The Nature of Loss

by Sazzy260

Summary

When it came to love, Tony was always sensitive, and when the man he loved so deeply was lost in the war in Afghanistan, he knew that he had to pull himself back together... Christopher Parker had been his everything, and now he had to rely on his teammates and best friends to pull himself away from the black hole that was threatening to swallow him alive. Gibbs was the first one at Tony's side and would always have his six, and now he had to find a way to fix his son's heart, before it was far too late.

Notes

As always with new stories - I like hearing what you all think before I continue on. I know this is a really short beginning, but I do (if it's liked) plan on adding more once I have a direction, I might even add a second chapter for everyone to nibble on and get a better feel for it... Still like to hear the feedback though!

And yes, this has a slightly AU-ish/OOC feel to it, because Tony is OPEN about showing his emotions in this, so... #Don'tHate. -- Also, this is the ONLY story that you will (probably) see an appearance from #NiceZiva, I have made it abundantly clear that I dislike Ziva as a character, but I TRY my hardest to stick to the proper timelines of shows, and this was after the time when Ziva was entered in as a character, but before Bishop came along (sigh)....
He could remember the day that they said good-bye, so vividly, it was as if it were just yesterday to him. The words still echoing in his mind every night, and kept him going through the day, it was the only thing he could hold onto every day. The voice in his mind’s eye was tangible, he could still see his smiling face…

~~Flashback~~

“I’ll be home soon, Tony… It’s only a six month deployment.” Chris said softly, his hand cupping Tony’s cheeks.

Tony nodded, smiling up at Chris, he leaned up on the balls of his feet to place a soft kiss against Chris’ lips – He always loved how Chris was taller than him, and stronger… He also loved his Marine more than anything in the world – “I love you, hero.” Tony said softly as he dropped back down onto the flats of his feet.

Chris smirked as he leaned down, kissing Tony again, his hands cupping the sides of his neck “I love you too, Casanova.” Chris said as he brushed his thumb across Tony’s cheek, his other hand slipping a piece of paper into the inside of Tony’s hand.
Tony clutched onto the paper, then smiled up at Chris as he slid his own piece of paper into the inside pocket of Chris’ BDU Jacket, “Stay safe, Marine.” Tony told him.

Chris nodded as he kissed Tony’s forehead, “You too, Fed.” Chris said with a wink as he bent down and picked up his bag, slinging it over his shoulder just in time for the call-out for his platoon to get onto the waiting C-130.

Tony and Chris held hands for a few seconds longer, just staring into one another’s eyes and smiling, they both mouthed ‘I Love You’ as their hands fell to their sides, and Chris turned and took off to join the rest of his squad.

Tony stood there with the rest of the families, his arms wrapped around his chest as he watched the marines board the plane, then as the plane took off… He even stood there an hour afterwards, the night sky rising to push away the daylight.

~~End Flashback~~

Tony now sat at his desk at NCIS, typing up a report after closing yet another case, if anyone who knew, asked how long Chris had been gone, Tony had the exact answer – Five months, three weeks, two days, fourteen hours, twelve minutes and some seconds – He was anxious, his husband would be coming home soon.

But he wasn’t going to put too much emphasis on it, whenever people did that, something bad seemed to always happen… But, then there were times that when even without putting too much thought onto the subject, terrible things still happened.

The casualty assistance officers stepped off the elevator, catching the attention of the first person to walk past “Excuse me, could you point us in the direction of Anthony DiNozzo?” the older gentlemen asked.

The agent nodded his head and pointed directly at Tony’s desk, “That’s him right there.” The agent said. The CAO nodded, saying his thanks as he and his colleague walked with precise movements, then stood in front of Tony’s desk at attention.

Tony registered the shadows first, his fist clenching as he thought it was Ziva and Tim hovering over his desk, “What do you-…” Tony stopped mid-sentence as he stared up at the two marine officers,
his heart sinking to the basement of NCIS and his skin paling to the likeness of a sheet of paper as he slowly stumbled up to his feet.

“Anthony DiNozzo-Parker?” The older officer questioned softly. Tony nodded mutely, clenching his bottom lip between his teeth.

The younger officer stepped forward slightly and cleared his throat “On behalf of the Secretary of The Navy, I regret to inform you that your Husband, First Lieutenant Christopher Parker, died yesterday evening by an insurgent who the unit thought was in trouble, and was subsequently shot at point-blank range.” The younger marine said, his tone sympathetic as he looked directly at Tony.

Tony shook his head “No… No… You… You have… you have to be mistaken…” Tony stammered out, tears quickly welling up in his eyes.

The two CAO’s shared a quick glance, then proceeding with informing Tony of everything that needed to be done, but the words were like white-noise in Tony’s ears, he just stared blankly, clutching his hand over his chest and his bottom lip trembling, the tears still dancing in his eyes.

Gibbs walked out of MTAC and stared down into the bullpen, seeing the two Marines standing in front of Tony’s desk, and then saw Tony who had his back against the filing cabinet. Gibbs quickly descended the stairs and was at Tony’s side in an instance.

“Gibbs…” Tony choked out, grabbing onto the older Man’s arm in a vice grip as the tears silently slipped from his eyes.

“Right here, Tony.” Gibbs said as he drew the younger man into his chest, holding onto him tightly as he looked at the two Marine officers, “Thank you.” Gibbs said, sending them both a dismissive nod.

The two marines nodded, snapping off a quick salute and then about-faced, leaving as quietly as they had come just twenty minutes ago.

Tony clenched onto the back of Gibbs’ suit jacket, his body shaking violently as he sobbed silently
into the older man’s chest.

Gibbs rubbed his hand up and down Tony’s back in soothing motions, turning his head to see that Tim and Ziva were standing close by, stunned and shocked into silence “Tim… Go and get Ducky and Palmer…” Gibbs said quietly.

Tim nodded mutely, quickly taking off down to autopsy. “Come on… Let’s sit you down Tony.” Gibbs said as he gently guided Tony towards his desk chair.

Tony nodded and sat stiffly in his chair, staring at his knees, keeping his hands clasped tightly together, “Why…” Tony whispered hoarsely, looking up at Gibbs with tears in his eyes that continually rolled down his cheeks.

“I… I can’t… answer why Tony… I can only answer how…” Gibbs said softly as he swiped the tears away from Tony’s cheeks.

“Eight days… He… He was… supposed… to come home… in eight… eight days, Gibbs…” Tony sobbed out, his entire body trembling again. Gibbs hit his knees and grabbed onto Tony, hugging him tightly as the younger man began sobbing loudly into his shoulder.

Tim returned to the bullpen with Ducky, Palmer and Abby in tow, Gibbs looked up at them, then quietly whispered into Tony’s ear. Tony nodded and stood up with Gibbs, moving to stand in the center of the bullpen.

Tony dug into the top of his shirt, withdrawing a silver chain with a gold band twisting around on it. Gibbs unlatched the necklace from the back of Tony’s neck, and Tony let the ring drop into his open palm.

Tony slid the ring on, inhaling deeply as he stared at the wedding band, more tears beginning to form in his eyes as he sobbed out loudly and dropped to his knees, “Oh god… WHY!?!?” Tony screamed in anguish, curling in on himself and clutching around his stomach as he rocked back and forth.

Gibbs stooped down, hugging Tony to his chest again. Abby and Ziva also joined them on the floor,
hugging protectively around Tony and trying to keep his body as still as possible.

Tim, Palmer and Ducky eventually joined the group-hug-huddle with Tony in the center of it all. Ten minutes had passed, and Tony had finally calmed down again “Our… anniversary… Gibbs… It’s… It’s in… eleven days… He… he left me… he… he promised me he would come home!” Tony shouted, the anger in his voice rising as his chest started heaving rapidly.

“Tony… Tony, listen to me.” Gibbs said firmly, holding onto Tony’s cheeks, forcing the tear-filled green eyes to look up into icy blue eyes, “Are you listening to me?” Gibbs asked sternly.

“Yes, boss.” Tony whispered as he pried Gibbs’ hands off his cheeks, sitting curled up against himself in the center of his family.

Gibbs inhaled deeply as he looked down at his Senior Field Agent and best friend, “We’re going to get you home, then we’re going to get you to rest some… Okay?” Gibbs asked softly.

Tony shook his head rapidly “No… no… can’t go home… can’t do it… Not now… not ever…” Tony said, still shaking his head as he flexed his fists rapidly.

“Okay… Then, Ducky and I will take you to my house… and everyone else will get you some things from your place…” Gibbs said softly as he grabbed Tony around the elbows and hauled the younger man up to his feet.

Tony nodded, slumping forward against Gibbs’ chest “Why did he go? Why? Why… Why didn’t he just… stay home! Why did I tell him to re-up! Why did I do this?!?” Tony shouted half-heartedly, his fists bunching into Gibbs’ jacket again.

Gibbs sighed as he looked over Tony’s head at Ducky, nodding his head ever so slightly. Ducky returned the nod as he withdrew a syringe from his pocket, he pulled the cap of and swiftly put the needle into Tony’s arm, injecting the sedative into Tony’s bloodstream.

Tony yelped and yanked the needle from his arm, whirling around to face Ducky “Not… nice…” Tony murmured, the sedative taking immediate effect on Tony as he swayed on his feet, then fell backwards against Gibbs’ chest “Sorry… boss…” Tony slurred as his eyes fell shut.

Gibbs sighed as he held onto Tony from underneath the younger man’s arms, while Palmer grabbed
Tony’s chair and pushed it carefully underneath Tony. Gibbs nodded his thanks while carefully settling Tony down into the seat “Palmer, Abby, Tim, Ziva, you guys go to Tony’s apartment… Pack at least a week’s worth of clothing and his bathroom items… And, doing this, does not give you permission to snoop through his belongings. Is this understood?” Gibbs asked sternly as he withdrew his keys and handed Palmer the key to Tony’s place.

The four nodded their understanding, then watched as Gibbs began wheeling Tony and the chair towards the elevators, while Ducky collected the two men’s belongings and followed them quietly.

After Gibbs left, the four looked around the bullpen helplessly, noticing the eerie silence that had reigned over the room, and noticing all of the sympathetic, yet confused, looks that were being brought down onto the center of the MCRT’s bullpen, the four shrugged off the feeling and collected their own stuff so they could meet at Tony’s apartment.
Chapter 2

Palmer stared at the key in his hand, then at the door that stood in front of him. Tim, Abby and Ziva were all standing behind him.

“I feel like we’re intruding on something sacred…” Abby whispered sadly, holding tightly onto Tim’s bicep.

Palmer sighed as he slipped the key into the lock and gave it an easy twist, “That’s because we are, are we not?” Ziva asked, slightly confused. They had all known that Tony was gay, but they knew nothing about the committed relationship that he was in until a few months ago, but with the two Marines showing up at the bullpen today, the reasons why the relationship had been kept quiet until now, were obvious.

Tim nodded his head as he laid his arm around Ziva’s shoulder “Yeah, we kind of are… But I mean, we knew about Chris… Sure, we didn’t know that they were married, which… kind of hurts, but I get it… with DADT only just being repealed a year ago… It made sense that they kept their private lives just that… Private.” Tim said softly.

Palmer nodded his head, remaining impassively silent as he pushed the front door to Tony’s apartment open slowly, the heavy scent of masculinity and two different strongly scented colognes mingled and wafted out into the hallway where the four friends stood.

“Wow…” Abby said softly, breathing in the heady scent deeply as she walked into the apartment slowly with Ziva only a few steps behind, inhaling deeply as well.

Tim and Palmer raised an eyebrow as they watched the two women with curious expressions on their faces “Did we miss something?” Tim asked curiously.

Abby and Ziva both shook their heads “Just the chance at being a woman, Timmy.” Abby said, giggling as she picked up a picture on one of the shelves, swooning as she held it out to Ziva “They were so hot!” she said, emphasizing greatly on the ‘hot’.

Ziva nodded in agreement, “Gibbs even looks good in a Tux. I wonder how he was invited, and we were not?” Ziva asked with a frown on her face as she looked at Chris, Tony, Gibbs and a forth unknown man.
“That’s something we’d have to ask Tony… or Gibbs…” Abby said sadly as she took the frame and set it back onto the shelf the way she had found it.

The group of four split up and walked around the apartment, gathering clothes and bathroom amenities first and foremost, and then they did their light-hearted snooping of the things that were in plain sight.

“Aww! Ziva! They-they-they have matching coffee mugs!!” Abby squealed as she pointed at the identical coffee mugs hanging next to the coffee machine.

Ziva shook her head and tapped one of the mugs that read ‘My husband has an awesome husband!’

“Had… They had.” She corrected somberly.

Abby sighed sadly, nodding her head slowly as she mumbled ‘Right’ under her breath. “It has been a long time since we were invited to Tony’s apartment… A lot of things are no longer what they used to be like…” Ziva observed as she walked through the kitchen and back into the living room.

Abby followed Ziva and sat down on the couch, thumbing through a photo album that was sitting open on the coffee table. “They looked so happy together…” Abby said sadly as she stopped on a picture of Chris and Tony cuddled together on a couch, both men were sleeping and were wrapped in each other’s arms. “How did he die?” Abby asked suddenly, looking up at Ziva.

Ziva frowned as she tapped at the keys on Tony’s baby grand piano, clearing her throat, she looked over at Abby “The marines said that he died while helping an insurgent… They thought that he was in trouble… and when Chris was close enough… the man shot him…” Ziva relayed sadly, sitting on the edge of the piano bench “I do not understand the cruelty of this world sometimes… Even coming from my own people.” Ziva added, sniffling a bit as she wiped the back of her hand across her nose.

Abby sighed as she walked over to Ziva, wrapping her up in a warm embrace, “I just wish there were something we could do to ease Tony’s pain… He’s going through this, and we have no idea how to help him…” Abby said as the two women held onto each other.

“Gibbs will know how to help him… He has lost a wife, he knows what grief Tony will go through, and help him come out on the other side, no?” Ziva asked curiously. Abby nodded mutely as she hugged Ziva a little tighter.

Tim and Palmer came back into the apartment, announcing that everything had been packed into the
The group pulled up into Gibbs’ driveway thirty minutes later and brought in all the things they had packed for Tony, then stood in the dining room where Gibbs and Ducky were seated at the table.

“There’s beer, water and some wine in the fridge if you guys want anything…” Gibbs informed them without lifting his head as he stared contemplatively into his coffee cup.

Palmer took drink ‘orders’ and retreated to the kitchen while everyone else grabbed a seat around the table and looked between Gibbs and Ducky, “So… How is he?” Abby asked hesitantly.

Gibbs shook his head, wrapping his hands tighter around his mug, “Right now? He’s heavily sedated and sleeping upstairs…” Gibbs said tensely, “When he wakes up? And everything sinks in? He’s going to be absolutely shattered… Chris… Chris was his absolute everything…” Gibbs said quietly. Nodding his thanks to Palmer who refilled his coffee mug, then handed everyone their requested drinks, then sat down beside Gibbs.

Abby sighed as she twisted a pigtail around her finger “Is there anything we can do to help him through this?” Abby asked softly.

Gibbs shook his head, lifting it up to look at his family, team members and closest friends, the newcomers – aside from Palmer – looked shocked at Gibbs’ red-rimmed eyes “There isn’t much you can really do right now. He needs to grieve, and… Right now, there are only two people on this planet who can help him with that…” Gibbs said as he glanced towards the front door, then back down into his coffee mug.

“Who?” Tim asked quietly, following Gibbs’ gaze to the door.

Gibbs sighed and rubbed his palms into his jeans, “Me and Steven… Chris’ best friend.” Gibbs said softly, twisting his coffee mug back and forth in his hands.

“And where is this mysterious Steven?” Ziva asked as she sipped at her water gingerly.
Gibbs shook his head “On his way… He had to make sure that his own husband was okay. Chris and Steven’s husband, Troy, were in the same unit.” Gibbs informed them, just as the front door opened and slammed shut.

Gibbs quickly stood up, and his body was encased with the mystery man from the wedding photo in Tony’s apartment – Steven was as tall as Gibbs, broad like Tony and wore the same designer clothes that Tony did.

Everyone exchanged glances as Gibbs and Steven clung to each other, Steven was crying into Gibbs’ shoulder, and Gibbs was rubbing soothing circles against Steven’s back and neck.

“Is Troy okay?” Gibbs asked after Steven had calmed down enough.

Steven nodded his head against Gibbs’ shoulder, “Heartbroken… But yeah, he’s okay…” Steven said, his voice hoarse sounding.

Gibbs nodded and patted Steven on the back of the head lightly “Steven, these are Tony’s friends from work… You’ve already met Jimmy and Ducky… But this is Tim McGee, Abby Sciuto, and Ziva David.” Gibbs introduced, turning Steven to face the group sitting at the dining table.

Steven nodded politely, shaking hands with the three mentioned, “Steven Caldwell, I uhm… Thank you all for being here…” Steven said hesitantly, turning to Jimmy and Ducky and giving both men a brief hug, he then turned to Gibbs with a questioning look in his eyes.

“He’s upstairs… Ducky had to sedate him.” Gibbs informed him, answering the unspoken question. Steven nodded and then excused himself as he quickly ran up the stairs.

Gibbs reclaimed his seat and inhaled shakily “Steven isn’t one for small talk… Ironic, since he’s a lawyer…” Gibbs said ruefully, staring into his coffee again – Something he hadn’t drank since the teams’ arrival, and something that hadn’t gone unnoticed but did go unmentioned.

“He seems nice.” Abby commented quietly, twisting her bottle of water in her fingertips idly.

Gibbs nodded his head, sniffling slightly “I uh… Gonna go get more coffee…” Gibbs said as he pushed back from the table and quickly left the dining area, leaving behind his coffee mug.
Abby stared at the entry way, then over at Ducky with a frown on her face “Chris was the son of one of Jethro’s buddies from Desert Storm… They were all quite close. Troy, he is a bit closer to Gibbs’ age… The six of them used to hang out a lot… Not that either man would admit it.” Ducky informed the three clueless members of the group.

Palmer sighed and lowered his head, “I’m going to go check on him.” Palmer whispered hoarsely as he stood up and followed Gibbs’ path into the kitchen. He pulled the pocket doors closed and leaned against the sturdy wood, hands shoved deeply into his pockets as the tears rode down his face. Gibbs joined Palmer at his side, and the two men wrapped each other in a comforting embrace, letting their tears silently track down their faces.

“Six? Where did you get six from?” Abby asked curiously after the doors were shut, refocusing on Ducky.

Ducky sighed, rubbing his head tiredly “Jethro, Jimmy, Troy, Steven, Tony and Chris - That’s where I get six from.” Ducky said quietly as he reached over, grabbing the tea pot and refilling his mug, sure indication that that conversation topic was closed.

Tony stirred slightly when the bed shifted, and then felt a warm hand brush across his cheek. Tony smiled, sighing contentedly “Hero…” Tony whispered groggily, his eyes slowly opening, a gritty feeling to them as he pressed the balls of his hands against his eyes and rubbed them.

Once his vision had cleared, Tony frowned heavily as he looked up to see Steven hovering above him “Sorry Hun… It’s just me.” Steven said sadly as he laid down next to Tony and wrapped an arm around his waist.

Tony sniffled, turning into Steven’s broad chest, letting out a strangled and lone sob, his entire body shaking with emotion. Steven sighed as he ran a soothing hand up and down Tony’s back, “I’ve got you T. Just let it out, it’s okay…” Steven whispered softly as he held Tony tighter.

After Tony had finally calmed down, he let out a shuddering breath and slowly sat up in the bed “Has… Has anyone… made arrangements to pick up Nick?” Tony asked quietly, looking over at the alarm clock on the nightstand.
Steven shook his head slowly “No, but… I can have my mom go and pick him up, if you want? And then have her bring him over here?” Steven asked quietly, gently rubbing up and down Tony’s back.

Tony nodded as he pulled his legs up to his chest, “Yeah, but… I uhm… Make sure she doesn’t say anything to him… I need to be the one who tells him, even if he won’t understand it…” Tony whispered as he rested his chin between his kneecaps, staring blankly across the guest bedroom.

Steven sighed as he squeezed Tony’s shoulder lightly, “I’ll go call her now, do you need anything?” Steven asked as he slid off of the bed and turned to look back at Tony.

Tony shook his head slowly “No… Just need Nicky here…” Tony whispered, idly plucking at the comforter that was still covering his feet. Steven nodded as he bit back his lip and headed out of the bedroom to make the call and head back downstairs.

When Sharon – Steven’s mom – showed up with a two year old attached to her hip, everyone in the living room and dining room turned towards the door. Sharon smiled sadly as she carried Nick into the room, “How is he doing?” Sharon asked as she adjusted Nick on her hip.

Gibbs stood up from his spot at the dining table and carefully extracted Nick from Sharon’s arms, “He’s doing a bit better… He’s upstairs if you’d like to go and talk with him. I’ll keep Nicky here occupied.” Gibbs said, smiling slightly as he tweaked the little boy’s nose.

Nick giggled, looking around the living room that was full of some familiar faces, and some unfamiliar faces “Are we habin a pawty Unca Gibbs?” Nick asked as he wiggled around in Gibbs’ arms to get a full view of the room.

Gibbs chuckled softly “Not exactly Nick. Just a few friends getting together to talk about something…” Gibbs said as he sat down on his recliner, letting Nick stand on his thigh so he can see the entire room still.

“Das a pawty!” Nick exclaimed as he bounced on Gibbs’ thigh for a few seconds then looked down at Gibbs “Where daddy Tony? Can’ hab a pawty wit’out him!” Nick questioned, his little brows furrowing together.
Tony sighed as he walked downstairs with Sharon “I’m right here, Nicky…” Tony said quietly as he shuffled across the room and stood behind Gibbs’ recliner. Nick scrambled up Gibbs’ chest and into Tony’s arms, “Hey baby boy.” Tony whispered as he wrapped his arms around the toddler, kissing the side of his head.

Nick giggled as he wrapped his arms around Tony’s neck, and looked down into sad green eyes “Daddy, how come you cryin?” Nick asked quietly, setting one of his hands against Tony’s cheek, tapping at the tear that was tracking down his father’s cheek.

Tony shook his head as he walked over to the couch, “Nicky… Daddy has to tell you something, and I want you to listen very carefully, okay?” Tony said quietly, brushing the young boy’s auburn hair out of his face.

Nick nodded his head “O’tay daddy.” Nick whispered as he adjusted himself in Tony’s lap to face his dad, a small smile on his face as the two looked at each other.

“You remember how Daddy Chris had to go across the big pond to help people a few months ago?” Tony asked, his thumb ceaselessly moving across the small boy’s shoulder. Nick nodded as he tilted his head to the side “And you remember how I explained that sometimes bad people hurt the good people who are trying to help them?” Tony continued, inhaling shakily to keep the tears from falling even more.

Nick nodded as he reached a small hand up to Tony’s cheek, Tony smiled sadly and leaned into his son’s touch a bit “Daddy Chris was hurt, by those bad people, and… Daddy Chris, well… He uhm… He won’t be coming home like most daddies do…” Tony said quietly, shaking his head and sighing heavily.

Nick tilted his head further, “Why not? Is he like the beterans we seened at that hopsickle?” Nick asked curiously, crossing his arms over his small chest as he stared at his dad, his brows knitting together in confusion.

Tony shook his head, chuckling quietly in his chest, “No baby, he’s not like the veterans at the hospital… No… Do you remember when Daddy Chris, you and I went to that church? For one of Daddies friends?” Tony asked, biting down on his bottom lip as he watched several emotions flicker in his son’s eyes as he tried putting the pieces together.

Nick nodded slowly as he huffed out a breath of air “Uh huh. Daddy’s friend was in dat big box,
wit da flag on top of it! A lot of sad people were there.” Nick said as he looked down at his lap, twisting his hands together slowly “Is daddy going to be in a box?” Nick whispered, looking up at his father with fat tears forming in his eyes.

Tony sighed, nodding his head slightly, “Yeah baby, Daddy Chris is going to be in a box.” Tony said quietly as he reached over to grab a tissue to wipe away the tears that were tracking down Nick’s cheeks.

“But he’s gonna come out of da box… Right? When we go see him at da church?” Nick asked, sniffling slightly as he looked up at Tony.

Tony shook his head slowly as he looked up at everyone in the room, “I don’t know… how to explain this any better…” Tony said sadly, holding onto Nick around the waist, “Nicky… Daddy won’t be coming out of the box. He has gone to heaven to be with the angels.” Tony said, looking directly at his son again.

Nick frowned slightly “Oh… Otay…” Nick said quietly as he slipped out of Tony’s lap, he looked around the room briefly and then toddled towards the kitchen.

Tony raised his eyebrow and looked down at his hands “Well, that was… easy?” Tony questioned, looking up at Gibbs who was still sitting across from him in the recliner.

Gibbs shrugged slightly “He needs time to figure out what this all means… Kids process differently than adults do. And when he’s processed it, he will probably have a lot of questions.” Gibbs said as he turned in the recliner, looking over at Nick who was prying the fridge door open.

Tony nodded as he slowly stood up, crossing his arms over his chest “I think I need to go lay back down… Could you keep an eye on Nicky?” Tony asked as he walked towards the stairs. Gibbs nodded as he stood up and walked into the kitchen, joining the toddler on the floor.

Tim, Ziva and Abby all looked around the living room, confused looks on their faces as they’d watched Tony with this unknown child, and watched as Gibbs joined Nick in the kitchen, where they were now sitting on the floor and talking quietly.
“So, I’m confused… When did Tony have a kid?” Abby asked, her brows furrowing as she looked over at Ducky, Palmer or Steven for information.

Steven shook his head slowly “Tony didn’t have a kid, Nicky is… was… Chris’ son, and Tony’s step-son. It’s really a long story, and not any of ours to tell, bottom line is that Tony has raised Nicky since the day he was born with Chris, and later adopted Nick when they got married last year.” Steven said, glancing over at the toddler and smiling sadly.

Abby nodded her head slowly, sighing sadly as she leaned her head against Tim’s shoulder. “So… You and Gibbs… Jimmy?” Abby asked, looking over at the man in question.

Palmer blushed furiously, looking down at the dining table while nodding his head slowly “Yeah, Gibbs and I… we’ve uh… been together or a while now…” Palmer said shyly, rubbing his palms against his legs nervously.

“No reason to feel ashamed by that fact, Jimmy, you seem to really care about him, and that’s… all that we can ask for, for anybody that we love.” Abby said as she reached over, squeezing Palmer’s shoulder affectionately.

Palmer shook his head slowly “Not ashamed of it… We uh, just never… discussed coming out to anyone, but… It happened, and although our timing isn’t so great, I think it’ll help bring some cheeriness back into the room.” Palmer said, smiling lightly as he stood up and headed towards the kitchen with Gibbs and Nicky.

Nick looked between Palmer and Gibbs, grinning widely as he stood up between his two uncles, setting a hand on each of their shoulders “When will daddy come home?” Nick asked quietly, looking at Gibbs directly.

Gibbs sighed as he wrapped his arm around the toddler’s waist, “Daddy Chris will probably be home within a day or two. And then you and Daddy Tony, and Grandma Betty will go to Andrews Airfield, and… You’ll meet the men who will bring him home.” Gibbs explained quietly as he scooted closer to Palmer, settling Nick in his lap.

“And he’ll be in da box then? Or will he walk off da plane and then get in da box?” Nick asked curiously, blinking his eyes slowly as he looked between his uncles.
Palmer frowned as he brushed Nick’s hair out of his eyes “Daddy Chris will already be in the box when he comes back to the airport… Do you think you’re getting it Nicky?” Palmer asked softly as he leaned his head against Gibbs’ shoulder.

Nick shook his head, auburn hair flying everywhere and falling back into his eyes “No… But, I learn, right?” he asked, looking up between his two uncles and then snuggling into Gibbs’ chest, yawning tiredly.

Gibbs nodded as he wrapped one arm around Palmer’s shoulders, and the other around Nick’s back “Yeah buddy, you’ll learn, and we’ll all be here when you need us…” Gibbs said softly as he rubbed his hand soothingly up and down Nick’s back until the toddler fell asleep.
This chapter is basically a series of flashbacks to give everyone insight into Chris & Tony's relationship and how everything transgressed, from their getting together to Nicky coming into their lives.

Tony sighed, staring up at the blank white ceiling of Gibbs’ guest bedroom, his hands linked behind his head as he thought back through the past three years since he met the love of his life.

~*~ Flashback ~*~

Tony walked into Gibbs’ house with a bunch of nervous energy rolling around inside of him. Tony was about to meet one of Gibbs’ oldest friend’s son’s, and even though Gibbs wouldn’t give him much information, what he had learned about ‘Christopher Parker’ was plenty to get the butterflies swarming his stomach.

“Tony! You’re early!” Gibbs exclaimed as he stood up from the fireplace after having pulled off three large cowboy style steaks and set them onto a plate.

Tony nodded “Uh yeah... Sorry, I... I should have... waited...” Tony stammered out nervously, twisting the end of his suit jacket in his fingertips.

Gibbs waved his knife in the air, “You’re fine... Chris is already here.” Gibbs said as he walked towards the kitchen “CHRIS, GET YOUR ASS UPSTAIRS!” Gibbs shouted in the direction of the open basement door.

Tony heard heavy footfalls beating down on the wooden stairs of Gibbs’ basement, and when the man ducked to avoid hitting his head on the doorway, Tony couldn’t help but to smile a little.

To say Tony fell in love with Chris at first sight, would be the biggest understatement of the millennium. He was ready to take the man down and love him right then and there, even though physically he would probably never be able to even break the guy’s pinky. Chris was tall, and muscular, his entire persona screamed ‘Marine’ from the get-go with the short buzz-cut, nevermind the fact that he was wearing an olive green USMC PT Shirt and digital camo cargo pants.
“Chris, this is Tony… Tony, this is Chris…” Gibbs said, without even looking at the two men who, once their eyes locked, hadn’t been able to stop staring at each other.

Chris was the first to step towards Tony, without breaking eye contact “Hey.” Chris said, his voice was deep and silky smooth, and greatly reminded Tony of honey.

Tony opened his mouth a few times, unable to form a coherent thought as he stared into the greenest eyes he’d ever seen before, they even rivaled his own eye color “H… HI!” Tony squeaked out, his cheeks going bright red as he finally broke eye contact with Chris, looking shyly down at his feet.

~*~ End Flashback ~*~

Tony rolled over in the bed, burying his face in the pillow as he let out another distraught sigh, his fingers clenching into the underside of the pillow as he tried to stem off the tears that seemed to be never-ending.

~*~ Flashback ~*~

When Tony’s cellphone began ringing, he was startled out of watching his all-time favorite movie, and nearly fell off the couch trying to reach his phone without moving from his spot on the couch.

“Hello?” Tony coughed into the phone, his throat was scratchy and felt like it was on fire, whoever had brought the cold to NCIS was going to pay for getting Tony sick, and boy was he sicker than he’d ever been, the touch of pneumonia that developed was worrisome, but Pitt had put him on strong antibiotics and he was slowly on the mend.

“Jesus, I didn’t know you were a smoker, Tony.” Chris teased into the phone, chuckling softly. Tony had damn near stopped breathing when he heard the voice on the other end of his line – He hadn’t spoken to or seen Chris since that night at Gibbs’ house, and that was nearly three weeks ago, then again, they got cases back-to-back until Tony came down with this cold.
Tony sighed, then coughed a bit more into his upper arm, “I’m not… Someone brought the cold from hell to work… and I caught it, thanks to the weakened immune system I now constantly carry around with me…” Tony said as he snuggled deeper underneath the thirty thousand blankets he had piled on top of him.

Chris chuckled slightly “Well shit, I was going to ask if you maybe wanted to go out… Found this neat little sushi joint around the corner from my house, and… well, I wanted to take you there.” Chris said, his tone sounding slightly saddened now.

Tony frowned as he peeked over at the clock on the DVD player “You realize it’s only ten in the morning? Who makes dinner plans that early!” Tony jested, laughing slightly until a horrendous coughing fit ensued.

Once Tony’s coughing was complete, Chris sighed “Usually you ask someone in advance before you decide to take them out… But, since you can’t go out… How’s about I come over there? I’ll make you my grandmother’s famous chicken noodle soup, which, by the way, cures everything! And we can watch a movie – Your pick.” Chris said, grinning widely, not that Tony could see it.

Tony shook his head, “And what? Get yourself sick in the process? Even I’m not that mean, Chris.” Tony retorted quietly, his heart started fluttering even more; not only was the man good looking, but he could cook and seemed to like movies, he was Tony’s dream wrapped up in an Adonis’ body.

“Oh come on, I could use the cold to my advantage if I actually did catch it – I haven’t caught a cold since I was a freshman in high school!” Chris exclaimed, chuckling slightly as he listened to Tony’s breath hitching slightly – Knowing it wasn’t from the cold, but the reaction he was having on the man.

Tony sighed in defeat, “Alright… Alright, you win… But you better be right about this soup, or I’ll never forgive you for it.” Tony said as he proceeded to give Chris his address and the access code for the parking garage so he didn’t have to park on the street, knowing the man rode a motorcycle, and Tony did live in a somewhat seedy neighborhood.

When Chris did eventually show up, bearing several bags of groceries and an overstuffed bag of books – All of which held interest to Tony’s curious mind – the two men hunkered down on the couch with huge bowls of soup and a box of saltines for each of them. Tony hadn’t even brought up the movie part of the deal, the two men just sat there talking, about everything and nothing in particular well into the night and some of the next morning until Tony couldn’t even keep his head up anymore, and that’s when Chris tucked Tony into his small twin bed – Of course, the man laughed about that, and told Tony he needed better digs for sleeping, and Tony just shrugged it off as he curled into the bed. The last thing Tony would remember from that night was Chris kissing him on the forehead and telling him to get better soon so they could do this again.
Tony rolled over onto his back, sighing as he felt someone staring at him from the doorway, he lifted his head off the mattress, but when he looked at the open doorway, there was nobody there, which should have freaked Tony out, but the presence he did feel actually calmed his nerves a bit “Thanks Hero…” Tony whispered hoarsely into the empty room.

Tony had a lot to think about, and while most of his thoughts were centered around the relationship that had started full-force a month ago with Chris, a lot of these thoughts also had to do with the choices he’d made in this relationship – He had once vowed that he would never date another bisexual man, but then in walked Chris, and now they were going to be going out on their fifth date, already.

Tony’s feet pounded restlessly against the footpath in Rock Creek Park, with his headphones blaring one of his favorite songs to keep him going even past the point of exhaustion, and he was that, especially after the grueling case that the team had just closed. Normally he would speak to Gibbs about the thoughts running through his mind, but with Chris being the son of Gibbs’ best friend, he didn’t think that was a good idea, so he resorted to the next best therapy – Running as hard and as fast as he could.

Tony had passed several joggers on the footpath, but he hadn’t noticed faces, nor did he notice when one of the runners was running behind him after having turned around to follow Tony. The next thing Tony knew, he was rolling down a hill with a heavy body wrapped around him protectively, when Tony and whomever tackled him finally stopped rolling at the bottom of the grassy hill, Tony opened his eyes.

“Chris! What… what happened!?” Tony shouted, pulling his headphones out of his ears and staring at the man who was only inches from his face.

Chris huffed out a breath of air, “You damn near got ran over by a biker! That’s what happened!” Chris exclaimed as he looked down into Tony’s eyes, sighing quietly as he plucked a few leaves out of the shorter man’s hair.
Tony chuckled softly, “So, you tackled my ass?” Tony asked as he also brushed leaves out of Chris’ short auburn hair.

Chris nodded slowly, “Nuh uh. I saved your ass from getting knocked down this… hill…” Chris said slowly, laughing at the irony of the situation.

Tony laughed as he looked up at Chris, his fingers intertwining in the short strands of hair at the back of Chris’ head “My hero.” Tony whispered as he kissed Chris – and they had shared several goodnight pecks in the past, but this kiss set a fire in the pit of both men’s stomachs – The kiss deepened when Chris placed the flats of his palms above Tony’s shoulders, both men opening their mouths up to the other.

When Chris finally broke the kiss, he smiled and nodded his head “Think I’ll always be your Hero, Tony.” Chris whispered as he kissed Tony once again, the fire spreading and warming each man in the cool crisp autumn air.

~*~ End Flashback ~*~

Tony sighed as he grabbed his notebook and a pen from his backpack, he didn’t know exactly what he wanted to write, but once the pen hit the first blank page, Tony’s hand flew across the pages, filling them up at an exceptional rate, even for him.

~*~ Flashback ~*~

Chris walked into his house, he’d had a terrible day and wanted nothing more than to just sit in front of his TV and relax with a cold beer. But when he opened the front door, his nose was assaulted with the best smell he’d ever known in his entire life, and he knew that Tony was in his kitchen, something even better than TV and beer, they had only been dating for three months now, but Tony was quickly becoming a permanent piece to his otherwise lonely house.

Tony turned around just in time to see the haggard expression fade from Chris’ face as the man walked into the kitchen, “Maybe I should have called ahead?” Tony questioned sheepishly as he
poured the pasta from the strainer into the pot.

Chris shook his head as he tugged the Velcro strips holding his BDU jacket together, apart, then stripped out of the jacket all together “No… It’s not you. Just a rough day… I’m glad you’re here, could definitely use the company.” Chris said as he set the jacket down, then sat heavily on one of the bar stools in front of the island.

Tony tilted his head to the side as he stirred the pasta in his homemade marinara sauce, “Wanna talk about it? You know, just because I tend to ramble a lot, but I also happen to have very good listening skills.” Tony said, grinning as he lifted a few noodles to his mouth and slurped them down.

Chris nodded “I do want to talk about it, yes, but… After we eat, I don’t want to risk ruining your appetite and all this wonderful food go to waste.” Chris said as he snagged a noodle out of the pot and slurped it into his mouth, humming in appreciation for the tastes running down his throat.

After dinner, Chris and Tony sat on the couch with barely an inch of space between their bodies, “Okay… Now, what’s bothering you? I’ve never heard you be so silent, for so long…” Tony asked quietly as he slid his hand underneath Chris’ and interlocked their fingers gently.

Chris sighed as he rubbed the back of his head with his other hand “Got a call from my Ex today… She’s uh… God, I don’t know how to put this… I really don’t want to hurt you, or lose you Tony…” Chris said quietly, his eyes locked on the coffee table that their feet were resting on.

Tony frowned as he laid his head against Chris’ shoulder “If she doesn’t want you back, and if she’s not suing you for any reason… Then, just say it. Whatever it is, I’m sure it’s not nearly as bad as you think it is.” Tony said just as quietly, rubbing his thumb over the back of Chris’ hand soothingly.

Chris nodded slowly “Oh, it’s bad, T… She uh… She’s pregnant. And yeah, before you ask; yes, it’s mine… I was… her only partner, ever.” Chris said quietly, glancing down at Tony to see if he’d react badly.

Tony furrowed his brows slightly, taking in the words his boyfriend had just said and thinking it over. He continued rubbing his thumb over Chris’ hand mindlessly as he thought about it, and after twenty minutes of unnerving silence, Tony shrugged his shoulders “So, you’re sure she doesn’t want you back?” Tony asked, looking up at Chris. Chris shook his head, grinning slightly despite the situation, “Then, I don’t have a problem with it. I can be a part-time daddy.” Tony said, grinning brightly as he kissed Chris reassuringly.
Chris shook his head and rested his forehead against Tony’s forehead. “That’s not the worst of it T... She doesn’t want kids, and she told me – plain and simple – if I don’t take the baby, then he... or she, will be put up for adoption...” Chris sighed, shaking his head again. “I can’t do that to my child, Tony... There’s just... I can’t do it.” Chris said sadly, looking deeply into Tony’s green eyes.

Tony kissed Chris on the top of his nose lightly. “Okay then, guess I’ll be a full-time daddy... don’t worry Chris, we’ll make it work somehow. How long do we have to prepare for Parker Junior to arrive?” Tony asked, grinning widely up at Chris.

Chris sighed as he snuggled further into the couch, resting his head against Tony’s shoulder. “A little over seven months. I really hope it’s a boy... I don’t think I could handle having a daughter.” Chris said softly as he closed his eyes, relieved that Tony has accepted this new twist in their ever-evolving relationship.

~*~ End Flashback ~*~

Tony set his notebook down and sighed as he looked at his watch, it was well past midnight now, and he’d been cooped up in the bedroom nearly all day now, not that it wasn’t understandable, but he missed Nick’s bath-time and bedtime, and he was starving, so he decided on putting the eulogy on hold while he went and checked on his son and got something to eat, knowing that there had to be something downstairs, since everybody left about two hours ago.

~*~ Flashback ~*~

They had been dating for exactly six months now. Tony and Chris were both pretty anxious about the fact that they were going to be parents, together, they had spent many days, weeks and even months, discussing the pros and cons of this new addition to their life, and the fact that they would now be a family, bonded by this little boy that was coming sooner than they both had known about.

Chris and Tony were lying in bed together, their naked bodies tangled together in the sheets when Chris’ cellphone began vibrating on the nightstand, “Lieutenant Parker speaking.” Chris said into the phone after having answered it, squirming in the bed slightly as Tony kissed his way down Chris’ body. “Yeah? Oh, oh shit! Okay, yeah, I’m on my way Lori...” Chris said in a hurry then promptly hung up the phone.
Tony looked up from his spot between Chris’ legs, quirking an eyebrow upward “It’s time! She just went into labor… Jesus Christ, it’s too early! I’m not ready, we’re not ready… Oh god I’m going to be a father!” Chris blurted out in rapid fire.

Tony chuckled as he rolled off the bed “You are ready, we are ready… Now come on!” Tony exclaimed as he gathered his and Chris’ clothes, quickly separating the articles and putting on his own clothes while Chris did the same.

After arriving at the hospital and waiting nearly thirteen hours, Chris came out of the hospital room with the biggest grin anyone had ever seen on his face, “Well, it’s official! I’m the proud father to a nine pound, five ounce, twenty-three inch long, healthy baby boy!” Chris announced proudly, giving his mother a bear hug and smiling over her head at Tony.

Tony smiled as he walked over to Chris, and after he had released his mother, Tony jumped into Chris’ arms and kissed him lovingly and deeply, “You’re going to be the best daddy ever, Hero.” Tony said softly as he ran his hand over the top of Chris’ head.

Chris nodded as he kissed Tony softly on the lips “Wanna go meet our son?” Chris asked softly, Tony nodded enthusiastically as he dropped out of Chris’ arms and waited impatiently in the hallway for the taller man to guide his mother and father to the hospital room.

When Tony saw Chris holding the small infant for the first time, he thought his heart would literally break in half at the scene, he had never imagined having a kid would be so emotional, but he was in tears by the time Chris had come over and introduced the small infant to him, “Nicholas Scott Parker.” Chris had said softly as he brushed a – compared to the infant – large finger down his cheek. Tony had fallen in love with the man all over again at the sight of Chris being so paternal and having a natural instinct to a child he hardly even knew.

~*~ End Flashback ~*~

Tony sighed as he sat at the dining table with a plate of pasta primavera and a juice box, all while sitting in the dark, he hadn’t bothered turning on any lights, he knew Gibbs’ house inside and out and knew where every piece of furniture was without needing the light to see it.
He blinked a few times when a light came on in the kitchen, and Gibbs walked out from the basement “I see you found your dinner.” Gibbs said softly, nodding towards the untouched meal.

Tony nodded slightly as he twisted his fork around the pasta, “Yeah… Came down here with a rumbling stomach, now I can’t even eat it…” Tony said, sighing as he pushed the plate away.

Gibbs shook his head and pushed the plate back in front of Tony, “You need to eat, even if it’s just a few bites, Tony…” Gibbs said sternly as he sat down next to the younger man and poked the straw through the hole in the juice box “And, don’t let Nicky know you’re drinking his juices, he’ll likely try and hurt you for it.” Gibbs said, chuckling softly.

Tony shook his head as he brought some of the pasta to his mouth “He wouldn’t, he shares these things with me all of the time. I always was his favorite…” Tony said quietly as he chowed down on the pasta – after having that first bite, his appetite had returned ten-fold.

Gibbs smirked a little “That’s because you spoil the boy to no end, he sees something he likes, you go out the next day and buy it… You do realize that he needs boundaries, right?” Gibbs asked, raising his eyebrow – Glad that Tony was actually out and talking in full, unbroken, sentences.

Tony nodded and shrugged his shoulders at the same time “Yeah, I know… But, he’s my son, aren’t I allowed to give him anything that he wants?” Tony asked curiously, tilting his head to the side as he slurped noisily on the plastic straw.

Gibbs shook his head “Moderation is key when it comes to raising a toddler, T. Gotta know when to put your foot down or else you’ll end up raising a hellion on feet.” Gibbs said as he cupped Tony’s shoulder and squeezed lightly.

Tony sighed as he slumped his shoulders slightly “Yeah… Thanks Jethro… Gonna go back upstairs and finish writing.” Tony said quietly as he stood up, as he was about to walk back towards the stairs, Gibbs grabbed the younger man’s wrist to stop him.

“We all love you Tony, and you know you aren’t alone in any of this… We’ll get you through to the other side, no matter how long it takes.” Gibbs said as he pulled Tony into his chest, wrapping the younger man up in a fatherly embrace.

Tony nodded against Gibbs’ chest, the tears he’d thought he’d finally gotten rid of returning in full force as he sobbed into Gibbs’ chest, clutching at the older man’s worn USMC hoodie. Gibbs just
held onto Tony tightly, letting his own tears wash down his cheeks, until he felt Tony’s sobs turn into hiccups, he then turned with Tony and took him back upstairs and into the guest bedroom.
With the funeral only a few hours away, the eulogy finally finished, typed and printed out, Tony was feeling extremely overwhelmed with all of the chaos around him – Not only did it seem like everyone was coming to visit him, at Gibbs’ house, where he’d practically moved into since the notification, but Nick was really starting to grieve, and not in a good way at all.

Tony sat on the floor in the guest bedroom with two small black leather dress shoes in his hands, “Nicky, come on bud, time to put your shoes on so we can go to the church.” Tony called to his son, who was sitting across the room playing with a few toys that Gibbs had brought over.

“No! I don’ wanna!” Nick shouted, crossing his arms over his chest and staring defiantly at his father.

Tony sighed “Nick, do not start this! Not today, please… Not today.” Tony pleaded, setting the shoes on the floor as he stared at Nick.

Nick furrowed his brows and shook his head, auburn hair flying everywhere “I say no!” Nick shouted as he stood up and, although on slightly wobbly feet, ran for the bedroom door only to run into a pair of strong legs.

Nick slowly looked up to see Gibbs standing in the doorway, “Hi Unca Gibbs!” Nick exclaimed with a cheesy grin on his face. Gibbs shook his head and silently pointed in Tony’s direction, Nick looked at Tony, then back up at Gibbs “NO!” he shouted, then slipped past Gibbs’ legs and down the hall.

Tony sighed heavily, draping his arms over his knees and hanging his head, “This is certainly not how I saw my morning going…” Tony said sadly as he tugged at a crease in his dress pants.

Gibbs frowned slightly “I’ll handle Nick, you just worry about getting yourself ready.” Gibbs said as he grabbed the shoes off the floor and then proceeded to follow wherever Nick had run off too.

Nick sat on the couch with the small black remote in his hands when Gibbs came downstairs “Unca Gibbs! We watch da cartoon?!” Nick questioned, pointing the remote at the black TV screen.
Gibbs shook his head, “Nicky, you need to get your shoes on, and then you can watch cartoons.” Gibbs said as he sat down on the coffee table in front of the toddler.

Nick shook his head, “No, no, no! I don’ wanna put shoes on!” Nick cried out as he tried slipping off the couch and away from Gibbs, but the older man grabbed Nick around the waist “Nooooo!” Nicky cried, squirming and thrashing his smaller body against Gibbs’ body.

“Nicholas Scott Parker!” Tony bellowed as he came down the stairs, staring at his son, the anger in his eyes was obvious, “You stop this right now, and put your shoes on!” Tony stated angrily as he came over to the couch and sat down in front of Gibbs and Nick.

Once Tony had gotten one of the shoes on, he smiled slightly “See, wasn’t… OW!” Tony yelped, holding the side of his jaw that had just been kicked by a small – but powerful – toddler’s foot, “Okay… I’ve had it!” Tony growled as he grabbed both of Nick’s feet in his hand, holding the boy as still as possible.

Nick screamed and thrashed harder as he was held down “Nooooo! No, no! I don’ wanna! I don’ wanna!” Nick continued his protests, although falling on deaf ears as Tony and Gibbs worked together to get the toddler into his shoes.

Tony sighed as he and Gibbs released Nick, watching as he ran off and headed back upstairs, “Please… Tell me the rest of the day will get somewhat better?” Tony questioned, looking up at Gibbs with tear filled eyes.

Gibbs shrugged his shoulders “I don’t know if it’ll get any better, T… But, it can’t get any worse than getting kicked in the face by a two year old, now can it?” Gibbs said, grinning slightly as he turned Tony’s head to the side to look at the swelling that had already started forming, “You should probably go ice that…” Gibbs added, patting Tony on the cheek lightly as he stood up.

After Gibbs had gone upstairs, Tony frowned as he grabbed his notebook, and opened it up to the page where a folded note was secured inside, he slowly and carefully unfolded the pages and smoothed them out;

Hey Casanova,

I know it’s going to be tough without me there, but you know it’s going to be okay, because you’re the strongest man I know, aside from myself of course. Don’t let Nicky run all over you when
I’m gone though, I know how you get around him – You know, you’re kind of like melted butter when it comes to that kid… Boy, I hope you don’t hit me for that one, although you probably will anyway… Oh well. Man, I’m going to miss you and Nicky while I’m gone, but you two will always be in my heart, no matter where I end up. And you make sure you keep your head up and stay strong through all of this, just remember that I won’t be gone forever and I’ll always come home to you Casa, you’re my everything and I love you more than anything, except maybe Nicky, I love that boy and I hope that you tell him that daddy Chris loves him every day that I’m gone. Only a few more hours before I have to get ready to leave, then only six months until I’m back in your loving arms.

Love you bunches, Hero.

Tony shook his head as he read through the dozens of similar notes, swiping at his teary eyes. Tony laid his head back against the top of the couch, staring up at the ceiling “Wasn’t supposed to happen like this, Hero… Wasn’t supposed to happen like this at all…” Tony whispered quietly, blinking back the tears as he stood up and headed upstairs to finish getting himself and Nick ready.

Tony stood at the front of the viewing room at the church’s funeral home, staring blankly at the handmade – by Gibbs – wooden casket that had the American flag draped over the closed portion of the casket. Nick had finally relaxed enough to get to the funeral home, and he, Gibbs, Nick and Palmer were the only people in the room right now.

Nick came over to Tony and tugged on his pant leg lightly, Tony looked down at his son and smiled sadly “What’s up Nickster?” Tony asked as he crouched down in front of his son.

Nick set his hands onto Tony’s shoulders and looked over at the casket “Daddy in da box?” Nick asked softly, looking back at Tony with a frown on his face.

Tony nodded slowly as he lifted Nick up into his arms, “Yeah he is… Do… Do you want to see him and say good bye to him?” Tony asked softly, rubbing a gentle hand up and down Nick’s back.

Nick nodded as he stuck a few fingers into his mouth, and began chewing on them “Uh huh… He say bye-bye to me too?” Nick asked around his fingers.

Tony cleared his throat and sighed, shaking his head slightly “Nicky, remember how we talked about daddy Chris is up in heaven with the angels now?” Tony asked softly, adjusting Nick’s vest slightly.
Nick nodded slightly “Uh huh, daddy has wingies now, he can fly!” Nick exclaimed, giggling slightly as he looked towards the casket, “Le’go see daddy!” Nick said, pointing towards the casket with a drool covered hand.

Tony inhaled deeply as he braced himself for this moment, he’d been worried about getting near the casket, and as his feet started moving, his apprehension grew ten-fold, and when he finally stopped in front of the casket, he couldn’t bring himself into looking down.

Nick was hanging loosely in Tony’s arms, staring down into the casket with a confused look on his face and his head tilted to the side slightly, “Daddy…” Nick said quietly as he leaned forward, tapping at Chris’ cheek. Nick immediately drew his hand back and let out a terrified shriek, Tony looked down at his son with wide eyes, he noticed the freaked out look on his son’s face and quickly stood back from the casket and sat on the floor, cradling Nick in his lap.

“Hey… Hey… Its okay Nick, I’m right here… Daddy’s got you baby.” Tony said softly as he rocked his trembling two year old back and forth slowly, placing gentle and reassuring kisses in the baby soft auburn hair.

After Nick had finally calmed back down and his body stopped trembling, Tony pulled the toddler away from his chest and looked down into his sons green eyes, “What happened Nicky?” Tony asked softly, carding his fingers through Nick’s hair slowly.

Nick shook his head as he slipped his thumb into his mouth, “Daddy cold…” Nick said, his voice muffled as he sucked on his thumb, rocking his own body the way Tony had to keep himself calm.

Tony sighed as he kissed the top of Nick’s head “Yeah, I know buddy… I know he is.” Tony said softly as he pulled Nick’s head to his chest and continued rocking the toddler in soothing motions.

Tony stood at the front of the casket that was now closed from viewing – And that was a bonus, because Nick had been freaked out to even be in the room after his encounter and he’d been calmed down while the lid was open. Tony sighed as he held the eulogy papers in his hands, staring at the blurred words, not that he needed the papers, but he knew exactly what it was he wanted to say.
Tony inhaled deeply and steeled himself, closing his eyes lightly as he opened his mouth.

“Christopher ‘Hero’ James Parker lived his life to the fullest, and was always ready for the next adventure. Chris was always making someone laugh, could turn any frown upright with just a simple act, he was strong, brave and loved his country for everything that it was worth. And he died protecting our freedoms, and if he had the chance, he would do it all over again, because that’s just the kind of guy that Chris was.” Tony began, taking a deep but shaky breath as he opened his eyes.

“Chris could be ultimately stubborn at times, but he was the most loving, caring man anyone would want in their lives. Although enemies were inevitable in the Marine Corps, Chris never made enemies when he was stateside, he would have – and has – gave the shirt off his back to anybody who needed it.” Tony took another breath and frowned slightly.

“I know that when delivering a eulogy, most people tell stories, but there are just so many stories that I could tell, that I honestly couldn’t pinpoint an exact one. Chris was, like I said, always looking for adventures around every corner and was definitely not afraid of getting hurt during any of these adventures, he definitely lived life on the edge.” Tony lowered his head slightly, “Chris was a first lieutenant in the Marine Corps, and he was inspired by his father and his uncle – Jethro – to join the Marines when he turned eighteen. He was recently been awarded the Purple Heart posthumously, he has also received the Navy/Marine Corp commendation medal, two Distinguished Service medals, The Silver Star, and the Bronze Star. And he also received Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan campaign medals while serving in each of those countries. Before every deployment, Chris would always tell me; if anything happens to me, make sure you tell my mom, dad, Nick and everyone that is in our lives, that I will always protect them, and always love them. He said some other things, but they would be relatively inappropriate in this setting.” Tony said, breathing out a sigh of relief as he stepped away from the podium and took up his seat next to Gibbs and Nick.

The congregation had thinned out by the time they got to the gravesite, and Tony watched as Gibbs, Troy and four other marines – all dressed in their military dress uniforms, naturally – carried the flag-covered casket towards the pedestal and gingerly set it down. Gibbs and Troy joined Tony, Steven and Nick, while the other marines about-faced and walked back off the lawn.

Tony adjusted Nick on his hip and pressed the toddler’s head to his chest and covered his other ear as seven marines preformed the twenty-one gun salute, Tony’s entire body jumping as each rifle shot echoed in the air, silent tears tracking down his cheeks as he stared at the casket, unable to take his eyes off the box since it had been set down.

When the bugler began playing ‘Taps’, Tony damn near lost it, he handed Nick over to Gibbs and had to step away from the gathering, his arms wrapped tightly around his own body to give himself some sort of comfort. After Tony had composed himself again, he returned to the group and was encompassed by an extreme group hug that held every friend from NCIS and outside of NCIS – Troy, Steven and Nick, even though he didn’t understand why, he just didn’t want to feel left out.
Tony watched on in silence as two marines began folding up the American flag that had been draped over Chris’ casket, into a tight triangle. The older of the two marines started his precision walk towards Tony, the flag held between his two white gloved hands “On behalf of the President of The United States, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, and a grateful nation, please accept this flag as a symbol of our appreciation for your loved one’s service to Country and Corps.” The man said directly to Tony.

Tony nodded as he enfolded the flag in between his hands and pulled it to his chest, watching as the marine in front of him saluted the flag one last time, and then turned and walked away with his colleague at a sedate pace. Tony hugged the flag to his chest, and watched as the casket was slowly lowered into the ground, he glanced over at Nick and saw that his eyes had gone wide with fear, “Nicky, would you like to go to the car?” Tony asked softly, turning towards his son who was still in Gibbs’ arms.

Nick nodded and held his arms out to Tony, who scooped his child up in one arm and held the folded flag underneath his other arm, “We’ll be waiting in the car…” Tony said quietly as he carried Nick down to the black town car. After getting Nick and himself situated in the backseat of the car, Tony set the flag down into Nick’s lap and turned to his son “Do you have any questions Nick?” Tony asked softly as he brushed away the tears on the toddler’s cheeks.

Nick shook his head and leaned into Tony’s side as he stared down at the flag in his lap, his silent tears still riding down his cheeks, he started hiccupping slightly and Tony knew it was only a matter of time before the reality that his two year old’s world had been irrevocably changed, would hit him full-force, and Tony had to brace himself for that possibility, a lot of things were running amok in Tony’s head now and he just held onto Nick a bit tighter to comfort the both of them.

Tony sat dejectedly on Gibbs’ couch where everyone gathered after the funeral, he couldn’t bring himself to try and ‘celebrate’ Chris’ life when that life had once held him in it. Tony wanted nothing more to do than run away from everything and just start over somewhere new, but the fact that he had Nick and wouldn’t know how the two year old would react to a new location worried him.

Tony sighed as he pushed up from the couch, he shuffled unnoticed upstairs and into the guest bedroom, he looked around the room he had been inhabiting for the past week and a half, and knew that if he really wanted to move on, he was going to have to get back up and brush himself off, and that all started with getting out of Gibbs’ house and back into his house – The one where he had built a life, and family, with Chris for the past three years.
As Tony was packing his and Nick’s bags up, he noticed someone standing in the doorway out of the corner of his eye “Hey Jimmy…” Tony said quietly as he stuffed a few more toys into one of Nick’s bags.

Palmer walked into the bedroom and frowned slightly “What’re you doing up here all alone?” Palmer asked as he sat down on the edge of the bed, peering into the packed bags.

Tony shrugged as he sat heavily on the edge of the bed, pushing the suitcases out of his way, “Just needed to be alone for a while, think about a few things… Time to try and pick up the pieces of my life… Give you and Gibbs your space back.” Tony said quietly, twisting a stuffed teddy bear around in his fingers.

Palmer shook his head and smiled sadly “Gibbs and I are doing quite fine with the space we’ve got, Tony. You don’t have to pack up and leave right now… You’re still grieving, and we wouldn’t kick you out at a time like this…” Palmer said sympathetically, setting a hand on Tony’s bouncing knee to stop the shaking of the bed.

Tony sighed “No, no… Nicky and I need to get back to the house, and give you and Gibbs back your space and time together… I’m sure you guys miss each other… I know from personal experience… It isn’t easy trying to find alone time with a toddler constantly underfoot.” Tony said wistfully as he stood up and began shoving more things into his bags.

Palmer sighed as he grabbed Tony’s frantically moving hands, “Tony – Gibbs and I spend plenty of time together. That’s the least of our worries right now anyway, besides… We love having Nick around, any chance to spoil him, even though Gibbs tells me not too.” Palmer said, grinning brightly as he sat Tony back down onto the bed and held onto his shoulders “You don’t have to leave, if you don’t want too… But if you do, at least let me help you?” Palmer said questioningly, looking at the mostly packed bedroom.

Tony nodded his head slightly “It’s not that I want to leave, Jimmy… But, I just… I need to try and… figure out what I’m doing with my life now… and its hard doing that here, when I know that I’m intruding on someone else’s life, especially with a toddler.” Tony said, his voice airing on the side of frustration and anger as he braced his hands on the end of the bed and stared down at the comforter.

After getting everything packed and into Tony’s SUV, the three men stood outside while Tony
Tony nodded as he clicked Nick’s seatbelt together and then turned towards Gibbs, shutting the backdoor, “Yeah, I know Gibbs… It’s just… It’s time for me to go.” Tony said as he stared into the tinted back window of his car, then back at Gibbs and Palmer, “I appreciate you guys putting up with me and Nick… I’ll see you at work.” Tony said as he hopped into the driver’s seat, and without a second glance, pulled out of the driveway and headed in the direction of the house.

Nick looked up, watching the scenery pass by his window “Daddy, how come we leaved unca Jethro and unca Jimmy house?” Nick asked curiously as he tossed his stuffed soccer ball around in his hands.

“Because we have to go back to our house now, don’t you miss all your toys and your own bed?” Tony asked, glancing in the rearview mirror at his son.

Nick nodded his head slowly “Uh huh, but I gonna miss them.” Nick said softly, looking at the back of his father’s head.

Tony smiled, shaking his head slightly “We’ll see them again, Nicky. Just like we used to before, every Saturday for dinner. Do you remember when Saturday is?” Tony asked as he pulled into the driveway of his house, and stared at the two story white house with a longing look on his face.

Nicky nodded enthusiastically “Yeah! Sadurday is aftah Fwyday!” Nick exclaimed happily as he bounced excitedly in his car seat, Tony chuckled and nodded his head sadly as he got out of the car and collected Nick.

Tony knew that walking into the house was going to be the toughest thing he’d ever deal with now, but he was also worried how Nick would react when they got inside, seeing all of Chris’ things in the house, and now – sort of – grasping the concept that Daddy wasn’t coming home. Tony steeled his emotions and inhaled deeply as he pushed the front door open, and watched as Nicky just looked around the living room and then wiggled out of Tony’s grasp and headed up the stairs.

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully the eulogy is decent -- I /never/ had to write one before and really had a tough time figuring it out, and even guides/writing tips didn't help me all that much... (sigh).
Oh, and if ANYBODY is confused by Nicky's reactions, don't be confused... He's only TWO - and this one, I did a lot of research on - Toddlers don't understand that death is permanent and they grieve in many ways (anger, rebellion, innocent, or sometimes they just ignore the sad feelings all together... just depends on the time of day kinda thing.)
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Fair warning, I cried while writing this chapter - so, if I cried over it, make sure you have your tissues ready too!

Two weeks had gone by since Chris’ funeral, and nobody at work or in the circle of their little family had seen or heard from Tony since he left Gibbs’ and Palmer’s place. The team, and family, were rightfully concerned about Tony, and Steven was the most worried, since Tony and He had a running dinner-date every Tuesday and Tony hadn’t even called to cancel, either time, which left Steven sitting in a corner booth at Mulligan’s all alone twice now.

Steven and Troy walked into Gibbs’ house without announcing themselves, and could have regretted it when they walked into the living room to see Palmer between Gibbs’ legs, “Oh god!” Steven squeaked as he covered his eyes and turned around, pushing Troy to turn around as he had just continued staring with a wide grin on his face.

Palmer and Gibbs both laughed loudly as Palmer pushed away from Gibbs’ body, falling onto his ass as he continued laughing. Gibbs swiped at his eyes and tucked himself away, then helped Palmer up off the floor “Serves you guys right, should learn how to knock!” Gibbs barked half-heartedly as he tugged Palmer down into his lap and looked over at Steven and Troy curiously.

Steven turned around and shook his head “Or… You could learn how to lock your front door – Anyway! Have either of you seen or heard from Tony?” Steven asked as he walked over to the couch and sat in the corner of it, furthest away from Gibbs and Palmer.

Palmer shook his head “Nuh uh, I got a text from him the night he left saying he’d made it home in one piece, but haven’t heard anything from him since.” Palmer said as he turned his head towards Gibbs, who was shaking his head and sighing as he rested his forehead against Palmer’s bicep, looking decidedly guilty as he hid his face.

“Maybe we should head over to the house? See how he’s doing? I’m worried about him, he has missed dinner at Mulligan’s, twice! And he never misses dinner there, not even when he’s neck deep with work!” Steven exclaimed, his brows furrowing as he looked at the two men curiously.

Gibbs sighed as he pushed Palmer out of his lap and stood up abruptly, Palmer squeaked a little as he was bounced onto the cushion, “Okay… Alright, we’ll go over there and check on him.” Gibbs said
as he headed for the door, grabbing his keys and wallet on the way out the door.

Troy, Steven and Palmer all scrambled to follow after the older man, and quickly hopped into their vehicles – While Palmer hopped into the passenger seat of Gibbs’ challenger and braced his hand against the ‘oh shit’ handle, knowing Gibbs would likely tear off down the street at neck breaking speeds.

When the four men arrived at Tony’s house, they all stood on the front porch, three of them – Troy, Steven and Palmer – were all looking through the window, while Gibbs was leaning casually against the wall, staring at his fingertips as he waited for the axe to drop.

Steven sighed as he pulled away from the window “Okay, well it doesn’t seem like he’s home – the entire house is clean and spotless though, so he had to have been home at some point between the funeral and today…” Steven surmised as he looked at the freshly cut lawn, his eyebrow raising upward.

Palmer leaned against the wall and sighed “Someone has been watering the plants and cutting the grass – and we all know that wasn’t Tony, because he hates doing either of those things…” Palmer stated as he crossed his arms over his chest.

Troy played with the mailbox flap next to the door and shook his head “And someone has been collecting his mail, box is empty… So, either he’s here and just not home… Or he’s gone…” Troy said quietly as he turned to face the three other men.

Gibbs chuckled quietly and shook his head “You all should have been detectives…” Gibbs said as he walked to the front door and pulled out a ring of keys separate from his own, and inserted it into the two locks, unlocking both the deadbolt and the door lock, he pushed the door open and sighed, “He’s not here, feel free to investigate further.” Gibbs said, waving his hand into the open house.

Troy and Steven walked into the living room and sighed as they began walking around the entire house, while Palmer stood on the porch with Gibbs, crossing his arms over his chest “You know where he is, don’t you?” Palmer asked accusingly, Gibbs nodded his head “And you brought us all the way over here, for what? To play games with us?” Palmer asked.

Gibbs shook his head “No. Steven wouldn’t have believed me without tangible proof, therefore, I
brought Steven here to prove to him that Tony really isn’t here.” Gibbs stated matter-of-factly as he looked directly at his lover.

“But you know where he is?” Palmer asked softly, worrying his thumb in between his teeth as he stared up at Gibbs. Gibbs nodded his head slowly as he pulled Palmer’s thumb out of his mouth “Damn it Leroy! Where the hell is he?!” Palmer all but shouted, staring angrily at his lover now.

Gibbs rolled his eyes at the use of his first name “Well James, last I heard he was in San Diego with Betty, Scott and Nick. And the only reason I know this, is because as his boss, I needed to know where my SFA was headed… So, don’t think he tried plotting against anyone, he had to let me know.” Gibbs said, his argument running out of steam halfway through.

“Why is he in San Diego? Has something else happened?!” Steven asked as he came back out onto the front porch, a worried look in his eyes.

“No! Jesus, you guys don’t understand what losing a spouse does to you mentally!” Gibbs started, only to be interrupted by Troy clearing his throat noisily “Okay well… Troy knows what it’s like… becoming a widower so suddenly especially, has a very profound effect on you, mentally… Tony needed time to get away and try to heal those wounds.” Gibbs stated quietly, turning away from the group and shoving his fists into his jean pockets. “Tony also said, when you guys finally figured out he wasn’t in DC anymore… If you wanted to come see him, you could… There’s four plane tickets waiting at Dulles with our names on them.” Gibbs added as he turned back to the front door, pulling it shut and locking it back up.

“Well, what the hell are we doing still standing here for then? We’ve got a plane to catch!” Steven declared as he grabbed Troy by the wrist and drug his husband off the porch and towards their SUV.

Gibbs shook his head as he looked over at Palmer “You want to go with them too? Might be nice to get out of DC for a while…” Gibbs questioned as he held his hand out to Palmer.

Palmer nodded and smiled slightly as he slipped his hand into Gibbs’ hand, “Yeah… At the very least we have to protect Tony from Steven brow beating him into coming back to DC before he’s ready…” Palmer said as he took a few steps forward, “And… I’m sorry. Sometimes we forget that you and Troy have also lost someone…” Palmer added quietly as he and Gibbs headed towards the challenger.

Gibbs shook his head and tugged Palmer closer to him, kissing him lovingly on the lips, “It’s in the past now, and I don’t live there anymore Jimmy. I’m where I want to be and need to be, even if it took you five years to realize that you were in love with me.” Gibbs said, winking as he kissed
Palmer again, then turned back to the driver’s seat of the challenger.

After all four men headed to their respective homes and packed their suitcases, they headed to the airport and got onto their flight. Five hours later, they were landing in San Diego Int’l and being picked up by Scott – Chris’ brother.

“Hey guys, how’re you all doing?” Scott asked as he helped load everyone’s luggage into the back of his SUV.

The four men shrugged as they hopped into the SUV with Scott at the driver’s seat “We could be better… How is Tony doing?” Steven asked – speaking for everyone, the way he always does.

Scott turned his head from side to side in contemplation “Better. At least compared to when he showed up at my house with Nick. He still has his rough days where he doesn’t get out of bed until past noon, but he’s getting there.” Scott said quietly as he drove through the congested airport parking lot to head towards the main highway.

“And Nicky? How is he doing with all of this?” Palmer asked, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth as he looked at the back of Scott's head.

Scott shrugged his shoulders “Depends on the day. Somedays are tougher than others, he’s finally starting to understand what death means. Mom and I have been talking to him whenever he’s up to it, and he’s catching onto it really quick.” Scott said as he drove at a relatively fast pace down the open highway, heading in the direction of Coronado.

“So, what do you do out here Scott?” Troy asked curiously from the back seat, looking at the younger man with a raised eyebrow.

Scott chuckled softly “I take it you don’t watch movies? I’m a director and producer… Part-time writer.” Scott said as if it were no big deal.

“Wait! You’re the Scott Parker Junior?!” Palmer asked excitedly, his eyes going wide as the realization hit him like a ton of bricks.
Scott nodded slowly as he turned into a long driveway “Yep, the one and only.” Scott said, grinning as he rolled his automatic window down and pressed a few keys on the digital keypad next to the gate.

“Tony must love being in your house then… Which is where exactly?” Steven asked, looking around the heavily wooded area, then went speechless as the woods opened up to a large three-story lodge-like mansion that had one-eighty views of the Pacific Ocean.

The four men entered the mansion with wide eyes as they looked at the modern interior that bellied the exterior of the home. Nick ran out from the living room “UNCA JETHRO! UNCA JIMMY! UNCA STEVEN! UNCA TROY!” he shouted each man’s names excitedly, tornadoing his small body into each man’s arms.

“Nicholas Scott! Get your butt back in here and finish your lunch!” Tony shouted from the living room, then came to stand in the doorway, looking sternly at his two year old son.

Nick turned his head and looked up at Tony, “Buh its Unca’s!” Nick protested, pointing in the direction of his four adoptive-uncles.

“I’ll give you to the count of three… One… Two… Thank you.” Tony said as he watched Nick run back past him and into the living room to go back to eating his abandoned lunch “Hey guys, glad you could make it.” Tony said, turning to the four men who were still a bit in a shocked state of mind.

Gibbs was the first to shake the cobwebs loose as he stepped forward and enveloped Tony in a fatherly embrace, “Any chance for a free trip that doesn’t involve work!” Gibbs jested as he released Tony.

Nick came back into the entry way and held up his empty plate to Tony “I done! I can play with unca’s now?” Nick asked with a megawatt grin on his face.

Tony shook his head “Nicky, your uncles just got here… Maybe they’d like to rest a little?” Tony suggested as he looked down at his son, “And go give your plate to Esme, she’s tired of picking up
your dishes from the living room.” Tony said, pushing his son in the direction of the kitchen.

“Whoa, what did you do with the real Tony?!” Gibbs asked rhetorically, looking between Tony and Nick’s retreating back.

“Huh? Oh… Someone has to be the authoritarian now. I can’t use Chris’ name for sake of punishment anymore, it would probably freak Nick out.” Tony said quietly, shifting on his feet uncomfortably “So, uhm… Let me show you guys around.” Tony added as he headed towards the oak semi-circular staircase that led up to the second and third floors, all four men following after with their suitcases in hand.

After getting his group of friends settled into their own rooms, it was time for Nick’s bath and bedtime, so now Tony sat on the floor in front of the bathtub, watching Nick play with the mile high pile of bubbles in the tub.

Gibbs came into the bathroom and smiled slightly “Mind if I join you sailors?” Gibbs said, winking at Nick who had just poured a ton of bubbles on top of his own head.

Tony shook his head as he leaned back against the wall, closing his eyes slightly, “What’s going on Tony? Talk to me…” Gibbs said as he slid down the opposite wall and stared at Tony, noticing for the first time all day the heavy bags underneath Tony’s eyes and the tired expression that seemed to be set in stone on Tony’s face.

Tony shrugged as he opened his eyes again and looked at Gibbs, he opened his mouth a few times, then sighed heavily as he scrubbed a hand over his face, and began telling Gibbs about what happened when they went back to the house.

~*~ Flashback ~*~

Tony sighed as he watched Nick trot up the stairs, after the toddler had disappeared down the hall, supposedly going to his bedroom, Tony looked around the living room at all of the pictures hanging on the wall and on the bookshelves that lined up one wall with the TV in the center of it – It was a wedding gift made by Gibbs, a huge entertainment center that held nearly all of Tony’s DVDs and dozens of other things – pictures, nick knacks and several Disney DVDs for Nick.
Tony had been so lost in the past, that it was nearly dark out when he finally brought himself out of his thought-induced coma and headed upstairs to find Nick. When Tony had went into Nick’s bedroom, he nearly had a panic attack at not finding his son in the room, but remained as calm as possible as he searched the entire upstairs, leaving the master bedroom for last – He wasn’t even sure if he would be able to open the door, but if Nick were in there, he needed to know.

Tony’s heart broke even more than it already was when he saw Nick lying on Chris’ side of the bed with the Marine Corp Build-A-Bear that he’d gotten for Christmas the year prior held tightly to his chest. Tony walked over to the edge of the bed and carded his fingers through Nick’s hair softly, “Hey buddy, what’re you doing?” Tony asked softly as he shifted on the bed and laid down beside Nick.

Nick turned and snuggled into Tony’s chest, sniffling loudly “Daddy really not coming back?” Nick asked, looking up at his father with fat tears in his eyes and riding down the sides of his face and disappearing into his hair.

Tony shook his head as he wrapped his arms around Nick and placed a soft kiss in his son’s hair “I’m so sorry Nicky. I… I wish that he could, but… No, daddy really isn’t coming back.” Tony said softly, his own tears tracking down his face as he stared at the large framed photograph of him and Chris at their wedding.

After Tony had thought Nick fell asleep, he rolled away slightly, only to have his shirt clutched onto by a small trembling hand, Tony looked down to see Nick’s eyes wide open and filled with tears and sorrow, it broke Tony’s heart even further, but he knew he had to do something to ease his son’s pain “Hey… I got an idea. How would you like to go visit Grandma Betty and Uncle Scott in San Diego for a while?” Tony asked softly, swiping his thumb over Nick’s cheeks.

Nick nodded as he pulled himself closer to Tony’s body, seeking the warmth of his father’s body and the comfort that it provided “I like unca Scott, he funny.” Nick whispered, his voice trembling slightly from his quivering lips, “And gamma Betty is da best gamma ever.” Nick added as he curled his arm back around his teddy bear once he’d gotten comfortable against Tony’s chest again.

~*~ End Flashback ~*~

“And that’s what happened to bring us here… I couldn’t stand seeing him in so much pain… let alone my own pain of being in the house even for just a few hours… I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to go back there, Gibbs…” Tony said quietly, swiping at the tears on his cheeks as he stood up and pulled the plug on the tub, then lifted a sleepy Nick out of the tub and wrapped him up in a fluffy blue towel.
Gibbs and Tony headed down the hall and into a rather large bedroom – at least for a toddler – that was decorated to Nick’s specific tastes, with a hand-drawn and painted 3D like dragon on the wall above Nick’s bed, “I thought the same thing when Shannon died… But, eventually, after sleeping on Mike’s couch for a month… I went back to the house, because it needed to be aired out, and I found, although painful at first, that it was a bit easier as the days went by…” Gibbs said as he pulled the blankets back on the bed while Tony got Nick dressed in his pajamas.

Tony shrugged as he carried Nick over to the bed and laid the toddler down in the twin size bed, “Night Nicky. Sweet dreams.” Tony said as he kissed Nick’s forehead and then tucked the toddler in while Gibbs kissed Nick’s forehead, then the two men left the bedroom “Yeah but, I don’t just have me to think about anymore – Nick has told me, point-blank, that he does not want to go back to the house… I could always go back to the condo, but it only has the one bedroom…” Tony mused out loud as he and Gibbs headed out to the backyard together.

Gibbs and Tony sat at the fire pit in the backyard, staring up at the star studded sky “So, you stay at the condo for a few weeks, until you can find something more permanent, if you really don’t think you can go back to the house… We – all of us – will help you with whatever you need T. Even if it’s moving the entire house by ourselves so you and Nicky don’t have to be there.” Gibbs said as he glanced over at the younger man.

Tony nodded slightly as he looked over at Gibbs “Where is Jimmy, Steven and Troy? I haven’t seen much of them after I showed them around the house…” Tony asked, feeling the need to change the subject so he could process and think about all of the changes his life was going through in such a short period of time.

“I don’t know about Steven and Troy, but I know that Jimmy is upstairs in our room, he brought all of his school work with him for the next couple of weeks, since he said – and I quote – I don’t know how long we will be in San Diego, and I really do not want to get behind. He’s such a dork, but I love him nonetheless.” Gibbs said, chuckling slightly as he curled up in the lounge chair, sighing quietly.

Tony frowned as he turned onto his side, curling up into a tight ball “I think I might leave NCIS…” Tony whispered, keeping his eyes on Gibbs’ face to see the older man’s reaction.

Gibbs shook his head “If you’re watching to see if I’ll have a heart-attack or something, I’m not going to… I’ve been expecting this Tony, you have to think about Nick and his future… and the job is dangerous – sure you could get hit by a bolt of lightning and die just the same, but you’re less likely to get hit with lightning than you are to get shot…” Gibbs stated matter-of-factly as he kept his eyes on Tony.
Tony nodded slowly “Thanks for understanding, Gibbs, it was a hard decision to make and I’m glad you won’t try and talk me out of it. Because, I’m sure everyone else will…” Tony said quietly, closing his eyes lightly.

Gibbs grunted slightly “Yeah but, could you at least stay on until I’m sure Tim is ready to be my new SFA? I’ll put you on desk duty if that’s what it’ll take…” Gibbs requested, biting at his bottom lip nervously.

Tony chuckled and shook his head slowly “He’s ready, Gibbs… and before you ask how I know – It’s simple, and I’m quoting from the best father I’ve ever had – I trained him, I know what he’s capable of doing. I don’t train my people to be bad at their jobs, I train them to be the best that they can be.” Tony said, imitating Gibbs’ voice the best he can.

Gibbs chuckled as he swiped at his eyes “Make me cry, why don’t ya, DiNozzo?!” Gibbs teased, grinning slightly as he looked at his son and best friend, “I’ll take your word for it, but I’d at least like you to teach him everything he needs to know and how to do it right… You can do that when you’re finishing out your two weeks, riding a desk.” Gibbs said in his ‘bosses’ tone.

Tony nodded tiredly “You got it boss.” Tony said softly as he pushed himself to a seated position “I’m going to go try and get some sleep… Think it might be time for me to really get my life back together and stop running from the inevitable.” Tony said as he stood up, then pulled Gibbs out of the lounge chair. Gibbs put the low burning fire out, and then he and Tony headed back into the house and went their separate ways to their own bedrooms.
Chapter 6

After spending another week with the guys in San Diego, Tony finally returned back to DC, with only a few goals in mind; Find a new career – something less dangerous – Find a new apartment or house for him and Nick, and get on with his everyday life, even though he knew the last one would be the hardest of all three tasks.

Tony adjusted his suit jacket, buttoning the center button, then looked down and smiled as he watched Nick try and do the same thing as they stood in the elevator at NCIS, “Here…” Tony said softly as he crouched down and helped Nick button his matching suit together.

Nick smiled as he kissed Tony on the cheek softly “Tanks daddy.” Nick said quietly as he slipped his hand into Tony’s extended hand as they stepped off the elevator together and walked towards the bullpen.

Tony slung his backpack off his shoulder and set it down beside his desk, watching as Nick did the same thing with his Power Rangers backpack. Gibbs chuckled from his desk and tipped his glasses off his nose “Mini DiNozzo has officially arrived at work.” Gibbs said, grinning as he stepped away from his desk.

Nick ran over to Gibbs and hugged the older man around the leg “Unca Gibbs! I look jus’ like daddy! An look!” Nick exclaimed excitedly as he pulled a pair of Ray Ban sunglasses out of his suit pocket and slipped them onto his face, a megawatt grin on his face as he looked up at Gibbs.

Gibbs chuckled as he lifted Nick up into his arms, “You look like a superstar, Nicky. You ready to hang out with me for the day?” Gibbs asked as he slid Nick’s sunglasses up to his forehead.

Nick nodded his head enthusiastically, “Uh huh! I wanna cash da bad guys and put em in da big house!” Nick declared happily, wrapping his arms around Gibb’ neck.

While Nick was distracted with talking to Gibbs and showing off his new suit, Tony was able to get his resignation papers from his backpack and head upstairs to the director’s office.
Tony sighed as he stood outside of the director’s office, nervously twisting the end of his sleeve in his fingertips as he watched the wooden double doors. When Cynthia smiled sadly at Harm as she came out of Vance’s office he stood up slowly and received a sympathetic hug from her.

“He’s ready to see you, good luck Tony.” Cynthia said softly as she moved back to her desk along the wall.

Tony nodded slightly “Thanks Cynthia.” Tony said as he inhaled deeply and then walked into the large office that belonged to Leon Vance, current director of NCIS.

Vance stood up, smoothing out his suit jacket “Agent DiNozzo, welcome back. How are you feeling?” Vance asked as he shook Tony’s hand than sat back down at his desk with Tony sitting across from him.

Tony nodded slightly “Still have some tough days, but I’m feeling better, thank you sir.” Tony said as he shifted slightly in the chair and rested his resignation in his lap.

Vance nodded as he withdrew a toothpick from his pocket and slipped it between his teeth “So, what can I do for you?” Vance questioned, briefly eyeing the pack of papers in Tony’s lap.

Tony sighed as he grabbed the papers and offered them over to Vance silently, once the director had the pages in his hand, Tony linked his hands together in his lap and watched as Vance began reading through Tony’s resignation, that was probably five pages long.

Vance shook his head as he set the resignation papers aside “Tony… I don’t think you should resign. You’re too good of an agent, and – No, hear me out – I understand why you want to do something less dangerous… There are other positions here that you don’t have to do field work…” Vance said as he linked his hands together on his desk, looking at the younger man curiously.

“Like what? I don’t want to sit in the basement and go over cold cases all day, Director.” Tony stated flatly, a blank expression on his face as he looked directly at the director.

Vance sighed as he tossed his spent toothpick, “You could always be a field training officer at FLETC… Or there is Counter Terrorism… And then there is also a lead position for the Behavioral Science division…” Vance stated, looking at Tony with a raised eyebrow.
Tony opened his mouth a couple of times, then cleared his throat “The… the lead for the BSD is… Typically the Assistant Deputy Director, though, isn’t it?” Tony stammered out, his eyes having gone wide.

Vance nodded slowly “Yeah, it is. You’ll have your own team, and get to stay in the DC area – Something that you wanted, isn’t it?” Vance asked curiously.

Tony shrugged “I mean… If there were a way I could stay on Gibbs’ team and stay out of danger, I would – but, there isn’t – This seems like a good step for me though, and keeps me out of the field at the same time… What are the requirements for the position? Because, I’m not a profiler, Director… I’m just a beat cop turned agent.” Tony said quietly, twisting his wedding ring around his finger slowly, his eyes still impassively locked onto Vance’s face.

“You’re more than just a beat cop turned agent, Tony… You have been working under Gibbs for ten years now and your skills as an agent have been… well, to put it simply, over developed. You could have had your own team, and have even been offered your own team a few times, if I read correctly in your file… You have what it takes to be the ADD and the lead of the BSD, Tony. You don’t have to make the decision right now, DiNozzo… Take a few days and think it over, because this is a huge opportunity for your career advancement.” Vance said as he stood up and held his hand out to Tony.

Tony nodded as he stood up and shook Vance’s hand, “I’ll think about it – Just keep my resignation around until I’ve made that decision, because if the cons outweigh the pros, I still have every intention of resigning.” Tony said firmly as he released his grip on Vance’s hand and walked out of the office, his head held a little higher from the praise given to him by the director, who Tony had always thought hated him.

Tony stood on the catwalk outside of MTAC, staring down into the bullpen, more specifically at his desk – The one he’d been an occupant of for the past ten years – sighing heavily he glanced over at Gibbs and Nick who were tapping at the keyboard on Gibbs’ desk.

Ducky came up and stood beside Tony, “Anthony, how are you my dear boy?” Ducky asked quietly as he looked over the railing at the toddler sitting in Gibbs’ lap.
Tony shrugged “I’m alright Duck, thanks.” Tony said quietly, linking his hands together as he continued hanging slightly over the railing, his eyes moving restlessly against the four people in the bullpen, joking and laughing at Nick who was being the center of attention, as per his usual self.

Ducky sighed as he cupped Tony’s shoulder lightly “What’s bothering you, Anthony? There is clearly more going on in your mind than meets the eye.” Ducky said warmly.

Tony chuckled humorlessly “You always have a deeper insight of people Duck… The director has offered me… an **amazing** opportunity… and I’m just… Trying to work it all out in my mind.” Tony said quietly, turning his head to look at the medical examiner.

“Well, what is the opportunity my boy? Perhaps my deeper insight could help you further your own thoughts.” Ducky said, grinning slightly “And I promise not to get into a long winded story about days of old.” Ducky added as he looked out at the bullpen below the two men, his eyes connecting with Gibbs, now that the man was staring up at them.

Tony sighed as he lowered his head to his clasped hands, “The director wants to promote me… to the Lead Agent of the Behavioral Science Division…” Tony said quietly as he glanced with one eye opened over at Ducky.

Ducky stayed silent for a few minutes as he thought over the position being offered to Tony, then a bright light lit up the older man’s eyes “Anthony! You do know what that position entails, don’t you?” Ducky asked enthusiastically, Tony nodded slowly “My dear boy! That is definitely a most amazing opportunity for you! You should not be so down on yourself, you have more than deserved this position!” Ducky said, his voice still excited for the younger man, but also quiet to only carry to Tony’s ears.

Tony shook his head slowly “I’m not being down on myself, per se, I’m just… The BSD is tough, Ducky. And it’s recommended that you have a psychology degree, something that I *don’t* have.” Tony said as he lifted his head up and let out a miserable sigh, “Not to mention, I don’t know the first thing about profiling… Or being a director…” Tony added as he turned around, leaning his lower back up against the railing.

“First of all, getting a psychology degree is simple, especially with today’s technologies, you could always take online classes to do it. Secondly, you know a whole lot more about profiling than most agents in this building, you just do it differently than anyone else I’ve ever seen before.” Ducky said firmly, looking directly at Tony as he said this, “And, if the director thinks you can do it, without a degree, then you should also believe that you can do it.” Ducky added as he shifted on his feet slightly.
Tony smiled as he stood up straighter and hugged Ducky fiercely “Thanks Duck Man, you’re right – I can totally do this. It’s what I need, along with this family, especially now.” Tony said as he released Ducky and smiled warmly at the older man.

Ducky nodded and squeezed Tony’s shoulder “That’s the spirit, Anthony. Now, speaking of directors, I must go converse with ours about getting some new equipment.” Ducky said as he patted Tony on the shoulder and then continued on his way towards the director’s office.

Tony walked into the bullpen, smiling as Nick ran up to him and launched himself into Tony’s arms, “Daddy, Unca Gibbs said that if it was okay with you… that, that, that he wanna take me to da zoo!” Nick exclaimed excitedly as he hugged around Tony’s neck.

Tony raised his eyebrow as he looked over at Gibbs “Did he now? Well, that certainly sounds fun!” Tony exclaimed, feigning Nick’s level of excitement. “Nicky…” Tony said to gain Nick’s attention.

Nick turned his head to his father and smiled “Yes daddy?” Nick questioned, tilting his head to the side slightly. Tony leaned into Nick’s ear and whispered something, smiling as Nick nodded his head and shimmied down Tony’s leg and ran back over to Gibbs, “Unca Gibbs, daddy said… If you come to lunch wif us, that I can go to da zoo!”

Gibbs looked down at Nick and smiled warmly “Then, I guess we’re headed to lunch, go get your backpack.” Gibbs said as he stood up and collected his keys, wallet, gun and badge, then grabbed Nick’s sunglasses off the corner of his desk.

Nick grabbed his backpack quickly, then slid his hand into Gibbs’ and Tony’s hands as they headed towards the elevator, “I can press da button?” Nicky asked, looking up between Gibbs and Tony.

“Sure bud.” Tony agreed as he picked Nick up into his arms, “Make sure you press the down button.” Tony stated, as he held Nick in front of the panel of two buttons.

Nick pressed both buttons and grinned up at his father, Tony chuckled and shook his head as he pressed the down button “Can I has sketti for lunch?” Nick asked as he dropped back to his feet and grabbed his father and uncles hand again.
Tony nodded as he started staring blankly at the steel elevator doors “Yeah Nick, you can get spaghetti for lunch.” Tony said distractedly, blinking his eyes a few times.

“Tony… Hey! Tony!” Gibbs called, shaking the younger man’s shoulder slightly.

Tony shook his head and looked over at Gibbs with a glassy look to his eyes “Huh? Oh… The elevator is here…” Tony said, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly as he stepped onto the elevator with Nick and Gibbs.

Gibbs raised his eyebrow as he pressed the button for the parking garage “Where’d you go? You kind of just… blacked out on us.” Gibbs questioned as he lifted Nick up into his arms, adjusting the toddler against his hip.

Tony shrugged as he walked off the elevator and into the dimly lit parking garage “I uhm… I was just thinking of… stuff.” Tony said quietly, shoving his fists into his slacks pockets.

Gibbs shook his head and wrapped his arm around Tony’s shoulder, “It’s okay to think about him Tony… You just need to not do it while you happen to be walking, or driving…” Gibbs said as he looked over at Tony.

Tony nodded as he dug his keys out of his pocket and set them into Gibbs’ hand, “Could you drive? I uh… I don’t really feel too good.” Tony said as he headed towards where he parked his SUV, his chin down against his chest as he slid into the passenger seat.

Nick looked at his father, then at Gibbs “Is daddy otay, unca Gibbs?” Nick asked quietly as he laid his head against Gibbs’ chest.

Gibbs sighed, nodding his head as he rubbed Nick softly on the back “Yeah Nicky, daddy is okay. He just has an upset heart is all.” Gibbs said as he stood beside the SUV, “We’re going to be quiet when we get in the car, okay? So daddy can get some rest.” Gibbs added as he helped Nick into his car seat and buckled the toddler into it securely.

Tony’s mind was swimming with all the possibilities of his future with the position that Director
Vance had offered him, and while he sat silently, staring at the untouched Chicken Parmesan he’d ordered from his favorite restaurant, the only thing he seemed to honestly be able to think about was Chris and what his husband would have said about the job offer given to him.

Tony shifted uncomfortably in the leather booth, “Tony…?” Gibbs questioned curiously, realizing that Tony was getting more and more uncomfortable and looked like the younger man would crawl out of his own skin any minute now.

Tony abruptly stood up, pacing the length of three booths, his hands shaking “I can’t… I can’t do this… I cannot keep pretending like everything is okay when… nothing in the world feels right anymore… How am I supposed to move on when my entire life has been turned not only upside down once, but so many times that I don’t even know which direction it’s pointing anymore?!?” Tony questioned frantically, his eyes darting erratically between Gibbs and the other patrons who’d stopped eating their lunches to observe the young man.

Gibbs sighed as he slid out of the booth, settling a hand on top of Nick’s curly head of hair “Tony, hey… It’s going to be alright, nobody said it would happen so quickly! Losing Chris was the hardest thing you will ever have to deal with in your entire life, but you will get through it. Do you hear me?” Gibbs asked, now holding onto Tony’s trembling shoulders as he crouched slightly to look into the saddened green eyes of his best friend.

Tony nodded as he placed his forehead against Gibbs’ chest, gripping onto the older man’s jacket as he let silent sobs shake his entire core, “I’m sorry… God, I’m so sorry…” Tony said repeatedly, hot tears staining his cheeks and soaking into Gibbs’ green-blue polo shirt.

Gibbs held onto Tony as comforting as possible, glaring at the other patrons who were gawking at the scene, they all quickly turned their heads and returned to their meals silently. Gibbs looked down at Nick and frowned as he saw the toddler idly playing with his sauceless noodles “It’s okay Tony… I’m right here with you… Not going to let anything happen to you.” Gibbs said quietly as he ran his hand soothingly up and down Tony’s back.

Tony eventually pulled away from Gibbs, “Could you… watch Nick for a few hours? I uh… I have to take care of something…” Tony said, hitching his thumb back towards the street beyond the restaurant windows.

Gibbs nodded as he sat back down in the booth, “Yeah, of course… Just be safe Tony…” Gibbs said as he hailed the waitress over to their table, keeping his eyes on Tony’s retreating back, a sad smile on his face as he turned back to Nick “Guess we’re hanging out for the rest of the day, how exciting?” Gibbs asked, forcing happiness into his words.
Tony laid on the grass, staring up at the new marble headstone that was placed where Chris had only been buried three weeks ago. The soil underneath his body still felt freshly churned, the grass around him smelled freshly cut and finely manicured. Small American flags waved with the slight breeze as Tony laid there on top of Chris’ grave, a slight sense of serenity washing over him as he laid close to his husband.

“How am I supposed to keep going without you? You promised me forever, Chris…” Tony whispered as he reached up, tracing his thumb over the black lettering of his husband’s name, feeling each groove and turn of the engraving on the slab of rock. “You know, forever usually means a lifetime… At least that’s what I had always thought, and yet… Here I am… and where are you?! Where the hell are you in all of this forever!?” Tony shouted, turning his body and sitting up on his knees, staring at the newly laid grass that held his husband beneath the surface.

Tony gripped the grass in his fist, clenching his eyes shut tightly as tears rolled down the sides of his face. The anger that he felt was almost enough to destroy whatever came in his way, his feeling of peaceful serenity all but shattered when he heard an echoing in the wind, ‘It’s only for six months...’ were the words he heard, and Tony lost all rational thought as he tore at the grass angrily. Clods of dirt and grass flew haphazardly over Tony’s shoulders, the distraught man hadn’t noticed the person standing behind him, dodging dirt and grass.

Tony stopped when a pair of strong arms encased his body and held him tightly, Tony laid his head into the familiar chest, agonizing sobs ripping from his throat as he held onto the arms around his chest, “He promised me forever… He said he’d come back to me!” Tony screamed mournfully, turning his head and burying it into the soft fabric of the man’s jacket.

“I know T… I know he did.” Steven said quietly, rocking Tony’s trembling body side to side “Forever isn’t always a guarantee though, and you know that… You know that he couldn’t truly promise you forever in his line of work.” Steven said as he tightened his hold on Tony, burying his head into the grieving man’s hair.

Tony shook his head as he stared at the destroyed grass, and his dirt covered hands “Why did it have to be him that died? Why did he always have to try and be the hero?” Tony asked quietly as he tried piecing back together the strewn pieces of grass and dirt.

Steven chuckled sadly as he gathered tossed dirt clods and settled them on the ground beside Tony “He was the unit commander, Tony… He always went in first that was his way of doing things…” Steven said quietly as he helped piece together the broken ground.
Once all the pieces of thrown grass were placed back into the ground, Tony sighed as he looked at the disturbed piece of land and shook his head “Pretty sure that’s what my heart looks like right now…” Tony whispered roughly as he placed his hand in the center of the broken bits of dirt and grass, swiping the tears off his cheek with the shoulder of his jacket.

Steven sat beside the headstone “A little scrambled, but with time and the proper nutrients… New grass will grow and cover those cracks… Same with your heart, Tony… You’ve absently created the perfect metaphor for yourself.” Steven observed as he looked at the grass, a sad smile gracing his features.

Tony nodded as he scooted back slightly, crossing his arms over his shins as he stared at the headstone, ‘Loving Son, Loving Father, Loving Husband – Be still, close your eyes and breathe. Listen for my footfalls in your heart. I am not gone, but merely walking within you.’ Was engraved near the bottom of the headstone, Tony smiled sadly as he closed his eyes and breathed deeply, listening to the sounds that played around him.

Birds chirped a merry tune, the leaves on the high oak trees rustled with the breeze, the sound of prayer echoed from the distance as another funeral took place, the chiming of a church bell nearby rang clearly, “Forever will always be in your heart, Tony… That’s where forever is… It’s not some fictional thing, although you can’t hold it in your hands and show the world… Forever is what you make it… And I’m making us forever, in your heart and in mine, because that’s where I will keep you… Forever.” Tony smiled sadly as he replayed the words Chris had said on their wedding night after everyone had let them go off to their honeymoon suite. Tony opened his eyes, newly formed tears riding silently down his cheeks as he stood up and placed his hand on top of Chris’ gravestone. Tony looked down at the silver and gold band on his finger, slowly pulling the braided metal off his ring finger, he laid it down on the top of the headstone and turned to walk away, Steven silently following behind Tony as they headed towards his SUV.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry it took SO long to get this posted!!

Oh my god though, I don't think I have cried this much since watching The Lion King for the first time (when I was old enough to realize what was going on that is)! I literally have been crying for the past two parts of this chapter!
The days seemed to grow slower for Tony after having left Chris’ gravesite. Tony had decided to take Vance up on his offer to become the ADD and take over the behavioral science unit, he’d informed Gibbs of this decision as well, and was now serving out his final days as Gibbs’ SFA, at home since he really didn’t feel like being around a whole lot of false compassion from coworkers who truly didn’t understand the pain his heart was experiencing.

Tony sighed as he stared blankly up at the ceiling of his old apartment, memories of Chris here were few and far between but some still held precious to his mind and heart as he laid in the California King that his husband had insisted they bought, the rationale behind the purchase was sound though…

~*~ Flashback ~*~

“It doesn’t make sense to keep this small twin sized bed, we’ve been dating for nearly seven months now Tony… I know you enjoy the privacy of your apartment sometimes, but seriously… How is a guy my size supposed to fit in this thing comfortably with you?” Chris complained as he tried shifting his six-foot-five frame on the small mattress, while simultaneously trying to keep Tony from falling over the edge of the bed.

Tony laughed as he clung to Chris’ body like a second skin, “You’re not supposed to, that was the whole point of buying this bed in the first place – So I didn’t have to share the space!” Tony jested as he rested his chin comfortably in the center of his boyfriend’s chest, mirth dancing dangerously in his emerald green eyes.

Chris grinned as he lifted his head up, and looked down at Tony, “and, do you plan on leaving me anytime soon?” Chris questioned curiously, thin eyebrow raising upward in askance as he stared at the love of his life with a loving look in his own sea green eyes.

Tony shook his head as he nuzzled into Chris’ chest, reminding the taller man of a large cat, “No... Not ever.” Tony whispered as he curled his fist around Chris’ shoulder and pulled himself up to meet his lover’s lips in a tender and passionate kiss.

The kiss only deepened as Tony squirmed relentlessly against Chris’ body, both men breathless and aching for more as Chris – in the heat of the moment – turned him and Tony over, effectively falling
out of the twin sized bed and came to a startling crash on the hardwood floors, sheets tangled around their legs and waists.

Both men began laughing as soon as the initial shock wore off. Chris burrowed his head in the juncture of Tony’s neck and shoulder, his entire body trembling with laughter, “You are so getting a new bed... Tomorrow.” Chris said with finality after his laughter had finally ceased.

Tony nodded as he slid his long fingers over the short strands of his boyfriend’s buzz cut hair, “Okay, we’ll go pick one out together, if we’re going to be sharing the bed, I think you should definitely have a say in what we sleep on.” Tony relented easily, especially because he knew he’d definitely have a bruised tailbone from landing so harshly on the hardwood floors.

They ended up sleeping on the floor that night, and the next day a California King was delivered after several hours of shopping, testing and retesting mattresses for much of the day.

~*~ End Flashback ~*~

Tony sighed as he rolled off the bed and ran a hand through his hair tiredly, he wasn’t getting any more sleep just thinking about his husband, and he really didn’t want to wake Nick up with his restlessness, it was already six AM and typically Tony would have already been up and functional by now anyway.

Tony trudged into the kitchen, looking around the room with a frown deeply inset on his face as he walked over to the coffee pot and grabbed onto the coffee mug that hung on the hook just above the machine, he poured the freshly brewed sludge into his mug, and leaned back against the counter as he stared at the identical twin of the one he was sipping from.

~*~ Flashback ~*~

Tony walked into the house, sighing tiredly as he dropped his backpack on the floor by the door. He hadn’t expected Chris home for another hour, and was pleasantly surprised and shocked when he saw the latter sitting at the dining table, holding Nick on his chest while searching the internet with his free hand, “Hey, what are you doing home so early?” Tony asked as he stripped off his gun and badge, setting them into the lock box on the mantle.

Chris shrugged as he stopped typing and looked over at Tony with a slight smile “Nicky and I wanted to surprise you. I was released from duty earlier than anticipated, so we came home and I
ordered a couple of pizza’s… Why, were you planning on inviting your side-guy over for a little romp in the hay?” Chris teased, waggling his eyebrows suggestively, the pink of his tongue poking out past his lips slightly.

Tony laughed softly as he walked over to his husband and three month old son, kissing the latter on the top of his soft head, then his husband, whom he’d only been married to for the past month, he kissed lovingly on the lips “Nah, my side-guy is already here, and such a shame, he’s already asleep.” Tony said quietly as he ran a gentle hand over the fine blonde hairs on Nick’s head.

“Hm, well… You should have come home when we did – I couldn’t get him to settle down for anything, even bribed him with money!” Chris said, chuckling quietly as he returned his eyes to his laptops screen, scrolling down the options of ceramic coffee mugs.

Tony shook his head as he sat down beside Chris “And what is it that you’re shopping for? Normally you would go to a store.” Tony questioned, leaning his head against Chris’ shoulder to get a better view of the website “Coffee mugs? Don’t you think you own enough?” Tony asked, looking up at Chris’ face.

Chris nodded “For here I do, yeah… But your apartment suspiciously lacks a copious amount of coffee mugs, and quite frankly I’m tired of using your Mighty Mouse coffee mug.” Chris said as he clicked on one of the mugs, then looked over at Tony’s affronted facial features, “Hey, don’t get me wrong… Mighty Mouse is an awesome dude, but… It’s definitely not big enough to contain the amount of coffee I consume in the morning.” Chris added, grinning as he leaned over and kissed the adorable pout away from Tony’s features.

Tony rolled his eyes as he set his chin onto Chris’ shoulder, “I like that one…” Tony said, pointing to the coffee mug that read ‘My husband has an awesome husband’ on it, centered on a rainbow heart in black lettering.

Chris tilted his head to the side, then nodded as he read the ounces it could hold, “It’s big enough, and look – They’re having a buy one get one sale… So, I’ll buy this as a wedding gift to you, and I get the free one, sound fair?” Chris asked as he turned his head towards Tony again, grinning brightly.

Tony nodded as he grabbed Chris’ wallet from the table and extracted the man’s debit card “Yeah, it does… But, how will you know which one is the paid for one, and which one is the free one?” Tony questioned as he propped the card on the corner of the laptop.

It was Chris’ turn to roll his eyes as he began entering his billing information into the designated
“Does it actually matter which mug is which? They’re both being paid for technically…” Chris retorted as he clicked ‘Buy Now’ on the screen, then kissed Tony lovingly on the lips and nuzzling into his husband’s cheek lightly.

~*~ End Flashback ~*~

Nick came into the kitchen, rubbing tiredly at his sleep filled eyes and leaning heavily against Tony’s thigh “Hey buddy, what are you doing awake so early?” Tony asked as he set his coffee mug down and lifted his toddler into his arms.

Nick yawned and laid his head against Tony’s shoulder “I no sleepy anymore. We watch toons?” Nick asked as he looked tiredly up at his father.

Tony nodded and smiled as he ruffled his son’s curly blonde locks “Sure Nicky, do you want breakfast or do you want to wait a little while?” Tony asked as he headed towards the living room with Nick slowly falling back to sleep in his arms, “Guess we’ll wait…” Tony whispered as he shifted onto the couch carefully, then turned the TV onto Nickelodeon, sighing as re-runs of SpongeBob Squarepants came onto the large TV screen.

Tony was nearly asleep himself when a low knocking on the front door began echoing in the rather barren apartment – since a majority of his belongings were at the house – Tony sighed as he opened his eyes and stared at the door, “Well how the hell am I supposed to answer that?” Tony questioned to no one in particular as he looked down at the top of Nick’s head, his son still fast asleep.

A few seconds later he heard keys rattling in the doors lock, and he sighed in relief knowing it was someone who had a key and not anyone of his nosy neighbors that he hadn’t seen in months. Gibbs came into the apartment a few seconds later, swinging his set of keys around on his index finger, “Morning!” Gibbs said quietly but cheerfully as he pushed the door shut and headed straight for the kitchen to refill his traveling mug.

Tony waited patiently until Gibbs returned to the living room and took up his usual spot on the reclining chair next to the couch “To what do I owe the pleasure, boss?” Tony asked sardonically as he shifted uncomfortably on the couch as Nick pressed an excruciatingly painful knee into his ribcage.

Gibbs shook his head and smiled “Not your boss anymore, Tony. Yesterday was your last day as my SFA…” Gibbs said wistfully as he sipped on his steaming cup of fresh coffee, smirking as the fluids were up to his standards of marine grade sludge and not the weakened hazelnut fluff that Tony seemed to enjoy more.
“Okay, well that still begs the question, what can I do for you?” Tony asked quietly, pushing Nick’s knee out of his kidney and back straight against his stomach.

Gibbs shrugged as he settled one leg over his knee and cradled his traveling mug in his hands. “Thought you’d need a babysitter for tonight… Heard that the guys have decided that tonight they were taking you out on the town, and although they begged me to go with them – I thought it prudent that someone watch Nick.” Gibbs said curiously, looking at Tony as a thousand different emotions and facial expressions cluttered for dominance on the younger man’s face.

Eventually settling on a slight scowl and furrowed eyebrows, Tony shook his head “I don’t feel like going ‘out on the town’ Gibbs… Have you told them that?” Tony asked, anger lacing his soft spoken words. Gibbs nodded wordlessly as he sipped his coffee “And, being who they are… They’re still going to try and get me out of the apartment, and into the nightlife…” Tony surmised as he set his hand against Nick’s back, rubbing a soothing hand across his toddler’s spine.

Gibbs nodded again in confirmation and watched as Tony mulled it over in his head, “They’re not going to try and force me into hooking up with anyone, are they?” Tony asked cautiously, the frown creasing his forehead deepening, Gibbs shook his head negatively and raised a skeptical eyebrow. Tony sighed and rubbed his forehead with his freehand “Alright… But I have free will of the time I feel it necessary to leave – I don’t want to be out too late, nor do I want to get into any uncomfortable circumstances.” Tony reluctantly relented as he laid his head back against the couch, sighing miserably as he stared at the ceiling.

Gibbs chuckled as he reached over and patted Tony’s knee reassuringly “You are your own man Tony, you don’t even have to do this if you don’t want too… They just thought a night out at Tornado would boost you up a little… Get you back to feeling more like…” Gibbs stopped and furrowed his own brows as he stared down at the lid of his coffee.

“More like my old self? Yeah, I don’t think I’ll ever get back to that particular point again… But, on the other hand, it might be nice to actually just… let loose and try to relax and enjoy something other than this bundle of chaotic energy.” Tony said quietly, a fond smile on his face as he looked down at Nick’s head.

And so, there Tony was with Steven and Jimmy, staring at the long line of people waiting to get into the nightclub Tornado, a highly popular gay club that was meant for the older generation, but often times garnered a lot of attention from the younger ‘raised by the eighties’ crowd. Tony sighed as he
tugged at his leather jacket sleeve, an obvious nervous habit of his that he could never seem to break.

“Everything is going to be fine Tony. We’ll drink a little, dance a lot, and just enjoy the night and see where it leads us!” Steven quipped happily as he slung his arm over Tony’s shoulder, grinning at the slightly taller man.

Tony shook his head “I know exactly where the night is going to lead us… Back home to your spouses, and my son… That’s where every night leads us, typically.” Tony stated flatly as the trio took a few steps forward in the line as it moved along at a snail’s pace.

Steven sighed “Not tonight. I’m going home to a lonely cold hotel room…” Steven sing-songed quietly, “Well, not really a cold hotel room, but cold bedroom nonetheless… Troy is out on maneuvers, getting ready to redeploy back to the unit.” Steven said wistfully, staring at the concrete beneath his feet for half a second before he turned back on a charming grin.

Jimmy chuckled quietly “And I won’t be going home to anyone either… I’ll be going home to an empty house until Gibbs gets home from babysitting Nicky…” Jimmy added to the conversation, popping his sleeves button in and out of the eyelet in boredom.

“Huh… So in all actuality I’ll be the only one returning to someone tonight… Well that’s mildly disconcerting.” Tony said ruefully as he scraped the bottom of his leather dress shoe against the concrete, then continued walking towards the entrance of the nightclub, the line having gotten a lot shorter in the time that they’d been standing there.

By the time they got into the nightclub, the music was pumping loudly and energetically, matching the rhythm of the pulsating strobe lights and other colored lights that constantly moved and grazed over the surfaces of the club “This is so not the Tornado we used to come too…” Tony shouted over the loud rave music.

Steven and Jimmy both shook their heads, “No wonder the line was full of twenty-somethings! Wonder when the hell they changed the club?!” Steven shouted back, glaring around the atrocity that once used to be a delightful place to party at.

A younger man approached the three in a t-shirt with a neon blue tornado on the front “The club changed about three months ago, new management!” he informed them, having overheard their conversation.
Jimmy furrowed his brows “Well what the hell for?! Tornado was doing just fine the way it was before… this!” he protested, waving a hand around the obnoxious club surroundings.

The young man shrugged his shoulders helplessly “Not really sure, but you’re right – It was better – just don’t tell my boss I said that! If you want, there’s a club about three blocks from here that still caters to the older crowd, it’s called Nightshade, it’s classy and a bit more elegant than what Tornado even was.” He told them as he pulled out a pamphlet from his back pocket and handed it to Steven, whom he was closest too.

Tony sighed as he leaned against the side of his SUV, scrubbing a hand down his face tiredly “Perhaps this wasn’t such a good idea after all…” Tony mused out loud, kicking the tip of his shoe against the concrete.

Steven frowned slightly “You look exhausted Tony… I’m sorry I didn’t notice beforehand… Since this outing was a bust – How about we do lunch this weekend? All of us, like old times…” Steven questioned, biting back his bottom lip nervously as he stared at Tony, hoping that his words wouldn’t strike a chord with the still grieving widower.

Tony shrugged his shoulders “Sounds like a plan, I’ll call you tomorrow morning about it and tell you what Nicky thinks… I’m sure he’d love to see all his uncles again, especially before Troy deploys.” Tony said quietly as he fished his keys out of his pockets, a small but genuine smile gracing his features for a few seconds before he turned to his SUV “I’ll see you guys later.” Tony said as he hopped into the driver’s seat and started the engine.

Tony dropped his keys on the foyer table, and furrowed his brows slightly as he looked at the display on the DVD player ‘9:48 PM’ “Early for a school night…” he said to himself, chuckling as he pulled his leather jacket off and landed it on the coat rack.

“NICHOLAS SCOTT, GET YOUR BUTT BACK HERE!” Gibbs shouted from the back of the apartment.

Nick ran from the back of the apartment, all the way to the entry hall, stark naked and covered in soap suds and water “DADDY!” Nick shrieked as he launched himself into Tony’s now wide open arms.
Gibbs came out of the bathroom, his entire front half soaked in soap and water, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows and a scowl firmly in place, “Nick… What have I told you about running out of the tub in the nude?” Tony scolded lightheartedly as he walked past Gibbs with a grin on his face.

Nick shrugged as he wrapped his soapy arms around Tony’s neck “Dat I could slip and huwt myself if I falled down.” Nick recited as he bounced excitedly in Tony’s arms as they headed back for the bathroom.

Gibbs followed father and son back to the bathroom, crossing his arms over his soaked chest as he watched Tony settle Nick back into the porcelain antique claw foot tub, with mountains of bubbles and every water-toy that Nick owned, “Right. And I also told you it’s not nice to get other people wet when they’re bathing you.” Tony said, glancing over his shoulder at Gibbs.

“Dat was unca Gibbs’ fault! He splashed me fiwst!” Nick protested, furrowing his brows and pouting his bottom lip out angrily.

Gibbs grinned, stifling a chuckle in his upper arm as he watched Nick glare at his father, then turn the angered, but madly adorable glare onto him “You’re the one who declared submarine wars… All is fair in love and war, young sailor.” Gibbs said as he snapped off a two finger salute to his nephew.

Nick sighed dramatically as he returned the salute sharply, “Aye, aye captain!” he said chipperly as he dove into a mountain of bubbles, giggling as the soft suds tickled his nose, “I santa claws daddy!” Nick exclaimed as he looked up at his father and uncle with a bright grin on his face, soapy bubbles covering his entire face and head.

Tony laughed heartily as he leaned back against the toilet, a happy and bright grin on his face as he brushed bubbles away from Nick’s eyes and lips, “There, now you look more like Santa Claus… What do you think, Gibbs?” Tony asked, turning towards where the older man had previously been, only to find that he was now gone.

Nick furrowed his brows again, “Unca Gibbs is bery sneaky. He sneaked away from us!” Nick stated, crossing his arms over his bare chest and plopping down into the tub with a harrumph.

Tony nodded as he grabbed a soft pale yellow towel “That he did… It’s well past your bedtime now Nick, let’s get you into your pajamas. And, if you behave for me, perhaps I’ll read Thomas and Friends for ya tonight…” Tony said as he lifted the toddler out of the tub and wrapped him in the towel.
After getting Nick settled into his pajamas and having read two different Thomas the Train books, Tony laid down beside his son, his eyes locked on the ceiling once again as his mind traveled through memories, he couldn’t quite shake the feeling of his emptied heart, but, tonight had definitely made him realize that he couldn’t keep living a life of solidarity if he ever wanted Nick to grow up to have healthy relationships with other people.

The realization of that was definitely a hard pill to swallow, but he had no choice, he couldn’t let Chris’ son – their son – growing up without knowing that true love does exist out there somewhere for the young toddler. Whether his son grew up straight, bisexual, or gay, none of that mattered to Tony, but what did matter was Nick’s happiness, and Tony would give up everything all over again to make Nick the happiest kid in the world.

“Daddy…” Nick said quietly, turning tired green eyes to look up at his father.

“What’s wrong buddy?” Tony asked just as quietly, turning his head down to look into the reflection of his late husband’s face, more specifically the same exact eyes and hair.

“Daddy is happy, up in heaven?” Nick asked softly, a single tear filling those beautiful sea green eyes and falling down the toddler’s cheek.

Tony frowned slightly as he lifted his toddler up onto his chest, rubbing a soothing hand down his son’s spine “I’m sure he is Nicky. He’s probably up there with Grandpa Joe again, and they’re probably there right now playing baseball…” Tony said quietly, he hated that sometimes, just sometimes, his two year old son was as smart as he was and acted a bit older than what he should, but he wouldn’t hurt Nick, not ever, even though possibly telling the toddler what he thought his husband could possibly be doing in heaven was a minor lie in itself, it was better than telling the boy that Chris wasn’t actually in a place called heaven, but just merely in a box underneath six feet of dirt.

“Unca Gibbs said that daddy watched us from heaven, can we see him?” Nick asked quietly, twisting his fingers around Tony’s pajama top slowly, something the toddler often did when he was thinking about things.

Tony sighed slightly “Well, not exactly… You won’t be able to actually see him… but, more like… feel him, whenever you need someone to watch over you… You’ll feel him in your heart, and you’ll know that he’s protecting you, like he always would if he were here with us… Does that make
“Why don’t you try making sense?” Tony asked, looking down at the head of blonde on his chest.

Nick nodded as he slid off Tony’s chest and snuggled into his father’s side, “Uh huh… Daddy say he will always be in my heart, just like you… I won’t go nowhere because I was forever.” Nick said, setting his hand over Tony’s own heart and smiling sadly up at his father.

Tony nodded and kissed the top of Nick’s head lightly “That’s right. Daddy will keep you and me in his heart always and forever, and he would never let us go.” Tony confirmed as he laid his head back down onto the pillow, “Go to sleep Nicky, we both have busy days tomorrow… I’ve got to go back to work, and you’re going back to preschool with all your friends.” Tony said as he continued his soothing ministrations on Nick’s back, smiling sadly as he closed his own eyes, although sleep didn’t come easily for him that night, and thought that sleep might be an elusive opponent for a long time to come.

Chapter End Notes

Slowly but surely, Tony is getting back up onto his feet. There will still be some rough patches ahead, but fear not, as for Tony is strong-willed and will turn his life back upright and come out stronger!
Chapter 8

Before he even realized it, time seemed to fly by for Tony and Nick – it had been six months since Chris’ death, and while Tony still thought of Chris every day, time did not stand still – Tony had found a new house in Alexandria, finally selling off his Condo, and the other house with much reluctance on that aspect.

As Gibbs had promised, he and their friends managed to pack away the entire house, moving the things to the new house and letting Tony sort through everything to figure out what he wanted to keep, sell, donate or just simply get rid of. And though it was hard parting with a lot of Chris’ things, he did manage to do it, although with a bitter taste left in his mouth afterwards, but a lot of the stuff was still in relatively good shape and everything that Tony didn’t keep was donated to the Salvation Army.

The house was rather quaint and unique in its own right, it was an old Cape Cod style home with only one main floor and a basement, but the interior was modernly upgraded and had a lot of the new bells and whistles which greatly appealed to Tony’s chef-like tendencies, at least where the kitchen was concerned. Nick’s two favorite parts of the house was the enormous backyard and the large bathtub that he had claimed as his own personal indoor swimming pool every night.

On the work side of things, Tony was greatly excelling at both being the new Assistant Deputy Director and the lead agent of the Behavioral Science Division. He’d enrolled in online classes for his psychology degree, and since it was a ‘do it at your own pace’ type of school, he could easily do the coursework when he wasn’t at work or when they had downtime at work. Tony worked closely with all the teams at NCIS’ headquarters, and even occasionally lent a hand to other NCIS offices via MTAC.

Everything seemed to be progressing right on track for Tony, and Nick as well. Nick had just recently had his third birthday, and also announced that he had his first ‘girlfriend’, a little girl name Elaine from the NCIS daycare center, although constantly Nick would complain that Elaine was ‘just using him to have his cookies at snack time’ which was a funny conversation in itself…

“Nicholas, where on earth did you hear such a thing from?” Ducky had questioned in mild shock at the toddler’s use of more ‘grown up’ terms.

Nick had a thoughtful look on his face as he tapped his chin with his index finger, tip of his tongue poking out the side of his mouth “A tebelision show!” Nick had exclaimed proudly, grinning a charm-all smile as he looked up at Ducky with sparkingly mischievous eyes.
Tony shook his head, sighing in exasperation as he looked at his three year old, “He’s been watching Soap Operas…” Tony had explained quietly, rubbing the side of his head with a sheepish grin on his face.

Gibbs shook his head “And just exactly when do you two have time to sit around and watch soap operas?” he’d asked, raising his eyebrow curiously.

Tony blushed furiously as he wrung the end of his shirt in his hands “Okay so I record Days of Our Lives and watch it at night when I’m doing classwork, and he sits with me and colors while watching it…” Tony had said, furrowing his brows slightly.

Everyone had gotten a laugh out of that one, and Tony couldn’t help but to feel a semblance of normalcy slowly creeping its way back into his everyday life. It had been a long time since every one of his friends had gotten together to just enjoy the evening together, and with Nick being their free entertainment as per the usual. It did hurt though, to be so carefree when he looked around the room at all of his friends, only two faces from the group were missing since Troy had still been deployed at the time.

Now as Tony sat in his new office, the brand new high-backed leather chair seated underneath him and a large oak desk in front of him with only a few clutter-items and four framed photographs on one corner of the desk, he thought back to the day that they’d announced Tony’s promotion agency-wide, also the day he decided that from there on, he’d go only as ‘Anthony or Tony Parker’ although late, he thought it never too late to be recognized as Chris’ husband.

~*~ Flashback ~*~

Tony stood on the platform in the meeting room at NCIS a week after accepting Vance’s offer, his back against the wall as he looked out at the small sea of people. Most agency leaders were in attendance, as were a lot of Tony’s friends at NCIS, and Nick, who was happily perched on Gibbs’ shoulders as they all waited for SecNav Jarvis to begin the ceremony.

Jarvis took to the podium and cleared his throat, garnering the attention of everyone and quieting them down “First of all, thank you all for coming this afternoon. Today, is a special occasion where we celebrate the advancement of a highly skillful young man who has been with NCIS for the past ten years, and has endured quite a lot within those ten years. Suffering from the Bubonic Plague, and recovering… Being under Jethro Gibbs for Ten years, and surviving…” that regarded much laughter, even from Gibbs himself, “Anthony Parker… Has an exceptional record here with NCIS, and as such, we have recognized his accomplishments and are therefore promoting him to the position of Assistant Deputy Director. Along with this position comes the role as team lead for the
Behavioral Science Unit, Director Parker will be assisting all that need profiling help for cold cases and current cases as needed, and will also take on the role of public liaison for all national media conferences. So, without further ado, I give you our new ADD – Anthony Parker.” Jarvis concluded with a smile as he stepped away from the podium, applause roared in the room as Tony stood forward and stood at the podium.

“I’d also like to thank you all for coming…” Tony began as everyone returned to silently watching Tony, “Ten years ago, I never expected to be standing here, accepting a promotion as an assistant director of anything… A lot of things have changed in ten years though, and I have a lot of people I am thankful for, those who saw me going further than even I saw myself going… Director Vance, for believing I had what it took to take on this position. Doctor Mallard, for encouraging me to take the chance to accept this position. Steven and Troy, for always supporting me no matter what I did with my life, both professionally and personally. And Gibbs, for always picking me up and dusting me off – in his own unique and different way – and… for giving me the life that I thought I would never have, for giving me unconditional love, and for letting me know that somewhere out there, there is always someone for you… Because of him, I have a beautiful son, I had a beautiful husband and marriage…” Tony paused, glancing down at his hands as tears welled up in his eyes, “I’m just… very thankful, for all that he and everyone has done for me… And I hope I live up to everyone’s expectations as the assistant deputy director… thank you.” Tony said, his voice slightly roughened with emotion as he stepped away from the podium.

Applause was again roared through the small meeting room, if not a little sympathetic to Tony’s emotional rollercoaster that he was still ceaselessly riding upon. Gibbs came up to the stage and Nick dropped into his father’s arms, “Love you daddy.” Nick said quietly as he clung to his father’s neck – Nick had now mostly grasped the concept of death and was even more lovable when it came to Tony’s emotional breakdowns, and often times without knowing it, would comfort his father.

~*~ End Flashback ~*~

“Director Parker…” the intercom system on his phone rang in, a bit of static crackled with his assistant’s words.

“Yes, what is it, Martha?” Tony asked after depressing the intercom button.

“Uh, your son is here to see you, sir.” Martha responded, a bit uncertainly.

Nick? What was he doing here at noon? He was supposed to be in pre-school… Tony thought to himself, before answering the intercom once again “Alright, send him in then please.” Tony replied
as he stood up from behind his desk.

Nick, followed by Gibbs, rushed into the office, “Daddy!” Nick screeched as he launched himself into his father’s arms and clung to him for dear life.

Tony held onto Nick, noticing a slight trembling to the toddler’s body “Nicky, what’re you doing here? What’s wrong?” Tony asked as he sat on the edge of his desk, looking down at his son with a concerned expression on his face.

Gibbs sat on the chair in front of Tony’s desk, locking his arms over his chest “There was a fire at the preschool – Nobody has been hurt, but they had to evacuate the school… They tried calling you, but said that your cellphone was going straight to voicemail. You haven’t given the school your office number?” Gibbs questioned as he looked up at Tony.

Tony shook his head as he grabbed his cellphone off his desk, furrowing his brows “Battery is dead… I haven’t given them the office number, guess I should… Do you know what damage has been done to the school?” Tony asked, rubbing up and down Nick’s back soothingly.

“Just the kitchen, there was a small grease fire… But the stench was terrible… That’s why they had to evacuate…” Gibbs said, crossing his legs and stretching out in the chair.

Tony sighed as he kissed the top of Nick’s head “Thanks for picking him up.” Tony stated as he adjusted Nick’s weight onto his hip and laid his cheek on the soft hairs of his son’s head “Anything else going on?” Tony asked, noticing that Gibbs didn’t look like he was quite ready to move from his position.

Gibbs shook his head as he looked around the office slowly “Not really… How are you doing?” Gibbs asked, looking at Tony with a curious expression on his face, one eyebrow raising subtly.

Tony set Nick down onto the carpet, watching as his son toddled over to the corner of his office where he’d had a small section made up solely for entertaining the toddler, “I’m okay… Lot to take in right now. Didn’t expect this to be as hard as it really is.” Tony stated as he slid from the desk to the seat beside Gibbs, lying his head back and staring up at the ceiling of his office as he blew out a puff of air through his nose.

Gibbs chuckled as he reached over and patted Tony’s knee lightly “You’ll get used to it Tony, you’ve only been in this position for six months. You’re still getting used to the work, but you’ll get
there.” Gibbs said confidently as he looked over at Tony’s profiled features.

Tony nodded solemnly as he lifted his head, rolling his neck slightly to release the tension “Still hate sitting behind a desk all day, but it actually does come with some thrills… Every now and again.” Tony stated sardonically, vaguely gesturing towards the mounds of paperwork littering the tops of his filing cabinets, all in neat stacks in several different colored file folders.

Gibbs laughed outright at Tony’s sarcastic comment as he stood up and clasped the younger man’s shoulder “Welcome to directorship, T. Enjoy it while you’re on the lowest ring, because once you’ve become Director of NCIS… That pile will only grow higher.” Gibbs said, keeping his voice low as he kissed the side of Tony’s head and then patted the younger man’s shoulder before making his exit.

At the end of another work day, Tony groaned as he walked into his house, it was well past midnight and Nick had already been asleep for the past four hours, having fallen asleep in the middle of his toys in Tony’s office. Tony toed off his shoes and then silently padded down the hall to Nick’s bedroom, Tony carefully undressed and then redressed Nick in his pajamas, then tucked his toddler into the bed and headed back to the living room where he’d left his bag.

Tony rubbed tiredly at his eyes then pulled out his laptop and turned it on. He was exhausted but he had to at least check his email before going to bed, he definitely couldn’t find enough energy to do any sort of work, school or otherwise at the moment. As Tony scrolled tiredly through his email, his cellphone started vibrating incessantly on the coffee table, Tony quickly reached over and answered the phone “Yeah, Parker?” Tony answered, grimacing at how much he sounded like Gibbs when he answered the phone, the older man had definitely rubbed off on him in more ways than one in all the years they’ve worked together.

“Director Parker, I’m sorry to have called you at your home – But something has come up…” One of Tony’s team members said, Tony looked at the clock and noted it was just a few minutes heading towards one AM.

Tony sighed and laid his head back “What is so urgent? It couldn’t have waited until tomorrow morning?” Tony asked, his exhaustion bleeding through his tone unconsciously.

There was a slightly disconcerting whimper on the other end of the line, and that made Tony open an eye curiously “I… I’m sorry sir… I… I was unaware of the hour… I hope that… that I did not wake your son… Of course it can wait until morning…” the team member stammered, a few seconds later the phone line went dead, leaving Tony to stare at the ended call on his phone in disbelief.
By the next morning, after Tony had gotten Nick settled in the daycare center at NCIS, he headed towards the Behavioral Science division offices which was upstairs. Tony could feel Gibbs’ eyes on him as he walked past and up the stairs, and it unnerved him slightly but he had to shove that feeling down because this wasn’t the time to figure out why Gibbs had been eyeing him so suspiciously lately.

Tony headed into the office “Alright Summers, what do you have for me?” Tony asked as he dropped his backpack in his desk chair and turned to face the young agent who had called him earlier that morning.

Summers stood up quickly and handed Tony a thin leaflet of papers – they were a service record of someone in the navy, Tony observed as he began flipping through them “Gregory Vukovic was arrested a few nights ago, on the charges of murder… An Admiral Rabb has requested you and Agent Gibbs’ help in solving this matter, whichever way it went.” Summers summarized short-hand what was written in the case-file.

Tony shifted on his feet slightly “Alright, sure… Thanks Summers.” Tony stated and turned on his heel to head back down to the bullpen, he went straight to Gibbs’ desk and dropped the file on the older man’s desk, standing there expectantly.

Gibbs slowly lifted the file “How may I help you, Director?” Gibbs asked, keeping all traces of his normal sarcasm he reserved for the directors out of his voice as he began flipping through the files slowly, genuinely curious about what Tony had brought him, considering this would be the first time in six months that Tony had ever pawned a case off on him, after long minutes of silence, Gibbs set the papers down and slowly looked up, regarding Tony with a half-smirk on his face “So, you and me, working together again… huh?” Gibbs questioned curiously.

Tony nodded and smiled a little as he headed out of the bullpen “I’ll expect that you have the car gassed up and ready to go in about twenty minutes, Agent Gibbs.” Tony said, his smile turning into a full-blown grin as he easily dodged a wadded up paper that sailed across the bullpen towards his body.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so, I posted this chapter because I need some insight from my faithful readers... Tony needs a new love interest, and I know that sounds kind of bad, but if he’s ever going to pick himself up and brush himself off, things have to start getting back to normal again, which means dating again... so, here are my suggestions, what are your pro’s and cons? who would you choose?
2) OMC Brandon Foster - DC Firefighter, Lieutenant.
3) OMC Jason Cox - DC District Attorney.
   or 4) OMC Daniel Tate - USMC, Captain.

I obviously won't give everything away about these three OMC characters, as I'd have to build their personalities beyond just their occupation and such, but I would however like to know what people thought about each character pro's/con's of their involvement, if they get involved etc.

Also, I'm trying to get http://sazzysstories.boards.net/ a forum up and running, for discussing topics like such above, so I'm not congesting AO3 with things like this - So, if you want to register, feel free to do so! :)
Tony traced the NCIS emblem on the folder he was holding as he stared at a spot on the large oak desk at JAG headquarters, having been nine years since he last saw Harmon Rabb – who was a Commander then, and was an Admiral now – he had forgotten how breathtakingly beautiful the man was. Sure they were five years apart, and Harm now had a bit more grey, as opposed to when they first met when he had almost none, but the man was still gorgeous and pretty much everything Tony looked for in another man.

Tony stopped moving his fingers briefly, his eyes darkening as he thought about the fact that he was actually thinking about another man so soon. And why would his thoughts go straight to this man? He’d read the NAVY TIMES, and saw that Harmon and his long-time partner had gotten married in 2005, and she was female so, why would he even entertain the thought that Harm would be anything but straight? Tony slowly looked over towards where Harm’s hands were resting on the table top and noticed, with an internal smile of pure elation and possibly a mixture of sadness, that Harm’s wedding finger was empty and there was no tan line to speak of.

“So, this Gregory Vukovic, is one of your employees?” Gibbs asked, breaking through Tony’s thoughts and startling him slightly that he’d gotten so distracted with the man in front of them.

Harm nodded, rubbing his hand slightly “Yeah. Started here about eight years ago when Admiral Chegwidden retired. Never really liked the guy, but he proved to be useful over time… Until this last year anyway.” Harm stated, looking down at the desk briefly before reasserting eye contact with Gibbs and Tony.

Gibbs made a vague gesture with his hand for Harm to continue the story, but Tony knew that the admiral wouldn’t understand the silent request “What happened this year that made him less than stellar?” Tony asked, crossing one leg over the other and leaning back casually resting his chin on his fist as he studied the man before him curiously.

Harm sighed, shifting uncomfortably in his seat “If I’m being honest, it started when he first came to JAG. His interest in one of the other members here, was… distasteful to the point where he ended up begging to accompany her to the assignment she was taking on…” Harm cleared his throat uncomfortably “This is difficult enough to speak about… Given my personal connection to the case…” Harm stated, averting his eyes once again as he stared blankly across the room, between the two investigators.

Gibbs barely repressed the snort of discomfort he made, but Tony just rose an eyebrow as he stared
directly at Harm, something was off about the admiral’s own discomfort “Just explain it the best way that you can – You’re not on trial here, Admiral. Currently you’re just a character witness.” Tony stated, smoothing down his jacket as he sat up a bit straighter.

Harm nodded slowly “Nine years ago, Mac – Colonel Sarah MacKenzie – and I were facing reassignment. Her to San Diego and me to London… When Vukovic found out that Mac was leaving, he began begging her to take him with. She flat out refused to do so, more than once… Mac and I soon after, got engaged… We were married within six months of our proposal…” Harm said, his eyes downcast as he relayed this information – Meanwhile, Tony’s stomach started sinking as Harm spoke, it was too much to think that perhaps he could have somehow convinced the Admiral of fun times.

“...To say Vukovic was pissed with me, and obsessed with Mac would be an understatement… But she never gave into his persistence, even after she turned down her assignment to come to London with me.” Harm continued, his thumb rubbing over the back of his other hand slowly “Mac and I got divorced almost two years ago now, but I’ve stayed in contact with her – We’ve always had a strong friendship, despite our ability to stay married – She’s told me, that on more than one occasion, Vukovic has emailed her or messaged her in some way, getting aggressive and more persistent in his efforts to try and start a relationship with her…” Harm sighed and shook his head as he flipped open the file on his desk, pulling out the image of a young woman with brown hair and a pale complexion “Which brings us to the here and now – This is Corporal Amanda Perry, she had transferred here last year, and that is when Vukovic’s attentions shifted from Mac to Amanda…” Harm said as he shifted the image around in his fingertips a few times “She was a lot like Mac, looked a lot like her as well which is I suppose is why Vukovic was immediately drawn to her.” Harm added, shrugging his shoulders as he set the service photo down.

Tony nodded in acknowledgement as he reached up and rubbed the side of his head slowly “And… Vukovic isn’t talking, claiming his innocence in Amanda’s murder. What about Amanda? What was she like?” Tony asked as he glanced down at the service photo and then back up at Harm curiously.

Harm finally relaxed, leaning backwards in the large leather chair that swallowed his six-foot-four muscular frame, making him look smaller than what he really was “Amanda was fierce, never backed down from a challenge and with a little more direction, she would have made a damned good attorney. She was well liked in the office, made friends with pretty much everyone she came into contact with, even if they were the accused. There isn’t much else to really say about her, we were all still trying to get to know her really.” Harm stated, shrugging his shoulders as he looked between Gibbs and Tony.

Gibbs continued to remain silent, simply staring at Harm with a raised eyebrow and an impassive look on his face. Tony shook his head, nothing would ever change with the man, he thought to himself as he turned his attentions back on Harm “And how did it come about that Vukovic was the prime suspect in her murder?” Tony asked – He knew the answer, but he needed confirmation from Harm, and hopefully Harm wouldn’t question the question.
Harm rubbed the side of his head, then leaned his chin on a closed fist. “Amanda and Vukovic were assigned a case together, they were working late the night she was killed… He was the last person to physically see her, and he had no alibi to speak of. NCIS investigators then proceeded to find several pieces of evidence that linked him to the murder, they informed him of that and he continues to deny ever being near her except for here at the office, and then walking her out to her car just a little after Oh-One-Hundred.” Harm relayed as he looked directly at Tony with a raised eyebrow.

Tony nodded “Just had to make sure that witness statements are as they should be.” Tony said by way of explanation. Harm nodded his understanding, then Tony looked over at Gibbs who now had a contemplative look on his face “Think you can crack him open, Gibbs?” Tony asked with a sly grin on his face, knowing full well that Vukovic would probably crack within an hour of being in the same interrogation room with a glowering, angry, Leroy Jethro Gibbs.

Gibbs snorted in amusement while nodding his head “I know I can…” Gibbs said as he stood up, critically eyeing Harm, then turning towards Tony “I’ll be out warming the car.” Gibbs added as he headed out of the office.

Harm glanced at the closed door, then over at Tony “Well, he’s mellowed out.” Harm commented dryly, a shadow of a smile crossing his features as he straightened up the files on his desk, glancing at Tony out of the corner of his eye a few times.

Tony snorted, chuckling softly “Mellowed out and Gibbs in the same sentence, just simply don’t work out that well… Maybe a little less serious and less frightening, but definitely not mellow…” Tony babbled nervously – Tony felt unnerved by the rush of emotions that were swimming haphazardly through his mind.

Harm chuckled as he leaned forward, his elbows resting on his desk as he looked squarely into Tony’s eyes “What’s with the sudden nervous energy?” Harm questioned, a finely manicured eyebrow raising upward slowly.

Tony shrugged as he rolled his shoulders to release the tension that had built up, “I don’t know honestly…” Tony practically whispered as he brought his hands together by the fingertips, pushing his hands together and apart.

Harm stood up and moved around the desk slowly, sitting down in the chair that Gibbs had just recently vacated, “Are you nervous around me because you almost arrested me for murder?” Harm asked, shaking his head and not giving Tony a chance to respond “No… I’ve read the paper, this has nothing to do with that, this has to do with what happened… six months ago…” Harm whispered, understanding shining in his eyes as he looked directly at Tony.
Tony bit his bottom lip tightly, his eyes falling to his hand that had been missing his wedding ring for several months now as he nodded his head “It’s been hard, but I… I think I’m ready to move on…” Tony whispered sadly, blinking his eyes rapidly to get rid of the tears that had started forming.

Harm frowned slightly as he reached over, clasping Tony’s hands in one of his own “I’ve been living a lie, for a long time, Tony… The reason Mac and I got divorced? Because she found out the truth… I… I couldn’t take lying to her, not anymore, not any longer… I’d already been doing it for twelve years, and it damn near destroyed her…” Harm confessed, lowering his head and releasing Tony’s hand and settling them back in his lap, sighing as if that confession had just tacked on another ten years to his life.

Tony glanced up briefly, noticing a framed photograph that was on the corner of Harm’s desk. Tony took ahold of the frame and turned it towards him, smiling as he looks over the image of a little girl, probably two or three years old, she had long blonde hair and magnificent blue eyes that rivaled that of her father’s “She’s cute…” Tony said softly, lifting up his hips to remove his wallet, taking out the picture of him and Nick together and handing it over to Harm “That’s Nick… He was… is… Chris’ son, I adopted him…” Tony said, stammering over the words some as he choked back more tears.

Harm smiled as he closely examined the picture of Nick “He’s quite the catch… My daughter is two and three quarters, as she would proudly tell you. Elizabeth, and I’m the only one allowed to call her Lizzy.” Harm said, shrugging awkwardly as he handed the photograph back to Tony, then took a deep breath “Would you like to maybe go out sometime?” he asked in a rushed manner, before he lost his nerve to actually ask the question.

Tony startled slightly, blinking a few times to clear his vision, then nodded slowly “I… I think I’d like that… Maybe we… we could do something… the four of us together?” Tony asked, nodding towards the two pictures still in his hands.

Harm nodded his head, his smile widening “I would like that, I’ll call you with details later on?” Harm suggested as he slowly stood up, grabbing a legal pad and pen off his desk and handing them both to Tony. Tony just simply nodded as he jotted his personal cell number down on the top of the sheet, then handed the pad back to Harm.

“I’ll see you around, Admiral.” Tony said quietly as he stood up and headed out of the office, and back down to the parking lot where Gibbs was waiting for him in the now very warm NCIS Sedan.

Chapter End Notes
I know I said that I wouldn't post chapters (on another story) until they were finished, but I honestly felt so bad about not having updated anything in a few weeks (My new stories don't count lol) that I decided to post this one -- I got a new job and it's been a hell of a time trying to adjust to it and find time to write and update stories...

Hope you like the newly forming bond between Tony & Harm, and we will see where their love goes to soon enough!!

And if this is a little short, I am sorry about that too :(
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nick squealed excitedly as Tony guided the toddler into the Chuck-E-Cheeses, his eyes bright and wide with excitement as he bounced in place, joining in the laughter of all the other children around, meanwhile Tony was searching almost frantically for a six foot four tall man, somehow expecting to see the admiral in his uniform.

Tony’s breath caught in his throat when Harm comes up with a blonde haired, blue eyed toddler attached to his leg, he was walking with a slight limp to compensate for his clingy little girl and god, he looked so damned handsome in his blue jeans that were tight in all the right places and that royal blue button down shirt that just accentuated those bulging muscles that were always hidden underneath his winter uniform.

The second Nick and Elizabeth spotted each other, they released their respective parents and then stood toe-to-toe with one another, Harm and Tony both looked down at their toddlers, their breathes held in their throats as they waited to see if the two would get along or not. The breath knocked out of both men’s bodies as their two children squeaked with excitement and then begged to go play, so Harm and Tony easily agreed, taking their children further into the playing area, where both of them could keep a close eye on their kids while they sat on the padded benches to talk.

Harm was seated beside Tony, their knees and shoulders just lightly touching as they watched Nick and Elizabeth climbing in the toddler-sized playground “So, the kids passed their test… Where does that leave us?” Harm asked curiously, glancing over at Tony with a small smile on his face.

Tony shrugged as he looked over at Harm as well “This leaves us with getting to know each other, without things… hanging over either of our heads.” Tony stated, obviously hesitating on certain words that would surely capture the attention of other parents around them.

Harm nodded, sliding his hands along the faux leather of the bench “Guess that seems about right. Just never been good at the meet and greet part of relationships… Or relationships…” Harm said, rubbing the back of his neck with a sheepish grin on his face as he flicked his gaze over in Tony’s direction.

Tony chuckled nervously, nodding his understanding “I’ve never been good at either part myself, guess that explains a lot of my failed attempts at relationships before…” Tony trailed off, sighing as he locked his eyes onto the ground, blinking away the tears yet again that seemed to come out of nowhere.
Harm frowned as he scooted just that bit closer and slung his arm around Tony’s shoulder, pulling the younger man close to his chest. Tony let out a shuddering breath and just let the emotions run over him as tears silently run down his cheeks; Harm felt the shaking of Tony’s body and just held him a tad tighter, letting whatever emotions that Tony had inside of him, out now, it was in a way better, much better than some months down the road when – or if – they established a relationship.

After a few more minutes, Tony sniffled and swiped at his eyes and nose, sitting up just a bit, but still staying in the safety of Harm’s arms “I’m sorry… I… I sometimes… I just can’t control it…” Tony whispered hoarsely, his eyes still averted towards the ground as he blinked away the last of his tears and cleared his vision.

Harm shook his head and tenderly kissed Tony’s temple “Don’t apologize, Tony… This is going to be hard on you, but it’ll get better with time…” Harm whispered, blinking a few times when a small hand came in contact with his kneecap repeatedly, he turned his head down to look at Nick slapping his leg rather hard for his age.

Nick finally stopped and looked up at Harm with what could only be described as a disgruntled scowl on his face “You kissed my daddy!” he proclaimed loudly enough that a lot of the parents around stopped what they were doing to see what all the commotion was about.

Harm and Tony pulled apart and Tony lifted Nick up onto his lap, “And what is wrong with that Nicky?” Tony asked quietly, pulling Nick’s hair back off his forehead so that the toddler could see clearly.

Nick shook his head and bit at his bottom lip as he contemplated his answer “I… I don’t know! You never kissed anyone else afore besides daddy!” Nick stated, his bottom lip wobbling as he pulled his sock-covered feet up onto Tony’s lap, his small arms encircling his shins as he closed his eyes against the tears that started pooling in his emerald green eyes.

Tony frowned as he kissed the top of Nick’s head lightly “I know I haven’t, but it’s really going to be okay Nicky. Your daddy would be happy that I’ve found someone who makes me happy again, and he would be happy knowing that you have someone else you can depend on when you need it…” Tony said sadly and Harm just smiled as he collected his daughter into his arms.

The four were silent for a little while, Tony and Nick seemingly thinking over what had just happened and Harm was giving them that time, Elizabeth was always a quiet child and hardly made a noise unless it was necessary, and when the silence was broken by her, it was clearly necessary “Daddy, I hungry and I gotta potty!” Elizabeth said, tilting her head back to look up at her father’s chin.
Harm chuckled as he kissed his daughter’s head lightly “Then let’s go get you to the restroom and then we’ll get some pizza.” Harm said as he stood up, cradling his curled up baby girl against his chest, her feet dangling precariously over his arms.

Tony grinned as he stood up with Nick hugged to his chest as well “I could use the restroom as well.” Tony admitted as the two men began walking towards the sign that directed them towards the restrooms.

Once bathroom breaks were completed and a large pizza was delivered to their table, Harm and Tony set out to cut up one slice of pizza for their toddlers and then proceeded to grab their own slices “Sorry this isn’t exactly the best first date idea.” Harm said after he’d eaten down about four bites of his pizza.

Tony shook his head as he clasped Harm’s unoccupied hand, interlocking their fingers and locking his eyes on their joined hands – he couldn’t help but to think about how perfectly their fingers connected together – “I think that it was the perfect idea for our first date… Our kids got to know each other, which was important if we were to ever try and start a relationship… It was a great idea.” Tony said quietly, keeping half of his attention on the two toddlers and the other half on the man he could definitely see going somewhere with in the near future.

Harm smiled shyly, his cheeks tingling a hot pink color as he ducked his head – Tony mentally snapped this moment, seeing an Admiral of the US Navy blushing was definitely something to keep as a memory. “And, do you see us starting a relationship?” Harm asked quietly, after having cleared his throat a few times to get the words out of him.

Tony released Harm’s hand as he returned to eating his first slice of pizza, a thoughtful look on his face as he carefully contemplated the pros and cons to the can of worms he’d just opened up; he could see some sort of future with the man in front of him, he could see going somewhere, but where he was not quite sure yet, he would have to give that time to develop. On the other hand, he had Nick to think about, and while it was clear that Harm was okay with being around Nick, considering he had a child of his own, Nick was still his main priority through it all. And that brought him back to Harm himself – He was a navy man, probably going to stay in it until the day he died, which given his career choices, that could be sooner than either of them might think if something were to happen, and that brought his thoughts back around to Chris and losing him way to soon.

Tony sighed, nodding his head slowly, somewhat still unsure “Yes, I do.” He replied honestly,
because, really, what could it hurt to actually try and get a handle on his life and start fresh? With a
guy who clearly was interested in him, for more than just the reasons that most guys were just
interested in him for – He was not interested in just sex, not after having found out that relationships,
when both parties were in it for the long haul, were definitely more productive than just sex.

Harm smiled warmly as he captured Tony’s hand in his again, bringing it up to his lips and tenderly
kissing the younger man’s knuckles “I’m glad.” Harm whispered against Tony’s hand as their eyes
locked with one another’s, a lot of emotions passing between each man’s expressions – Fear,
uncertainty, the beginnings of love… So many things that couldn’t be put into words.

“Daddy, can we go play again?” Nick asked, breaking the silence and the staring contest that Harm
and Tony had found themselves in.

Tony quickly pulled his hand out of Harm’s hand and turned to face his son, whose face was
absolutely covered in pizza-sauce, “Sure buddy, let me just get your face cleaned up and then we can
go play.” Tony said as he grabbed one of the napkins off the table and began swiping the sauce of
Nick’s face carefully.

Harm was on the other side of the table, doing the same with a squirming and restless Elizabeth,
clearly ready to get back to playing herself – Once the two kids were cleaned, they both took off,
hand-in-hand towards the ball pit close to the skee-ball games “Perhaps we could catch a round of
skee-ball?” Harm suggested as he came around the table, tossing the used napkins into the trash can.

Tony grinned, nodding his head a little too enthusiastically “You are so on!” Tony exclaimed as he
grasped Harm’s hand, interlocking their fingers again – he couldn’t seem to get enough of just
holding Harm’s strong hand in his own – and then practically drug the older man over towards the
skee-ball machines.

Harm and Tony found side-by-side machines and inserted the first of what would be many coins into
the slots; Harm knew he had a competitive side, but he didn’t know that Tony also had one, and
once they started playing it became more like a sport, trying to one-up one another, rather than just a
game inside of a kid’s play place.

By the time the two men had ran out of coins, fifty between the two of them – They had what
seemed like over a million little golden tickets “Well, that was surely exciting.” Harm said, grinning
as he swiped sweat off his brow, then glanced over at Elizabeth and Nick who had long since
abandoned playing to watch their fathers gain more and more tickets.

Tony nodded as he bundled up his tickets and shoved them down into his jean pockets, “It was
definitely fun – We should do this again.” Tony stated, grinning as he walked over to Nick and Elizabeth, looking down into two terribly tired looking faces “Although I think it’s time to get some small people home for bed.” Tony said as he slowly lifted Nick up, nestling the toddler against his chest.

Harm collected Elizabeth as well, nodding as the two men headed towards the ticket counter, “What do you want for a prize, Lizzy?” Harm asked, jostling the almost-sleeping little girl to get her to pick something out – Elizabeth managed to raise a tired arm up to point at an overly large pink stuffed dog, then dropped her arm back to Harm’s chest, snuggling in deeply.

Tony already knew what Nick would want – He’d had his eyes on it for a long time now, so Tony pointed out the large neon green and orange dinosaur, hoping the damned thing would fit in his SUV. The counter attendant quickly gathered both prizes and handed them over, it was awkward to try and carry the toys and the children, but somehow both men managed to get out of Chuck E Cheeses without incident.

Harm shoved the obscenely large pink dog into his trunk, then shifted Elizabeth in his arms to join Tony over at his car “Need a hand with that?” Harm asked, noticing that Tony was struggling to open the trunk of his SUV while balancing Nick in his arms at the same time.

Tony nodded as he stood back, his car keys falling to the ground by his feet, both men sighed as they looked down at the silver keys “Today was a great day, until we left the safety of drooling and screaming children.” Tony commented idly as he watched Harm gracefully bent over, keeping Elizabeth somehow cocooned against him and picked the keys back up, then unlocked and opened the trunk to Tony’s SUV.

Tony managed to shove the huge dinosaur into the almost full to capacity trunk, then sighed as he shifted Nick in his arms “I can’t wait to do this again.” Harm whispered as he reached up with one hand, tucking a stray hair of Tony’s behind his ear, keeping his warm palm against Tony’s cheek afterwards.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the two men’s bodies draw closer together, and their lips touch for the first time in an electrifying way; their eyes sliding closed as they tentatively explored one another, first with just lips, then slowly their tongues met, twisting and caressing in an dance as old as time.

When they finally pull apart, having two squirming toddlers breaking their kissing-concentration; Harm and Tony are both flushed and slightly breathless as they stare into one another’s eyes “I’ll call you… tonight?” Tony whispered questioningly, his green eyes lit with amusement and just a bit more love than what he should probably be feeling at this point in their relationship. Harm just nodded his head, pecking Tony’s lips once more before turning on his heel expertly to head back towards his own SUV.
Chapter End Notes

Alright guys;; I need to know, should I stick with the title "The Nature of Loss" or end this on Chapter 10 and move to a new series, titled "The Nature of Rebuilding" (or something similar)?

Let me know what you think, of my question and of the story as well!!! :D
Tony looked up at the slightly darkened house, he had to be quick about returning to his own home – his neighbor was watching Nick while he had to go out and clear his mind – This always seemed to happen when things got serious in his life, especially when it came to relationships. Tony and Harm had been dating for nearly a month now and things were progressing as they should – they were getting to know each other, Elizabeth and Nick were getting to know each other and were actually comfortable with one another’s company.

Tony wanted their relationship to take that next step, but he was also nervous about doing that – Honestly, nobody knew he was seeing someone new, not even Gibbs, who he always confided in about pretty much everything since starting to work for the older man twelve years ago. Tony inhaled shakily and finally walked up the steps and entered Gibbs’ dark house, noticing only the slight shimmer of light coming from the upstairs hallway.

For several seconds, there was only silence encompassing the house until a long and loud moan seemingly echoed through the house, Tony cringed as he heard what sounded like Jimmy moaning in ecstasy. Tony moved silently, but further into the house, heading towards the basement so he wouldn’t have to hear what was going on upstairs; he knew Gibbs would come down eventually, he has accidently come into the house when Gibbs and Jimmy were in the midst of sexual activities numerous times to know these things.

While Tony ambled aimlessly around the basement, occasionally sanding a rough spot on the ever-present boat, his ears unfortunately were tuned into listening to the rapidly growing noises that were taking places two floors above him – Gibbs’ bedroom being almost directly above the basement – Jimmy was a very enthusiastically loud lover, his screams of pleasure nearly shaking the house; Tony almost feels guilty for listening to the intimacy of their relationship, but it’s not like he’s going to leave, he never does.

Tony doesn’t know how long he’d been sanding the boat when he heard footsteps coming down the stairs, they were almost silent, but Tony had honed his skills over the years, and now Gibbs could almost not sneak up on him, he just let the older man do so, not that he had a need to let Gibbs sneak up on him anymore, not after becoming the ADD. Tony turned to look at Gibbs, smiling lopsidedly as he looked the older man over – Gibbs had a towel wrapped around his shoulders, catching the drippings of his still wet hair, he clearly just got out of the shower, wearing a pair of old sweats, NIS shirt and his tennis shoes.

“Jimmy asleep?” Tony asked quietly, setting down the sanding block and leaning against the boat as he stared down at his feet, twisting a loose strand of thread from the rip in his jeans.
Gibbs nodded silently as he grabbed two clean mason jars – that was something new, well, sort of new, clean glassware being in the basement; must be the Doctor in Jimmy that has taken over and replaced Gibbs’ bad habits. Gibbs pours two glasses half-full of bourbon and set one in Tony’s hand “So, what’s going on?” Gibbs asked – Usually he let Tony just ramble aimlessly until they got to the heart of the problem, but Gibbs was exhausted and, not that he was rushing Tony out of the house, but he knew the younger man didn’t like being away from Nick for too long on weeknights.

Tony shrugged, sipping at the bourbon, almost wishing that the alcohol would burn his throat badly like it used to when he first started coming to Gibbs’ basement, but now it’s just a subtle and soothing burn that leaves him feeling numb “Harm and I are dating…” Tony started, looking up briefly at Gibbs before shrugging again “And… I’m just… I don’t know… floundering slightly? It’s been a month and… everything is going pretty good so far.” Tony said, sighing as he finished off his glass of bourbon, setting it upside down so that it wouldn’t magically refill.

Gibbs grunted in acknowledgment “Yeah, I kind of figured you were seeing him… Haven’t seen much of you the past month.” Gibbs stated shrugging as he downed the rest of his own bourbon and set the glass aside “So, what is the problem?” Gibbs asked, hoisting himself up onto the workbench and taking his towel off his shoulders to finish drying his still damp hair.

Tony sighed “I’m not sure honestly. Is… Is it wrong…? That I think I might feel like… I could… actually fall in love with him?” Tony asked, stammering through his question like some nervous school girl, and he can’t seem to stop the trembling of his bottom lip or the shaking of his hands, no matter how hard he tries to still the movements.

Gibbs jumped off the workbench and walked over to Tony, quickly pulling the younger man into his arms – he has seen many breakdowns over the past six months to know that it was inevitably going to happen. Tony inhaled shakily as he wrapped his arms tightly around Gibbs’ waist, burying his head against the older man’s shoulder as hot, fat tears began raining down his cheeks in rapid succession, barely giving him a chance to catch his breath as the tears overwhelmed him.

Gibbs held onto Tony tighter, bringing one hand up to the younger man’s head and the other in the center of his back “Breathe Tony… Breathe.” Gibbs softly instructed as he rubbed up and down Tony’s back soothingly, sighing in relief once Tony’s breathing was once again under control, yet the hot tears still soaked into his shirt, feeling the heat of them on his shoulder.

Tony slowly pulled back, shaking his head as he swiped at his eyes and nose, “Sorry… I… I don’t know why…” Tony stopped talking and walked back over to the boat, picking up the sanding block and turning back to the boat to sand over the places he’d missed earlier.
Gibbs inhaled deeply “I know…” he said quietly, joining Tony at the boat with a sanding block of his own “When I lost Shannon and Kelly… I couldn’t control it either. I cried, a lot, I screamed, I threw things, I broke a lot of things, and I drank a lot…” Gibbs shook his head as he pushed the sander over a rough spot “Everything that you’re going through is normal, Tony… I wish there was something that could take away that pain, but there is really only one way that gets you over this hump.” Gibbs said, looking over at Tony who was looking at him imploringly, “Time Tony, it takes time to get over a loss like yours – But you’re getting there, you’re rebuilding your life and you’re also reconstituting a love life, with a guy who is really good for you.” Gibbs finished, having set the sanding block down halfway through his speech and was now looking straight at Tony.

Tony smiled shakily, nodding his head as he straightened himself up “You’re right, as always… I just need to stop worrying about what anyone else thinks and do this for me – Harm is a great guy and he deserves everything I have to offer. I can do this, I can rebuild.” Tony said with a firm resolve as he walked over to Gibbs, they shared another fatherly hug, albeit brief, and then Tony was heading up the basement stairs “And by the way, you should really start locking your doors when you and Jimmy are upstairs.” He called over his shoulder as he headed both out of the basement, and then Gibbs’ house all together.

Tony had ran home, ever thankful that he only lived five minutes away from Gibbs’ house. He bolted into the house, stopping long enough to dismiss his neighbor and lock the door behind her as she left, and then dashed towards his bedroom, nearly crashing into the closed door on his way into it. Tony grabbed his cellphone – having stupidly left it on his nightstand before leaving – and tapped out a quick text message ‘Can you talk right now?’ mindful of the time, that was quickly closing in on midnight.

Instead of receiving a text message in response, his cellphone started vibrating and Tony was quick to accept the call “Is something wrong?” the man on the other end of the phone asked, worry and concern coloring his voice.

Tony chuckled as he divested himself of his sneakers “No… I just… I wanted to hear your voice is all.” Tony said quietly as he undid his jeans and let them fall to the floor. “Is that alright? I mean… I know it’s late and we have work in the morning…” Tony said hesitantly – Maybe calling Harm wasn’t the best idea after all.

“Its fine, I’m just going over expense reports and other fun stuff like that…” Harm sighed, the distinct sound of papers being shuffled echoingly eerily over the other end of the phone.

Tony was now standing in just his boxers as he climbed into his bed, pulling his own paperwork off
the nightstand and onto the top of his comforter “Guess we can do our reports together, I’ve got my own expense reports to go over…” Tony said as he grabbed his pen and stuck it between his teeth, chewing on the already bitten up end as he thought about his next words – the line was silent for a long time, each man just breathing into the mouth piece.

“I know what it is that I want now.” Tony said quietly – this had been a discussion that had come up a few times in the past month, but Tony never had an answer, was never able to commit, not until now; now he was ready, and now he had the answers that Harm had been looking for.

Harm’s breath stuttered, his mind almost immediately thinking the worst possible scenario “Wh… what is it that you want…?” he asked quietly – the shuffling of papers having stopped on both ends of the phone now as their almost silent breaths take over the line again.

Tony frowned when he heard the hesitation in Harm’s voice, but he had to do this, there was no way out now, not after tonight’s discoveries and not after the month of happiness flooded through his mind “I want more, Harm… More time with you, more of us… I’m ready to let myself live again, to be a part of this life we’re trying to create together…” Tony whispered into the phone, his voice sounded so sure and confident, even with the minor pauses to gather his thoughts and make sure they came out in the order that they needed too.

Harm let out an audible sigh of relief, chuckling nervously “Jesus Tony… You scared the living hell out of me, I thought… Never mind what I thought, that’s not important…” Harm said, and Tony could hear that he was sitting up or moving around now “I’m happy, more than happy… I know I can be a bit dense sometimes, but… I do care for you, a lot Tony and I couldn’t imagine… I just… You’re really special to me and I don’t want to lose you, ever.” Harm said quietly.

Tony could feel the tears welling up in his eyes again as he listened to Harm – He hadn’t meant to scare the older man into thinking he would end it, he wouldn’t do that, at least not over the phone, but to hear Harm declare that he was special, and while not saying that he loved him, because that statement was far too soon to come up, but it was close enough, Tony let the tears fall freely “I care about you too, Harm and… I don’t want to know what it’s like not having you in my life either…” Tony whispered, even as his breath hitched in his throat, he knew he could start sobbing any minute, and he couldn’t, not on the phone, he had to regain control of his emotions before they threatened to overwhelm him again.

“Hey, get some sleep Tony, it’s late… we’ll talk more about this tomorrow, we have a lot to figure out now.” Harm said quietly, and Tony reluctantly agreed, both men saying their goodnights and hanging up the phone – only for them to turn out their bedroom lamps and begin texting until Tony fell asleep, his phone lightly clutched in his hand and dreams of the future dancing around in his head.
This will be the last chapter in THIS series -- Coming up next will be the healing/rebuilding process :P!

As always, love to hear what you guys think of the chapter/story as a whole! Don't hold back on me ;)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!