Images and Assumptions

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Summary

Tony was making some changes in his life, and he wanted to share the news with the team.

Notes

My response to The Big Short prompt “original male character.” I wanted to play around with creating a character that was totally unattached to canon. I also have a persistent desire for Tony to meet a nice guy outside of work, and have his life become that much more complete.
Tony stepped into the low lighting of the bar, and scanned the tables for his team. He’d had a last report to finish up, so everyone had arrived a few minutes ahead of him. He just hoped they hadn’t harassed Nick too much.

He’d invited him for two reasons. Tony wanted to introduce him to his team, and he also had some news to share with them. He spotted them quickly, and sighed in relief as he realized Ducky was in the middle of what seemed to be a long tale. Hopefully that meant Nick hadn’t gotten the interrogation yet.
Nick spotted him as he drew alongside the table and stools they were using, and Tony pulled him into a side hug. “Hey, Nicky! So glad you could make it tonight.”

“Tony! You’re late!” Abby exclaimed.

“Always more paperwork. Sorry about that,” Tony said, turning to direct his last statement to Nick.

“Don’t worry about it. I spotted Dr. Mallard, and we just started introductions before you got here.” Nick turned his bright smile to Tony, and Tony couldn’t help but return it.

Nick was someone whose genuine smile was displayed often. Tony could appreciate that, being the kind of person that was usually playing some kind of role. He was always being diplomatic with victims’ families, or playing a suspect in interrogation, or playing his part on their team. He so rarely got to be himself without conscious thought for others, and he appreciated someone who could so easily do that.

“So,” Tim broke in. “Who’s your friend? We thought this was just going to be a team thing tonight.”

“Nick, this is Tim McGee, Ziva David, Abby Sciuto, and you know Ducky. Everybody, this is Nick Matthews.”

“And Gibbs!” Abby shouted, seemingly incongruously.

“What?” Ziva furrowed her brow.

The reason for the exclamation became obvious when Gibbs walked up to the table.

“Gibbs! You made it! Tony was just introducing us to his mystery friend over here.” Abby’s volume had not decreased.

Gibbs looked at Nick and nodded in greeting. “Nick.”

“Gibbs, nice to see you again.”

“Wait, you guys have met before?” Tim asked.

Tony huffed. “Yes, McCaptain Obvious. We had dinner with Ducky at Gibbs’ place a couple weeks ago.”

At the varying looks of confusion that crossed the other’s faces, Tony started to get a feeling in his gut that tonight was not going to end particularly well.


Tony sighed. “Why what, Abs?”

“Why bring a random friend to dinner with Gibbs and Ducky, duh? And why weren’t we invited?” Abby replied.

Before Tony could explain, Ziva spoke up.
“Yeah, Tony. How do you know Nick? He doesn’t really seem like the kind of guy you’d be friends with.”

Tony knew his voice was cold when he replied, but he couldn’t help it. “What exactly is that supposed to mean, Ziva?”

“I think what she means,” Tim spoke hesitantly, “is that Nick wouldn’t really fit in with your macho frat buddies.”

There was an awkward beat of silence.

“It’s okay, Tony. I can just go. We don’t have to do this tonight,” Nick said softly, but calmly.

Tony turned to him and replied lowly. “No. The whole point of tonight was to do exactly this.” He turned back to the group. “So what are you saying, McGee? That I don’t hang out with guys that aren’t my frat brothers or football buddies? Or would you like to clarify what kind of guy you think Nick is that he wouldn’t fit in with that crowd?”

In his peripheral vision, Tony saw Gibbs cross his arms in a classic sign of disappointment, but he was grateful he didn’t try to interject. He wanted to work this out with his colleagues, and right now that meant seeing how far McGee was going to dig himself into this hole.

“Well, yeah, I mean. Look at Nick’s style,” Tim answered, gesturing broadly toward Nick’s outfit.

Nick usually dressed preppy with a trendy edge. Tony thought he looked particularly great today in his pale lavender and grey gingham shirt tucked into slim chinos with casual grey oxfords. His dark blond hair was tousled into a subtle pompadour.

Tony gestured to himself as he spoke. “Look at me, McGee. You think I’m intimidated by someone’s fashion sense?” He was in one of his favorite suits, having just come from work. In fact, he thought he and Nick looked good standing next to each other.

“Well, no, but Nick looks…” Tim sputtered to a halt.

“Spit it out, McTongue-tied,” Tony interrupted impatiently.

Abby interjected enthusiastically on Tim’s behalf. “I think he’s trying to say Nick’s setting off our gaydar, Tony.”

“Now, Abbigail-“ Ducky started, but Tony cut him off with a bitter chuckle.

“Your gaydar, Abby? Really?” Tony shook his head. “You think you can make that assumption based on appearance alone?”

“Tony’s right. A magazine should not be judged by its cover. We should try to get to know Nick better first.” Ziva decided it was her turn to do some damage. “What is it you do for a living?”

”Book by its cover,” Tony scolded in obvious frustration.

Nick’s smile was a little wary, but he answered the question in a friendly tone. “I’m a stylist at a salon in Alexandria, and I started working at my friend’s coffee shop part time last year when she needed some extra help. It’s in Tony’s neighborhood. That’s actually how we met.”
“See? Nick fits the stereotype perfectly!” Tim exclaimed triumphantly.

Tony knew these guys could be morons, but they were in rare asshole form tonight. This really couldn't be going any worse. He couldn't help the biting words that followed, even if they were petty.

“No, McGee. Not everyone is as one dimensional as the characters you write in your books.”

Tim’s jaw dropped, and Abby squealed Tony's name is disapproval.

“I’m sorry,” Tony sighed. “This is not how I wanted this to go. I invited Nick here because we're together, and I wanted to share that with all of you.”

Nick grabbed Tony's had and laced their fingers together in a subtle show of support. Tony’s tension eased a bit. It didn't last long, because after a moment of stunned silence, Tim started laughing.

“Nice try, Tony. We aren't falling for it, but nice try.”

Ziva and Abby had joined in the laughter too. Tony was too shocked to respond.

“Are you kidding me? You think he's joking?” Nick said indignantly.

“Well, yeah. Tony pulls pranks at work all the time,” Abby helpfully supplied.

"Abs," Gibbs said in a warning tone.

“Come on, Gibbs. Tony’s not gay!” Abby persisted.

“Let me get this straight.” Nick interrupted. “You think Tony brought you all out to a bar, invited along someone you all didn’t know, all to prank you by telling you he’s in a relationship with a guy?”

Abby started to nod her head, but Nick held up his hands and continued. “No, don’t. Most of you have worked with Tony for years. He considers you his friends, and I’ve heard so much about each of you in the past eight months, that I feel like I know you. Yet, you think all he does is play the class clown? Really? All the time? And even if he did, this whole thing doesn’t even make sense as a prank! That leads me to believe Tony gives your intelligence way too much credit.

“I’m actually shocked by the level of close-mindedness here, and I grew up in a small Midwest farming town! I don’t—” Nick paused and took a deep breath, at a loss for words.

“I feel like I can’t even work up into a full rant at you all, because you wouldn’t learn anything anyway.” Nick flapped his hands once aimlessly as he wound down.

Tony chuckled. “Oh that’s a shame. I love it when you really get going. You guys should hear him talk about that new Shyamalan flick.”

“Oh, don’t get me started!” Nick interjected. “It was so weird! And the father-daughter thing they tried to do with Giamatti’s character and Bryce Dallas Howard was just creepy. She wasn’t wearing pants!”

Ducky was chuckling by this time, and Gibbs had even cracked a small smile. “Do tell us how you really feel, Nicholas.”
Tony couldn’t help but smile at Nick. “God, I love you. Let’s go home. I think I’m done here.”

Without another word, Nick waved goodbye to Gibbs and Ducky, and grabbed Tony’s hand to lead him out of the bar. They had just made it outside when they heard Gibbs.

“Dinozzo, hang on a sec.”

Nick turned to Tony and flashed an easy smile. “I’ll give you two a minute. I took a cab, so I could catch a ride home with you. Where are you parked?”

Tony pointed to his car in street parking about a half block away, and Nick turned to head that direction. Tony faced his soon-to-be former boss.

“Thought you were going to tell them about the new job,” Gibbs said gruffly.

“Nah, after this little stunt, they can find out through the grapevine like everyone else.”

Gibbs sighed. “I’m sorry to see you go, but I can’t deny your talent is wasted as my second. I know we didn’t see eye to eye on Ziva, or really Jenny either, but I’d hoped you would have been able to stay at NCIS.”

Now it was Tony’s turn to sigh. “Look, I tried with Ziva for the past year, and I just can’t. I don’t trust her, and I don’t trust the Director’s judgement for putting her on our team. I know you see things differently, but I hope you'll watch your back. Don’t let them play you, Gibbs.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Tony nodded and turned to go.

Gibbs spoke to his retreating form. “The FBI will be lucky to have you, Tony. Come by for steaks sometime, and tell me all about it. Bring Nick too. You know I don’t care what those bozos think.”

That was about as sentimental as Gibbs ever got, and Tony took it for what it was. He’d appreciated Gibbs and Ducky’s relatively easy acceptance of Nick in his life. But then, they’d always seen him as more of a complete person than his other colleagues apparently did.

He found Nick leaning against the side of his parked car. Tony walked right into his personal space and kissed him.

“I’m sorry,” he said, after pulling back enough to make eye contact.

“It’s okay. Well, it’s not. They’re your friends and they should know you better, or at least know to treat you better, but tonight wasn’t your fault.” Nick popped the button on Tony’s suit jacket as he spoke and circled his arms around his waist in a loose embrace under the fabric.

Tony smirked. “Should I have told them you have a degree in mechanical engineering? Think that would have smashed their stereotypes?”

“Should I have told them you have a degree in behavioral psychology?” Nick laughed lightly. “Although, they might have been surprised to learn I used to help my grandpa with his plumbing business a few summers in college.”
“Plumbing, you say? I have some plumbing I think you could check out back at our place.” Tony waggled his eyebrows in a cheesy leer as he spoke.

Nick threw his head back and laughed, and Tony took a moment to appreciate the sight.

“No, Tony! Just, no. Plumbing is not a sexy euphemism.”

Tony stepped back, and they moved to get in the car.

“What about carpentry? Got any wood for me to handle, Nicky?”

Nick laughed again, and they were practically breathless by the time they were both seated in the car. As the moment of mirth faded, Tony turned to Nick with a serious expression.

“Thanks for always seeing me.”

Nick’s smile was sweet in response. “It’s really my pleasure, babe.”

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