The Most Beautiful Tide
by shadeshifter

Summary

“The most beautiful tide is the sweep of your heart against mine.”
— Sanober Khan

Aaron is putting one foot in front of the other, surviving Witness Protection and the separation from everything he is and everyone he knows as best he can, when Tony sweeps in and complicates matters. And makes them so much easier at the same time.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Windbound

Chapter Notes

SpencnerTibbsLuvr and the amazing art for this story can be found [here](#).
Aaron glanced up, catching his reflection in the cabinet glass. He averted his eyes and raised a hand to scratch at the scruff that he’d let grow over the last few weeks. He barely recognised himself these days, not just the beard that made him feel like a stranger in his own skin, but the shadowed eyes that betrayed his resignation, that showed too much of how little he thought they’d make it out of this unscathed.

“How did you sleep?” Aaron asked. The last time Jack had been in this situation, they’d lost Haley. Even if Jack didn’t remember the details of what happened, he didn’t think he’d ever forgive himself for bringing Foyet into their lives. He didn’t think he’d ever forgive himself for Lewis either.

“Fine,” Jack said, not quite meeting Aaron’s eyes.

Not well, then. Aaron couldn’t blame him, not when he barely slept either, too concerned with making sure nothing could harm Jack to rest anything but fitfully. Still, Jack didn’t have the bags under his eyes he’d had at the start, so things were improving. He was sure it was an indictment of his abilities as a father that he considered the fact his son wasn’t sleeping well but at least wasn’t having debilitating nightmares as a win.

He hoped Haley would have understood. She had always known that whatever else, he always wanted the best for Jack, even when they hadn’t agreed what that was. Jack was the one thing that had connected them at the end.

“You ready for school?” Aaron tried again. Jack nodded, but didn’t otherwise answer, instead taking another bite and keeping his mouth purposefully full of food. He still hadn’t looked up. Aaron didn’t sigh, but the weight of his resignation and frustration sat heavy in his chest.

“All set for tonight?” Aaron persisted.
Jack was staying over at a friend’s house. It was the only friend he’d made since they’d arrived and Aaron had had the Marshals do the deepest, most thorough background check they could. Everything had checked out. The family had been part of the town going back generations and there hadn’t been anything compromising in their history. Aaron still didn’t want him going.

He’d never felt so alone, not when he was a child keeping his brother safe from their father, not even when Haley died, as he did now. He hadn’t contacted the team in weeks, hadn’t been able to lean on them for support. This was how Prentiss felt, alone in Europe, cut off from everybody. It was how Haley felt before Foyet caught up to her; anxious and alone, terrified that everything she could do wouldn’t be enough.

“Yes, Dad,” Jack told him, pushing his plate away from him.

“You know the rules?”

When this whole thing had started, they’d sat down together and come up with a set of rules they both had to follow. As much as Aaron worried about Jack, he knew his son worried about him. The very first, most important rule was to always have a fully-charged cell on them at all times, even in the house. The second was to never be out of contact, to always answer when a call was from either of them.

“I remember,” Jack said without any of the frustration or attitude Aaron would have expected from a pre-teen in his situation. Jack raised his eyes to finally meet Aaron’s, expression serious beyond his years. “I’ll be careful, Dad.”

“I know you will,” Aaron said, putting his coffee down and moving to stroke Jack’s hair, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. “Remind me to set up a haircut for you.”

“Dad,” Jack said, a hint of a whine entering his voice, but he was smiling a little and Aaron couldn’t help but smile faintly back, glad that he could maintain at least a small bit of normality for Jack. He’d never forgive himself if he kept Jack alive but destroyed the rest of his life in the process.

“We’d better head out,” Aaron said, ruffling Jack’s hair again. Jack batted half-heartedly at his hand, even as he leaned into him.

He grabbed his keys and gun, sliding it into the holster on his belt at the small of his back, concealed by the loose, dark green flannel shirt he wore over it. As much as he was willing to trust the Marshals with his and Jack’s safety, he knew mistakes could and had been made, and he wasn’t willing to take the chance.

Jack grabbed his backpack and waited for Aaron to join him. It might only have been a couple blocks to the school, but Aaron insisted on being with him there and back. The school had fewer than 200 students from the entire area and Jack seemed to benefit from the more personalised attention. He was tempted to stick around, even after everything settled, just for Jack.

As he locked up behind them and turned to see the ocean waves breaking softly on the shore, he couldn’t help but think that the Marshals had gone all out when they settled them. It might almost literally be as far from DC as he could get and still be in the same country, but everything about the little town on the California coast felt like it was designed to make the whole thing as easy on them as possible. If it hadn’t been for the stress of everything with Lewis, the constant fear that he’d find them, that he’d find Jack, Aaron might even have considered it a vacation.

That fear wouldn’t leave him though and he vacillated between thinking he’d done the best possible thing by leaving and entering WitSec, and wondering if leaving the security of having the team at his
back was the worst choice. Lewis had shown before that he could get to people, even in WitSec, but the team, as good as they were, couldn’t stop everything.

It was one of the reasons he’d insisted on a small town. While he and Jack might have been subjected to intense and uncomfortable scrutiny when they arrived, he knew that attention could cut both ways. With such a small population, everyone knew everyone else, even if only by sight, and any newcomers would stand out immediately.

Jack walked a little closer to him than he had other mornings and Aaron didn’t need to be a profiler to know he was anxious. Jack’s hand would twitch every few steps as though he wanted to hold Aaron’s hand, but considered himself too old to need to. Aaron ruffled his hair, causing Jack to look up at him, and then let his hand drop to Jack’s shoulder.

“You can always call me if you change your mind,” he said.

“I want to go,” Jack told him with all the stubborn will he could muster.

Aaron simply nodded, not arguing. As much as he wanted to protect Jack, he also wanted him to have as normal a childhood as was possible, despite everything. The first time it had been Billy, Jack’s friend, staying with them and Aaron had steered as many visits as possible to be at his house, but it was inevitable Billy’s parents would extend the same invitation to Jack. As much as Aaron might not like it. They stopped outside the school and Aaron turned to Jack, giving his shoulder one last squeeze before letting go.

“Have fun,” was all he said. Jack rolled his eyes, so much like a normal pre-teen that it almost hurt Aaron to watch. He would give everything that was in him and more to save that spark in Jack.

“Bye Dad,” Jack told him as he turned to enter the building.

Aaron watched until he was safely inside and then watched some more to make sure he stayed that way. Finally, he had to drag himself away, his steps reluctant as he continued on his way down the road. As much as he knew he couldn’t, there would always be a part of him that wanted to take Jack and lock him away where nothing could ever touch him. Resisting that impulse, especially after everything that had happened, was the hardest thing he’d ever had to do.

“Aidan,” a voice greeted as he turned to walk into the mechanic’s garage.

“John,” he returned, nodding to the owner even as he tried not to frown at the use of the name of his new identity. He had been Hotch, Unit Chief of the BAU, for so long that he was still struggling with trying to be anything else.

“Kid get to school okay?” John asked, wiping his already greasy hands on an equally dirty cloth. Occasionally, John was helped after school by his nephew, but mostly he was the only mechanic in the area and he was seldom short of work.

“He did,” Aaron told him. They’d kept most of the their history the same and the reason they’d given for Aaron and Jack moving was a need to start over after Aaron’s wife and Jack’s mother died. It had made the town take an extra interest in their fitting in, which Aaron hoped would only benefit them if anything happened. “He’s staying with Billy Parker’s family tonight.”

John nodded, watching Aaron with patient amusement and Aaron knew he had very little chance of disguising his anxiety. Aaron knew it was an open secret that he was more than a little over-protective, but the town assumed it was because of what happened with his wife, not because he was worried about the serial killer stalking his son.
“Is there still some coffee in the pot?” Aaron asked and John nodded again, tipping his head in the direction of the back office.

Aaron continued on his way, taking a moment to settle his worries and focus on the day ahead. Obviously he couldn’t work in law or law enforcement again, not while he was part of the program, but bookkeeping wasn’t anywhere close to what he’d expected out of his life.
Aaron forced himself to remain seated or he’d go straight to Jack and check he was all right for himself. He’d already phoned to make sure Jack went with his friend after school. He’d even driven by the house to make sure no one was keeping an undue eye on it. Jack’s cell was still at their location and he hadn’t triggered his panic button either.

Everything was fine, Aaron knew that, but he couldn’t help but worry anyway. But if they had any chance of making it work here, of allaying suspicion, he knew he couldn’t give in to his fears. It was why he found himself in the town’s only bar, surrounded by people he barely knew by sight, never mind more personally, hoping to find some sort of distraction.

“Hey Hopkins,” the bartender said. He’d come into John’s with his motorbike and roped Aaron into helping with his taxes in return for complimentary drinks. It had seemed like a good way to get involved with the community.

“Hernandez,” Aaron returned.

“Mateo,” he insisted with a smile which, if Aaron wasn’t reading it wrong, was bordering on flirtatious. The smile Aaron returned was stiff and tight, but the man simply leaned forward on the counter. “What can I get you?”

“Beer,” Aaron told him, despite wanting something stronger.

While the light-hearted flirting was flattering, Aaron couldn’t even superficially contemplate the idea of getting involved at the moment. Not only was he lying about who he was, but he had a serial killer after him and anyone who was close to him. Aaron simply wasn’t willing to complicate his time here, not when it could be the rest of his life.

“Preference?” Mateo asked and Aaron shook his head. A moment later there was a glass in front of
him. “Heard about Nancy?”

Aaron made a non-committal sound that Mateo seemed to take as acknowledgement. Over the course of the day, he’d heard about Nancy being pregnant. And that her husband had been serving overseas for the last year. He’d also heard about the stranger who was spending the night at the Williams’ bed and breakfast even though it was the off season and it was unusual for them to get guests around that period. He’d even heard about Phil spending another day with the Sheriff because he’d been picked up wandering the streets and shouting about his ex-wife after a heavy night and morning drinking. There was very little that didn’t get around a small town. The only thing that might concern him was the stranger, but all information seemed to point to it just being a passer-through.

Someone from the other end of the bar called out an order and Aaron breathed a sigh of relief when Mateo went to fill it. Maybe this hadn’t been the best idea, but he couldn’t face sitting at the house staring at the wall all night. He’d done enough of that after Foyet. If he’d been back home, he might have spent the evening with the team at a bar or at Rossi’s, but he had no one here but Jack.

He could try picking up the guitar he’d purchased on a whim, thinking he might use it as a distraction from everything else to fill his time, but playing it just reminded him of college and Haley and everything he’d thought his life would be.

Someone slid onto a stool a few seats down and Mateo was there in a moment with his flirtatious smile. Aaron ducked his head to hide his amusement.

“What can I get you, stranger?” Mateo asked as he leaned forward.

“What do you recommend?” the man asked

“We have a stout just in called Fundamental Observation.”

The man laughed at that for a long moment before he sobered. It was the kind of laugh that made Aaron feel a little lighter just hearing it, full of life and humour.

“You might be a little late with that,” the man told him with wry amusement and Aaron couldn’t help but wonder what the story was. His business was people. Or at least it used to be. Finding out the things they wanted to stay hidden, even from themselves, was second nature by now.

“Well I’m sure I can find a way to make it up to you.”

“I might just take you up on that.”

A crowd entered just then, farm workers who moved straight to the bar. The man moved a few seats over to make room for them, so that he ended up next to Aaron.

“Aidan,” Aaron said, giving his assumed name.

“Tony.”

“Staying in town long?”

“Just the night,” Tony answered. “I’m on something of a road trip.”

“So, where you headed?” Aaron asked, trying to carefully feel out whether this man was a threat to him and Jack or not. Tony shrugged.
“Not so much headed somewhere as away from where I started.”

“Running from something?”

Tony gave him a wistful tilt to his mouth that wasn’t quite a smile.

“I’m with the Doctor on this. Once you start running, it’s difficult to stop.”

It was a reference Reid might have made, and a little too close to the truth for Aaron, and he looked away uncomfortably.

“Sorry,” Tony said after a pause, looking contrite. “I guess we’ve all got something we have trouble facing.”

Tony was quiet for a long moment as he absently ran a finger along the rim of his glass.

“You ever been to Utah?” he asked when he finally spoke again.

“Once or twice,” Aaron conceded, figuring that wasn’t enough information to be identifiable. It wasn’t exactly much of a clue as to who he was or what he did either way.

“Yeah, I’d been through with the job, but I’d never really stopped long enough to take a look around,” Tony told him with a faint smile that brightened his eyes. “Decided to take a swing through on my road trip. You see those rock formations in movies, but there’s nothing like seeing them in real life.”

“Didn’t get a chance to see them myself,” Aaron admitted, knowing that he’d focused too much on his job and, when it mattered, getting back to Haley. He’d been all around the States, but he hadn’t really taken time to see any of the sights. He wondered if things would have been different if he had. Somehow, he didn’t think so. He was who he was and no matter how much he’d tried, he couldn’t change that.

“Sometimes it takes leaving everything behind to see what’s really important.”

“Sometimes it’s too late to go back,” Aaron said softly, to which Tony leaned forward and tapped Aaron’s glass with his own. They bumped knees and Aaron didn’t say anything when Tony didn’t move away. It had been so long since he’d connected with someone else like this, so long since he’d taken any kind of comfort in someone.

“What started you on your journey?” Aaron continued, equally as interested as he was in drawing out information. Tony shrugged.

“I’m a city boy, born and raised; I realised I’d travelled from one end of the country to the other without seeing what it really had to offer. It’s easy to overlook something when you’re stuck looking in the wrong direction.”

It was clear he wasn’t talking about his travels any more, that his distant gaze had turned inward, and Aaron wondered if this was what he was running from.

“You ever been to Seattle?” Aaron asked him, fascinated by the way Tony’s eyes seem to shift with emotions that never seemed to settle too long. It made him difficult to read and Aaron figured if Tony really tried, it would be next to impossible.

“Once or twice,” Tony told him with a smirk that was distractingly attractive.
“There’s a bakery in the city centre that makes some of the best pastries I’ve ever had.”

“I’m headed in that direction. I’ll have to take a look when I get there.”

From there conversation seemed to flow easily and they talked about all the places they’d been. They didn’t go too deep into any serious topics and Aaron felt better, more settled, than he had in awhile. He was almost sad to see Tony finally reach for his wallet and throw a bill on the bar.

“I’m heading out,” Tony told him with a sly look. “If you want to join me, I’ll be waiting in the parking lot.”

Aaron watched him leave, gaze lingering until he was out the door, before turning to look at his phone. There was a message from Jack letting him know things were still all right and Aaron couldn’t help but smile at that. He really had lucked out in the kid department.

For a moment, Aaron considered how bad an idea it would be to give in to the desire coiled low in his stomach, before he tossed the last of his drink back. He briefly nodded to an unhappy Mateo and followed Tony out.

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Aaron lay in bed looking up at the ceiling as he waited for his breathing to slow and his heartbeat to settle. He glanced to the side when he felt the bed move and Tony shifted to swing his legs over the side and sit up, back to Aaron. There were marks that showed a lifetime of rough treatment; a scar that looked like a bullet crease on the arm, faint scars that looked years, if not decades, old and the slash of what looked like a knife wound across his shoulder. Aaron’s eyes trailed the curve of Tony’s spine as he reached down to pick up a shirt. He was a little embarrassed and a little surprised by how enticing he found the bruise he’d made at the base of Tony’s neck, just next to his spine.

“I can see myself out,” Tony told him as he pulled his shirt on over his head. He stood without turning to look at Aaron. Tony didn’t seem to expect better and Aaron felt like an asshole even so. One-night stands weren’t something he usually did. He’d barely dated outside of Haley and Beth and it had been months of knowing them before he’d even asked either out.

“Want some coffee?” Aaron found himself asking as he reached to the floor to grab his jeans while Tony did the same.

“Sure,” Tony said, shooting Aaron a surprised look. Aaron couldn’t help but notice the appreciative gaze that swept over him as he went to pull on his jeans. Grabbing a shirt and pulling it on, he lead Tony out of the room.

He’d brought Tony back to his place mostly because he couldn’t trust that the whole thing wasn’t an ambush he was walking all too blithely into, but he couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable watching the other man inspect his house like Aaron would a crime scene. Those kinds of skills were difficult to put aside, Aaron was all too aware of that.

“You have a son,” Tony said, not quite a question as his gaze rested on the school books at one end of the kitchen table then moved to the baseball and glove that had been absently thrown on a corner of the couch that could just be seen across the open plan room.

“James,” Aaron said, because there was little point in deliberately hiding information Tony could find out from anyone in town. “He’s almost eleven.”

“A real mathlete from the looks of it,” Tony said, turning to grin at him. Aaron was impressed that he could tell that from a glance at a few textbooks with colourful tabs and a worn glove. If things had
been different, he might have tried recruiting him for the FBI.

“He’s a good kid.”

Though he must have noticed it, Aaron appreciated that Tony didn’t comment on the lack of pictures with his wife in them. They’d been all over his home in DC, he wanted Jack to know who his mother was, but he couldn’t risk too many indicators of his real history.

As much as they were hiding and as casual as their encounter had been Aaron felt a kinship with the man he couldn’t quite explain. Perhaps it was because Tony wouldn’t be in town for more than a day and there was little point in keeping up appearances. Perhaps it was because they were both adrift, separated from everything they knew, for whatever reason. The world had worn them both down and they were just doing what they could now to make it through.

“Milk? Sugar?” Aaron asked, figuring that returning to the initial offer of coffee would move things away from topics they were both uncomfortable with.

“Both,” Tony said with a smile as he took the out. “And lots of it.”
Aaron rubbed at his forehead as he considered the loose pile of papers and slips that had been John’s system before Aaron had arrived in town. The room was quiet except for the scratch of Jack's pencil as he filled in his homework at the other side of the table and faint sounds of John's tinkering that drifted in from the workshop. John ran the garage every day of the week and Aaron usually spent at least part of Saturday working in the shop. He made sure Jack got his homework out of the way at the same time and then the rest of the weekend was theirs to do with as they pleased.

He’d fetched Jack from his friend on the way in and he’d been more relieved than he’d be willing to admit to find Jack healthy and happier than he’d been in weeks. It was almost worth the anxiety he’d suffered from the moment Jack left his sight.

“I'll be back in a moment, I just need to check something with John,” Aaron told Jack as he stood up. He squeezed Jack’s shoulder briefly as he passed and waited for Jack’s nod before he left the room. Aaron walked out into the work area and saw Tony leaning against one of the work benches, white T-shirt marked with sweat and dust. It took him a moment to gather himself and the other man’s face showed his surprise at seeing Aaron before his expression changed to a sly smile.

“Aidan,” he said, gaze sweeping over Aaron in a way that made him shift uncomfortably.

“I thought you’d left,” Aaron said, trying his best to sound unconcerned.

From everything Tony had said, Aaron assumed he’d be well on his way out of town by now. Suspicion coiled tightly in his gut and his skin prickled as he broke out into a cold sweat. What if the man really had been sent by Lewis and he just hadn’t had the opportunity to get to Jack last night too. He’d known the entire thing was a mistake before he’d even started it and he should have listened to his instincts.
“My car broke down,” Tony said with an aggrieved look. “I was hoping it would hold out until San Francisco but instead I got to walk 6 miles back into town.”

He seemed sincere, and everything about his body language was open and honest, but he could just be a very good liar or Lewis could have implanted a trigger he wasn’t even aware of. Aaron very carefully didn’t glance back at the door to the room where Jack was. He didn’t let himself move to stand between it and the other man as well. Either action would have been too clear an indication that there was something there he wanted to protect.

“Never had a chance to get my hands on a Chevelle Super Sport,” John said with a wide, anticipatory grin.

“She is a beauty,” Tony told him, matching John’s grin with his own.

“I’ll head out to tow her now,” John said. “Don’t worry. I’ll take excellent care of her.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Tony said, tossing his keys to John who caught them easily. “I guess you can find me at Driftwood Bed and Breakfast, if they’ll let me rent a room again.”

Tony glanced at Aaron once more and gave him a nod before he turned and walked out.

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It was almost a week later when Aaron saw him again and the time without any evidence that Tony was there on Lewis’s orders allowed him to relax just a little at the idea that he was staying in town for a while. Jack was an aisle over in the small convenience store looking at cereal while Aaron picked out healthier alternatives.

“Aidan,” a voice said, causing him to turn.

“Tony.”

“Just doing a little shopping,” Tony said, raising the basket in his hands a little as evidence. It was filled with things like crackers, peanut butter and fruit; things that could be snacked on without the need of a fridge, and he realised that staying long-term in a B&B without having planned for it was probably not the most convenient experience.

“I can see that,” Aaron said blandly, to which Tony responded with an undaunted smile.

“Sorry,” Tony told him after a moment’s hesitation, smile turning bashful.

“For?” Aaron asked, turning to give the man his full attention. Tony raised an eyebrow and gave Aaron a look that questioned just how intentionally blind he thought he was trying to be.

“I know you didn’t expect me to stick around. I didn’t exactly plan for it either.”

“It’s hardly something under your control,” Aaron told him with a shrug, though the suspicion still squirmed uncomfortably in the pit of his stomach, refusing to let him relax his guard.

“Still,” Tony said, stepping closer and lowering his voice. Aaron tamped down on his automatic response to the voice that reminded him too clearly of the evening they’d shared. “Having your one-night stand stay in town when he’s supposed to leave isn’t a comfortable situation for anyone involved.”

The smile Tony gave him was inviting and open and made Aaron want a part of that for himself in a
way that really wasn’t helpful in his current situation.

“We’re both adults,” Aaron told him, taking a step back, though Tony’s brief smirk showed he hadn’t entirely covered his reaction. “I’m sure we’ll manage.”

“Of course,” Tony said. “John’s ordered the part he needs, as I’m sure you know, so I shouldn’t be around for too much longer. Guess it was less difficult to stop running than I thought.”

“I’m not going to chase you out of town,” Aaron told him, unable to entirely hide his amusement. Tony smiled, the corners of his green eyes crinkling, and Aaron wanted him. He wanted him with a visceral need that none of the gentle, slow seductions of his previous relationships had made him feel.

“Dad?” Jack questioned and Aaron half-turned toward him, tensing at having the target of his conflicted suspicions in proximity to his son. Tony glanced at Jack briefly, before returning a steady gaze to Aaron. With a quick, two-fingered salute, Tony turned and walked away. Aaron watched him go for a moment before he rested a hand on Jack’s head and ruffled his hair.

“Decided what you wanted?” he asked his son who nodded, already dismissing the presence of the man his father had been talking to. Aaron would do anything to have cereal choices be Jack’s most pressing concern.

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A few days later, Aaron was standing out on the porch, looking out at the ocean as he sipped his coffee. John had taken the day to deal with some personal matters and given Aaron a day off too. Aaron had dropped Jack at school and then returned to the too quiet house, not entirely sure what to do with himself without having work to focus on or Jack there to monitor and protect.

Movement caught his eye in the otherwise serene landscape and he watched as a figure ran along the beach with the steady and sure stride of a practised runner. Each movement was economical but graceful and Aaron leaned on the railing to watch more closely as the figure drew nearer until he realised it was Tony and he scoffed to himself but didn’t look away. Tony’s steps faltered a little and he slowed to a walk as he looked around, sensing the attention. Aaron straightened when Tony’s gaze met his and waited as the man approached him.

“Despite appearances,” Tony began, stopping at the edge of the porch and looking up at Aaron. “I promise I’m not stalking you.”

“You’d be doing a rather poor job of it,” Aaron pointed out since he’d seen Tony long before the other man had seen him.

“That’s true,” Tony said, putting his forearms on the shoulder-height railing and resting his chin on them. “Maybe you’re stalking me.”

“You don’t seem too upset at the idea.”

“Devastated, really,” Tony said dryly, ruining it with a grin. Despite himself, Aaron smiled back. “You know, I think this is the longest I’ve stayed anywhere in months.”

Aaron wondered what had started him on his journey, what was so terrible that it had kept him moving, unable to settle, for months. His thoughts drifted to Gideon, who’d finally bowed under the pressure of their job and disappeared on his own journey. He could only hope Tony would come to a better end.
“So is this what you do all day?” Aaron asked, curious, as he moved to the steps and sat down. “Go on runs and take in the sights?”

“Sometimes,” Tony said, watching him for a moment before taking a seat next to him, elbows resting two steps behind them. “I pick up a bit of work here and there too.”

“A life of leisure?”

“Mid-life crisis maybe. I’m too old to realise I don’t know who I am,” Tony said, gaze shifting away from him to look at the gently breaking waves, expression pensive and closed off. Aaron thought he might understand, just a little bit. His work had been such a huge part of what defined him that he was feeling a little lost without it. That was probably one of the reasons why he was over-compensating with Jack, despite the circumstances. “I was tired of picking up the pieces of myself.”

Aaron wanted to push, to dig out the secrets and uncover the truths, but held himself in check.

“I’ve left more than a few pieces of myself strewn behind me,” Aaron admitted and tried not to think of Foyet and Lewis; Haley, Gideon, Greenaway, Reid, Morgan, all those he’d failed in one way or another. He didn’t falter when Tony’s piercing gaze shifted back to him, those shadowed eyes seeing more of him than he would have liked.

“Is that what you’re doing here?” Tony asked, sitting up and suddenly they were a lot closer. Aaron wanted to lie, wanted to tell him that it was, but he wasn’t really entirely sure he’d ever recover what he’d left behind in D.C. He felt the weight of a hand on his knee, warmth sinking in, and he looked down. He knew he should shrug off the comfort, put some distance between them, but instead he rested his hand over Tony’s and let him entwine their fingers.

“If there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s providing a distraction,” Tony told him, bright smile only a little bitter. Aaron tugged him closer and Tony raised his other hand to curl into the hair at the back of Aaron’s head.

“I thought you were finding out who are you,” Aaron said, because if there was one thing he’d learned about the other man during their brief encounters it was that he was anything but simple and one-dimensional. Tony frowned, pulling back a little, but Aaron reached out to trace his jaw and followed him when he moved back.

“Didn’t say I was making progress,” Tony said, but he’d stopped trying to pull away.

They were both too raw, too close, too vulnerable in so many ways for this to be anything like a good idea. Aaron had avoided close ties because of the danger it posed and his reasons for that hadn’t changed. Tony’s eyes searched his, reading the doubt there, and when he pulled back again, Aaron let him. As Aaron sat on the porch steps, letting the sound of the breaking waves soothe him, he decided that he was becoming far too familiar with the sight of Tony walking away.

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Aaron was spending his Sunday doing some fixes around the house, something he’d never really had the time to do before, not with the hours his job took up. He was replacing some of the porch railing and keeping an eye on Jack as he played on the beach, not too close to the water, not without Aaron there too. He’d already rewired his bedside lamp, treated the shower for mildew and even changed the kitchen light bulb. It felt good to be able to do something practical and constructive, the tasks letting him put aside, if not entirely forget, everything else that was going on.

He glanced up to check on Jack when his gaze was drawn to a now familiar figure running along the
beach. He’d seen Tony from a distance several times since that first one, usually in the morning but
sometimes in the evening as well, but they hadn’t interacted again.

The saw slowed in his hand as Tony approached the beach in front of the house and Aaron couldn’t
help but watch and wonder and want. Aaron swore suddenly, clutching at his bleeding hand as he
half cursed the pain, half his weakness and distraction.

“Dad?” Jack questioned, dropping down next to his father.

“You all right?” Tony asked a moment later, having been drawn by the commotion and following on
Jack’s heels.

“Fine,” Aaron said, lifting his good hand to see the extent of the damage. It didn’t look too bad, but
he needed to stop the bleeding.

“James, right?” Tony asked, turning to Jack. Jack glanced between Aaron and Tony before nodding
hesitantly. “Can you go fetch a towel for your dad?”

Aaron gave his son a nod and Jack rushed inside. Tony used the time to take Aaron’s hand in his and
inspect the wound and Aaron let him. He was so tired of holding himself apart, of carrying it all
alone. It was so much easier to just let someone else deal with things, just for a little while.

“You know, you really didn’t have to resort to bodily harm to get my attention,” Tony told him, his
hold firm but gentle.

“I’ll try to restrain myself next time,” Aaron said dryly and Tony grinned at him, clearly pleased that
Aaron was playing along.

“It doesn’t look like you’ll need stitches,” Tony said as Jack returned, handing a towel over quickly
which Tony wrapped around Aaron’s hand. “Have you had a tetanus shot recently?”

“I’m fine,” Aaron repeated.

“Need some help?” Tony asked, not rising from where he’d been kneeling.

“I can manage,” Aaron told him, but found himself reluctant to let Tony go. The more time that
passed, the more likely it seemed that Tony really was just a passer-through whose car had broken
down. If he was one of Lewis’s, he hadn’t reacted to either Aaron or Jack and he’d had plenty of
opportunity.

“I have some experience working with wood,” Tony told him with a waggle of his eyebrows and
Aaron’s steady gaze broke as he snorted softly. Jack glanced between them again and rolled his eyes,
then headed back inside so he didn’t have to watch his father flirting. Aaron ducked his head to hide
his amusement.

“I suppose I could use a hand,” he said with a faint smile. The surrender felt so easy, so right, almost
like it was victory instead.

“So where do you want me to start?” Tony asked, hands still holding Aaron’s.

...

Over the last week, Aaron had tried not to think too hard about the cut on his hand that was healing
nicely, or the feel of Tony’s hands on his skin, or the sound of his voice and the glint in his eyes
when he was teasing. He hadn’t succeeded very well at it and he knew himself well enough to know
that he hadn’t really wanted to in first place.

Aaron let his fingers pluck absently at the strings before he fell into a rhythm of a song that, while familiar, he couldn’t quite place. That morning Jack had asked him if he was ever going to play it and he’d put him off, but the thought wouldn’t leave him. There were things he’d held on to, some for longer than he’d any need to. What happened with Haley, the divorce and her murder, was one of those things.

“A policeman’s lot is not a happy one,” he heard Tony say and his fingers stilled as he looked up. It was clear that Tony had been on one of his runs again and Aaron squinted against the sun as he followed Tony’s progress up the porch steps.

“Pirates of Penzance,” he said, frowning. It was how he met Haley. He’d known from the moment he saw her that he wanted to marry her. Nothing since then had ever been as clear as that moment.

“I have a confession to make,” Tony said, drawing him out of his thoughts. “I might actually be stalking you a little.”

“Oh,” Aaron said without inflection. Tony’s smile in response was a little sheepish and Aaron really wished he wouldn’t look quite so endearing like that.

“When my car broke down, I was planning to leave town. I was leaving, just one stop of many, but for the first time in a long time, a part of me wanted to stay.”

Aaron was silent for a moment, knowing the pull Tony was talking about, the inexplicable kinship that Aaron couldn’t just shrug off no matter how hard he tried, but knowing equally that they couldn’t afford to indulge it.

“I can’t be what you want,” Aaron told him. Maybe Tony wasn’t one of Lewis’s – and Aaron had also questioned John about the legitimacy of Tony’s car trouble – but that didn’t mean Lewis wasn’t still a threat. To Jack and Aaron and, if Aaron let this continue, to Tony. That didn’t mean a part of him didn’t want Tony to stay.

“I’m still figuring out what that is,” Tony said with an easy shrug. Aaron envied the way Tony seemed to roll with the punches, how he seemed to adapt to whatever the situation threw at him. Aaron himself had always been rigid and unbending. He wondered how things might have turned out differently if he’d been just a little more like Tony. He wondered how they’d both ended up in the same place anyway. “Just do one thing for me.”

“What?”

“Dinner.”

“Tony...”

It worried Aaron that the first thought he had wasn’t that he couldn’t have dinner with Tony, couldn’t draw him closer into his life, but rather that he didn’t want to leave Jack alone, not even for an evening.

“We don’t have to go out,” Tony told him, interrupting his protest. “I don’t have access to a kitchen, you’d be doing me a favour.”

“I really can’t...”

“Great,” Tony said with a grin that told Aaron Tony wasn’t going to listen to anything he had to say.
“Don’t worry about anything. I’ll bring everything I need. Tomorrow at 6 o’clock.”

Tony spun around and had continued his run, throwing a wave goodbye over his shoulder, before Aaron could muster a response. He couldn’t deny there was a large part of him that was glad about that, even if he knew it was a bad idea. With a shake of his head, he returned his attention to his guitar. After a moment he began playing again and tried not to read too much into the fact that his fingers automatically started strumming the Beatles’ Here Comes the Sun.

...

As Aaron leaned against the door frame and watched Tony move around his kitchen like he owned it, refusing to let Aaron assist him, he couldn’t help but think of Dave. The two men shared an insistence on only the best when it came to their cooking. Tony might have been a little awkward around Jack to begin with, but once he commandeered him as his helper, everything had gone much more smoothly.

After some initial hesitation, Jack seemed to be flourishing under the attention, but then he was used to being surrounded by an extended family of people and Dave had had a similar way of dealing with him.

“Can you grate that for me, passerotto?” Tony asked nodding to a block of cheese and Jack jumped to follow his order. Tony glanced at Aaron as he peeled the tomatoes with deft movements. “I had to substitute some ingredients, but the store here simply doesn’t have the ones I need.”

Aaron smiled at the put upon tone, sure that just like with Dave there was little that was more frustrating than not being able to create the meal exactly as they wanted to. He could concede that the way Dave cooked did make it seem more like art than just food and Tony had the same flair.

“What does passerotto mean?” Jack asked as he swept what he’d grated so far into a bowl. “Uncle Da...”

Jack froze and looked to his father, while Aaron tensed and didn’t relax even when Jack cut himself off. He knew what Jack had been about to say, that Dave called him ‘cucciolo’, puppy, instead. Tony glanced between the two of them briefly, a faint frown creasing his forehead before his expression smoothed out and he smiled down at Jack as he shifted to chopping the tomatoes.

“It means little sparrow,” Tony told him, keeping his tone and expression light and friendly even as his gaze cut briefly to Aaron. “Stick with me, kid, and I will show you all you need to know about cooking. If nothing else, it’ll help you survive college.”

“I don’t want to have to think about that for a few more years,” Aaron said, glad to shift the attention away from the slip.

“James is a smart kid,” Tony told him, dropping the tomatoes in a pot he had simmering. “I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

Jack gave Tony a shy look and Aaron smiled faintly at the sight. It was so good to see that Jack could still be a kid, that their circumstances hadn’t weighed on him so much that he bowed under the pressure of it all. There wasn’t anything he wouldn’t, hadn’t, sacrificed to make sure Jack stayed that way.

“Now usually I’d have made my own lasagne, but we’ll have to stoop to the levels of store-bought this time,” Tony told Jack who giggled at the aggrieved tone. Aaron really wished he could introduce him to Dave. He had a feeling they’d fight over which way to do things and get on famously.
“Why don’t you get cleaned up while I put this in the oven?” Tony suggested and Jack nodded quickly before darting off.

“Thank you,” Aaron said, once Jack had left the room.

“For what?” Tony asked, surprised.

There were so many things he could say. Tony made him feel like he was part of the world again, not just existing in a limbo of anticipation for the moment when Lewis would find them again. For whatever reason, Tony didn’t question Aaron’s past, was as reluctant to bring it up as he was, but that had never become an issue between them. Tony made everything so much easier.

“Making me do this,” Aaron said, because he couldn’t say the rest without bringing up the very topics that they didn’t, that Aaron couldn’t, discuss.

“All it took was a little stalking and home invasion,” Tony said with a grin. “I’m pretty sure that’s not the usual way of these things.”

“I won’t tell if you don’t.”

Despite the potential awkwardness of their first encounter and the atypical way they’d gone about it, Aaron was having a good time. Better than he knew most first dates went. Tony was only in town until his car was fixed, maybe Aaron could let himself have this, just for a little while, just until then.

...  

“What do you know so far?” Aaron asked as he looked around the clearing that had been turned into a centre of operations. The sheriff had a map laid out across the hood of his truck and Tony stood at his shoulder, looking over it with a frown. He hadn’t spoken to Tony since the dinner, where they’d chatted and laughed over wine and lasagne. This man seemed entirely different with the way his sharp gaze focused on what the sheriff was showing him.

"Billy Parker’s been missing six hours. Last anyone knew he was headed to the Turner’s pond, but when his parents went to fetch him, he wasn’t there and the other kids said he’d never showed,” the sheriff told him. “We’ve searched the trails there but there’s no sign of him.”

“What’s his last known location?” Aaron asked, joining the other two at the map. He’d never let Jack go to the pond, not on his own, but it was a known spot for kids to gather on hot days.

“His mother last saw him heading out to what she thought was the pond. There’s a report of a child matching his description crossing the lane bordering the Morris farm,” the sheriff told him, pointing out the locations.

In a town this small it wasn’t a secret that Billy had become friendly with the new kid and Aaron was grateful he was being given more information than he might otherwise. Jack had wanted to help with the search but Aaron had left him with John at the garage. In exchange, Jack had made him promise to find his friend. Aaron wasn’t going to let his son down now.

“An eleven year old on fairly flat terrain, he could be as much as ten miles away,” Aaron said, tracing out a boundary with his finger.

“Your kid have anything to say on the matter?”

“Just that Billy mentioned a stream he liked to go to when the pond was too crowded. He didn’t know where it was,” Aaron said. The sheriff nodded gravely and circled several places on the map.
“We’ve got teams near these four.”

“We’ll take the last one,” Tony said, already slinging his backpack on his shoulder and grabbing one of the walkies.

“It’s getting late,” the sheriff told them. “You got flash lights?”

Aaron nodded, adjusting his own pack as he accepted a copy of the map from the sheriff with their search area highlighted. As soon as he’d known where he would be spending the foreseeable future, he’d made a point of investigating the area, so he knew the general location of basic landmarks.

The two set off in silence, breaking it only to call out Billy’s name every few meters. It was surprisingly easy to keep pace with Tony’s steady stride and the silence wasn’t entirely uncomfortable, even if Aaron felt the pressure of what he was hiding and everything he might have revealed.

“I happened to mention to the sheriff in passing that I used to be NCIS. He called me in when Billy’s parents reported him missing,” Tony said by way of explanation, when they were about a third of the way to the stream. His tone was deceptively casual but he refused to meet Aaron’s gaze. “I’ve never run search and rescue though, so there’s only so much support I could provide.”

“You have questions,” Aaron said, turning to look at Tony’s profile. Tony opened his mouth and then closed it again. He took a moment to clearly consider what he wanted to say before he responded.

“I already knew you were law enforcement,” Tony told him with a shrug. “You reach for a side-arm at your belt that isn’t there when you’re startled or feel under threat. You’re hyper-aware of your surroundings. You like to go through doors first and you check to make sure the area is clear before you can settle.”

Aaron was silent, not sure how to respond to that without digging himself in deeper.

“I don’t need to know your reasons,” Tony said.

“Tony...”

“This doesn’t change anything for me,” Tony told him. “But I can understand why it might change things for you.”

Aaron was silent again for a long moment.

“Let’s just find Billy,” he said finally. Tony nodded decisively.

“Agreed.”

When they came across the boy twenty minutes later and discovered he’d at least sprained, but likely broken, his ankle, Aaron was relieved for more than one reason. He looked at Tony over Billy’s head as they tended to him.

“I’ll let the sheriff know,” Tony said as he stood, raising the walkie and moving a few steps away. Aaron’s gaze followed him closely for a long moment before returning to the task at hand. If nothing else, Jack would be happy his friend was okay.

...
Aaron didn’t know why he was there. By the time they’d finished bringing Billy in and getting him and his parents under way to the nearest clinic, Jack had been settled down at John and his wife’s place and Aaron was hesitant to disturb him. He’d found himself at a loose end, so here he was, knocking on a glass door that looked over a small, neatly trimmed garden and, further down the slope, the beach.

He waited for a tense moment for the door to slide open, half hoping it would and half that he’d have an excuse to leave. As he was about to turn, disappointed and relieved in equal measure, a silhouette moved across the curtain and it was pulled to one side. Tony glanced at him only long enough to see who it was before he opened the door.

“Aidan,” Tony said, not concealing his surprise.

“I shouldn’t be here,” was what Aaron greeted him with. Tony’s response to that was a patiently amused look. “This is a terrible idea.”

“I don’t mind being a terrible influence,” Tony told him, smile widening as he stepped forward into Aaron’s space.

“You are the worst temptation.”

“I’ve been called worse,” Tony said, moving forward again until they were standing chest to chest.

Aaron stared at him for a long moment before he surged forward, raising a hand to cup the back of Tony’s head as he angled his mouth to Tony’s. A hand settled on his hip briefly, then tugged at his shirt, sliding against his skin.

“I’ve been thinking about this since that first night,” Aaron breathed against Tony’s mouth.

“You are an extremely frustrating model of restraint,” Tony murmured, running his hands up Aaron’s back and pulling him closer.

“I’ve been called worse,” Aaron said, kissing away his smile and edging him back into the room.
Aaron closed his eyes and let himself sink into the sensation of having someone in his arms after such a long time. Tony lay, sprawled against his side, and Aaron held him close, not letting him believe Aaron wanted him anywhere but where he was. Not after their first night together.

“You might not be the most stubborn man I’ve ever met,” Tony said with amusement colouring his voice. “But you might come close.”

There wasn’t much Aaron could say to that.

“Somehow I think you’re probably included in that list yourself.”

“Don’t tell anyone. You’ll ruin my reputation,” Tony said with a laugh.

“The one you’re trying to outgrow?” Aaron asked. He didn’t know the specifics of what that reputation might be, but he had seen hints of behaviours that had become automatic after years of use that Tony had clearly been trying to shed. The uncomfortable way Tony reacted to compliments, the way he sometimes filled silences with chatter but angled the conversation away from anything too personal.

“We all have our security blankets,” Tony said, pout clear in his voice. “Although you make a decent substitute.”

Aaron chuckled as Tony slung an arm across his chest and curled in closer to his side.

“So, something interesting happened...” Tony began before trailing off. Aaron made an inquisitive noise hoping it would prompt him to continue. “The sheriff asked me to consult while I’m in town.”

Aaron could feel Tony’s muscles tightening as he grew tense at the anticipation of Aaron’s reaction.
“Being around me... it’s not safe,” Aaron told him. He’d tried to avoid personal connections, kept himself as much apart from the town as he could, but Tony was warmth and comfort and everything Aaron couldn’t defend against.

“I’ve always been a little reckless,” Tony said and Aaron could feel his mouth curling into a smile against his shoulder. He couldn’t help but scoff at the thought.

“You play at being open and carefree,” Aaron said softly, tightening the arm he had wrapped around Tony when it seemed like the other man might pull away. “But I’ve met few people who plan their actions as much as you do.”

“You’re more observant than most.”

Aaron kept his silence at that comment, all too aware that Tony would read far more than he liked into any response he made. He’d been trained as a profiler, but he had a feeling Tony was naturally intuitive. As accepting of the situation as Tony was, Aaron was sure it was only a matter of time before the secrets became too much of a chasm between them.

... 

“Go home,” John told him when it approached his usual time to leave. Aaron hesitated. It had been a long week of long hours, with Aaron taking work home when he could. They were cutting the deadline to submit the tax records for the business fine as it was. If he took too long getting everything in order, John would be the one to suffer penalties and Aaron owed him too much for his help and the allowances he had made.

“I’ll make a plan,” Aaron said instead and reached for his phone. There were few people he could trust, most of those in DC, but perhaps an exception could be made.

“Aiden,” John said and he knew John was aware there was more to his situation than he’d told him, but also knew John would never pry.

“It’s fine,” Aaron told him, even as he dialed Tony’s number and stepped away to get some privacy.

“I was just thinking about you,” Tony said in a tone that made Aaron long to really be heading home.

“I need a favour.”

“Anything,” Tony said immediately and Aaron wished he could offer him more than he could right now. The truth at the very least. But no matter his own desires, Jack’s safety came first, and WitSec only worked when everyone kept their silence.

“I’m caught up with work and James is about to get out of school. I hate to ask, but I always meet him at the gate.”

“Just so you know, great as James is, kids hate me,” Tony told him. Aaron smiled a little to himself because he’d seen hints of Tony’s need to please people, something he’d clearly been taking the time to work on during his road trip, because it didn’t show up often and Tony usually tried to redirect his actions when he realised what he was doing. It wasn’t the sort of attitude kids responded to well.

“But you’ll do it?” Aaron prompted and chuckled when Tony sighed in resignation. “You’ll do fine.”

“I’ll make sure nothing happens to him,” Tony told him.
“I know. I trust you,” Aaron said, feeling a tension he’d grown so used to carrying he barely recognised it was there ease within him. “I trust you with James.”

They said their goodbyes and Aaron turned back to John who’d spent the time looking busy. He sent a quick message to Jack telling him to go with Tony so he wouldn’t worry when Aaron didn’t show up.

“How is your young man?” John asked and Aaron didn’t think he meant Jack. He flushed slightly and made a non-committal noise rather than respond and he caught a hint of John smiling as he turned away.

...

When Aaron finally got home that evening, it was to a feeling of contentment as he heard Jack giggle at something Tony said in a low tone. He didn’t feel too guilty slowing his pace and lingering outside the kitchen so he could overhear a little more of their conversation.

“I like it when you’re here,” Jack said and Aaron smiled faintly.

“Oh yeah,” Tony said and Aaron could hear the effort he was making to keep his tone casual.

“Why’s that?”

“Cause you make my dad happier.”

Aaron frowned at the fact Jack could tell the stress he’d been under, that it was ‘happier’ and not just uncategorically happy. He’d been doing everything he could to protect him from that, but Jack was growing up and he’d spent his entire childhood around profilers. Some of their perceptiveness was bound to rub off.

“I like being around too,” Tony said finally. “You and your dad make me happier too.”

A warmth suffused him at hearing that and the temptation to hold onto it and forget everything else, put aside all his other concerns, even if only for a moment, was almost breathtakingly strong.

“He needs someone to look after him,” Jack said, voice full of youthful earnestness and Aaron didn’t know whether to laugh or walk in there and interrupt them before they could get any further in dissecting him.

“He’s a lot of work, huh?” Tony asked and that was definitely humour in his tone. Aaron wiped a hand down his face and decided enough was enough. The last thing he needed was his kid and his lover teaming up against him. The mischief the two of them would surely get up to didn’t bear thinking about.

“So much,” Jack said just as Aaron walked into the room. The two were sitting at the table with what was left of the makings of banana splits around them. He wondered who had broken first; Jack at what would have been a rather blatant display of bribery, or Tony at what might have been some monumental nagging and puppy-dog eyes. Neither seemed too put out, so the possibility of them conspiring didn’t put him at ease at all. Tony didn’t seemed surprised and Aaron was embarrassed at having been caught out.

“How was your day?” he asked, pressing a kiss to the top of Jack’s head.

“Good,” Jack told him, looking up at him with a grin that had Aaron smiling back automatically.

“Tony helped me with my homework.”
Aaron sent a grateful look to Tony who shrugged and looked a little uncomfortable at the attention. “Have you had dinner?” he asked, not seeing any sign of dishes that might indicate they had.

“Not yet,” Tony told him, standing as Jack gathered his books to take them to his room. “I know you like to eat with James and I wasn’t sure when you’d be back.”

“Stay,” Aaron told him, moving closer and crowding Tony against the table.

“I don’t want to leave too late,” Tony said, even as he slid an arm around Aaron’s waist, drawing him closer. “The sheriff wanted me to look over some old cases in the morning.”

“Stay,” Aaron said again and Tony grinned.

“Well, when you put it like that.”

...

They’d unintentionally fallen into a routine for the few late nights Aaron had needed for John’s tax returns and Tony had somehow become a fixture during that time. The longer they were here, the longer he was around Tony, the less Aaron could help being drawn into letting Tony be part of their lives.

Aaron lay along the bench on his porch, drowsing in the late afternoon sun with Tony sprawled half on, half next to him. Jack was on the sand just in front of the porch seeing how big he could build a sandcastle. Aaron’s guitar leaned against the bench next to him, where he’d placed it when Tony decided he’d make a better resting spot than the other side of the bench.

“I didn’t know kids could be so exhausting,” Tony murmured, head pillowed on Aaron’s shoulder. Aaron smiled into Tony’s hair.

“Just be glad he’s long past being a newborn.”

“That might have been a deal breaker.”

“You’re good with him,” Aaron told him. They’d all spent most of the morning playing touch football with Jack responding well to Tony’s brand of distraction. He’d insisted on teaching Jack football before he was completely subsumed by baseball. While a bit over-dramatic, Aaron had more than welcomed Tony taking an interest in Jack. He’d known Jack hadn’t been sleeping well, but he’d tried to keep the worst of the situation away from him. He hadn’t realised how much Jack had been troubled until he’d seen him really let go.

“There’s a first time for everything, I guess,” Tony said with a little laugh that was partly self-deprecating.

Anything Aaron might say to that would just get brushed aside, he was sure. Tony might be working on himself, but changes didn’t happen over night. He settled for running his fingers through Tony’s hair and felt a sense of triumph that he carefully didn’t examine too closely or let slip when Tony sighed contentedly and relaxed fully against him.

“This isn’t the worst place I could have stopped,” Tony murmured finally, voice sounding distant and drowsy.

“Such a ringing endorsement,” Aaron teased, tugging lightly at his hair. Tony made a soft noise of protest.
“Well, it’s not the Grand Canyon. Or Vegas.”

“But it does have its own charm,” Aaron said. All things considered, he had enjoyed his time here despite being stressed by the circumstances surrounding it.

“I’m definitely not disputing that,” Tony said, reaching out to cover the hand resting on Aaron’s stomach. Aaron entwined their fingers and tried not to want too much or think about what the future might bring. They’d made no promises or assurances and Aaron couldn’t risk them even if they had.

Just because things had been quiet so far did not mean they would stay that way. In fact, Aaron was inclined to believe the quiet just meant Lewis was plotting more inventive and horrific ways to get to them. He still had nightmares about being in the man’s control, about doubting, even if only for a few moments, what was real and what wasn’t.

Gradually, Aaron let his eyes close and the sounds around them became distant. He could worry about everything else later, tomorrow, when it would all seem much more urgent again. He could take this moment, just this single one, for himself. There wouldn’t be any harm in that. Tony shifted against his side and he felt the light press of lips to his jaw.

“I love you,” Tony said softly on a sigh as though only half aware of the words escaping him before going still for a long moment and then finally settling back down again.

A distant sense of panic prickled at the back of his mind, but the warmth of the sun, the lull of the ocean waves and Tony’s presence at his side were all pulling him down. He breathed out and let them.

... 

After a week filled with doubt and self-recriminations, Aaron still hadn’t reached any conclusions. He rested his elbows on the porch railings and tried to still his clenching and unclenching fists as he watched Tony jog up the beach and head toward him.

“Aiden,” Tony said with a smile as he greeted him with a kiss. Aaron pulled him close for a moment, revelling in the feel of him, before letting him go. “I was hoping you’d be here.”

“Oh?”

“I always hope you’ll be here,” Tony said with a grin. Aaron smiled back, unable to help himself at Tony’s irrepressible nature. His smile faded and Tony’s did too, shifting to a concerned frown. The man must have noticed a difference in his behaviour, he was sure. Tony would have to be oblivious not to and he was anything but.

“Whatever you’re trying to sort out in your head, I can give you space if that’s what you need. I’m here when you’re ready to talk about it,” Tony told him, taking a step back and moving to lean on the rail next to him.

“I didn’t plan for this, for you,” Aaron said after a long moment, when he’d finally gathered his thoughts.

“Didn’t exactly plan for it myself,” Tony told him without judgement. He bumped Aaron’s shoulder and smiled at him a little. “This doesn’t have to be anything more than you want or need.”

Aaron was tempted to ask what Tony wanted and needed, but was all too aware that he wouldn’t get anything close to a real answer. Regardless of what Tony thought though, Aaron knew he deserved better, deserved honesty and commitment, and if circumstances had been different Aaron would have
offered them in less than the span of a heartbeat.

“There are things I haven’t told you,” Aaron said, trying to aim for a middle ground.

“I know,” Tony assured him. “It wasn’t difficult to realise that much.”

“If I could tell you more...”

The Marshals would never agree to it and Aaron couldn’t conscience dragging him into the whole Lewis mess anyway. Just the thought of what Lewis could do to Tony, the way he’d fracture and twist Tony’s vibrant and stubborn spirit, terrified him. Something in Aaron would irrevocably break to see it happen.

“I get it,” Tony said, voice gentle as he turned to look at Aaron with a soft smile. “We both went into this with our eyes open.”

“I’ve been selfish,” Aaron told him, turning and drawing Tony closer to him. “Even without the details, especially without them, you’re in danger.”

“I was a federal agent. I sleep with a gun under my pillow and I’m never without a knife. I’ll be careful.”

According to the Marshals, Lewis wasn’t close to finding him and, at their best estimate, wasn’t even in the country. Everything pointed at him and Jack, and those around them, being safe. There was a part of his mind though that he couldn’t silence, that couldn’t ignore the consequences if the Marshals were wrong, that knew Tony was so much more than a distraction.

“There aren’t any guarantees. Not for you, not for me. That isn’t special to whatever secrets you’re keeping, that’s just how it is,” Tony told him. “I’m not ignorant of the risks, I just think there’s more to consider.”

Aaron closed his eyes, leaned into Tony and let himself believe, if only for a moment, that this was all there was.

... 

Aaron breathed in the steam rising from his coffee cup as he wandered into the garage proper. He stopped short when he saw John working on Tony’s car. It took him a moment to realise it had been almost two months since Tony arrived in town. It didn’t feel that long, but then Tony made everything feel a little easier, seem a little simpler.

“Aidan,” John acknowledged as he rose from where he’d been bending over the engine. “The fuel injection kit arrived and I thought I’d start working on your young man’s Chevelle SS.”

“When?” Aaron asked, because there hadn’t been any deliveries in the last day or two.

“When what?” John asked distractedly as he wiped at his hands.

“When did it arrive?”

“Oh, about two weeks ago,” John said guilelessly and without hesitation. Aaron’s gaze was steady as he watched John’s reactions. “How is your young man?”

“Fine,” Aaron said automatically, wondering how he should even begin to address the situation.

“Didn’t think I could delay too much longer,” John told him as though he hadn’t left Tony stuck in
town for longer than necessary. Though Aaron couldn’t argue that he wasn’t conflicted by that.

“Why?”

“All that boy needed was a reason to stay. Figured it wouldn’t take long for one to be provided.”

Aaron flushed at having his love life manipulated by his employer. There was no way he was ever going to so much as mention this to anyone else. Especially not Tony.

“That really wasn’t necessary,” Aaron said, trying to remain firm and implacable. John scoffed.

“Didn’t see you so much as look twice at anyone until he walked into the garage. And he hasn’t called once to check my progress. Don’t think he cares much one way or the other,” John told him, raising an eyebrow.

Aaron dropped his head into his hand and sighed. As proud as John was of his actions, he likely wouldn’t see them from any other perspective, certainly not how other people might not be happy with him.

“Besides, you barely cracked a smile until he showed up,” John added. Aaron had no response to that and, when his phone rang, he gladly used the excuse to step away.

“Hopkins,” he answered.

“This is Marshal Nathan Kendall. We have reliable intel that Peter Lewis, aka Mr Scratch, is in the country,” the voice on the other end of the phone said without bothering with etiquette or platitudes and Aaron had to remind himself to breathe. He moved to the back room where his office was and closed the door behind him.

“Where? And how up-to-date is your information?” he demanded.

“Washington DC,” the Marshal said. “He’s targeting the BAU.”

“Is anyone hurt?”

“No,” Kendall said a little too quickly and there was something in his tone of voice that made Aaron sure there was information being kept from him that he should know.

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“You don’t need to know,” the Marshal said, sounding sympathetic.

“Given I can imagine a whole host of atrocious scenarios, I’m not sure that’s true,” Aaron said thinking of being in Lewis’s clutches, of the many truly terrible cases they’d dealt with, of Gideon’s body laid out before them.

“Reid was arrested,” Kendall conceded. “The BAU is confident that he’s innocent. They’re working to prove it.”

“How do his chances look?” Aaron asked, moving to his chair and sinking into it.

“Not good,” the Marshal admitted and Aaron hung his head, torn between wanting to help the team and knowing WitSec was the safest place for him and Jack. “Your team is doing everything they can.”

“I’m sure they are,” Aaron said absently as he tried to think through all the possible consequences of
his potential actions. In the end, it came down to trusting the team and trusting Emily to lead them well. He nodded to himself. “Thank you for telling me.”
Aaron had just checked in on Jack to make sure he sleeping peacefully and was about to go to bed himself when there was a knock at the door. He considered ignoring it, but knew that no one in town would be knocking on his door unless it was important. With a sigh, Aaron unlocked and pulled open the door only to see Tony standing there with his hands in his pockets and his usual bright smile, though it somehow didn’t seem quite so genuine.

“So, John says I can pick up my car tomorrow,” Tony said without preamble. Aaron stepped aside and gestured for Tony to enter.

“He mentioned he was working on it,” Aaron said as they went through to the living room.

“I wasn’t sure what you...” Tony began before trailing off. He turned away to look out the glass doors to the beach beyond. “It’s like being in a different world here, like nothing from before matters.”

Aaron remained silent as he watched Tony’s shifting expression in the reflection on the glass, wondering where he was going with those thoughts, what conclusions he had reached.

“We weren’t supposed to be anything serious or long-term, we weren’t supposed to be anything at all, but that’s not exactly how things turned out, is it?” Tony asked, still not turning around, not willing to risk being unceremoniously turned down.

Aaron’s heart thumped painfully in his chest, every instinct wanted to reach for Tony and pull him close and, if things had been different, he would have done exactly that, would have confessed the depth of the emotions he could barely begin to examine. But they weren’t. Lewis was a very real
threat and distance was the best protection Tony could have. Before he could speak and deny the tumult of emotions that made it difficult to think clearly, Tony turned finally and looked at Aaron with such open feeling that his breath caught. Tony moved forward then, calloused hands cradling his jaw and silencing him before he could even think to speak.

“I was engaged once,” Tony started, thumb brushing over Aaron’s lower lip when he opened his mouth to question him. “It didn’t end very well. She left me just before the wedding. I loved her and I thought I was going to marry her. I want you to understand this when I say I can see a forever with you that I couldn’t ever dream of with her.”

“Tony,” Aaron said, voice cracking. He paused gathering himself.

“Don’t,” Tony said, surging forward and kissing him fiercely, desperation and longing clear in the way his hands shook and his breath shuddered.

“I didn’t even realise how lonely and unhappy I was until I met you. That I’d been that way since long before I began my road trip,” Tony said, lips grazing Aaron’s cheek as he spoke. “But now I know what it’s like to have you, however briefly, there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do to keep you and Jack in my life.”

A tremor ripped through Aaron and he let himself fall into Tony’s embrace at those words, sincere and broken as they were.

“I can’t,” Aaron said, not sure if he meant he couldn’t let Tony stay or couldn’t let him leave. Both seemed equally true. He tried to unclench the hands that clutched at Tony’s shirt but couldn’t.

“Tell me you don’t want me here, in your life, and I’ll leave. You’ll never hear from me again,” Tony told him, pulling back enough that he could look Aaron in the eyes. He met Aaron’s gaze steadily and Aaron knew he would do exactly as he said if Aaron just said the words. He opened his mouth, ready to sacrifice this thing between them for Tony’s safety, but the words stuck in his throat and he couldn’t force them out of his mouth.

“If things were different,” he said finally and Tony pulled him in for another kiss, silencing him.

“Tony,” he managed when the other man finally let him breathe and Tony kissed him again. Despite everything, Aaron found himself smiling fondly at his persistence.

“Later,” Tony told him, fisting a hand in Aaron’s shirt and guiding him back toward his bedroom.

When Aaron woke it was to the warmth of the sun against his back, the stripe of his lower back where his T-shirt had ridden up uncomfortably hot. He took a long moment to just breathe in the smell of the sea air and slowly blink his eyes open. The other side of the bed was rumpled but empty and, when Aaron reached across, the warmth had leached out of it. Tony was gone, likely had been for hours. His clothes were gone from where they’d flung them last night.

Aaron closed his eyes again and buried his face in his pillow. Tony was gone and he didn’t know how to feel about that. It was what he’d wanted, or thought he wanted, but faced with the reality of it, he wasn’t sure he could deal with it.

He hadn’t realised how much he’d gotten used to Tony’s presence until he was faced with the prospect of not having it. He’d come to rely on Tony’s humour and easy companionship to make everything seem a little less dire, to remind him that the things he wanted were still worth fighting for. That there could be something left for him when this was all over. But that wasn’t true any more.
Now that the choice had been taken away from him, now that Tony had done as Aaron couldn’t bring himself to ask and left, Aaron could acknowledge that the depths of his grief could only be because he loved Tony. He loved Tony and had lied to himself in a futile attempt to save himself the pain of losing him.

If he were in DC he could change this, he could bring to bear the full resources of the FBI, or at least Garcia, to track down Tony. But he couldn’t do that now. Even discrete inquiries would draw attention to him and Jack that they couldn’t afford. And who knew how long this thing with Lewis would last and where Tony would be when it did finally end. And it had to. Aaron had to believe it would.

There was no going back. Either way though, Tony was lost to him and it was his own fault. He knew he wouldn’t easily be able to forgive himself for that. Jack and Tony had been the only reasons he’d held himself together as well as he had. Without them he knew he’d be wallowing in feeling helpless and useless against the serial killer who’d already taken him and had threatened his son.

“Dad?” Jack asked softly and Aaron raised his head, pulling himself together for Jack, and pasted on a smile that he hoped would put Jack at ease, if not entirely fool him. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” Aaron said, moving to sit up. Jack came closer and climbed into the bed, curling up against his side. Aaron wrapped an arm around his shoulders and held him close. “You don’t need to worry about me.”

Jack snorted and Aaron didn’t need to see his face to know he’d probably rolled his eyes too. It looked like Jack was well and truly ready to embrace being a teenager and Aaron pressed a kiss to the top of his head while he could still get away with it.

“I got up to get some water in the middle of the night and I saw Tony,” Jack told him softly. Aaron’s breath caught at those words. “He said he had to leave.”

“Did he say anything else?” Aaron asked, trying valiantly to keep his voice even so he didn’t worry Jack.

“Just that we wouldn’t be able to contact him because he had to get rid of his phone,” Jack said. “That it wouldn’t be safe to keep it once he left.”

Aaron’s heart skipped a beat at that, but he breathed in slowly and out again. Tony was extremely intuitive, Aaron knew that. He could pick up details with very little prompting. Aaron just hadn’t realised how much Tony had been able to work out. He couldn’t help the brief moment of doubt before he realised how ridiculous it was. Even after Aaron had all but rejected that heartfelt confession, there was no part of Aaron that believed Tony would consider hurting him or Jack. There might be a lot they didn’t know about each other but Aaron knew him better than that.

“Was that all?” Aaron asked.

“He said he had something important to do. That he didn’t want to go but he didn’t have a choice,” Jack said, turning to look up at Aaron. His mouth was pulled down in a frown and his eyes were a little red, but it was clear he was trying to be strong at the loss of another person from his life. Aaron was grateful that Tony had spared Jack the truth, that his leaving was Aaron’s fault. If Aaron had taught him nothing else, Jack at least understood duty.

“He cares about us, he wouldn’t leave if he had any choice,” Aaron told him, hating himself even as he said the words.
It had been months since Tony had left and things weren’t all that different from before he’d arrived. The house was quiet and solemn, with little of the laughter that Tony seemed to naturally engender around him. Jack was back to giving him the shortest answer he could. The main difference was the way John seemed to watch over Aaron more closely in the first few weeks after Tony was gone.

“Dad!” Jack yelled and Aaron looked up from his book, wondering what the panic was about. “Come quick!”

Jack appeared at the glass door and then raced over to pull at Aaron’s arm. Aaron let himself be dragged up from the porch bench and followed Jack inside where the TV was on a news channel.

“What’s going on?” he asked, because news wasn’t exactly one of the things Jack usually watched.

“Just watch,” Jack insisted, so Aaron did.

The anchorman rambled on a little before saying they were cutting to the scene of an FBI raid that had gone awry. The screen then switched from an aerial view of the scene to a cameraman on the ground as the reporter talked. Both views showed what was clearly a crime scene, police lights flashing as personnel moved purposefully around the scene.

“Earlier tonight, the FBI raided a warehouse in the District,” the reporter said as the cameraman panned across the scene.

“There,” Jack said, pressing a finger to the screen and looking at Aaron with wide eyes. It took less than a second for Aaron to see what his son had; Tony. Tony in a tactical vest with FBI emblazoned across it. Tony sitting in the back of an ambulance looking equally aggravated and pleased as the EMTs looked over a head wound that didn’t appear to be too serious. Aaron’s breath caught when he saw Emily wheeled by on a gurney and loaded into another ambulance. She seemed conscious and alert though as Rossi followed the gurney, deep in conversation with her. A little further away,
he could just make out Reid and another agent he didn’t recognise watching the scene.

“Two agents were wounded in the course of confronting the suspect, but neither sustained significant injuries,” the reporter continued.

Tony had told Jack that he had something important to do, but Aaron had thought that was just something he’d said to make his leaving easier on Jack. He hadn’t suspected anything close to this.

When the camera caught a brief glimpse of the unsub before the body bag was zipped closed, Aaron sank onto the couch, his legs unable to hold him up any longer. It hadn’t been that long of a look, but he was certain it was Lewis. That face had joined Foyet’s in haunting his nightmares and would continue to until Aaron took his last breath.

“Is it over?” Jack asked, unable to look away. Aaron found himself in a similar predicament, caught between desperate hope and the desire to ruthlessly temper it with something more logical.

“I think so,” he said. The Marshals would tell them when they’d verified the information and determined the threat was over. Until then, all he and Jack could do was wait.

...

It had been the better part of a week since the news of Lewis’s death had broken; five days since the Marshals had contacted him and let him know that, barring the tying up of loose ends, it was over and he could return to his life or stay without their protection, and Aaron was driving himself to distraction trying to decide where to go from there. The knock at the door was an interruption he would gladly take.

“Tony,” he breathed when he opened the door. He’d seldom seen anything better looking than Tony standing there, jacket flung over his arm, rumpled shirt unbuttoned at the top, and tie stuffed into his pocket. It was more than Aaron had dreamed. He’d had plans to beg, cajole and demand Tony’s location from the team at the first opportunity, but this meant he and Tony were, if not on the same page, then at least on the same chapter.

“We wanted to make sure Lewis didn’t have any minions lying in wait. I took the first flight I could,” Tony said with a smile that didn’t quite hide his insecurity as he shifted in place, arms folded across his chest defensively. “I haven’t showered in two days and I can’t remember the last time I slept.”

“I didn’t think I’d see you again,” Aaron said, although his hope had been a desperate, clawing thing that he hadn’t even tried to ignore.

“Wasn’t entirely sure you wanted to, but I had to at least fight for the chance,” Tony admitted, rubbing the back of his neck, like he still wasn’t sure what Aaron’s reception would be and Aaron couldn’t exactly blame him. “FBI’s been after me for years. Working with your team to get Lewis was my condition for signing up.”

“Some fight.”

Aaron might not know any of the details, but he knew Tony was NCIS before his road trip. Something had happened to set him on his journey, something that hadn’t made him so much as consider the FBI until he’d met Aaron. He wasn’t sure how guilty he should feel about being such a huge factor in that decision, if he should feel that way at all.

“Oh no, look what you’ve done,” Tony said, stepping forward before holding himself in check again. “I said I’d do anything for you and Jack.”
“I never doubted your word,” Aaron told him, quietly, insistently. Even if he had, what Tony had done dwarfed any possibility of doubt. “And nothing I could do would ever be enough to thank you.”

“I can think of a few ways you could try,” Tony said with a bright grin, though it faltered before becoming fixed and Aaron realised Tony still didn’t know how he felt. He moved forward then, bringing a hand up to Tony’s cheek and stroking the contour of his cheekbone until the smile fell and Tony’s gaze darted away from his.

“As gestures go, I can’t think of anything more spectacular than what you’ve done,” Aaron said, leaning in closer until he could feel Tony’s exhale brush lightly across his skin. “But I could spend the rest of our lives trying to think of something that might match it.”

“Yeah?” Tony asked, smiling again but more genuinely and Aaron smiled back.

He’d known Haley was his from the moment he laid eyes on her and not doubted that for a moment, not even as their relationship fell apart around him. It had taken a little longer with Tony, or at least it had taken Aaron longer to admit it, but his feelings were no less true.

“I don’t know your full name,” Aaron said.

“Anthony Dominic DiNozzo,” Tony interrupted quickly, barely a moment after Aaron had the words out.

“Or where you’re from.”

“New York, originally.”

Aaron smiled a little at Tony’s swift replies.

“Or why you chose to join law enforcement.”

“Because everyone deserves a chance to be saved.”

“But I know the things that matter. I know you’re strong and brave and loyal. I know you use humour as a weapon as much as a shield. I know you’ve been hurt but haven’t let that turn you bitter. I know I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Tony told him, releasing a tremulous breath. Aaron pressed his lips to Tony’s in a soft kiss, just a light brush before he rested his forehead against Tony’s.

“I don’t know what your plans are now,” Tony said in a rush, “but we can find a way to make this work. You want to stay here and I’ll visit every weekend and holiday. You want back in with the FBI, I’ll stay in DC, cancel my transfer to LA. If you want a fresh start, the LA office has an opening for White Collar Unit Chief. As long as you’re with me, I don’t care about the details.”

“We can make a plan,” Aaron said with absolute certainty. Whatever it took, they’d find a way. Tony had a way of making things fall into place and Aaron was willing to more than meet him halfway. “When you left, I realised how much a part of my life you’d become. A part I’m not willing to do without. When I saw you on the news, I knew I had to make you understand that too. Which is why I went out the next morning to get these.”

Aaron reached into his shirt pocket for the rings he’d been keeping there as a promise to make things right. They were plain and unadorned, but he knew that that would suit them both better than something fancier. They weren’t anything to write home about, just something he’d picked up from
one of the local artists. He took Tony’s left hand in both of his and met Tony’s wide eyes.

“I was going to track you down and get on my knees and beg if I had to, but you always seem to
break expectations,” Aaron told him.

“It’s what I live for,” Tony murmured, gaze fixed on the ring Aaron slid onto his finger and the
matching one Aaron slid onto his own.

“So that’s a yes?”

“I don’t think you actually asked,” Tony said with a warm laugh and, as calm and collected as Aaron
could be on the job, he never seemed to do things the right way away from it. It was always too
much or not enough, but Tony was looking at him like none of that came close to mattering. “But,
always.”

Aaron pulled him into a kiss, swearing to himself as he did so that he wouldn’t take for granted the
feel of this man in his arms. He was sure that whatever the future held, they’d find a way to navigate
it together, all three of them, because nothing else mattered.

End Notes

This was the first time I've participated in a challenge like this and I want to thank everyone
involved because it's been a really fun experience from start to finish. With special thanks to
SpencnerTibbsLuvr for the awesome inspiration and the mods for their hard work and for
answering all my questions.

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