

Ghosts by Xanthe



Story Archived: <http://www.xanthe.org/ghosts/>

Story Notes:

This story is a sequel to "Andy" and it won't make much sense if you haven't read that one. "Ghosts" was written for generale_kenobi, hildejohanne, taylorgibbs, murgy31, and thaigirl123 in aid of the help_haiti campaign. Thank you so much for your kind generosity.

The original prompt read: "a story, from Tony's POV, featuring his job interview at NCIS, when "Andy" sees Jethro for the first time in 10 years, with musings and memories about their time together and Tony looking for Gibbs..."

On a side note, there's a line in here which someone sent me via email feedback to "Andy" ages ago. I can't credit them because my last PC ate the fb when it died, but I always remembered the line!

1. **Chapter 1** by Xanthe
 2. **Chapter 2** by Xanthe
- Chapter 1 by Xanthe

2008

The Ferrari ate up the road, its sleek, red, highly polished exterior drawing admiring glances from all the other road users – well, in Tony's mind anyway. It was entirely possible that a proportion of the admiring glances were directed at his handsome passenger, because Gibbs was a damn fine looking man and all the more so for being dressed in his formal funeral garb.

He had shed the black jacket and tie, his crisp white shirt was open at the neck, and he was laughing, looking happy, relaxed and carefree. Hell, the man looked younger now than when Tony had first laid eyes on him in that bar all those years ago. Then his eyes had been full of shadows, and he'd carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. Now he looked like he'd emerged from a long, lonely sleep, prepared to face the world again.

Tony didn't give a damn whether people were admiring his hot car or his hot passenger; he was the happiest guy alive, and he had the car and lover to prove it.

Tony pulled into a motel just before dusk, swerved the car in an elegant loop around the parking lot, and then swung it effortlessly into one of the available parking spaces with an entirely unnecessary flourish of his wrists.

"Show off." Gibbs rolled his eyes.

Tony raised an eyebrow. "And this would be different to that shit-eating grin you had on your face when freewheeling your yellow charger down Stillwater Main Street how?"

Gibbs laughed out loud, and Tony didn't think he'd ever tire of how exhilarating it was that he could make that sound emerge from Gibbs's usually taciturn throat.

"I guess that where our choice of cars is concerned, we're both kids at heart," Gibbs acknowledged.

"Yeah – although you rescued yours as a heap of junk and spent months patiently trying to get her working again - whereas I just coveted this beauty for her looks." Tony patted the Ferrari's glossy red exterior through the open window and then glanced sideways at Gibbs. "Why do I get the feeling I'm more shallow than you, Boss?"

Gibbs gave an amused shake of his head. "You just wanted something you couldn't have. Plenty of us do that." His smile faded. "I've been doin' it for years."

Tony gazed at him, unsure how to reply. He knew Gibbs came with baggage – hell, they both did. His own father was barely cold in his grave, and Gibbs knew all about his daddy issues.

But Tony had seen Gibbs in the aftermath of Shannon and Kelly's deaths and witnessed, first hand, all the anger and self-destructive behaviour that had accompanied that dark time in Gibbs's life.

"You sure about this?" Tony asked quietly, remembering all of Gibbs's failed marriages and equally failed affairs. He'd seen some of them crash and burn with his own eyes – Stephanie, Jenny, Hollis...and he had a pretty good idea why they hadn't worked out. "I didn't mean to rush you into anything, and this all happened pretty fast. I don't want you feeling like you owe me anything just because I was this loser kid you took under your wing once, and who couldn't let you go."

"Nobody ever hung in so long for so little." Gibbs gave a wry grunt. "Don't know what made you so sure I'm worth it, Tony, because I figure you've only ever seen the worst of me."

"Not true. You took care of me, Jethro – back when I was nineteen, and every day since I started working for you. Okay, so you're a bastard..." Tony grinned. "But you're my bastard now."

Gibbs snorted, and Tony wondered if he got it. Gibbs had been kicking his ass and keeping him safe from the minute he'd first met him, and Tony didn't just enjoy the combination – he needed it. He had never once doubted Gibbs's honest affection for him, no matter how big a bastard he could sometimes be.

He reached out and touched the side of Gibbs's face, drawing his chin up so he could look straight into those vivid blue eyes.

"You threw me a lifeline, Jethro," he said quietly. "You gave me a chance, and you never turned your back on me, no matter how much I screwed up. Even when you ran out on me all those years ago it was to protect me. If I'd known it was you paying for my education...well, I'd have felt obligated, and I'd have come to resent you for it."

"When you weren't offering to offset the costs of that education with blowjobs no doubt," Gibbs said, with just a quirk of a grin.

"Oh, you cannot expect me to hear the word 'blowjob' from your lips and not react!" Tony exclaimed, feeling his cock harden in response. "What the hell are we doing sitting in the car when there's a motel room with our name on it just over there?" He jerked his head and moved to open the car door.

Gibbs caught his arm firmly and pulled Tony back down into his seat. "How about you? Are *you* sure about this, Tony?" he asked. "Only...there's a big difference between what you wanted when you were nineteen, and what you might want now, as an adult."

Tony saw that same dark, brooding look in Gibbs's eyes that he recognized from a time long past.

"I'm sure," he said firmly. He glanced at the shiny red car and then at Gibbs. "And there's no

damn difference at all, Jethro. What I wanted then is what I want now. No question."

Gibbs released his arm, and Tony gave it a rueful little rub. He saw the apology in Gibbs's eyes that he knew he'd never hear from the man's lips.

Tony jerked his head in the direction of the motel. "C'mon. You look way too hot in those clothes for me to let you stay in them for long."

He gave Gibbs a wicked grin, and then he scrambled to get out of the car with Gibbs following on behind at a more leisurely pace, a little smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

The motel room was small but clean. Tony threw the bags onto the bed and kicked the door shut behind them.

"Bring back memories?" He reached for Gibbs and pulled him close. "You and me, alone in a motel room..." He grinned suggestively.

"Yeah, except you're not a hustler, and I'm not drunk this time around."

"At least I was a good hustler – you were a lousy drunk." Tony began unbuttoning Gibbs's shirt urgently, wanting to get at all that taut flesh underneath.

"You're kidding right?" Gibbs chuckled. "You were a lousy hustler. You turned your tricks for free."

"Just one trick. Only you. All the rest paid." Tony slid Gibbs's shirt off his shoulders, trapping his arms by his sides, and trailed a line of kisses over Gibbs's newly exposed collarbones.

"How many were there?" Gibbs asked.

Tony paused and glanced at him. "This some weird jealousy thing? You know what I used to do, Jethro. You always have."

"No." Gibbs shook his head. "Just...you're mine now, Tony. I don't like to think of what you had to do to get by. Don't like to think of where I was in my head when I first met you, either. Those memories you talk about...they're one hell of a mix of good and bad. Good that I found you; bad that we were both so fucked up back then."

"I know. That's why we have to make new memories."

Tony stared into Gibbs's eyes, noticing the hints of uncertainty there – Gibbs wanted him, he had no doubt about that, but he was afraid, too. Tony could see the fear there, and he understood, instinctively, what it was about. Gibbs hadn't truly loved anyone since Shannon – and even seventeen years later he was afraid of laying his heart on the line and having it shattered again. Tony wasn't sure Gibbs could survive that happening a second time; he'd been broken enough.

"You said it, Jethro," he murmured. "I'm yours now." He slid his hands around Gibbs's back, pressing the flat of his palms against his warm skin, pulling him in. "But I've been yours for seventeen years, and I've spent the last eight of them by your side. I'm not going anywhere, Jethro. You've got me. You always did."

Gibbs was still held captive by the arms of his shirt, and Tony took advantage of that fact and kissed his lips gently but firmly. It was like waking a sleeping giant; Gibbs's brief moment of doubt disappeared, and he surged into action. He flung off his shirt, freeing his arms, grabbed hold of Tony, and kissed him back. He pushed Tony over to the bed and threw him down on it, then paused and looked at him, a predatory gleam in his eyes.

Tony grinned and moistened his lower lip slowly and maddeningly with his tongue, knowing that the action would go straight to Gibbs's cock. Sure enough, Gibbs gave a low growl and the front of his dress pants tented appreciatively. He launched himself onto the bed, landing just to one side of Tony, and began caressing him with that slow, passionate, smouldering intensity that Tony remembered from seventeen years ago – and last night.

They got naked quickly, and Gibbs fished the lube and condoms from the side of Tony's bag. Within seconds, Gibbs was sliding his cock into Tony, and Tony was gasping, his body rising to meet Gibbs's fast, forceful thrusts. It felt so good. It was as good as he remembered it being when he was nineteen – it just felt so right to be gazing up into Gibbs's intense, blue-eyed gaze as he made love to him.

Tony reached down and slid his hand along his own cock in time with Gibbs's urgent thrusts. They were both in such a hurry that they came at almost the same time, gasping out their orgasms with little panting shudders of pleasure. Then Gibbs lowered himself down onto Tony's body and lay there, his hair soft beneath Tony's chin, while they both recovered.

"So, I'm thinking if this was a film, it'd be *Pretty Woman*," Tony mused, wrapping both his arms around Gibbs's back. "You do kinda have a look of Richard Gere, Jethro." He ran his fingers through Gibbs's silver hair to illustrate the point. "Only better looking of course," he added hastily as Gibbs glanced up at him with a frown.

"Well, I hate to break it to you, DiNozzo, but you look nothin' the hell like Julia Roberts," Gibbs replied, resting his weight on his elbows and gazing at Tony quizzically, his cock still embedded in Tony's body.

"Hey! We both have big smiles!" Tony grinned to illustrate the point.

Gibbs rolled his eyes.

"Did you know that whole movie was based on a fairy story?" Tony said, his usual post-sex chattiness kicking in. Gibbs raised an eyebrow. "Cinderella," Tony informed him with a smirk.

Gibbs grinned. "Cinderella huh? Suits you."

"Hah! If I'm Cinders that makes you Prince Charming!" Tony laughed out loud. "Yeah, I can totally see you in that role, Boss!"

Even lying on top of him, with his cock up Tony's ass, Gibbs still possessed the ability to deliver a might fine head slap. Tony grinned even more and pushed up, forcing Gibbs off him. He rolled over onto his lover and now it was his turn to look down at Gibbs.

"I think you belong in a different fairy story though, Jethro. I think you have your own story." He leaned down and sucked gently on Gibbs's earlobe, loving the way Gibbs went totally still beneath him.

"Oh yeah, DiNozzo? What's that? Be careful here...you could be on dangerous ground." The expression in Gibbs's eyes was halfway between amusement and arousal as Tony continued to suck on his earlobe.

"Think of you more as Sleeping Beauty, Jethro," Tony whispered huskily in his ear.

Gibbs rested his hands on Tony's ass, looking both curious and amused. "I know I'm gonna regret this, but go on, tell me why." Gibbs sighed.

Tony drew back and rested his weight on one elbow. He ran his hand gently through Gibbs's hair. "Seventeen years stuck in a lonely tower, waiting for someone to get through all the brambles and briars keeping the world out – waiting for someone to force their way through those walls and bring you to life."

Gibbs gazed up at him, a startled expression in his eyes. "With a kiss?" he asked quietly.

"With a kiss." Tony moved his head down and gently captured Gibbs's mouth with his own.

Happily ever after, Tony thought, as he explored Gibbs's mouth with his tongue, sinking in deep. The trouble with fairy stories was that they always ended just as something big and important was beginning. It was all very well finding out how the couple in question got together – but what happened after Cinders had been rescued from a life of drudgery and Sleeping Beauty had been awakened with a kiss?

What the hell happened next?

~*~

1991

Tony glanced around the crowded gym, looking for Gibbs. He'd been here a few minutes ago... Tony frowned and moved away from his group of friends.

“Hey, Tony, you coming with us?” Jason asked. “We’re going to Matt’s place for a party.” He leaned in close. “Looks like we’re gonna get lucky tonight,” he leered, glancing at the gaggle of girls clustered around them. “Nothing like being on the winning team for getting the babes all wet and ready, huh?” He made an obscene gesture with his tongue.

Tony looked at the pretty girls, and a couple of them eyed him back suggestively. He could have his pick – he knew that. He was the star of the team, he was popular, he was good looking...he could bury himself balls deep in one of those girls tonight and enjoy every single second of it. And yet...he glanced around again.

“Anyone see where my old man went?” he asked.

Jason looked at him as if he’d gone nuts. “Forget your old man – we have some partying to do, Tony!”

“Yeah...sure...you guys go ahead. I’ll catch you later.”

Tony made a run for the door. Why had Gibbs just shot off like that without saying goodbye? Why hadn’t he waited around to give Tony a lift back to the motel room? Had Gibbs thought he’d prefer to party with these kids than go back with him? If so, he couldn’t be more wrong.

“Idiot,” Tony muttered to himself, running out into the parking lot. “Damn stupid idiot.”

He liked his friends, but they were just kids. They’d lived soft, easy lives. They didn’t have that darkness in their eyes that Gibbs had – and that Tony somehow connected with, even though he didn’t know why. Those girls smelled good and looked pretty but they weren’t Gibbs. Tony knew he wanted to be on his hands and knees being reamed by Gibbs’s hard cock rather than pounding into some doe-eyed girl who hung on his every word.

He wanted to smell Gibbs’s earthy scent and feel the rasp of his stubbled chin as he kissed him – one of those long, deep, possessive kisses that sent Tony wild. He wanted to be pinned down by strong, muscular arms and feel a hard, toned body against his own. He’d never felt about anyone the way he felt about Gibbs – hell, he hadn’t felt this way since...since military academy.

Tony didn’t want to think about his first love or how that had ended. He was a fast runner, and the motel wasn’t far away. Maybe Gibbs had gone to get drunk in the nearby bar – if he had, hopefully Tony would be able to drag him out before he was too drunk to get it up. Not that Gibbs had been drinking so much over the last few days. When Tony had first met him he’d been so sure he was an alcoholic like his mom. However, it seemed that although Gibbs could drink mom under the table he could also stop whenever he wanted, which she had never been able to do.

Tony was still warm from the basketball game and the run back to the motel was easy. He had just reached the parking lot when he saw the tail lights of Gibbs’s car disappearing off up the road. He stopped and stood there, panting heavily; where the hell was Gibbs going at

this time of night?

Tony had a bad feeling about this. He fumbled for his motel room key, unlocked the door, and then shoved it open and turned on the light. His stuff was where he'd left it, strewn all over the room in a dozen different places, but he saw immediately that Gibbs's stuff was gone.

Tony's heart was hammering in his chest as he ran into to the bathroom. He frantically checked to see if Gibbs's shaving gear and toothbrush were there – but there was only an empty gap where they'd been this morning.

He ran back into the bedroom and threw open the closet door, but the only clothes hanging inside were a couple of his own shirts. He shut the door with a savage swing of his hand.

“You bastard. You fucking bastard.”

He dropped to his knees, feeling like someone had punched him in the gut. It hurt. He'd finally found someone he liked, someone he trusted, and someone who had been there for him when he was hurting. His dad had never been that person – hell, nobody in his life had ever been that person...until Gibbs. And now he was gone.

“Fuck you!” he screamed at the empty room.

He knelt there, arms crossed over his belly, panting heavily. His hitching breaths morphed into bitter, angry sobs, and he wiped his arm across his eyes, trying to scrub the tears out of them.

He didn't want to feel this way. He wasn't the same damn stupid kid who'd got caught fucking another boy at boarding school and hauled off in disgrace. He wasn't the same stupid child who'd allowed his father's endless stream of criticism and acutely timed jibes to get under his skin and hurt him. He'd told himself he wouldn't be that person again. He wouldn't let this latest rejection get to him, either. Fuck Leroy Jethro Gibbs. He'd managed just fine before he came along, and he'd manage just fine without him.

He glanced around the room bitterly and saw the note lying on the table in the corner. He got up, went over there, and picked it up.

Dear Andy,

It's time for me to move on. The room is paid for until the end of the month so that gives you three weeks to figure some stuff out. I've left you some cash under the pillow for food. Do not go back on the streets.

Take care,

J

“Fuck you. You’re not my father - you don’t fucking get to tell me what to do.”

He scrunched up the note and threw it on the floor and then threw himself on the bed. The pillow smelled of Gibbs. It was a smell that reminded Tony of warmth, safety, a gruff kind of loving, and nights of endlessly hot sex.

He slid his hand under the pillow and found the cash – then whistled as he saw how much Gibbs had left for him. Between this and the motel room he wouldn’t have to go back to the bars looking for trade for weeks. Although how the hell Gibbs thought he’d figure anything out in that time was beyond him. It wasn’t like his situation would have changed by the time the money ran out.

He heard a car pulling up outside and got up, feeling the surge of hope. Maybe Gibbs had changed his mind. Maybe he’d realized what a mistake he’d made and turned tail and come back. Tony ran to the door and threw it open – to see a young couple get out of their car, talking and laughing as they made their way to their motel room.

“Idiot,” he berated himself, slamming the door shut again. “Why do you always ruin everything by falling in love?”

He said the words without thinking, and then the sudden blinding realization hit him. In love. He was in love with Leroy Jethro Gibbs. This was only the second time he’d been in love – the first time had ended in disaster, and the second time, it seemed, hadn’t ended much better. “Don’t do it again,” he warned himself. “Don’t ever give someone the power to hurt you like this again.”

He stood in the doorway, looking around the little room that had been his whole world these past two weeks. Everywhere he looked he saw a memory: Gibbs lying in a drunken stupor on the bed, unshaven, his eyes red-rimmed and his tee shirt stained with liquor. Gibbs sober – and completely naked - standing by bathroom door, grinning at him, his cock jutting out proudly, hard and ready for a vigorous bout of fucking; Gibbs sitting in the chair beside the bed, feeding him medicine and rubbing ointment into the worst of his welts; Gibbs sleeping on his back, hair dark against the white pillow, snoring away.

Tony had spent hours awake at night just watching the man sleep, his chin resting on Gibbs’s chest while Gibbs snored. There was something about him that fascinated Tony. He longed to feel those strong arms wrapped around him again, longed to inhale the scent of the man, and to feel those firm, mobile lips pressed against his own.

Tony went over to the note he’d thrown onto the floor and picked it up. Gibbs had packed up, taken everything he owned, and vanished into the night. Tony knew nothing about him except his name. He didn’t know where Gibbs had come from or where he was going. He didn’t have a clue why he drank so heavily, or why he slept with a gun under his pillow every night. He didn’t know why an air of shocked grief hung over the man like a permanent cloud; Gibbs was as much of a mystery to him now as he had been when they’d first met.

All Tony had left of Leroy Jethro Gibbs was his memories of the two weeks they’d spent

together and this note. Tony smoothed out the creases gently with his fingertips and then folded it up carefully and placed it inside his wallet.

~*~

2008

They went to a diner across the street to grab something to eat and on their way back to the motel room they passed a bunch of local kids playing basketball. Tony grinned at Gibbs and ran off to join them, ignoring Gibbs's sigh of exasperation and shout of "you're way too old for this, DiNozzo!"

The kids didn't seem to feel the same way – especially when they saw how good he was.

"Too old? Like hell! I've still got the moves!" Tony called out to Gibbs as he dribbled around his opponent, rose up into the air, and landed the ball in the basket with that satisfying whoosh of air that always made his heart beat a little faster. God he loved this game!

As he played he was aware of Gibbs's eyes on him, and he was nineteen again, back in that gym, playing in front of his 'dad'. His own father had never once come to watch him play. He was always too busy or just plain disinterested – he never had given a damn about Tony's passions. He wanted his son to be a mini-me, a little version of himself with the same interests, the same goals, and the same sexual orientation. It had infuriated him beyond belief when Tony had made it clear he was different in every single way. No wonder the old man had disowned him.

Tony faltered as he began a jump, remembering what it had felt like to stand in his father's dark, oppressive study and hear the old man tell him that he wouldn't be getting a cent out of him. He was a fucking *fag*, a queer, and a dumb little shit as well – he was no son of his.

The lapse of concentration cost him as his opponent launched himself at him, and Tony fell sideways, landing awkwardly and falling into a graceless heap on the ground. He felt the impact grazing his shin and knee and growled out a curse. A few seconds later a shadow fell over him, blocking out the light.

"Still having a good time, DiNozzo?"

Tony looked up into Gibbs's amused blue eyes.

"Ow. No." Tony gazed up at him pathetically. "You're right – I *am* getting too old for this."

Gibbs grinned and held out a hand; Tony grabbed it and allowed him to haul him up.

"Ow," he said again as he limped a few steps. He could feel the blood trickling down his leg under his jeans. Gibbs took pity on him and pulled his arm over his shoulder and began

walking him back to their motel room.

"I'm getting a strong sense of déjà vu," Gibbs muttered as they walked.

Tony laughed. "Me too! That was a couple of years ago – we went to a Navy base, and I threw a few hoops with the guys – then landed badly on my ankle. You had to haul me off the court back then too."

"Always wondered if you played that day just to get my attention," Gibbs said softly. Tony turned to look at him. "Andy was pretty thrilled when I went to watch him play that time," Gibbs explained.

"Yeah." Tony smiled to himself. "And yes, I played basketball that day to get your attention, Jethro. I wanted to see in your eyes if you remembered."

"Get any answers?" Gibbs quirked an eyebrow.

"From you? Are you kidding! Remind me never to play poker with you. I just assumed you didn't remember – that you had no idea I was Andy so watching me play basketball was meaningless to you."

"Oh, it wasn't meaningless, Tony." Gibbs gave a tight little smile. "I couldn't stop thinking about you – about Andy – for days after that."

They reached the motel, and Gibbs propped Tony up against the wall and opened the door, then helped him inside.

"And this is bringing back another memory," Tony said, as Gibbs deposited him on the bed.

"Yeah. Bad memory. You sitting on the step outside the motel room, all beat up." Gibbs jerked his head at Tony's jeans. "Get 'em off. Let's see the damage."

Tony undid his fly and peeled his jeans down his legs, pulling the fabric gingerly away from his sore leg. His knee was badly grazed and blood was flowing freely down his shin.

"Damn it," he muttered mournfully as he surveyed his injured leg. "I really thought today was going to turn out better than this."

"Been kind of a rollercoaster, hasn't it?" Gibbs said, going into the bathroom.

Tony could hear him turning on the faucet, and then Gibbs emerged a couple of seconds later with a wad of toilet paper and a glass full of water. He knelt down in front of Tony.

"First you bury your dad, then you get a Ferrari, and then you smash up your knee."

"You missed out the bit about the bone-meltingly good sex." Tony grinned. "One thing I never forgot was how damn good you are in the sack."

Gibbs grunted, but Tony thought he looked pleased. He dipped the toilet paper in the water and gently bathed the blood away from Tony's shin and knee.

"There have been so many times these past eight years when I've sat across the squad room from you, watching you, and remembering what it felt like when you rammed that big, fat cock of yours into me." Tony smiled happily.

Gibbs frowned. "Clearly I wasn't working you hard enough if you had all that time to think about sex."

Tony laughed. "Don't tell me you never once looked at me and thought about how hot we were together! There was never anyone as good as you, Jethro – and I sure as hell went looking. Nobody else ever measured up."

"Hmm." Gibbs finished washing Tony's leg and reached into his bag and rummaged around for a few seconds before fishing out a small first aid kit.

"Aw, c'mon, don't tell me you never once remembered how good it felt when I had my lips wrapped around your cock! We're good together in bed, Jethro. We always were. You have to admit that," Tony chided.

Gibbs made no reply, but Tony didn't miss the small, secret, very satisfied smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth. He opened the first aid kit and found a band aid.

"Who travels with a first aid kit anyway?" Tony wrinkled up his forehead in disbelief.

"Me. Always," Gibbs replied. "You never know when the idiot you're with is going to get himself hurt showing off."

He stuck the band aid onto Tony's knee and then sat back on his heels. "There – all done."

"Thanks, Dad." The words were out of Tony's mouth before he realized it, and then he could have kicked himself. He saw Gibbs's shoulders tighten and suddenly there was an atmosphere in the room you could cut with a knife. "Not gonna throw me out for calling you that this time, are you?" he asked softly.

"Don't be an idiot." Gibbs stood up and his back made a popping sound. He threw the band aid wrapper and soiled toilet paper into the trash can.

Tony thought about making a joke to diffuse the tension, but then he realized that this particular issue would always be between them – they had to find some way of getting to grips with it.

"I didn't know – back then. Christ, you'd only just lost Kelly – no wonder you freaked out."

Gibbs flinched when Tony said her name – it was only a tiny movement, but Tony caught it

all the same.

“Ghosts,” Tony murmured. Gibbs turned around, a question in his eyes. “My father, Kelly, Shannon – those ghosts were always in the room with us back then, Jethro; looks like that hasn’t changed.”

Gibbs rubbed a hand over his chin, and then he came and sat down on the bed beside Tony.

“I’m not...this is not stuff I’m good at, but I will try – for you. Never could before. Not for any of my ex-wives, but I want this – us – to work out.”

Tony saw it again – that little spike of fear, so unlike Gibbs. That fear that he’d never made a relationship work since Shannon’s death, and that fear, also, of loving someone again – of giving his whole heart and having it shattered.

“My ‘daddy’ issues, your ‘being a daddy’ issues.” Tony gave a wry smile. “We are broken in such complementary ways, Jethro.”

Gibbs shook his head. “Not broken, Tony. Mike Franks once told me that I was battered and bruised but not broken. And you aren’t broken, either – hell, you went ten rounds with your father before he died, and he never once landed a knockout blow despite you pulling your punches more than he deserved. I almost broke though - back then, when I was on my liquored-up road trip.”

“You slept with your gun under your pillow. I never knew if one day you’d put it in your mouth and pull the trigger,” Tony said quietly.

“And you slept in dumpsters and turned tricks in bars. I think...” Gibbs hesitated and then ploughed on determinedly. “I think that finding you stopped me from breaking, Tony. I think I was close to it.”

“And finding you stopped me from...well, I have no idea what the hell would have happened to me if I’d continued with that kind of lifestyle, Jethro.”

“I was such a shit back then; the drinking, the gun, the weird reactions that must have freaked you out. Why didn’t you just move on and forget about me? Why the hell did you come looking for me all those years later?” Gibbs asked, looking genuinely puzzled.

“Oh, that’s easy.” Tony smiled. “You left me a note.”

~*~

2001

"Hey, DiNozzo – you coming to the bar later?" Daley asked.

"Hmm?" Tony hid the brochure under a pile of papers and glanced up at his partner. Daley was a big, capable cop who ate too many donuts, but he'd taken Tony under his wing when he'd first arrived at Baltimore PD and had been a good friend to him.

"Bar?" Daley sat back in his chair and his shirt rode up over his ample belly. He patted it proudly. "Beer," he added unnecessarily.

"Maybe." Tony glanced surreptitiously at the brochure.

"What you got there? Picture of Susan in her birthday suit?" Daley grinned. Susan was his latest girlfriend – Tony was always careful to parade his girlfriends around the police station to draw attention away from his frequent trips to gay clubs when he was between women. He'd learned the necessity for camouflage the hard way as a teenager, and it wasn't a lesson he was going to forget.

"Hah! Wouldn't you like to see that!" Tony gave a lascivious wink.

Susan was a former model and beauty queen, with a statuesque figure that made all the guys' heads turn. Tony liked her well enough, but it wasn't as if it was going to go anywhere. The sex was good, but he never felt connected. If he'd never known any different he might have thought this was as good as it got...but he did know different. The only time he'd ever connected with anyone during sex, and enjoyed it on a whole other level, had been with Jethro, all those years ago. He'd been searching for it ever since but never found it. If it hadn't been for those two weeks with Jethro he'd never even know such a connection existed. But he did. And he couldn't forget.

"Yes I would..." Daley could move surprisingly fast for such a big guy and a second later he'd snatched the brochure from Tony's fingers and was holding it aloft, with a triumphant grin on his face. "What beauties do we have here...?" he began, only to trail off in surprise when he saw what it was. "NCIS? What the hell is that?" He glanced at Tony.

"Federal agency. Navy cops," Tony muttered, shame-faced.

"And you're reading their recruiting brochure? Why?"

Tony sighed. "Can't stay here forever, Bill."

"Why the hell not? I intend to," Daley retorted. "Seriously, Tony – you're thinking of becoming a fed? Why?"

Tony grinned. "Aw, c'mon – being a fed is way more attractive to the chicks than being a cop, Bill. Think how many more hot babes I'll get."

"You already get more than your fair share, pretty boy." Daley threw the brochure back at Tony. "But if you wanna impress the ladies, then join the FBI. Ain't nobody even heard of NCIS."

Tony grinned and quickly stowed the brochure away in his desk drawer again. But when Daley left to get coffee he reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet, took out an old piece of paper, and gently smoothed it out in front of him. He knew the message by heart, but he liked looking at it anyway. He traced his finger over the signature.

J

Jethro.

Leroy Jethro Gibbs.

Tony was a cop – he was good at tracking people down. He'd resisted the urge to track down Gibbs for years, but that piece of paper had burned a hole through his wallet, through his pocket, and right through to his skin, and in the end he'd had to go looking just to ease the ache.

It had taken him awhile, but he'd found out where Gibbs worked. Maybe he should have been more surprised to find that his old lover was in a similar line of work to him, but he wasn't. He thought Gibbs would make a good federal agent. There was something so tough and focused about the man.

Daley was right about one thing though – Tony sure as hell hadn't heard of NCIS; he'd had to read up about the place where Jethro now worked.

Tony fingered the ad he'd attached to the brochure. He'd printed it off the NCIS website during one of the many long sessions he'd spent browsing the site. There was a vacancy in the Major Crimes Response Team, headed up by none other than the object of his fascination himself. Tony would have to get accepted as an agent and go through the FLETC, but he had all the right qualifications for the job.

Did he dare do it?

Could he walk into an interview, sit opposite that man he'd known all those years ago, and pretend like it never happened? Or supposing he went in there, all piss and vinegar, and reminded Gibbs of what they'd once shared, with a cheeky raised eyebrow and an invitation on his lips? What was he expecting Gibbs to do? Throw his arms around him and tell him he'd missed him? The man would more likely kick his ass and throw him out.

"Damn it!" He got out the brochure again and threw it in the trash. "Thinking with your dick as usual, DiNozzo, you stupid idiot."

He could hear his father's voice in his mind, throwing out all his usual taunts.

"What the hell makes you think he'll even remember you? You were just a sniveling little shit when he met you, sucking off strangers in bars like the whore you are – the whore you'll always be inside. He hasn't thought about you for even a second since he high-tailed it out of

your life. As for you – a federal agent? Don't make me laugh, boy. They don't take lazy little shits like you."

He sat there for a moment, thinking about it. "You know what, Dad? You're probably right." He picked the brochure out of the trash, a grin on his face. "And you know another thing? I always did love proving you wrong."

~*~

Chapter 2 by Xanthe

2008

Tony didn't think he'd ever get tired of waking up to find Gibbs lying beneath him. He stretched out, luxuriating in being entangled so thoroughly in Gibbs's firm body. He loved the feel of the man's chest hair under his ear and the scent of his sweat from the previous night's love-making.

He knew he had a habit of physically smothering his bed partners by lying half on top of them, his legs entwined in theirs, but he couldn't help himself. He had never been great at asking for physical affection – he just stole it in the night when his lovers were sleeping. He didn't dare ask when they were awake. He didn't even know how. Physical affection wasn't something his family had been in the habit of handing out, and he'd never learned how to get it any other way than by stealth.

His mom had offered the occasional absent-minded hug but had usually been too drunk to notice him. His dad...well, he couldn't remember the last time his father had hugged him – he thought maybe he'd been about six, and even then it'd been a cursory necessity rather than a show of affection. He'd broken his leg climbing a tree, and his father had picked him up to carry him into the house while his mother had staggered off to call an ambulance.

His mom had been supposed to be supervising him while he played, but as usual she'd been drinking which is why the accident had happened in the first place. Tony wasn't sure who his father had been most annoyed with – his mom for getting stinking drunk, or him for taking his attention-seeking to the extreme of throwing himself out of a tree to get noticed. Either way, all it won him was a sigh of exasperation and a half-hearted hug from his father as he howled in pain, and yet he remembered it to this day.

He remembered lying in his father's arms as he'd carried him into the house, feeling his father's solid presence beneath his thin cotton shirt, and smelling the man's familiar scent of aftershave combined with whisky. And he remembered feeling for just a little while as if he might have some meaning in this man's life. As if he might count for something. As if maybe, just maybe, he was precious in some way. It wasn't a feeling that had lasted for very long, and he couldn't remember his father ever hugging him again.

Now he had Gibbs...and he'd never thought during all those long, lonely years that this would ever be possible. He shifted a little and felt Gibbs's cock stirring against his thigh. He grinned and slid down the bed, located Gibbs's sleepy cock, and gently sucked it into his mouth. He heard Gibbs give a low moan and a second later a hand came to rest on his head and began stroking his hair. He needed no further encouragement and proceeded to give his lover the best blowjob he knew how.

Gibbs came with a satisfied, throaty growl that went straight to Tony's cock. Tony swallowed down his come and then traveled back up the bed, emerging into the daylight to find Gibbs smiling at him languidly.

"Great way to wake up," Gibbs murmured, reaching out an arm to pull Tony close. Tony went, resting his head on his chest again.

"About that..." Tony began. "Uh...about where we wake up...and...uh...how..." Gibbs glanced down at him, frowning. Tony bit on his lip. "Are we going slow, or...?" Gibbs was looking utterly mystified, so Tony decided to just say it. "When we get back to DC, I don't want to wake up alone," he said quietly. "Not ever again."

Gibbs's frown disappeared, and he gave a grunt. "That what the blowjob was for? Some kind of bribe?"

"No." Tony sighed. "Maybe. I dunno. I'm not good at relationships, Jethro."

"You're not a hustler anymore, Tony – sex doesn't have to have any kind of currency between us."

"You paid for my goddamn education!" Tony blurted. Damn it, all those years, not knowing something so big. He understood why Gibbs had done it, but even so...so much money and such a big secret. It was hard to fully get his head around that.

"And I never damn well asked for anything back!" Gibbs retorted. "The money, the sex – they were never linked for me. Don't link them now, Tony."

"I wasn't. The blow job wasn't a trade in for moving in with you...just..."

Gibbs's hands went down south, and he gently cupped Tony's butt cheeks.

"If you think I'm gonna let you sleep anywhere else but in my damn bed, DiNozzo, then I'll figure it was your head got bumped last night, not your knee." He squeezed Tony's ass firmly, like it belonged to him, which, Tony was happy to concede, it totally did. "How is your knee by the way?" Gibbs asked.

Tony moved it with a little wince. "Kinda hurts. Not as much as my pride though, obviously." He grinned and ran his finger over Gibbs's mouth. "It feels like I'm dreaming. I mean...living the happily ever after? How the hell did that happen to me?"

"Because you took a chance. You found me again, Tony. After all those years. You came looking – and thank God you did."

He said it in such a heartfelt tone that Tony was surprised. He'd been so wrapped up in his own emotions that he'd somehow missed how huge this was for Gibbs too. Gibbs was looking at him from eyes that had never looked so blue, and there was an intense expression in them.

"I was terrified," Tony told him. "That day, in the interview, I was so damn terrified. Bet you couldn't believe it when I waltzed in there, bold as brass, and acted like we'd never met."

"Wasn't sure what the hell you wanted from me." Gibbs gave a grim little laugh. "For a while I figured maybe it was just a coincidence, but I don't damn well believe in 'em. Finally, I decided that if you'd gone to all that trouble to track me down, least I could do was see how you'd turned out."

"Wanted to see you hadn't wasted all that money on my education, huh?" Tony grinned.

Gibbs squeezed his ass again. "Wasted? Are you kidding! Best damn money I ever spent." He grinned and angled his head up for a kiss.

"Hah! I'm that good an agent then?" Tony preened, obligingly depositing a kiss on Gibbs's waiting mouth. Gibbs laughed into the kiss and slapped his ass.

"You're not bad, but I was thinkin' more that if I hadn't done what I did all those years ago, you wouldn't be here now, in my bed, makin' out with me. And that... *that* doesn't bear thinking about, DiNozzo."

Tony didn't think it was his imagination that Gibbs's hands were shaking just a little, where they were resting on his ass. He kissed him again, more slowly and deeply this time, reassuring him that there was no place else he wanted to be other than in bed with him.

Gradually, he felt Gibbs's body relaxing beneath him, as he kissed that reassurance into him. It felt strange but good to be reassuring Gibbs instead of it being the other way around, but then he guessed they were both more than a little fucked up in their own way.

He drew back with a wry little chuckle. "My fear of rejection, yours of letting anyone in – it's a miracle we ever got together, Jethro."

Gibbs gave a wry little laugh. "Hell yeah – so let's not fuck it up, DiNozzo. We've fucked up enough between us in the past. Let's make this miracle work."

~*~

2001

Tony stood in the men's room at NCIS and gripped onto the basin tightly with both his hands. Shit, was he really doing this? Was he seriously going to go into that interview room and come face to face with Leroy Jethro Gibbs after all these years?

He couldn't do it. He was an idiot.

"Wouldn't it have been more sensible to pretend to bump into him in a damn coffee shop?" he berated himself. "Why engineer *this* way of meeting him again after all this time? It's a *job* interview, idiot. This is your fucking *career* we're talking about. Shit...you are such a stupid fucker." He gazed at himself in the mirror, shaking his head.

Nobody had been more surprised than him when NCIS had accepted his application. He'd resigned from Baltimore PD, gone through the FLETC, and then immediately applied for a job with the MCRT. It had all been so easy – he'd jumped one hurdle at a time in a sort of numb haze, without even thinking about it. He could so easily have faltered at each one, but instead it had felt like the hand of destiny was upon him, steering him effortlessly towards his inevitable fate.

He'd even gained the highest grades of his entire intake at the FLETC. That might have surprised everyone else, but it hadn't surprised him. He'd learned how to work hard back at college, when he knew he'd have to send every term paper to Daniel Weston, and if his grades dried up then so did the money. There was no way was he going back on the street again, so he'd worked his ass off. It wasn't a habit he'd ever forgotten.

Now he stood here, at ten minutes to ten, shaking in his boots. He'd arrived an hour early, so terrified of being late, and now it was taking all his courage not to turn around and run straight out again.

"Stupid fucker. All this for some guy you haven't seen in years," he muttered to himself, splashing cold water onto his face and then gazing at his wet features.

He was wearing his best dark navy blue suit, a crisply laundered white shirt, and a blue and silver tie. He looked good, and he knew it. Looking good only took you so far though – he knew that too. It was convenient to use his dazzling good looks to attract and distract, but he never let himself be fooled by them. Only one person had ever got to know the man beneath the handsome mask, and that person was waiting for him in an interview room just down the hallway. No wonder he was scared shitless.

He wiped the water from his face and noticed that his hands were shaking.

"Idiot." He threw the paper towel into the trash. "I'm going to do this," he told himself. "I'm really going to do this."

There was no more time to rehearse, and he was better flying by the seat of his pants anyway. He'd deal with the situation when he set foot inside the interview room that was his own personal lion's den. Then he'd see whether Leroy Jethro Gibbs remembered the down on his luck hustler he'd shared a motel room with for two weeks ten years ago.

He glanced at his watch: 9:58. It was time. He pulled himself together, straightened his tie, plastered his most confident smile on his face, and walked along the hallway.

~*~

2008

They took a long, slow shower together, and then ate a late breakfast before heading off. The Ferrari purred like a cat and ate up the ground like a cheetah, but Tony was in no hurry to get home. He wanted to savour each and every single moment of this journey. It had been seventeen years in coming after all.

"Gotta collect some stuff, 'cause I figure it's gonna be me moving in with you," he said as he drew up outside his apartment.

"Well yeah, DiNozzo." Gibbs gave an impatient jerk of his head. "Unless you've got a basement in that tiny place of yours where I can build my next boat?"

Tony laughed. "No basement. No guest room, either, for when I wanna get away from your snoring."

"I don't snore."

"Sure you don't. You just breathe heavy." Tony snorted. He leaned over anyway and kissed Gibbs's surprised mouth. There was nobody around, but Tony didn't give a damn. He'd been hiding all his life; he wasn't going to hide anymore.

They collected several boxes of his belongings and threw them in the back of the Ferrari, and then Tony turned to Gibbs with a raised eyebrow.

"Home?" he suggested nervously.

Gibbs grinned. "Home," he said firmly.

It felt like home too, the minute he walked through the door. Gibbs went over to his safe, stowed his gun away, and pulled out a spare set of keys to the house. He threw them at Tony who caught them deftly in one hand.

"Thought you never locked the door," he said, with a raised eyebrow.

"Never had anything here worth protecting before," Gibbs said, with a meaningful look in his direction. "Do now."

Tony thought that might be the closest Gibbs would ever get to any kind of declaration of love, and it warmed him through and through. He put the keys in his pocket, and they took his boxes up the stairs and into the main bedroom.

Gibbs opened the closet and shoved his own clothes to one side.

"That's not really gonna be enough space," Tony pointed out, glancing at his many suits and the collection of casual clothes that he'd unpacked and laid out on the bed. This wasn't even the half of it – he'd had to leave just as much behind for them to pick up another time.

"I'll build you another closet over here." Gibbs pulled a tape measure from the dresser

drawer and began measuring up a space on the far wall.

"In the meantime...how about I put these in the guest room?" Tony suggested, gathering up an armful of his belongings.

"No!"

It wasn't so much the word itself as the tone of voice that made Tony stop dead in his tracks. He glanced back to see those old, impenetrable walls back in Gibbs's blue eyes.

"Just put the ones you need in the closet and pack the rest away again. I'll get the new closet built next weekend."

"Okay..." Tony said uncertainly. He wasn't sure what that was about, but, for the first time since they'd got together, he felt anxious about how this would turn out.

He did as ordered, while Gibbs went downstairs and cooked them some steak over the fire. After they'd eaten, Tony rested his head on Gibbs's shoulder, unable to shake that feeling of unease. Maybe he was just tired. It had been a long few days, a rollercoaster of highs and lows, and he was embarking on something he'd never done before; he'd just moved in with a lover. No wonder he was jittery. It had to be the same for Gibbs too.

"Hey – sleepyhead. Time for bed."

Gibbs got up and held out his hand, pulled him to his feet, and then led him up the stairs to the bedroom. Then he proceeded to strip him naked and make love to him with such gentle care and loving attention that Tony's doubts melted away.

He didn't question that Gibbs loved him and wanted him here...but what the hell was he hiding in the guest room that he didn't want Tony to see?

~*~

2001

The walk along that hallway to the interview room seemed to take forever. Tony could feel his palms sweating as he made the journey although he knew that he looked calm, relaxed, and completely confident on the outside. There was a woman sitting outside the door. She looked up and nodded to him as he approached.

"Agent Gibbs is ready to see you now. Just go in."

So this was it. Tony took his courage in his hands and knocked on the door, then opened it and breezed in without waiting for an answer.

He found himself in a small room with a desk in the middle and a chair on either side. And there, pushing the chair away from the table as he stood up, was Leroy Jethro Gibbs.

Time seemed to stand still. He felt as if he'd found a time machine and traveled back ten years to a grungy motel room in Ohio.

Gibbs's hair was dark grey now, compared to the dark brown it had once been, but it suited him. Apart from that, nothing about the man appeared to have changed. How was that even possible?

Tony's gaze lingered on a lean, muscled body, and he was suddenly vividly aware of what it felt like to lay on that body, and to have that body lie on top of him. He remembered how good it had felt to trail a line of kisses over that area of collarbone exposed by the open collar of Gibbs's shirt. He remembered lying back and welcoming that body onto and into his, and how it had felt so good and right, as if that was where both their bodies belonged.

Those memories assaulted him so violently that it took him a moment to collect his thoughts and return to the moment. When he did, he found Gibbs standing there, looking at him, his blue eyes as deep and intense as they'd always been.

He's not crazy anymore, Tony thought to himself. His eyes didn't have that edge of madness combined with a terrible sort of grief that they'd had back then. Now that edge had dulled into something else, something guarded and closed off.

This man had found a way to live with himself – Tony could tell that just by looking at him. The sharp edges of his sadness had turned into an inner steel. Gibbs didn't go to bed each night with a gun under his pillow now. He had built a wall around himself instead.

Gibbs was still standing there, looking at him, and neither of them said a word. Did Gibbs remember him? Tony looked for some hint of it, but Gibbs had never been the kind of man who gave anything away. Even now, Tony had no idea what kind of grief had caused him to take that road trip all those years ago.

Those blue eyes were still gazing at him. They were impenetrable, giving nothing away, and as hard and cold as ice.

Gibbs glanced down at the file on the desk in front of him and then up at Tony again. "Anthony DiNozzo?"

His voice was the same; it was a voice Tony had heard in his dreams for years. Low, deep, and unbelievably sexy. It went straight to his cock.

"No," he wanted to reply. *"It's me, Andy. Remember me? You fucked my ass into the mattress for two weeks ten years ago, and I haven't been able to forget you since."* But he didn't say that. He just nodded, gave a polite smile, and moved forward, his hand outstretched.

Gibbs moved towards him, his own hand extended too, and there was this surge of *something* as their hands met. It felt so strange to be touching this man again, to have exchanged the fantastic abandon of love-making for this falseness and formality all these years later.

"I know what you look like when you're making love," Tony thought to himself as they shook hands. *"I know what it feels like to kiss you. I know what turns you on."*

They finished shaking hands, and Gibbs gestured to Tony to sit down in the waiting chair. He took his own seat on the opposite side of the table.

Gibbs asked some questions, and Tony was aware that he was answering them. He was on some weird plane, inhabiting his body and watching himself at the same time, and he was on fire! He knew he was making some brilliant replies, but he didn't have a clue what he was saying.

He knew what his eyes were saying though, as they gazed at Gibbs across that table.

"I miss you," they said. *"I love you. I've always loved you. Do you know who I am? Do you remember me, Jethro? Have I changed that much?"*

Gibbs's blue eyes made no reply, or if they did it was no reply that Tony could decipher. They were assessing, but then he was in an interview. They were guarded, but then this was a man who never let his guard down...except maybe once, in a motel room ten years ago with a fucked up kid who had a giant crush on him.

"Ohio State..." He heard himself saying words that should have meaning for both of them, but still there wasn't even a flicker of recognition from Gibbs. "Phys ed...basketball..." Nothing. "Decided to be a cop..." *You remember. You were there!* He wanted to yell. *And how have the years treated you, Jethro? Are you better now? 'Cause you were fucked up as all hell back then. I was too – but look at me now. I turned out okay, Jethro. I gave up being a hustler. My dad paid for me to get through college after all. It all turned out for the best and meeting you seemed to be the turning point. Thank you for that. Even if you were a bastard and ran out on me."*

He hoped Gibbs saw all that in his resume and in the pride in his voice as he recounted his job history. Okay, so he hadn't stayed anywhere very long, but that wasn't his fault.

"It's yours," he wanted to say. "Couldn't settle," he said instead. "Always felt I was missing something. Haven't found the right..." he paused for a long moment, never taking his gaze off Gibbs. "Path," he finished eventually. "Right career path."

"And do you think working Major Crimes at NCIS is what you're looking for?" Gibbs asked.

"Yes," he replied, without any hesitation at all. "I've found exactly what I'm looking for."

Gibbs's blue eyes bored holes into him, but he never once dropped his gaze. Maybe it was

his imagination, but he thought those eyes were talking back to him, asking him what the hell he was doing here, what he meant by it, and what he wanted. Then the moment passed and those walls came down again. Gibbs glanced at his file.

"Okay then. We're done."

"Did I get the job?" Tony couldn't leave this room without knowing. He hadn't joined NCIS just to work some other team. Now that he'd seen Gibbs again he knew it wasn't enough. He had to keep seeing him again; every day; day in, day out. It wasn't enough to work in this building and know Gibbs was here too. He had to stand beside this man, where he belonged, always on his six.

He might never again get to share a bed with him, but sharing a working life with him would be enough.

"I'll be the best I can be," he found himself saying. "I will work my ass off for you, Agent Gibbs. I'll never let you down. Please...I want this. I want this so much."

That much at least was true, but it wasn't just the job he wanted – it was a chance to be near Leroy Jethro Gibbs every day of his life. That was priceless, and he wanted it so badly it hurt. He put all that emotion into his words, and he saw those blue eyes flicker just a little. Gibbs might not remember, but he did believe in his sincerity.

"Yeah, DiNozzo. You got the job. You start tomorrow."

Tomorrow. He felt as if the room was reeling around him. Tomorrow. There was still no sign that Gibbs knew him, but that didn't matter. Now they could get to know each other all over again, and get to know each other properly this time. They weren't the suicidal drunk and the fucked up hustler anymore. This time they were both in a much better place, and he could finally find out just what made Leroy Jethro Gibbs tick.

He might never be this man's lover again, but he could be his friend, his colleague, and his valued second.

He'd settle for that.

~*~

2008

Tony awoke with a start, shaking.

"Hey...you okay?" Gibbs traced gentle patterns over his back with his fingers.

"Yes...just...had a dream that I was back in that interview room with you seven years ago."

Tony shivered. "Scares the hell out of me how close I came to not going into that room; and how close you came to not giving me the job."

"What makes you think I wasn't going to give you the job?"

"Were you?" Tony looked at Gibbs in the dark bedroom, resting his hands on Gibbs's chest.

"I nearly didn't," Gibbs agreed with a chuckle. "Wasn't sure what the hell you were doing there. Wasn't sure what you meant by it."

"I just had to see you again."

"I thought that was it. Thought that once you'd had your curiosity satisfied that'd be it. Then you said that thing, right at the end."

"I told you how much I wanted it."

"Yeah...and then I realized you weren't just havin' some fun with me, or scratching an itch. You really meant it. Couldn't let you down."

"Thank God." Tony rested his head back on Gibbs's chest. He loved how it felt. He wished he could spend his life here, listening to the strong, steady beat of Gibbs's heart. It made him feel safe. It didn't matter where they lived; Gibbs would always be home.

"Go back to sleep," Gibbs said, and there was just a hint of a chuckle in his voice.

"Everything's fine." He rested his hand on Tony's hair and stroked.

Tony closed his eyes, but he didn't go back to sleep. He listened as Gibbs's breathing deepened, and he began to snore.

Tony got up slowly, quietly, and slid out from under the sheets. He felt as if he was still in a dream as he walked out of the bedroom and along the hallway. He didn't know why he was doing this, or what he thought he'd find in the guest room, but he was **Tony**. This was who he was.

"Nosy fuck up is what you are," he muttered to himself in his father's voice. "And you're gonna ruin the best thing that ever happened to you by sneaking around in the middle of the night. Stupid fucking idiot. Always was a total fuck up; always will be."

He pushed open the door, paused for a moment, and then stepped inside.

He didn't know what he'd been expecting, but it wasn't this.

The room was a shrine to people long since dead. There was a little girl's bed, hand-made - no doubt by her doting father - painted pink with horses and ballet shoes stenciled around the edges, reflecting an eight year old's obsessions.

There was a dresser with perfume bottles and jewellery on it. Tony let his fingers trail over a photograph of a woman with red hair cradling a newborn baby in her arms.

There was no dust on the photo frame. This place wasn't a forgotten shrine – it was visited regularly and well cared for.

What had all Gibbs's ex-wives made of the ghosts who lived in this room?

"No wonder he got divorced so often," he muttered, reaching out to open the closet door. Then he paused. None of Gibbs's relationships after Shannon had lasted. What the hell made him think he'd be any different?

He opened up the closet anyway and found a mix of dresses – some that belonged to a little girl and some that belonged to an adult woman.

"You never could get over them, you poor bastard, and I don't think you ever will."

Maybe he should have been surprised by what he'd found here, but he wasn't. This was who Gibbs was, and didn't he, more than anyone else, know exactly what effect losing Shannon and Kelly had had on him? Hadn't he been the one who had seen and dealt with Gibbs in his darkest hour?

A hand touched his shoulder, and he jumped and let out what might have been a ludicrously high-pitched scream. Then he laughed in relief when he saw Gibbs. The laughter faded in his throat when he realized where he was and what he was doing.

"Sorry. Snooping. You know me. Can't help myself," he murmured in apology. "Couldn't sleep. Kept wondering what you could possibly be hiding in here. Didn't guess it was this. Should have..."

He trailed off as he looked at his lover's face. Gibbs looked pained but not surprised or disappointed. Just...sad. Hadn't that always been the case though? And wasn't it his job to cheer him up, then and now? That much hadn't changed.

"Damn it, Jethro, you've got three ex-wives!" he said shakily, sitting down on the corner of the bed. "Didn't they ever...?"

"Object?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

"Well yeah." Tony made a face. "Couldn't be easy on the second Mrs. De Winter...or the third. Or the fourth." Or the fifth, he added silently to himself because that was, effectively, him. "Uh...that's a movie reference. It's also book...haven't read the book, because, well, we both know I don't read books, but I've seen the movie. Damn good movie. *Rebecca*..."

He knew that he was waffling again. He always did when he was nervous.

"Rebecca was the first Mrs. De Winter, and her ghost was always there, hanging over the

second," Tony explained as Gibbs quirked an eyebrow upwards. "The second Mrs. De Winter never had a name. Unlike me. I'm greedy. I've got two: Andy...Tony...not sure either of them can defeat these ghosts though, Jethro." He waved his arm at the eerie room.

"Andy already did," Gibbs said gruffly, closing the closet door. "Seventeen years ago. I'd be dead if it wasn't for him. I'd have swallowed that gun and killed myself."

"And Tony? What the hell can he do against ghosts this powerful?" Tony asked, glancing around the shrine to a woman and a little girl that Gibbs had loved too much to ever let them go.

"I'm not the only one with ghosts, Tony," Gibbs told him. "I heard you talking to yourself just now. Telling yourself what a fuck up you are. You sounded just like your father."

"Well...he's always in my head." Tony sighed. "Old bastard. Should have known I wouldn't get rid of him just 'cause he died."

"Some habits are hard to break." Gibbs touched the photograph on the dresser with his fingertips.

"I wouldn't ever ask you to forget them," Tony told him.

"And you couldn't forget your father if you tried," Gibbs replied.

"Well, then I guess you're right. We both have our ghosts, benign or hostile." Tony managed a wan smile.

Gibbs came over to him, tipped up his chin, and looked in his eyes. "We always did. That's how we began."

"Can we defeat them together? Like last time?" Tony asked. "I mean, you didn't die, and I didn't end up on the streets. Somehow it worked."

"And it'll work again this time." Gibbs leaned down and kissed him gently on the mouth. "Trust me," he said as he pulled away.

Tony smiled. "I do. I always did."

Gibbs grinned. "Come back to bed. It's cold in here."

Tony gave a little shiver. "You're right," he said. "Too many ghosts."

~*~

Tony gazed at the pictures on his computer screen, his heart thumping wildly as he read about Gibbs's first wife, Shannon, and his little girl, Kelly. They had been murdered in 1991; killed by some bastard drug dealer.

Tony had been working with the man for the past five years, getting to know him as a real person, not just the fantasy object of his hero worship. The man, the real man, was infinitely more complicated and rewarding than the fantasy from that motel room years ago. Over time, his crush had turned to something far deeper and much less self-obsessed. He hadn't been in love with Gibbs before, not really, that had been something closer to infatuation. Now though...**now** he was in love.

And now, also, the final piece of the jigsaw that was Leroy Jethro Gibbs fell into place.

1991. Shannon and Kelly had been killed just before Gibbs went on his road trip that ended up in a motel room in Ohio.

Now, finally, Tony understood what had been behind that savage, all-consuming grief. No wonder the poor bastard had slept with a gun under his pillow every night.

The last thing Gibbs must have wanted back then was some stupid kid intruding on his grief and insinuating himself into his bed and his life.

Tony could have gone looking for the answer to this part of the puzzle years ago, but something had always held him back. It felt too much like intruding maybe...or maybe he was just scared of what he'd find out. Either way, he'd held back until Gibbs had walked out of his life for the second time, leaving NCIS to go to Mexico.

Being abandoned again had made him angry, and he'd overcome his initial reluctance and gone searching for answers. It had taken him a few months – and in the meantime, Gibbs had come waltzing back into his life to resume his job at NCIS without a word of apology or explanation.

Director Shepard had offered him a job in Rota, and Tony had decided to take it so he could walk out on Gibbs the way Gibbs had walked out on him. That was before he found this. Now, as he gazed at the smiling faces of the little girl and the red haired woman, he knew he couldn't take the job. He couldn't leave Gibbs, no matter how many times the bastard walked out on him. He closed down the screen, got up, and went to tell Jenny his decision.

Later that night, when he was alone in his apartment, Tony took out the neatly folded piece of paper from his wallet and smoothed it out, as he'd done so many times over the past fifteen years.

"I forgive you," he murmured, tracing the lines of the faded writing with his fingertip. "I forgive you for running out on me - twice. Shit, I didn't know about your wife and daughter. I didn't damn well know."

He'd known Gibbs was screwed up, just like he was, but he'd never guessed about *this*. The grieving widower and the hustler; you couldn't make it up.

"Should'a been a movie," he said to himself. "Like *Pretty Woman*, except one hell of a lot darker."

He folded up the piece of paper again and returned it to his wallet.

Now at least he understood. Gibbs had lost the great love of his life, and he wasn't looking for another.

All that was left for him was to keep the promise he'd made at his job interview; he'd be the best he could be, and he'd never let Gibbs down.

Gibbs wasn't his to love. He never had been. He belonged to that red haired lady and that pretty little girl, long dead though they were. He walked every day with ghosts, and the past still cast its long, dark shadows over him.

Tony could only watch over him and hope that one day he'd step back into the light.

~*~

2008

"Hi honey, I'm home!" Tony yelled as he walked through the door.

Gibbs came jogging down the stairs, dressed in an old pair of sweats and a dusty tee shirt.

"You ever gonna get tired of that joke?" Gibbs growled, pulling him close and kissing him deeply anyway.

"Hmmm. Let me think..." Tony pretended give it some thought. They'd been together a week, and every time he'd returned home he'd yelled out the same thing, like a kid too excited to ever let it drop. This was their first weekend together, and he'd left Gibbs to work on the new closet while he went out to run some errands. "Uh...no." Tony grinned and pulled Gibbs back in for another kiss. "Mmmm...you're sweaty. I like it. And the whole handyman thing? Totally works for me. Hmm, is that a chisel in that tool belt or are you just pleased to see me?" He gave a lascivious grin, reaching for Gibbs's fly, but Gibbs batted his hands away.

"You're late. Chores take longer than you thought?" he asked.

"Aw...you were worried about me."

"I was worried about getting a hot meal before it's time to go to bed. It's your turn to cook,

remember?" Gibbs retorted.

"Oh yeah." Tony glanced around the dark hallway. The boxes he'd brought his stuff over in were piled up by the door. They hadn't been there when he'd left this morning. Maybe Gibbs had finished the closet already and thrown his stuff into it and was now getting rid of the boxes.

"I...uh...look...I wasn't just running some errands like I said," he muttered, feeling his ears go hot. Gibbs raised an eyebrow. "I was doing something else. See...I was thinking about those ghosts...and...well...if I'm gonna fight back then I'd like to actually do something; something real, not metaphorical. If you get my meaning."

"Not really, DiNozzo." Gibbs grunted. "You gonna start making sense any time soon?"

Tony took a deep breath, reached into his pocket, and took out an envelope. "This is for you," he said.

Gibbs looked at the envelope, a puzzled frown on his face, and then back at Tony. Then he slid his finger through the seal and drew out the slip of paper inside.

"It's a check," Tony said hurriedly. "I don't know how much you paid to put me through college, and I don't know how to figure out all the interest over the years, but I figure...this kind of pays off the debt."

He could feel himself flushing even more as Gibbs's intense, blue-eyed gaze came to rest on him questioningly.

"See...my father's voice is always in my head, telling me what a worthless, lazy, no good shit I am, and I wanted to prove him wrong by doing something right for a change."

"You didn't need to do that, Tony. There were no strings attached to that money," Gibbs said softly.

"I did need to do it. I'm my own man, Gibbs. I will always be grateful to you for what you did...but I want you to know I'm in this relationship as an equal, not some kind of pity case."

"Never thought of you as that."

"I know that...but the ghostly voice in my head didn't." Tony gave a wry grin.

A suspicious look entered Gibbs's eyes. "Where did you get the money, Tony?"

Tony sighed. "It's okay. I didn't want anything of his. I've got something a hell of a lot better now. Something you can't buy with all the cash in the world."

"Tony...if you've done what I think you've done..."

"Look, I might have wanted that car when I was a kid, but I grew up!" Tony interrupted.

"Damn it! I knew it. You sold the Ferrari! Aw, hell, Tony – you loved that damn car."

"Yeah...but I love you more." Tony pulled Gibbs into his arms and kissed him again. "A hell of a lot more," he said softly.

When he pulled back, he thought he saw a glimmer of a new kind of respect in Gibbs's eyes. The man had always loved him, he knew that, but maybe he'd never seen him exactly as an equal before. He did now.

"So...you want a hand throwing out these empty boxes?" Tony went to pick one up, only to find that it wasn't empty as he'd expected. It was heavy, packed to the brim. "Uh...are you throwing me out, Jethro?" He stood up and looked at Gibbs, startled, wondering what the hell was going on.

"Idiot." Gibbs rolled his eyes. He flicked open one of the boxes, and Tony caught sight of a pink dress and a toy horse. "Can't throw out the photos, Tony. I'll never do that. But...what the hell am I gonna do with a bunch of dresses and some old toys?"

"Shannon and Kelly are part of who you are, Jethro," Tony said quietly.

"I know. But that doesn't change whether I keep all this stuff or not. They'll always be part of who I am. Just as your old man is part of who you are. What we have to do is make sure it's a good part."

"Not sure any part of my old man was good," Tony said.

Gibbs laughed. "You just sold his car. I actually think he'd be proud of you for that."

"I'd prefer it if you were proud of me for that, not him."

"Tony – I've always been proud of ya." Gibbs rested his hands on Tony's shoulders. "You never once disappointed me, or let me down. When you walked into that interview room seven years ago, so strong, and proud, and confident, you blew me away. You weren't that kid I'd pulled out of that dumpster all those years ago. You grew up good."

"If I did it was because of you, not my father."

"No, it was because of you – the man you are inside. I didn't need the proof, but thank you for it anyway." Gibbs folded the check and slipped it into his pocket. "Now...are we done fighting ghosts? 'Cause I'm starving! Time to eat." He jerked his head towards the firelight glowing in the living room next door.

"Oh yeah..." Tony glanced around at the piled up boxes in the dark hallway. "We're done fighting ghosts, Jethro."

Gibbs put an arm around his neck and pulled him close for another kiss, and then they stepped back into the light together.

The End

Chapter End Notes:

Friendly feedback adored!

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