

## Louder than Words by Xanthe



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### Story Notes:

Author's bluespirit\_star for audiencing.

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Notes: *Flesh and Blood* was so perfect and complete as it was, that I almost didn't want to write a post-ep. Then this idea came to me, and I found I wanted to explain the air of easy intimacy between Tony and Gibbs in that final scene and invent a back story to go with it, as well as doing a little 'what happened next' :-).

Many thanks to:  nikitarriddick and 

Tony picked up some beers on his way home – they'd run out a couple of days ago, but between the case and the complication of his father being in town, he hadn't had time to go and buy any. He'd been living at Gibbs's house ever since he got back unexpectedly early from his stint as an agent afloat eighteen months ago. He'd sub-let his own apartment, so Gibbs had allowed him to bunk down in his guest room. It had started out as a temporary arrangement, but had turned into something more permanent a few months later.

Tony smelled the steak cooking the minute he walked through the door and that gave him a warm feeling inside. It had been a hell of a couple of days and chargrilled ribeye was his favourite comfort food – as Gibbs knew very well. That was why it was cooking on the fire right now - not that Gibbs would ever say as much.

"Ah, steak, cowboy style – I love it," Tony said as he entered the room, and Gibbs gave a wry smile, maybe because he knew what a completely useless cowboy Tony would make ever since that trip to Arizona the previous year.

Tony liked to refer to that trip as 'our Brokeback moment', which always earned him an eye-roll from Gibbs. But he could date the start of their relationship back to that cave where they'd stopped to eat and sleep. Tony had been aware of the tension in the air when Gibbs had asked him if he intended to leave NCIS if he inherited a fortune from his Uncle Clive. Tony had been nonplussed at the time. He hadn't even thought about it. He hadn't thought about anything except getting his hands on all that money and going on a giant spending spree that included buying the biggest, reddest Ferrari he could find.

So he hadn't had an answer for Gibbs's question. And by the time they'd got back from Arizona his boss was in a foul mood and barely talking beyond a series of grunts, which, in Gibbs-speak, Tony translated as meaning his boss was extremely pissed off with him. He just wasn't sure *\*why\**.

"Look, if I do inherit the money at least I'll be able to move out and get out of your hair," he'd said as they walked into Gibbs's living room. He was tired from all that damn horse-riding, to say nothing of having to put up with a monosyllabic, glaring Gibbs on the journey home.

Gibbs had thrown his duffel against the wall with such force it split open, spilling out a sweat-stained tee shirt and the latest Jack Reacher novel. Tony turned, startled.

"Okay, okay, I get the message! I know I've overstayed my welcome. I figure it's bad enough you having to see me every day at work without coming home to find me cluttering up your house as well," he sighed.

Gibbs stood there, hands on his hips, looking as mad as Tony had ever seen him.

"You want me to leave now? Right this minute? Fine. It's okay, I know I can be annoying." He had

known Gibbs would get fed up with having him around eventually. It was inevitable. Everyone did. "Heck, sometimes I even think my mom died on purpose just to get away from me," he said, trying to make a joke of it and somehow...failing.

"Don't be an idiot," Gibbs told him.

"Oops. Too late." Tony made a face at him. "Look, you should have just told me earlier. See, thing is, I've enjoyed staying with you, Boss. I know I should have got my act together before now and started looking for somewhere else to live, but it's been good. I liked it." He bit on his lip. "And it seemed like you were okay with having me around."

It had certainly felt that way. They'd gotten into a routine of being together and sharing the house. They didn't really talk about it, but somehow they'd ended up splitting the chores – like Tony buying the beer, and Gibbs the steak; Tony taking out the trash, and Gibbs doing the dishes. They just got along. It felt easy.

Sometimes Tony spent the evenings in his room watching DVDs while Gibbs worked on his boat, and sometimes they spent evenings together in the living room, sitting on the couch, side by side, drinking beer. Sometimes Gibbs read – he had a real thing for thrillers - and Tony sat beside him, feet resting on the coffee table, listening to his iPod and flicking through GSM or Premiere magazine.

And sometimes, on Saturday nights, Tony managed to persuade Gibbs to go to the movies with him. Afterwards they always went for a coffee, and Tony always analysed every single detail of the movie while Gibbs just sat there, looking at Tony over the rim of his coffee mug and occasionally saying "uh-huh" whenever Tony stopped for breath. It had been good. Tony had never been happier in his life.

Clearly it'd only been good for him though, and Gibbs had been barely tolerating having him around.

Gibbs was still glaring at him.

"But I guess I got that wrong. I guess you were just being polite," Tony said. Gibbs's glare turned into a look of incredulity. "I'll go then," Tony said quietly. He picked up his bag and inched slowly past Gibbs on his way to the door.

"That it?" Gibbs growled as he reached out a shaking hand to open the door. "The minute you hear you're gonna come in for a truckload of money, you can't wait to move the hell outta here?"

Tony paused, puzzled. He turned to find Gibbs looking like he was about to explode. Tony tried to figure out what the hell was going on here.

"Isn't that what you want?" he asked, bemused. "For me to leave? That's what this is about, right? You want me to move out?"

"That what I said?" Gibbs demanded.

They both stared at each other. Then Tony gave a big grin. "Oh, you're mad at me because you \*don't\* want me to move out!" he said, feeling unbearably relieved. "Damn it, Gibbs – why didn't you

just say that?"

"Why do I have to state the damn obvious? Why the hell did you assume I didn't want you around?"

"Maybe 'cause my dad could never spend more than a week in my company before farming me off on some bellboy or concierge somewhere – or finding a summer camp that'd have me at short notice," Tony retorted.

"I'm not your damn father, Tony!"

"I know that!"

They both glared at each other some more.

"Why couldn't you just say it?" Tony demanded. "Why couldn't you just say, 'Tony, I like having you around, and I'm gonna be pissed off if you inherit this money and move out?'"

"Be more like you, you mean? Talk and talk just to avoid sayin' what's really important?" Gibbs muttered darkly.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Gibbs moved a step closer, so close that their chests were almost touching. Tony could feel his own chest heaving with some big, unexpressed \*thing\* that was making him mad, and he didn't even know what it was, or why.

"Christ! Do I have to spell it out for you?" Gibbs demanded.

Tony could feel the heat radiating off his boss. Every muscle in Gibbs's body seemed to be taut with tension, stretched almost to breaking point.

"What d'you mean 'spell it out'? Look, I've been working with you for eight years - I practically have a degree in 'Gibbs-speak' - but sometimes it's not easy differentiating one set of grunts and 'uh-huh's from another, or translating them into something that makes any damn sense!"

Gibbs looked exasperated. It was like they were speaking two different languages and neither of them could get through to the other and make himself understood.

"It's got nothin' to do with the damn words, DiNozzo!" Gibbs's blue eyes were flashing sparks at him. "Christ, want me to make it simple for ya?"

"Be nice, Gibbs, yeah!"

"Fine. Translate \*this\*!"

Tony found himself being shoved against the wall, and next thing he knew Gibbs was kissing him hard on the mouth, and the surprising thing, the really surprising thing, was that he wasn't remotely

surprised. He just pulled Gibbs close and kissed him back like he was the only source of oxygen in the whole damn world.

Tongues clashed, lips burned, and all Tony could think was, "Yes! At last! Thank God!"

They kissed for ages, and this, it seemed, was one language they both understood. It was raw, and passionate, and \*necessary\*. And then it was over, and Gibbs drew back and glared at him again.

"Now d'you understand why I don't want you to leave?"

Tony gave his widest, most infuriating grin. "Well why didn't you just say so in the first place?"

Gibbs slapped the back of his head – and then he grabbed hold of Tony's hand and hauled him off up the stairs to bed.

The following day Tony had floated into work on a cloud so high that nothing could bring him back down. When he'd heard he hadn't inherited his Uncle Clive's fortune, he'd just shrugged and grinned and said, "It's only money!" because he didn't give a damn about the inheritance anymore. He had \*Gibbs\* and that was worth a hell of a lot more.

Now, nearly a year later they were still together, and Tony was the happiest he'd been in his life. Or at least he had been until his father had shown up and turned his world upside down.

Tony slung the beers down on the coffee table and noticed the pillow lying on the couch. He knew immediately what it was for, and he was relieved because it was a clear sign that Gibbs wasn't still mad at him. He winced as he remembered screwing up like a probie in the hotel suite earlier. Damn it, sometimes he wondered why Gibbs put up with him. All his old insecurities had emerged the second he'd laid eyes on his father again. Just being around the old man brought back the feelings of inadequacy, of not being quite good enough, of being somehow disappointing...and that nagging sense that sometime soon he'd be on his own again, abandoned by the one person he wanted to be close to.

Gibbs didn't say anything about the pillow, but then again he didn't have to. Tony had become almost fluent in 'Gibbs' over the past year. He knew that if you wanted to know what Gibbs was really thinking you had to listen to what his eyes were saying and watch the way he moved. You had to read the truth in how tight his muscles were, hear the nuances in his pauses, and catch the tiny, unexpected little grins that sometimes curved at the corners of his mouth.

As for Gibbs – he already spoke 'Tony' fluently it seemed. He could read Tony as easily as he zipped through those trashy thrillers he liked so much. He heard everything Tony never said, saw the meaning in every meaningless word he spoke, and laughed at Tony's clown mask while never once being taken in by it. He definitely knew why Tony had screwed up so badly in that hotel suite.

Tony picked up the pillow and threw it on the nearby chair. He knew that the pillow was for later, after they'd eaten. He sat down with a sigh and pulled out his knife. Beside him, Gibbs did the same. Tony filled Gibbs in on what had happened with his father, and Gibbs, as usual, saw right through his lies and called him on them. Tony shook his head ruefully.

"How do you do it?" he asked. Whether it was something big like this or something small, like a lie about taking the trash out when he hadn't, Gibbs always knew.

Of course Gibbs knew he'd bailed out his dad, and of course Gibbs knew he'd blown his cruise money to do it. He'd asked Gibbs if he minded him taking the cruise with his old friends, and Gibbs had shrugged and muttered, "Mind? Hell no! Be nice to have a break from you, DiNozzo," but the little quirked grin, and the kiss he pressed to Tony's cheek, had told Tony that he really meant, "I'll miss you, but you should go and have some fun with your old friends anyway".

They finished eating in companionable silence, and then Tony glanced over at the pillow. It was time. Gibbs was right – he did talk too much to avoid saying what was really on his mind. Talking about the deep stuff didn't come easy to him, but he always felt better when he finally let it out. It was easier to do it when he wasn't looking at Gibbs though – and somehow Gibbs had figured that out and devised the pillow method of communication. He always seemed to know when Tony needed it and why.

Tony got up with a sigh and stretched. He went over to the chair and picked up the pillow. Then he returned to the couch and placed it on Gibbs's lap. Gibbs didn't say a word. The flames from the fire lit up the dark room. It felt warm. Cosy. Tony lay down on the couch and rested his head on the pillow on Gibbs's lap, looking away from Gibbs, into the fire.

"Even by my standards, the level of idiocy I showed in that hotel room was shocking," he said.

"Yeah. It was."

"Um...you know nothing happened between me and those girls, right?"

Gibbs snorted. "Oh yeah. I know that."

"I never do it deliberately."

"Uh-huh."

"I don't screw up or act like an idiot on purpose."

"I know."

"And I knew exactly what time you were coming to the hotel suite to relieve me," Tony added, glancing up at Gibbs for the first time.

The corners of Gibbs's mouth quirked up. "Yeah. I know that too," he replied.

"I know you know." Tony smiled and looked away again. He felt Gibbs stroking his hair; slowly, gently, and rhythmically.

Tony stared into the fire, and they were silent for a long time. This went deep, and Tony knew it would hurt. Then, finally, the words started to come out.

"When he said goodbye, he told me that he loved me."

"Uh-huh." Gibbs kept on stroking.

"First time he's ever said it. I wanted to hear him say those words for so long and then when it finally happened, I didn't feel anything," Tony said quietly. "Maybe it would have meant something if he'd said it a long time ago, when I was a kid. Maybe if he'd said it back then, when I needed to hear it, it would have made a difference. But now...I found that it didn't matter anymore."

"Yeah." Gibbs's fingers felt so good on his hair.

Tony remembered coming home from his time away as an agent afloat and having nowhere to stay; he'd looked around the squad room as everyone began to leave for the night, suddenly realizing that fact, and had seen Gibbs rolling his eyes at him. "With me, DiNozzo," he'd said, and that had been all that was necessary.

"Maybe 'cause I finally figured out that saying the words doesn't really mean a damn thing," Tony said, still gazing into the fire. "He dumped me in schools and summer camps and half the time I didn't even know where he was. I had to act out and get into trouble at school just so the headmaster would call him, 'cause that was the only way I got to see him. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have set eyes on him from one year to the next."

"Mmmm."

"He just wasn't that interested in being with me," Tony said softly. It hurt, but at least it was the truth. "Turns out, it's not the words that matter. But then you've always known that."

Tony turned his head on the pillow and looked up. Gibbs leaned down and pressed a kiss to Tony's lips.

"Uh-huh," he said.

**The End**

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