for dinner followed by sex, and sometimes he goes over to hers for the same. They don't have a routine – he doesn't want to get into one, and she's not asking for one. She doesn't ask for anything save what he's prepared to give, and that's why it lasts as long as it does.

Her place is a lot more homely than his. She thinks his place lacks a woman's touch, but he likes it just the way it is: Sparse. Tidy.

Home.

He's surprised to find he's starting to view it that way; he thought it would take longer.

He doesn't let her move anything in – he wants to keep it as his place. It's a lot like whatever it is that they have between them. He doesn't let her in there, either.

In that respect it's just like every other relationship he's had since Shannon died. He's lost count of the number of feisty redheads who took up the challenge that is Leroy Jethro Gibbs.

They all, in some way, thought they could change him. They moved in on him, full of energy and a belief in their own powers of attraction. Each one thought that she was the one who could chip away at that ice cold heart of his, thaw him out, and make him her own. They all believed that they would succeed where others before them had failed. And they were all wrong.

They slept in his bed, dined at his table, and some of them even took his name and moved into his house, but they all had something in common and it wasn't just the red hair: They all eventually gave up and left. And he never tried to stop them.

Emmylou comes up for dinner the week before Christmas, a few days before the big snow is forecast. He can see the unasked question in her eyes all through the meal, and he knows what's coming.

After dinner she goes over to the window and looks out. It snowed a few days ago, but the road isn't impassable yet.

"Won't be long before you're cut off again," she says.

"Yup." He gets up and starts clearing away the plates.

She clears her throat and then turns to look at him. "So...I was thinking...there's no need for you to be alone during the big freeze. You could come down to my place...or I could stay here."

He puts the plates down and considers his words carefully, but she's already seen the answer in his eyes.

"Or not," she says quickly. "It's just...I need someone in my life who's gonna be *in* my life, Jethro, not just passing through."

"I understand."

"So, I'm saying, if we aren't spending the winter together, that when the spring comes you're more than welcome to visit – but the bedroom door will remain shut."

"That's more than fair, Emmylou. And you're right – you do deserve better."

"I didn't say that..." she begins, but he goes over there and pulls her into a hug.

"You really do," he whispers into her red hair. "I'm not for you, Em. I never was."

She draws back and looks at him. "Oh, Jethro, I knew that the minute I met you. Whatever happened to you, it screwed you up bad."

She's seen him at his most vulnerable; shaking, puking, and screaming out the nightmares, but he never did tell her what they were about. He knows she's jumped to her own conclusions.

She glances over his shoulder at the photo of Shannon and Kelly that he's placed on the shelves he recently made.

"You know, sweetheart, you really do have to get over them one day," she tells him.

"I know that." He gives a rueful little half-smile because the truth is he kind of has, and he never thought that would happen.

"Then you need to get on and start living, 'cause life's passing you by. What the hell are you waiting for, Jethro?"

Her eyes are puzzled, but he can't give her the answer. He can barely give it to himself. He

just leans in and gently kisses her cheek.

She draws him in and holds him for a moment, her hands making little sweeping motions over his back. Then she clears her throat and pulls away, wiping her fingers over her eyes.

"Well, I'll be going then, honey. I'll see you next year. You take good care of yourself, y'hear?"

When she's gone, he finds he doesn't really miss her at all.

A few days later, he's making his final stop at the store before the big snow arrives when one of the locals comes in with a sack and puts it on Max's counter. It's sodden, crusted with ice...and Gibbs notices that it's moving.

"What the hell have you got there, Cliff?" Max asks, prodding the sack suspiciously.

"Just fished it out of the river," the old guy replies. "Five of 'em in there. They were all dead except this one, poor little critters."

Max opens the sack and pulls out a tiny, wet mound of half-frozen black and tan fur. The puppy moves its head and gazes around with bleary blue eyes. It can't be more than two or three weeks old.

"Don't suppose it'll last much longer," Cliff says. "But I thought someone might want it. I can't keep it – Sarah can't stand the smell of dogs."

"I'll take it," one of the hunters says. He's a big guy, taller than Gibbs, and has enough weaponry to take out a small army rather than a few wild animals up on the mountain. "It'll make good bait."

His face breaks into a macabre grin, and he grabs the puppy by the scruff of its neck. It lets out a pathetic little squeaking sound, and Gibbs isn't aware of making a decision, or of striding forward, but the next thing he knows he's caught the guy's wrist in his hand and is clamping down hard with his fingers.

"Drop it," he orders. "It's mine."

"What the fuck...?" The guy turns, clearly looking for a fight. Gibbs doesn't move. He just faces him down with utter stillness and a look in his eyes that dares the bastard to make his day by starting a fight. The hunter wilts. "Okay, okay. Let go of my damn wrist. Jesus!"

Gibbs releases his grasp, and the hunter drops the puppy onto the counter and immediately cradles his wrist to his chest. Gibbs picks up the pup, opens his jacket, and sticks the little creature inside against the warmth of his chest. He can feel its cold, damp fur through his shirt. He grabs some extra things he'll need for the puppy and throws them on the counter along with his other supplies. Nobody says a word as he pays for it all and then strides out to his truck.

When he gets home, he wraps the puppy up in a blanket and puts it in front of the fire. He heats up some milk and improvises a teat, then picks up the puppy and sits it on a towel on his lap, trying to feed it. At first, the puppy seems more dead than alive, but he manages to get some food down it.

He very much doubts it'll last the night, but he rouses himself every couple of hours to force more warm milk down the pup's throat.

He's surprised when he wakes up in the morning to find that the puppy is warm, wriggling, and very much alive. The little creature proves the point by peeing on the towel. The pee seeps through to his pants, and Gibbs gives an amused grunt and looks down into a pair of curious blue eyes.

"Guess we're stuck with each other then," he says.

The pup yawns and stretches, and Gibbs rolls it onto its back to discover it's a boy. He strokes the puppy's tummy gently with his finger, and the little creature gives a sigh of contentment and promptly falls asleep again. Gibbs is not so much of a bastard that he can bring himself to move him, even though he really wants to go and change his pants.

When the big snow comes a few days later, it's just him and the pup, sitting by the fire, waiting out the winter.

Shannon always said he was good with small creatures, and it's true. They like him, and he likes them. It doesn't matter if it's babies, toddlers, cats or dogs. They just take to him. Maybe it's because of his capacity for stillness, or the fact that he doesn't coo over them or sentimentalise them. He takes them for what they are, and they love him for it.

He decides not to name the puppy until he's sure he's going to make it. If the puppy thrives, then Gibbs is sure the right name will come along without him having to think about it too hard.

Slowly, day-by-day, the puppy responds to his tender care. He gets bigger, his tummy bulging like a little barrel, and begins chewing on Gibbs's fingers when he's being fed. Before long, he's been weaned and is tearing around the place like a lunatic.

Gibbs spends his second Christmas day on the mountain all alone save for the company of one small puppy.

After lunch, he's sitting reading in the living room when it occurs to him that the puppy has been suspiciously quiet for a long time. He goes into his bedroom to find him sitting on the bed, chewing on one of his slippers. The puppy looks up at him with an expression of such combined devotion and mischief in his eyes that it reminds him vividly of someone else...

And he's instantly back in the squad room in the aftermath of the bomb.

He's fairly sure Tony has internal injuries, and who the hell knows what condition his legs are in beneath the rubble. Gibbs can't do anything for him though; Tony needs an ER doctor and proper medical aid. He needs to be rescued.

Gibbs peers through the smoky squad room, trying to see if there are any other people still alive in here. It's late so it's unlikely many people were around when the bomb went off, and he can only see the body he encountered earlier. He glances up at the dangling staircase, hanging loose in midair, wondering if Vance, SecNav and the Director of Homeland Security made it out of there alive. Judging by the damage up there, it doesn't look likely.

He's sure rescue is on its way – an explosion that big hasn't gone unnoticed - but it occurs to him that if his cell phone is working he can at least tell them where to look for survivors. He pulls it out of his pocket – it seems unharmed, and he's almost hopeful until he sees the 'no service' message. He bites back a curse and stuffs it back into his pocket again.

He could try and find a way out of here. At least then he could find someone and bring them back here to help Tony.

"Tony..." He looks down to find that Tony has lost consciousness again. He pats his face firmly. "DiNozzo!" he says, in a louder voice.

Tony's eyelids flicker. "Boss? Did I...fall...asleep again?"

Gibbs can hear the rasping sound of his breathing – and that's when he remembers Tony's plague-scarred lungs. It must be twice as hard for Tony to breathe in all this smoky air as it is for him, and he's finding it hard enough.

"Tony...I need to go get help."

Tony's eyes grow a little dimmer. "Leaving me?"

"I gotta go tell them where you are. You'll be fine. I won't be long. Okay?"

"Okay...Boss." Tony closes his eyes again.

Gibbs is about to crawl away when he hesitates. Logic tells him this is the best thing to do, but his gut isn't happy with his decision. His gut says that if he leaves now he'll never see Tony alive again.

He struggles with himself and then steels himself to do it. If he doesn't go for help then Tony won't last long anyway, and he's in such a bad way he probably won't even notice Gibbs has gone. He begins crawling across the floor but the further away from Tony he goes, the more his gut protests.

He gets as far as the elevator when he decides to follow his gut instead of his head and turns around and goes back.

At first he wonders if Tony is dead. He's so still. He places a finger against Tony's neck and feels a faint, erratic pulse. Then he hears a rattling sound and watches as Tony struggles to take a breath; his lungs must be giving up. His chest falls and there's a long pause – too long – before it rises again.

A rasping sound fills the air as Tony tries to take another breath...and fails. His chest stays still. Unmoving.

"Tony?" Gibbs searches for a pulse again but finds none. "Tony!"

The puppy gazes at him curiously as he lies on the floor, shaking and gasping for air. He can hear himself sobbing and wishes the sound would shut the fuck up; it's so damn irritating. His chest hurts as the sobs emerge from what feels like the bottom of his soul.

The puppy gets up and half jumps, half falls off the bed on his little legs and comes towards him. He nudges his head against Gibbs's and gently licks the tears off his face. He gives an interrogatory little whine when Gibbs doesn't respond, and Gibbs wishes he could talk to the puppy, pick him up and tell him it's okay, but he can't do anything but lie there, shaking, the sweat pouring off him.

Eventually the puppy settles down beside his belly and nestles against him. It helps. He appreciates the warmth and the company and eventually the shaking subsides, leaving him as weak and wrung out as he always is after one of these attacks.

He manages to get up and crawl into the bed and a little while later the puppy follows, lying down on the pillow beside him where he proceeds to wash Gibbs's face with his little puppy tongue.

It's been a bad one, and Gibbs sleeps for the rest of the day. When he wakes up he wraps his arms around the puppy, holds him close, and kisses his soft black and brown head.

"Thanks," he mutters, and the puppy snuggles against him happily.

When the puppy is about three months old, Gibbs takes him outside for the first time. There's still some snow underfoot, but it isn't too deep. At first the little creature shivers when confronted by the outside world, but he soon throws himself into the snow, jumping around like a crazy thing. Within minutes he has dug several big holes in the snow in Gibbs's yard, pausing only to look up at Gibbs with a very pleased expression in his eyes.

"Digger then," Gibbs decides. It's a good name for a dog.

In the summer he builds Digger a kennel, which Digger takes one look at and then turns his back on. The dog runs indoors, jumps on the bed, and lies down there instead. Gibbs doesn't blame him. He likes having the pup in the bed beside him anyway.

Digger grows into a mid-sized dog, stocky and full of energy. He's stubborn as all hell, but that's a trait Gibbs can appreciate. Hell, it's probably what kept Digger alive in the first place

when all his littermates died.

He enjoys training the dog, and Digger soon learns who is boss, just like every other living thing that Gibbs has trained.

Digger comes with him when he goes out walking, fishing, hunting or swimming. It's a good life for a dog, and Digger thrives.

When Gibbs first sees Emmylou again after the winter she's with one of the new season's hunters, an older guy who looks at her like she's every good thing he's ever known all rolled into one. Gibbs is glad for her; she deserves it.

She wraps him up in her usual warm hug and then pulls back and looks at him.

"You still waiting, Jethro?"

"Looks like it, Em," he replies, with a wry shrug.

"Well, I hope it turns up soon, whatever it is you're waiting for."

He turns away at that so she won't see what's in his eyes.

He spends the summer building an extension to the storeroom to use as a workroom. There isn't as much space in the living room these days, with the table and chairs and couch, and he has plans to make something more challenging this winter.

Last winter he made a closet for the bedroom and enjoyed putting more decorative features on it, like the acorns and oak leaves he carved into the bed, and this winter he wants to build a really fancy dresser with several intricate details that will test his skills to the limit. He's bought several books on the subject and is relishing the thought of it.

He makes a start on it when the first snow falls. It's early this year, and the big snow won't be far behind. The road up the mountain isn't yet impassable but it won't be long before he's cut off for the winter.

His new workroom is cosy. He's built a wooden bed for Digger to sleep in, with a blanket thrown inside, and placed it in front of the little electric heater he's brought out here for warmth. Digger seems happy to be wherever he is, and happily noses through the sawdust and wood shavings for off-cuts to play with when he isn't dozing in his bed.

Gibbs lays out his plans for the dresser, humming softly to himself as he works. He gets out the lumber, selects the piece he wants to work on, and fastens it in place.

A few hours later, he's smoothing his sander along a stretch of wood when a bead of sweat falls on it, and then another, and he notices that his hands are shaking. He puts the sander down and moves away from the wood, trying to figure out why the hell this is happening.

Maybe he let his mind wander back to the past, or maybe it's the sound of the high winds picking up speed outside, or maybe nothing has set it off this time.

He crouches down with his back against the wall as the shaking consumes him, and is only dimly aware of Digger coming over to sit next to him when the flashback hits.

He's kneeling beside Tony's body, looking down on his burnt hand and smoke-blackened skin.

"No way. There's no fucking way I'm letting you go this easy, DiNozzo," he growls.

He puts his hands on Tony's chest and begins doing compressions. Then he pauses, pulls Tony's head back, holds his nose shut, and presses his mouth against Tony's lips. He breathes into Tony's mouth, willing his body to accept the air and for his damaged lungs to start breathing again.

His world closes in to that tiny point in time. He's pressing on Tony's chest, then breathing into his mouth, pressing on his chest, breathing into his mouth...

And that mouth suddenly moves under his, coughing, and he draws back, wiping the sweat out of his eyes. Tony's breath is coming in those ragged, rasping gasps again, and he turns his head and looks at Gibbs.

"You...still...here? Thought...you'd gone...Boss."

"No, Tony. I'm still here. I won't leave you again," he promises, sitting down beside Tony and cradling his head in his lap.

He is so damn glad he listened to his gut instead of his head. If he'd left then Tony would have slipped away, and they'd have only found his corpse when he finally led the emergency services back here.

He strokes Tony's hair gently, trying to soothe him, willing him to stay alive. If he can just stay alive until help gets here, then Gibbs is sure everything will be okay.

He knows McGee and Ziva are safe, but he wonders about Abby and Ducky. He hopes they weren't here. He hopes that it was only him and Tony who were caught in the blast. But he can't think about them right now. He can't help them. He can only think about Tony, lying here, the air rattling in his lungs like every single breath is his last.

"You'd better damn well keep breathing, DiNozzo," he orders. "You are not gonna die on me."

"Wouldn't...dare...boss..." Tony jokes feebly.

They're silent for a long time. Then Gibbs moves his leg to relieve the cramp that's built up, and Tony gives a groan of pain at the movement. Gibbs remembers the agonised screaming he heard when he was in the elevator, and he suspects that came from Tony too.

"It's okay...ssh...just moved my leg..."

He tries to soothe Tony with his fingers, stroking his hair again, settling him back down, and he sees Tony staring up at him through the gloom. There's something strange about the expression in Tony's eyes, and it takes him awhile to realise what it is. Then it hits him: Tony isn't hiding anymore. There's no clown's mask in place. No laughing, stupid, idiot Tony, always angling for a head-slap and hiding his true feelings behind that deft smoke and mirrors act he's so good at. The pain has torn Tony's mask away and left him defenceless.

"Think I'm...dying, Boss," Tony whispers.

"No you're damn well not," Gibbs says fiercely.

"Am. So...should say...love you, Boss."

"Love ya too, Tony." It's too quick, too glib, and seems somehow impersonal, like he's speaking of the love of friendship and a long, close working relationship and nothing more.

Tony reaches up his good hand, grabs hold of Gibbs's shirt, and pulls him down.

"No," he says firmly, and his eyes are dark with something deeper than pain. "Mean it," he says. "I love you. Always have."

"Yeah, I know, Tony. I know."

And he does. He remembers all the little looks Tony's given him over the years, the devoted loyalty, and the sense of closeness that neither of them ever wanted to be called on.

Tony 's always understood him like nobody else, except Shannon. And neither of them ever said anything, all these years, because...well, now he's not sure why. Because of their gender, their careers, their pride, their sheer stupid masculine pig-headedness, their refusal to acknowledge what was going on between them, their lack of understanding of their own emotions and desires, or any one of a number of other reasons...or all of them combined.

"I mean it too," he replies, because he can't let Tony die without hearing this. "I love you, Tony."

Tony's eyes seem to brighten momentarily. He looks relieved that it's finally been said, as if a great burden has been lifted from him.

Then he loosens his grip on Gibbs's shirt, and a second later he stops breathing again.

Gibbs snaps back into the present to find Digger licking his face, whining softly. He lies there quietly for a while, stroking Digger's head, and he only gets up when he hears the truck outside.

He goes out, forcing himself to walk straight and steady and not hang onto the wall for support.

Emmylou is getting out of her truck as he reaches the door.

"Hey, Jethro! I thought you might like a tree this year!" she hollers, and he sees there's a big pine tree fastened to the back of her truck.

"Nope." He shakes his head, but she dismisses the word with a wave of her hand.

"Sure you do! Tom cut down a whole bunch of them to sell in town. Had a few left over, so I thought I'd bring this one up to you."

"What the hell will I do with a tree in the house?" Gibbs asks. "Aren't there enough of 'em all around it without dragging one inside too?"

"Scrooge!" She ignores his protests and insists on pulling the tree off the back of the truck and then heaves it into the house where she leaves it propped up against the living room wall.

"I haven't got anything to decorate it with," he says.

"There's still time for you to drive down to the store and buy some tinsel before the big snows come," she chides.

"There's time, yeah, but I'm not gonna do it."

She just grins at him and kisses his cheek. "Merry Christmas, Jethro!" she says, and then she pauses to pat Digger before striding out of the house, getting back in her truck, and driving away.

It snows a couple of days later. He stays in the house with Digger and when it stops falling they both go out to inspect the landscape. It's deep but not so deep he can't walk around out there, and Digger immediately does what he always does – he goes around digging some holes. He always seems to feel happier once he's dug a few holes.

Gibbs gets his axe and begins chopping logs for firewood. He's laid in a good store for the winter but he likes to keep it topped up, and he enjoys the exercise. He soon works up a fine sweat and pauses for a moment to take off his sweater and hang it on the door handle, and then he returns to work.

He's got a big pile of kindling stacked up when a dot in the distance catches his eye, way over on the horizon. At first he thinks it's a bird, because why the hell would anyone be walking around up here? It keeps moving, a blur of navy blue and green. He watches as the dot comes closer...and closer...

It isn't a bird. It's a man.

Digger starts barking, but Gibbs silences him with a firm "ssh". He puts down his axe, grabs his sweater, and pulls it on over his shirt.

When he looks up again the man is much closer. It's hard work tramping through the snow, and his breath is steaming the air in front of him.

It isn't just any man.

The recognition catches in Gibbs's throat, and he can only just stand there as the man comes closer. It's been nearly two and a half years, and he wasn't sure this day would ever come.

Closer...closer...closer.

They're close enough now to call out to each other.

Closer, closer, closer.

Close enough now to see each other's faces. Close enough to smile, to say something, to acknowledge each other in some way.

They don't do any of those things. Gibbs just stands there, Digger by his side, and the man just keeps on walking towards them, his gaze fixed on Gibbs, his face unsmiling.

Gibbs doesn't know what to expect. He isn't sure what will happen when the man finally reaches him, and he braces himself for anything from a hug to a punch. Either would be entirely appropriate.

Beside him, Digger's ears are flicking wildly as he picks up on the tension in the air. Gibbs isn't surprised – you could cut it with a knife.

He stands his ground as the man takes his last few strides through the snow and then stands there, right in front of him, so close he could touch him. He doesn't.

They look at each other for a long moment. Then, finally, the man speaks.

"You are a fucking bastard."

"Yeah." There's no point denying that. It's true. "You track me down and come all this way just to tell me that, Tony?"

"No." Tony glares at him. "I tracked you down a long time ago. If I'd wanted to come all this way to tell you that I'd have done it before now."

"So why are you here?"

Tony's eyes flicker, and Gibbs realises a different mask is in place now. Not the clown, but someone a good deal darker. He's not surprised, but he's sure this mask will be as hard to see behind as the last one; he doesn't expect to get answers any time soon.

Tony is thinner than when Gibbs last saw him, and his hair is shorter and spiky. Apart from that, he hasn't changed much. Gibbs stands there, waiting for a reply he knows he's not going to get.

At that moment, Digger presses his nose inquisitively into Tony's crotch. Gibbs winces, but it does at least break the impasse. He orders Digger away with a click of his fingers.

"You've got a dog," Tony says expressionlessly.

"Yup."

"What's he called?"

"Digger."

"Why?"

Gibbs rolls his eyes. "'Cause he likes to dig. Why the hell d'you think, DiNozzo? Now are you coming inside for coffee, or did you climb all the way up here just to stand outside talking about my damn dog?"

He turns and goes inside, not looking back. He pours two coffees from the pot and turns to find Tony standing in the doorway.

"How did you get up here anyway?" Gibbs asks. His hand is shaking as he gives Tony the mug of coffee, and he hopes Tony doesn't notice. "You can't have walked all the way."

"Hitched a ride with a woman; red hair, nice smile. Lives in the blue house down there." Tony gestures with his thumb. "My car got stuck just down the road from her place, and I knocked on her door. She brought me up to the end of the road in her truck – said I could walk the rest of the way. I think she was scared you'd be mad at her for bringing me here, so she didn't want to be around when you first saw me."

"That's Emmylou."

"She's nice. Kinda weird though. When I told her I had to get up here, she said to go home and come back in the spring. I told her that wasn't an option. She gave me this long, freaky stare, and then she grabbed her keys and said she'd give me a ride. "

"She was just being neighbourly." Gibbs shrugs.

"No. It wasn't that; she said you were waiting for me. Like you were expecting me or something."

"I wasn't expecting you, Tony."

Tony's eyes narrow and harden. "Yeah, I think you were. Maybe not now, maybe not today, but you knew I'd show up here one day."

Gibbs takes a sip of his coffee and then gives a slow nod. "Maybe I did."

They stand there looking at each other, awkwardly, over the rim of their coffee mugs.

"You gonna sit down?" Gibbs asks at last.

Tony shrugs and sits down on the couch. Gibbs can't sit beside him – it's a small couch, and he doesn't want to be squashed up that close to Tony.

He gets a chair from the dining table, brings it over, and puts it beside the couch. Then he sits down on that.

Tony puts his coffee mug down on the floor beside the couch and takes off his gloves. His left hand is heavily scarred, the scarring disappearing up the sleeve of his jacket, but apart from that he seems to have healed up well. Gibbs glances at it fleetingly and then glances away again.

Tony picks up his mug again and glances around the place. "You've got a tree," he says, looking at the pine tree.

"Yeah."

"Just leaning there, against the wall."

"Yeah. Emmylou left it there."

"Aren't you going to stick it in a pot and put bells and stars and tinsel on it?"

"Nope. I haven't got any of that shit. I didn't want the damn thing. She just wouldn't take no for an answer."

"She likes you."

He doesn't have a reply to that, so he just grunts and sips his coffee.

"She's a redhead."

"Well yeah, Tony, I had noticed."

"You and she...?"

"That what you came here for, Tony?" Gibbs interrupts roughly. "To ask me a lot of stupid questions?"

"No," Tony says quietly. "I didn't come here for questions – I came for answers, Gibbs, and I'm not leaving until I get them."

There's a hard look in those green eyes, but then Gibbs has always known that underneath the charm and humour, Tony has a stubborn streak almost as strong as his own.

"Better start asking the right questions fast then," Gibbs mutters. Tony gives him a questioning look, and Gibbs shrugs. "The big snow is due in a couple of days, so if you haven't got your answers by then you'll be stuck here for the next couple of months. Maybe you should stop wasting your time asking the wrong questions and start asking the right ones."

Tony sits back, an assessing look on his face. "Fine. See, I remember waking up in a hospital room, and you being there. And I remember you showing up for regular visits for the next few weeks, and even though everything hurt like hell, and I nearly died..."

"You did die. More than once."

"Yeah, and even despite that, I felt pretty damn good because I thought you actually gave a crap, and that we actually had something going on between us. Then one day you were gone. No explanation. No visit. No phone call. Not even a fucking note. You were just gone."

Gibbs can feel his hands trembling, and he puts the coffee mug down on the floor so that he won't drop it. He feels too hot, and when he wipes his hand over his forehead it comes away covered in sweat. Damn it, now is not a good time to have an attack.

Tony is gazing at him, looking for those answers he wants, and he deserves them too but Gibbs knows he's only got a few minutes before he's on his knees, shaking and sobbing, and he doesn't want Tony to see him like that.

When he makes no reply, Tony gets a mulish look in his eyes and continues on doggedly, getting it all out. And why the hell not? He's had nearly two and a half years to work on this speech.

"And eventually Vance tells me you've resigned. Ziva and McGee don't know a damn thing, and at first I'm sure there's a reason, and that'll you'll tell me what it is in your own sweet time, but then the weeks pass, and, dumbass that I am, I finally figure out that you won't because you're not coming back. Not one day, not soon, not ever."

Tony slams his empty mug down on the floor.

"You left me with nothing. Not one damn thing. You just left, Gibbs. Were you that much of a coward that you couldn't at least come and tell me that you were running out on me?"

"Damn it, Tony, not everything is about you! Did you ever stop for a second to consider that?"

Gibbs gets up and lurches towards the bathroom. The shaking is much worse now, and he needs to get out of sight before it takes hold. He slams the bathroom door shut behind him, locks it, and then sinks to the floor before the shaking takes him down.

He wishes he hadn't said that. Tony, for all his faults, doesn't have his head up his own ass, and he's got every right to be angry. He closes his eyes, resting his head on the wall behind him, and he's back in the squad room again.

His hands are on Tony's chest, and he's pumping away, performing CPR on Tony for the third time. He's so engrossed in keeping Tony alive that he doesn't even hear their rescuers until he's being pulled away from Tony.

"It's okay, sir. We've got him now. Sir?"

He brushes the sweat out of his eyes and finds himself looking blindly at a fire fighter. A paramedic is crouching beside Tony, putting an oxygen mask over his face, and a bunch of fire fighters are clearing the rubble off Tony's legs so that he can be moved.

"I'm fine...he's not...he needs help...his lungs were damaged...not now...a few years ago...plague...he couldn't breathe..." He tries to turn back to Tony but another paramedic is holding him still and shining a torch into his eyes.

"You're not fine." The paramedic touches his forehead, and he realises it isn't sweat that's running down the side of his face – it's blood. "You have a serious head injury."

"We need to get you out of here, sir," the fire fighter says. "This way. We've cleared a route."

"Not until they get him out," Gibbs says stubbornly, and they can't make him move until Tony's been dug out of there and put on a gurney.

There's a haze of scrambling through rubble, following Tony's gurney, and then he's in an ambulance, then a hospital bed. Nobody answers his questions, and he's about to rip out the IV and get the hell out of there and find Tony when Abby comes rushing in, and that's at least one less person for him to worry about.

"Ducky?" he asks her before anything else, because he's the only member of his team left unaccounted for.

"The Duckman is fine!"

"Vance? SecNav?"

"Everyone's fine, Gibbs! They weren't even in the building. I think they were supposed to be but their meeting got called off for some reason."

He's relieved about that. At least the bombers didn't succeed in their aim.

"Oh Gibbs! I was so worried!" Abby says, hugging him tight. "I'd just left the Navy Yard when the bomb went off. I came running back, but they wouldn't let anyone in. I kept calling you and Tony on your cell phones, and I was going crazy when you didn't answer. I've left, like, twenty messages on your voicemail..."

He doesn't hear the rest. All he can hear is the booming sound of the bomb exploding as it reverberates around his head. Every time he closes his eyes he's back in the elevator, being thrown backwards by the force of the explosion. He keeps re-living it, over and over again.

Tony is in a critical condition for the next four days. Nobody is sure if he'll pull through, but by some miracle, he does.

Gibbs sits at his bedside for the next couple of weeks, wondering where the hell they go next. For a long time neither of them talk about the elephant in the room, and then one day Tony turns to him.

"There are things you say when you think you're dying..." he begins.

"You were dying. You did die," Gibbs interrupts. Then he gives Tony the out. "I'll forget it, if that's what you want."

"No," Tony says firmly. "I don't want to forget it. Do you?"

Gibbs picks up Tony's good hand and squeezes it gently, and that's all the reply Tony needs. He watches Tony's eyelids droop, smiling at the little smile curving on Tony's lips. They can do this. To hell with all the reasons why it's a bad idea; they can make it work. He settles back in his chair, happy to just sit here and watch Tony sleep.

Somewhere in the hallway outside, a nurse drops something. It makes a loud, clanging noise as it lands, and he is instantly back in the elevator again. He gets up and walks unsteadily out of the room. A nurse asks him something but he can't hear her. All he can hear is the booming sound of the bomb exploding in his head.

He makes it down the hallway to the bathroom, gets inside, and fumbles with the lock. He's sweating and shaking, and he stares at himself in the mirror, wondering what the hell is happening to him.

The sound of whining breaks into his consciousness, and he comes back to the present. He's in a different bathroom, in the cabin, and he can see Digger's black nose trying to poke through the gap under the door.

He takes a few deep breaths, calming himself, hoping this particular attack is over. Then he gets up and splashes water over his face to try and make himself look and feel more normal.

He wonders if Tony will still be there when he goes back out into the living room. He opens the bathroom door, and Digger is immediately upon him, pushing his wet nose against his hand; Digger is always protective of him during and immediately after one of his attacks.

He clears his throat, straightens up, and steps back out into the living room...to find Tony standing in front of the shelves he made to hold his ever-growing library of books. Tony puts a book back onto the shelf and then turns. His gaze is assessing, curious...but he doesn't say anything.

They stare at each other in silence for a moment, and then Gibbs speaks.

"So...how is everyone at NCIS?" he asks because he does genuinely want to know.

None of them has his address, and he hasn't been in contact with any of them. He doubts Abby will ever forgive him for that. Ducky might. He wasn't close enough to Ziva and McGee for them to be as hurt by the way he left, but he'd still like to know how they're doing all the same.

"I don't know." Tony shrugs. "I resigned over a year ago."

It's a bombshell he wasn't expecting. He sits down on the chair, feeling winded.

"You resigned?"

"What's the problem? You resigned too. It's not a big deal." Tony goes over to the pine tree lying propped up against the wall and inhales deeply. "Mmm...I love the smell of Christmas trees."

It's the first glimpse of *Tony*, his Tony, that he's seen since he arrived, but Gibbs is still reeling from what Tony just said.

"So what have you been doing for the past year?" Gibbs asks.

"Travelling." Tony sniffs the tree again. "You really should put this in a pot with some water in it, or it'll die."

"It's already dead. Someone cut it down from the forest. It was alive out there. In here it's dead."

Tony raises an eyebrow, his meaning all too clear, and Gibbs finds himself rattled by the analogy he's sure Tony is making.

"I'm not dead," he snaps.

Tony shrugs and sits down on the couch. "Never said you were. Might have wished it occasionally though." He makes a funny little face as he says that and then laughs at his own joke

"Travelling?" Gibbs tries to get back on track.

"Yeah. Ever since I went to Paris on that assignment, I've realised I was missing out on a whole great big wide world out there. So I resigned from NCIS, and I've spent the past fourteen months travelling around the world."

"How the hell were you able to afford that?"

"Dad died." Tony's eyes darken again, and his mood is serious once more. "He died on the up, much to my surprise, and left me everything. There was more than enough to buy me some travelling time."

"Tony, I'm sorry." He can imagine how much that must have hurt. Tony and his father were just starting to build some kind of a relationship again, and he knows how much that meant to Tony.

Tony waves a dismissive hand in the air. "Don't be. He had a heart attack while in the act of making love to a hot, wealthy divorcee twenty years younger than him. I can't think of a more fitting end for the old bastard."

Gibbs gives a little grunt of amusement; Tony has a point there.

"After I figured out you weren't coming back, that you really had run out on me without a word, I did some digging to find out where you were," Tony says.

"I hid my tracks well."

"Yeah, but I'm me." There's a note of pride in Tony's voice. "And, no offence, Gibbs, but I was always the best investigator on the team."

"That so?" Gibbs snorts.

"Yup! You had the gut and the ninja interrogation skills, but when it came down to just plain old detective work...well, I was the cop on the team. Your background was the military. Different skillset."

Digger comes over and sits down in front of the fire with a heavy sigh. Gibbs leans forward and rubs his ears. Digger rolls onto his back, displaying his belly, so Gibbs obligingly rubs that too.

"Ziva was the muscle, McGee was all about the computers, Abby was forensics, and Ducky...well, he's fantastic with dead bodies, but I was pretty sure you weren't dead. Cop skills were the only thing going to track you down, and I've got those."

He looks pleased with himself, and he has a right to be. Gibbs wasn't lying when he said he hid his tracks well; he doubts anyone but Tony would have been able to find him.

"Of course I wasn't the only one who looked. Abby tried to find you too, despite Vance warning us all away. And she's great with forensics and electronics, but you didn't leave that kind of trail, did you?" Tony raises an eyebrow. "You know we'd look, and you didn't want to be found."

"How are they?" Gibbs asks softly. "Ziva, McGee, Ducky...Abby?" His voice breaks a little as he says that last name.

"Oh no." Tony shakes his head. "You walked out on them. If you want to know how they're doing then you'll have to ask them yourself."

Gibbs feels his jaw tighten, but he makes no reply.

"Did you walk out on everyone without a word?" Tony asks. "I mean, I know you walked out on me, and on your team, but what about your dad? Tell me you didn't just disappear out of Jack's life without saying a word too."

"Jack's dead, Tony."

For the first time since Tony showed up, Gibbs sees the mask slip. The hardness and anger are gone, and he sees a flash of that deep empathy that Tony has always tried so hard to hide.

"Christ Gibbs, I'm sorry. Damn it. I liked the old man." Tony rubs his hand over his hair.

They stare at each other glumly. Somehow, they have failed to be there for each other in two of the most significant moments in their lives.

"When?" Tony asks.

Gibbs gives an evasive shrug. "A while back."

"See, I tried calling him when I was tracking you down. Left him a few messages but he never got back to me. I figured you'd told him not to talk to me, so I gave up after that."

Gibbs says nothing but he's aware that Tony's deceptively casual eyes are gazing at him searchingly. He was right about those cop skills of his. Gibbs, of all people, knows that you underestimate Tony at your cost – and that when he is at his seemingly most harmless is precisely when he's at his most dangerous.

"It's getting cold. Need some more wood for the fire," Gibbs mutters, getting up, wanting to get away from Tony's gaze.

He's relieved to step outside into the cold, and he takes several deep breaths of freezing air. It helps clear his head – and he needs his head clear if he's going to go back in there for another round of cat and mouse with Tony. He doesn't like the feeling that he's the mouse

in this scenario; he isn't used to it.

He's just bending down to pick up some logs when he hears a loud, crashing sound. Instinctively he ducks back against the wall of the cabin, crouching down and covering his ears. Digger is by his side in seconds, licking his hand as Gibbs relives the sound of the bomb blast in his head again. He's heard it so often now, and he wishes he knew how to make it go away.

He takes a moment to calm himself; Digger's relentless tongue helps, anchoring him in the moment. Finally he gets up, grabs the logs, and walks back inside as if nothing has happened.

He finds Tony crouching down beside his shattered coffee mug, trying to pick up the shards.

"Sorry." Tony looks up at him, making an apologetic face. "I went to pick it up and it kind of slipped out of my grasp. Hand muscles still aren't right. I should do more of the exercises the therapist gave me but...well, most of the time I can't be bothered."

He shrugs, and Gibbs forces himself to look at his left hand properly for the first time. Last time he saw it, it was covered in bandages and before that it was burned black and red. It's badly scarred, a little bent and twisted, and he can see why it wouldn't work properly.

"I'll do it," Gibbs says curtly, pushing Tony out of the way and sweeping up the pieces himself. He throws them in the trash and then turns back to Tony.

"It's getting dark. You won't be able to go back tonight. You can sleep on the couch. I'll get us something to eat."

Dinner is a more relaxed meal than he'd expected. Tony seems to have changed, but he's not sure why. The hard, angry mask has gone, to be replaced by something more like Tony's old mask of combined chatterbox and idiot. Gibbs has never been fooled by either of them, but at least they're back on familiar territory now.

Tony tells him a little about his travels, pausing only to feed Digger titbits of meat under the table when he thinks Gibbs isn't looking.

After dinner, Gibbs grabs a spare pillow and blanket and throws them on the couch.

Tony lies down with a frown, pummels the pillow, and then tries to lie flat. It's not possible, so he rolls onto his side and bends his knees up. There's something almost funny about the way he tries to fold his big body into the small space.

"No offence, Gibbs, but why the hell did you make this couch so small?" he gripes.

Somehow Gibbs isn't surprised Tony knows he made the couch himself.

"How did you...?" he begins but Tony just grins and taps the side of his nose with his finger

in a way that's extremely infuriating.

"Cop skills, remember," Tony says. "I think you made pretty much everything in this place; the shelves, the table, the chairs...even Digger's bed over there."

"I'd forgotten how truly irritating you are," Gibbs grunts, and Tony's face breaks into a delighted grin in response. It's too soon for a head slap, but Gibbs's hand itches to deliver one all the same. "Night, Tony." He turns off the light, closes the door, and goes into the bedroom, with Digger by his side.

He lies there for a long time, looking up at the ceiling. The day was full of surprises, but it ended better than he would have expected. Maybe there is still some kind of redemption to be had here. And maybe, just maybe, there's even some room for hope.

He should have remembered that it's when Tony is at his seemingly most harmless that he's most dangerous.

When Gibbs wakes up the next day he goes into the living room to find it empty. The blanket has been folded neatly and placed on top of the pillow. Tony is nowhere to be seen, but there's a note on the dining table.

I got my answers.

Tony

PS I put the tree in a pot. It was bugging me.

That's it. Nothing else. Gibbs stares at it for a long time, wondering what the hell answers Tony thought he got. Whatever they were they seem to have satisfied him because he's definitely gone.

He glances over at the tree. Sure enough, it's been wedged into the bucket he keeps in the kitchen. Tony must have ransacked his cupboards in the night, looking for a suitable container. There are some logs around the base of the tree, keeping it upright, and the bucket is filled with water. Tony has moved the tree away from the wall and spread out the branches, so it looks like a proper Christmas tree now – minus any form of decoration.

Gibbs sits down on the couch and gazes at it blankly. It's Christmas Eve, and although Tony was only here for a few hours, he misses him already.

He leans over, picks up the pillow Tony slept on, and buries his face in it, inhaling Tony's scent.

He wasn't lonely before. He's spent the last two Christmases without human company and it wasn't a problem for him, but now it feels like the last thing he wants is to be alone for a third.

He glances at Digger, who sniffs the tree curiously and then takes a lap of water from the bucket.

"Looks like it's just you and me again, Digger."

Seeing Tony again has unsettled him, and he finds it hard to lose himself in the new dresser he's making. He keeps stopping to stare out of the window. He makes a few mistakes, and in the end he abandons the project for the day to go back into the house and read.

He's bored – and he's never felt bored before in his cabin high up on the mountain. He's always relished the isolation. Now he misses the vibrancy of Tony's presence, and it just makes him realise how much he was missing it before too, without even knowing it.

It's too late though. He can't turn the clock back and even if he could, he knows he'd make all the same choices and mistakes all over again. It's who he is.

He glances over at the tree, and now he almost wishes he had gone and bought something to decorate it with; it looks so bare and empty standing there.

He goes to bed, bracing himself for the day ahead: Christmas Day. And after that, the solitary months that will, inevitably, follow. He spends a few hours staring at the ceiling before finally dropping off to sleep in the small hours.

It took him so long to get to sleep that it's late when he wakes up. He pulls on his bathrobe and walks into the living room on his way to the kitchen...and then stops.

His tree is covered in tinsel and baubles in bright, garish shades of gold and red. There's even a fairy perched on the top, wearing a tacky gold dress and waving a sparkling wand. Several strings of lights are wound around the tree, glowing blue, pink, red, yellow and green.

"What the...?" Gibbs walks over to the tree, and there, beneath it, curled up in a red blanket, is Tony. He's surrounded by stuff: a couple of rucksacks, several big boxes, and, surprisingly, a battered old guitar case.

Digger pokes his snout into Tony's face and licks his jaw, and Tony stirs and then sits up, his hair a mass of spiky points.

"Tony...what the hell is this?" Gibbs asks.

Tony glances up at him blearily, and then he looks at the tree.

"A Christmas tree should have stuff on it," he mumbles, reaching his arms above his head in a big, elaborate stretch.

"Not the damn tree. You. Here. This." Gibbs waves his arm around the room.

"Oh right. Well, I figured if I was going to be holed up in here for the entire winter with just you and Digger for company, then I'd need more than your book collection to keep me

sane." Tony pushes the blanket away and gets to his feet, groaning slightly. "So I went and stocked up on supplies. TV..." He points to one of the boxes. "DVD player. Laptop." He waves his hand around the room. "Clothes...extra food...that kind of stuff."

"You're staying for the winter?" Gibbs asks blankly. "Why?"

Tony shrugs. "We have stuff to talk about, and I figure it might take that long to do it."

"I thought you said you'd got the answers you wanted."

"Oh, I did." Tony's face breaks into a grin. "That's why I came back. Otherwise I'd have just kept on going."

Gibbs wonders what the hell answers Tony thinks he got, but he doesn't think about that for too long, because he's aware of feeling something he hasn't felt in a very long time: Happy.

"Left here at dawn yesterday, hiked back down the mountain, got my car and drove back to town," Tony says. "Bought this stuff, sold my useless car, bought a truck that would get me back up here, piled the stuff onto it, and got here at about 4 a.m." Tony gives a proud smile. "Decided to decorate the tree before going to bed. Hated seeing it like that."

"And why the hell were you sleeping on the floor?"

"Because that couch really screwed up my back. Like I said, you made it too small."

"I wasn't expecting company when I made it," Gibbs grunts, and then he thinks about it and smiles. "I was gonna make a dresser this winter but screw that. I'll make a bigger couch instead."

Tony grins at him again, and Gibbs knows they still have one hell of a long way to go, but it's a start.

Digger snuffles through Tony's belongings curiously, and Gibbs glares at the dog.

"Fine guard dog you are," he mutters. "Didn't even damn well bark when this idiot broke into the place this morning."

"He did come and investigate, but I might, uh, have given him a bribe to keep him quiet," Tony says with a grin.

It should feel strange, sharing this small space with another human being after so much solitude, but somehow it doesn't.

Tony is upbeat and energetic, definitely more like the Tony he knew of old. He bustles around the place, preparing a big Christmas lunch and talking non-stop. He mulls some wine and hands Gibbs a glass, talking at length about his grandmother's Italian Christmas traditions before segueing effortlessly into a riff on the best Christmas movies.

After lunch, Tony opens all the boxes, and they spend the afternoon installing the huge new plasma TV, hooking up the DVD, and unpacking Tony's clothes. There isn't one suit among them – he seems to have ditched those in favour of a supply of jeans, sweatpants, tee shirts, plaid shirts and sweaters. He's got a couple of pairs of sturdy Timberland boots as well.

"Must have killed you to get rid of those fancy shoes you liked so much," Gibbs comments.

Tony shrugs. "Not really. I wanted a complete change. Threw out or sold everything before I went travelling. Learned how to travel light. It felt good."

"Thought you could leave the past behind, huh?"

"Yeah." Tony glances up from where he's unpacking an assortment of underwear.

"Doesn't work."

"I know. That's why I'm here. Unfinished business." Tony is giving him one of those searching gazes again. "Can't leave the past behind when it's in your head the whole time."

"What changed?" Gibbs asks, sitting down on the couch. "Why did you decide to come here, Tony?"

Tony stops what he's doing and sits down on the floor beside his half-unpacked rucksack. "Honestly? I don't know. I enjoyed travelling, but it was like every step was in the wrong direction. Something was tugging at me inside, telling me something. Eventually I decided to listen to my gut, like someone once taught me." He rolls his eyes in Gibbs's direction. "So instead of planning my route, I just got up each day and went where my gut took me. I got on this train, or that bus, or this plane depending on what my gut said. That's how I ended up here."

"What happened at NCIS? Why did you leave?" Gibbs asks, aware that he's got no right to expect an answer but hoping for one anyway.

"At first, I thought I could stay." Tony looks kind of small and lost. "Then, after awhile, I knew I couldn't. It wasn't the same anymore. Without you."

"Must have been hard for you, Tony, leaving the team. I know they were like family to you."

"You assume there was a team to leave," Tony says bitterly. Gibbs raises a puzzled eyebrow. "Did you really think that when I came back, after months in physical therapy, Vance would just hand me the team on a platter?"

Gibbs feels a surge of anger. "Vance didn't make you team leader?"

"Hell no!"

"The damn idiot!" Gibbs wishes he could go back there, storm into Vance's office, and ask him what the hell he thought he was playing at. Tony's the best agent he ever worked with – but, he has to concede, if you don't really know Tony, if you don't *get* Tony, then he might not come over that way. And Vance never did get Tony.

"He brought in some new person. She was okay, but she wasn't you. And McGee went off to be the boss of some new, shiny, ultra high-tech cyber crimes unit that Vance set up. Ziva didn't stick around for long, either; she went back to Israel." Tony gives a little shrug. "Ducky retired, and Abby got poached by Fornell and went to the FBI. She said he was the next best thing to you. I guess you were the glue keeping us together, Gibbs. Without you we fell apart like that." He clicks his fingers in the air, making a loud snapping sound. Gibbs jumps slightly, only just suppressing the instinctive urge to duck.

Tony is sitting there, gazing at him, as if waiting for something.

"What?" Gibbs demands.

"Just wondering when you're going to apologise, that's all." Tony shrugs. "I know it's a sign of weakness, but in the circumstances, given what you leaving set in motion..."

"I'm not going to apologise, Tony," Gibbs says stiffly, because he knows he'd do the same again.

"Yeah, I thought you'd say that. Anything you want to tell me?"

"No." Gibbs gets up and goes outside to get some air and process this new information.

When he comes back, Tony has packed all his stuff away and is sitting in front of the TV, a bowl of popcorn on his lap.

"You ready?" he asks.

"For what?"

"*It's a Wonderful Life* of course! It's Christmas, Gibbs!" Tony pulls on his arm and makes him sit down on the couch beside him.

It's been a long time since he watched a movie, and he finds himself enjoying it, sitting beside Tony, their thighs touching, sharing the bowl of popcorn.

When the movie's over, he gets up.

"Time for bed." He hesitates. "Thanks, Tony."

"For what?"

"For making it a real Christmas." Gibbs glances around the living room. "The big meal, the

Christmas movie, the tree with all the crap on it."

"Don't forget the presents underneath it." Tony grins. "The TV, the DVD player, the laptop, me..."

Gibbs rolls his eyes at that, and Tony laughs out loud. Gibbs picks up the pillow and blanket that were stowed away on one of the shelves in the corner, and Tony groans and rubs his back dramatically.

"Oh shit; that choice between the floor and the couch again. Great."

Gibbs only thinks about it for a very brief moment. "The bed's plenty big. We could share," he mutters.

Tony nods thoughtfully. "Okay then," he agrees quietly. It's another little step, among many little steps, and Gibbs has no idea where all these steps are leading.

Digger doesn't seem fazed by having two humans in the bed instead of one. He arranges himself down one side, on the edge closest to Gibbs. Tony slips under the blankets and turns on his side, facing away from them, and Gibbs turns out the light. Then, slowly, he turns over, so he's facing Tony's back, puts his hand on Tony's hip, and leaves it there. Tony doesn't shove it off. It seems they've taken another little step.

He's standing in the squad room. It's just how he remembers it from working there for all those years. The desks are all in position, the lights are shining overhead, and the walls are that particular shade of warm orange that gives anyone standing next to them a tangerine glow.

The only strange thing about it is that it's entirely empty. It's eerie...like everyone stepped out for a moment, leaving it frozen in time. There are papers on desks, phones ringing, and coats slung over filing cabinets and the backs of chairs. Then, one by one, the phones stop ringing, leaving only one: Tony's phone.

It keeps on ringing until Gibbs goes over to Tony's desk and picks it up. He holds it to his ear, wondering who it is, but all he hears is the massive booming explosion of a bomb going off. He ducks for cover, and that's when he sees Tony, lying under his desk. He smells burning, and he realises that it isn't just Tony's hand and arm that have been burnt – his whole body is black and red, and he's screaming in agony....

Gibbs wakes up to the sound of his own scream fading on his lips, the scent of burning flesh still lodged in his nostrils. For a moment he doesn't know where he is, and then he feels a familiar shaking and has the imminent sensation that he's about to vomit.

He jumps out of the bed, runs through the living room to the front door, opens it, and manages to get out just in time to throw up on the snow. Digger is beside him, pressed close, and Gibbs is glad of that.

He takes several deep gulps of icy air, calming himself, and then returns to the living room...to find Tony standing there, holding a blanket. He throws it over Gibbs's shoulders and wordlessly hands him a glass of water, then shoves him down on the couch and chucks a few logs on the still glowing embers of the fire. Then he sits down on the floor beside the fire, facing Gibbs.

"All that rich food...must have screwed with me," Gibbs mutters by way of explanation.

Tony's snort is both loud and incredulous. "Bullshit," he snaps. "It's PTSD."

Gibbs looks up sharply.

"Post traumatic stress disorder," Tony spells out, although they both know what it means.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Gibbs growls.

Tony shrugs. "I figured it out two days ago. The shaking hands you tried so hard to hide, the way you ran off to the bathroom and stayed there for a good twenty minutes. While you were in there, I took a look at your book collection." He glances up at the bookshelves. "You've got a few books on PTSD, all of them looking pretty dog-eared, like you've read them a few times."

"I've read a lot of books a few times. Doesn't mean a damn thing."

"That's why I did a little test, just to be sure."

Realisation hits him. "The mug you broke – you dropped it on purpose."

"Yeah. Wanted to see how you reacted to the sound. And boy, did you react. It was textbook."

Gibbs could have kicked himself for not figuring that out sooner. It's not as if Tony hasn't bragged about his cop skills often enough.

"I told you I had the answers I wanted," Tony says. "Not all of them – but enough to know where to look for the rest."

Gibbs raises an eyebrow. "The rest?"

"When I went into town yesterday I did some research in an internet café. I found Jack's obituary. It seems he never called me back because he was already dead."

Gibbs feels his hand shaking and water spills from it onto the floor. Tony gets up and removes the glass from his hand. He crouches down in front of Gibbs and looks up at him.

"See, I thought you ran out because you're a coward, and you couldn't face up to what happened between us when I thought I was dying. I thought it was me you ran out on."

"It wasn't you," Gibbs says hoarsely.

"I know that now. That's why I came back with all my stuff. If I'd believed you were a coward I wouldn't have come back. This is how I think it happened, Jethro." He rests his hands on Gibbs's knees, still gazing at him. "I think that bomb set off something in your head. At first, you tried to ignore it and carry on. I mean, you're Gibbs! Stuff like that doesn't happen to you."

Gibbs doesn't want to hear this. He wants to turn away, so he doesn't have to look into those serious green eyes, but he finds he can't move.

"Maybe you thought you could handle it, and maybe you could handle it. Maybe you were just in shock, and it would have gone away...but then, just a few weeks after the explosion, your father died. Not just any death...not peacefully in his sleep. He died when some young punk, hopped up on drugs, pulled a gun on him in his store."

Gibbs doesn't reply. He remembers his father coming to see him a few Christmases ago, to tell him about how he'd had to kill some guy who had invaded his store and waved a gun around. He'd been distraught about it, and Gibbs could kick himself for not seeing the bigger picture back then. He hadn't realised that his father was trying to tell him how much Stillwater had changed and how vulnerable he felt by himself in the store. Gibbs had ignored all those warning signs, dismissing the incident as a one-off.

Tony is still gazing at him with that intense expression in his eyes. "You didn't tell anyone, not even Abby, and you went to Stillwater on your own to handle the funeral arrangements. When you came back nobody thought you might be falling apart, did they? Not you. Not Gibbs."

Gibbs brushes a hand wearily across his eyes, but Tony hasn't finished.

"Hell, even you wouldn't admit it, but it was all too much, wasn't it? There was Kuwait, and Shannon and Kelly, and Hernandez, and a lifetime of danger and being in the firing line at NCIS. And then there was the bomb at the Navy Yard, followed so soon after by your Dad dying in such a terrible way. And there's a limit to what one man can take, Jethro. Even you."

Gibbs swallows hard. His throat feels dry, and his lips are parched. Tony hands him the glass of water, but his hand is shaking too much for him to hold it. Tony puts his scarred hand over Gibbs's shaking one and holds it to his lips for him. Gibbs drinks thirstily, gulping it down. When he's done, Tony takes the glass away again and puts it on the floor.

"You refused to acknowledge what was going on. You even went back to work, but then something happened. I don't know what...but something out in the field...and you realised you'd become a liability to your team."

"McGee almost died," Gibbs growls. "Because of me. Damn it, DiNozzo, I was a liability."

"So you went to Vance and told him about it. He insisted you see a shrink, and although you hate shrinks with a loathing as deep as the deepest pit of hell..."

Tony pauses, an amused gleam in his eye, and Gibbs gives a wry grunt of acknowledgement.

"...you went to see this one because you knew you needed help. He or she didn't give you the kind of help you wanted though. You wanted it to just go away, and they told you it wasn't that simple."

"I've fought in wars. I've been a sniper behind enemy lines. I've been a federal agent for years. I survived all that. Why *this*? Why now?" Gibbs shakes his head. "Didn't add up to me, Tony. I've seen soldiers get PTSD. I understand it. I just couldn't figure out how the hell it had happened to me."

"The shrink probably told you not to be so hard on yourself, but she doesn't know you," Tony says wryly. "She probably explained that it was a culmination of events. Maybe the bomb triggered it, but it could have been waiting for you for years and of course your father's death, coming when it did, just made it worse."

"I wasn't there for him, Tony. Kept him at arm's length for years, and he didn't deserve that," Gibbs says tiredly.

"Hey – I understand all about fucked up relationships with fathers. I understand the regrets, Jethro." Tony sighs. "But what happened to him wasn't your fault."

Logically, Gibbs knows that, but a part of him feels guilty all the same. Not just for his father's death but also for the long years when he cut him out of his life.

"You realised you couldn't stay at NCIS because you couldn't do your job...and now we come to the bit I don't understand."

That hard look is back in Tony's eyes; the one from when he first showed up a couple of days ago. "You just left without saying goodbye. You didn't just leave them, but me too. You left me in that damn hospital bed without a word of explanation. You walked out on me, Gibbs. That's the bit I don't get."

"You died on me three times, Tony. You had internal injuries. One of your legs was badly broken. You were facing months of rehabilitation and painful physical therapy. You didn't need me draining your resources with my problems."

"Bullshit," Tony snaps.

"I'm not lying," Gibbs snaps back at him. "I didn't have anything to give to you, Tony. I was falling apart. I couldn't handle what was in my own head, let alone help you. Everything I ever knew about myself was taken away, so how the hell could I be of any use to you? I thought you'd be better off without me, and that's the damn truth."

"I believe you," Tony says slowly. Then he rocks back on his heels. "But it's not the whole truth." He thinks about it for a moment, and then the realisation creeps into his eyes. "Oh, I get it. You hated your own weakness so much that you thought I'd be repulsed by it too. Christ, you are such a fucking idiot."

"Am I? Whatever the hell you saw in me all the years you chased after me like a puppy, it damn well wasn't weakness," Gibbs growls. "You wanted strength and certainty, Tony. You didn't want someone who gets the shakes every time a car backfires in the street. You wanted someone who knew how to do his damn job and could take care of you, not someone who pukes and hollers like a baby at random moments for who knows what goddamn reason."

"Wow, that's some lousy, low opinion of me you've got there, Gibbs." Tony looks hurt for a moment, and then a resigned look enters his eyes. "But I can see why you'd have thought that. I never really gave you any reason not to. I've done a lot of soul-searching these past couple of years. That bomb was a wake-up call for me; I've changed, Gibbs."

Gibbs can see that, although he's not sure if Tony has really changed so much as dispensed with some of the more idiotic aspects of the mask he habitually used to wear. Tony's stopped pretending he's the skirt-chasing fratboy and owned up to who he really is, inside. It can't have been an easy process, and Gibbs respects him for it.

"So how did I do?" Tony asks, with a cocky gleam in his eyes. "Did I get it all right? Was that how it went down?"

It's pretty damn close. The one thing Tony couldn't know, and he sure as hell isn't going to tell him, is how spectacularly he fell apart after Jack died. The PTSD attacks were coming several times daily, and he was confused and in shock. He had just shut down and done what he always did when he was hurting; he'd crawled off on his own to lick his wounds someplace quiet.

"Well, like you said, you always were the best investigator on the team," Gibbs replies, and Tony gives a little laugh. "You're wrong about me not saying goodbye though," Gibbs adds quietly. "I did. Came to see you in the hospital before I took off, but you were asleep. Thought about waking you but..."

"But in the end you thought you'd prefer to have me hate you for leaving, than resent you for not being able to be strong for me when I needed you most," Tony says, accurately.

"Somethin' like that, yeah. Can't say it was that coherent though." Gibbs gives a wry shake of his head. "You just looked so pale and ill lying there...couldn't wake you up to tell you I was going. I was barely functioning myself. Couldn't drag you down with me."

Tony shivers, and Gibbs realises he's dressed only in his boxer shorts and a tee shirt.

Gibbs gets up. "C'mon, it's late, and we've done enough damn talking for one night," he

says, holding out a hand to haul Tony to his feet too.

"I did most of the talking. You mainly just grunted," Tony points out, and this time Gibbs doesn't stop himself from delivering the well-deserved head-slap. Tony laughs out loud and rubs his head extravagantly. "Just like the old days!" he says gleefully.

Gibbs wraps an arm around Tony's shoulder and presses a kiss to the side of his head. "Yeah, just like the old days, Tony," he says softly.

They get back into bed, and this time, when Gibbs rolls onto his side, it's Tony who presses up close behind him and puts a hand on his hip. Gibbs doesn't push him away.

It's snowing when they get up the next day. Gibbs is used to it, but Tony seems excited by it, and he goes outside and runs around with Digger for half an hour until they're both worn out. Gibbs glances out of the window every so often, smiling to himself at the sight of the two living beings he loves most in the world having so much fun together.

Digger has taken a huge liking to Tony, in part, Gibbs suspects, because of his habit of feeding the dog scraps of meat under the dinner table when he thinks Gibbs isn't watching. Gibbs knows he'll have to put a stop to that soon, but not just yet.

Digger's fur and Tony's hair are wet through when they return to the cabin. Gibbs rubs Digger fiercely with a towel and then throws a fresh towel over Tony's head and rubs him too. Tony laughs and tries to twist away from him, but Gibbs wraps an arm around his chest to keep him still, and Tony finally submits, still laughing.

As he holds him in place, Gibbs has a flash of some new sensation burning in the pit of his stomach. He's suddenly very aware of Tony's proximity, of his hard body pressed against his own, and of how good that feels.

He finishes towelling Tony down and releases him, whipping the towel away to reveal Tony's flushed cheeks. He looks younger now than he did in those final years at NCIS. Hell, he looks younger than he did a couple of days ago. It's as if the years have melted away from him, and left him with some renewed sense of innocence. He's much more like the light-hearted young cop Gibbs first met so many years ago.

They gaze at each other for a long moment, both of them aware of the sudden change of atmosphere in the room, and then Gibbs clears his throat.

"I'm gonna go work on the new couch," Gibbs says gruffly. "You...uh...gonna be bored? There isn't much to do around here."

"You're not the only with hobbies, Jethro," Tony says, and Gibbs remembers the guitar case.

He goes outside to the workroom, Digger by his side. Digger settles down in his bed in front of the little electric heater, and Gibbs begins measuring up some lumber.

A few minutes later, Tony enters the workroom, carrying a chair in one hand and his guitar under his arm. He plonks the chair next to the heater and sits down on it. Then he begins strumming on the guitar. He's actually good; very good.

"Didn't know you played," Gibbs says, when Tony pauses for a moment.

"Used to as a teenager and then took it up again when I was travelling. It's been good therapy for my hand – helps keep it moving. I started..." He pauses, biting on his lip. Gibbs is intrigued and waits for Tony to continue.

"Started composing some of my own songs," Tony says. "Helped me...kinda make sense of things. Writing it out, coming up with melodies."

"Play some."

Tony hesitates, but then he begins strumming. His left hand is clearly still a little stiff and awkward, but he manages to move his fingers across the strings well enough to play.

"I'm thoughtful and...I'm gloomy and...bitter and blue," Tony sings. He has a surprisingly mellow voice, and he knows how to hold a tune.

"I haven't been happy in such a long time...cloudy and grey skies...instead of sunshine. I guess that's how I'm looking now...so pale...like I'm in disguise."

It's a deeply personal song, but it has a kind of raw beauty too. It's his way of spilling out his heart without actually telling Gibbs all about the anger, sadness and pain of his past two years. It somehow manages to be informative without being too accusatory.

When the song ends Tony looks at him with a defiant expression in his eyes, as if he isn't sure what Gibbs's reaction is going to be.

"Thank you, Tony," is all Gibbs says, meaning it, and Tony smiles and goes back to strumming on the guitar again.

Slowly, over the next few days, Tony sings the entire repertoire of his songs to Gibbs. They form a narrative, and although it's a hard story to hear Gibbs knows he has to listen all the same. Tony has his own pain and has been on his own journey. They're both different men in some ways now to who they were, and yet, fundamentally, he suspects they're pretty much the same.

As Tony sings, Gibbs has a mental image of him sitting in various European cafes, writing his lyrics on the backs of napkins and strumming his guitar alone in his room in a succession of hotels and guesthouses.

He can see the entire process Tony has gone through since he walked out on him, and it's painful, but he's glad he's finally getting a chance to share some of that pain with Tony as he caused so much of it.

The new couch begins to take shape, and Gibbs already has plans for what he wants to build next. He wants to make a rocking chair for Tony. He likes the idea of him strumming on his guitar while rocking in a chair. It'd be more relaxed than the straight-backed dining chair he's been sitting on. He's always complaining about his bad back – although Tony does like to complain about almost any given thing under the sun. It's part of his charm.

Tony finishes playing his repertoire of songs and begins work on some new ones. Gibbs becomes used to the aimless strumming as Tony riffs around trying to find a melody to go with the words he's thought up. Sometimes there are muttered curses when it goes wrong, but Tony perseveres and finds the right tune eventually, and the song begins to take shape.

Gibbs is impressed by Tony's song-writing talent – his songs have a catchy quality, and he finds himself humming along as he sands down the wood he's working on.

Every so often, Gibbs glances up at Tony who grins at him as he sings. Gibbs grunts and looks back down on his work.

Tony finishes a new version of the song he's been playing around with all afternoon and puts his guitar down. "You do realise it's New Year's Eve, don't you, Jethro?"

"Yup." Gibbs blows some sawdust away from the wood.

"So, we gonna party?"

Gibbs snorts. "What do you think?"

"I think you should look up."

Tony points up at the ceiling, and Gibbs glances up to see the sprig of mistletoe that's pinned up there. Tony must have cut it from a bush when he was out with Digger this morning.

"Trying to tell me something, Tony?" he asks, taking off his glasses.

"Yes. This." Tony gets up, comes over to him, and gently cups the back of Gibbs's neck with his hand. Then he pulls him in close and their lips meet.

The kiss is soft and tender, sweet and deep. It touches something frozen in Gibbs's heart, mending a tiny part of what is broken. It's like warm blood rushing back into cold skin; it hurts and heals at the same time.

Tony draws back, and he's looking at Gibbs intently. "It's time, Jethro," he says.

Gibbs puts down his sander, and Tony takes his hand and leads him back to the cabin.

He wants this. He's wanted to touch and taste and make love to Tony for more years than

he cares to admit, and now the time has come he almost can't bear the anticipation anymore.

When they get to the bedroom, Tony begins slowly unbuttoning his shirt, pausing between each button to kiss Gibbs again. Last time Gibbs kissed Tony's lips it was to save his life; this time, he thinks it might be the other way around.

Tony finishes unbuttoning his shirt and then strips it off his shoulders. The motion seems to awaken some sleeping giant within, and Gibbs gives a low growl and pushes Tony against the wall. He kisses Tony with every single piece of focussed intent in his body, and he is gratified when Tony melts against him, moaning helplessly into the passionate embrace.

Tony, it seems, has prepared for this eventuality well in advance because lubricant and condoms are waiting on the nightstand. They divest themselves of clothes as quickly as humanly possible, and then Gibbs sits down on the side of the bed and pulls Tony down on top of him.

This isn't about losing himself in the act of sex. It isn't about seeking out the familiarity of red hair, white skin and soft breasts and burying himself in a willing body.

Everything about Tony is as different an experience from that as can be. Tony's body is all hard planes, golden skin, and copious amounts of chest hair. It may be different, but Gibbs loves it immediately.

Gibbs has always been an active lover; he finds it hard to lie back and be passive, but Tony is pretty active too, and for a while they exhaust each other with their struggle for dominance.

In the end, Gibbs gives a growl of frustration, and Tony laughs up into his kiss, and from that moment on Tony is sweetly pliant beneath him, and Gibbs can finally explore him the way he wants to.

Tony's cock is thick and heavy, and Gibbs takes it between his lips and sucks down hard on it, swirling his tongue over the crown in a way that makes Tony positively mewl with pleasure.

He keeps up the motion until Tony shudders, arches up into him, and then comes in his mouth. Afterwards, Tony lies there, gloriously naked, and Gibbs strokes his body, tracing patterns across his skin with gentle sweeps of his fingers. He finds the rough skin of Tony's scarred arm and presses his lips to it, kissing the scar from forearm to fingers.

When Tony gets his breath back he rolls over and takes hold of Gibbs's cock. He begins sliding his hand up and down his hard shaft, making Gibbs gasp in pleasure. Tony grins, looking far too pleased with himself that he's able to reduce Gibbs to such a state, and then he very deliberately removes his hand. Gibbs gives a growl of frustration, and Tony laughs out loud.

"Want you in me," he says, reaching for the lube.

Gibbs takes the lube from him impatiently and opens Tony with smooth, gliding motions of his fingers. Tony lays back on the pillows, gazing at him, a look of unguarded pleasure in his eyes.

This is Tony without any kind of mask at all. This is who he is. First he nearly died, and then Gibbs walked out him. That was followed by the long struggle back to physical fitness, the disappointments of his working life, and his grief over the death of his father. Tony spent a couple of years in the wilderness trying to make sense of it. First he had to come to terms with himself, and then he came looking for answers.

Gibbs knows all this from the songs Tony has sung to him, and he knows it too from the utterly naked and transparent look on Tony's face. Tony is laying himself bare, being completely honest with him, and Gibbs won't let him down again.

Gibbs puts a condom on his hard cock and then slides slowly into Tony's eager, waiting body.

It's so hot, so tight, and so slick, but that's not what's so arousing. What makes Gibbs ache with pleasure is looking down and seeing Tony looking back up at him, a rapt expression in his green eyes. He thrusts in deep, making Tony whimper with pleasure.

"You're a miracle worker," Tony whispers, and he takes hold of Gibbs's hand and places it between their bodies, guiding it onto his cock, which is now hard again. "Haven't been hard again that soon since I was seventeen!"

Gibbs moves his head down to capture Tony's mouth in another long, deep, slow kiss. Then he twines his hand in Tony's hair, holding a gentle fistful as he moves inside him. Their bodies are so closely joined that he brushes Tony's cock with each inward thrust. He kisses Tony repeatedly as he thrusts into him, and their bodies become locked in a rhythmic motion, rising and falling as one.

When Gibbs comes, he can feel from the stickiness on his belly that Tony has come too. For a while they both stare at each other in a kind of shocked daze at the realisation that they've finally done this, after all this time, and that it was so damn good.

Eventually Gibbs rolls off him, and Tony wraps his arms around him, pulls him in close, and drags the blankets over them both.

"I uh...think..." his voice is husky, and he clears his throat and starts again. "I think that was worth the wait."

"Oh yeah. Definitely." Gibbs grins into his shoulder.

"I know you're a take charge kind of guy, but one day, when you're ready to let me all the way in, I'd like to do that to you," Tony murmurs.

Gibbs kisses the soft skin of his neck thinking that he'd like that too. "Maybe. One day."

Little steps...

"Happy new year, Jethro," Tony says, and Gibbs thinks that there's a chance that this one actually will be.

The snow's stopped falling and the sun is shining the following day. There's a beautiful blue sky and the mountain has been transformed into a winter wonderland. Little icicles dangle from tree branches, sparkling in the sunlight, and the snow is deep and white and fresh.

Tony grabs hold of his arm and drags him outside for a walk with Digger. Tony is full of exuberant energy, laughing and playful as he runs through the snow and throws sticks for Digger. Every so often he runs back to Gibbs, grabs him, kisses him on the mouth, and then runs off again.

It makes Gibbs acutely aware of how tactile Tony is, of how important touch and petting and sex are to him. He's got a sensuous quality to him that reminds Gibbs of a cat his mom once owned who loved being stroked and fussed over.

A puff of snow explodes against the side of his face as Tony's well-aimed snowball hits him...it takes him unawares, and for just a second he freezes.

"Sorry..." Tony runs back towards him. "I didn't think...are you okay?"

Gibbs turns away, leaning over, and when Tony comes to check on him he grabs him and throws him onto his back in the snow. Then he scoops up a handful of the cold, wet stuff and stuffs it down the front of Tony's sweater. Tony laughs out loud, wriggling to get away, and Gibbs straddles him and holds him there, looking down on him.

Gibbs wishes that he could freeze this moment in time forever. Tony's hair and eyebrows are covered in a fine dusting of snow, and the expression on his face is happy and carefree. The sun is shining down on them, lighting Tony's eyes as he looks up. After all they've been through, who would have thought they'd ever have a moment like this?

Gibbs can't resist. He lowers his head, captures Tony's lips with his own, and kisses him into the snow. Tony's hands come up, he pulls Gibbs down onto his body, and they kiss for a long time like that, half buried in the pristine white snow.

Digger dances around them excitedly, and then, clearly intrigued, sticks his head into the gap between their necks and proceeds to lick their chins until they laughingly pull apart.

As they walk back to the cabin, Tony slips his gloved hand into Gibbs's, and neither of them says a word as they walk like that, hand in hand, through the snow. It's not something Gibbs could have imagined doing a few years ago, but he's different now, and so is Tony. He wonders if it actually would have worked out if they'd got together back then, after the bomb. He suspects that the nearly two and a half years they spent in their own respective wildernesses might have been what each of them needed to bring them to this point.

They settle into a routine. Tony does most of the cooking – he's surprisingly good at it – while Gibbs keeps wood chopped for the fire. Tony seems to enjoy leaning in the doorway, sipping coffee, and watching him hammering away at a succession of logs with his axe.

"Are you sure you're not too warm? Maybe you should take your shirt off?" he suggests with a leer on more than one occasion. That always earns him a head-slap but usually later, when he's least expecting it.

Despite sharing a small cabin at close quarters for two months, they get on surprisingly well, which isn't to say they don't quarrel because they do; a lot, and about stupid things: Tony's messiness; Gibbs's habit of not shaving for days on end; Tony spoiling Digger with titbits from the dinner table; Gibbs's refusal to have sex anywhere but in the bedroom. But they aren't serious quarrels. They're the kind of low-level bickering that creates in-jokes between them and provides any number of opportunities for make-up sex.

It's going so well that he almost forgets his problem until he has a sudden, particularly bad attack one day. Tony is in the house, making dinner, and Gibbs is out in his workroom. It's very quiet in there without Tony's singing, and Gibbs is lost in the wood, enjoying the feel of it under his fingertips.

Outside, the branch of a nearby tree breaks under the weight of the snow with a loud, explosive crack, and Gibbs is back in that elevator again, falling back against the wall, warm coffee spilling out over his hand.

He can feel Digger snuffling around his face, but he's already lost, back in the past. The bomb in the Navy Yard and the explosion in Kuwait that injured him in 1991 seem to merge and combine, and he's caught up in an onslaught of jumbled-up memories from both times in his life.

He's looking at Shannon and Kelly's dead bodies in the morgue, and then Jack's, cold as ice on a mortuary slab, and he's looking at Tony lying in his arms in the squad room, dying over and over again in an ever-repeating loop.

He wants to cut open the top of his head, reach in, and scoop out the memories just to get some respite but there's no escape. He's shaking and sweating, lying on his side on the floor in the sawdust. He's aware of Digger whining and licking his face, but it's no good; he's too far gone, and he can't bring himself back.

He's not sure how long he's there, shaking and sobbing on the floor, but suddenly he's aware of a pair of strong arms lifting him up and holding him. There are gentle fingers stroking his hair, soothing him through the nightmarish visions that revolve in his head like a never-ending horror movie.

Eventually he's back in the room, and he's furious that Tony got to see him at his worst. He hates being this shaking, sweating, sobbing wreck of a man. It isn't how he wants Tony to think of him, and it isn't how he views himself. He has his pride, damn it, and it hurts to be reduced to such weakness.

He pushes away from Tony and gets up, willing his knees not to buckle. He feels as if his body doesn't belong to him, and he's always been so strong and sure of himself before that it makes him want to lash out.

His legs shake as he stands up, and he almost falls. Tony reaches out a hand to steady him, and Gibbs shoves him away angrily.

"I'm not a fucking invalid!" he growls. "I can walk by myself!" Tony stands back, watching. "What the hell are you looking at, DiNozzo? Side-show's over!"

"Symptoms of PTSD," Tony intones emotionlessly. "Intrusive, upsetting memories of the event; flashbacks - acting or feeling like the event is happening again; nightmares, either of the event or of other frightening things; feelings of intense distress when reminded of the trauma; intense physical reactions to reminders of the event – such as a pounding heart, rapid breathing, nausea, muscle tension, and sweating."

Gibbs holds onto the half-finished couch and turns to glare at him. "Your point?"

Tony shrugs. "I've been reading up on it too, Jethro. I know all the symptoms. Here are a few more you might recognise: irritability or outbursts of anger, and feeling jumpy and easily startled. Oh, and feelings of guilt, shame, or self-blame."

Gibbs stares at him for a moment, and then he sinks down onto the couch frame with a shaky laugh.

"Guess I really am textbook. Damn it, Tony, I'm not this person. Who the hell am I?" he asks despairingly.

"Still Leroy Jethro Gibbs." Tony crouches down in front of him and rests his hands on Gibbs's knees. "Still the bastard I love."

Gibbs manages a faded, washed-out kind of smile at that.

"You might have been right before," Tony says. "About me being able to handle this back then. I was in a bad way myself after the bomb, and you're right; your strength was always a big part of the attraction."

Gibbs looks down. He always knew that if Tony saw him having an attack this bad then it might change his view of him.

Tony puts a finger under his chin and forces him to look up again. "We've both come a long way from that time. You've learned how to let me in – at least a bit – and I've learned that you aren't Superman."

Gibbs raises an amused eyebrow. "You thought I was Superman?"

"Sure!" Tony laughs. "Closest to it I'll ever get anyway!"

"Hell, I'm not Superman, Tony. I'm not even close."

"No...but I'm finding I like Clark Kent much more. He seems less like a fantasy. More real." Tony leans in and kisses him, and then he draws back. "C'mon. Dinner will be ready soon, and this time you have to let me feed some of it to Digger."

"I do?" Gibbs queries as Tony pulls him to his feet.

"Yup! He came to get me. It was like a scene out of *Lassie*! He ran into the kitchen and kept barking at me and tugging on my jeans with his teeth until I followed him out here and found you."

"He's a good dog."

"You saved his life – he's just returning the favour."

Tony doesn't try and hold him up, or hover over him, or smother him with his concern, but Gibbs is aware, as they walk back to the house, that Tony's holding up his arm at just the right angle so that it's available for him if he needs it. He swallows his pride and leans on it just a bit as they go inside.

Gibbs is almost sorry when the thaws begin in March. He's enjoyed the solitude and being alone with Tony, but at the same time he's aware that cabin fever will set in if they spend too much time alone together in the confined space.

Tony's not exactly an outdoorsy kind of guy, but he does love fishing so when the nearby lake unfreezes, Gibbs takes him over there to spend a day there.

"This reminds me of this one time with my dad," Tony says as they sit there, side by side, watching the water.

Gibbs glances sideways at Tony, waiting for him to continue. He knows Tony's relationship with his father was complex and the source of so many of Tony's insecurities and personality quirks. He doesn't think that'll ever be resolved for Tony, but he wants to be part of Tony's attempts to make some sense of it.

"It was just before Mom died. Dad took me out on his yacht – well, he said it was his yacht, but I think that was a lie as I never saw it again. I think he scammed it for the day to impress me."

Having met DiNozzo Snr, Gibbs thinks that's very likely.

"He was relaxed and so much fun. I mean, he always did know how to turn on the charm and be fun, but most of the time he didn't bother doing it with me; he saved it for people he wanted to impress."

"I suppose at least that means he didn't put on an act with you. He was more himself."

"I guess." Tony's shoulders hunch uncomfortably. "And on that fishing trip I really did think he was the real him. He wasn't the grumpy, secretive bastard he so often was later, always keeping me at arm's length, but he wasn't turning on the false charm, either. I think he genuinely had fun with me that day. We had fun together."

Gibbs always feels angry when he thinks about the way DiNozzo Snr treated his son. He's always been able to see the lost child in Tony, the one whose mother died and whose father sent him away. Even when all anyone else ever saw was the nosy, infuriating, fratboy idiot, Gibbs could always see that lonely kid beneath the clown mask.

"After mom died, I never saw that side of my dad again – the guy who liked hanging out with me and who had fun with me. You know..." Tony pauses and then turns to look at Gibbs. "It's one of the things that always used to piss me off when other people met him. They'd think he was the life and soul of the party, such a great guy, so much fun – but he wasn't that way when he was alone with me. My school friends all thought he was such a great dad to have – he used to turn up at boarding school with pocketfuls of cash and boxes of candy and charmed the socks off them. He did the same thing with you guys when he showed up at NCIS those few times."

Gibbs reaches down and strokes Digger, who is lying beside him. He can hear the hurt in Tony's voice, and he knows he needs to talk this out.

"I resented you all for falling in love with him so easily," Tony says bitterly.

"I wasn't fooled by him, Tony. You know that."

"Yeah. Maybe." Tony nods. "But everyone else was. He came to town and it was like party time – just like at boarding school. Everyone got stupid and giggly, and he had them eating out of his hand."

"He knew his trade well, Tony. He made a living out of his charm. You can't blame them for being taken in by him."

"I don't. What annoys me is that I was always taken in by him too." Tony sighs. "I wanted him to love me so much that every time he showed up I'd fall back into old habits. I wanted to sit him down and have a serious conversation, but he always seemed to sidestep it with some bit of flim-flam – a photo, a touching story, telling me he loved me. And I fell for it every single time."

"You're just a kid who wanted his dad to love him. Don't be so hard on yourself." Gibbs pulls Tony's head over and brushes a kiss on his hair.

"Hah! Pot, kettle, black," Tony says, and Gibbs has to concede that point.

They don't catch any fish that day, but Gibbs thinks that maybe they did something far more important.

He finishes the new couch, and they carry it into the cabin and place it in front of the fireplace, directly opposite the TV. Then they throw the cushions onto it that they bought down at the store a couple of weeks ago.

Tony can't wait to get on the couch with a bowl of popcorn and start watching a DVD. He lays down on it, his back on the armrest, and pats the space between his legs, and Gibbs rolls his eyes but comes over anyway. He lies down awkwardly between Tony's legs, his back against Tony's chest, and Tony laughs and wraps his arms around him, holding him as they watch the movie together.

The movie finishes, and Tony kisses him and then starts undressing him. Gibbs insists on moving it into the bedroom even though Tony complains that the new couch is plenty big enough for them to have sex there.

Tony is out walking Digger when Emmylou makes her first visit after the winter. She breezes in as usual and glances around the place. She looks at the laptop open on the table and a pile of DVDs spread out in a messy pile on the floor. She sees Tony's abandoned Timberlands by the fire and his guitar resting on the hearth. And she laughs out loud.

Gibbs brings them both a cup of coffee and hands one to her with a raised eyebrow. "What's so funny?"

"I always said this place needed a woman's touch. It was always so cold, and sterile, and bare. It felt kinda...frozen. Just like you." She pats his arm. "Now you're starting to warm up," she says softly.

"Tony's not a woman," Gibbs points out.

"No, but he's what you were waiting for, isn't he?" She leans back, an assessing look in her eyes. "Hell, you're even looking halfway human! I didn't think anyone could defrost you, Jethro, and God knows I tried, but that boy seems to have done it. He's good for you."

Gibbs gives a little grunt. "He's in his forties, Em, but I'm sure he'll be pleased to know you called him a 'boy'."

Emmylou waves a dismissive hand in the air. "Whatever. I'm happy for you, Jethro. When he showed up on my doorstep and said he was looking for you, I wasn't sure if he was going to kill you, or bring you back to life. I didn't know what to do for the best, but in the end I figured that if he didn't kill you then he might just cure you, so it was worth the risk."

"Yeah. It was."

He presses a little kiss to her cheek, and she gives a bright smile in return.

The months pass quickly. Tony spends a lot of time on some music site on the internet, swapping compositions with other amateur musicians. He's still writing songs, and Gibbs is surprised how engrossed he can be when he's composing. He reminds him of himself and the way he gets with a carpentry project – he loses himself in it, disappearing into his own little world.

They don't talk about the future, but one day, as they're eating breakfast, Tony makes an announcement.

"I have to leave soon, Jethro."

Gibbs looks up, and his eyes must give away his devastation because Tony looks startled.

"Hey...not like that. I'm not leaving you. Just...see, this cabin, up here, all alone...this is your thing, Jethro, not mine. I love it here, but not all year round. I need cities and movie theatres and other people beside you sometimes!"

He's right, and Gibbs knows it wouldn't be healthy for them to spend their entire lives cooped up here like this with just each other and Digger for company. It'd drive them both insane eventually.

"I'm not ready to leave yet," Gibbs says. There has been some improvement with his PTSD; the attacks are fewer and further between and not as severe when they do hit, but he doesn't kid himself that he's anywhere near cured.

"I know, and that's fine." Tony shrugs.

"I may never be ready to leave."

"That's fine too." Tony looks as if he means that.

"Tony, even if I get better I can never go back to NCIS or any kind of Law Enforcement. I've been out of the game too long for a start, but also I can't be sure it won't happen again. I wouldn't trust myself out in the field."

"I know all this." Tony pats his arm. "I don't want to go back, either, Jethro. I'm not asking you to leave here. I'm just gonna go away for a month or two, to take a breather. I'll be back before the big snows come and cut you off from the world again."

He leaves a week later, and when he's gone the small cabin suddenly feels far too big without him. Digger sits by the door and whines for a whole week after he leaves, and Gibbs feels like doing the same.

He decides to bury himself in a new project. He goes down the mountain and scours the surrounding towns to find what he's looking for. Then he brings it back up to the cabin and sets about restoring it to its former glory.

He tries not to think that Tony might not come back, but sometimes, when he's working late at night, it does cross his mind that Tony will decide he likes it better back in the city. He wonders whether he can ever move back to a bustling metropolis again but his stomach churns at the thought. Before he left DC, he was having PTSD attacks all the time. There was too much noise, too many people, and too many triggers that could set them off. It's been easier to manage his condition up here.

Tony calls him every day, sounding happy and full of life, but Gibbs has never been very good on the phone, and he doesn't have much to say. There isn't much news to offer Tony in return; nothing much changes on the mountain.

As the weeks go by they have the occasional snowfall. The roads aren't impassable yet but Christmas is looming, and Tony is cutting it mighty fine. Gibbs has half convinced himself that Tony will leave it too late on purpose and then make some excuse to avoid telling him the truth.

It's the week before Christmas, and he's busy finishing up his big project when Digger suddenly takes off, barking like crazy, and runs out into the yard. Gibbs follows him, frowning, wondering what the hell has spooked the dog.

He finds Tony lying on his ass in the yard with Digger licking him half to death.

"Damn it, Digger! I wanted to creep up on him and take him by surprise!" Tony complains. "You've ruined it now!"

Gibbs laughs out loud and leans against the wall, waiting until Digger has finished doing what he feels like doing to Tony himself.

When Digger finally finishes with Tony, Gibbs hauls him to his feet and then pulls him in close for a long, heartfelt kiss that lasts for several minutes. After he lets him go, Tony gazes at him open-mouthed, clearly shocked by the length and intensity of that kiss, and then he laughs and shakes his head.

"You thought I wasn't coming back."

"I didn't."

"Yeah, you did. Idiot. Damn it, Jethro, what the hell do I have to do to convince you to trust me?"

"It's...I'm not...fuck it, Tony, I'm crap at this."

Tony rolls his eyes but wraps an arm around Gibbs's shoulders anyway. They walk into the cabin together, and Tony stops short when he sees the massive Christmas tree jammed into a bucket full of wet earth. It's covered in all the tinsel, bells and baubles that Tony bought last year – and the fairy in her gold dress is sitting right at the top, her sparkly wand poised, seemingly in the action of granting a wish.

"Who are you and what did you do with my old Grinch Gibbs?" Tony asks him, laughing again.

"Oh shut up!" Gibbs grabs Tony's hand and takes him straight to the bedroom to become reacquainted with every single inch of him.

Tony has brought a ton of Christmas food and various presents wrapped in bright paper that he insists on placing around the bottom of the tree, much to Digger's delight as he snuffles around them for the next few days. As several of them are for him, Gibbs is surprised that they remain intact until Christmas Day.

When the day comes Tony is like an excited child, and Gibbs can see all too clearly the kid who lost his mom when he was eight, and effectively lost his dad and his childhood at the same time.

Tony wakes him up at 6 a.m. and drags him into the living room where Gibbs sits on the couch while Tony sits on the floor among all the presents. He's soon surrounded by a pile of wrapping paper as Digger opens various chews, bones, dog cookies, and reindeer toys wearing Santa hats. When Digger's done opening his presents, he settles down in his bed with the biggest chew between his front paws and sets to work, grinding away at it.

Then Tony starts handing Gibbs his presents; there's a massive pile of them to get through. First the obligatory bottle of Jack Daniels and then a box of honey dust.

"For old time's sake!" Tony says cheerfully as Gibbs rolls his eyes.

The next present is a strip of red and white fabric with eyes, a nose, and a Santa hat. Gibbs holds it up with a raised eyebrow.

"If you think there is any way in hell I'm wearing this..." He glances down at his crotch. "THERE, then you have another think coming."

"Oh, I knew you wouldn't wear it – it's a present for you, remember?" Tony gives a leering grin and insists on divesting himself of his bathrobe and putting the silly thing on his cock.

There's a brief lull in the present opening while Gibbs succumbs to the joys of an almost completely naked Tony kneeling in front of him and giving him a blowjob.

Later some more sensible presents emerge, including an expensive cashmere sweater in a deep shade of blue, and a massive brown and cream fur rug.

"For here," Tony says, laying it out in front of the fire. "For the day when I finally persuade you to have sex anywhere but in the bedroom."

"You just blew me in here," Gibbs points out.

"That doesn't count. I'm talking full-blown sex. I'll wear you down on this one day, Jethro, and when I do, we'll have sex on this nice fur rug and not one of those fuck ugly rugs you bought before I moved in and brought some good taste to this place."

"Good taste?" Gibbs snorts, glancing pointedly at the ridiculous Santa thong Tony is wearing. Tony just laughs out loud at that and tweaks his Santa-covered cock obscenely.

Gibbs gives Tony some new boots and an expensive watch, which Tony is delighted with.

"I've got you something else – but you'll have to wait until later to open it," Gibbs tells him, knowing Tony will love the drama of that.

He's right, and Tony keeps pestering him for more information for the next two hours while he makes lunch. Gibbs remains mute – he's always been good at that.

Tony keeps glancing at his new watch over lunch. He's insisted on having the radio playing while they're eating, and then suddenly he goes quiet as a song comes on the radio. Gibbs finds himself humming along to the song, and, realising he knows it, he glances at Tony in surprise to find that Tony has a look of gleeful anticipation on his face.

"This is one of your songs," Gibbs identifies slowly. It isn't Tony singing it, but he recognises it as one that Tony composed over the summer. It's a catchy little number, and he often used to hum along with Tony when he sang it.

"Yup!" Tony looks like he's about to burst. "I sold a song, Jethro! I didn't want to tell you before in case nothing came of it. And I wanted it to be a surprise."

"That's fantastic, Tony!" He plants a kiss on Tony's cheek. "Sounded better when you sang it though."

Tony proceeds to tell him all about the process of finding an agent and selling the song, and his plans to write more. Gibbs is glad something so good has happened to him; he deserves it.

Later that evening, it's time for Gibbs to give Tony his final present, so he gets one of his own scarves and fastens it over Tony's eyes.

"Ooh – kinky!" Tony says, reaching out to grope Gibbs enthusiastically. Gibbs slaps the back of his head and leads him out into the workroom.

He places Tony's hand on the sleek wood he's been working on for the past few weeks.

"What the hell is it?" Tony asks him, and Gibbs puts him out of his misery by removing the blindfold.

Tony stares at the baby grand piano for ages, looking completely shocked.

"You made this?" he asks at last, running a hand over the shiny black surface of the piano.

"Not from scratch. I restored it. Got some guy up from town to help with the stringing and tuning. I know you love your guitar, but the piano is your first love so I thought..."

"It's beautiful. I mean...it's..." Tony pauses, his eyes looking a little glassy. "Nobody has ever done anything like this for me, Jethro. I mean...not ever."

Gibbs hadn't expected him to be so overwhelmed. He pulls him in for a hug so Tony can surreptitiously brush his wet face against his shirt and hide the evidence.

Tony sits down at the stool Gibbs made to go with the piano and lays his hands almost reverently on the keyboard. He plays a few notes, gently coaxing a melody out of the piano, looking the happiest Gibbs has ever seen him.

"But where will we put it?" Tony asks as they return to the cabin. "I mean, we're running out of space in the living room." He stands there, looking around.

"Emmylou is moving," Gibbs says. "She and Tom are heading south, and she asked if I was interested in buying her house. It's a lot further down the mountain and doesn't get cut off nearly as often as this place does in the winter. And it's a hell of a lot bigger. There's enough space for you to have your own music room, next to my workroom."

"Sounds perfect." Tony is looking at him with a surprised expression in his eyes. "But is it what you want, Jethro? I'm not asking you to do this."

"I know." Gibbs shrugs. "But I figure it's time to move a little closer to civilisation."

Maybe at some point he'll even be able to spend a few months of the year in the city with Tony. He's not there yet, but he thinks he might be one day. Little steps...

"This place was what I needed a few years ago, but it's not big enough for two people, long-term," he adds.

Tony grins at that and wraps his arms around Gibbs, drawing him close. "Long-term?"

"Yeah, see, you're wrong. I do trust you."

"About damn time." Tony leans in for a kiss. Then he draws back, an assessing look in his eyes. "You mean that? You trust me?"

"Yeah, Tony. I trust you."

"So you're ready now?" Tony asks softly.

"I guess I am."

Tony gives a slow smile and holds out his hand. Gibbs takes it and allows Tony to draw him over to the rug in front of the fire. They're going to do this Tony's way, and Gibbs finds he doesn't mind that.

He's learned a lot in the past three years.

He's learned that he can't control the PTSD, or what it does to his body.

He's learned that he can't rely on himself to be strong and in control all the time and that sometimes he has to lean on other people.

He's learned to accept the unconditional love of one man and one dog, even when his pride protests.

He's learned that someone else can be as strong for him as he's always been for them.

He has learned that he has to bend, or he will break.

And he's learned that while he can't always trust himself anymore, he can always trust Tony DiNozzo.

Tony switches off the lights, plunging them into semi-darkness. The room glows, illuminated only by the soft light of the fire and the twinkling of the Christmas tree lights. Tony puts on some music; sweet, low, mellow jazz, and they undress each other slowly, pausing to kiss and nuzzle as they go.

When they're naked, Tony guides him down onto the new rug in front of the fire. He is bathed in the fire's warm embrace, and the fur rug feels luxurious under his bare skin.

Tony's body is so perfectly familiar; his weight, his smell, his taste, and the firmness of his skin under Gibbs's fingertips.

Tony nuzzles his neck, kissing and sucking, and then bestows a trail of kisses down his belly. Gibbs rests his hands on Tony's ass, surrendering to the sensation of just being loved.

They become lost in their own lazy, leisurely world of lovemaking. There's no rush; they have all the time in the world, alone in this cabin so high up on the mountain, surrounded by snow.

Tony's lubed fingers slick carefully in Gibbs's body, stretching and opening him, and Gibbs lies back, relaxing and allowing himself to just enjoy being taken care of.

The fire has dwindled down to warmly glowing embers by the time Tony eventually slides into Gibbs's body. Gibbs wraps his legs around him, pulling him in deep.

In the background, the jazz plays a smoky melody as Tony kisses him deeply with each smooth inward thrust.

It's a slow orgasm that takes its time building, bit by bit, until it reaches a magnificent crescendo. Both of them are lost to the world for several minutes after. Tony just lies on top of him, breathing heavily, his body covered in a thin sheen of sweat, and Gibbs kisses his neck, stroking his hair lazily with his fingers.

Eventually Tony pulls out, grabs the throw from the couch, and wraps it around them both.

They lie there face to face, gazing at each other drowsily in the dimly lit room. Tony's hand is on Gibbs's hip, and every so often he strokes his fingers lazily over Gibbs's thigh.

They doze, and sleep, and kiss, and doze. At some point Gibbs wakes up to find that the music has finished playing and the fire has almost completely died.

He slips out from under the blanket and throws some more logs onto the fire. Over in his basket, Digger makes a soft little sighing sound in his sleep. Gibbs glances at Digger and then looks down on Tony, remembering how he spent his first Christmas in this cabin, all alone, without these two in his life.

Tony stirs and looks up. "Hey...get back under the blanket. You must be freezing," he says, raising his arm to welcome Gibbs back in.

"No, I'm not...in fact, I think I'm all thawed out now," Gibbs says softly.

Gibbs gets back under the blanket, and Tony wraps his arms around him immediately, holding him close and warming him all the way through.

It is Gibbs's fourth Christmas after leaving NCIS.

And he knows that he will never spend Christmas alone again.

The End

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