

Stubble by Xanthe



Story archive:

<http://www.xanthe.org/xo/stubble/>

Story Notes:

Back in April, I held a Tibbs iContest on my LJ. You can check out all the entries and the winners **here**.

I promised the winners I'd write them all a story inspired by their icon. Originally, I offered to do drabbles - fics of 100 words exactly. But when I came to do them, I found I wanted them to just be as long as they wanted to be - so I went with that.

My apologies for how long it has taken. First I wanted to finish **Two Wolves**. Then I broke my ankle and didn't write anything for a long time. So, I'm delighted to finally be able to post them now.

The stories vary in size from 300ish words long to nearly 4000 words long. I started out thinking I'd keep them very short, in the spirit of a drabble, but somehow each one kept turning out longer than the previous one! Please don't assume any value judgement from their length; I just looked at each icon and went where my imagination took me, whether it was a short 'joke' fic, or a longer, more angsty story. Or, you know, lots of spanky BDSM ;-).

Sometimes, my imagination was surprising; the best Tony icon is a story largely about Gibbs, and the best Gibbs icon is a story largely about Tony. Go figure! I tried to keep all the stories to one scene - except for the best BDSM icon fic which, once I had the idea, I knew would have to be comprised of several short scenes in order to do what I wanted with it, which was to contextualise the icon.

I did my best to capture some feeling or truth that struck me about each icon. I hope I succeeded.

Please make sure to admire each icon before you read - the stories work much better that way!

Thank you again to all the entrants of the iContest for making it such a great competition. You all rock!

Thank you: To  **bluespirit_star** and  **taylorgibbs** for beta and to Nikita, Hilde and Sue for audiencing.

This story is for  **wintermute_lj** who made the winning icon in the Tony category. When I looked at it the things I thought of were a) stubble and b) prison. I have no idea why! But I decided to just go with it.

Chapter 1 by Xanthe

Stubble By Xanthe

The doors clang shut and are locked behind him for the last time, and he steps out of the prison gates and pauses, taking a moment to adjust to being a free man again.

His clothes feel strange against his skin after three years wearing prison overalls, but the sky is blue and the sun is shining – it's a good day to start a new life.

He feels strangely at peace. He once told the Reynosas that he'd never lost a night's sleep over killing their father, and that was the truth. Hernandez was a scumbag who deserved justice, even if it had to come from Gibbs's gun instead of the courtroom.

He might have never lost any sleep over killing Hernandez, but he'd lost plenty over lying to those closest to him and covering it up for all those years. The sentence the judge gave him reflected his dim view of the lie even more than the murder, and Gibbs approved of that. He deserved it.

Now he's served his time, and it's over. Now he's finally free of the secret that kept him a prisoner for so many years, and it's such a relief. Maybe now he can move on and leave the past behind, once and for all.

There's nobody waiting for him outside the prison. He wasn't expecting anyone. He deceived them for years, after all. He was their great leader, their idol with feet of clay, the kind of man who put away people for a crime he'd committed himself, however mitigating the circumstances.

"Great damn hypocrite, more like," he mutters to himself.

He takes the waiting cab back to his house. He doesn't know if he'll stay here, in this house he once shared with Shannon and Kelly. He lived a lie in this house for years, leaving it every day to go to NCIS and live the lie there too.

He thinks that maybe he'll be able to leave now, to go someplace new and start afresh. It's time to leave the dead to rest in peace. Shannon and Kelly deserve that – and he deserves it too, now that he's finally paid his penance. He doesn't have any lies to tell or secrets to keep anymore. He's done with all that now.

"Well, look at that!" the taxi driver whistles as they pull into his street. "I didn't think people did stuff like that anymore!"

Gibbs glances out of the car window and sees the big oak tree in his front yard...and twined around it, around and around, is a yellow ribbon. There's so much of it that you can barely see the tree.

“What the...?” He pays the driver, gets out of the car, and stands there, scratching his head, puzzled.

A familiar figure emerges from behind the tree. He’s got stubble all over his chin, and there’s a look in his eyes that Gibbs didn’t think he’d ever see there again.

“Too much?” Tony jerks his head at the tree. “I wasn’t sure, but you know me; if I can go over the top, I will.” He gives a little wince.

“What are you doing here, Tony?” Gibbs asks quietly.

“You wouldn’t see any visitors in the prison, and you didn’t reply to any of my letters.” Tony comes slowly towards him, looking unsure of himself but determined all the same.

“Penance,” Gibbs says with a dismissive shrug. “It’s not supposed to be easy.”

“You didn’t have to do any kind of penance for killing that bastard.” Tony stops a few steps away, close enough that Gibbs can smell him. It’s an old, familiar scent, and it hits Gibbs in the gut, bringing back so many memories.

The stubble – almost a beard – makes Tony look older. He is older; it’s been almost three years.

“We all understood,” Tony says quietly, his gaze never leaving Gibbs’s face. “You could have let us be there for you.”

“No, I couldn’t.” Gibbs hopes he can make Tony understand this. “I wasn’t doing penance for killing Hernandez, Tony. You’re right – that bastard deserved the justice I gave him. I was doing penance for being a federal agent who fell short of the standards he expected from everyone else.”

Tony nods slowly. “I get it,” he says, and Gibbs knows he does, because he always did get Gibbs. “And have you done your penance now?” Tony asks.

Gibbs gives a weary nod. “I think I have, Tony. Had a lot of time to think.”

“Me too.” Tony is gazing at him thoughtfully.

“And there’s one thing I have to say to you.” Gibbs drops his bag and clenches his fists, forcing himself to do this; his penance won’t be complete until he does. “I’m sorry,” he says.

It’s the first apology he’s uttered in many years, and he’s never meant the words more.

“I’m not the man you thought I was, Tony. I slapped your head and ordered you around for all those years, trying to make you a better agent, when all the time I was keeping this secret. I’m sorry for that, Tony; damn sorry.”

Tony is silent for a long while, and then he gives a low sigh. "Thank you," he says quietly.

Gibbs looks at him, regretting so many things now. A life not lived, kept frozen in stasis because of a secret he'd hidden for far too long. He's sorry for that, and he's also sorry for what never happened between them because for all those years he didn't trust Tony with who he truly was and what he'd once done.

"Sorry," he says again, dropping his gaze to the ground. "I'm so sorry, Tony."

Tony closes the remaining distance between them in three quick strides. He puts his finger under Gibbs's chin, lifts it, and then leans in and kisses him on the lips.

Tony's new stubble is a little rough against Gibbs's skin, but he likes the way it feels; raw and honest. He leans into the kiss, trusting Tony with his true self for the first time. Tony won't let him down. He never has. He wishes he could say the same about himself.

Tony draws back. "Abby, Ducky, McGee, Ziva, Jimmy, Fornell and Vance are all inside." Tony jerks his head in the direction of the house. "So are a hell of a lot of other people – people who care about you, Gibbs. There's food and balloons and stuff. I said you'd hate a surprise party, but Abby insisted, so I told them I'd come out here first to make sure you didn't freak out when you went inside."

"A party?" Gibbs is surprised. "For me? All those people...?"

"Your friends," Tony says firmly. "We know what you did, Gibbs, and we don't care. We know who you are, in here." He puts his hand on Gibbs's chest, over his heart. "We always did. We know because we worked with you all those years, and we're not the kind of friends who bail just because the going got tough."

Gibbs looks down again, so Tony won't see the expression in his eyes. He gets himself under control and then looks up once more.

"So what's with the stubble?" he asks, running a hand over Tony's cheek.

"I'm getting old. It hides the double chin." Tony deflects effortlessly, as always.

"Maybe you just wanted a change." Gibbs gives a little grin.

"Maybe. The old times are gone," Tony says quietly. "But the new times can be better." He returns Gibbs's grin with one of his own.

"They can?" Gibbs can hear the desperate sound of his own hope in his voice.

"Yeah – they can," Tony says firmly. "C'mon – let me show you." Tony wraps an arm around his shoulders and leads him towards the house.

As they walk, Gibbs glances back at the oak tree in his front yard, festooned with all those

yellow ribbons.

“Not too much, Tony,” he says softly, “Just right.”

The End
Friendly feedback adored!

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