Teen Spirit

by LoveChilde

Summary

They’ve learned to expect the unexpected, but this was something new. When an unexpected twist leaves only Agent Rossi above the legal driving age, the team races against time to solve the case and restore their old(er) selves. Gen, case fic, no pairings, supernatural overtones

Notes

Ladywolf asked me for a fic, and somewhere as we brainstormed ideas it stopped being silly crackfic and turned into something serious. I own no rights to Criminal Minds, the characters therein and anything else. Several characters from other shows might be mentioned later, I don't own them, either. No money being made. Set in the latter half of season 5, any and all episodes up to there are fair game.

Originally (and still) published on fanfiction.net. Feedback is very much appreciated.
Charmed?

It is never too late to have a happy childhood. ~Tom Robbins

"Well." Rossi looked around the room, closed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose and opened them again. The room didn't change. "Explain to me again what happened."

"We went out to check out the building the unsub used as a dump site, you know that." The police chief explained, "Your team went in first. There was a bright flash of light and when we came in we found- them. Like that. We brought them here. They, uh, appear to be unconscious."

"I can see that." There was a migraine coming on, really there was. "And there was nobody else there?"

"No sir." The police chief was about to say something else, when a new voice intruded on the conversation.

"Did anybody get the number on the truck that hit me?" A boy, maybe 14 if Rossi was any judge of children's ages, sat up and rubbed his head. "Shit. Rossi?" He looked around. "How's we get back here- and-" He touched his throat. "What the hell's wrong with my voice?"

"Morgan?" This was several kinds of impossible. "You know who I am?"

"You're Dave Rossi, we work together." The boy nodded. "It's 2010, we're in Missouri on a case, why do I sound funny?" He looked down. Then he looked up. Then down again, then to the left and the right, spotting the rest of- well, he assumed it was his team, because otherwise some crazy asshole had dressed a bunch of kids in their clothes. "What the FUCK is going on?"

"We were just trying to review that, actually. Chief Matthews says you entered the building?"

"Yeah. It was an abandoned building, you when where the dead kids had been found?" Four so far, three girls and a boy, all under the age of 13, all sexually assaulted and strangled. Rossi had stopped at the police station to set up with the rest of them started from the dump site. "There was some kind of smoke inside, and someone shouted something I didn't really get, I'm pretty sure it wasn't English, and then it all went very bright for a sec, then nothing and I woke up here." Morgan decided he'd best shut up, as his voice was freaking him out. The rest of it didn't bear thinking about, really. "Um, are those-?"

"I think so." Rossi nodded, sitting down. One of the girls- the dark haired one, so he guessed Emily- was stirring and sitting up as well, looking at them all strangely.

"Ugh. My head." She put her hand up to her hair and froze, feeling its newly goth-spiked 'do. "The hell?"

"Emily?" Morgan tried, frowning.

"Yeah." She looked from Rossi to him and did a double take that would've been hilarious in other circumstances. "Who're you?"

"Morgan. Em, look down a see."

She did, and Rossi could swear he saw the physical reaction as the fact of her own body- roughly Morgan's age, he guessed, maybe a bit older- hit her. "Shit- where are my b- what happened to us?"
She recognized this body, the feel of that hairdo, but why- and how? "Oh god. Are those-?" She gestured at the others, who were started to open their eyes.

"We think so." Rossi nodded.

"Huh. JJ was seriously cute as a kid."

"You can tell her that when she wakes up."

"Yeah. Maybe not."

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An hour later they were all awake, past the initial explanations and reassurances that they were all themselves, knew the year, the name of the president, what they'd learned in school and generally retained their complete memories up until that morning. The fact that they were all, for all intents and purposes, children, remained unexplained. Reid sat on a hard chair by the main conference table, swinging his legs and squinting. His contacts had disappeared somewhere, and his emergency glasses weren't the right prescription anymore. One of the cops had gone to try and find him a pair, since of course he remembered the relevant prescription from an earlier age. The others sat at the same conference table, more or less freaked out.

"I'm going to call Garcia in." Rossi started.

"Why?" Hotch, who was pretty sure he was about 15 now and was clearly having a hard time not being livid about it, spoke for the group.

"Because I'm going to need all hands on deck to find this unsub and undo what he did to you, and your ability to be in the field or conduct interrogations has pretty much been cut down to nothing." He needed a Tylenol, badly.

"We can continue with the profile, work from here, we don't need to drag Garcia out." Morgan said decisively.

"You're just worried she'll start cooing about what cute kids we all are." JJ snickered, a sound much better suited to her younger self than her adult persona. She appeared to be about 11, with her blond hair in a messy braid and unexpected freckles. That put her and Reid, who'd disappeared into the bathroom and reported he was roughly ten years and two months old when he returned, at the youngest range of the group, with Hotch and Prentiss roughly fifteen and Morgan fourteen or so.

"Oh, you're not? She'll take blackmail pictures."

"We still have an unsub to catch, people." With his voice not quite settled into an adult register, Hotch sounded less authoritative than usual. "I don't think there's a lot we can do about this tonight, though. Maybe we should sleep on this?"

"How are we going to explain this at the hotel, exactly?" Emily was more obviously upset by the change in all of them. The others were as well, but she was showing it more clearly.

"We haven't checked in yet and I didn't give them our ages. I hope they won't give us any trouble." JJ shrugged. "How're the locals taking it?"

"They're freaking out." There was no other way to describe it. "This isn't exactly anything that's happened before."
"We knew the unsub was using occult elements." Reid piped up, then made a face. "This sucks."
He cleared his throat, inwardly cursed the hated braces he'd been forced to wear at that age and
which were making a very unwelcome repeat appearance, and continued. "Anyway, the unsub was
using occult symbols and writing things on the victims' walls that looked like- well, spells, for lack
of a better word. D'you think maybe-"

"Magic, Reid? Seriously? Get real." Morgan crossed his arms and Prentiss scoffed, and Reid
hunched further into himself but didn't back down.

"I am getting real, Morgan." He protested. "Or can you think of another reason why we're all
kids?"

"We need to find him." Hotch said, frowning. "And make him undo this, however he did it. But we
should really sleep on it and get used to things again." They were all shorter, with a shorter reach
and shorter legs, and they'd already found themselves stumbling and walking into things. "Maybe
it's a temporary effect and we'll wake up normal." He didn't sound optimistic. Beyond everything
else, he was worried about Jack- he was fifteen now, but he still had his son to worry about. If they
couldn't undo this soon... They were all holding panic off, but only just. "Dave, can I have a word,
before you call Garcia?"

"Hotch, come on!" Morgan glared at him.

"No, he's right. We're going to need all the help we can get here, and I don't want to do this over the
phone." Hotch stood up. "Get your things, we'll leave in a few minutes." He tilted his head towards
another, smaller office, and Rossi followed him there. "Dave, this could be real, serious trouble."

"More trouble than it looks, you mean?" Rossi raised an eyebrow. He had an inkling of what Hotch
meant, but wanted to be sure. "How so?"

"We're assuming that the unsub did this- if he did this and it's not an elaborate shared hallucination
or something else entirely- to neutralize us."

"Yes."

"Then there's a reason we're all the ages we are. I mean, beyond the teenage hormones which are
already affecting us, and I've forgotten how intense this age is. Everything's a lot... sharper.
Harsher." he hated feeling so out of control. "But think of where we are now. Morgan's fourteen."
Hotch remembered Carl Buford and what he'd done, and Rossi had read the case file, despite still
having been retired at the time. "Reid's the age he was when his dad left. And- JJ was eleven when
her older sister killed herself. They were pretty close, she took it hard."

Rossi sucked in a breath through his teeth, and nodded. "I know what happened to Emily when she
was fifteen, but it's not my story to tell." He paused, his eyes narrowed a little. "What about you?"
Hotch shrugged, tight and distant, his face blank but it was clearly taking an effort. "Isn't your
brother fifteen years younger than you?"

"Yeah." One word, but it was enough. Rossi'd trained Hotch, knew him better than any of the
others. Enough that he could've guessed his reaction, knowing there was a new baby in the house
who might go through what he'd gone through. Rossi nodded.

"Ok. So if those memories surface, if you start to revert-

"We already are a bit, haven't you noticed?" Funny how he could sound so unlike himself one
moment, then entirely adult the next.
"Yeah. You're angrier, Morgan and Prentiss sullen and Reid's trying not to flinch away from people but it's not really working." This could be very bad. "He's trying to put you completely out of the picture."

"And if it lasts- if it doesn't go away by tomorrow, or the next day- if we never find him-" Hotch's voice wavered and he looked away, mortified at this lack of reserve he just couldn't control. Rossi squeezed his shoulder.

"We'll find him, and we'll get you all back to normal." He tried to sound confident of that. "I'll get Garcia here, she's, uh, good with kids. Better than I am, anyway." Through the glass doors he could see Prentiss and Morgan playing monkey in the middle with Reid's bag, and Reid did not look like a willing participant in the game. "Aw, hell." He glowered at Hotch, "Why are the pessimists always right?"

"They're usually like that, though. They'll settle down. We're still adults, Dave."

Somehow, neither one of them was reassured by that.

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"We're going to need to go shopping tomorrow." JJ said. They'd gathered in one of their hotel rooms- hers, since it was the largest, to review their situation and eat, having picked up some burgers on the way. "What I'm wearing is not age-appropriate, and nothing else I've brought with me fits anymore." It was true- she was wearing a shrunk-to-size skirt-suit, and heels, both appropriate for an FBI liaison but not for an 11 year old. In fact the only one of them who looked remotely comfortable was Morgan, in a sweater and blue jeans. "I don't even have anything to sleep in. I know we should concentrate on the case, but we need to…fit in better, I guess?"

"That and not wear the same clothes two days in a row." Emily nodded.

"Ok, we'll start with that tomorrow, I guess. Hell, you two are going to need adult supervision, aren't you?" Rossi looked over at JJ, on her bed, and at Reid who'd curled up on a couch, unusually quiet, and sighed. "Garcia's flying in early in the morning, she said she'll join us here for breakfast. I'm sure she'd love to help."

"That's what I'm afraid of." Morgan groaned, but he had to admit he'd need a clean shirt, and everything was too large for him. It was true he was pretty well developed, as an athlete, but he was still a good head shorter than his full adult height. "Let's- review the case, ok? I need a distraction."

"Good idea." Hotch needed a distraction as well. He was worried about the team, and about the case, and about himself. "We've profiled a white male aged 25-40. He's been killing kids, no gender preference, all four have been assaulted and strangled, and they were all found in the same building two days ago."

"M.E. said they didn't all die together- from what he's found, they died about a week apart over the past month." Morgan added. "And there are no missing kids in this area who fit the description, and no ID on the kids yet."

"We know it's not his primary site, just the dump site." Prentiss continued smoothly. Kids or not, they still functioned as a team. "Without an ID on the kids, creating a geographical profile for the abductions has been pretty much impossible so far."

"I had Garcia extend the search for missing children in the right age group to the surrounding
states." Hotch said. "We'll see what she had tomorrow morning."

"Speaking of the age group…Not to be morbid, but now, after today? Reid and I fit right in that group." It wasn't that JJ was worried, exactly, but it was something to keep in mind. Reid made a small, strangled noise in his corner, but when the others all looked at him he had his eyes closed and was doing his best to fade into the couch.

"Did you have anything to add, Reid?" Hotch asked, and the younger agent flinched and shook his head. "Ok…" There was something else going on there, but none of them were at their best so Hotch let it slide. "We should probably get to sleep. Long day tomorrow."

"I think we should double up tonight." Rossi said. "I know we're paying for six rooms, but just in case there's something going on here that we don't know about yet, with you guys," he barely stopped himself from saying 'kids', "I don't want anybody alone."

Reluctantly, Prentiss nodded. "Roomies, Jaje?"

"Yeah. Go get your bag?" Luckily the beds in their rooms were actually two singles put together, and could be separated. "We're gonna need a hand separating these. How're you guys splitting up?" That was a very good question. Rossi looked at Hotch, who shrugged.

"I'm old enough to have a room of my own." Rossi almost laughed at the stubborn look on his face.

"Yeah- you're with me, Hotch. Morgan and Reid, you two are together. No exceptions, Aaron, I'm sorry. If anything happens during the night you need to be with someone." At least he wasn't putting him in with other 'kids'.

"Fine." Hotch straightened his shoulders. "Ok. Let's get some sleep. If nothing changes over the night, we meet for breakfast at 7:30." He stood up. "Dave, I'll move my bag over to your room?"

"Yeah, here's the key." Rossi handed him the key card. "I'll be there in a sec. Morgan, can I have a word?" As Prentiss and Hotch went to collect their respective stuff, and JJ started tugging at the beds, trying to separate them, he drew Morgan away from them a little. "Be careful tonight, ok? No teasing." Morgan frowned, questioning, and Rossi nodded towards Reid, who was still on the couch, looking pretty lost. "Reid's too quiet. I don't know whether it's shock or what he was used to in terms of not drawing attention when he was younger, but just…be careful, ok?"

"I'm always careful." Morgan promised. He knew some of what things had been like for Reid at school, and the last thing he wanted to do was scare him.

"Ok, good." Rossi nodded. "Go get settled in, I'll check on you later." Morgan looked inclined to argue with that, so Rossi raised a palm to stop him. "I'm checking in on everybody tonight, got it? It's not because I don't think you can handle yourselves, but you have to agree it's a bit of a shock."

"You can say that again." Morgan pursed his lips. "What if we can't change back, Rossi? I mean, my mom might be happy to take me back, and I don't want to go through it all again. And the others don't have family that's up for this kind of thing, Hotch has Jack, and-"

"Derek, calm down. You'll all be fine. We'll catch the unsub and we'll fast-forward you back to adulthood. You'll be legal again in no time. We just need to focus, ok?" Rossi put a hand on his shoulder and ignored it when Morgan shrugged away from him, looking uncomfortable.

"It's a lot harder than I remember. Teens have a really hard time, don't they?"

"So I'm told, yeah. Fortunately it looks like we all forget it eventually. You will as well- again.\"
When we close this case." He hoped he sounded confident enough for both of them. "Go get your stuff and move to Reid's room, ok?" Morgan nodded and left, and Rossi helped JJ move the two beds apart. "You going to be ok tonight, kiddo?"

"Not really a kid, Rossi." She pointed out, but she was smiling a little. "I'll be ok, I think. It's freaking me out- I mean, how am I going to explain this to Will? I'm suddenly all of nine years older than our son? He didn't sign up for this." Her smile threatened to turn into something else entirely, and she sat down on the bed, looking at the carpet.

"Hey..." Rossi sat down next to her. "Don't think like that. We're going to get the guy who did this and you'll all be ok."

"We should look for missing adults." The words, very low and hesitant, made both Rossi and JJ look up sharply. Reid leaned back into the couch and adjusted the glasses the people at the police station had found for him.

"Why?" Staying very calm, Rossi didn't move but turned his full attention on Reid.

"If the unsub did this- to us, I mean- he could've done it before, to others. Maybe he wants to take away their power as adults, or he's too weak to subdue anyone bigger and stronger than a child. Maybe he's a sexual sadist who chooses adults but prefers to assault kids." Now that Reid noticed them listening to him he warmed up to the subject, growing more animated. "That could be why there are no missing kids- because they aren't kids."

"We'll definitely look into that tomorrow morning." JJ was grinning again as Rossi nodded. "Good work, Reid." The boy beamed at him. "Magic. I thought this was the FBI, and none of us are working X Files."

"Actually, the X Files department doesn't exist." Reid corrected him, sheepish. "I checked. Twice."

"You would." JJ giggled. "If it existed we wouldn't have been told anyway."

"Probably true." Rossi smiled at them both. "Reid, Morgan's in your room tonight, ok? If anything happens, call me immediately. Clear?"

"Uh huh." If Reid looked a little less pleased by the idea of sharing than Rossi'd expected, he at least didn't protest it. "I'll go there?"

"Yeah, go ahead." Rossi wanted a word with Emily, and caught her in the corridor as Reid started in the other direction. "Prentiss, hold on a moment." She stopped, giving him a guarded look. "Let's go back to your room for a moment." He didn't want to risk being overheard.

"What?" She asked as soon as the door closed behind them. She looked defensive and aggressive at the same time, her behavior perfectly matched to her younger body, but a far cry from her usual calm under pressure.

"You're fifteen, you said." He did her the favor of not pussy-footing around the issue. "What you told me, a few years ago- are you before or after that?"

Her defiance seemed to crumble and she took a moment to swallow hard before answering. "After. Really soon after, I think." She looked away. "It- I'm sore. Like I was right after. And it's really hard not to snap at people. I'm really scared, Dave." Admitting that cost her, Rossi knew, and he respected her courage.

"Will you bite my head off if I hug you?"
"N-no." He drew her into a hug, surprised that she let him and freaking out a little by how much shorter and slighter she was. "Those few weeks right after were hell. Really really bad." Her voice was muffled by his shirt.

"I'm sure. You'll be ok, Emily. We'll get him and you'll go back to normal, you all will. In the meantime, take an Advil so you can sleep." He kept holding her until she pulled away, not very long at all really but longer than she'd ever allowed. "Ok?"

"Yeah. I think. I'll be ok." She gave him a shaky smile. "I'll be nice to JJ, she doesn't deserve my moodiness."

"Good. Go to sleep, we'll all have clearer heads in the morning." God, how he hoped he was right.
In the room he was sharing with Reid, Morgan searched his bag for something reasonable to sleep in. Fortunately he had a few t-shirts that were now too large to wear outside, but just fine for sleep. He wondered whether he should offer two to JJ and Prentiss and decided against it. They probably had their own shirts that could be useful for this. "Kid? You ok in there?" He shouted at the closed bathroom door.

"Fine," Came the reply. "I'll be right out." In fact, Reid wasn't entirely fine. He was even clumsier than usual, kept missing whatever he was reaching for, and it was really frustrating him to be so damn short. He'd had several growth spurts as a teenager and even after, the last one right before he'd joined the BAU in fact, but at just past ten he was a fairly embarrassing 4'10". Plus, he'd managed to get soap in his eyes. Finally he was out of the shower, dry and dressed in shorts and an undershirt which hung down far enough to cover everything important- except the bruises. There was a reason Reid knew, to the day, how old he was; he remembered exactly the pattern, cause and development of each and every mark he carried, and some of them couldn't be covered without drawing attention to the fact that he was sleeping in a long sleeved shirt. He just hoped Morgan wouldn't notice or wouldn't care. Nobody else had cared, at the time- why would they now? It was the past.

He should've known better. He didn't even make it all the way from the bathroom to his bed before Morgan noticed. "Hold it, kid. You're hurt."

"I am?" Reid stopped, a deer-in-headlights look on his face. "Not really." He was silently begging Morgan not to make a big deal of this, but Morgan's never been good at hearing anything that's silent, and came over anyway. "It's nothing."

"Nothing?" What's that on your shoulder? And yours legs- what happened?" His shoulder's the worst, Reid knows, a black and purple bruise from where the corner of a locker almost cut into him when he'd been slammed against it. There'd been no blood but it was a close call. His shins bore the marks of multiple kicks from whoever shared his desk any given day, in almost every class. He'd learned not to react, because tattling was worse than anything. The shirt hid the few bruises around his ribs, which was just as well.

"Nothing happened, Morgan." He growled, and it sounded too much like a sulk for him to continue. A childish voice just wasn't suited to growling. "Look, you played football as a kid, right?"

"You know I did." Morgan crossed his arms.

"Ok, and think about it- are you bruised from it now? This is your body, how it was when you were fourteen, on a specific day. If you had bruises from playing then, you have them now." Reid watched the play of expressions on Morgan's face as he mentally checked himself out- disbelief, wariness, a flash of fear, and finally grudging agreement. "I'm in the same body now as I was
during my first year in high school, sometime in the second month of it. So you see, nothing happened. Not in the past fifteen years or so, anyway. Can I go to sleep now?"

"This is how you walked around, as a kid?" Morgan swore to himself that if they ever had a case in Las Vegas again he'd pay a visit to Reid's school and see if any of his teachers were still there, and give them a piece of his mind. "Damnit, Reid…" Reid shrugged.

"It's over, it happened, I've gotten over it." They both knew that was a lie. "Just…leave it alone." The way Morgan was looming over him brought back all those memories of those years at school, the outlet, it had felt like, for everybody's violent urges. He knew Morgan'd be hurt if Reid asked to switch rooms, but was starting not to care. He hated being this scared again, of anybody, and especially of someone who was supposed to be a friend.

"Ok. I'll let it go. For now." There wasn't much he could do about it anyway. Or actually…Morgan reached into his bag and tossed a tube of arnica cream on Reid's bed on his way to the shower.

"Here, put some of that on. It actually helps with bruising."

"Thanks. Why do you carry that around with you?" Reid opened the tube and sniffed carefully, then rubbed a small amount on his left shin. He couldn't feel any immediate relief, but arnica did take a while to work, so…

"Damage control. We get banged around a lot on this job, I'm sure you've noticed. It's part of my first aid kit." Morgan closed the door to the shower behind him, and leaned against the door, his hands shaking with anger and fatigue and something he didn't want to define, because he was not afraid, he was not freaking out.

He still couldn't shower with his eyes open. It had taken years before he'd been able to, back then. Before he'd been able to look at his own body with any sense of pride. Not until college, when he'd realized the girls could only see the athletic, successful man, not the damaged kid inside him. But back then, he couldn't bear to look at himself. Apparently, he still couldn't. He knew that if he opened his eyes he'd wonder what it was about his body, tallish and gangly and fourteen, damn you to hell, Buford that had attracted a grown man to do what he'd done to him. The same sense of choking shame that something about his face, his arms, his shoulders (he never thought below his neck, that way lay the real danger) had called out to the twisted man who'd taken him under more than just his wing. He knew Reid was right about the bruises, but the ones under his skin, the lasting tingle of ghost-fingers caressing him, touching him uninvited but unresisted, were the ones he felt most sharply. He recognized the physical remains of it in a way that threatened to make him rush to the toilet and lose his dinner, unable to contain anything more than the guilt and self hatred it had caused.

Somehow, he got through the shower and getting dressed again, glad that the mirror was fogged up, glad that his darker skin didn't show redness from scalding water and excess scrubbing. Even gladder that Reid appeared to be asleep when he came out. There was enough light from the parking lot outside coming in through the open window that he didn't turn on the light, to avoid waking him. When Rossi knocked on their door he could tell him that they were both ok, stretching the truth but not outright lying, and lock the door and get into bed. He had a lot more space, even in a single bed, than he'd had in years. Somehow there was no real pleasure in stretching out and not reaching the edge of the bed. Morgan reminded himself that he was an adult, that Carl Buford was in jail, and that in any case he was nowhere near Chicago, and in repeating those reminders over and over again, managed to fall asleep eventually.

Reid opened one eye and listened carefully. Finally, Morgan was asleep. The younger boy had resorted to pinching himself to stay awake until he was sure his roommate was fully out for the
count, and now he could finally relax. Friend or no friend, Reid remembered sharing rooms with his supposed friends on class trips. Falling asleep before they did usually led to getting his face painted with toothpaste or worse, and he wasn't about to risk it again. With a sigh, he turned over and let himself drift off, reciting equations in his head to unwind until sleep took over.

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Across the room from them JJ was fast asleep, and Emily was just settling down as the painkiller she'd taken finally started working. She hadn't even realized how much the constant ache put her on edge, affected her mood. She did not want to revisit the emotional rollercoaster of those days, but hell, at least she had some real support now, right? If nothing else, Rossi already knew, and even as a Catholic had reacted much better than her parents would have, or that priest they'd consulted with. She was on the edge of sleep when the chocked noises from the next bed drew her back to full awareness. She rolled out of bed and found JJ sobbing into her pillow, quietly but hard. "Jaje? Honey, what's wrong?" Was it the shock finally hitting her, or one of the normal nightmares? There was a reason they rarely doubled up during cases- most of them liked their privacy when they slept, to deal with whatever demons chose to attack at night alone. "JJ, wake up sweetie."

"'M awake." The young blonde said, hiccupping. "I'm sorry. I just- I heard you breathing and, and..." She became pretty incoherent for a while, and Emily sat down next to her and rubbed her back, making meaningless but comforting noises. "I thought you were my sister." JJ finally explained.

"I didn't know you had a sister."

"Ha-had being the- the operative word." JJ sniffled. "She d-died. When I was about the age I am now." She was silent for a moment, getting her breathing more or less back under control, before she added, biting the bullet, "She killed herself. I heard you breathing and in my dream she was still alive, you know? And I was so glad...And I woke up and you weren't her. I miss her, Emily, and I don't let it get to me usually, but it feels like it happened yesterday for some reason. I hate this." She turned over, her face stained with tears and snot, and Emily got up to get her some tissues. "I'm sorry for being like this."

"You shouldn't be. It's ok, it's natural to be sad." Emily wasn't exactly sure what to do now, but she let JJ dry her eyes and blow her nose, and poured her a glass of water and left her alone until it looked like the storm was temporarily over.

"I was devastated at the time, but it was twenty years ago...I guess to this body it feels a lot more recent." JJ sat up and hugged her knees to her chest, enjoying the flexibility of youth that allowed her to do it comfortably. "I just remembered her really vividly, I guess it all came crashing down together. Sorry for waking you."

"I wasn't asleep yet." Emily stretched and looked at the gap between their beds. "But we should try to get to sleep. Wanna push the beds back together?"

"Can we?" JJ looked absurdly grateful for the idea. "I'd like that. And we're too young for even Morgan to get ideas if we share."

"You are, maybe." Emily snorted. She didn't want to be there when her hormones started sparking with Morgan's- or worse, Hotch's. With a bit of shoving and pulling they got the beds together. Emily didn't protest when JJ reached out and held her hand. It sort of made her feel better as well.

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"You're not asleep." Rossi turned over to look at Hotch, who glared at him.

"Guess not."

"You should try, we're going to have a busy day tomorrow, and you need more sleep now than as an adult." Not that any of them needed a reminder, but Rossi thought they'd better get used to this new state of things, however long it lasted, as quickly as possible. It would save up on frustration and trouble later. As the only legal adult of the group he knew he'd have to take the lead with the locals now, and Hotch never did very well with having his authority threatened. In a way they were lucky he was at least as old or older than all the others.

"I didn't call Jack tonight." Hotch said, out of the blue. "I always do when I'm away, unless we're in the middle of confronting an unsub and I miss his bedtime." It was keeping him awake, beyond everything else, that thought of how the hell he could explain this to his son.

"You could've called, we had time." Rossi pointed out reasonably, and Hotch made a disbelieving sound.

"I don't even sound like myself. Not on the phone, either."

"You can tell him you have a cold. He'll just be happy to hear you- and you'll be happier calling him, too. Call him in the morning."

"You make it sound so easy." Hotch turned over and pulled a pillow over his head. "Good night, Dave."

"Night, Aaron." He knew Hotch would fight sleep off as long as he could, but it was his life and he had to let him – let all of them- retain as much independence as they could. Rossi kept Reid's suggestion about the case to himself- it would wait until morning, and he didn't want to distract Hotch with it now.

When Hotch jerked awake from a particularly unpleasant dream in which Jack was only one more victim on the current unsub's list, he glanced over at Rossi, feeling sick and clammy and frankly, awful. Rossi looked entirely peaceful. Hotch knew he was faking it, and was profoundly grateful as he lay back down and tried to get back to sleep. Almost two hours later, as false dawn was starting to lighten the sky, he managed it.
Shopping with Teens

Chapter Summary

The gang go shopping, and teen tempers start to run wild.

"Oh my god you are so adorable I could eat you!"

"Garcia, please-" Reid screwed his eyes shut as the technical analyst squealed over him, hunching away from her touch. "You're not helping."

"Aw, honey- are those braces? Dr. Reid, I never would've guessed. You are such a cutie, though." Crazy, magic-using killer and a transformed team aside, Penelope Garcia was enjoying this far, far too much. The others were giving her wary looks, aware that as soon as she exhausted her fascination with Reid she'd move on to them. Rossi cleared his throat.

"Garcia, we do have a case to work here- and this-" he indicated the rest of the team, "to undo."

"Really? Can't I keep them?" She looked suspiciously like she was about to pinch Reid's cheek, and he backed away from her slowly, then darted behind Prentiss, who laughed at him but didn't let Garcia get near him for the half hour that followed.

"Garcia!" Hotch's trademark glare wasn't as effective, but it still brought the techie up short, because it looked so damn weird on a face that didn't need to shave yet. "Concentrate. We're going to eat, and then we need to go shopping, apparently-" All three girls nodded enthusiastically, "And then we need to work the case. The faster we solve this, the better."

"You got that right." Morgan nodded. They'd all held on to a stubborn hope that they'd wake up normal, and when none of them did they were all depressed by that fact. Reid was even quieter than the previous evening, motioning for Rossi to share his insight with the group. Talking around older kids was risky, the conditioned knowledge of it was a lot more intense for him now, and he wanted to avoid it at all costs. Grown-ups might be easier, but still, it was a risk. He really hoped he wouldn't need to share a room with Morgan again tonight.

While they ate (they were all hungrier than they were used to for breakfast. JJ glanced down at her remarkably slender self, shrugged and added another bun and some cream cheese to her plate.), Rossi explained Reid's idea. "So you see, we need to age them up- you do have a program that does that, right? You've used it before."

"Yup. I'm pretty sure even the local PD has it. I'll start with that first thing, and start searching for missing adults that match the type. They could be any age?" Garcia had set herself between Morgan and Prentiss, mainly to keep them from arguing since they were both on edge and a little snappy. She was pretty sure that the decreed 'no coffee for anybody under 18' rule was part of the reason- if she didn't know Hotch any better she'd have said he was sulking about it.

"As far as we can tell, yes." Rossi nodded.

"Ok. And…did any of you hear the words the unsub used when you went into that building?" She asked. "I might know a few guys who could maybe help us with that."
"You might?" Hotch raised an eyebrow, and she looked away, a little embarrassed.

"I have contacts, let's just say, and some of them would prefer not to be directly involved in anything official, but they owe me a favor or three." She wasn't about to expose some of her friends to the FBI, especially since what they did wasn't always legal, sometimes involved collateral damage and at least one of those friends was, from an official standpoint at least, dead. "Anyway, if you can tell me the words he used I might be able to track down exactly what he did- and whether it was a limited spell or not." As she'd expected, that got them interested.

"It wasn't English." Morgan repeated his observation from the previous night.

"Sounded like Italian, so it might be that or Latin." Prentiss added. "I caught a word or two but nothing clear."

"Prettyboy, did you hear it?" Suddenly all eyes were on Reid, and he looked at them, wide eyed behind his glasses, his lower lip caught between his teeth. "Reid?" Morgan's voice was sharper and Reid jumped and visibly collected himself.

"I- uh, maybe. I don't want to repeat it though." He was talking to Garcia only, ignoring the others as well as he could. She was the safest person there, for the moment. "If it was a spell, I'm not sure what just blurtin it out might do."

"Yeah, I get that. Could you transcribe it for me?" Garcia found a pen and notepad in her bag and pushed it over. Reid scrawled several words then paused, frowning, and tore the page away. Still frowning, this time in concentration, he wrote more carefully, several long lines of words broken into couplets.

"This is everything I can recall. I'm not sure it's complete, and there's a good chance some of the words aren't spelled the way I heard them, even if it was Latin, and it did sound like it, but my Latin's a bit weak." He returned the notepad to Garcia and looked up to find that everyone was still looking at him, silently. "What?"

"You're still smarter than all of us, aren't you?" Morgan asked, exasperated. On Garcia's other side, Prentiss looked mournful. Reid honestly hoped the ground would open up and swallow him, despite the statistical improbability of it.

"Uh..." Of course he was still smart. In fact, as he was under 18 now his IQ score was a lot more relevant than it was to an adult, and he still had three PhD's (although he'd tried to see if he remembered everything earlier, and there were some parts of his memory he just couldn't access fully and that was terrifying in itself), and most of his adult memories...But he didn't want to mention that. "I guess." Was his final, lame response. Morgan reached across the table to ruffle his hair, and froze in midair when Reid gasped and shrunk back, fear clear in his eyes.

"We have work to do, people." Rossi broke the tension and Morgan's hand dropped, but he still looked a little freaked out, and Reid blinked and slipped away from the table without another word. Garcia went after him. "Let's see if we can get all your shopping done and get to the police station by ten, ok? We need to hurry this up, he probably knows that working this magic, whatever it really is, on the FBI will mean we have a lead on him now, and greater motivation to catch him. We have roadblocks on the exits from town, but off-road vehicles can get around them with a bit of effort. We can't let him disappear." It wasn't a very large town and they'd already been noticed-dead kids called a lot of media attention, and the case had made the 6 o'clock news and then every other news show the previous night. Fortunately the media hadn't mentioned the FBI yet, and so hadn't caught on to the fact that five of the six agents weren't old enough to drive anymore- yet.
"Yeah." Hotch nodded, but the mood around the table had taken a definite slump.

"Rossi- I- I didn't mean to-" Morgan started.

"I know you didn't. Even Reid knows. It's not your fault, Morgan. But we're all going to have to be a bit careful around each other until this is over." Rossi shrugged. "Go get everything you need from upstairs and we'll work out where I can take you shopping. We might want to drive out of town for this."

"There was an outlet shopping center we passed on the way in yesterday." Prentiss suggested. "It's a lot more anonymous, and a better variety too."

"You know, this is one thing I never thought I'd have to do, shopping with teenagers. Thought, hoped…" Rossi rubbed his face, already tired and it wasn't even eight yet. "Please don't go completely insane with it? Two changes each, three at most. Hopefully you'll be back to normal before we need them."

"I'll have to call Will at some point." JJ was clearly not pleased with that prospect. "Maybe I can get Garcia to explain it to him. He won't believe that I'm me." The rest of the night had passed without incident for her, but waking up with Prentiss and still eleven had been a little upsetting, and she was having a much harder time keeping her emotions under control.

"It can wait until later, if you think it won't worry him too much if you don't call immediately. Maybe after we have a few more answers it'd be easier to talk to him. If we're really lucky you'll all turn back by tonight." Rossi suggested.

"We're not that lucky, Dave. We never are."

"You're too young to be a pessimist, Aaron."

"I also have poor impulse control and really want to hit you for saying that."

"Hotch, you're smiling!" JJ squeaked.

"I am?" Hotch paused and considered that, then smiled a notch wider. "Guess I am."

"Good. Go get your stuff." Rossi shooed them all away from the table. He just hoped Garcia'd managed to catch up with Reid.

She had, mainly because he hadn't gone very far. She found him sitting on the steps outside the hotel, his elbows on his knees, staring at the ground. "Reid?" He didn't look up. "Can I sit down?"

He gave her a guarded look. "You don't need to ask. I'm not a witness and I'm definitely not a victim."

"Nope. But you shouldn't be sitting here alone, it's too cold for it." Garcia agreed quietly. "You know Morgan didn't mean to scare you, right?"

"Of course I know it." She could hear the barely-suppressed anger in his voice, see the coiled tension in his shoulders. "And I didn't mean to get scared. It just happened, I can't help it." He hadn't reacted that way to Morgan since exactly two months and three days after he'd joined the BAU, the first time Morgan had grabbed his arm before he managed to flinch away- seconds before Reid walked right off a mountain path and down into a ditch. That's when he'd realized that people grabbing you wasn't always bad. But that reaction was no longer hardwired into his brain, and avoiding contact at all costs was. "It'll just make me look even more like a freak."
No, sweetie. They know you can't help it. Besides, they're all used to you being a little weird, you know. I'm not sure how any of them would've handled it if you were just a normal kid who liked the Disney Channel and Little League." Garcia grinned at him, and Reid had to smile back, just a little, because that was really a ridiculous thought. "It would've been like some pod person had taken you over. Just don't pay them any attention, and they'll stop noticing it pretty soon."

"You...don't really know kids that well, do you Garcia?" There was no anger in his voice, just resignation. "Or you're trying to make me feel better, which I really appreciate." He smiled again. "I'll be ok. They can't be any worse than school was." He scowled. "And I have this irritating, nagging feeling I have to be at school right now." Routine had played a huge part of his childhood, his reaction to having a fairly messy home-life- if he couldn't hold himself to a schedule and a routine, nobody else would, so he'd taken care of it himself. That included waking up and feeding himself and making sure he got to school on time, no matter how much he hated it. "I keep thinking I'll miss the bus."

"Call it an unexpected holiday." Garcia put an arm around his shoulders and drew him to her, and he let her even though it was strange. He wasn't used to being smaller than she was, or to being hugged. After a moment he found he rather liked it. "C'mon, let's go get you all some clothes. I'm sure Derek's going to be a lot more careful with the sudden gestures now."

Reid wasn't, but he let it go and pulled away, so that when the others trooped out he and Garcia were sitting side by side on the steps. Morgan dropped Reid's coat in his lap. "There, kid. And Rossi has your bag."

"Thanks." It was an effort to look at Morgan directly, but he couldn't show any more fear than he already had. "We're leaving?"

"Yup." Prentiss beat Morgan to the answer and he glared at her. "Shopping time!"

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"Emily, you can't get all black!" Garcia almost wailed, looking at the pile of black shirts, black slacks, even black underwear that Emily was carrying towards the checkout, looking as determined as usual. "Come on, just one color, for me?"

"PG, I like black. I usually wear black, and I'm not going to change that now." The argument had been going on for a good fifteen minutes now, and JJ was slumped over by the changing rooms, her own pile of jeans, t-shirts and underthings next to her, bored out of her mind. "Black is stylish, it's mature, I still need to be respected." Prentiss had done her best to stay more or less professional and not go for any too-short skirts, torn looking shirts or studded jewelry, which is what she really wanted. "They're my clothes, I don't want colors. It's only for as long as we need them, right? Please let it go."

"It's such a shame, though. You could try to relax a little, let your hair down, explore new things..." Garcia tried again, only to encounter a glare that finally made her give up. "Ok, fine. Black, enjoy it, you get to go goth twice in a lifetime, most people don't manage that."

"Watch it, or I'll throw in the black nail polish and lipstick as well." Emily smirked. Garcia chuckled.

"Talk Rossi into paying for it, my sweet, and I'll help you put it on if you do the same for me."

Emily flashed a five dollar note. "Rossi doesn't have to pay for everything."
"For the last time, we are not buying a suit." On the other side of the large department store, Rossi was reaching the end of his rope.

"Why not?" Hotch glowered at him, hands on his hips. "I've worn a suit to work for the past twenty years, Dave, I'm not going to stop over- over all this."

"Aaron, I am not paying 300 dollars for a suit you're going to wear for less than a week if everything goes as it should!" Rossi tried to reason, even though the argument had already been ignored twice. "Pick out some nice jeans and a few shirts and let's get on with it." On the sidelines, Morgan and Reid looked from one of them to the other like spectators at a tennis match.

"Fine, you don't have to pay for it." Striving for patience, Hotch snarled through clenched teeth. "I have my own credit card."

"Yeah, and when you try to swipe it for that sort of money they'll want an ID, and d'you know something? Your photo doesn't look like you anymore. And the birth date on your ID? It's not 1995. So you can't use yours and you know it."

"But-"

"No!" Rossi shouted, and the other three all jumped. "No more arguing. Everyone picks two pairs of jeans and three shirts and some underwear and that is it!" He spun to face Reid, who clutched his pile of khaki trousers protectively. "That includes you, Spencer- if I hear another 'no' or 'but' out of any of you then so help me God I'm going to let Garcia pick all your shirts and your underwear!"

"Go to hell, Dave!" Hotch slammed his hand into an innocent shelf and stormed off out of the store, slamming the door behind him.

"Damnit. You two don't move." Rossi ran out after him, cursing himself, his team, the unsub and the day he ever agreed to return to the FBI.

"Huh. He should've let us have coffee." Reid said, blinking, and plopped down on the floor, leaning back against the wall. Morgan joined him, nodding.

"You ever seen Rossi get pissed off like that?"

"Don't think so. Ever seen Hotch lose it like that?"

"Uh…Well, after Foyet. And Haley." Morgan pointed out, and both kids were silent for a moment, lost in painful memories. "But over jeans? Nope. Hell, if he's flipping out, what does that mean about the rest of us?"

"That we can feel better about it when it happens to us?" Reid suggested, and Morgan laughed unexpectedly. "Our brains aren't developed enough for complete impulse control yet. And you, Hotch and Prentiss have puberty working against you. At least JJ and I are pretty rational…as far as prepubescent kids can be, with an adult set of memories behind them. On the downside, I can't reach the top shelf in the bathroom, and JJ has very little she can breastfeed with. Good thing Henry's on formula." He was rambling, talking just to talk, keeping Morgan distracted so they'd both not think about things too hard.

"Kid- you know I wasn't trying to hurt you earlier, right?" Morgan took advantage of Reid stopping to breathe. It had bothered him since breakfast and he wanted to set a few things straight. "I'm not a
bully. I wasn't back then, either." Sure he'd had a rough youth, but they'd lashed out against people their own age, older, never against little kids. "Hell, I was past most of the trouble by the time I got to the age I am now." Past the trouble with the law, anyway.

"I know that. I know you weren't going to hurt it. My mind knows it." Reid sighed. "My body's too used to keeping safe, though. And kids your age were the biggest threat to me when I started high school. They were the lowest on the food chain, other than me. Older kids just ignored me." Until he'd started taking classes with seniors the following year, at least. "I didn't mean to freak out."

"I didn't mean to freak you out." They had to at least try to maintain the adult relationships inside the team, to function like the well-oiled machine they were so they could solve this case. "I'll be more careful though. Remember, we're your family."

"Thanks." Reid smiled a little. "That goes both ways, though. If you need to talk, or...anything. I can listen just as well as I could yesterday morning."

"Thanks man." Morgan almost punched Reid's shoulder, but caught himself at the last second.

"Think Rossi was serious about jeans? I've never even owned a pair."

"Seriously? Come on, I'll help you choose. We do not want to let Garcia anywhere near our underwear, I'm not taking any risks."

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"If you kids are going to storm off every five minutes, I'd appreciate it if you keep taking turns doing it." Rossi was breathing hard by the time he caught up with Hotch, halfway across the parking lot- kid was fast, all things considered. "Have I mentioned I never wanted kids?"

"You didn't have to follow me." Hotch turned away from him, sullen, angry. "You can go away. I'd prefer it if you did."

"I didn't have to follow you, but I need everyone clear headed today. You need everyone clear headed, including yourself. So get all the angst out of your system now, and show a nice, mature, professional front when we get to the station later, got that? Otherwise one of them is going to call Strauss and we'll all be pulled off this case so fast our heads will spin, and probably sent back to high school- myself included, just because Erin's spiteful like that." Rossi took a deep breath. "Will you look at me when I'm talking to you? Your back is very hard to read." Actually, he was reading more from the way Hotch was holding himself than he could usually read from the man's face. Reluctantly, Hotch turned around. "I know you're pushing me, like you've pushed every authority figure until you finally became one. Remember I trained you."

"So?"

"So you don't need to push, Aaron. You're the Special Agent in Charge, you're team leader. I know it, you know it, and the rest of the team knows it. Out here, and at the hotel, yeah, maybe I take over more than you'd like. Maybe I make suggestions and don't expect an argument about each and every one."

Hotch snorted in disgust. "They aren't suggestions."

"Fine, maybe they're orders. I'm pulling rank, ok? Because I may be the only one in this group whose mind and body are more or less in synch, and I'm starting to wonder even about myself. It might be better for the case if we all went back to DC and let another team solve this."
"No!" Hotch wasn't yelling, he told himself. It just came out a lot louder than he'd intended. "This is our case, Dave! Our lives are at stake here. I'm not letting another team take over."

"Finally, we agree on something." Rossi breathed a sigh of relief. "Now, I'd have been happier if you hadn't just stomped your foot...Were you given to tantrums at that age, or are you really trying to see how much you have to act out before I hit you?"

He'd gone too far and he knew it as soon as the words were out. Hotch froze, went a little pale with shock, then he shut down entirely, a mask slipping over his features, but it was an imperfect mask. Rossi was shocked to see his eyes bright with tears. "I'll get the jeans."

"Aaron, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that, I was way out of line."

"You were." Hotch hugged himself, turning to he was standing sideways to Rossi, still able to see him but not looking at him head-on. His voice wasn't entirely steady, which Rossi tactfully ignored. "And you shouldn't have. Doesn't mean you weren't right. I shouldn't have lashed out like that."

"If it's any help, no matter how much you act out I will never, ever raise my hand to any of you."

He knew Hotch wouldn't believe him, not deep down, but hoped his adult mind would override the old tendencies not to trust any figure of authority. "When you're back to normal, though, we'll schedule a sparring session maybe."

"Dave, you're out of shape. I'll kick your ass." The start of a smile peeked out on Hotch's face, even though he still looked upset.

"Probably." Rossi shrugged. "You ready to go out there and be the team leader you know you are, no matter how tall you are?"

"I don't know." Hotch admitted. "The suit's part of the job. In jeans and a shirt I'm just a kid, you know? We need the locals to cooperate with us."

"Possession is nine tenths of the law, you know that. In our case, it's self-possession that matters. If we take ourselves seriously they'll be forced to do the same. That, or we'll tag-team them and bully them into letting us do our job." Rossi squeezed Hotch's shoulder. "We have leads, Aaron, it's more than we had yesterday. Have some faith."

"I'm angry. And I'm cranky, and it sucks." God, he was as bad as Jack without a nap. "I'll get jeans, and try not to argue so much." Then he finally looked at Rossi, and his eyes were dry. "And you stop profiling me, and don't ever mention my father again, until this is over at least. Just be my friend, Dave. Please?"

"I can do that, sure." Somehow Rossi thought that a hug would be even less welcome here than it would've been with Emily, so he didn't even ask. He'd already done more comforting of teens in 24 hours than in the past decade or so. There was a reason he let others deal with younger victims or suspects- he just didn't like children. But he loved his team like family, and if they needed a responsible adult, that's what he'd be. "Let's go back to the store, I'm pretty sure we just scared Reid and Morgan."

"Doesn't take much to scare Reid now." Hotch started walking back across the parking lot.

"No, guess not. But we all need to hold it together. We're a team, and a family. We can do this." Rossi cleared his throat. "You don't have to tell the others I said that."

"I won't." Hotch smiled a little. He wouldn't tell, but it made him feel better. Having someone to look out for always made him feel better- in fact, Sean being born had been a turning point for the
better in his life. For the first time he'd had someone to protect other than himself and his mother, and he found that protecting people gave him a purpose in life. That was what had started him towards law school- that and Haley. "Dave?"

"Yes Aaron?"

"Could we stop for coffee on the way to the police station? Pleeeease?"

"If you get a coffee everybody else is going to want one as well."

"Then let them. They're mentally old enough to make that call."

This was a test. "You know what? Ok. We'll stop for coffee. But if we end up with two pre-teens on a caffeine high, I'm putting you in charge of them both."

Hotch grinned. "Deal."
Police Chief Matthews was in a bit of a fix. For a start, it was the first time in a twenty year career in the police force that he faced something like four murdered kids at once, and only the third time in as many years that they'd had to call the FBI in. Beyond that, five of the six agents who'd shown up yesterday were now teenagers or younger, and that sort of thing- magic, shared mass hallucination, whatever it was- was entirely outside his area of familiarity. He'd been understanding the previous evening, after making sure they hadn't collectively gone insane or been drugged, had let them go to their hotel without even starting to do their job, had agreed to store their guns in the safe at the station (which was good, because the thought of kids with guns made him shudder, no matter that they were supposedly certified), and written the whole thing off as something that would surely be fixed by morning.

He hadn't expected them to troop back in around ten am and ask where they could set up and get to work. He definitely hadn't expected them to be serious about it.

"Chief, is this a joke?" Detective Rick Moreno, his right hand man for five years now, seemed to have some difficulties with it as well.

"No joke, Rick. They're the profilers we called in yesterday, believe me, I saw them come out of the plane. Two hours and a crime scene visit later, we have this." He gestured to where the one who'd stayed an adult, thank god, was helping the littlest of the group get maps up on the board. "They look like they know their business." In fact, they really did. The perky blonde woman who'd joined them that morning was setting up an elaborate network of three computers and many extra gadgets, while the others moved around her smoothly, setting up what they needed. "They haven't been recalled yet, and they do have a personal stake in this, I guess…” He looked at his crew, the full complement of ten cops of varying ranks and levels of experience. "We're going to give 'em the respect they deserve, people, and help them in any way we can. They're maybe the only ones who can solve these murders for us. Clear?"

There was a chorus of agreement, not particularly enthusiastic, and Chief Matthews privately resolved to keep an eye on his men, especially the younger ones, in case anybody decided harassing the Feds would be fun.

Beyond the glass wall, SSA Aaron Hotchner was watching his team as well. Under a spell or not, they moved like a practiced, experienced team, and only someone who knew them really well noticed the hesitation, the hitches in their behavior, the tiny interruptions in the flow. Garcia was about done setting up, with Morgan's help. JJ and Prentiss were going over missing persons reports state-wide, and Rossi and Reid had set up the board with maps and photos of the victims. But Morgan was restless, twitchy and constantly sneaking looks at the locals through the glass, and JJ
stopped every few minutes as if she couldn't quite remember what to do now. Emily was hunting and pecking at the keyboard, deleting mistakes and repeating lines. Reid was just not tall enough to reach the top of the board, and he seemed to still be a little subdued and quiet. For himself, Hotch felt almost naked in jeans and a hooded sweatshirt, and without a gun. He agreed with the others that it'd be best if none of them carried their firearms- for one thing, the photos on their credentials and gun permits no longer matched their faces, and for another, they'd all lost the muscle-memory that was in charge of operating the guns safely. Besides, they were inside the police station.

"Let's go over our plan." He called their attention to him, and was relieved when they all listened without an argument. He felt a lot better after that coffee, really. "Dave, I want you to go talk to the ME, see if he's pulled prints from the vics. If he hasn't, have him print them all." Dave was the only one who could do that, seeing as the ME hadn't been informed of their little problem, and they wanted to keep it that way. Children were rarely fingerprinted, so it was unusual to try and ID them by fingerprints, but if they were really adults then the prints would still match, with a few compensations for the aging of the skin and microscopic scarring on the fingertips that a lifetime of nicks and cuts caused.

"Ok, I'll start with him." Dave nodded.

"Good. Garcia, you're setting up the program to age the vics' photos up?"

"Yup. And my miniature muffin's helping me." Garcia grinned at Morgan, who gave her a long-suffering look.

"I'm not a miniature anything, baby girl. I'm all me."

"That you are, except your calling me 'baby girl' is suddenly a lot funnier. But I can't call you just a muffin, Derek, it makes me feel like a dirty old woman and I'm too young to be a cougar." She grinned at him and he forced a smile back. He was actually pleased she hadn't called him anything other than types of pastry all morning- he wasn't sure he could handle being called a hunk, a stud, or even reasonably handsome, not even by Garcia. Working with the computer made a good distraction.

"JJ, Prentiss, missing persons databases?"

"Blondes, male and female, all ages older than puberty." Prentiss nodded. "We're starting with the past month state-wide, since that's when the killings started as far as we can tell."

"Good. Look into similar incidents in other towns, even out of state if you don't find anything- dead kids that nobody's filed a missing report for, and adults that match the possible type."

"Will do. By the way, do you think there might be security cameras around the dump site? I mean, if he was there yesterday to cast that spell on us, they might've caught him." Prentiss rubbed her forehead with a wry smile. "Cast a spell...In my deepest goth days I never imagined I'd say that and mean it."

"None of us did." Hotch looked over at Reid, who was sitting cross legged on the table, surrounded by crime scene photos. "Reid?"

"Mm? Oh." Reid looked down. "I'm, uh, looking over the crime scene photos, the symbols and words on the walls and on the victims' bodies, I'll see if anything comes up in an online search for them." He swallowed hard, expecting some kind of negative reaction, and visibly relaxed when Hotch smiled and nodded.
"Great. I'll go talk to the locals, see what the evidence from the dump site looks like. Garcia, have you contacted those mysterious friends of yours?"

"Yup, emailed them from the car. I sent it out to several contacts who, well, they practice different styles. One of them might know what's going on." She was pretty sure at least one of them wouldn't answer at all, and Justin probably wouldn't be able to help, what he and his sibs did was too different. Bobby or Willow though, or maybe Jonas…They might help. "No idea when or even if I'll have an answer though."

"It'll have to do. Ok, let's get to work."

"Can I come with you and talk to the locals?" Morgan was restless, having skipped his morning run and feeling full of nervous energy. The coffee he'd had after Rossi relented on that point wasn't helping either.

"Sure, might help actually." Hotch nodded, and they both left.

"You guys don't get into any trouble, ok?" Rossi didn't wait for a reply before leaving as well. For about ten minutes the room was quiet, only the rustle of papers and the sounds of typing and clicking disturbing the silence.

"God damnit!" Emily pushed herself away from the desk and spun around in the office chair from the force of it. "Damnit, damnit, damnit!"

"Emily?" JJ jumped back, startled, and both Reid and Garcia looked up. Emily glared at the room in general.

"It's frustrating, ok? It's like my fingers have forgotten how to type. I'm so slow it's killing me." She was angry and frustrated and really enjoying swearing, which she didn't usually do.

"But your fingers have, essentially, forgotten how to type." Reid said from his perch on the table. She glared at him. "How often did you use a computer when you were 15?"

"Almost never." She admitted sullenly.

"Exactly. Typing is mostly muscle memory, and your brain isn't wired for it anymore. Or not yet, anyway. It's one of the things we'll have to re-learn."

"But my mind knows how to type." She insisted.

"Yeah, but in this case it's very much matter over mind. Like reloading and checking your gun isn't as natural and comfortable as breathing anyhow, and like we'd all be a danger to society if we tried to drive. Like not knowing how long your reach is, or tripping over your feet just because they're shorter and don't land where you planned." Obviously while lecturing Reid was a lot less shy.

"That's just you, Spencer." Prentiss drawled, even though she'd had a few near misses herself, "And not just as a kid."

"Come on, I'll do the typing." JJ intervened and took over the keyboard. Emily nudged her out of the way, maybe a little too hard. "Ow."

"Leave her alone!" Reid scrambled off the table and managed to trip himself, crash-landing on the floor. Emily snickered and even JJ had her hand to her mouth to hide a laugh.

"Graceful, Spencer. Proving your own theories?"
He frowned. "Stop calling me that." Emily almost never called him by his first name, even though by team ethics she could, and he used her first name about 40% of the time. The way she'd said it, however, had thrown him back to the days when his first name, used by everyone and anyone other than his mother, had been an insult.

"Why not? It's your name, Spencer." She drew it out, taunting. "You're too young to be called by your last name."

"Actually, last names were traditionally used for all children in the British school system, for example, even children as young as seven. You could go through your entire education and never know your schoolmates' given names, unless you were very close friends. So you see, calling me by my last name is entirely acceptable, even polite, and-" A rolled up ball of paper flew by his face, missing him by about a foot as Emily misjudged her aim and her reach. "Point on muscle memory, proven."

"No throwing things." Garcia didn't look up. "Ladies, come help me age our victims up if you're bored with databases, ok?"

"Fine." Prentiss groused, turning back to the computer. "But I can totally see why you got beaten up so much in school." She said it quietly, but Garcia's head jerked up sharply and JJ's horrified 'Emily!' showed it had carried to everyone in the room. Reid didn't react- if there was one thing school had taught him, it was never to show that words could hurt him, no matter how deeply they cut.

"I'll take over the databases." He said, moving to the computer. "The spell can wait until we get some answer from your contacts, right Garcia?"

"Right, Boy Wonder. Let's get to work."

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As they walked out of their own little bubble and Rossi veered off towards the morgue, Hotch felt like every eye in the room was on them, and he could hear the hushed whispers. They headed straight for the police chief, who also had the crime scene photos spread out.

"We wanted to go over the evidence with you." Hotch started when the older man finally turned his attention them. "What did the ME's report give us?"

"Four bodies, three females, one male. Raped, then strangled."

"Are we sure it was done in that order?" Morgan asked, and another wave of murmurs rose up behind them.

"As far as the ME could determine, yes." Chief Matthews nodded. "Bruises from some kind of handcuffs on their ankles, and from being grabbed on their wrists. One of the girls had skin under her fingernails, we sent it away for DNA analysis- we don't have a lab in town." He explained apologetically.

"Look at the marks on the boy, though." Morgan traced the photo with a finger. "Bruises, cuts, as well as symbols carved into him- that's a lot more violent than with the girls." The three girls had been lined up, naked but posed carefully, arms at their sides and their hair combed neatly. They also had symbols carved into their abdomens, but they weren't as deep, and looked like they'd been done with more care. The boy had been at the end on the line but thrown haphazardly, just dropped where he was, and he showed a lot more damage than the girls.
"With the girls there are signs of remorse or care." Hotch agreed. "With the boy, there's anger but still the meticulous work with the symbols." He looked at the Chief over his shoulder, "No trace evidence other than the skin?"

"Nothing. He used a condom and there were no hairs, no nothing. Not even footprints, and that place was dusty as hell."

"The words and symbols on the wall, what were they written in?"

"Standard black paint, the kind you can get in any store." The chief shrugged. Hotch pursed his lips, having hoped for something a little more exotic.

"He's organized, he's thought these out, I think." Morgan tilted his head, still studying the board. "One a week, all blondes, the youngest is what, eight?" And the oldest girl maybe thirteen. The middle one looked eerily similar to JJ as she looked now, and both Hotch and Morgan tried not to think about that. The boy was maybe ten or twelve as well. "He's sticking to a pretty narrow age group." He wondered how long he'd held them, and whether he'd done anything to them as adults before changing them. Weren't spells supposed to end when you died? They usually did in movies, but movies were all he had to go with here.

"Any idea on how long the unsub held them before they died?" Hotch asked.

"The ME wasn't certain, but he said at least a day and a half, without feeding them. Their stomachs were empty." Matthews replied.

Morgan hummed, narrowing his eyes. "I wonder where he grabbed them. That building was a dump site, he had to have somewhere private as his primary location, where nobody'd notice children…or abducted adults."

"You think he might've taken adults and done- well, whatever he did to you, did it to them? Like, those could be adults and not kids?" One of the locals asked behind them.

"We're considering it an option and looked at it, yes." Hotch replied and they both turned around to look at the man who'd spoken. He was relatively young, maybe in his late 20's, red headed and red faced but pleasant looking. "Given the circumstances, we have to."

"Detective Jeff Wallen." The man held out his hand. "And may I just say this situation? Is bizarre."

"Try living it." Morgan grinned and shook his hand, and several of the locals smiled back. Even as a youth he had charm. "Derek Morgan, and this is our unit chief."

Hotch introduced himself. The detective chuckled. "They recruit 'em young at the FBI, huh?"

"At least I was older yesterday." Hotch shrugged. "And if we can figure this out, I'll be older again tomorrow. Have any of you encountered any previous incidents in this area that involved occultism, things that tried to look mystical or were unexplainable as long as magic wasn't a viable option? I'm not saying it necessarily is, but if it is, having some background or earlier incidents will help us form a profile."

"We've had some kids scrawl inverted crosses on walls about six months ago." One of the police women in the back said. "But it was just vandalism, a few seniors having a prank war."

"We'll need their names just in case." Hotch took a mental note about that. "Anything else?" There was silence, and Detective Wallen finally broke it.
"I guess nothing that stands out, but I'll look at the bigger cases from the past few months and see if anything comes up."

"Great, thank you." Morgan was starting to fidget again at his side, and Hotch decided they'd better get back to their own work. "Ok, we're here if anything comes up. Hopefully we'll have a few things soon."

They returned to the room they'd been assigned. As they walked through the main bullpen, they could both hear a muttered 'some Feds', but Hotch's hand on Morgan's arm stopped him from reacting. It didn't stop him from getting angry.

"They're not worth a fight, Morgan." Hotch said quietly as soon as they were out of earshot. "We need their cooperation, just like they need ours. Let them talk, it doesn't matter."

"We can't work with them if they don't respect us." Morgan argued, his excess energy expanding with his slightly raised voice.

"Yelling won't add to their respect of us." Hotch reminded him, and Morgan subsided, not too gracefully. The room was fairly quiet now- Reid and JJ were both going over databases, while Garcia and Prentiss worked the photo manipulation equipment.

"I think we've got one!" Garcia jumped up from her chair. "Great timing, guys. Look- we aged one of the photos to about 30, and it matched a woman who's been missing four weeks." She showed them a photo of a blonde woman, smiling with a group of friends. "Went a step further, too- lucky for us she was sloppy with her Facebook account and had a few pics there of herself as a child. As far as I can tell she's a pretty good match." She lined up the crime scene photo with older, grainier scans she'd found. "If we get a fingerprint confirmation…"

"Is she in the system?" Hotch looked at the name of their possible victim- Marissa Sainjon, aged 32, from her Facebook account a librarian at a community college just out of town.

"Surprisingly, she is. I called Rossi and told him to try to get a match from the ME's office, they're hooked into the database there," Prentiss nodded. "We should be getting a call-" her phone buzzed, "Right now, actually. Prentiss. Hold on, I'll put you on speaker, we're all here."

"Fingerprints are a match to Marissa Sainjon, as far as the ME and the computer can determine. Very slight differences due to age but still enough markers for a clear match." Rossi reported. "Any luck with the other three?"

"Not yet, but at least we know our theory is at least partially correct." Hotch knew he should've been elated to have this breakthrough, but it only brought up more questions and complications. "Ok, Garcia, pull up everything you can find on her- and especially find her family."

"Oh God." JJ's face reflected what they all felt, "How are we going to explain it to her family? Or to the media? Somehow I don't think magic is going to make for a reasonable explanation. Oh God." She looked a lot closer to panic than he'd ever seen JJ when somebody's life wasn't on the line. "Hotch, I can't talk to families like this."

"Nobody's expecting you to, Jaje." Emily reassured her, and Hotch nodded.

"We'll have to rely on the locals for interviews; if they have a one way mirror we'll at least be able to watch them. As for explaining this to the families…"

"Lying to them isn't an option, is it?" Prentiss asked. "They deserve closure and they deserve justice. But…Can't we tell them we only found her clothes, or something, and not a body? Or that
there isn't enough left to recognize."

"And have them think something even worse happened to her?" Lying was definitely not an option. "No, we'll just have to edit the truth a little."

"Not necessarily that, even." Reid had sort of faded into the background, and they all jumped a little when he spoke.

"What do you mean?" Hotch frowned.

"If there's a- a way to counter the spell, if we find out what it is, through Garcia's friends or other research, we might be able to, uh, if we turn ourselves back there's no reason we can't do it for them as well." The truth was, Reid wasn't entirely sure about that. "Traditionally in mythology magic usually expires once the target is dead, but in this case clearly it didn't- if it was magic." He fully believed it was, now, but felt he needed to qualify that all the same, "Maybe we'd be able to either change them back or at least use something like an illusion?" He shook his head a little. "The last time I had a discussion that went like this there were dice and miniatures on the table, not crime scene photos."

"You played D&D?" Garcia's mouth stayed a little open.

"You didn't know? There's a great store in Vegas with a play room on the first floor, I used to play there in college." Reid's face shown with genuine pleasure. "It was kinda fun. Geeks cared less about my age and more about the fact that I literally had the rule books memorized. But that's…no real help to the case. It's not, you know, actual magic. But the principles may apply here as well."

"All that depends on getting an answer, though." Prentiss reminded them. "Until then, we might as well see about matching the other three victims to missing adults, and see if they have anything connecting them."

"Yup. Garcia, we can take over that. You get me that info, and let's see how and when she disappeared."

"I need a break." JJ announced. "I'm sorry, my concentration's shot." She'd already discovered that she had trouble concentrating on anything for more than half an hour, and they'd already been going over records for an hour and a half. "Just…Anything. PG, d'you have Angry Birds on this or something?"

"JJ, is this really the time?"

"I really really need a break." She repeated, insistent.

"Actually, I need one too. My eyes hurt." Prentiss joined her and stood up. "You boys can go over the databases for a bit, I'm going to get us something to drink. Anybody want something? I saw a machine in the break room."

"Lemonade please?" Morgan asked, and Reid nodded.

"Same."

"I'll come with you." Hotch headed to the door, but Emily gave him a flat look. "We don't need an escort, Hotch. We can handle ourselves, it's just across the bullpen."

"Yeah, we'll be fine." JJ agreed, pushing the door open. "We're big girls."
"Exactly my worry…" But they were already gone. Hotch frowned. "Is it just me or is Emily being…”

"A little sharp today?" Morgan suggested delicately. "Kind of on edge? We all are, though."

"I'm controlling it better, so are you. She should at least make the effort." Hotch crossed his arms, conveniently ignoring his outburst earlier at the store. Garcia, who'd been deep in thought during that entire exchange, suddenly spoke.

"You know, there's a problem with Reid's idea."

Reid smiled ruefully. "Only one?"

"Well, assuming we find the spell, and assuming there's a counter-spell, I'm not sure any of us would be able to cast it." She explained. "Physics magic is great, but it's not that kind of magic. This sort of thing needs training, focus, actual magical ability… Not something you can just pull out of thin air, if you'll excuse the terrible choice of words there." She turned to check her email for the third time inside ten minutes. "I might be able to get whoever recognizes the spell to undo it, but we'd probably owe them. Most of them prefer not to draw any attention from the law, you know? Makes sense."

"None of this falls in the 'make sense' category, baby girl. But in its own, insane category, that does make sense. Let's worry about that after we hear back from your friends though, yeah? We'll cross that bridge when we get to it." Morgan sat down and started looking through missing persons again. He was still restless, but it was his turn to work now. "I hope they answer too."

"Me too."

"Me three."

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The girls felt awfully self conscious as the crossed the bullpen, but the break room was empty this early in the day, and the vending machine free, which made them both breathe easier. "You know, I don't remember being this nervous as a kid." JJ started feeding coins into the machine.

"You probably didn't know the sort of things that could happen to a kid alone among adults when you were a kid yourself, though." Emily pointed out, and JJ nodded.

"Guess not- and that was a good thing, you know? No actual kid should know that. Not at the level of detail that we do." Their job brought them into contact with too many children or teenagers, who'd forever lost their innocence, though contact with acts of violence of human cruelty. "I'd have never left home. But we aren't really kids, we can handle ourselves." She just wished she believed that. "Em…” She hesitated before asking, but went ahead anyway, "Why are you so mean to Reid? Can't you see he's already scared of you?"

"He's scared of everything." Emily lined up the cans, three lemonades, a Coke for herself and orange soda for JJ. "That's the problem. It's- it's really pissing me off, that he's so twitchy. He should man up, you know? We're all adults, and he's finally worked up some confidence, in the field and with locals, and he's losing all that. Maybe being angry with me will make him more assertive." God knows it'd worked for her, anger always built up more confidence in her, even if it was just a mask to cover up the fear and hurt. "He has to hold on to his adult attitude, or he'll lose it. People will treat him- treat all of us- like kids unless we prove we aren't, appearances aside." She found it infuriating, his diffidence, his sudden silences, the way he just took it all without
"But Emily, Reid never fights. He almost never snipes back, even as an adult. At worst, he teases a bit. Not even as an adult. Do you really expect him to snap and yell at you? The only time he ever did that, he was in withdrawal." JJ shook her head and popped her can of soda. "You can't expect him to change entirely just because he's ten now. He's not a very aggressive guy, you can't bully him and expect him to react like you or Morgan would to the same comments or treatment, you know? He'll just be more afraid of you, and we can't have that. The world beyond the team is bad enough, we all have to feel safe inside it. If he's scared of you, you won't be able to work together."

Emily frowned, thinking about that. Reid's shrinking violet routine made her angry at the people who'd made him like that- was she becoming one of them by taking that anger out on him? She was angry because he didn't even try to fight back. "I guess we deal with things differently."

"Totally." JJ agreed. "Em, you ok?"

"Other than irrationally angry all the time? I guess hormones are hitting me pretty hard. I don't recall being this moody when I was actually fifteen..." But she'd been on more drugs back then, so many of her memories weren't entirely clear.

"Why?"

"You're rubbing your stomach. Are you hurt?" JJ looked genuinely worried, so even though the question caught Emily entirely off-guard, she hadn't even noticed doing it, she could reply with reasonable calm.

"Just achy. I wasn't on the pill back then, always got nasty cramps. I'll take something for it." She hadn't taken any painkillers yet that day, because in the morning it hadn't seemed so bad. Now, after two hours of sitting and working, it really hurt. "Might improve my mood, too."

"I'll bet. Come on, let's get back before they send the cavalry after us."

"Worryworts." Emily snorted inelegantly, and JJ giggled, and suddenly everything was pretty ok, after all.
Taking a Little Break

Chapter Notes

My eternal gratitude to Ladywolf9, who pushes and pushes me to write, helps me work out plot issues, and is generally wonderful, and to Wikipedia and Google, for assistance in writing Reid *wink*.

Chapter 5- Taking a Little Break

Two hours later they had two of the other victims matched up- Nadine Law and Mark Leibgott, 30 and 34 respectively, aged 9 and 11 in death, as far as the ME could determine. The last female victim was still a Jane Doe, but they were piling up the information on the three others- and all had local ties, more or less.

"So nobody reported Nadine Law missing until last week, and she's been gone at least three?" Hotch asked.

"Yeah. She was a student, her friends assumed she'd gone home and her mom assumed she was at school. She was off work for a week, but when she didn't show up last Monday they called her place and her roommate got worried, and they reported her missing when they found out she wasn't with her mom." Prentiss explained. "Mark Leibgott was reported missing, but not in Missouri-apparently his girlfriend in Los Angeles reported him missing when he never came back home. He was here for a seminar at the community college two weeks ago and never made it back home to California."

"So we have a librarian, a guest lecturer and a student…Odds are, our unsub's connected to the college as well." That was satisfying, in a way. Knowing who the victims were would make everything else a little easier. Rossi wasn't back from the ME's office yet, still going over the final fingerprint set, which was running through AFIS. "We'll have local cops talk to their friends, just to see where they were seen last. Too bad we can't do it ourselves."

"You know, we could pretend to be kids on a fieldtrip…You know, seeing how 'real cops' work." Morgan suggested. "It might let us sit in on interviews?"

"It's a bit far-fetched." Prentiss wrinkled her nose. "But we could get them to film them, if they can. Just so we can watch for body language."

"How are they going to explain a police station full of kids when they bring people in?" JJ asked, and Rossi, opening the door, heard her and replied.

"They aren't, apparently." He looked a little grim, almost annoyed. "The chief has asked, very politely, that we see if we can work victimology from the hotel this afternoon while they do their interviews. Everybody ok?"

"So far so good." Morgan nodded, "But working from the hotel? Really? We won't have the right resources there, or the focus."

"You can focus anywhere, Derek. And I can set this rig up at the hotel as well, they do have
internet and electricity, it's all I need." Garcia shrugged off this new constraint. "It's not a bad idea, actually, disappearing for a bit. Before people outside this cop shop start to notice the average age in the building's gone down really sharply today." She checked her watch. "We could pick up some lunch on the way."

"I don't care where we go, but lunch sounds really, really good right now." She hadn't noticed it before Garcia'd mentioned food, but JJ found she was starving. "We haven't even had a snack since breakfast, and these bodies can't handle days on energy bars and coffee like we usually do."

"I thought that was just me." Morgan looked a little relieved, and Hotch and Prentiss nodded, as did Reid behind them. "Food?"

"Definitely food. And we'll move to the hotel, it might be easier to work without everybody staring at us." Hotch decided, and nobody argued. It took another fifteen minutes to break up Garcia's equipment and collect all their papers and maps, but soon enough they were all at a diner by the hotel, digging into lunch.

"Spence, you didn't get any vegetables." JJ looked at Reid's cheeseburger, from which he'd carefully extracted the lettuce and onion, and as much mayo as he could scrape off the bun.

"French fries count as a vegetable." Morgan defended him, and indirectly himself as well since he had the exactly same thing on his place, except as a double rather than a single burger. "Besides, we got a big salad for everyone."

"Which I have to intention of eating, but thanks for trying." Reid smiled slightly. "What's the point of being a kid if I can't eat like one? Besides, you're not exactly having the health option, either."

"Mine has beans in it." JJ stuck her tongue at him and dug into her chili and rice. "And it's not fried. So there."

"Children, please. Less arguing, more eating." Garcia nibbled daintily on her sandwich. "You're looking tired." She told Rossi quietly.

"I'm worried about them. And I just spent the morning looking at dead kids, it's enough to depress anybody." And the living kids under his charge showed no sign of changing back. In fact, JJ and Reid at least seemed less mature than was normal for them, although with Reid you never could tell. And the others seemed to simmer with energy, angry or excited or just...There was a reason the FBI didn't recruit anybody under 23. They were too young to do this. "We should call Strauss when we get to the hotel." He told Hotch.

"We should." And they all agreed they really didn't want to. "She'll recall us."

"We'll have to tell her eventually, if we can't change you back by tonight." It would be better for her to hear it from them than indirectly, or after the fact. "We'll at least get points for honestly."

"Somehow I doubt that." Hotch looked morose. "Fine, we'll call her. We'd better find a way to present this in the best possible light."

By the time dessert showed up, was devoured, and they all walked to the hotel, they still hadn't found any way to spin this positively. They gathered in JJ's room again, setting up the laptops and hooking one of them up to the hotel room's TV, which was slightly larger than a laptop screen, so they could all see better, and as a group.

"So my room's a command center now?" JJ bounced on the bed a little.
"Our room."

"Right, Em. Our room. By the way, if we're staying for more than another night it might be wiser to invest in larger rooms, or even a family suite. It'll end up cheaper if we're sharing, and more convenient."

"After I'm done explaining this to Strauss, if we're still here, I'll bring that up." Hotch said, sounding morose but resolute. He had to talk to her eventually. He just wanted to put it off a little, until they had an answer from Garcia's friends maybe.

"You know, when we catch the guy he might be able to undo what he did." Morgan brought up all their databases. "Hey look- a fingerprint match to the last victim- and nobody reported her missing."

"According to the ME she's been dead less than a week, it's possible nobody's noticed she's gone." Rossi came up behind him to have a look. The woman in the photo was younger, somewhere in her late 20's. "Her prints are from a juvie record. Melanie Carson, 26, she was a cafeteria worker and part-time student at the same college."

"We are definitely going to have to go there at some point…" Hotch hesitated, holding his mobile phone in one hand, ready to call Chief Matthews. "Dave, you're going to sit in on the interviews, right? Since you can, it's better than having a recording later."

"Sure. They said they were going to start in a couple of hours, though. They don't seem to be in any hurry, maybe they don't think he's going to strike again." Rossi replied sourly. "He is, though, in all likelihood."

"Probably." They had the start of a linkage, but nothing solid yet, and no real motive for something this violent. "What do we have by way of a profile so far?"

"A man who's either a pedophile or likes to completely take away his victims' control and power before he kills them." Reid said immediately. "Possibly too physically weak or not confident enough to overpower an adult, so he turns them into children, which are at the very least easier to carry. He paused, "Morgan, what do you mean if we could catch him he might be able to undo this?"

"Well, if he cast the spell he should be able to break it, right?"

"Not necessarily, sad to say." Garcia offered unhappily. "There isn't always an 'undo' button on spells, from what I've heard. Especially the kind that don't even expire when the target's dead." Her email pinged and she turned towards the computer with an excited sound. "And, we have an answer! It's…Oh, it's Justin. He says he can't help, it's not anything he's familiar with. Great." There was another 'ping'. "Hold on…Yes!" She spun her screen around so they all could see. "Bobby came through. Now I'm just wondering what the others might have to say, if they reply."

"Well, it's not much of an answer, is it?" Rossi read out loud. "He says 'PG, it reads like a standard de-aging spell, not something I've ever seen used, only heard of. I'll look into it, might take a while, no promises it's reversible'. Your friend is a great optimist, isn't he?"

"Not reversible?" JJ rubbed her face hard. "It has to be."

"It is. We'll find a way. He said he'll look into it." Hotch was trying to convince himself as well as the others. He did not want to go through thirty years of life again. It just wasn't fair. He wanted to punch a wall, but only because it'd be more polite than punching someone's face. "And there are
others who haven't answered yet, maybe they'd know."

"Right." JJ didn't sound at all confident, and the others all looked downhearted again. "We'll figure it out."

"We sort of have to." Morgan agreed. "I'm not going to college again."

"I'm not going through high school again." Reid rubbed his shin absent mindedly, not only the bruises he'd woken up with bothering him but also the new one he'd gathered earlier, along with a scrape on his arm. He'd tripped, going to the bathroom at the police station, and if he was pretty sure that it wasn't just his natural clumsiness and one of the younger guys there had tripped him, he wasn't sure which of the three he'd gone by it was, and it didn't matter. He was used to bullies, and they hadn't really caused any harm. It wasn't worth mentioning.

"None of us are going through anything again. Relax. Let's concentrate on what we can do, which is find the unsub." None of them could afford to be kids again for much longer. Hotch wasn't sure Rossi's nerves would hold up, for a start. He was already looking a bit harried. "I need to clear my head before I talk to Strauss." He wasn't even sure why he said that out loud; he wouldn't have, under normal circumstances. But this wasn't normal.

"I saw a basketball hoop in the back parking lot." For a moment Hotch didn't get what Morgan meant, but JJ's eyes lit up.

"Could we? The front desk lets you have the ball for an hour if you leave an ID and your room number." She jumped off the bed, grinning wide. "It'll only be an hour."

"You go ahead, I'll hold down the fort." Emily didn't like basketball and didn't feel like anything too active yet, even though she'd taken a painkiller and was feeling a lot less aggressive.

"Me too. Not a big fan of basketball." Most games Reid had ever played, and those numbered in the single digits, had ended with him getting a ball to the face or the stomach or someplace else that hurt.

"You up for it, Hotch?" There was a competitive gleam in Morgan's eye which Hotch just had to respond to.

"Sure." He'd played in high school, though he hadn't been an athlete near Morgan's level, and as long as he had a younger body that didn't twinge in a dozen places from years of running and fighting and getting shot or stabbed, why not make use of it? "Dave, you in? You can help JJ out." He had no doubt their media liaison would be a spitfire on the court, even though soccer was more her thing, but she was still a good head shorter than them both, which was a distinct disadvantage.

"You'll slay me." Rossi seemed amused, "But sure, why not. Let's go play. Garcia, you'll keep an eye on these two?"

"Sure. We'll cheer on you from the window. Actually…We'll cheer on you from the court." Garcia unplugged the laptop and stood up. "Come on kiddies, we're going to get some fresh air. You all need a break."

"Don't call us that." Emily snapped, then subsided apologetically, "And we shouldn't, anyway. There's a lot of work-"

"Nothing that won't hold an hour. Come on. Right Hotch?"

"I guess." He shrugged. They did all need a break, and he'd feel better if they weren't separated.
Reid and Prentiss obviously weren't happy with the idea, but they came along. Reid snagged a tablet computer so he'd be able to go over the financial records of the four victims and see if they had any other connections beyond the college itself. Rossi acquired the ball for them, and the court was free since it was the middle of the day.

"Time limit or should we play to ten?" Morgan tossed the ball to Hotch, who caught it neatly.

"Whatever, let's just play 'til we're tired." JJ bounced in place, and started circling around him. There was only one hoop, and the court itself was tiny, so two on two was ideal. Garcia, Prentiss and Reid found some reasonably comfortable steps to sit on and enjoy the sun as they watched and worked.

"We'll play until I have to leave for the station, so not too long." Rossi checked his watch. "Let's start. Youngest gets the ball."

"Rampant ageism." But Hotch threw the ball to JJ, who only almost-fumbled it. The game started slow, as three of the players were still not sure of where their arms and legs ended, but as they got used to the adjusted range and length of motion things smoothed out and Rossi found he really had to work to keep up.

"Oh, come on! I could've made that shot!" Hotch glared at Morgan as the younger boy attempted a long shot from the very edge of the court and missed the hoop, instead of passing to Hotch who was much closer. "We're supposed to be a team!"

"We are a team. As a team, we want to get 3 point shots." Morgan explained reasonably. "Watch Rossi, he's sneaky."

"Very sneaky." Rossi agree as he passed the ball to JJ, then lifted her up so she could dunk it. She felt fragile in his hands, but far from ethereal- very real, slightly boney and chortling with pleasure at the unexpected flight. Garcia clapped and cheered as both boys protested the blatant unfairness of picking teammates up to get around the 'no walking with the ball' rule. "If either one of you can do the same with the other, be my guest, guys. Otherwise accept our advantage gracefully." He put JJ down and she ran up to Garcia and the others, still laughing.

"Didja see? Didja see me? That was so much fun!" They hadn't seen her that happy in months, certainly not at work. Reid grinned at her, recognizing her expression as one she still wore while playing with Henry, or when he did something particularly clever or funny.

"It looked like fun." He agreed, "But you left Rossi alone there and the guys are going to wipe the floor with him." In fact, they looked a bit busy with trying to pick each other up, proving that yes, they could, for short times at least, but nothing like what Rossi and JJ had done.

"Betcha I could pick Reid up." Morgan announced at last. "You game, kid?"

"No way in hell." Reid replied pleasantly. "I don't play with balls."

"Oh yeah? Good to know." Morgan winked, and Reid flushed and ducked his head. Garcia glared.

"Wash your mouth out with soap, Derek Morgan. And I'm sure you could pick Emily up."

"Oh no, leave me out of this." Emily shook her head and drew back a little. "Out of your macho contests, please."

"Ok, so come help me kick their butts." JJ offered. "Or I can pair up with Morgan and you can have Hotch."
"Gee, thanks Jaje." Hotch gave her a dirty look. "Have you ever even played basketball, Emily?"

"Um…No? I mean…well, no. Not really. I sort of know the basics." Sports had never played a bit part of Emily's life, until she'd started working out for the Academy. Dancing had always been more her thing, if only because her mother managed to find a ballet class for her wherever they went. "Should we be working?"

"You're just chicken because you know we're better at it." Morgan bounced the ball and threw it in her direction. Sheducked out of the way and Garcia reached out to catch it.

"Watch the tech equipment and the techie, please." She threw it back. "You gonna let him diss you like that, sweetpea?"

"Like hell." Prentiss rose. "And I'll have you know, high-and-mighty-Morgan, that Hotch and I are going to make you both our bitches."

"Not exactly the language I'd have chosen…" Hotch winced. "But I agree with the general sentiment." He took the ball from Garcia. "Stop talking about it and show us you've got game, Morgan."

"Have you noticed that their linguistic patterns are changing?" Reid asked Garcia quietly. Rossi came to join them.

"They are. A little." He agreed, and Garcia nodded, looking a little less cheerful tan before.

"We're losing it, aren't we? Regressing emotionally as well as physically." That was bad, really bad. "Good thing I was fairly mature as a child. But I hope Hotch retains enough of himself when he calls Strauss, or we'll all be recalled and in foster care before we can solve the case." He knew none of their parents except maybe Morgan's mother were capable of taking care of child, even if they were alive. Garcia hugged him unexpectedly and he froze, puzzled.

"None of you are going anywhere as long as I'm alive, ok? So don't worry about that, at least. Absolutely no foster care ever. We'll solve this, kiddo, just don't get so gloomy over it. It's barely been 24 hours. We'll figure it out."

"I wanna believe you, Garcia, I really do." But it was harder by the hour. The hug, however, was pretty nice.

"Hey, how come I don't get a hug?" Morgan came over to join them, and behind me JJ screeched that she was being abandoned with the older kids on the opposing team.

"Because you're old enough to need sensitivity training after a hug, cupcake." Garcia grinned. "Also, because you're losing." He turned around and saw that indeed, JJ was making a valiant effort to wrest the ball away from Hotch, but finally he pulled away and she jerked after him, off-balance, and ended up in a heap on the floor. Her cry of pain brought them all running.

"Aw hell. I'm sorry." Morgan crouched by her and eyed the bloody scrape along her arm and the scuffed knees of her jeans with very clear guilt. "Are your knees ok?"

"N-no." She bit her lip and examined her bloodied palms, the most obvious wound. "Ow. Really. But, uh, I've had worse. At least it wasn't a tree this time."

"There was a tree?" Hotch was on her other side, one eyebrow raised.

"Sort of fell out of one when I was eight. Broke my right arm, wasted a whole summer with it in a
sling. And of course they removed the cast in time for school so I didn't even have an excuse not to write homework." She nodded.

"Come on, kitten, let's get you cleaned up." Rossi helped her stand, attentive to her grimace of pain and to the fact that she favored one leg. She took his arm with no argument, but slanted a bemused look up his way.

"Did you just call me kitten?"

"Did I?" He hadn't even noticed.

"You did." Reid confirmed behind them, having satisfied himself that JJ was in no immediate danger.

"Huh. Ok then, I guess I did. You're more a fox kitten than a cat kitten though." She wasn't so much cute and fuzzy as feisty, so it fit better.

"Ok." JJ was apparently just fine with being called a fox, kitten or otherwise.

"Sensitivity training all 'round, when this is over." Hotch sighed, and Reid snickered. Prentiss bounced the ball and caught it. "Back up to the room, huh?"

"Yeah, and I have to get to the station. You guys are in charge of the cleanup here- you do remember basic first aid, right?" Rossi didn't want to leave JJ, but she wasn't badly injured and they did have a case to solve. "Hotch, if you want to wait for me to call Strauss, I'll be back in about four hours."

"I do, thanks. The later the better." Hotch nodded, "And don't worry, I think we all know how to put on a band aid."

"I can even put one on myself, it's no big deal." Ok, it hadn't happened in some 15 years, but JJ was pretty used to getting bumped and scratched playing sports, or just because she'd had a thing for trees and low walls and jumping fences as a child. It was hardly her first fall. It did hurt an awful lot more than she remembered, though. "You go, Rossi, I've got the whole wolf-pack here guarding me."

"I'll call you with updates." He promised and veered off towards the van. They were grown-ups, he reminded himself, and they had Garcia, and emotional regression aside, they were the best profiling team the FBI had. They could handle this.

Upstairs, Garcia and JJ went to the bathroom to clean up and Hotch followed, looking a little guilty. He'd been the one pulling too hard after all, and he felt responsible. Besides, a member of his team was injured, even if it was only a scraped knee and hand. In the room itself, Reid went straight to the computers, hooked up his tablet and started scrolling down files too fast for the others to follow.

"Whatcha doin', sprout?" Morgan settled on the bed behind him.

"Checking a theory and please don't call me that." Reid didn't even blink.

"You know, this could've been worse." Prentiss said, as she opened a bottle of water, drank and passed it to Morgan.

"Really? How so?"
"We could've been toddlers instead." She replied, and Morgan shuddered. "Think about it- five teens is hard enough, but can you imagine Dave's reaction if we were all in diapers?"

"He'd have left us all in a hospital safe-drop zone and gone back to DC." Morgan laughed, imagining the look on Rossi's face. "That would've been awful."

"D'you think we'll be recalled?" Prentiss asked, and there was a real note of worry in her voice. "I mean, we may have all the experience and memories, but we're not legal adults yet. We're not even old enough to be emancipated."

"She can send another team here and let us stay as well, we can still help." It was a slim hope, but one Morgan held on to anyway.

"Unless one of the other teams closed a case in the past two days, nobody's free." Reid said, still not looking away from the computers. "They could recall a team that's off-rotation, but it's unlikely."

"You keep track of the other teams?" Emily shook her head.

"You don't?"

"I have better things to think about." She shrugged, "But that's sort of good to know, actually. Maybe Strauss won't have a choice, and we'll have to stay." They all knew it was a long shot. "Maybe Rossi'll manage to talk her into it. I'm sure he has some blackmail material from her younger days."

"Don't be, she wasn't a profiler." Hotch came out of the bathroom, followed by Garcia and JJ, now sporting bandaged hands and a slight limp. "Reid, what are you doing?"

"Testing a theory. Five minutes." From Reid's voice, whatever theory he had was working out so far.

"Ok, go back to what you were looking at before the game," Hotch instructed the others. "I think we're going to visit that college tomorrow morning. Maybe a bunch of teens draw less attention than FBI agents."

"That'd be kinda cool. We could say it's an AP-class fieldtrip." Emily chuckled. "Think they'll believe us?"

"Sure. In these bodies, we're all geniuses, not just the boy wonder there."

"The correct term is genii." Reid, again, didn't look away from what he was doing. "When applied to people, as it's derived from the Latin genius, first person masculine singular, and the first person plural form is genii, and you can actually help me with this I think."

"Stopping to breathe when you talk was something you learned in college, right kid?" Morgan pulled up a computer. "What are we looking for?"

"Remember what you said earlier, that it could've been worse?" They nodded. "The same occurred to me, along with the fact that there's no real mathematical formula for the ages we ended up in. JJ and I aren't close enough in age to justify the gap between the two of us and you three, and if we're going in the rough order of our actual ages, Hotch should be older than you," He pointed at Emily, "And he isn't, by more than maybe a few months. So why those ages? Why not earlier, where we'd be even less effective? He could've made us all babies, theoretically. But he didn't, because I don't think that's what the spell does."
"What do you mean?" Hotch frowned and grabbed a laptop as well.

"Look at the victims' early histories. Any notable incidents, especially traumatic ones." He pointed at the screen. "Marissa Sainjon lost her father in a boating accident when she was 12 their boat capsized; she saw him drown and held on to a buoy for hours before they found her. He rejuvenated her to 12, as far as the ME could determine."

"Her worst memory." Prentiss swallowed hard, her hand unconsciously reaching for her stomach.

"Her most vulnerable time." Reid agreed. "If I'm right, we'll find the same incidents with the others- and with ourselves." He knew about himself of course, and Morgan, and JJ had told him about her sister after that case with the choking game. Like Rossi, he'd put two and two together for Hotch, so only Emily remained a mystery. The freaked-out looks around the room confirmed his thoughts.

"Obviously he's aiming for worst memory or worst part of people's lives but only as minors. We all have had pretty tough times as adults." Hotch felt a little sick, bit still, it would've been pretty useless to make him only a few months younger and put him right after Foyet's attack or Haley's death- he'd still functioned, even after those. "So he's trying to neutralize them-"

"Yeah, but he's also a sexual sadist, he gets off on making people as powerless and vulnerable as possible." Reid nodded.

"Nadine Law was home alone during a robbery when she was 9 years old." Morgan reported, "A guy in some serious 'roid rage broke into the Law family home, caused massive damage and, um, killed their dog, apparently. Nadine hid in a cupboard and saw the whole thing, and then he found her, nearly killed her. She was in therapy for years for it, got addicted to all kinds of things, had a nervous breakdown five years ago...She'd only just got her life back together and her head straight enough to go to college, it looks like." Garcia's databases were real treasure troves of horror sometimes. "Poor woman."

"I hate that he knows that much about us." Prentiss shivered.

"He doesn't have to, I think. If the spell just targets a traumatic period and de-ages you to that age, he doesn't have to know the reason, just that you're suddenly that age." Garcia hugged her shoulders. "He's a creep, but I don't think he's a telepathic creep."

"No, just highly organized and with access to magic." Reid didn't sound at all cheerful. "Let's see if we can find anything on the other two."

The worst thing in Mark Leibgott's history was his parents' very messy divorce when he'd been 11, which fit the age he was when he was killed. Melanie Carson had spent several months in a reform school at the tender age of 13, after being involved in a gang war- peripheral involvement, but enough to take her away from her family and into the system. Morgan scowled, the words on the screen echoing too closely his own record, except that he'd had a loving mother and a second chance, one he'd almost fouled up a few times- and maybe paid too high a price to finally use. A hand on his arm made him jump. "Wha?"

"You zoned out on us." Reid looked worried. "Everything ok?"

"See for yourself." He turned the screen so Reid could look. Reid took it all in and squeezed Morgan's arm, which he was still touching.

"At least the theory hasn't been disproven so far. I wonder what he does if he finds a victim who"
had a happy childhood."

"I don't think there's such a thing as a completely happy childhood." Emily stretched out on the bed on her stomach, sparing only a thought to the fact that it was hardly a dignified position. "Every kid feels wronged or misunderstood or ignored at some point. Granted, most of them manage to reach adulthood without encountering major violence, though you wouldn't think so, seeing only the kids we do." There were nods all 'round. "Now what?"

"Now we wait to see what the police comes up with." It was still pretty early, but there really wasn't much they could do without interviews and more background. "We could build a geographical profile of where the abductions themselves happen, as soon as we have more information." Hotch hated having to wait. "You can help me come up with a way to talk Strauss into letting us stay here and not putting us all on enforced vacation."

"Just so we're clear," Garcia tugged on JJ's pony tail lightly, "If you all get enforced vacation, we're going to DisneyLand."
The afternoon passed quietly. After they all went through everything they had, with at least another hour before Rossi returned, one by one they gave up on continuing, for the moment. Hotch and Reid kept it up the longest, Hotch because of a sense of responsibility, and Reid because he couldn't think of anything else to do, but eventually they too abandoned the search for more facts that simply weren't there. They were waiting on warrants for phone records, and possibly more answers from Garcia's friends. Morgan turned the TV on and found a random movie, and they all joined him to watch it.

"You know, I'm not sure you should be watching that..." Garcia squinted at the screen uncertainly.

"Why, because it's R rated?" Prentiss laughed.

"No, because it's a terrible movie. Really, Underworld? Can't you find anything with a plot that makes sense?"

"See if they're showing anything that includes magic, maybe we'll get an idea about our current situation. Hm." Reid was still playing around with photos of the victims. "Garcia, did you send these marks that were carved into the bodies to your contacts as well?"

"No, I didn't have any way to scan them from the car. Should I?" She reached for a laptop, keeping one eye on the screen anyway.

"It's worth a try. They're all the same marks, I wonder if they're part of the spell, because he didn't even try to do the same to us, so maybe the effect would be different, ultimately." Reid was frowning. Maybe, if they were really lucky..."I'm going to see if an internet search brings up anything."

"You can find practical magic sites online?" Prentiss wasn't sure why that surprised her, but it was all bull anyway, right? She was still having a hard time believing in magic, despite everything.

"Thousands of them. The problem is finding those that are serious about it, because most are just fantasies and 'focusing the will' and positive thinking. And from what I can see here, much of it is about candles, sacred stones, and nudity."

"Really? Gimme." Morgan reached over to grab the laptop, and Reid pulled it out of his reach.

"Do you mind? I'm trying to work."

"You're hogging the softcore, is what you're doing." Morgan tried to wrestle the laptop away from him, and Garcia slapped the back of his head.

"Hey! Any damage to the equipment is coming out of your hide and paycheck, young man. And any damage to the genius I'm going to let Hotch make you pay for."

"Which I'll be more than happy to do." Hotch's eyes flashed with all the irritation, frustration and worry he couldn't otherwise show. "Just give me a reason, Morgan."

"If we had mats here, I'd take you up on that. But we don't." A nice sparring match might be really useful, in fact, but Garcia's face stated very clearly that she wouldn't allow anything like that.

"Uh, guys? Chill. Please." Emily put herself between them, hands spread out to hold them back.
"Not that I wouldn't love to see you two go at it, but now is not the time or the place. Deep breath, focus, calm down." She'd rarely seen either of them this volatile, and it scared her a little. Reid and JJ clearly shared her feelings, as both of them nodded enthusiastically.

"Here, you can look. There's nothing useful there anyway." Reid passed Morgan the laptop. "You could've just asked. Just keep an eye out for those runes we saw on the bodies."

"And if you have an urge to go take care of business, do it someplace else, far, far away. We still have to work together when this is over."

"Ugh, Prentiss. That just made sure I won't need to." Morgan made a disgusted face and handed the laptop back to Reid. JJ grinned and held a hand out to Emily for a high five. "Guys, a little help here? I'm feeling ganged-up-on."

"The movie's terrible." Reid went back to his computer, but Morgan suspected he was playing minesweeper instead of actually working. Or maybe online Sudoku.

"At least it's not a police movie." JJ rolled her eyes. "The mistakes those things make set my teeth on edge."

"They're fun to mock." Any movie or show involving the FBI was fair game as far as Emily was concerned. "Hey, maybe there are some X Files reruns somewhere." She started channel surfing over Morgan and Garcia's protests when Hotch's phone rang. He glanced at the caller ID, winced and put the phone under a pillow, then sat on it for good measure.

"Strauss?"

"Yeah." There was a hunted look in the team leader's eyes. "Second time today. I was supposed to call her with an update an hour ago. She'll try either one of you or Rossi in a moment." Indeed, about five minutes later Rossi called.

"I'm on my way back." He said when Hotch put him on speaker. "I'll pick up pizza on the way, and the interviews came up with a few interesting things. And I told Strauss that we'll video-call her in half an hour. We're making her stay late at the office, so she won't be in the best mood."

"Great." Hotch sighed. He was just glad he hadn't started getting tension headaches until college, but it sure felt like one was starting a little ahead of schedule. Then again, he hadn't had this kind of tension in high school. Fear and occasional violence, sure, but not this level of responsibility.

"We'll be ok." Rossi promised and hung up. The rest of them exchanged mournful looks.

"Don't look so glum, guys. She's not entirely heartless, you know." This was testing even Garcia's reserves of optimism, but she tried to stay cheerful for the others' sake. JJ looked dangerously close to tears. "Once you get her to believe we're serious, I'm sure she'll let you stay on even if she does send another team in. You're the best people to solve this, you know. You've made more progress with no leads at all since yesterday than the locals have in almost a week."

"Yeah, but we had a great big huge clue in turning into kids ourselves." Emily reminded her, "And if she says that's a liability, we can't even argue with her because it really is."
"You're doing fine so far..." She was holding on to hope with an effort, and the others looked pretty grim. "Look, let's not freak out before you even talk to her, right? Go into it thinking like winners and the universe will just assume you're right, and everything will work out just fine." The cheerfulness fell away like an ill-fitting hat. "I wish I had some cookies to brighten up the situation with."

"I texted Rossi." JJ put her phone down. "Asked him to bring ice cream as well as pizza. My mom would be scandalized, but I think we'll need it."

"What we'll need is extra workout hours when we're back to ourselves." Emily complained, but she was smiling as she said it, and the thought of ice cream did seem to lighten the mood a little. They went back to bickering over the choice of TV, all of them trying not to think about the upcoming call until Rossi came back.

"You guys better eat while it's still hot." Hotch said as he turned to the computers.

"You should as well." Rossi joined him. "Or do you want to get this over with?"

"Get it over with." He couldn't eat right now anyway. Facing off with figures of authority right now, when he was completely off-balance, just sounded like a horrible idea, but he couldn't put it off. "Can we have a word in private before we call, though?"

"Sure." Rossi tilted his head towards the bathroom. Hotch tried not to notice that everyone was staring at them before the door closed, and that sympathy and worry mingled in equal amounts on their faces. "Aaron, you have to calm down before you call her. You have to stay professional."

"You think I don't know that, Dave?" He was already almost yelling, and he restrained himself with visible difficulty. "She's going to call us back and put us all on medical leave until this is sorted, and I can't even tell her she'd be wrong to do it, if we go by the book."

"But this situation isn't in any of the books."

"Exactly, but d'you think she'll care? I have a hard time controlling myself when I talk to her even when I don't have crazy hormones affecting my brain and incomplete impulse control." And, he added privately, the underlying fear than any confrontation, even by phone, would eventually end with a punch or a slap. He'd rarely stood up to his father, and the few times he had, had ended painfully and humiliated. "I- I can't do this with all of them watching, Dave. They can't see me like that. What if I can't stay calm?"

"Then they'll see you explode. They're your team, they can handle it." Rossi seemed infuriatingly calm about the whole thing. "You can't hide this from them, Aaron. And you need their support. They trust you, even if you're as messed up as any of them currently. I actually think it might make them all feel better if you're not perfect."

"Oh, so I need to put myself entirely out there to make them feel better? What if I don't wanna?" They'd already seen him at his worst and that had been bad enough, along with everything else. He knew his reaction to Haley's death hadn't made them respect him any less, but he still hated that he'd broken down like that. At least, looking at it now, months from the actual event, he hated it. At the time he hadn't cared. "They'll freak out."

"Maybe, but they'll get over it. You know you have their unconditional support, Aaron." Rossi was reaching the conclusion that most of his teammates just hadn't had enough reassurance from their parents as children, and he spared a moment to be intensely grateful to his parents, who'd never been anything less than open and demonstrative about loving and supporting all their children.
There'd been no shortage of hugs at the Rossi household. "They'll all back you up. And if you storm out in a huff, they'll take over talking to Strauss. If, as a group, we can't convince her to let us stay, then nobody can, and we'll know we've done our best."

"Our best may not be good enough." Hotch was calmer, but far from hopeful.

"Doesn't mean we won't give it, though. Nothing less than our best, right?"

"Right." Resolute, Hotch nodded.

"Good. Now, if we're all going into sensitivity training after this anyway…" Reconsidering his thoughts from earlier than morning, Rossi decided it was worth the possible risks and pulled Hotch into a hug before the teen had a chance to get away.

Hotch shuddered against him, his face buried in Rossi's shirt for a moment, before he muttered "Let me go, Dave."

"Ok." Rossi did, and Hotch took several deep breaths. "Ready to go out there?"

"Yeah. I'm ready. Don't ever do that again."

"I make no promises whatsoever. You have half a lifetime of those to catch up on." Clearly this was something Hotch wasn't in the mood to argue with, as he simply snorted, opened the bathroom door and faced the five worried pairs of eyes directed at him.

"Garcia, do we have the video conference set up?"

"Yup, set up and ready to dial." The tech analyst confirmed. "All yours sir."

"Good, thanks. Dave, you might wanna start this, since you're the one she'll recognize at the moment." He sat on the bed and turned the screen so Rossi was facing the camera. "Here goes nothing." He hit 'dial'.

"Agent Rossi." Section Chief Strauss looked tired, as was reasonable, considering she was still in her office quite late in the evening. "I thought I was going to talk to Agent Hotchner."

"You are, in just a moment." Rossi braced himself. "As you know, we came out here to investigate the murder of four children."

"Yes…And I'm eagerly awaiting an update." She sounded impatient.

"Well, the main discovery that we've made are that the unsub is targeting adults, not children." There was no real good way to explain it, was there?

"What do you mean, adults? I thought they found dead children."

"They did, but as you also know, there were no missing children reported in the area." He could feel everybody else holding their breath around him. The added pressure wasn't helping. "There were, however, missing adults that matched the fingerprints of the dead children."

"What?" She frowned, "Agent Rossi, you're not making any sense. How could dead children be a fingerprint match for missing adults?"

"We, uh, have a working theory…" Rossi hesitated and Hotch nudged him aside carefully and moved to face the camera.
"I'll take it from here, Dave. Good evening, ma'am." He made an effort to sound like his adult self, but knew he still fell short of the mark. Strauss gave him a piercing look.

"And who are you? Where's Agent Hotchner?"

"Right here, I'm afraid." He held himself very still, focusing on every breath in turn. "It's me. We have, well, a situation here." He turned the camera so it swept the others, demonstrating the 'situation'. "We believe the unsub is somehow turning adults into children."

She was silent for a long moment. Nobody in the room seemed to move, or even breathe. Finally, she leaned back. "This is a very elaborate practical joke, and in very bad taste, considering. Now let me talk to Agent Hotchner."

"Ma'am, I am Aaron Hotchner. And these are my team behind me." He could feel them moving in to crowd behind him on the bed. "As I said, we believe the unsub is turning adults into children, both because the fingerprints match missing adults, and because, well, we've living evidence of it having happened."

"This isn't a practical joke, Erin." Rossi spoke up behind him, and Garcia nodded her agreement. "They are all who they say there are, unfortunately."

She blinked several times. "Your entire team?"

"Yes ma'am."

She pinched the bridge of her nose, a motion which reminded Rossi sharply of his own reaction when all his had started. "I'm going to need some proof. And a great deal of explanations. You'd best start at the beginning."

It took fifteen minutes for them to recount the events of the day, explain their working theory and their findings thus far, as well as the small amount of information the police had uncovered, which Rossi hadn't had time to update the team about yet. To Hotch's surprise, Strauss let them talk, asking only relevant questions. Finally, she sighed.

"Magic." And then rested her forehead on her hand, "I hate magic."

"You've, uh, run into it before?" Emily seemed to be the only one not too shocked to speak.

"Not quite this type, but if you spent long enough in my position, you run into everything at least once. And before you ask, none of you have clearance for any of it, so don't bother. Ms. Garcia, if you send me all the details of what exactly happened I'll forward them to a few consultants we've worked with before, they might be able to help with restoring them to their older selves."

"Y-yes ma'am. Um, thank you." Garcia closed her mouth with a snap, completely confused by this unexpected turn.

"So...There is an X Files section?" Reid was curious more than anything else, and pleased that at least it didn't look like Strauss was going to have them all committed.

"Not in the way you think, Dr. Reid." The answer, and the title, came naturally, but Strauss paused and shook her head. "This is—well, there's hardly a way to anticipate something like that, is there? You're all physically well?"

"So far, ma'am. We were hoping to go visit the college tomorrow, and find out more about our victims and the possible connection between them." Was it possible that she was going to let them
work the case? Any hope Hotch had in that direction was dashed in the next moment, however.

"Tomorrow? Tomorrow, Agent Hotchner, you are going to get on that jet of yours and return here. I'm putting you all on medical leave until we find a way to undo the spell."

There was a chorus of 'no' and 'you can't' and 'please, ma'am' behind him, and Hotch let them all express themselves before raising a hand for silence.

"Respectfully, ma'am, we'd like to stay here and work this case. As you've seen we've already made considerable progress-"

"Which another team with fully functional and capable members can follow up on. Agent Hotchner, you know you can't do this. You're limited by your situation, and as much as I appreciate Agent Rossi's skills, he can't cover for all five of you."

"He doesn't have to," Hotch argued. "We can do everything except interviews. And taking him down, when we find him. That's what the local police are going to have to handle." Although considering the levels of simmering anger behind him, he was willing to bet good money on his team taking the unsub down with extreme prejudice, when the time came to do it.

"I can work with the police, Erin. I have most of today, and they're capable people." Rossi said. "Give us a chance to solve this, you know it's personal now."

"All the more reason why you shouldn't work this case." She replied reasonably. "I understand you have a stake in this, but most of you aren't old enough to go to the mall unsupervised, much less go after a dangerous criminal. This is not The Famous Five, Agent Hotchner."

"And if we promise not to go in the field?" Morgan asked, unable to stay silent anymore.

"Not good enough, Agent Morgan." There was a slight questioning note there, as if she was no longer sure how to address them. "I'm sorry, but I want you back home by tomorrow afternoon."

"To do what, exactly? As you've said, we can't really go home, can we? I mean we could, but." JJ was clearly making an effort to stay calm. Reid took her hand discreetly, silently supportive. "We might as well stay here and be of some use, ma'am."

"She has a valid point. Out here they already know what happened, and we don't want to start spreading this around. We all have neighbors and relatives who will want to know what's going on." Hotch nodded. He didn't want to have to explain this to Jack, he really, really didn't. But he was starting to get desperate.

"Ma'am, is SSA Green's team back from New Mexico?" Reid's question seemed to come right out of left field, and they all looked a little puzzled while Strauss frowned.

"No, not yet."

"Then there's no team available unless you put DiAmico's team on this, and they're off rotation with two people on medical leave." There'd been a shootout with a couple of spree-killers two weeks earlier, leaving two of DiAmico's team in the hospital. "That makes them almost as limited as we are. Give us a chance."

She glared at him. "Nobody likes a smart-aleck, Dr. Reid."

"Actually, we sorta love him." Prentiss hugged him from behind, and he squeaked and froze, before giving a small, hesitant smile.
"I'm going to need to think about this and make some calls. I'll call you back in an hour, don't do anything until then. Is that clear?" Now she looked pissed off, which Hotch actually took as a good sign.

"Cristal, ma'am. We won't leave this room." He signed off, looked around at the others, then allowed himself to fall bonelessly back on the bed. "God. Is there any pizza left? I'm starving."

There was a momentary silence, then Morgan started clapping, and the others joined him, JJ going as far as to cheer, but quietly.

"She'll have to let us stay now." Morgan was grinning. "And we can eat!"

"Don't start celebrating yet. In an hour she'll have found three more reasons to recall us, and figured out a way to replace us here." Hotch felt drained and a little shaky, the adrenaline rush receding. But he'd held up just fine, he hadn't yelled, he'd been cool and collected and professional and adult. Thank god.

"Yeah, but she's at least thinking about it. That wasn't a flat 'no'." Prentiss started putting pizza on paper plates and passing it around. "We may just have a chance."

"In an hour, we'll see. We're not done fighting for this, anyway. And if we win she'll make us all pay for it later." Hotch reminded them. He pushed himself up to a sitting position again. "Good job, Reid."

"Uh. Thanks. She would've found that out herself, though." Reid was still a little stunned by that spontaneous hug from Emily earlier. "It was just a matter of checking who was available."

"Yeah, but you took the wind right out of her sails and gave us the advantage. Temporarily, at least." JJ handed him a pizza and he considered for a moment before biting into it. The cheese on pizza couldn't hurt, could it? There wasn't that much of it, anyway. Besides, he was really hungry. "Plus, you've proved you're still yourself, which should make it easier to let us stay, since we're all still ourselves. More or less. Right?"

"More or less." Garcia agreed with her. "You're all considerably cuter."

"Even Hotch?" JJ's eyes glittered mischievously, and Garcia winked.

"I'll let you be the judge of that, seeing as any answer I might give will get me into trouble one way or another."

"Wise move, Garcia."

"I know, sir."

"Let's go over what we have again, until she calls back."

What they had wasn't all that much more than they'd had earlier. The locals had interviewed Melanie Carson's boss at the cafeteria and the head librarian about Marissa Sainjon. They planned on interviewing Nadine Law's roommate the next day, and were still trying to contact Mark Leibgott's girlfriend. Both Nadine and Marissa had been loners, as far as their colleagues could say. The head librarian had said that Marissa had been a fan of occult studies, and seemed a little 'odd' most of the time. She also remembered a bad breakup and a very persistent ex boyfriend some six weeks earlier.

"So we have a possible unsub? Anybody over there remember his name?" Morgan was polishing
off the last of his pizza.

"Not as far as they've found. But they'll keep digging, I hope. For their sake and ours." Rossi said. "Tomorrow I'd like to see if there was anybody else she was sharing that occult hobby with. If there's a group of dabblers, they might know which one of them was the real deal, if any one of them was."

"Good idea. We'll see about that when we visit the college tomorrow." There was no more pizza and Hotch was still hungry. "Were there vending machines downstairs?"

"Yes, but do you really think you guys need more junk food?" Garcia frowned a little. "I should buy apples or something tomorrow."

"I think I might have apples in my bag, actually. I usually do. And energy bars." JJ went to look for them.

"And I did bring ice cream, we just need to wait until after Strauss calls back to eat it, I think. It's only polite." Rossi reminded them, tilting his head at the mini bar where he'd left it earlier. There were grins from everybody.

"You'll all be bouncing off the walls tonight if you have ice cream now…" Garcia warned, and at least three people glowered at her in reply. "But you're adults and do whatever you like, just don't expect to be entertained. I need my beauty sleep. Not a word out of you, my little chocolate bomb." A warning finger was held out to Morgan, who leered.

"I wasn't going to say anything, baby girl. Why would I need to?" Fortunately the rest of that conversation was cut short by the video-conference program beeping, and they all gathered around the computer again, tense with anticipation.

"Agent Hotchner, Agent Rossi- you have three days. In three days I'll have another team available to replace you, and if you have not managed to resolve this by then, they will come out and they will replace you, and you'll return here." There was a muted, quickly repressed whoop behind Hotch's right shoulder.

"Thank you, ma'am-"

"Don't thank me yet, Aaron. For a start, I'm making Agent Rossi temporary unit chief during your…Well, until you're all back to your normal selves. He's in charge. Are we clear?"

"Yes ma'am." It was a bit of a blow, but only to be expected, and it did make sense. That didn't make it any easier to accept.

"Good. Furthermore, absolutely no field work, no contact with the media, no interviews, and under no circumstances are you to make contact with the unsub, if and when you find him. Leave that to the local police."

"Yes ma'am." There was a repressed sigh in his words, but that was also reasonable.

"I am only letting you stay because we can't afford to lose three days on this, he might strike again. None of you are to go anywhere outside the hotel or the police station unsupervised. I will have a very hard time explaining injured agents in children's bodies, or worse. Is that understood?"

Hotch's shoulders slumped a little. "Ma'am, you're severely limiting our ability to work this case."

"Not I, Agent Hotchner. Your situation is the limiting factor; I'm simply forcing you to act your
age, as it were. Temporarily."

"But we aren't children, ma'am. Not really. We can handle ourselves." Emily argued, and Hotch shook his head slightly to stop her. She continued anyway. "You'd let a normal 15 year old go outside unsupervised, even a ten year old."

"Maybe so, but not until we know the full effect and extent of that spell you're under. Agent Garcia, I expect to be updated as soon as you know anything." Strauss stood firm, and directed her glare at Garcia, who nodded.

"Of course ma'am. You'll be the second to know, immediately after Ho- uh, Agent Rossi, since he's in charge now."

"Exactly. I need your word on these conditions, all of you. Otherwise, you're on the plane home tomorrow morning, and the locals will simply have to manage on their own. Do I have your promise, Agent Hotchner?"

"Yes ma'am." She asked each of them in turn, and they all answered in the affirmative. Finally she seemed satisfied.

"Good. Agent Rossi, I'll expect two updates a day, and don't hesitate to call more often if anything comes up or if I can help with anything. Take care of yourselves, children, and good luck." She disconnected, and the room was again silent for almost a minute.

"Can we have that ice cream now?" JJ asked despondently.

"Good idea." Rossi reached for the mini bar.

"If she hadn't called us children it would've been ok, you know?" Reid handed out plastic spoons. "Making us 'act our age', really? That's just vindictive."

"She did have a point about no field work." Rossi passed the ice cream to Prentiss, who started handing out paper cups filled with chocolaty goodness.

"Yeah, but trapping us in the hotel was uncalled for. We're practically grounded, and we haven't even done anything wrong. How are we supposed to solve the case from here? It's insulting." She scowled and handed Hotch his ice cream.

"We've already managed quite a bit, working only from here and the police station. We can do this, and we have three days, so the pressure's on." They all worked better with a deadline. "Let's not let her trip us up with this, right? When you get right down to it she's trying to look out for us, and care for the Bureau's interests as well. I can't even blame her for it." He couldn't say that he would've done the same with this team, but with every other team? Probably. "These are the rules for now, and we'll follow them."

"We'll be good." Morgan agreed unhappily. "And hell, what better way to prove her wrong than to- well, prove her wrong? Show her was can totally solve it from here. We're the best team they have, we need to keep up that reputation."

"That's the spirit." Things were looking a bit more cheerful, and Rossi was relieved. There was only so much teenage angst he could deal with in a day, and he'd pretty much passed his quota around breakfast time. "Now finish your ice cream and we'll watch a movie and go to sleep. JJ, what are you doing?"

"Going over our budget and hotel room prices." She looked up from the laptop she was working
on, her ice cream abandoned and melting in the cup. "If I can get us a family suite for the same price in another hotel, we won't even need authorization for it. And I think we should switch hotels, just in case somebody starts asking questions." There were three other hotels in town, all slightly fancier than the one they were staying in now but still inside their budget. "We won't be able to move there tonight, but if we relocate tomorrow morning, we'll at least have three bedrooms around a main room we can work from. It'll cost just a little less than six individual rooms. And we'll have the right number of beds, which is nice."

"Great, go ahead and see if you can book the rooms. You still have all our account details?"

"Sure. I never leave home without them." She started making the reservations. "Uh…Four people per room at most, with a family room, that's…Garcia, I'm guessing you're in charge of Emily and me, and Rossi, you'll be with the guys?"

"It's traditional, more so than the other way around." Rossi shrugged. "Two family rooms should cover us, and frankly if we're only here for three nights, any one of you can sleep on a pull-out sofa."

"You're too kind, really." Prentiss groused. "Just because we're short enough and don't have back problems yet…"

"Yes, exactly because of that." Rossi leaned back with a grin. "Now, weren't you watching a movie when I came in earlier?"
Chapter Summary

Nobody sleeps easy tonight.

Chapter Notes

I just want to say at this point that this isn't now, nor will it ever be, a shipping fic. There will be cuddling, possibly hugging and the occasional puppy pile, but any potential pairings will be in your minds only. I swear my inner slasher has been shoved into a box in the back corner of my mind for the duration.

It was probably a bad idea to watch Sleepy Hollow. They all agreed in advance that, as a supposed horror film, it worked much better as a comedy, and wasn't all that good besides, but it was spooky without bringing up memories of their job, and the girls all wanted to watch Johnny Depp, with or without his head, so that's what they watched. They were about equally spread out around the room- Hotch and Morgan on one bed, Garcia, Prentiss and JJ on another, Reid on the floor and Rossi in an armchair where he couldn't really see the screen, but didn't mind since he had a book to read. They did a lot more arguing than watching, however, and maybe half an hour later Garcia discreetly turned the movie off so they wouldn't be distracted by it, and launched herself fully into the geek-out the movie had aroused.

"But that story makes no sense!" Reid was on his feet, glaring at Morgan. "Most gothic horror stories don't. A headless horseman is a physical and anatomical impossibility!"

"It's a fairytale, Reid. Besides, chickens can live without their heads, as long as they're fed." Prentiss argued. "It's just a story, you don't have to look for sense in everything."

"It's not even a very good story." JJ agreed. "I know much better horror stories- and some of them I even heard before I started working at the BAU!" They all laughed, and Rossi watched with a pleased smile, happy to see them unwinding a little. It'd been a very tense day.

"Ok Jaje, you tell a story then." Garcia poked her side, and the girl nodded eagerly.

"'Kay. But you all have to listen, ok?" hen they all nodded, she started. "It's called 'The Lady in Grey', and I heard it in a the castle in England where she can still be seen sometimes, moaning in the halls, floating in her grey robe, searching for her murdered children- and for her own lost head." She was trying for dramatic flair, but the truth was most of them really couldn't enjoy horror stories, as most of them echoed to things they'd actually encountered. As JJ tried to weave a story of royal murders, ghosts and evil cardinals, Reid kept interrupting.

"Cardinals didn't wear black hats, JJ, they wore and still wear, red robes. Scarlet, technically. And besides, was this before or after the Dissolution of the Monasteries by Henry VIII? Your story doesn't make any sense!" It was clear he'd lost all patience with his teammate's attempt at fiction. Prentiss groaned, JJ looked hurt, and Morgan shook his head.
"Hey kid? Take off your glasses a sec, ok?"

"Huh? Why…?" Uncertain, Reid took off his glasses without waiting for an explanation, and as soon as they were safely out of the way, Morgan heaved a pillow at Reid's face, knocking him back with an 'oof'. He recovered, glaring, and threw the pillow right back- but his lack of glasses made his aim even worse, and the pillow, instead of hitting Morgan, hit Hotch square in the face.

They all froze for a moment, as Reid's brain caught up with his eyes and he clapped a hand to his mouth with a squeak of shock. Hotch picked the pillow up, looked at his, rubbed his nose with a wide grin and brought it down on Morgan's head.

"Pillow fight!" JJ shrieked, grabbing the pillow from the bed she was on and hitting Emily with it. Emily didn't just take it lying down, and soon they were both clubbing each other with pillows while Hotch and Morgan wrestled on the bed and Reid did his best to stay out of anybody's line of fire. The game temporarily changed to boys against girls, with both groups crouched behind their respective beds and pillows flying in both directions, and giggles filling the air in a way not even Morgan remembered from his actual childhood. Garcia wisely stayed out of it, but cheered them all on equally, and Rossi watched to make sure it wasn't getting too out of control. They could afford to pay for damage to the pillows, but he didn't feel like a trip to the ER tonight.

Things devolved into general chaos pretty fast, as soon as JJ decided she'd rather side with the boys and gang up on Emily, who enticed Reid over to her side and they double-teamed Morgan, who jumped on Emily and tickled her mercilessly. Rossi was just starting to think he should stop them before things got out of hand, even if they weren't technically teens, when Morgan's hands touched something they shouldn't have, and Emily's knee went up, and there was one temporarily-teenaged FBI agent curled up on the carpet, gasping in pain and swearing a blue streak, while his supposedly professional colleague alternately blushed and snickered.

"Serves you right."

"Dude! I didn't mean to and you know it! My hand slipped." Morgan glared at her through barely-open eyes. "You don't need to get violent."

"Guess I did, though." Her arms were crossed defensively; her body shouted the fact that he'd freaked her out even if her voice was covering it up reasonably well. "Don't be a baby, you've had worse."

"Children, that's enough." Rossi finally got up from the armchair and gently plucked the pillow from JJ, who was sitting on Reid, assisted by Hotch in subduing him. "Up you get, kitten. Leave him alone." He didn't miss the quickly-disguised flash of fear on Hotch's face, the defensive anger on Emily's or Morgan's distress, both physical and emotional. "I think you've all had enough excitement for one evening, right? Maybe we should separate to our own rooms now."

"Not a bad idea, there. Come on, Em, let's clean up here so you girls don't have to sleep with the mess." Garcia crouched by Morgan. "You ok, babycakes?"

"I think so. No permanent damage." For her, he managed a wan smile. "I'm going to sleep." He got to his feet, wincing. Emily, hands full of empty paper cups, stopped him with one hand on his arm.

"I'm sorry, ok? Too well-trained, I really didn't mean to. I had certain moves pretty well drilled into me as a child, as an abduction risk." Moves she had never had to use as a child, and never wanted to use as a teen, because using her body to get what she wanted had made sense back then. But she didn't want to respond that way to her teammates, hormones or no hormones, not ever. The shock of instinctively wanting to respond, of enjoying the fact that his hand 'slipped', even though she..."
was sure it really had been unintentional, was what made her lash out. "You gonna be ok?"

"Yes, I'll be fine." He didn't look her in the eye, and that hurt, but he had every right to do that. "That's a seriously lethal knee you have there."

"Um. Thanks?" She must've looked as awkward as she felt because he laughed, and suddenly things were closer to ok again. "I'll see you in the morning?"

"Bright and early or I'm claiming your pancakes." He promised, and closed the door quietly behind him. Emily looked at the others and to her extreme embarrassment felt tears rising in her eyes, and quickly looked away. They all looked either shocked or worried or, in Reid's case, both of those and a little bit wary as well. She sat down heavily on the bed and buried her face in her hands.

"Please, please stop it with the puppy eyes. It was an accident. I didn't mean to!"

"We know, Em." Hotch sounded gentle, and enough like himself that she dared to look up. "Nobody's blaming you. It's just...Maybe we should try to act our actual, real ages from now on, and not the age we are now?" Emily shrunk into herself, mortified, and Garcia hugged her shoulders.

"Pillow fights used to be a lot safer. Granted, I haven't had one that involved boys who weren't related to me since I was about six, so maybe it's just the co-ed ones that are risky. It happens, sweetie, and it's ok. You'll be back to normal in the morning."

"Yeah, what passes for normal now." She replied bitterly, then decided to shut up now because everyone could hear she was about to cry and she couldn't handle that right now. "Let's just go to sleep."

"Yup. Let's go, Hotch." Rossi steered him out with a hand on his shoulder, knowing he wanted to stay and sort it out, but couldn't. Or rather, in this case, shouldn't. "Come on, Reid. Another long day tomorrow." Reluctantly, both boys followed him. Rossi waited for Reid to go into his and Morgan's room before continuing on to his own room. "I don't have to drag you in here, do I?"

"No." Hotch was pretty sure he was about to be lectured at best, and braced himself accordingly. When the door closed behind them he threw himself on the bed. "Can you save it for tomorrow?"

Rossi tilted his head and turned the tiny coffeemaker on, figuring he was nowhere near the end of his day, regardless of the others. "Save what?"

"Whatever you're about to say." Hotch spoke into the pillow, aware that he sounded exactly as old as he looked but too drained to care.

"I wasn't about to say anything. I know you'd like to help her, we both know you can't, right now, and it's pissing you off. Nothing more needs to be said." Rossi moved around the room as he spoke, looking through his bag, getting the packet of his favorite coffee that was a permanent part of his travelling kit.

"Ok." Hotch didn't believe him, but he was willing to let it go. He'd had too many difficult conversations today already. "God. I haven't called Jack." And it was way too late now. "Damnit. First thing in the morning."

"I'll remind you." Rossi nodded behind him. "Coffee?"

"Not unless you want to keep me awake 'til about 3." It was late for coffee even for an adult. "You're expecting something to happen?"
"I'm expecting the unexpected, let's say." Mysterious Rossi was almost as bad as smug know-it-all Rossi, and Hotch grit his teeth and refused to ask further. "You want the shower first?"

"I guess." With an effort, Hotch rolled to his feet. He was a lot more tired than he usually was at this hour, but it had been a hard day. He got clean clothes from his bag and headed to the bathroom. Rossi's words stopped him with his hand on the doorknob.

"You had fun this evening. Playing with the others."

Was it a trick question? Hotch was silent for a moment, thinking about it. "Yeah. I think I did."

Rossi smiled. "Good. You should do it more often." He turned serious again, "There's nothing wrong with relaxing and letting go for a while. We're watching each other, we won't let you lose too much of yourselves. But you're allowed to enjoy yourself. It's not all bad."

Hotch didn't answer, but as he closed the door behind him and turned the water on he thought that hell, maybe it really wasn't all bad. The thought made him smile, just a little.

As soon as the boys were gone Emily went into the bathroom and slammed the door behind her. JJ swallowed hard and looked at Garcia uncertainly. "Should we, uh-?"

"We should finish cleaning up, hon." The older woman said decisively. "Let's let Emily calm down on her own, ok? We won't help if we crowd her. When she comes out though, she's fair game." She started piling pizza boxes and ice cream cups into a trash bag.

"Ok." Still hesitant, JJ helped her restore the room to something like neatness. "It was all going so well, everyone was having fun, and it just..." There was something very close to a wail in her voice, and she pulled herself short and made an effort to sound mature again. "Why can't it ever go right, PG? Teens are so damn difficult." Her little hands clenched into fists and Garcia had to turn a laugh into a cough.

"That they are, sweetpea. But they'll get over it, both of them. And all the rest of you, too. By tomorrow we might even know how to get you back to normal."

"By tomorrow I'll have to call Will." JJ reminded her. "I've texted him a few times so he knows I'm ok and very busy, but I need to hear his voice. I need to know something's still normal."

"He'll understand, babe. Remember he's from New Orleans. He's...open minded."

"Not open minded enough to wait another seven years 'til I'm legal again." JJ sighed. "At least, I hope he's smarter than that."

"Jaje, you're worth the wait." Garcia hugged her. "And besides, it won't be seven years. Now, d'you want to use the shower in my room, or try to see if Emily's ready to come out?"

"I can hear you, you know." Emily's voice floated to them, a little scratchy but steady. "I'm already here so I'm gonna shower first, ok? I'm alright. I just feel like an idiot. I'll apologize to Morgan in the morning."

"I'm sure he'll be in a forgiving mood, he knows you didn't do it on purpose." Garcia leaned against the door. "You'll be ok tonight? I'm right next door if you need anything."

"I'll be ok. We both will." She actually sounded like she meant it. "Right, Jaje?"

"Yeah." If Emily was ok, then JJ was too, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. "We'll be
"Kids need more sleep than adults do. You're using up a lot of energy just growing, you know." At JJ's scowl, Garcia laughed. "It's true, ask any parenting book."

"Fine." She pouted. "Then I'm going to sleep." She could shower in the morning anyway. "Night, PG. Thanks for today."

"You're ever so welcome, sweetpea." Garcia wasn't sure it was safe to leave them alone yet, but decided it was worth the risk. They couldn't watch over the team all the time, they all needed time to themselves, herself included. She was pretty bushed as well. "Night, ladies. I'll see you in the morning."

When Reid entered his room, it was pitch dark inside. Fortunately there was light coming in from the hall, but still he hesitated before tiptoeing into the room and turning on the bedside light on his side of the room. The Morgan-shaped lump in the other bed rolled over and threw a hand over his face. "Turnitoff."

"In a moment." As quietly as he could Reid stripped and pulled on a t-shirt, brushed his teeth and climbed into bed. He left the bathroom light on and the door slightly open, and turned off the bedside light. Moments later he heard Morgan get up, a 'click', and when he opened his eyes the room was completely dark again. "Could- could we leave a light on?"

"Can't sleep with the light on." Morgan sounded belligerent, so Reid didn't point out that they'd had some light in the room the previous night with no complaints. "Just go to sleep, kid. It's dark behind your eyelids anyway."

"I- I can't." It didn't matter that Morgan was there with him, the darkness was still terrifying. "Please, Morgan. Can't we just leave a window open?" There was enough ambient light from the highway to keep him calm.

"No, it means we'll both wake up at 5:30 when the sun comes up, like we did today." Now Morgan was impatient. "Kid, seriously, just let it go." There was a longish silence, and finally Reid stood up, turned on the bedside light and took his go-bag. "What're you doing?"

"Moving to my own room." Reid said reasonably. "I need that light to sleep." He hated that Morgan was forcing him to say it, seeing as his teammate already knew he hated the dark. "Good night, Morgan."

"Jeez, kid, dramatic much? Get back into bed, I'll leave the damn light on for you. We checked out of the others rooms anyway." Morgan got up as well, glowering, and opened the bathroom door a crack. Reid hid a sigh of relief, because even as an adult he didn't like getting to know a new room when he was really tired and it was really dark and quiet, and crawled back under the covers. "Thanks. Night."

"Night, kid." Ten minutes later, Reid was breathing deeply, evenly, most definitely asleep. He didn't hear Morgan get up to turn off the bathroom light, and didn't notice the growing darkness in the room.

It started like a normal dream, one with the usual dissected bodies, cult leaders, and running down endless corridors after an unsub that was probably behind her, chasing her, rather than being chased. But then it changed, because the stitch in her side from running turned into an agonizing cramp in her lower stomach, and she stumbled to her knees, clutching her middle and gasping for
breath through the tearing pain. There was a rush of wetness under her, and all she could see was her own blood, and the cramps like a knife, twisting in her, and the stream of blood draining her of life, except it wasn't draining her, was it? Not, it was somebody else's life's, someone else's blood flowing out of her, and it hurt more than she could've imagined, more than she could remember it hurting, and—"

"Emily!" Something stung her face and she bolted awake with a cry of pain and shock, curled up into a tight ball in the middle of her bed. All the lights were on and two blonde heads were looking down at her. She kept staring at them until her eyes misted over, then tucked her head down so they wouldn't see the tears roll down her face. She couldn't breathe. "Oh, honey…” She felt warm arms around her, and as the dream slowly dissipated she started shivering, hard enough that it felt like she'd fly apart.

"She was crying, screaming and I couldn't wake her up." JJ's voice sounded high and panicky, and Emily couldn't find the words to reassure her because she couldn't even calm herself down, never mind anybody else.

"I know, sweetie, but it's ok now. She's awake, right Em? Stay with me here, honey." Garcia had the words, and that saved Emily from having to repeat them. She opened her mouth to say that yes, she was fine, it'd just been a dream, when another cramp caught her and the words turned into a choked cry of pain.

"Hurtssss…God, it hurts, make it stop please, I didn't mean to, but I had to- I didn't take a pill, I couldn't, gotta stay clear headed, but it freakin' hurts-" She was babbling, sobbing into Garcia's lap, and even JJ's arms around her from behind didn't help calm her down. It hurt and hurt and went on hurting until finally, it didn't anymore. Slowly her hysteria wore down into ragged sobbing, and then even that stopped, turned into shivery breathing that became calmer and calmer. She could feel JJ trembling against her back, heard her own whimpers echoed from her younger friend, and finally pulled away from both of them, working up the energy to speak. "W-why are you crying, baby?"

"B-because you were." JJ sniffled. "And you were screaming and wouldn't stop. I thought you were dying." She wiped her eyes on the back of her hand. "Have you had your appendix taken out?"

The sudden, adult question surprised a shaky laugh out of both Emily and Garcia. Emily took a deep breath.

"When I was eight. It's not that." Tears were still sliding slowly down her face and soaking into the collar of her shirt. "And I'm not dying. At the time I sort of wished I was, though." At the time she'd allowed Matthew to drug her out of her mind in the two weeks it took her body to recover from the abortion. Now she was dealing with it without the benefits of chemical assistance. She was sore right now, but could feel no wetness now she was awake, so it wasn't all physiological, at least. "Sorry I scared you."

"Not to worry." Garcia stroked her hair. "Wanna talk about it? And does either of you have tissues?"

"There's a box in the bathroom." JJ scampered off the bed and returned with them, and all three women helped themselves, since Garcia was a little tearful as well. "What happened, Em? You scared the hell outta me."

"I'm sorry. It's just-" She owed them an explanation, didn't she? With a sigh and a few very simple sentences, Emily set out the story. Rome, the pregnancy, the priest, Matthew, and the abortion. "As
far as I can tell, my body thinks it was maybe a week ago. Maybe less. And it was far from legal and professional, at the time. So, well…Took me a while to recover." She was crying again, or still, and JJ was sniffling again.

"God- I'm so sorry. Sorry that you had to go through that so young, and alone." Garcia gathered her into a hug again, and moved one arm to let JJ join them. "It still hurts?"

"Yeah. I'm- I'm taking painkillers, but I'm trying to limit myself. Shouldn't overdo the Advil, you know? The last thing I need is to come out of this with a dependency." The warm solidity of friends around her helped, warmed her right down to her soul, and she let herself be held and comforted in a way she hadn't let anybody hold her since that time in Rome. "M-my parents never knew, of course."

"Of course." Garcia wiped her eyes delicately with a tissue. "You should take something now, to help you sleep. And if this continues tomorrow I'm taking you to a doctor, sweetie. I can whip you up records and insurance, no problem. You can't just let it keep hurting. Were you on meds, back then?"

"Antibiotics." She nodded. "And painkillers, lots and lots of them. I spent about a week in a Nyquil haze. Not an option right now."

"Not really, no. Tomorrow, doctor. Ok?"

"We'll see." It was nice that someone cared enough to want to go with her, anyway. "I woke you both up, didn't I? I'm sorry." She reached into her handbag at the side of the bed and found her Advil and a bottle of water.

"Don't be. You don't have to do this alone." JJ told her firmly, shaking her head, and Garcia echoed her. "But we should try to get back to sleep. It's like 2 am."

"It is?" Emily checked her watch. "Shit. Beds, all of us."

"Anything at all, no matter the hour, you call me, ok?" Garcia dropped a kiss on JJ's head and then on Emily's, ignoring her embarrassment. "If not, I'll see you in the morning."

"Night Garcia. And thanks." Emily lay back, wide awake but exhausted, feeling the pain recede slowly. JJ reached out for her hand again, and Emily laced their fingers together and squeezed. "Thanks, Jaje."

"Anytime, Em." JJ sounded half asleep already. "Sleep?"

"Yeah, baby. Sleeping." And finally, she did just that.

Coming out of the girls' room, Garcia ran into Rossi. Her face clearly showed the marks of the past hour, because his first words were "What's wrong?"

"Nothing more than the usual." She answered, shaking her head slightly. "Emily had a nightmare. Did you- I mean-" Emily had told them that Rossi knew, so Garcia knew it was safe to talk to him about it, but not to the others. "She's in pain, and freaked out a little. Scared JJ enough that she came to call me."

"I'm glad she did." Rossi squeezed her shoulder. "Are they ok now?"

"Yeah, I hope so. Calmer, anyway." She nodded.
"And are you ok, Garcia?" He asked, perceptive as ever, and she shook her head slowly.

"I feel so bad for her. For all of them. And to think that she had to go through it alone the first time around? I could strangle the Ambassador, diplomatic immunity be damned." She felt her fists clenching with helpless anger at the unfairness of it all. "What are you doing out here at this hour?"

"Patrol." He shrugged. "I heard a noise and came to check it out. Good thing I did, isn't it?"

"Kinda." She smiled, still shaken by the whole experience. "Hotch asleep?"

"Finally, yeah. Took him a while to wind down." He nodded. "I take it I don't have to look in on the girls?"

"Nope. Let them sleep, they're going to need it tomorrow." The two of them would need it as well. "Morgan and Reid?"

"My next stop. You can go ahead, though, I'm sure they're fine." Given Morgan's state earlier he wasn't sure of any such thing, actually, but it was three hours at least since they'd split up, and if nothing had happened yet then maybe they'd get a quiet night now. He was glad he'd kept the spare keycards to everybody else's rooms as well as his own.

"I'll stay. My chocolate muffin was a bit upset earlier, I want to be absolutely sure he's ok." Garcia stood behind Rossi's shoulder as he carefully pushed the door to the boys' room open. The room was dark, and from the light snoring Morgan seemed to be dead to the world. From the bed closer to the door, though, wide awake eyes reflected the light from the corridor. It was clear it wasn't the door opening that woke him up.

"Reid?" Rossi spoke very quietly, and the boy blinked at him and put a finger to his lips. "Yeah, we don't want to wake Morgan. You ok?" Hesitation, then a headshake. "Wanna come out here?" Less than a second later, Reid was out in the corridor, having slipped out of bed silently and shot across the distance between them. He leaned against the wall and in the full light of the corridor Rossi could see the tear tracks on his face. He slid down the wall to sit on the floor and pulled his knees up to his chest. "Penelope, why don't you go to bed? I'll handle this." At least one of them needed to sleep. She looked down at Reid than up at him, concern written all over her face.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I've got it. Besides, you've dealt with your crisis for the night." He waved her off and she disappeared into her own room. Now that they were alone, Rossi crouched down to Reid's level. "Can we take this into a room, or do you want to stay here?" The boy struggled for a moment, obviously fighting more- and louder- tears. "Take your time, it's ok."

"Room's ok." He said at last. "Not back there though. Gonna wake Morgan up." His voice hitched twice, and trailed off into the inaudible range towards the end.

"Yeah, and not mine either, Hotch gets grumpy when you wake him up, apparently," Damn, and they'd checked out of the two rooms they weren't using. "Guess we're stuck here for now. I'm going to need you to help me up later." Rossi groaned as his knees protested sitting on the floor. "Now, talk to me kiddo."

"'S nothing." Reid looked away. "Jus' a dream." He should've been used to dreams, he had nightmares at least once a week, this wasn't unusual, but his brain was clearly not responding as it usually did to the stimuli from the dream. "It was dark." He explained, aware that it wasn't an explanation, but he could feel tears threatening again, or still, and crying in front of Rossi was
completely unacceptable. That his older teammate was being exceptionally nice was only making it harder, of course.

"In the dream?"

"There too." It was usually dark in his dreams, deep hellish blackness that hid monsters and people who were worse than any monster his imagination could generate. Darkness and the smell of fire and burning flesh. "But then I woke up and it was still dark." He couldn't breathe; even with the harsh light in the corridor, he could feel the darkness pressing in on him from all sides. He'd laid awake for what felt like hours, afraid to move or make a sound, holding so still and quiet that his own heartbeat sounded too-loud, too scared even to cry. He curled up into himself, ashamed but too miserable to care much. At least at home the nightmares ended when he woke up. Most of the time, anyway. But at home nobody turned off the lights, either. It was something of a betrayal, and that was pretty much what pushed him over the edge, that flare of hurt and anger. "He- He turned the light off." He stuttered, tears filling his eyes and spilling over against his will. "I couldn't- get back to sleep. I t-tried."

"Shh…I'm sure you tried, kiddo. Calm down," Rossi never wanted to have kids, and certainly not five at once and all at the worst possible age to be. But he couldn't see any of them so unhappy, especially over something that could've been fixed so easily…He quenched a spark of irritation with Morgan- Reid wasn't comfortable with darkness even as an adult, and clearly wasn't much different as a child. He contemplated Reid's trembling form for a moment, then patted his shoulder carefully. A hug might be called for here, but he liked the shirt he was wearing and didn't want to get tears and snot all over it, and Reid was even less comfortable with hugs than Hotch was. "Take a deep breath, you're ok now. You can come sleep in our room, the sofa's big enough for you, right?"

"Yeah." He didn't want to sleep on the sofa, but going back into his room wasn't an option, unless he could turn the light on without waking Morgan, and he didn't want to risk it. It could only end in a fight, and fights always ended badly. He wiped his face as discreetly as he could, only making more of a mess than before. Rossi noticed his hesitation.

"You wanna go back to your own room? I'll turn the light on in the bathroom for you."

"It'll wake Morgan up. Doesn't matter." He was tired enough to sleep just about anywhere, frankly, but only where he felt safe, and that room, with its rustles in the darkness that he already knew too well, wasn't safe anymore. He stood up, setting his jaw and squaring his shoulders as best he could. Rossi pushed himself to his feet as well, grimacing at the creaking of his knees. "You ok?"

"My knees are too old for sitting on the floor. And should I be asking you that, Reid? D'you want to talk about it?" Reid shook his head frantically. He definitely did not want to talk about it, thank you. "Ok. But you'll be able to sleep? You're going to need it."

"Yeah. I can sleep." He was almost back to normal now, the terror fading away from the back of his mind, feeling stupid and too young and useless. "I'm sorry."

"You don't need to be. It's not your fault. We all have nightmares, it happens. It's nicer to have someone to support you when it happens, though."

"No it isn't." It was private, and he hated to let others see him like that. Especially Rossi, although maybe Hotch would've been worse. And Morgan worse than both of them, because Morgan teased. Altogether it would've been better to be alone. "I'd have gone back to sleep again 'ventually." He was aware of his own linguistic patterns changing, the words less exact, the syntax simpler. It wasn't helping him feel better.
"No you wouldn't have." Rossi contradicted without a trace of judgment in his voice, and Reid knew he was right, that he'd have stayed awake and terrified all night, in all likelihood, or until he gathered enough nerve to reach out of bed and turn on the light, which would've led to a fight with Morgan. It all spun back to that. He took a deep breath.

"I'm not sharing tomorrow night. If we're still like this." He clarified. "I'm not sharing."

"Tomorrow night we'll be in family suites." Rossi slid the key card into his door. "You won't be sharing with Morgan, or at least not only with him. We'll discuss it in the morning, ok? Let's see if we can avoid waking Hotch."

"I should wash my face." He didn't want to go to sleep like this. "I'll be quiet, 'kay?"

"Sure, kiddo. Go ahead." Rossi found a spare blanket and they both moved as quietly as he could, Reid to the bathroom, where he carefully closed the door behind him. Hotch twitched a little, opening one eye and subsiding as Rossi waved him back to sleep. "It's ok, nothing's wrong. Sleep."

Reid tiptoed out of the bathroom, his hair hanging wet around his face, but cleaner than he'd been. He got on the sofa, which was just long enough to be comfortable for him. "Smells like coffee." He observed quietly, keeping a wary eye on Hotch.

"Yeah it does." Rossi stopped at his side, smoothing the hair out of his eyes. "You gonna be ok, kid? Garcia won't forget me if I don't take good care of you."

"I'm ok." He had to be brave and adult and- Reid recognized the thoughts, too familiar as the ones he'd had so often after his dad had left and he had to take care of his mother instead of the other way around. "I'll be fine." He promised, and tried to mean it.

"Good. Now shh, go to sleep." Rossi squeezed his shoulder, then got into his own bed, finally, at long last. He was asleep in seconds. The window was open, and a lone streetlight shone by it, so it was far from fully dark. Reid curled up under the blanket, almost too tired to sleep and too buzzed from fear to calm down quickly. He focused on matching his breathing to the others- deep, even, steady- reassuring. Still, the last time he checked his watch before sleep finally claimed him, it was just after four. It was going to be a very long day.
Fieldtrip

Chapter Summary

The kids go 'splorin', and teen tempers start to flare.

Habit woke Derek Morgan up, and for a moment he wasn't sure what time it was, where he was, or even entirely who he was. He stretched, noticed that his feet didn't reach the end of the bed, and everything came rushing back, jerking him awake. He groaned and blinked, straining to see the glowing display on his watch in the dim sunlight that showed through the closed blinds. Just past 7 am. He turned over and stopped short- the bed next to him was empty. "Reid?" He cleared his throat and rolled out of bed. "Kid, you here?" There was nobody in the bathroom, and as Morgan pulled the blinds open, flooding the room with light, he came to the conclusion that he was alone. Alone was very bad. He pulled some pants on as he went, knocking on Rossi's door with worry curling in his stomach.

Rossi opened the door a moment later in his pajamas, looking rumpled and half asleep and grumpy. "Morgan? What's wrong?"

"Reid's disappeared. He's not in our room, and-"

"He's here." Rossi's flat response, and his irritated tone, stopped Morgan cold. "He's safe and asleep and he should stay that way for at least another couple hours. You guys have a late start today, take advantage of it. Go back to bed."

"Why is he here?" Morgan frowned, suspicious. Rossi glared at him.

"Because he had a nightmare, Derek, and he came here. Let it go, and either go get breakfast or back to sleep." He checked his watch. "Damn. I have to be at the station at nine. Might as well stay awake." He hated short nights, and this one had been both short and busy. Glancing back, he saw Hotch scrubbing at his eyes, waking up, and signaled for him to be quiet. Hotch looked around, focused on the blanket-covered guest on their sofa and raised a questioning eyebrow. Rossi shook his head, dismissing the question for the moment. "I'll meet you down in the hotel restaurant in twenty minutes, ok?"

"Thirty?" Still confused and worried, Morgan waited for Rossi's nod and closed the door. Nightmares happened, but why would Reid leave the room over that? They all got them, he shouldn't have been embarrassed...It was worrying, to say the least. But it wasn't an emergency, clearly, so he let it go for the moment.

"Why is Reid here?" Hotch asked quietly, looking at the boy to make sure he wasn't about to wake up. It didn't look like it- Reid was clutching the edge of his blanket with one hand, and the thumb of the other hand was stuck firmly in his mouth. Hotch frowned. "What happened?"

"He had a nightmare, I guess Morgan turned off the light in their room, and Reid got a little scared. He didn't want to go back there so I brought him here. Let him sleep on, you have no reason to rush this morning and he was up pretty late." Rossi stretched. "I'm gonna shower. Join us for breakfast?"

"Morgan knows Reid's afraid of the dark." Hotch's whisper held growing anger, and Reid stirred,
turning over and drawing the blanket over his head. Hotch glanced at him guiltily.

"Never mind. Breakfast?" Rossi was annoyed as well, but this was neither the time nor the place.

"Yeah. I'll get dressed." Not having to get up immediately wasn't a familiar sensation, and Hotch found he rather liked it. He could take another five minutes to just enjoy it.

"Good. Wake Reid up just enough to explain that we're going down so he won't worry if he wakes up alone?" Hotch nodded and Rossi escaped into the privacy of the bathroom, where he could feel like himself and not like somebody's dad for a few minutes. He wasn't sure what he'd done in a previous life to deserve this, good or bad, and figured that as karma went, this was pretty vindictive. They just had to get through the day, solve the case, get back to normal and then he promised himself a vacation. A long one.

"Reid? Spencer, wake up a sec." Hotch shook Reid's shoulder carefully. Blinking, the boy turned over and gave him a bleary, confused look. He wasn't sure why he was here, or why Hotch was shaking him, and where were his glasses?

"'M I gonna be late for school?" It was obviously morning, and morning meant school. But he was so tired, it felt like he hadn't gotten any sleep at all. Hotch held him down, not hard enough for it to register as a threat.

"No school, Reid. Remember, we're in Missouri on a case, and the unsub turned us all into teenagers. Remember?" This too-natural reaction scared Hotch, but Reid blinked again and there was adult recognition in his eyes.

"I remember. Are we going to the station?" He remembered, yes, but it was far easier to remember that he needed to catch the bus to school than that he needed to catch a child rapist and killer.

"No, Rossi's going alone. We're going to breakfast, but he said you can stay and sleep in if you like. Just don't freak if you wake up and we're not here." Reid looked so young and his eyes were red and Hotch worried about him and about all of them.

"I'll come with you." He struggled to get up, and Hotch's hand on his shoulder exerted a little more pressure, easily keeping him down.

"Stay, and sleep." He said firmly. "That's an order, Dr. Reid. You're going to need it later. It's still early, you're allowed another hour at least." He gave Reid his best 'leader' look, the one that came naturally as an adult but took concentration now. But still, the look and the formal order did their job, and Reid nodded.

"Ok. Night. Or morning." He sighed sleepily, his thumb wandering up to his mouth before he caught himself and self-consciously lowered it. Hotch shook his head and got dressed, certain that he'd have his answers later. He knocked on the bathroom door.

"Dave, is it ok if I go for a run before breakfast? I'll be careful."

Rossi stuck his head out the door, half-shaved and frowning. "Strauss said no going anywhere unsupervised."

"I'm going to run around the hotel twice, Dave, not across county lines. You'll be able to see me from the window." It was such a good, reasonable argument, and after a day without exercise Hotch was twitchy and feeling half-awake because his morning routine had been disrupted.

"Take your phone." Rossi instructed. "And if Morgan wants to join you he can. Be back here by
8:15." He closed the door again. Strauss had a point, but so did Hotch, and they were big kids- big enough to let out for a run if they wanted one. Hotch grinned, pulled on his shoes, and headed downstairs. He was glad he hadn't had to argue with Rossi about buying trainers the previous day, because they'd both agreed that jeans and his shrunk-down dress shoes didn't go together. He ran into Morgan just coming out of his room.

"I'm going for a run before breakfast. Want in?"

"Rossi ok with that?" Morgan asked, and Hotch rolled his eyes.

"Yes, he's fine with it. We have until 8:15. You in or not?" They were wasting good running time here. Morgan shrugged and nodded.

"We going somewhere special?"

"Around the block, I think. I don't wanna give anybody a reason to be pissed off at us about this. It's too early for a fight."

He remembered those words as the sprinted and raced each other until they were forced to agree that they were about evenly matched, and slowed to a jog they could both sustain for a while. Remembered, and didn't give Morgan a hard time about turning off the lights, because it wasn't his fight. In fact, Hotch said almost nothing as they ran, and Morgan seemed content with the silence. They both had their thoughts to think, or to avoid thinking, in any case. After another twenty minutes or so running in circles got a bit boring, and Morgan suggested they turn back, so they did. In the hotel parking lot, Hotch stopped.

"I'm gonna stay here for a moment. Need to make a phone call."

"Oh." Morgan gave him a sympathetic look. "Ok. See ya at breakfast."

"See ya." He watched Morgan jog away, and sat down on the curb, looking intently at his mobile phone. He had to call home. For his own peace of mind, and Jessica's, because they'd texted so she knew he was alive and ok, but it wasn't enough. He wasn't used to not hearing Jack's voice more than two days in a row anymore, and it made him antsy, worried. He had to call. "E.T. phone home." He said to himself, smiling a little. He hadn't been much older than he now was when that movie had come out. Bracing as if for a high-speed impact, he hit speed dial. Jessica answered on the second ring. "Jess?"

"Yes? Who is this please?"

"Jess, it's Aaron. I know I sound kind of strange, but...it's a very long story." And one better explained on a video call, which his home phone wasn't equipped for. "I just wanted to let you know I'm alright and make sure Jack was, as well." He tried to pitch his voice as low as it was willing to go, but it was still clearly not an adult voice, and Jess turned hostile.

"No, Jess, it's really me. Listen- I met Haley in high school, joined the drama club and the school production to be close to her. You used to wear your hair in this crazy high ponytail back then, with huge ribbons because you thought it was cute, and you were thirteen, so it was, somehow. Uh- Haley was killed by George Foyet six months ago." He could say that now, and it only hurt a little. "Jack's favorite TV show is Dora the Explorer, which we both hate but let him watch anyway because it's supposed to be educational, and-"

"Ok, ok, you can stop. I think I believe you." There were people who could know one or two of
those facts, but all three? Farfetched. "But I'll need more details."

"You're going to have to keep a very open mind, here." He had to tell her, if only because there was a chance they would have to go home before they went back to their adult selves, and he wanted to give her (and himself) time to get used to the idea. "Just...Let me talk and don't stop me, ok? No matter how impossible it sounds." In very simple terms, he gave her a summary of the past day and a half. "And that's why I sound funny. I can even send you a photo." It was a bit of luck that she'd known him for so long, as he hadn't changed that much between 15 and 17.

"Ok...You're right, it sounds impossible. Are you sure you're not injured and hallucinating?"

"Probably not, unless everybody else is sharing the same illusion. Anyway, I just- I need to talk to Jack, and I don't want to scare or confuse him, but I have no idea how long I'm going to stay like this- and we do have a case to work." He had to concentrate on that. Solve the case and all the rest of their problems would be resolved. "I just need to hear his voice." To know that this one precious thing was still normal.

"Aaron, are you sure you should? He's old enough that he'll know something's off." Jessica hesitated, and Hotch understood her entirely. She was right, but he really had to try.

"I may have to explain it to him eventually anyway. I'll tell him I have a cold or something- if I explain on the phone it'll just confuse him more."

"You got that right. Well, good luck. Jack, wanna talk to daddy?"

Hotch braced himself again, but wasn't ready for the joy and relief of hearing his son's voice. "Daddy!"

"Hey buddy." He didn't even have to work for his voice to come out gruffer. "How're you doing?"

"Ok. You sound funny, daddy."

"I know, I have a bit of a cold. Remember how you sounded funny when your nose was all stuffed up?"

"Uh huh." The boy sounded happy and healthy, which had an immediate cheering effect on Hotch. "Do you have to drink awful syrup?"

"Yeah." Hotch chuckled. "Really icky syrup. But I'll be better in no time, I promise."

"When're you comin' home, daddy?" The million dollar question, the one Jack seemed to ask almost as often as 'why' these days, as he was in that stage of eternal curiosity.

"As soon as I can, buddy. I'm chasing a bad guy, and I'll come home when I've caught him. You be good for your aunt, ok?"

"Uh huh. Go catch the bad guys." Imperious as only a six year old could be.

"Will do. I love you, buddy."

"Love you too daddy." Jack handed the phone back to Jessica and Hotch took a deep breath, settling himself.

"I'll try to call again tonight, as soon as we know more."

"Ok, Aaron. Good luck. And text me that photo, I want proof, if only so we can laugh about this fit
of insanity later."

"Ok, will do. And Jess? Thank you. A lot."

"Anytime. Now do as your son says and go catch a bad guy."

"Gone. We'll talk." He hung up and closed his eyes, relief and worry equally threatening to overwhelm him. But at least he wasn't dreading this call anymore. And he had less than five minutes to clean up and make it to breakfast. Fortunately when he went upstairs, nobody was in the restaurant yet- in fact, they were all in Garcia's room, crowded around a computer, all of them including Reid, who looked sleepy, and Emily who looked even worse. Hotch gathered that some people had had rough nights. Even Garcia was looking tired, but she was also typing furiously and very excited about something.

"What's up?" He asked JJ, who was closest to the door. She waved him over, grinning.

"Garcia got some answers from her contacts! And one from Strauss, somebody worked really fast tonight." Now that he looked at JJ more carefully, she looked tired as well.

"What did they say?" It looked like Garcia was only now putting all the information together and cross referencing, so the others didn't know more than he did, so far.

"Patience, grasshopper. Let me see what they all agree on, for a start." She tapped a few more keys with a flourish and spun around, presenting the screen. "Morning, Hotch. Ok, here goes. All three of my super-secret consultants agree that the symbols carved into the victims' bodies mean 'permanence', or 'forever', which is why the spell didn't end when they died. All three agree that it's a complicated ritual and there are about a thousand ways it could go wrong, reflect back on the caster, that sort of thing. And that every time he uses it is going to take more out of him. They say that casting it on five at once means he's probably holed up somewhere suffering from overload- except for one of them who thinks magic use at this level could also lead to a serious- well, she calls it a 'major psychic freakout', and she speaks from painful experience. The equivalent of a violent psychotic break by a guy who can call down lightning." The tech analyst winced, but typed a few more words into what Hotch assumed was a reply email. "She says if we haven't had reports of a killing spree yet, it's unlikely that happened, at least."

"Wait- he needed to add those symbols for permanence?" There was a painful note of hope in Prentiss' voice. "That means-

"Our third agreement- the spell isn't built to be permanent." Garcia confirmed, clearly as happy with that as they all were. "That's the good news, and may I say, about the best news I've had all week. The bad news is that's where the agreement ends. None of them can give me an exact duration of the spell. One of them says it probably depends on the amount of power invested, one of them thinks it should've been in the language of the spell and isn't, which is very bad news, and the third thinks it might have to do with moon phases. Like, until the next full moon, or half moon, or no moon, depends on the type of ritual used." She concluded, brow furrowed in concentration. "I have a feeling they're dumbing it down for my sake, which is a tad insulting."

"It's probably more for our benefit." Rossi looked over her shoulder, wearing a baffled expression. "Can't any of them just undo the spell?"

The big question right there. Garcia's smile drooped. "I'm afraid not. They all agree that messing with this kind of spell might have, well, unpleasant consequences." She hated giving them bad news, but all of the consultants, especially Strauss's, were very clear on that point. "They say the original caster might be able to undo it, and even that isn't certain. One of them might be available
to run what he calls a diagnostic to see if he can tell how long the effects will last, but even when we know that, there's apparently nothing to do but wait." It was still a fairly optimistic outlook. "It can just end, now, or in three hours, or in a week. In any case, no longer than a moon-cycle."

"The full moon was last week." Morgan recalled, having seen it while they were flying back from a case.

"Next completely moonless night is in eight days." Reid contributed, "And the next full moon is in 23. Lunar cycles are 28 or 29 days long, so give or take a day on both."

"So no longer than three weeks and a bit, and no less than another week?" JJ sighed. "That means I have to call Will and explain. Better do it in a video call, if I can? We have Skype at home." She looked at Garcia, who nodded.

"Sure, babycake. No problem. And yeah, from what I can tell it's not supposed to last longer than a month."

"It's something, I guess." Could've been worse. Hotch tried to read the emails, but Garcia minimized those windows and he frowned. "Anything else?"

"Some, yes. One of the contacts said that from the wording of the spell, it's not just meant to make the target younger, but also throw them to the worse time of their life, as long as they're under 18 for it." They'd theorized as much, but this was confirmation. "But she's not 100% sure of that. She said there are tag words in there for 'suffering' and 'trauma', but said it can just as easily be about the reason for casting the spell, not a qualifier of the expected result."

Morgan huffed, half laughing and half exasperated. "This is the dumbed down version? We're not Hogwarts graduates here."

"No, I think that part was just for me. You've read Harry Potter?" Garcia raised an eyebrow, grinning, and Prentiss pushed at his shoulder, grinning as well.

"No! Ok, yes. But only the first three. Four. Then it got too long and complicated. Everybody was talking about them, I wanted to see what all the noise was about." Morgan crossed his arms defensively, but nobody looked like they were going to mock him for it.

"They were a bit simplistic, but not bad." Reid shrugged. "I missed most of the hype though, only read them when the last one came out. I hate unfinished series."

"We're getting off-topic here, people." Hotch redirected their attention to Garcia and her information. "Anything else, Garcia?"

"Only one, sir." And it wasn't good, judging by her expression. "My more pessimist consultant wants to warn that it's entirely possible, uh, that if the caster- that is, the unsub- gets his hands on any of you for long enough to put the permanence runes on you, well…"

"The effect will be permanent." He finished for her, and she nodded. Then her expression turned fierce.

"But he won't get a chance to, because you'll catch him beforehand."

"We will." He promised her, and himself, because if the unsub had them long enough for that, he'd probably also have them long enough to kill them anyway. "Plans for today- Dave, you're at the station doing interviews. We'll join you after lunch and go over the results, hopefully we can put together a complete profile and start to canvass the college more extensively. Meanwhile, the rest
of us are going on a fieldtrip."

"To the college?" Morgan's eyes brightened at this chance of finally doing something useful.

"Yes. Garcia, you'll be our adult supervision? We'll work out a cover story over breakfast."

"I guess, but are you sure it's a wise idea? It'll be hard enough to explain why you five aren't in school." Garcia loved children, but she wasn't sure she could keep five of them out of trouble, especially since they were all pretty trouble-prone by nature.

"Fun day off!" JJ grinned, punching the air. That'd been Garcia's initial reaction when she'd wondered why she didn't have to go to school, when she'd woken up, before the recollection of her adult self came back. Those flashes of acting and reacting her physical age were coming more and more often, and JJ was deeply worried about that. She needed to call Will, asap, before she forgot completely. They had to untangle this mess before they all became children in mind as well as body. The fear was actually helping her retain a level of maturity, but it was getting harder. The others shot her looks ranging from the indulgent to the worried, and she shrugged them all off. They all had their problems, didn't they? She was no different.

"Pretty much what we were thinking, actually. AP class on a fieldtrip." Prentiss nodded. "JJ and Reid could pass for your…niece and nephew?"

"Good thing I'm a blonde this week." Garcia winked at them. "Ok, let's feed the troops."

Nobody needed to be told twice.

Over breakfast they worked out the final details- AP English, which they could all fake even distracted, on a fieldtrip to see a 'real community college', either as something to hope for or as a terrible warning of what might happen if they didn't work hard enough, even though Reid insisted on pointing out that community colleges sometimes had just as high an academic level as universities. Still, they all made a mental note not to use 'terrible warning' in front of the people attending the college. Reid and JJ could possibly pass for siblings if one didn't look too close, and as most people judged mainly by hair color, they could both claim a kinship with Garcia and not get too many questions asked. And kids did get fun days off from school with their aunts occasionally, didn't they?

"Never more than two." Reid said firmly. "No matter how well I can fake her signature."

"Yeah, they have people who check on you." Morgan had run into more than one of those when he'd been younger, and didn't want to repeat the experience.

"Guys- there's nobody looking for us. No school that we're missing, no moms to sign passes. Remember?" Emily snapped her fingers under Morgan's nose and he snapped his teeth at them, making her giggle and pull away.

"Right. No school, no passes, not missing anything except real life." Hotch nodded firmly. The thought was a little sad, as awful as his home life had been, as much as he'd resented his mother at times for not protecting herself or her family, he still kind of missed her. Especially now, the longing was oddly sharp- she'd been dead over a decade, and he didn't think of her all that often, most of the time. Not with the very real sense of 'wish she was here' that he was feeling now. "We need answers, people. They're counting on us for a profile, and the clock's ticking." Not that any of them needed the extra pressure.

"Although, would you really be dragging your niece and nephew to work with you, if you're a
guidance counselor?” Reid questioned, and Garcia sighed.

"If anybody looks suspicious we'll think of something else, ok? I doubt anybody'll really care that much."

"Keep your phones on you, and don't go off anywhere alone. Don't make me regret letting you out to investigate, please. Outside of movies people don't take kindly to younger people poking their nose into things." Rossi didn't like sounding so…parental, but he also didn't like the fact that Hotch and Morgan looked far too eager to be out and active. He didn't want them all to get into trouble when this was all sorted out.

"Very Scooby Doo- we'll be 'those meddling kids'." Prentiss’ eyes lit up with something that looked disturbingly like unholy glee.

"They were cartoons. They didn't even bleed when they fell from high places or got hurt in other ways." Reid reminded her. "And I don't think any of them even got shot."

"None of us are gonna get shot either." Now that they were decided, Morgan wanted to be up and moving. "The unsub's a strangler."

"For you I'm sure he'll make an exception." Emily stuck her tongue out at him and Hotch scowled.

"Not funny, Morgan. There's a very real killer out there, and this isn't a game."

"I know, Hotch. I know. Lighten up." Morgan shook his head. "You can be a real wet blanket sometimes."

"Oh yeah? Well I'm the wet blanket who's going to keep us all from getting fired over this, so listen to me for a change."

"When have I not listened to you?"

"You want a list?"

"Children!" Rossi whistled and the both jumped. Morgan leaned forward, aggressive, and Hotch glared at him, not backing down. "If you don't stop this, nobody's leaving the hotel today. Can't even trust you at the station if you're going to fight. We have to keep the locals thinking you're adults under the peach fuzz, ok? Fo-cus." Now they were both glaring at him, sullen, until Hotch pulled himself together.

"You're right. I'm sorry." He glanced sidelong at Morgan. "I shouldn't have yelled, Morgan."

"No, you're right. This is serious, we have a killer to catch." The three others, silent spectators so far, let out a sigh of relief.

"So, are we going?" JJ asked, being either the bravest or the least tactful, at the moment.

"Yeah, we're going. Um…Garcia, you drive?" None of them could, could they? Emily perked up.

"I can drive! Or at least, I could, back then."

"Well, now you can't." Rossi handed the keys to Garcia. "I don't know what the legal driving age in Rome was, but here it's more than fifteen, besides the fact that your license details and photo don't match your face."

"And that you don't have diplomatic immunity by proxy anymore." Hotch added, and she pouted,
although it was entirely true- she had taken shameless advantage of her mother's status back then, figuring that if nobody cared what she did as long as she showed up to formal events on time, sober and presentable, she'd do whatever she wanted the rest of the time. The past two days had constituted almost more 'adult supervision' than she'd ever had as a real teenager. She found it a little stifling.

"Fine. Spoilsports both of you."

"I'm too young to die." Morgan poked her in the side, "And I don't trust your driving when you aren't tall enough to see the whole back of the car in the mirror."

"Let's just go?" Reid asked hopefully. He hated it when people fought over his head, it reminded him far too vividly of his parents- and those memories were far too close to the surface for his liking. Everything about being younger was sharper today, and he was having a harder time remembering himself as a 29 year old genius instead of a ten years old one. It was disturbing to say the least. He tried not to think about the previous night, and was definitely too embarrassed about it to talk to Morgan- or to Rossi. At least neither one of them seemed likely to bring it up.

"Yeah, go already. I need to get to the station." Rossi was already late. "Garcia, keep in touch throughout the day, and the rest of you, for God's sake don't make me have to come bail you out of something." And with that, Rossi was up and away. Garcia looked at the rest of them, a bit at a loss.

"So…Fun day at the college?"

It took them a little longer than expected to get to the college. Hotch insisted on taking shotgun, Morgan disagreed and when Prentiss offered to end the argument by sitting there herself, they both shot her down and it devolved into a yelling match.

"Should've brought popcorn." JJ snickered as she and Reid watched, bright eyed.

"We just had breakfast."

"So?" They were holding hands, which neither one of them had noticed really but was comforting to them both. "Guys!" JJ's shout stopped the fight temporarily. "You're pissing Garcia off. And wasting time."

"Yup, to both of those." Garcia's smile was strained. "Emily, shotgun. Hotch and Reid take the middle bench, Morgan and JJ, far back." She didn't want the three oldest within arm's reach of each other, and this was closest to the needed distance. "Get in the car so we can move? Killer to catch, maturity to regain, move."

Grumbling, they all got in the car without further argument, which Garcia thanked her lucky stars for. Before she did, JJ squeezed her arm sympathetically. "Boys kinda suck, don't they?"

"It's a difficult age." She winked at her best friend, and eleven or no, JJ winked back. "They'll get over themselves eventually." Or at least she really hoped they would. Otherwise it would be a very long day- or a very short one, in a bad way. Finally she was behind the wheel. "Emily, you're on map duty."

"Sure. Gimme a moment." It took more than a moment, and some further grumbling from behind, but she programmed the destination into the van's GPS. "Ok, good to go. Next left and out of town."

Rossi had a feeling his coming into the police station was a surprise to some of the locals. He went
straight to Chief Matthews. "Morning."

"Morning, Agent Rossi." The policeman smiled at him, but the smile was strained. "I had a long
talk with your Chief Strauss earlier- very early, in fact."

"I'm sorry if she woke you." Just figured that Erin would mess up their relations with the locals,
even if Rossi knew she never intended to. "What did she have to say?"

"She didn't wake me actually. She said you're staying and dealing with this case, but you have
three days. And that I'm not to let any of your k- I mean, any of your team- outside unsupervised.
Especially the two of them that match the unsub's type. And that you'll be the only one dealing
with the investigation actively- interviews and the like, which I already knew but she confirmed it.
Nice to know it's on the up and up."

"You had doubts?" Rossi raised an eyebrow.

"Not as such, but we've had a few mavericks around, I had to make sure."

"Of course." There were piles of paperwork, photos and documents spread out on the desks. "What
do we have so far? Anything new today?"

"We have Mark Leibgott's girlfriend flying in this afternoon, and Nadine Law's roommate is
coming in for an interview in about an hour. I have uniforms out on campus trying to look into
Law's and Sainjon's friends, and into Carson's cafeteria colleagues. Hopefully they'll have
something. This...It's still pretty insane, Agent Rossi, if I may say so."

"You may, and I'll even agree with you. At least we're almost sure it's temporary now." He updated
the police chief about their findings about the spell, and the other man nodded.

"That's good to hear. I'm glad for your team- and for you. They look a bit exhausting."

"They're a good group, the best the BAU has, and they're holding up remarkably well so far. Trust
me, this won't affect their professionalism." He wasn't actually sure of that, considering the very
clear changes in their behavior that morning, but he had to keep acting like he believed it until he
was sure they really weren't capable of continuing. So far, as long as they were reminding of the
objective, or of their adults identity, they'd managed to pull themselves together and work. He just
hoped they wouldn't traumatize Garcia. "And we have a basic profile, more or less."

"That's good to hear. The truth is, I have two kids of my own at home, and that's exhausting
enough as it is. Having five of them at once...Can't even imagine it." Matthews shrugged. "But if
you think they can manage, and your section chief agrees, then I'm sure they can. You said you
have a profile?"

"Yeah." Several minutes later he was facing the full complement of the police staff. "Our unsub's a
white male, aged 25-35." The familiar words restored a sense of normalcy that his day so far had
 sorely missed. "He's a sexual sadist, who gets gratification from torturing and murder, and quite
likely a social outcast. He targets adults, but can't face them as adults- he's probably physically
weak or small, uncertain of himself, but against children, he's more confident." Everyone had been
brought up to speed about the magic use, and while Rossi knew most of them didn't believe it, the
evidence was hard to argue with. "We're looking at the community college as his likely base of
operations, but keeping all other options open. Please keep your eyes and ears open when you're
canvassing, we don't want to miss anything because we're too focused on one location." There were
nods around the room, and a few whispers. "Questions?"
"Where's the rest of your team?" It was a younger cop, from his haircut and general look either former military or a wannabe with a lot of football behind him. He was leering a little, and Rossi gave him his best polite-yet-superior glare.

"They're reviewing notes and trying to form a more accurate profile. They'll join me here this afternoon." There were some looks at that, and a few whispers too indistinct to respond to. The young cop's smile was anything but pleasant. "Questions about the profile? Anybody?" There weren't any. Chief Matthews dismissed them back to work.

"I just have to make a call." Rossi told him before they got down to business, and walked away from the group to call Hotch. "Hotch, there's a group of locals interviewing people and looking around the college today. Try to stay out of their way, and don't draw attention to yourselves, ok?"

"Gotcha." He could hear Hotch was still in the van, but it was fairly quiet around him. "Anything else we should keep an eye out for?"

"See if you can find any other fans of the occult around there. Marissa Sainjon, the first vic, had a persistent ex boyfriend, see if you can dig up anything more about him. And be careful."

"We will be." Hotch disconnected and raised his voice a little to draw the attention of the others in the car- Morgan and JJ were playing some sort of word game in the back, and Reid was engrossed in his tablet, reading whatever it was he had on it. "People- Dave says there are some local cops around the college, and we should try not to draw attention to ourselves. They won't appreciate us stepping on their toes."

"Hey, they invited us in." Morgan leaned over the top of the seat so they could talk without yelling. "It's not stepping on toes, it's doing our job."

"We'll see it that way, but I'm not sure the locals will. Remember, meddling kids."

"Does that mean I'm Daphne or Velma?" Prentiss wondered from the front seat. "Not that I want to be either, really…"

"Just as long as I'm not the dog." Reid said without looking up from his tablet.

"You sort of have to be, buddy." Morgan reached over and ruffled his hair, and Reid drew away sharply. "'Cause I'm not the dog, and Hotch sort of has to be Fred."

"Fine. Woof. Better the dog than the stoner who'll never go to university." Reid moved out of Morgan's reach as best he could.

"I'm not a character out of any cartoon." Hotch protested. "Especially not Scooby Doo."

"Not even Batman? You could totally pull off Batman." JJ joined the conversation, leaning over the back seat as well. Garcia, looking through the rearview mirror, whistled for attention.

"JJ! Morgan! Seatbelts right now. And you would make a pretty good Batman, boss."

"Batboy, more like." Prentiss snickered, and Hotch huffed in irritation.

"No cartoons. Unless they make a show about FBI profilers, and that's pretty heavy material for Saturday mornings."

"He has a point." Reid again. "At best, we could be comparable to the Muppet Babies."
"Except none of us are babies except you, squirt."

"Morgan, stop that. We're here." Never had Garcia said those words with more relief. "Remember, we need to convince people you are serious, responsible AP class students who're looking forward to higher education."

"We'll be good." Prentiss promised as she hopped out of the car and pulled the back door open for the others. "Nobody'll suspect we're anything but normal teens."

"You see, that's what I'm worried about." Garcia sighed. "Let's start with the library?"

"Yeah. Keep your eyes open for anything that could be connected with the case."

They walked slowly, looking around and trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, all things considered. There was no security at the gate, which was a blessing even if Garcia had their cover story down. Mostly nobody gave them a second glance, although a few people did look, but nobody commented. They stuck close together, though.

"I haven't walked a potential scene without a gun in…Never, I think." Morgan said quietly, tense for no reason he could figure out. Hotch nodded.

"I know. It's strange. But nobody's going to jump us in plain view of everybody, so relax. As far as anybody's concerned, we're kids on a fieldtrip." His shoulders were tight, like somebody was watching them, and he forced himself to relax.

"Here's the library, guys. Let's go, let's go, stay together." Garcia herded them into the library, a separate building which held only a few classrooms in the top floor. Reid's eyes lit up at the sight of all the books, although in the back of his mind he compared it to other university libraries and decided it really wasn't all that impressive. Still, he'd always felt safe in libraries.

"Can I go look around?"

"We're going as a group, don't just disappear on your own. You have your phone on you?" Just in case he decided to disappear anyway. They all still had their mobiles, and Reid patted his back pocket and nodded. "Good. Ok, let's see if there's anything interesting on the message board, see the sort of fun things you can do at a college." Garcia tried to sound chirpy and cheerful, and it wasn't that big a stretch for her, but the others were sort of playing 'bored teens' a little too well for her liking. "Guys, this might be important." She reminded them, and they did look a bit more focused.

"Mm…Yoga, Pilates, women's health, rugby tryouts- fascinating stuff." Emily drawled, looking over the board. "Spirituality, that's a bit more interesting." The flyer had bats and moons on it, and called for a neo-paganism study group on Friday nights. "This place looks pretty drowsy, activities-wise."

"I'm guessing they have a lot more online than out here." JJ tilted her head at the board. "Who uses paper flyers anymore? I mean, they do-" She grinned at a flyer for an 'adopt-a-cat' drive the next day, "but I'm sure they have a school portal with all the announcements and options." She turned around. "And there are computers there. We can go check."

"Go, JJ. Morgan, go with her." Even inside the library building, technically safe, Hotch didn't want anybody alone. "Reid, where are you going?"

"To talk to the head librarian?"
"About what? And how are you going to explain your being here?"

"About Marissa Sainjon and the occult group… I was thinking, uh, well, librarians usually like kids who're interested in books?" Reid felt a little lost, and looked it as well. On one hand, he was tempted by all those books, but on the other he wanted to get some helpful information, and the more he thought about it, the harder it looked like it'd be. They couldn't just come up to people and ask questions, they had no real right to it now. No more flashing a badge and getting answers. He hung his head. "Never mind. You're right."

"I didn't even say anything. But this is a little more complicated than usual, Reid. We have to be careful. Really careful." Two policemen walked into the library. "Like, careful enough to get out of sight right now." They got between the aisles, and watched as the two policemen walked up to the main desk. "I wish we could listen in on that."

"We could try." Prentiss suggested. "As long as they don't notice us, there's nothing stopping us from getting closer."

"Are you sure that's a good idea? They're trained to observe things." Garcia was starting to think coming here had been a terrible idea. Emily scoffed.

"They're local beat cops, they're trained to stop domestic disturbances and bring in drunks. They won't notice us." Behind her, Hotch was actually nodded, which Garcia hadn't expected. "Let's go then." Reid slunk in behind them, absent-mindedly plucking a book from one of the shelves as they went. He was already deep in it by the time they found a fairly well hidden spot they could still hear the conversation at the main desk from. The head librarian, an older, skinny woman, was clearly unhappy at being disturbed.

"Young man, I don't know what I can tell you that I haven't already said down at the station yesterday. I don't know who Marissa was friendly with, I don't know what she did after work hours, she was a very private person."

"Did you see that?" Emily whispered. "Her eyes- she was glancing over in that direction." Towards the couches for private study, where several groups were talking quietly. "One of those groups might be a lead, if she wasn't just checking to see nobody was talking too loudly."

"It's worth checking out." Hotch agreed quietly.

"What about her ex boyfriend, ma'am?" One of the policemen asked. "Is he also a student here, maybe, have you seen him since?"

"I haven't seen him since Marissa disappeared, I hope he'd simply given up. Do you think he might've hurt her, maybe?" There was a worried note in the woman's voice. "If he was a student here I never saw him in the library before she started seeing him, and even then pretty rarely, until they broke up and he started hanging around here all the time, bothering her. She was this close to trying to get a restraining order on him. He was a bad egg, young man. A very bad egg."

"Do you remember the bad egg's name, ma'am? You couldn't yesterday."

"I never knew it, actually. Marissa never called him anything other than 'my man', and when she did call him by name it was something silly and made up, like 'moonbeam' or 'rowan', so sort of frou-frou idiocy." The librarian wrinkled her nose. "Certainly not the name his mother gave him."

"Do you have any idea where we could find him?"

"None. I know they met through that neo-paganism group someone started around campus, but the
Catholic study group was up in arms about it and they went underground. Stopped handing out flyers and everything, except the one up here at the library on the board, that I made them leave here for Marissa's sake. She's a good girl, even if she gets very strange ideas. I hope she's alright and that you'll find her, officers." The woman closed her notebook with a note of finality. "And now, I'll thank you if you leave and let me do my work."

"Y-Yes ma'am." The policeman who hadn't been taking notes very quickly nodded, while the other one finished writing. "If anything else comes up, you have our number. Thank you for your time." They both left without even a glance at the BAU team, and all four heaved a sigh of relief. Or rather, all three of them did. Garcia looked around a bit wildly.

"Where's Emily?" Hotch was at her side, and Reid just a step behind them, deep in a book, and she could see Morgan and JJ at the computer stations behind them, but Emily wasn't anywhere she could see.

"She went over to the study group area." How Reid had managed to see that without apparently looking up from his reading, she wasn't sure, but Emily was definitely where he'd said she was, talking to a couple of young women, one of whom was dressed in full Goth regalia.

"I told them not to go off alone." Hotch scowled. "Fine, I'm going to get her back. You two go see what Morgan and JJ came up with." He marched over to the study group area and grabbed Prentiss's arm. "Emily, we gotta go."

She turned to him angrily and pulled away from his hold. "Don't touch me, you preppy creep." She gave the other girls a long-suffering look. "See? I told you they're cramping my style here. I can't wait to get to college already."

"Well, if we get into trouble now, your chances are going to drop really low, Em." She reminded her through clenched teeth. He knew, in the back of his mind, that she was trying to build a rapport with the two girls most likely to know where the occult study group was meeting, but she was also defying him, and that pissed him off. "Come on already!"

"Lay off, Aaron." She sneered. "I'm talking to people who're actual real grown-ups and mature enough to act it." She stressed the two words, and he was stunned enough at the use of his first name, even though it made perfect sense in context, that he dropped back a step. "I'll be right back, ok? Tell Miss Garcia not to get her panties in a twist." With an expressive eyeroll, she proceeded to ignore him and return to the two women. "Now that the jerk's been taken care of…"

"Hey!"

"Like I said, I can't wait to get to college. Is it true they teach, like, ancient languages and mythology and stuff? I saw a flyer for an occult group, do you know anything about that?" She sounded genuinely excited, and the two girls didn't even blink at her eagerness.

"We're not allowed to do that officially anymore. We're working together an appeal about our rights being infringed." The one dressed more or less normally replied. "But if you're interested…"

Her friend elbowed her.

"She's too young, Donna."

"I'm seventeen." Emily was clearly trying to make herself look taller, "And I-" She glared at Hotch and lowered her voice, "I have an ID that says I'm 19, too."

The first girl, Donna, snickered. "I'll just bet you do, babe. You got a cell phone?"
"Yeah." Prentiss presented it proudly. "Gimme your number?"

"You give us yours. I'll text you where we're meeting this afternoon." Donna promised.

"How do you I know you won't just drag me somewhere dark and isolated and kill me?"
Nevertheless, Emily was already programming her number into Donna's phone. The second girl laughed.

"I love the way you think, kid. Emily, right?"

"Yup. And trust me, this is just my school outfit." Black on black, spiky hair and all, Emily still wasn't anywhere near as overtly into the Goth style as she had been at school. "Wait 'til you see what I can do when I'm not getting credits for this stupid fieldtrip." She winked. "So, no creepy dark places and ritual murders?"

"Nope. Just inner wisdom and maybe a beer." Donna promised. There was very little of the sinister about the girls, and Emily's profiler senses weren't tingling at all- when she remembered to see if they even worked anymore. "Here's my number." Donna programmed hers into Emily's phone.

"You gonna be ok getting away from home?"

"Yeah, nobody cares where I am as long as I'm back by curfew." Actually, Emily had never had a curfew, but she knew it was traditional and would make sense.

"If you're done making new friends, can we go already? Miss Garcia'll come looking for us any second now, you know how she is about schedules." Hotch glared at the two women and at Emily alternately, radiating impatience and irritation.

"Geez, alright already. I'm coming. Jerk. Later, ladies!" With a cheerful wave, Emily followed Hotch towards the exit. "You could've toned down the show a little." She said in undertone.

"What show? What the hell were you thinking?" The others were waiting for them outside the library, and when they reached the group Hotch spun on her, eyes blazing. "What part of 'no going off alone' did you not understand, Agent Prentiss? What was that, right now?" He'd grabbed her arm again.

"That was me getting a lead to Marissa Sainjon's ex boyfriend! Getting an in to that occult group! And let go of my arm before you lose that hand, Hotch." She was vibrating with rage, two bright spots of color in her cheeks.

"Whoa, whoa, guys-" Morgan tried to pull them apart and they both turned on him, Hotch going as far as to push him away.

"You stay out of this!" They said almost in unison, and Hotch added "I'll deal with this. Prentiss, what were you thinking?"

"I was thinking we're on a deadline and we need to see who in this hellhole of a town thinks they can do magic." Aware of potential listeners around them, Emily kept her voice low but she was clearly furious. "One of them may know our unsub."

"One of them might be our unsub, did you think of that?" Hotch spat back.

"Wait, what happened back there?" JJ asked, watching both of them like they were poisonous snakes who might turn on her without warning. "Both of you calm down and explain. Morgan and I didn't find anything useful in the online portal. Apparently if there are any occult activities, they're off-campus."
"Yeah, apparently the Christians got on their case," Hotch was still glaring at Prentiss, who glared right back. "You can't just go to one of their meetings, it's too risky."

"We've all done undercover before." She countered.

"We have, but we don't have a wire for you, you can't carry a gun, we have no real way to back you up and the locals would never agree to it." Reid was standing a little apart from them, and looking as wary of the older guys as JJ was. "Beyond that, Rossi'd never let you."

"Rossi doesn't have to know." Emily bristled. "I'm going, it's our best lead so far."

"Emily, are you listening to yourself? You can't just go off alone." They were still a team, and this was dangerous. Really, really dangerous. "That's insane. Far too risky and we have no way of knowing it has anything to do with the unsub, anyway!"

"If it has nothing to do with the unsub than there's no risk." Emily knew there was a flaw in her logic there, because there were plenty of risks that had little to do with this specific unsub, but she just didn't care. She knew this was important, and Hotch had no right to try and stop her. "I have to at least try."

"You have to do what you're told!" Hotch snapped.

"Go to hell! You can't tell me what to do!"

"I'm your team leader, the hell I can't!"

"Guys, shut up!" Garcia's voice was almost shrill, and they both stopped and glared at her. "listen to yourselves, you're scrabbling like little kids. Remember who and what you are, please." She didn't want to have to physically separate them, because she had never seen either of them like this, and it scared her a little. "Do you have an address for that meeting thingie?"

"Not yet, they're supposed to text it to me." Emily grinned. "I do have a phone number you can run for background on a girl named Donna who's part of the group. We can see who she hangs out with or calls."

"Nice!" Morgan grinned at her. "Good job."

"Great, ok, we can do that." Garcia nodded. "And about going to the meeting, let's wait and discuss it with Rossi, ok? We don't have to decide right now. Agreed, you two?" She leveled a serious look at both Hotch and Emily, and they both nodded, not entirely happily. "Good. Now let's keep going." She turned around and almost walked straight into a uniformed man.

"Is everything alright, ma'am? It looked like you might have a problem with this bunch here." He asked pleasantly, and she smiled at him, covering sudden anxiety.

"Not at all, Mr…?"

"Shell, ma'am. I'm a security guard here. Aren't these kids a bit young to be in college?"

"They aren't yet, sir." She indicated the older three, "They're my AP English class, we're on a fieldtrip to better understand their options for college."

"Yeah? That's nice for you guys. What about the little ones?"

"I wrote an essay." Reid said unexpectedly, looking unusually proud of himself. "About going to
college. We had an essay contest and I won, I wrote the best one, so they let me join the older kids, and bring my sister." He indicated JJ with a conspirational smile. "We're in the same grade, even though she's thirteen months and three days older than me!"

"Smartass." JJ slapped his shoulder and he scowled at her, sticking out his tongue. The guard chuckled.

"Got yourself a boy genius here, ma'am?"

"Oh, you have no idea." If Garcia's smile was a little strained, it didn't waver. "We do have a schedule though, sir, there really was no problem. You know how kids get excited about things. We need to move on with the tour, kids, let's go."

"Have a great day ma'am, children." The guard tipped his hat and moved on, as they did.

"Quick thinking, Reid." Hotch muttered, approving.

"Basic." Was all the younger boy said. Hotch stopped by Morgan before moving to the front of the group.

"Push me again, Morgan, and I'll push back, harder."

"You're welcome to try," Morgan glowered at him. As he saw it, now that Rossi was on charge, Hotch had no authority over them. He was barely older than Morgan himself now, it was unfair for him to order them around.

"Don't start again, boys. Let's go try the cafeteria, ok?"
Temper, temper...

Chapter Summary

Teenaged tempers finally go 'splody.

Chapter Notes

This chapter brings special thank you's, to Ladywolf, my partner in crime and chief cheerleader, and to Gryphon and Joannie M. who served as sounding boards and advisers while I flailed about the scene below.

The next two hours yielded practically nothing, and were interrupted by ducking out of sight and trying to eavesdrop when the cops questioned people. By one pm they were all thirsty, hungry and starting to get cranky, and Garcia decided they needed a break and some lunch before moving on to the police station. She called Rossi and asked him to meet them at the diner they'd gone to the previous day. Prentiss was still sullen and distant, and Hotch and Morgan were glaring at each other with barely suppressed fury, having exchanged snipes and barbs since leaving the library. She wanted to separate them, and there was only one of her to do it, and she had to keep an eye on the younger ones as well, as they were both looking a little freaked out by all the high emotion going around. As they parked by the diner, the van emptied in record time.

"You know, I thought the phrase 'tension thick enough to cut with a knife' was a metaphor." Reid whispered to JJ. The two pre-teens stuck closer to each, both worried about their teammates, but neither one sure of how to diffuse the tension. JJ nodded, her lips pressed together in a mix of irritation and worry.

"I know. I can almost taste the testosterone off those two."

"Think they'll fight for Emily?" That was almost funny, if it wasn't such a worrying reality.

"I'm not sure. I think whichever of them thinks he's won her at the end of the process might have a painful realization waiting, when she explains she doesn't want to be won." Somehow JJ thought that Emily wouldn't want to mess around with anybody right now, teen hormones notwithstanding, and especially not her teammates. "Remember we still have to work together when this is all over. The fraternization rules still apply."

"Yeah, I guess they do." In any case, Reid couldn't see how this would end any way but badly. "You ok?"

"Yeah, I think. Low-level freakout. I still haven't called Will. It had slipped her mind in the morning, a coping mechanism she recognized from her childhood; when she really didn't want to do something it was all too easy to just forget it. She'd have to eventually, though, especially if they were going to be stuck like this for a week or more.

"After lunch?" Reid suggested quietly.
"Yeah, maybe."

"I'm going to the bathroom." Garcia announced. "You guys go find a table, ok? Remember Rossi's about to join us so a table for seven. Anybody else needs a bathroom break?"

"I'll come with." Emily joined her, and they quickly disappeared around a corner.

There was an almost open hostility between Hotch and Morgan now, although neither one of them was entirely sure why they were so furious. Both thought it was entirely justifiable, of course, but the level of emotion was one both of them hadn't encountered very often or personally as adults. Hotch was angry that his authority was being undermined, angry with Emily for brushing them all off, with Morgan for interfering, and most of all with himself, because he could feel the last of his control slipping. The fear that he wouldn't be able to hold on to his temper wasn't improving it any, in a vicious loop of mingled guilt and rage. He wasn't concentrating, that was his only defense for what happened next, when Morgan stopped suddenly and they collided painfully. Morgan spun on him, almost snarling. "Watch where you're going, dumbass!"

"Watch when you stop without warning, you idiot." Hotch shoved his shoulder, intending it to be light but exerting more force than he'd planned. "And watch your tone with me, you got that?"

"Oh yeah?" Morgan pushed him back, as he'd promised before, and considerably harder. Hotch slammed into a parked car. "Watcha gonna do about it? Why the hell should I watch anything with you, you aren't any better than me." All his childhood Morgan had had to deal with uppity white boys thinking they deserved the world, or older gang kids who got first cut of everything. Even out of the gang, in high school, he'd had to fight for everything. Looked like he'd have to do that here, as well. If he'd been thinking at all rationally, he'd have realized that his place on the team was entirely secure, but like Hotch, he really wasn't.

Hotch didn't bother to answer, he pushed off from the car and launched himself at Morgan, driving both of them to the ground hard enough that they both paused for a second, breathless. JJ tried to drag Hotch off, but couldn't really move him and he jerked out of her grip on her shoulder. Reid tugged her away as Hotch landed the first punch, and the two older boys were hitting, kicking and scratching for all they were worth.

"Don't go near them. You'll only get hurt." Reid held JJ back. Getting in the crossfire between two angry boys who were bigger than both of them was too much of a risk. "Go get Garcia and Em."

"I can't- they'll kill each other!" Morgan was a little stronger than Hotch, it looked like, but he was sloppy, with none of his adult precision and grace in hand-to-hand. Hotch, though not really an athlete, had started taking self defense classes as soon as his after school job could pay for them, so even with the muscle memory of a teenager he had a few moves he was sure of. Still, their flailing fists got a few mutual hits in. And Garcia was nowhere to be seen, and Rossi wasn't there yet…"I have to do something fast." The truth was JJ was as scared of going off by herself to find Garcia as she was of staying. "Wait. Um. Cover your ears."

As Reid covered his ears, he had to admit it wasn't a bad plan. There was one thing he was almost sure would stop both Hotch and Morgan in their tracks. He looked around the parking lot, fortunately empty, and JJ opened her mouth and screamed as loudly as she could. It was a good bet- Hotch had Morgan in a choke hold, but they both froze at the noise. JJ paused for only long enough to take a breath, and screamed again. She was just preparing for another howl when the sound of screeching tires stopped her mid-breath, making her cough instead as the scream turned into a squeak.

"What the hell is going on here?" Dave Rossi got out of the car and stood just behind JJ and Reid,
looking furious and larger than any of them remembered him being and downright terrifying. Hotch dropped Morgan like a hot potato and the younger boy dropped to the ground, coughing and gasping. "You know what- don't bother explaining. Hotch, get in the car. Morgan, get in the other car. Now."

Reid, watching from the sidelines, was pretty sure that Hotch was a classic study in fight-flight-freeze response options. The fight had gone out of him, and he was frozen, his eyes darting one way and another, clearly too scared to move anywhere. Morgan picked himself up, wiped blood off his face and slunk into one of the vans. "Hotch. Move." Rossi's voice, softer now, finally released Hotch from the dilemma and he was inside the other car so quickly that it was surprising he hadn't caught his fingers in the door.

Garcia and Emily arrived at a dead run. "What happened? I was only gone for five minutes!" Garcia's voice was high and panicky. "JJ, are you hurt? I heard screaming."

"I needed them to stop." JJ's voice wavered slightly and she cleared her throat. "Ow. Too loud, maybe. I knew a girl in distress would make them stop and pay attention. If you hadn't arrived I'd have… kicked them, I think. Hard."

"I didn't see exactly what happened. They bumped into each other, and…It's been brewing all day." Reid tried to explain.

"It's been brewing for the past few years." Prentiss corrected him, looking first at one car and then at another. "They're just impulsive enough to finally go for it, and they have an excuse."

"Unfortunately, I can't even disagree with that assessment." Rossi sighed. "Great. Penelope, would you go make sure Morgan doesn't need stitches? I'll talk to Hotch."

"Dave- with all due respect, you shouldn't." JJ stopped him. He gave her a questioning look and saw Reid nodding quietly behind her.

"Why not? Look at him." They could all see Hotch curled up on the back seat, arms around his knees, shoulders hunched as if waiting for a blow. "I want to make sure he's not hurt."

"Not as badly hurt as Morgan is." Reid studied him for a moment. The fight had somehow made it easier to see things as an adult would, because it was an emergency of sort and he's always been pretty mature in an emergency. Apparently he did his best work in times of extreme terror as a child, too. "Did you see his face when you arrived? He was scared. Really scared. It should be someone as non-threatening as possible." He didn't like profiling his team leader, but in this case it was for his own good, really. "Either JJ or me."

"I'll go." JJ touched his arm lightly, and he smiled at her. It made more sense- she wasn't afraid of Hotch, as an adult or a child, and he'd always been a little closer to her anyway.

"I was hoping you'd say that."

Rossi cleared his throat. "If you're done being independent-minded… It's a bad idea."

"I think they're right, Dave." Prentiss added her vote, not that the team was a democracy, but the agreement of three profilers, no matter how immature they were now, did have some weight.

"Fine, go. But be careful." It wasn't that Rossi thought for a second that Hotch might hurt JJ, but he didn't know what he might do, if he felt cornered. "Garcia?"

"Already gone, good sir." Garcia made a beeline for the other van. Reid followed her, staying by
the van's door as if standing guard. Rossi leaned against another car, the one that'd started the whole thing, and massaged his temples to diffuse a headache.

"So, did anything interesting happen at the college?"

Emily pulled out her phone and checked for new texts. "Nope, not really. We'll tell you over lunch."

Hotch was well on the way to an anxiety attack when he heard the car door open and close. That was it, the one thing he'd never done to anybody on his side, and rarely enough to anybody else. The last time he'd been justified, and even so he'd almost lost his job over it. And now…The fears of the adult who'd lost control of the temper he'd been fighting his whole life mingled with and amplified the terror of a boy who knew his father would be furious, that this time there'd be a price to pay he wouldn't be able to run fast enough to avoid. When something touched his arm he tried to bat it away, refusing to go down without defending himself.

"Ow." That wasn't his father's voice. Or Rossi's. Hotch looked up, frowning but momentarily distracted from breathing too quickly. JJ rubbed her arm. "Careful. It's not that big a back seat."

"What are you doing here?" They wouldn't have sent JJ in to tell him they were all going back to DC, would they have? She was just a kid now. "Are you ok? You screamed, earlier."

"Yeah, I needed to distract you." She shrugged. "I'm ok. Nothing that an ice cream won't cure. How about you? You're going to have a real nice shiner tomorrow." Now that Hotch thought about it, his ribs hurt from a well-placed kick, and he could feel sore patches on his shoulders and face. He grimaced.

"Doesn't matter."

"Of course it does." She glared at him, but somehow from her the look wasn't as worrying. "Look at yourself- you're a mess. And you're bleeding." He had tasted blood before, but ignored it. "Your teeth still all there?"

"Yeah. Yeah. I- I think Morgan was better with knives than with his hands as a kid." Now that the adrenaline rush from the fight was gone, he started feeling a little sick.

"Then you're damned lucky he didn't have a knife." JJ actually punched his arm, but not very hard. He backed away from her. "Hotch…"

"What? What do you have to say, JJ? That I screwed up? I know that. Is- is Morgan ok?" He tried to sound normal, but couldn't speak above a choked whisper.

"He was walking, and I don't think he broke anything. Bruises and a nasty cut to his cheek, from what I could see." JJ scooted closer to him. "You didn't screw up."

"I beat up one of my agents." His voice was flat, and near inaudible.

"Yeah, and he gave back almost as good as he got. You both have mitigating circumstances. Somehow I don't think he'll want to file a complaint about you." Keeping it in nice, professional terms seemed to be calming him, so JJ kept the conversation there, even though she knew they'd need to discuss some other things before she was sure he could come out of the car. And before, she thought, he'd be willing to come out. "It happens, Hotch. You got angry. So did he. It wasn't right, and it wasn't what you shoulda done, but it's not the end of the world."

"The end of us working the case. Of me working it, at least." He wouldn't look at her. She reached
up and tugged on his hair, and he finally gave her a reluctant, sullen look. "Watch it. I'm
dangerous, remember?"

"No you're not." She grinned at him, and it was incredibly hard not to smile back. "You won't
touch me, I'm too cute and not afraid to use it."

"I believe you." He took a deep breath, and another, feeling his heart rate finally settle a little.
"Nice job with the scream, by the way."

"Thanks." A girl has to use what weapons she has, right? "You're coming with me to have lunch,
right?"

"Are you kidding? I'm lucky if R-" He choked, remembering the fury on his friend's face. He
swallowed hard. "If I don't get dumped on the next flight to DC with my name on a sign around my
neck."

"Rossi'll understand, Hotch." Again she stroked his arm, tracing a scratch mark carefully. "You
need to get that cleaned."

"What will he understand? That he doesn't deserve this burden? That he didn't sign up to play
guardian to screwed up kids? He- He was-" He couldn't say it. Not even to JJ.

"He wasn't as angry as he looked." Hotch's anger didn't scare JJ, not for herself, but for him, and for
the amount of fear and anger he was obviously bottling up. She wondered how much of it was the
adult stresses, exploding without the adult control he usually exerted, and how much he'd already
carried around with him as a teen. "Remember that I told you about falling out of a tree when I was
eight?"

"Yeah…?"

"Well, my mom and dad were furious with me, I think my dad yelled all the way to the ER, and I
was a lot more afraid of that than I'd been of falling off a branch. And when he realized half my
crying was over that, he stopped, and apologized, and explained he was just really scared that I'd
hurt myself badly, and that I could've been so reckless because they'd warned me about trees
already." She explained. "It was- it was worse after my sister died. Like anything even remotely
dangerous that I did terrified them. They didn't want to lose me as well. I think Rossi was just
scared."

"That was scared? JJ, that was angry. Really angry." And it had terrified Hotch. The one or two
times he'd gotten caught or gotten into trouble, there'd been support in front of the school
authorities, sure, because appearances had to be kept up, but at home there'd been hell to pay.
"He'll send me back." Actually, that was about the best case scenario, as Hotch saw it.

"He won't. And he won't do anything else, either. First of all, I won't let him." She crossed her arms
and looked so fierce that Hotch had to smile, at least a little, and felt his shoulders relax a little.
"And second, Morgan was just as much to blame and I think you've both paid enough, right? I
mean, he might lecture, and he may never let you live it down when we're grown-ups again, but the
worst he can do is ground you, and he won't, because he wants to solve this case just as much as
we do, and we need you."

He stared at her, put off-balance (again) by this insight. "How are you the most mature of us all?"

"No puberty hormones yet." She shrugged. "And my parents loved me. A lot. Even after…You
know. I was never afraid of them." She was honest with him about herself, and even more so
extremely blunt about him and her knowledge of what haunted him. He closed his eyes tightly and she crawled over him and threw her arms around his neck, more or less forcing him to hug her back. "We're your family now, and we do love you." It was so simple, really. And love was a lot less complicated when you saw it from an eleven year old perspective. "Rossi'd never ever do anything you're afraid he'd do. At worst, he'll lecture."

"Oh, he'lllecture me about this until Jack graduates high school." And if the chuckle that accompanied those words was a little shaky, JJ tactfully didn't notice.

"Then you might as well come out, clean up, eat lunch and let him start. We have a killer to catch." She tightened her hold on him. "Right?"

"Right." He kissed the top of her head, not sure where the gesture came from but it felt right. "Why is everybody into hugging suddenly?"

"The question is why did we ever stop being into it, Hotch." She looked up at him, her eyes twinkling. "Why, who else has been hugging you?"

"Never mind." He disengaged from her gently. "We should go before the others start thinking I've eaten you or something."

"I'm starved." She agreed. "You gonna be ok, Hotch?"

He took a deep breath. He could do this. Maybe. "Maybe. When we catch this guy and get back to normal, I'll be ok."

"Fair enough." Since she felt pretty much the same, she couldn't ask him to feel any different. "Man, Rossi won't let any of us out of his sight now, right?"

"Probably not. Sorry."

"Sucks. Oh well." She bounced away. "Maybe we'll convince him Reid and I are traumatized enough by the big kids fighting that we all need Sundaes to recover."

Miserable as he still was, Hotch couldn't help laughing.

In the other car, Garcia settled down next to Morgan, who was holding a leftover napkin from yesterday's lunch to his face. "Babycakes?"

"Go away, Penelope." He sounded rough and tired.

"I will, as soon as I'm sure you don't have any broken bones and that you don't need stitches on anything." She didn't touch him, too-aware of the barely held guarded expression and the way he was sitting. "Then I'll leave you alone to angst, if you prefer."

"I'm not 'angsting'," Morgan spoke through gritted teeth. He was hurt, and furious with Hotch and almost as much so with himself. He couldn't believe things had gone as far as they had, or that Hotch had been as- as damned good at it, if he had to be honest with himself. How the hell had they exploded like that? Now, in the aftermath of the red-hot anger, he was feeling more balanced, more adult than he had since at least the previous morning, and couldn't believe his own lack of control. "Shit."

"Language, Derek." But her voice was gentle. "Let me see your face. And why are you holding your hand like that?" Morgan had his left hand cradled to his chest, holding it as still as possible.
"Wrenched it somehow. It's not broken- I think." It hurt enough that he wasn't sure, but he could move it a little and it's not swelling yet, so he guessed it was probably just a bad sprain. His knuckles were skinned from contact with either the sidewalk or Hotch's face or probably both.

"Ok. Now let me see your face." What Garcia really wanted to do was make sure Morgan was alright, then do the same for Hotch, then yell at them both for a day and a half for scaring her like that, but she couldn't. They needed a responsible adult, so that's what she'd be- if she fell apart or gave in to the flood of yelling she was holding back with an effort, what sort of example would she be giving? They needed support, not panic. Besides, Morgan was talking, and not in any real danger. Just banged up. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and held her hands at her temples, muttering a calming mantra a few times. When she opened her eyes, Morgan was looking at her funny.

"What are you doing?"

"Calming myself." She explained. "Because I just saw two of the people I respect most in the world in a knock-down, drag-out fight, and it scared the hell outta me, but I need to be the responsible one because the rest of you clearly aren't anymore, so I took a moment to collect myself."

"I don't need a responsible adult. You can go." That hurt, actually. Mainly because she had a point, and he hated anything that damaged Garcia's cheery outlook- especially when it was himself. She scowled at him and pulled his good hand away from his face.

"I'll go when I'm satisfied, cutie." The cut wasn't as bad as it'd looked at first, just bled like crazy, as facial injuries tended to do. "We'll need to get that cleaned up, but I think you can do without stitches. At worst you'll have an interesting new scar to use as a conversation piece. Or, you know, if you're lucky it'll just disappear when you go back to your older body." She tried to sound cheerful and wasn't sure just how successful she was. "Now, talk to me. What just happened out there?"

"Nothing." He shrugged, as closed off as she'd ever seen him.

"Uh huh. And?"

"And what? We fought, that's all there was to it." He glared at her, his scowl pulling at the forming bruises he could already feel rising. Damn, they were going to put on a hell of a show for the local cops, if Rossi didn't send them both back home on the next flight. He sighed. "Not responsible adults anymore, huh? Well, it's pretty good proof of it, I guess."

"Pretty much." She patted his good arm. "Who started it?"

"He did." Of course Hotch had started it- and if he hadn't, Morgan wasn't sure he'd have admitted it. "He threw the first punch."

"What did you do to provoke him, though? You've been sniping at him all morning, dissing him every chance you get." She pointed out. "I'm not saying he has any justification- not any more than you do, and you both have some justification, because you're both crazy-stressed- but you're no angel, angel."

He snorted. "He thought he's still the boss of me. Rossi's in charge now, I had to show him he ain't better than me."

"Hate to point it out, babe, but you were totally about to lose that fight."

"Who's side are you on, Garcia?" The scowl was becoming a permanent fixture on his face.
"There are no sides, honey. We're all on the same side, and the same team, remember?" She pushed his shoulder gently. "So I can be on your side and on Hotch's too. Like a Möbius strip."

"Philosophical, really." He looked down. "I can't believe we just had an all-out brawl. God. I didn't even do that sort of thing when I was really fourteen, you know? Well, never one on one, anyway." He'd been in fights before, but they were always of groups facing each other, or at worst two or three or more against one. Or against a single unsub, but he usually had a gun for those. He dabbed at his cheek again and hissed. "I'm sort of glad I never got into it with Hotch as an adult. Man's vicious."

"Not as an adult. Not really. Well, not to us, anyway." She imagined as a prosecutor people'd pretty much hated him, if they got on the wrong side of the stand from him. "I sort of think he was a very angry teenager. Which is part of what made it so scary, by the way. You're both pretty different from you adult selves. I pity your mothers, frankly, if you were that angry as kids." She meant it as a joke, but the comment hit a bit too close to home for Morgan.

"My mother didn't know why I was angry." He looked away again and Garcia winced, mentally kicking herself.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to- uh-" She'd been trying so hard not to bring any of that up, and it was throwing her completely off her game.

"I don't need any help remembering it, Penelope. Especially now." Because he had been angry, in an understated sort of way, as a teen. Happy that he was finally getting his life on track, but still angry, because he'd given up more than anyone should have to, for that second chance, and because no one had noticed. Never, not once, had anybody asked him what was up. Nobody'd ever suspected. "Damnit." He aimed a punch at the window and Garcia caught his wrist- his bad one, since he'd idiotically tried to strike out with that hand, and he yelped in pain.

"Derek Morgan, you can be a real idiot, for a smart man." Garcia let his hand go, apologetic but annoyed with him. "Do you want to turn a sprain into a break, babycakes? Because we can't really afford a trip to the ER even if I can whip you up a new identity and some insurance in twenty minutes."

"No." He sulked. His hand friggin' hurt. "I'm sorry."

"Don't tell me, sweetie. Tell yourself, and then tell Hotch." He glowered at the suggestion and she held up a hand. "Not right now. Later, when you've both cooled down some. Possibly after he's apologized first."

"On the plane back home, you mean? Might be a good idea to wait until we have limited space and seatbelts keeping us down."

"De-rek, you sound like a pouty teenager. Snap out of it, will you? At least for long enough to prove to Rossi you and Hotch can be mature about each other and still work this case. You're good enough actors to fool him, right?" She winked at him and he snorted. "You do want to go back home and be yourself again, right?" He was usually a lot easier to deal with. Then again, he was usually a lot closer to forty.

"Yes." What he really wanted was a brace for his wrist, a few band aids and some sympathy, but it looked like he was going to have to wait for all three. "They'll all stare at me. I can't believe I did something that stupid." He smiled bitterly. "Can't believe Hotch did, either."

"But it happened to both of you, and you both did it. So that means you both need to apologize, and
that if Rossi's angry, he's angry with both of you equally." The logic was inescapable.

"He should apologize first." If it hadn't been too painful, Morgan would've crossed his arms.

"Why?"

"Because he's in charge, he shouldn't have jumped me like that!" It'd been an unfair attack, an
abuse of power, a-

"So you agree he's still in charge?" The question caught him unprepared, and his mouth dropped
open. "No double standard, Derek-boy. If you hold him to a higher standard as team leader,
shouldn't you hold yourself accountable to him, as well? And if he isn't in charge of you, there's no
reason he should apologize first, if you provoked him." Again, the inescapable logic, except he
didn't really care about logic. Morgan groaned.

"Penelope, I'm too wired, sore and cranky to be reasonable about this."

"About time you admitted that." She was no profiler, was Garcia, but she knew her team inside and
out. "I'm gonna squish you for a moment, tell me if I hit anything that hurts too much."

The hug did actually hurt, as it revealed new sore places around Morgan's shoulders and ribs, but
he honestly didn't notice it, for a long moment. After about a minute he did start to, though, and
pulled away. "Thanks, baby girl."

"Anytime, sweetheart. Promise me you'll try to tone down the macho top puppy thing? Neither one
of you's old enough to be top dog anyway, right now." He'd gotten blood on her shirt, but she didn't
care. They'd need to swing by the hotel anyway before they were presentable again.

"Yeah. I'll try." He just hoped he'd actually manage it, too. "Do I have to come out of the car?"

"We could just stay in here and I'll take you back to the hotel to change and clean up." She
suggested, but they would need to leave the safety of the car for a moment to explain. "You'll scare
people in the diner if you go in looking like you're back from a war."

"True…But I need to make sure Rossi's not too pissed off about this. Otherwise I might as well go
back to the hotel and pack, anyway." He was reasonably sure that Rossi wouldn't send them away,
as they were still mid-case. "God…Is it really only lunchtime? I'm wiped."

"You'll get your second wind after lunch." Garcia promised him. "Come on, let's get this over
with."
Lectures and Leads

Chapter Summary

Rossi plays dad (again), more leads are found and Emily wants to go undercover.

A/N: We're more than half way through, guys! I know most of you are in post-finale haze, but I haven't seen it yet so shush As ever, you reviews make bad days turn good.

Chapter 10- Lectures and Leads

Both car doors opened within seconds of each other, and the two boys, flanked by their blonde spear-carriers, faced each other again. There was silence.

"May I make a suggestion?" Rossi broke the silence, keeping his tone mild, almost a little sarcastic. Nobody objected, so he continued. "While you four were otherwise occupied, we bought lunch to go." The three who hadn't been involved with the fight and the subsequent drama were loaded with paper bags, the others now noticed. "We figured we might as well make use of the time. So, we return to the hotel, eat, get cleaned up, and have a little talk." Hotch swallowed and JJ discreetly squeezed his hand, reassuring, "Not necessarily in that order, by the way. After we're done with all that, we'll see about the rest of the day and going to the police station. Alright?"

Various people nodded, some more easily than others. "Good. Can I trust the two of you in the same car?" He leveled a look at Hotch and Morgan. Hotch nodded, relieved by the fact that while Rossi was clearly unhappy with them, he was no longer blazing with anger. More like exasperated, and exasperation Hotch could deal with. He nodded.

"Yeah."

"Me too." Morgan nodded as well.

"Good. Get in the car, Garcia, you drive. Anybody want to join them?"

"I'm going with them." JJ hadn't moved from Hotch's side yet, and he glanced down at her, raising an eyebrow.

"I don't need a babysitter, Jaje."

"No, but I do, silly. I'm just a little kid, remember?" Her grin was pure deviousness, and the senior agent surrendered as gracefully as he could.

"I've been appointed, I guess."

"Fine, we'll meet you at the hotel." Out here was no place to continue discussing this. As Rossi got into the car and Emily and Reid buckled up behind him, he sighed from the very depth of his soul.

"Oh, come on. They're not so bad." Emily smiled slightly. She'd settled in the back seat next to Reid, rather than at Rossi's side. Getting almost identical looks from her companions, she giggled. "Ok, fine, they totally are. Terrible."
"And there's nothing I can do about it." Rossi concentrated on driving, but he did want to sort out what he'd do with the two errant boys when they finally got somewhere safe, and talking it out was easier than running an endless loop in his mind. "I can't suspend them from the case."

"No, we need them both. And it'll look bad in front of the locals." Emily agreed.

"I think they way they look now will look pretty bad to the locals, too." Reid pointed out quietly, and Rossi nodded, half-disgusted and half still disbelieving. "They look like they've been fighting."

"Yeah, and any other story will probably lead to even worse accusations."

"Jesus, could one of you be at least a little encouraging about this? You're not helping." Rossi hit the steering wheel and Reid started, but shook it off.

"Um, if it's any help I'm pretty sure it won't happen again?" He suggested. "They've gotten it out of their systems, if we get any new leads on the case I'm pretty sure we can keep them apart until their hormones settle down again, however long it takes. Also, I think they scared themselves at least as much as the rest of us. Possibly even more."

"I really hope so, because I'm not built to deal with this. Actually, what can I do other than lecture them?" Rossi was honestly too old for this shit.

"Not much." Emily sounded inappropriately cheerful. "I mean, threaten to ground them when the case is over and we're home, if it makes you feel any better…"

"What would be the point? No, the best I can do is make sure it doesn't happen again." And he knew how he could make sure of that, and had a viable threat he could and would act on if he had to. "And I think they'll make an effort, now."

"They both looked too injured to think about another fight." It'd been oddly exciting, Emily thought, and while she didn't want to analyze why the sight of two young men hitting each other had made her blood heat up expectedly, she wouldn't deny it, either. They'd both looked pretty beat up at the end of it, though. "I hope it wasn't anything that needs more first aid than we have in our bags, though."

"If it was, Garcia and JJ would've said something already. Looked like Morgan banged up his wrist, but not enough to need an X ray, I hope." In the wake of the fight, it looked like everyone was calmer, more together than before. It'd been a very stark reminder of the changes in them, and somehow it was easier to resist the change now. Reid felt a lot closer to his adult self, and it was reassuring in itself, the awareness of people and things from an adult perspective.

"They'll be ok, Rossi." Emily nodded firmly. "Give them a while to cool off, lecture them because they expect it and they'll wonder what's wrong with you if you don't, but they already know they screwed up, so don't push too hard. They'll apologize and we'll all dive back into the case." And repress like pros, she didn't add out loud, but they were all thinking it, and that was ok. There was a lot to be said for healthy repression. "Did you get anything new at the station?"

"Plenty, but let's wait until we're all together, I don't want to tell it twice. And I need a full update on what happened at the college, too."

"We managed to stay out of sight of the local police for three hours." Reid reported proudly. "We'll wait until later with everything else." They were at the hotel, anyway- the new one, as they'd checked out of the old one in the morning when they'd left. "At least we won't have to invade somebody's room for work-space."
Indeed they didn't. The family suites were spacious, comfortable, and had two bedrooms and a pull-out sofa in the main room in each suite, which was more than enough for them. They put down their bags in one of them without claiming beds yet, saving those arguments for later. "Ok, you two go get yourselves cleaned up. D'you need a hand?" Rossi looked from Hotch to Morgan, and both boys shook their heads quickly. "Morgan, that hand of yours ok?"

"I'll put an ace bandage on it and some ice and it should be fine." He was almost certain it wasn't broken, and he really didn't want any help. Just some water and antiseptic lotion and he'd be ok. "I'm good."

"I doubt that." Rossi gave them a very sour look. "Go clean up. Separate bathrooms." They didn't actually need to be told that, he was sure, but it made him feel better to say it. The nodded, and after a moment of hesitation Hotch headed to the door, to use the other room. JJ started following him and he stopped, taking her by the shoulders gently to stop her.

"You stay, ok? I'll be fine alone. And don't give me that 'babysitter' line, I'm leaving you with a group. I just…" He glanced at the others, "Need a moment alone?"

"Sure thing." She nodded, and stayed put when he went out to the corridor. By the time she turned back, the door to their suite's bathroom had closed behind Morgan. "Ok, so we eat while they try to make themselves not look like they just walked into each other's fists?"

"I'm going to." Garcia nodded. "I'm hungry."

"Me too." Reid agreed, "And everything's still warm, and won't be for long. Let's eat." He started passing out the food carefully, too-aware of his tendency to trip and spill things. Emily helped, so they set everything up without mishap. In the ten minutes it took Hotch and Morgan to return, they didn't talk much, but didn't eat much either. Hotch showed up with his face clean but bruised, a split lip and the start of what JJ had correctly predicted would be an impressive black eye, moving carefully but otherwise normal looking. Morgan left the bathroom a few minutes later, his hand wrapped up and the cut on his cheek covered with some surgical tape. He looked a lot happier, all things considered, because he'd proved to himself that he didn't need help with such basic things, and felt a lot more like himself. Emily passed him a towel filled with ice cubes which he took with a nod of thanks.

"Now that we're all here…" Rossi started, and Hotch raised a finger to stop him.

"Dave, could we please, please wait with the lecture until after lunch?" He knew he'd be a lot calmer after getting some food in him, and from Morgan's expression, he wasn't alone in that.

"Teenage boys are bottomless pits." Garcia put in her two cents.

"That's why we got extra everything and enough to feed a platoon. Here." Emily shoved a milkshake at Hotch. "Start with something you don't need to chew."

As his jaw was still tender, it wasn't a bad idea, but…"Milkshake is dessert." Hotch looked at it suspiciously. "I'll-"

"Spoil your appetite? Seriously, Hotch? I think you're allowed to bend the rules of lunch, just this once." They were all grinning, even Reid, and he knew they were laughing and him, and to his surprise found he didn't care.

"Oh, fine." Chocolate milkshake. It tasted like heaven.

"Don't I get a milkshake?" Morgan asked in mock irritation (at least, Emily very much hoped he
wasn't really annoyed, as she passed him his own milkshake). "Oh. Thanks."

"Don't think this is some kind of reward, guys." Rossi warned before starting in on his sandwich. "That was the pinnacle of inappropriate behavior."

"We know. Eat now, lecture after?"

"Fine, Aaron. Then eat already."

Things settled into a busy silence after that, as everyone concentrated on refueling. Things were still a little tense, and nobody wanted to trigger any further arguments. As it turned out, the milkshake didn't ruin anybody's appetite.

"Everybody done?" There was very little left, so there were no further excuses. "Good." Rossi stood up. "Hotch, Morgan, bedroom."

"PG, can you set me up with a computer? I forgot to call Will earlier and I can't put it off any longer, he'll start to really worry." JJ didn't want to do this, but Will was her husband and she loved him and he deserved the truth. Besides, if they could be stuck like this for two weeks, she might as well tell him now and be done with it. "Please?" It was getting harder and harder to hold on to her adult self, and she had to talk to Will while she could still relate to him as an adult. When that was over, now she was relatively certain that Hotch wasn't about to fly apart, she could stop fighting it. She texted Will, who was working from home this week, asking if he could get online, and got an affirmative.

"Sure thing, sweetie. You two can find something to do, right? We'll use the other bedroom." Garcia grabbed one of the laptops. "Actually, you set up the stations so we can all work, ok? I can trust you to just hook up and network things, right?" Normally she wouldn't even let them near her babies, but she knew Emily knew her way around computers, and while Reid didn't like them, he wasn't a genius for nothing.

"Yeah, we'll keep your toys safe." Emily was already on her feet, moving the computers out, while Reid started cleaning up the remains of lunch.

"Good girl. C'mon, Jaje." It took her all of two minutes to get Skype up and running, and during that time JJ stood at her side, shifting her weight and biting one fingernail nervously. "You're gonna be fine, honey. Will's an…open minded kind of guy." Calm, laid back, "And he loves you to bits."

"Garcia, I'm eleven. He's not that open minded, and if he is then I'd rather not know about it." JJ wondered whether she was about to throw up, and then decided she wasn't. Maybe later, though. "And he loves me, and I love him, but…Two weeks is a long time. A month is even longer."

"Only 22 days. That's practically three weeks. Besides, with some luck the unsub'll be able to unspell you, or you'll change back in a week, and everything will be ok. By Christmas we'll look back at this and laugh." God, Garcia hoped she was right. Then again, Christmas was pretty far off.

"Yeah…” She was definitely feeling nauseous. "Let's do it." Will was online. She connected the webcam. "Stay with me? At least you still look like yourself."

"Sure." Garcia sat down next to her on the bed, offering silent support. The call connected and Will's face appeared on screen. He had Henry on his lap, and JJ's breath caught on a surge of emotion she was used to feeling on seeing them both, but was a lot sharper now, more extreme. Her vision misted, and she had to clear her throat twice to speak.
"Hey Will."

"Hello…?" He frowned, eyebrows drawing together, then started to smile. "Testing out a new app on me, chère? Like the one that adds a funny background?"

"No." She made an effort to pull herself together and sound more like herself. "No, Will. It's really me, but- only temporarily. JJ, in the pre-teen flesh. We've run into some unexpected problems out here on the case."

"If this is a joke, it's no longer funny." Will wasn't smiling anymore. "Garcia, is that you?" He noticed the older woman at the edge of his webcam-feed.

"Yeah, hi Will." She gave a cheery wave. "And I'm afraid it's not a joke, or a prank. It's a bit Freaky Friday here, except nobody's growing older, only younger. The entire team except for Rossi and me got a free trip back to middle school." Coming from her it might be more believable. Will knew her well enough to know that when she was serious, things really were dead serious. "On the good news side, it's temporary."

"Wait." He held up a hand. "Hold on." He got up and moved out of the frame, and when he returned Henry wasn't in his arms anymore. "Put him in the playpen, I have a feeling I'll need my full concentration for this."

"I wanted to see him…" JJ said forlornly, "But you're right, we need to talk without distraction. The unsub is some kind of…well, as best we can tell, he cast a spell on us."

Will sucked in air with a hiss. "That's not good."

"You sound less disbelieving than I thought you would." Garcia interjected, then waved herself quiet. "Never mind, I'm not really here. I'm just moral support."

"She's right though. Even I didn't believe it at first, and I know exactly who I was two days ago and who- or rather, what I am right now." JJ tilted her head. "And before you say anything, I'm sorry I waited to tell you. I- I think I needed to know it wasn't permanent." She had no idea what she'd have done if it had been for good, but fortunately she didn't even need to think about it.

He thought about that for a moment and finally nodded. "I get it, honey. And- well, I was a cop in New Orleans. All those urban legends? Some of them ain't so much legends as the public faces of very well-kept secrets. But I come from a long line of detectives, do anything long enough and you run into the sort of thing. For every hundred or so fakes in N'awlings, there's one guy or gal who know what they're doing and how to do it. I never met one in person, but dad had some tales just too tall not to be true." He leaned forward, closer to the camera and the screen "You're kinda cute like that, chère."

"Shut up." She smiled, still tearful. "Sit back, relax, I'll tell you everything."

"Let's do this fast." The boys sat down on the two beds in the room, with the door closed behind them. Rossi decided not to sit down, not that he needed to stand to look down on the two others now. "I don't like lecturing unless it's to people who actually want to listen, and about something interesting." This was as far away from a book signing as he could get. "You know what happened earlier was wrong on several levels?"

"Yeah." Hotch decided to take the lead, being older and team leader and feeling responsible, because he had sort of started it. Morgan nodded his agreement. "And I'm sorry." He wasn't willing to apologize for both of them, though. "Morgan, I'm really sorry. I lost it, and I shouldn't have, and-"
"And he felt awful about it now, seeing Morgan hurt and knowing he'd caused it. "I'm really sorry." He repeated lamely. There wasn't much else he could say, was there?

"I'm sorry too. I pushed you an' I shouldn't have." Apologies sucked, but Morgan could tell Hotch was sincere in his, and felt he owed him the same sincerity. "I guess I gave as good as I got."

"Almost." Hotch half-smiled, and Morgan laughed.

"Don't start. We can call it about even?"

"Best that we do, yeah." Ending the fight there and then was the only option. "The others need us united."

"We need each other united. There's enough problems with this case without us butting heads." Morgan pointed out, and Hotch nodded, worry clear on his face. Then both boys turned expectant looks on Rossi.

"Good start. My turn."

"Wait, didn't you already have your turn?" Morgan frowned. "I mean, we agree with you that it was a stupid, dangerous thing to do, and that we shouldn't have done it, apologize, promise never to do it again...What'd we miss?"

"The part where I tear you both a new one. Verbally, of course." Rossi replied flatly.

"Um, I thought you didn't want to do that." This time Morgan was taking the lead, and Hotch let him. Clearly Morgan had a lot more experience in the field of parent-figure negotiations, which Hotch only knew from the parent's point of view, and for boys aged five or under.

"I don't. Doesn't mean I won't though. D'you have any idea how much trouble you two are in? How much trouble we all could be in because of you?" He had to be careful not to let too much anger leak through to his words. Hotch was already looking more drawn, and Rossi didn't want to undo all of JJ's work. "I mean, I'm pretty sure you actually do know exactly how deep our shit creek is out here, and we're low on paddles, but kicking a hole in the boat isn't helping! How are we gonna explain the way you look when we need to give a profile in a couple of hours?" They both hung their heads, silent. "Well, think about that, because we'll need to figure something out. Chief Matthews called Strauss this morning, she backed us up 100%." He glared at the two of them. "I swear to you both, if either of you does anything like this, with anybody who isn't a direct threat to you or somebody else on the team, or even gets in an argument you can't justify, I'm dragging your asses back to DC so fast you won't even leave skidmarks, and letting Strauss deal with you. Is that clear?"

"Yeah."

"Yes." Both boys were quiet, a little wild eyed, because neither one of them doubted for a moment that Rossi would do exactly that if he had to.

"You scared the hell outta me." Rossi's shoulders slumped, and he finally sat down, exhausted. "The others, too. You both owe Garcia an apology, she almost had an anxiety attack."

"I think she's forgiven me for that." Morgan brightened a little. At least he was sure Garcia was on his side. At Rossi's look he sobered again. "I'll apologize."

"Me too." They all deserved an apology, right? "And we can tell the locals it was a basketball game gone wrong. We can still claim we're not used to being this short." Because it was true.
"Yeah, it threw me off entirely, being in the wrong body." Morgan grimaced. "Can we go back out there before the others start thinking you've killed us both or something?"

'They won't." Rossi wanted to stay and rest a moment longer, but pushed to his feet anyway. "Now, have I made myself entirely, perfectly understood? Not a toe out of line, either of you, or I turn you over to Strauss, and suspending you is the least unpleasant thing she can do to you."

"You were clear." Hotch nodded. "You know, sometimes I forget you used to be a Marine."

"Hotch, sometimes I forget it." A slow mile appeared on Rossi's face. "Comes in handy sometimes, though. Come on, let's go solve this case and catch a scumbag."

JJ and Garcia still weren't back when they returned to the main room. The computers were set up, and Emily was flicking through screens and browser windows, digging up financial records and phone records, now that warrants had come in on everything. From the looks they got, it was clear both Reid and Emily were still a little unsettled by the fight and the yelling that followed it.

"JJ still talking to Will?"

"Guess so, they haven't come back out yet anyway." Emily shrugged. "What do you have from the police station? And when do we need to return there?"

"After we finish eating. I told them around four, this gives us enough time to catch up here and build a profile from what we have. Give me the update on what you've found at the college, and then I'll share what we found at the station." JJ and Garcia weren't an official part of the profiling side of their team, but Rossi wanted to wait for them, because they might have some input or idea, precisely because they didn't think like profilers most of the time. Besides, since they were all stuck here and only had this case to work on, he didn't want them to feel left out.

"Ok." Hotch gave him the basics, what they'd seen of the campus, the occult studies group, and ended with Emily making contact with the two girls, where she interrupted.

"They're supposed to text me the address of their off-campus meeting place later today. I think I should go there, to see if anybody in that group fits the profile or knew anything about Marissa Sainjon's boyfriend."

"And I told her it's completely out of the question. We'll have no way of backing her up, she can't go in armed, what if the unsub's there?" Hotch recaptured the lead on the conversation, shooting Emily an irritated look. He honestly just didn't have the energy for another fight.

"It's our best lead!" Emily argued. "I won't need to be armed, for all they know I'm just a kid looking to play with the big boys and girls. I told them I was 17." She explained, "And I'm sure with some make up and the right clothes I could pass for older, too." In fact, she had past experience with doing just that. "If we send the locals cops in it'll take forever to get any info out of them, and the unsub might get scared and run, and we'll never catch him. He's not mission-oriented, as far as we know there's nothing keeping him here."

"Except for the college, which is his comfort zone." Reid said, but added quickly, "If we get too close he might get very uncomfortable even there." When Emily glared at him.

"We could send the cops in once I have the address." Emily conceded, "But that'll blow any real chance of establishing a rapport outside the station, in a more natural environment."

"Well, I said you can't, so you can't." Hotch cut her off, and Rossi raised an eyebrow and one finger. Hotch subsided, sighing. "Sorry. But I'm right, aren't I?"
"You know, other people in my current position only have to arbitrate on the point of who's turn it is to set the table." Rossi looked skywards, and Morgan snickered. "Emily, Hotch's points are all valid and to be taken into account. It's a risk I don't think we can take, until we've exhausted all the other leads." Hotch looked smug, and Emily scowled.

"But it's our into that occult group! That's where everything started."

"We don't know that." Hotch disagreed. "Not for sure."

"Actually, Emily may be right on that. It is our best current lead." Now it was Emily's turn to look smug. The door to the other room opened and JJ and Garcia rejoined them. JJ's eyes and nose were red from crying, and her braid half undone. Garcia didn't look much better, but calmer. "Everything alright?"

"Better that it looks, actually." Garcia smiled. "Go wash your face, sweetie." JJ nodded and disappeared into the bathroom, ignoring the worried looks from everyone. "Will actually took it pretty well. Apparently we're about the only people in the universe who haven't run into magic of some kind, or at least heard about it. He said catch the bastard, change back fast, and if not then he's willing to take care of an extra kid or two until we do."

"That's really nice of him." Reid was frowning a little. "Then why's JJ so upset?"

"She's...happy. Kinda. It's just not showing very well." In fact, the conversation with Will had ended well over five minutes earlier, and it'd taken the time since to calm JJ down, when her relief had devolved into helpless tears of mingled tension, worry, and happiness. It'd just been a bit overwhelming, that was all, and Garcia didn't want the others to know, or JJ to be embarrassed about it. "She'll be fine, anyway. And Will was really nice about it all."

"He was." JJ, looking a little more presentable, rejoined them and hopped up to sit on the bed next to Reid. "Spence, if we don't change back by the time we're done here, you're coming home with me."

"Uh, I am?" That was a nice surprise, entirely unexpected. "Are you sure?"

"Will's invited you. And I'm inviting you. So yes, we're both sure. You're coming with me. Ok?"

She grinned at him, and he smiled back.

"Sure. Uh, thanks."

"You three ok?" She looked at Hotch first, then at Morgan and Rossi. All three nodded.

"They are, and I am, but I'm going to tell you four what I told them- anything like this happens again, or anything that's even a bit similar, and the people involved will be sent back to Strauss with no complaints and no explanations asked for. Clear?" Everyone nodded. "Good. Now, I've been caught up on what you did this morning, so it's my turn." He takes a deep breath. "Most importantly, we've found a potential link between two of our victims. Apparently Marc Leibgott's girlfriend in California was more of an ex-girlfriend. She was hoping they'd get back together, seems he dumped her right before he came here for the seminar. When he didn't come home, she assumed he'd just cut all contact as part of the breakup, but she still had all his stuff, so she worried and filed a missing persons. In any case, according to his co-lecturers at the college, he was taking full advantage of his availability- including heavy flirtation and a few dates with Melanie Carson. She was a pretty popular girl, turns out- always surrounded by men, some she accepted, some she rejected. Her friends said she went out with him twice during the two weeks he was here, including on his last evening before he supposedly left for home. Nobody saw him the next day, and his car
was gone, so they assumed he'd left."

"Ok…Let's look over the timeline." Hotch said, and Reid pulled out sheets of papers and photos, and spread them out on the floor. "We should get a board in here."

"Let's hope we're not here long enough to need one." Rossi watched as Reid set out the victims in order. "So, we know Marissa Sainjon disappeared first, and died first."

"Four weeks or so ago." Morgan nodded. "Then Nadine Law, three weeks ago, Mark Leibgott about two weeks ago, and Melanie Carson last week."

"What do they know about Nadine Law, Dave?" Emily asked, taking notes about all their observations up to now.

"Not much to know. She was an undergrad, majoring in business, junior year. She lived off-campus alone, and it looks like she just didn't get enough mail for it to pile up enough that her neighbors were alarmed." Rossi reported. "No financial activity starting exactly three weeks ago. Her friends assumed she'd gone back home, her mother lives about 100 miles away, and she assumed Nadine was still here, they're not very close so there were no phone calls to miss." He spared a moment to think about people who could go unmissed by the people who were supposedly closest to them, for weeks or months even.

"The last charge on her credit card was a restaurant here in town, twenty two days ago. That was a Wednesday night." Garcia looked up from the screen. "If they have an internal camera we might be able to see if she was with anyone."

"If they don't, we can show her photo and ask if anyone remembers her." Emily suggested.

"Or look at the credit receipts, we know at what time the charge was made, we can see whether there was someone with her." Reid added.

"Ok, that's something to have the locals explore for us." Rossi pulled them all short, and saw them all chafe under the limitations placed on them by their de-aging. "None of Nadine's friends recalled her having a boyfriend, they said she usually kept guys at an arm's length. Apparently going to college was a way of distancing herself from a marriage that ended very badly."

"Could her ex be involved? Some kind of revenge?" Morgan asked. Garcia's fingers flew over the keyboard, accessing databases and cross-referencing searches.

"Unlikely, sweetpea. He's remarried and living in Belize." She wrinkled her nose. "Creep, not three weeks between divorce and second marriage. Guess he was the one to end it."

"The locals can look into that if they like, but it doesn't look like it's connected to any of the others." Rossi didn't think the ex husband had anything to do with it.

"So, we have one woman with a persistent ex, one guy who was playing the field and the woman who went out with him twice, and a woman who didn't date at all." Prentiss frowned thoughtfully. "Rejected lover? Or would-be lover, anyway, since he was rejected?"

"We've said he's small, physically unimpressive and not strong enough to bring down an adult, even a woman- and Marissa Sainjon's pretty tiny even as an adult." Morgan pointed to her photo- the woman had stood barely 5'1". "So they reject him, and Melanie Carson chooses someone else-" his finger moved to Mark Leibgott, who was a good looking guy, tanned from years of travel, and in pretty good shape for a college professor, "and he snaps and kills them?"
"We still need to figure out the trigger. Was Marissa Sainjon his first kill, or has he done this before?" Rossi looked at Garcia, who shook her head.

"Yesterday I couldn't find any cases like this in-state. I was going to widen the search to neighboring states today, but haven't really had the time. I'll look into it when we get to the station?" Being a babysitter, as much as she was enjoying it, was cutting into her work time. Rossi nodded.

"You do that. So, we have enough for a profile?"

"We do." Hotch said.

"Great, then let's go."

At the station they set up quickly. Hotch and Morgan ignored the puzzled and wondering looks at their various bruises and Morgan's bandaged hand, and nobody came right out and asked about it, although there was clearly some speculation going on. They reviewed the interview tapes, reading body language and verbal cues- none of those interviewed seemed to be lying or covering anything up, they were most of them dead ends.

"Nadine Law was at the restaurant with a female friend." Emily reported about an hour and a half after they got to the station. "Not anyone we've interviewed, and her roommate said she remembered Nadine had a meeting with a childhood friend who'd come in from out of town."

"Got a name?" Hotch looked up from the computer screen and rubbed his eyes. Concentrating on anything for a full hour was harder than he remembered.

"Not yet, but I'll call her mother again, maybe she'll know." As Emily left the room to make the call, her phone vibrated with an incoming text message. *The old warehouse on Mason street, 19:00* It said, *If you're not too scared of playing with the big boys.* She grinned and texted back. *See you there* That gave her about an hour and a half to talk the others into letting her go- or slip away without being seen, which was also a viable option. She made the call to Nadine's mother first, and the older woman had no idea who her daughter might be meeting. She'd paid her part of the restaurant bill in cash, so there was no paper trail. Emily's gut was telling her this wasn't much of a lead, but her gut was less trustworthy than usual this week, being skewed by hormones and general insanity. She came back to report her (lack of) findings.

"Nobody knows the name of Marissa's ex boyfriend, right?" Morgan scowled. "This is starting to feel pointless."

"It's not." Hotch shook his head once. "Nobody did though. They all remember something new-agey and made-up, like Raven or Moonlight, but nobody can agree on what it was exactly."

"Great- see, that's why I should go to meet with them." Emily waved her phone. "They just texted me the address. They meet at seven."

"But you're not going." Hotch gave her a Look.

"Hotch- don't take this the wrong way, but it's not your call anymore. It's Rossi's. Strauss put him in charge." She kept her voice mild, but still the others all winced, expecting yet another fight. Hotch flushed, but didn't say anything, just looked over at Rossi. Emily was right, and there was little he could do about it, however annoyed it made him.

"Let's give the profile and then we'll discuss it, ok?" Rossi asked tiredly. He wasn't in the mood for
another argument, either. "In a few minutes we'll be ready. There are a few more interview clips we haven't been given yet, from the two I didn't sit in on. Reid, could you go get them from the locals?" The younger boy was fidgeting and distracted, and Rossi thought a change of pace might help him refocus. Reid raised his head, a little startled by suddenly being called on, but nodded when Rossi repeated himself.

"Sure. Two clips, right?"

"Yup. Chief Matthews should have them on a memory card."

"Ok." Reid left the room, waiting until he was out of sight of the others to scrub the gritty feeling out of his eyes. He was tired as hell, having slept maybe three hours that night, which was only barely enough for his adult self with the help of a lot of coffee throughout the day, and he hadn't had any coffee since their transformation. As he collected the camera memory card from Chief Matthews, he decided that maybe coffee was worth the risk, because it wasn't even evening yet and they might have a late night, especially if Emily had her way about going to that meeting- and he suspected she would. Emily was assertive like that, and nobody wanted to fight anymore. He was deep in thought as he made a detour to the break room, looking for coffee, and maybe his instincts weren't as sharp, muddled by fatigue and adult habits, because he found himself backed up against the coffee maker, paper cup in hand, with three cops who were much larger than him closing him in, crowding against him, and smirking in a way he remembered from high school bullies. One of them wasn't even that much older than the oldest kids in his school.

"Well, look what we have here…It's little Baby Fed. FBI didn't want me, but they're recruitin' little kids now." The biggest one leered, and Reid flinched inwardly- if the cop already harbored some resentment towards the Bureau... "Ain't you a bit too young for coffee, Baby Fed?"

"Probably." Reid agreed, as mildly as he could. He could feel cold sweat on the back of his neck, and his heart was racing. He didn't think they'd hurt him…But he wasn't sure. Just the remembered fear was enough to drive his reactions further into the old coping mechanisms. Talking himself out of trouble had rarely worked back then, but if he could keep them baiting him until someone in authority came by…One of them reached and plucked the memory card out of his hand. "I need that back, please. It could be crucial to our investigation." He wanted to run, but now he couldn't, because then he'd have to explain why he didn't have those clips, and that- no, he couldn't do that, no way. "Give it back!"

"You're being immature." He said reasonably. "And trust me, coming from someone in a ten year old body that's saying someth-" Again, his mouth got him in trouble. It'd always been like that at school. One of them shoved him, and the coffee cup tilted wilding, splashing hot liquid on his arm and on the floor. A yelp of pain turned into a muted sound of distress as the others crowded him in even further.

"You got coffee on my shoes, pipsqueak." The one who wasn't holding the memory card looked down at him, dangerous as any schoolyard bully but larger. "Whatcha gonna do about that?"

"Perry, O'Dell, Fletcher, what the fuck do you think you're doing?" The booming voice from behind them made Reid heave a shaky sigh of relief, as his three tormentors turned to face their Chief. The one holding the card- Fletcher, Reid tagged him mentally- dropped it, and Reid managed to catch it discreetly.
"Baby Fed dropped his coffee, Boss. We were just helping him out." The oversized one, O'Dell, was all innocence.

"He has a name, O'Dell, show some respect." Matthews glowered at them all. "Dr. Reid, are you alright?"

"Y-yes. I'm fine, everything's alright." As if he could tattle on them. They'd just catch him later and make him regret every word. With trembling fingers he refilled his coffee and retreated as quickly as he could without looking like he was running away. "I need to get those interview clips to the others." He explained over his shoulder. His wet sleeve was sticky and clammy against his skin. He could hear the Chief yelling at his people behind him, and knew there would be retribution over it later. He swallowed hard, cold fear curling in his stomach. His hands were still shaking when he returned to the room they were using, but he made an effort to look normal. Of course, working with profilers, that wasn't easy. Rossi took the memory card from him and handed it to Garcia to upload.

"Everything ok, Reid?"

"Yeah. Fine." He answered shortly. Rossi's expression expressed disbelief very clearly, but Reid shrugged. "I'm fine."

"If you say so. Are you sure you should be having a coffee?" Rossi asked. He knew something had happened, but now was neither the time nor the place to push about it. Reid took a long drink, made a face, and almost spat it all back.

"No, and I'm definitely sure I shouldn't have it without any sugar. Em, d'you have any sugar baggies in your handbag?" He knew Emily tended to keep a few on hand for energy on the go during long cases, despite using artificial sweetener in her coffee. She tossed him three bags and he emptied them into his cup. "Now I'm sure I should have it."

"You'll be bouncing off the walls in a while…" Garcia looked more amused than worried by the prospect.

"I'm too young for most other legal stimulants, and I need one." He sounded irritated enough that the others backed off and let him drink in peace. Fifteen minutes later, they were ready to give the final, updated profile.

"So, to repeat- we're looking for a white male with a history of rejection- by his parents possibly, by potential friends lovers, certainly. He's a loner, and outcast who clings to the fringes, hoping to get in." Rossi concluded. "Look for the ones people see as 'creepy' or clingy, the ones who are too friendly, yet off-putting. He's smart, and very organized, but something drove him to kill, and we believe he'll do it again if he faces another rejection, which is only a matter of time. So far we've had no reports of missing adults in the past week, but keep an eye out for blondes who go missing. No word to the media, but be extra-vigilant if anybody reports a missing person. Questions?"

There weren't any, and they broke the meeting up and returned to their room. As soon as the door was closed behind them, Emily started talking.

"If I'm going to the meeting I'm going to need about fifteen minutes to prepare- and accessorize. There's a shop right by the hotel I can get everything I need in." Long dangly earrings, a few studded bracelets and heavier make up would reinforce her Goth image. "Garcia, could you help me?"

"If you do go, I'll help you." Garcia nodded, looking grim, "But I hope you don't go. I don't think
you should. It's too dangerous, Em."

"It's our best lead." Emily said for what felt like the umpteenth time, through clenched teeth. "It's not like I'm missing anything important! You're all here if anything happens, I'll give you the address, you'll be able to come and get me if anything happens. Actually-" she paused, starting to grin, "It might even give more credence to my cover if Rossi storms in and drags me out like an angry parent."

"Emily, if you go I won't even have to pretend to be angry." Rossi informed her. "The others are right, it's too much of a risk."

"What's the risk? I'm serious, give me all the risks you can see here." They were all so heavy about it, it was getting annoying. Emily was sure she could knock all their arguments down.

"For a start, you'll be going in alone and without backup." Hotch started.

"Says who? You and a local cop can be in a car within shouting or running distance, you know. I could even wear a wire if you insist, and a camera if we can set one up in the time we have." They could make it as secure as it could possibly be. Hotch looked grumbly, but shrugged that it could work.

"We don't have a lot of prep time." Morgan added his two cents. "And I doubt the locals would agree to sending a minor into a potentially dangerous situation."

"We don't have to ask them, you know. We can just let them know we're doing it." She argued, glancing over at Rossi. "We don't owe them any explanation."

"Actually we do, because they'll have to justify it if anything happens, Emily." He replied. "We can secure it as much as possible, we send you in wired, but that doesn't negate the fact that you're not at your full capacity as an agent. You're weaker, smaller, and not as proficient at defending yourself, despite your proven ability so far." He looked over at Morgan, who winced at the memory. "Even with backup, it'll be hard to agree to it. I'm sorry."

She glowered at him. "Fine. Let me make it really clear, then- I can either go in alone, with no backup and no wire, or I can go in with someone backing me up and a wire and a camera, but either way I'm going! Unless you want to lock me up in a room or a car or something." Not that it'd help, she could pick a lock if it wasn't too complicated. It was a necessary skill when it came to her parents' liquor cabinet.

"I'm not going to lock you up anywhere." Rossi rolled his eyes. "You're being juvenile, Emily, try to remember you're not really fifteen. I know you understand why we're not sure this is a good idea."

"I know exactly why you think it's not a good idea, Dave, but I'll be careful. Really. Do you think I want to be kidnapped by an unsub? Really?" She barely, at the last second, stopped herself from saying something cruel about Reid having the monopoly on that. "I'll be careful."

Dave sighed. "We have an hour, right?"

She checked her watch. "Yes."

"Good. You go with Garcia to get what you need by way of Goth accessories, and we'll see what our options are about wires and cameras here." He doubted the locals had the most cutting edge technology here. "If, in 45 minutes, I'm not sure we can send you in and be as close to certain as can be that you're safe, I'm calling it off."
"Fair enough." Emily nodded. She figured that if Rossi decided not to go through with it, it'd be easier to evade Garcia and sneak away to the meeting anyway than to leave the station unobserved.

"Ok by you, Hotch?" Rossi wanted to give Hotch the feeling that he was still partially in charge, reasoning that treating him as an adult would help keep him that way for longer. Besides, he wanted the entire team's backing on this, just to cut down on future arguing. Reluctantly, Hotch nodded.

"It's not ideal and I don't like it, but Emily's right about it being a good lead. But only if you have backup somewhere they can reach you."

"Yes, yes, I'll have backup." Emily waved him off and ignored his frustration with an eyeroll. "Let's go, PG? We need to give this op out full attention, shopping's very serious business." Her own attitude was considerably lighter than that of everybody else in the room.

"I still don't like it." Garcia gave Rossi a pleading look, and he half shrugged. "Ok, let's go. Might as well deck you out right, if you're going to need to fool those people. You do know Goth culture has evolved in the past twenty years, right?"

"Sure, and I expect a crash course on the way." Emily grinned, and Garcia had to smile back. "Let's go already."
Undercover

Chapter Summary

Emily gets her way, and Reid gets cornered.

Chapter Notes

My everlasting thanks to my readers and my vigilant beta readers (including the 'Reid isn't crying enough, I wanna see him cry' brigade- I totally blame them, here.). Onwards we continue. Also, check out www.isketch.net at your own peril, it really is an addictive game.

They left the station, and Rossi went to brief the locals- and argue them down. This was proving to be a very, very long day, and it's wasn't dark outside yet. Left behind, the others all felt a little lost, set adrift by these plans that didn't involve them. Reid was nervously bouncing one foot, and fiddling with a pencil. Morgan walked up behind him.

"What's up, kid? You're twitchy." Indeed, Reid jumped almost clear off the table he was sitting on with a squeak of surprise.

"Shouldn't have had that coffee." He explained shortly. It was true he was wide awake suddenly, but his pulse was a little too fast and he was full of nervous energy that didn't really help anything productive. "Caffeine rush, sort of. I hope it goes away soon."

The others smiled, even Hotch. "Shouldn't have had it, then. Your body isn't used to it anymore."

"I know, but it can't be undone now, right? I'll just have to ride it out. Wish there was anything useful to do with all that data we have...Without further details on the first vic, we're stuck." The nervous energy and stress from earlier bubbled into frustration. He wished he had a book to zone out with and clear his mind, if only for a few minutes. It looked like JJ had taken the initiative and was playing Tetris on one of the laptops. Hotch tactfully ignored that, despite usually being pretty stern about goofing off on work hours.

"Not entirely. We could go over the details again, maybe come up with something new that we didn't see earlier. If we trade files, maybe a set of fresh eyes will help." Morgan tried to cheer them all up, but could see it wasn't working.

"I've already read all those files." Reid kicked the table leg, irritated. "I can't see anything, and I know we're missing something." He was scowling, buzzed with frustration and coffee. "Why did he rape Mark Leibgott?"

"What do you mean?" Hotch pulled up the crime scene photos of Mark Leibgott and his autopsy results.

"We said it was a matter of rejection and regaining power over women who'd refused him, right?
But there's nothing in the profile that suggests he's bisexual, other than that he also assaulted Mark." Reid traced a finger over the photo.

"There was nothing sexual about it, though. He just wanted to demean him further, to take away all his power as a male. Possibly because he'd been successful with Melanie Carson, where the unsub wasn't." Morgan reminded him. "Doesn't mean he was bisexual, just violent."

"Possibly he was impotent, and discovered he could become aroused only through killing his victims." Hotch suggested.

"He used a knife on Leibgott as well." Morgan looked at the photos again as well. "Could be mutilation of the victim as a ritual act to make him less human, could be just because he'd been good looking as an adult, and the unsub wasn't enough so to be noticed."

Reid gave them both a sour look. He had all that knowledge in his head, and as sometimes happened, none of it was enough to explain the extent of human capacity for violence and hatred. It was just a lot harder to accept than usual. "So basically he's trying to destroy what he can't have and what he can't be. Like so many of them." It was ugly and awful and he hated it. Hotch huffed a sigh.

"Ok, it's clear was all need a break. Come on." He grabbed a laptop. "Morgan, you too. Everyone grab a computer." Puzzled, they all still obeyed. "JJ, link us to that site you're on, ok? I'm sure they have this in competitive mode."

"You want us to play Tetris? Against Reid? The guy reads patterns without even trying! We'll have our butts kicked." Morgan protested.

"Hey, it's better than chess. Besides, we could try something else, just need to get on the right website for it."

"I have an idea." JJ volunteered. "I saw- um, an FBI agent I won't name because I'd rather not implicate her- or him, of course- play this thing…Hold on." She typed an address. "Here, go to this site and get the closed chat I created named JJrulez." Garcia had introduced her to iSketch during an all-nighter at the office, and she'd discovered it was good relaxation. "Password's BAU."

"Of course it is. What is this thing, online Pictionary?" Morgan logged in and started smiling. Reid looked marginally less on the edge of a tantrum. Even Hotch had to smile a little.

"Yup, pretty much. It's fun and it passes the time. Try it."

By the time Rossi returned, having talked Chief Matthews into agreeing to send Emily in and gotten his people working on getting her a wire to carry, Morgan was in the lead with Reid close behind him, because he was very good at guessing what people were drawing but Morgan had much better mouse-control and drew better as a result. JJ and Hotch weren't as competitive, but they were having fun, just fooling around with it. The important thing was that the tension in the room was mostly gone. Rossi looked at them, smiled indulgently, shook his head and sat down. He could give them a few more minutes before they had to start being adults again. He did tap Hotch on the shoulder after a few minutes. The teen jumped and looked back guiltily, caught breaking his own rules.

"Don't worry about it. Clearly, you needed it." Rossi said quietly. "But Emily just texted me that she and Garcia were heading back, and I let her know the mission has a green light from the locals as well, so I need you all to refocus on this."
"Right." Hotch nodded, looking at the others, who seemed to be absorbed in the game and ignoring them. "We really needed it. Reid was really close to a meltdown, and JJ not much better." Hell, him and Morgan hadn't been too steady, either. Looking at photos of dead kids was hard, even as adults. Right now it was pretty overwhelming, unless they had some very clear target to be focused on. "So the locals agreed?"

"I had to pull some rank, but yes." Rossi smiled as JJ cheered and punched the air as she beat Morgan to a guess. "Think we can draw them away from whatever that is?"

"It's a game I'm worried will come back to haunt us when we're done with this case. It's a little addictive." Hotch smiled as well. "But it did the job. Guys? Play time's over, let's get back on track." He called, and waiting until he had their full attention. They all looked a little shamefaced, seeing Rossi had been there for a few minutes already, but they were definitely calmer. "Emily's going in, with a wire but without a camera, so we'll have to rely on her memory for people's descriptions."

"Oh!" JJ jumped and held up her hand as if she wanted to ask a question in class. Morgan snorted inelegantly, turning it into a cough when she shot him a look. "I think the head librarian sat down with a sketch artist yesterday to get a sketch of Marissa Sainjon's mystery ex." She said, excited. "Emily should see it before she goes, so she'll know if here there."

"I didn't even know they had a sketch." Rossi frowned slightly. JJ rifled through the papers strewn on the table and pulled out a police sketch. "Huh. Must've missed it."

"Sketches are my area, so I know to look for them." As liaison, JJ was in charge of additional information from the victims' families and friends, beyond the interviews the rest of the team conducted or watched, and that included documents and sketches. She grinned, pleased to be helpful.

"Good thinking, Jaje." Hotch smiled at her and she glowed at the praise. "Now we just wait for Emily."

"I'm here." Emily walked in, and there was a stunned silence, until Morgan broke it.

"Whoever's pretending to be your daddy, he'd better pretend to be really angry if that's how you left home."

She giggled. "That bad?"

"Worse." There was a mix of horror and fascination on JJ's face. "Emily, what did you do?"

"I accessorized. None of it is permanent…Well, except the pierced ears, but I already had those." The wide grin on Emily's face looked out of place with the heavy, dark makeup, the pierced eyebrow, the spiked, carefully and artfully messy hair, and the row of black and silver earrings going up both her ears, at least three on each side. "They closed as I got older and stopped using them." She was also wearing a skirt barely long enough to be called decent, ripped black stockings, heavy combat boots and a tight lacy vest under her own black dress jacket, shrunk down when they've been transformed and now just right for a young girl trying to look older and stylish. That combined with a spiked collar and a studded bracelet, completed the image.

"You look like Abby." Reid blurted. "Um, a friend of mine back in DC. She wears things like that on a regular basis."

Hotch raised an eyebrow. "Didn't know you had friends at NCIS, Reid."
"Sure, we met a few years ago at a chemistry seminar. She's pretty great." Reid smiled fondly, not even surprised that Hotch knew who he was talking about. After all, they'd worked with NCIS once or twice, and everyone in the building could hear Fornell complaining about Abby's team at least once a month. They were legendary, in their way. "Even if she goes on and on about her team having a better solve rate than ours."

"Friends with a Goth girl, Reid? Does she put that collar on you?" Morgan leered, and Reid blushed.

"Morgan, I'm ten, can this wait until we're back to normal? And also, none of your business." He threw a pen at his teammate and missed. Rossi cleared his throat.

"Focus, please. Emily- you definitely look sufficiently like a rebellious Goth- or at least like a rebel wannabe."

"Good, that's what I was going for." It was a bit of a shame that she wouldn't be able to wear it when they all turned back, because it'd been more expensive than she'd have liked for a costume, but she was really too old to wear anything like that, anyway. "Think I'll pass for 17?"

"You'll pass for undead." Reid assured her, "And I mean that as a compliment."

She skipped and grinned. "Kickass. Let's see where we can fit a wire into it. Garcia, you're still playing stylist?"

"Oh, you're responsible for this?" Rossi gave Garcia a Look, and she chuckled.

"I toned her down, sir. I mean, I added a dash of color." She indicated the purple stones in the bracelet, and the red highlights on the vest. "Otherwise she'd have looked straight out of the Addams Family."

"She still does." Rossi replied sourly, "But if that's what kids are wearing these days... Then I'm just glad I don't have any."

"Oh, we need to decide whether you're coming to drag me out, 'daddy'." Emily reminded him with a sweet, teasing smile. He scowled.

"Don't call me that, and we'll play it by ear. I might come charging in, I might not. It'll make your reaction more authentic if you don't know I'm coming. Let's go get you wired up. And I need you to look at police sketches of Marissa Sainjon's ex boyfriend."

As they trooped out, Hotch and Morgan hung back with Reid. "This is a bad idea." Morgan muttered.

"Why, because she's going somewhere exciting and you aren't?" Reid's mood was much improved, but he still felt irritable, and thinking about how tired he felt led him to the main reason he hadn't had enough sleep, which led directly to being a little angry with Morgan.

"That too." The older boy admitted easily, "Not that I have a hope in hell of blending in there. But it's risky, and she's just a kid. I'm surprised Rossi agreed to it, now that she's actually going."

"Well, she is, so we'd better make the best of it. Come on, let's see if we can help." Hotch led the way and they rejoined the group in the station's bullpen area. It didn't take long to fit Emily with a wire, as she studied the sketches, and while the cops stared and whispered, Rossi's glowering presence was enough to deter any overt comments they might've made. "They're all staring at her." Hotch whispered to Morgan.
"I know. Pervs." Morgan growled, and they moved to flank Emily, both hiding her a little and maintaining a buffer zone between her and the locals. She gave them an exasperated look.

"Guys, you don't need to go all cavemen on me, ok? I'm supposed to look like this."

"Oh, so you wanted to put a big sign on yourself saying 'child rapist bait'? " Morgan asked irritably. "At least you're not his type."

"Exactly. Stop worrying, I'll be ok. Ok?" Finished with her prep, Emily slipped easily from between them. "And I gotta go or I'll be late. Do I get an escort?"

"Yeah, I'm driving you and Detective Wallen's joining us." He'd been one of those who'd been nice to them the previous day, and Morgan figured he could be trusted, so he nodded, satisfied. Hotch still looked uncertain, but he didn't protest. The station seemed oddly quiet when the three of them left.

"What do we do until she starts transmitting?" Morgan asked.

"Let's look at the info we have on the people she'll meet, see if there's anything there that we missed." They'd run Donna's number, and discovered nothing unusual- she was a history major, 23, and had had no brushes with the law, nor anything else in her history that pointed to anything sinister. She was just a young woman who was interested in the occult, and that, as Garcia'd pointed out, wasn't illegal or even dangerous, most of the time.

"There's nothing we missed, Hotch." Morgan sighed. "But I guess unless someone gets a brilliant flash of inspiration, we have to wait until Emily gets something."

"What if she doesn't get anything?" JJ sounded tired and despondent, and Morgan tweaked her braid.

"She'll get something. She was right, it's our best lead so far."

"Ok, but what if she doesn't?" She was almost petulant, and none of them remembered ever seeing her like that. Reid took her hand again, reassuring.

"Then we keep looking, Jaje. We'll find him, we're the best at this, remember? He won't be able to keep hiding from us." He wasn't sure he believed himself, but the important thing was to make JJ feel better. "Until then...Let's go over the timeline again, or something." All he really wanted to do was close his eyes for a few minutes, since the coffee, after the initial rush, had proved fairly ineffective. But this wasn't the time or the place for it, they were in the middle of a delicate operation- and a dangerous one, despite all of Emily's reassurances.

They collected all their notes and settled down to wait. Fifteen minutes later, the radio crackled. "I'm going in, radio on now." Emily said. They gathered around the radio, laptops and papers ready, and waited.

The warehouse looked, as promised, pretty abandoned. It was also isolated- not enough so that Emily felt it wasn't safe to go in, but enough that it had no close neighbors. At the entrance she ran into Donna and the second girl they'd met at the library.

"You made it!" Donna grinned and poked her friend in the ribs. "Told you she was cool, Jan."

"Sure I'm cool." Emily grinned back. She then did a little spin. "I'm not overdressed for the occasion, am I?" Donna was wearing loose slacks and a lacy purple tank-top with a jacket over it, and Jan, who'd dressed pretty Goth even at school earlier, was wearing even more metal and leather
than Emily was— and hers looked pretty real, too.

"Not at all. You look pretty good, kid." Jan looked less suspicious of her. "Your mama know you're here?"

"Oh, like she cares." Emily waved the question off. "I'm my own woman. So, where's the meeting?"

"Downstairs, come on." They led her down, where two young men were already sitting, one strumming a guitar and the other listening and leafing through an oversized book. "We're not all here yet. Guys, this is Emily. Emily, these are Raven and Ben." She had to suppress a smile at the contrast between the names. Raven, with dark hair that looked dyed, heavy eyeliner and piercing, looked appropriately melancholy, but Ben let go of the guitar to give her a cheerful wave. "We dug her up at the library today, she's new and said she was interested."

"I really am, it's nice to meet you all." Emily smiled with what she hoped was the appropriate mix of assertiveness and politeness. She didn't want to come off as too confident, but not as too shy, either. She was the ambassador's daughter, and as such had confidence and presence drilled into her from an early age, but she was also new, younger, and on their turf. Stay respectful without being too clingy or enthusiastic, but still interested. She knew she needed to be careful.

"Come on, let's give you the basics before the others get here. Usually they're all here before Midnight." Donna led her to some throw pillows on the floor. Emily hesitated.

"Midnight? Really? That's a really long meeting…My curfew's at eleven." Jan and Donna looked at each other and burst out laughing, and Ben was chuckling. Even Raven had a smirk on his face. Emily flushed, confused and embarrassed, "What?"

"I'm sorry, Em, but you should've seen your face." Donna patted her arm. "Sit. Midnight's our teacher, he should be here in about half an hour. He's usually the last to arrive— but it sounds so appropriate, doesn't it? We wait for Midnight, for the witching hour."

Jan coughed "Walking cliché."

"Cynic." Donna shrugged it off. "Anyway, let's give you the basic guidelines, just so you don't feel too lost later."

Emily listened obediently, absorbing the information Donna and Jan were rattling off and filing it away for later use, but most of her attention was on this mysterious leader. Midnight, they'd called him, which matched what Marissa Sainjon's friends and co-workers had remembered about her boyfriend— some kind of made up name, wasn't it? Midnight was probably not the name his parents had given him. She hoped the others were getting all this, because she was pretty sure she wouldn't really remember any of the info being dumped on her by the girls. She'd be able to repeat it to them perfectly, as she'd done with protocol, addresses and instructions as a child, but she wouldn't actually process or retain the information for longer than it was needed— like cramming for exams.

Back at the station, fingers were flying over keys and pens running on paper, taking rapid-fire notes. Garcia was recording the group's philosophy, to see if any of her magical contacts could pinpoint the type of magic used, and to see if there might be a way to undo the spell without waiting for it to wear off. She doubted it, but it was still worth a try. Nobody said anything, because none of them wanted to miss an important detail later.

During the lecture more people arrived, and Emily made sure to be introduced to each of them separately, and repeated their names— Autumn, Sharon, Ryan. They all sounded young, college age
or even younger, and none of them looked particularly interesting. Emily was finally reaching the end of her capacity for listening when the door opened and everyone fell silent.

"Oh, Midnight's here!" Donna was the first to speak, and she turned towards the group's leader with a smile. "Got a newbie for you, Big M."

"Donna, I've asked you not to call me that." The voice was a warm tenor, amused rather than annoyed. Emily looked up- the man was at least a foot taller than she was, and in his early thirties-straight into a face that was almost a perfect match to the police sketch she'd looked at earlier. "Hello, my dear. Welcome to our group." Striking features, jet black hair- not dyed like Raven's was- and cool grey eyes. He was, Emily thought privately, drop dead gorgeous. And this was their potential unsub? The extra clingy ex boyfriend? It made no sense to her. But he needed to be questioned, definitely.

"Dave?" The radio crackled in the car where Rossi and Detective Wallen sat, discreetly behind a van but with a good view of the warehouse. Reception wasn't great.

"Yeah Hotch, we're here."

"Do you have eyes on the entrance? Guy who just went in, he's the Midnight people were talking about- could you see his face?"

"No, but he's the only one who came by car, run his plate number and see what comes up." Wallen was already sending them the number, and Garcia checked it in while Emily was still busy with introductions.

"Midnight Raynes, birth name Walter. He had it legally changed five years ago. 32, born in St. Louis. Has one or two trespassing misdemeanors as a teen, but nothing recent- well, one outstanding parking ticket, apparently, if you need a reason to bring him in." She rattled off the information. "Looks a lot like the sketch you got from the head librarian." She added, quietly.

"Ok, let's keep listening. Rossi, be ready for an extraction." The adrenaline was rushing through Hotch’s blood, making him sharper, more energized. It felt comfortable, more right than the past few days had been. This was his element- the chase.

"Are we ready to begin?" Midnight asked, and got a round of agreement. Emily was distracted by studying the other boys, seeing if any of them might look like the sketch as well. Raven was right out, having sharper features and the wrong color eyes. Ben, broad and blond, was nothing like it. The third guy, Ryan, was just nondescript, and didn't look at all like the sketch. Had to be Midnight, everything else matched. "Good, let's sit then." They all sat down in a circle, holding hands. Midnight lit some incense in a dish at the center of the circle. As the smoke rose- nothing more than musk, as far as Emily could tell, and not intoxicating- he started talking in a musical sing-song. "Feel your energies flowing. From the Earth, All-Mother, to the Air, through the Fire that burns in us and the Water that forms our blood. Feel the energies merge through the circle and focus inward. Feel that strength that comes from the circle, whole and unbroken." Emily tried to focus and tried to look like this wasn't kind of silly. "Focus your energies, members of the circle. Feel the energy flowing from us and out. Search with it, direct your will and your heart towards finding Marissa."

It was all Emily could do not to gasp, to keep her eyes open. They were looking for her? That didn't really point to any direct involvement in her disappearance…Or did it? In the squad room at the station, there was a tense silence, as the group at the warehouse apparently focused and directed their will, or as one cop put it, 'somesuch bullcrap, begging your pardon ma'am' towards Garcia. The silence stretched for a minute or two until Midnight spoke again.
"There is a flaw in the circle. Someone isn't directing properly, someone here doesn't want Marissa found." He opened his eyes- and focus them directly on Emily, who didn't have to fake her look of wide-eyed surprise and worry- what would he do now? "Emily." There was no anger in his voice.

"Um- yes?" Hesitant, because there was a chance he was a cold blooded killer and rapist, after all.

"You are new to the circle, and didn't know Marissa. Perhaps it is better for you to sit the circle out this time, and just watch. I don't mean to insult you, you understand? But we all knew her personally." He sounded so serene, so earnest, that she had to trust him. She nodded.

"If you could tell me about her I could maybe try to help?" There, that was a good way to see what they knew of her and her disappearance, and to see if Midnight knew more than he was revealing. The man considered her for a moment, and nodded.

"I will tell you, but not right now. It will interrupt the flow of the circle. But later, I'll tell you everything."

"Alright. I won't disturb, then." She settled down on a beanbag, and watched quietly as the meditation continued.

At the police station, Garcia was bringing up more information about Midnight. "He was a software developer, if you can believe it. Sold his company for a huge pile of money, and retired in 2005, changed his name, put all the money to work for him with some very good trust funds, and took up paganism. There was nothing suspicious about it, he just got really lucky. He gives a lot to charity- look at these articles about him- vegan, spiritual, charismatic, he owns an organic food store in town, called Mother Nature, but he doesn't work there. He teaches. And paints."

"Has he ever been married?" Hotch asked, and Garcia looked it up, her face clouding over.

"He was engaged to a girl he met right after he retired, Louise Baker, but she was killed in a car accident a month before the wedding. Must've broken his heart. That was in 2006."

"Nothing suspicious about her death?" Hotch looked at the redheaded woman on the screen- she looked nothing like any of their victims.

"Nope. Drunk driver hit her when she crossed the road in broad daylight, and he was out of town. The driver's still in jail. He took it hard, but there were no violent incidents, Happy home life as a child, too, as far as I can see." Garcia shook her head. "He looks clean. Hotch."

"We still need to question him. I hope Emily starts that for us." They'd heard her ask for information, and heard the request granted. She was the best of them at undercover work, even as a teenager. Long history of lying, Hotch thought ruefully, but it sure came in useful. "Garcia, do we have an address for him? If nothing happens tonight we can pick him up for questioning in the morning." There was no reason to keep the locals any later than they had to. Several of them had already left- gone home or just left the main squad room, Hotch didn't know, but it didn't matter much at the moment.

He pushed himself back into focus as the meditation ended and the group in the warehouse started talking again. Midnight was the main speaker, of course, as he started a lesson that seemed to focus on simple rituals for protection of plants. It all sounded harmless, if a little surreal, because he clearly took himself very seriously and the others seemed to as well. He was also quite patient, attentive to his students- Emily was quiet, so the team got the full benefit of the lesson.

"Babygirl, are you taking notes?" Morgan looked over Garcia's shoulder with a grin. She gave him
"We're supposed to take notes, muffin-top. That's why we're listening. Also, if this stuff he's talking about can keep bugs off my flowers, it's worth a try."

"Hush, listen." Hotch pulled them back on track. Frankly, it was really really boring, and contained nothing that he thought would be useful to them, but he still listened as best he could. It was a little too quiet in the room, and he glanced around. "Where's Reid?"

"Left about five minutes ago. Bathroom I think." Garcia was still taking notes and didn't look up, but Hotch nodded, satisfied. JJ was still with them, looking half asleep but clearly making an effort to concentrate. It was almost nine, and it hadn't been an easy day for any of them. He hoped the meeting would end soon and Emily'd get the information they needed, and they could all go get some rest.

"Jan, Raven, take over the tutoring." Midnight said at last. "Emily-" he motioned her to him, and she came easily, drawn to him by his charisma, not through any magic- or at least, she was pretty sure she wasn't being coerced to come closer to him. He was really pretty, and radiated power. She sat down next to him. "You wanted to learn about Marissa."

"Yeah." She nodded. "Is she missing? Left?"

"Disappeared. The police published her photo in the missing persons when her boss filed for her, but I don't think they have any leads. I don't think they care." There was genuine, as far as Emily could tell, sadness in his voice. "She was a vital part of this group for two years, Emily. We miss her, even if nobody else does."

"That's so sad..." Emily gave him a sympathetic look. "When did she disappear?"

"Almost five weeks ago. We were all here for a meeting- she was so connected to her spiritual roots, so grounded- she could've been immensely powerful, but she was too kind to use her power to the fullest. Anyway, we were here for a meeting, we all left, and everything seemed alright, but nobody saw her after that night. She never made it home." He seemed to choke on emotion for a moment.

"You- you were close to her, weren't you?" Hell, fifteen year olds knew enough about that stuff to ask, didn't they? Emily decided it was worth probing a bit further. "Were you, like, together? Was she your girlfriend?"

He smiled sadly. "It's a little more complicated than that. A long story- and a private one. But she was an important member of the Circle, and we hope they find her safe and sound- and soon."

"Totally." Ok, so he wasn't about to spill everything. That just made him more appealing, and Emily always had a thing for older men...She pulled herself sharply back to the mission at hand. "So...You don't do anything scary and dark here, do you? No demons, no summoning, no animal sacrifices, right? Because, uh, that's not what I'm looking for, you know? The style's just my style, but I like my cats alive, yeah?"

Raven looked up at that question. "We all like our cats alive, new girl. Not all stereotypes are right." Most of the others nodded.

"We interpret a peaceful message in the Mother's teaching." Jan added. As the two most 'extreme edgy' fashion supporters in the Circle, their word on this probably carried the most weight. "We use it only for good, not for personal gain or for harm. It corrupts the soul otherwise."
That sounded idealistic enough, and harmless, but Emily wasn't sure she fully believed them. Still, it would've reassured her if she'd been an actual teen, so she nodded. "That's good. Because if my parents did find me here I'd be in serious trouble. I mean, my mom wouldn't give a shit, but my dad…"

"Dave, that's your cue." Hotch tapped the radio. "She wants outta there, guess she's had enough spiritual babbling for one night." As Rossi acknowledged and headed to the warehouse, Hotch looked around. "Reid's not back yet?"

He wasn't. In fact, he hadn't been back in almost half an hour, having left for a bathroom break and stopped to sit down in the break room for a moment. He was tired, and bored of listening to the meeting, which was all completely unscientific and silly in his opinion- although of course important to the case, but the others were there, weren't they? He snuck into the station's one interrogation room, as it was the most out of the way and had no window, and sat down at the desk. Really, he was just going to close his eyes for a moment, nobody'd notice he was gone, right? Just a few minutes.

Later, he knew it was a testament to how tired he'd been, because even at the age of ten putting himself in a room that only had one door and no windows and then letting his guard down had been next to suicidal. Actually, it was his second thought, after 'where am I?', when a hard poke in the ribs woke him up. It hadn't been long, he knew, because his head felt stuffed with cotton wool and his eyes had trouble focusing even with the glasses.

"Little Baby Fed needed to be put down for a nap? Where's your nanny, Baby Fed?" His three old friends from earlier were grinning at him, looking even larger now that he was sitting and they were standing. He blinked rapidly, trying to clear both his eyes and his brain. Coming out of an unusually deep sleep wasn't easy, but the adrenaline rush provided by fear helped.

"Can I help you gentlemen?" He asked politely. "Because if not, I should really get back to the others." He started to get up but one of them pushed him down hard.

"Siddown, short stuff. We started a conversation earlier we didn't get a chance to finish." He smirked cruelly. "And we got reamed out by the Chief over you and your bullshit, too."

"We had to clean up the coffee you spilled in the break room." Another glowered at him. Reid raised an eyebrow.

"Really? Well, you made me spill it, so it's really only fair, isn't it?" He never knew what possessed him to talk back to bullies, when what he really wanted was to curl up and disappear, or run away, or otherwise get himself out of this situation instead of deeper in trouble. The largest one- O'Dell, Reid remember from earlier, grabbed a fistful of his shirt and shook him. "Lemme go!"

"No, I don't think I will. Apologize for making a mess, pipsqueak. And for disrespecting your elders." He held on tighter, and Reid started to panic.

"I'm- actually- pretty sure I'm older than all of you." Not that commonplace, even now he was nearing thirty, but these three were definitely younger than him- his adult self, anyway. He could see why they were laughing right now, but it wasn't a pleasant laugh.

"Doctor Reid, huh? When did the FBI start recruiting kids?"

"I'm sure your chief explained we weren't really children- in fact, I heard him do it. I've been an FBI agent for five years, three months and nineteen days- and I had 3 PhDs when I was recruited." Maybe, maybe he could talk them down. But he was doubtful, and he could feel the fear choking
him and his eyes burning with impending tears that he absolutely couldn't let them see. He was an adult, he was an FBI agent, he'd faced up to psychotic killers and the worst humanity had to offer besides, and these three bullies were harmless kittens in comparison. The thought sustained him for about as long as it took O'Dell to drag him out of the chair and throw him to the floor.

"Oh yeah? Three PhDs? Why, wasn't one enough?" Reid scrambled to get to his feet, but they were crowding him from every direction, and he couldn't help thinking about the damage they could do with a single kick. "Maybe that's what I needed to be FBI, a few letters after my name."

"A few letters could help." At least a BA, in fact, but again Reid's mouth ran away with him, "In your case, however, I think you might start by acquiring a brain, because you already have S.O.B. after your name and it doesn't seem to've helped any."

It took them a moment to process this, which Reid took advantage off to get up and edge as close to the door as he could. He was scared- less of the impending violence he could feel brewing and more of being discovered in such a humiliating position, menaced by three straw-for-brains cops, unable to get away. Finally, Fletcher, who was apparently the smarter of the three, snapped his fingers.

"O'Dell, pipsqueak's calling you a son of a bitch."

"Issat so?" He tried to grab Reid, who dodged but slipped and ended up grabbed by the third one, Perry, who seemed happy to let the others do the dirty work for him. "Think you're so clever, Baby Fed?"

"Smarter than you, O'Dell." A shred of maturity reasserted itself, and the look Reid directed at the two of them he could see gave them pause- it was far too old to come from a child, too knowing and a little dangerous. "O'Dell, Fletcher, Perry- I know your names, I know your faces, and I'm not going to be like this forever. If anyone finds you harassing an FBI agent, your chief will do more than lecture you. If anyone publishes a story about police officers bullying a kid, how do you think you'll look? Trust me, the media like us better than they like you- we're the FBI. They make movies about us. Does anyone make movies about Middle-of-Nowhere PD?" In the back of his mind he was amazed they'd let him keep talking that long- in high school he'd have been stuffed into a locker half a speech ago. "Let. Me. Go." He tried to stomp on the foot of the guy holding him- and found himself lifted right off his feet.

"No, I don't think we will. You won't tell anybody. Big bad Baby Fed, can't handle himself with the locals. What're your friends going to think, huh? That maybe you can't handle the heat, maybe they need to send you home to your mommy- will she want you back, pipsqueak?"

The words were like a blow, because Reid knew she wouldn't, or rather would, absolutely, but couldn't take care of him now any more than she could back then. Less so, even, because her condition had worsened. All the fight drained right out of him, his failure to talk them down proving once and for all that adults couldn't help, even if he was the adult, himself. Although he was pretty sure there was a logical fallacy somewhere there, he just couldn't be bothered to find it. Also, he was still dangling by his collar, and it was getting hard to breathe.

"Nothing to say, pipsqueak?"

"Just leave me alone." To Reid's eternal embarrassment, he could feel tears rising in his eyes, and knew they could see them- it just made them all grin wider. "I can't- breathe."

"Fletch, let him go." Surprisingly, Perry came to his rescue. "We just wanna scare him a bit, right? He's just a kid."
"Yeah, he's a little kid." He was dropped unceremoniously on the floor. "You gonna cry, Baby Fed? And you call yourself an agent. Embarrassment to the badge, kid. No wonder you don't get to carry a gun."

"I'm. Ten." The three cops had no idea how lucky they were that Reid didn't have a gun on him just then. More than ever, he remembered every adolescent unsub with a shotgun they'd ever profiled, and understood them all. His own anger and frustration, more than the bullying, made the tears finally overflow. "You'd be-better go, someone'll cuh-come looking for me." He managed to say, curling up against the wall.

"This ain't over, pipsqueak. We'll see you tomorrow."

They didn't dare touch him before they left. They didn't really need to. Experienced agent or not, Reid was in a ten year old body, sleep deprived, depressed from looking at horrors all day, stressed and still coiled with the tension of trying to evade the bullies, verbally and physically. He tried to tell himself that crying was a natural release valve for emotion and stress, and as an adult he rarely felt too embarrassed about crying, but as an adult he lost control rather more rarely, and not quite as messily.

It took him several minutes to calm down enough to wipe his face, glad that he had a tissue in his pocket and didn't need to use his sleeves, because that would be noticed. He was still shaky, and even more tired than before, but with careful glances around corners and one or two short sprints, he made it to the bathroom unseen, and spent a minute making himself at least a little presentable. He didn't want anyone to ask, he knew they'd be angry- with the locals for harassing him and maybe even with him, for letting it happen. He should be better than this, he should've handled things differently. He could take care of himself. Tomorrow he would. He swallowed hard, and made a mental note to verify that their guns remained locked up, just in case he got any more violent urges. He was just about ready to go back out when the door opened and Hotch came in.

"Oh, there you are. We thought you'd fallen asleep."

"Um, I sort of did. Sorry, it's just…I'm sorry." As usual, Hotch had excellent timing.

"Can't blame you, actually. Rossi and Prentiss are on their way back, as soon as we get the wire off Emily and a short debrief, we're going back to the hotel and straight to bed, I think." 12 hour workdays were all good and well for adult agents, even though they were all usually tired by the end of them, but even youthful energy was no help here. If nothing changed in the case the next day, Hotch resolved to take more breaks, and force the others to do the same. Somehow he didn't think they'd put up a fight over it. "You ok? You look a bit flushed."

"I'm fine." Reid wasn't sure if it was a particularly convincing lie or if Hotch simply wasn't on top of his game, observation-wise, because it passed without comment. "Going sounds good. And- did we skip dinner?"

"You know, I think we did." In all the excitement of sending Emily undercover, they hadn't even noticed. "Maybe we'll pick something up on the way to the hotel."

"Ok." He was pretty sure they were all too tired to eat. If Hotch noticed him moving a little more slowly and darting nervous glances around when they returned to the squad room, he didn't mention it. Most of the cops were gone, leaving only Chief Matthews and his second detective, Moreno. JJ looked almost as wiped as Reid felt, and Morgan wasn't much better. Even Garcia was looking tired. They sat more or less in silence until Rossi, Prentiss and detective Wallen returned. Emily was elated, grinning and chattering brightly as they entered.
"-and the rest of it you know." She noticed the others and bounced over to them. "Guys, you should've seen Dave come in, I thought those kids at the meeting were going to wet themselves. It was hilarious!"

"Emily," Morgan spoke for the group, "we're really tired. Debrief and you can be really excited at the hotel, ok? Quietly." She stuck her tongue out at him.

"You're just jealous because I went undercover and met a hot guy and you didn't."

"No, to all three parts of that accusation." He grumbled. "I'm just tired. So, what happened other than what we could hear?"

"Uh, not much. I think he really loved her, he never did explain why they broke up. The police are going to pick him up in the morning. None of the others looked suspicious. When Rossi came in to drag me out he didn't really give them a lot of time to react- just shouted a bit about what was I thinking going there, and what were they thinking, letting a fifteen year old hang out with them without parental permission, and that no, I won't be calling or texting back because my phone's officially confiscated and I'm grounded- are you sure you haven't already raised teens, Dave? Because that was an award-winner, right there." Then she yawned, and drooped a little. Despite her excitement, Emily was as tired as the others, and not up for a long debrief. Rossi nodded to Matthews.

"Can we finish this in the morning? We'll all be sharper then. We'll be here at 8:30."

"Ugh, that means an early wake-up." Morgan grimaced. "Can we go, then?"

"Yeah, we can go." Hotch nodded. "Right?"

"Right." They were all running on fumes and he didn't want them to make a mistake because of it. Better to withdraw, even though it might look bad to the locals, than to screw p, which would look worse and half longer-reaching effects. "Goodnight, Chief."

"Night, agent Rossi, everybody." He could see the man barely stopped himself from saying 'kids'. Fortunately, the 'kids' didn't seem to notice.

They all piled into the SUV, finding their seats with minimal bickering. They were all exceptionally quiet, which Rossi thought was due to fatigue, rather than some kind of contemplation that sometimes led to breakthroughs in the case.

"So, I hope tomorrow will get us that strong lead we need." He said, to break the silence. "If that Midnight guy doesn't alibi out for all four murders, he's our best suspect at the moment." Which was a problem, because he didn't entirely fit the profile, but they'd been wrong before. "And we can question the others in that group as well."

"Rossi-" Garcia, seated next to him, touched his arm with an odd smile on her face. "Shh. Look." She nodded at the rear-view mirror, and Rossi, looking at it, nearly drove right off the road.

JJ was curled up against Morgan, who had an arm around her waist. In the row behind them, Hotch was sprawled on the seat with Emily's head on his shoulder and Reid's on the other. All five were fast asleep. Rossi chuckled quietly. Garcia dug her fingers into his arm.

"You are not waking them up before I get all of this on camera."
Midnight

Chapter Summary

Just as things seem to be looking up, they start to spiral out of control.

Chapter Notes

Starting to wind down towards the climax here, people. I would like, again, to repeat that this isn't a 'shipping fic and that my inner slasher has been stuffed into a metal box and kicked to a far corner until I'm done. There will be an awful lot of hugging and cuddling in the upcoming chapters, please don't read anything more into them.

"I'm telling you, he doesn't fit the profile." Emily said for about the fifth time, and it wasn't even 8 yet. Morgan groaned into his cereal.

"Ok. We get it. The police will bring him in and we'll see, ok? You're letting his dreamy eyes affect your opinion, Prentiss." They were all still barely awake and a little grumpy. Actually, Garcia thought as she looked at Reid and JJ and the identical scowls they were wearing, more than a little. The two younger kids had ended up in the same bed, despite having gone to sleep in separate rooms, citing nightmares and not wanting to wake anybody else up, and there'd been a lot of teasing going on in the thirty minutes since Rossi woke them all up. Otherwise the night had passed with no further mishaps, for which Garcia was very grateful. They needed all the rest they could get. It looked like they were about to have another very long day.

"It's not his dreamy eyes, ok? He had charisma, the others were clearly crazy about him-" Emily defended herself. She didn't want the locals to harass Midnight, she knew he wasn't the unsub. The others just wouldn't listen to her, and that was annoying as hell. "You'll see." She knew the police had to question him…She just really hoped he wouldn't find out it was her fault. She really wanted him to like her, and something in her whispered that wasn't the right reaction to a man who might be at best a stalker and at worst a murderer and rapist. "Can we just go to the police station already?"

"Finish your coffee first." Hotch replied. "And add enough sugar to it to make you sweeter, ok? The sun's barely up and you're already bi-" he caught himself, blushed and backpaddled. "We need to work together on this. From what you said, you're probably right about him and the profile, but we need to be sure, you understand that, right?"

"Yeah." She sighed, gloomy at the prospect of the occult group finding her out as a traitor. "You'll see, he's not involved."

"I'm fairly sure he is involved." Rossi countered, "Even if he's not the unsub. He knows more than we do."

"Enough shop talk until we get to the actual shop, alright you guys? Concentrate on eating, breakfast is the most important meal of the day." Garcia tried to redirect their attention to
something more productive.

"That's actually a misguided belief, based on faulty research and advertizing-" Reid started, and Morgan threw a bun at his head.

"Please, please don't start that again, ok kid? You'll mess up my digestion. Just shut up, curl up with JJ and eat breakfast. And think about how you'll explain things to Will." He added with a sly grin. Reid huffed in irritation, blushed scarlet and subsided, nibbling on a slice of orange. He wasn't very hungry. The night had been fairly calm, especially after JJ had crawled into his bed- she'd woken up, he'd invited her, and she'd come without more than two words being spoken between them- but he dreaded going back to the station. Those bullies would still be there, and it'd be just like school all over again. Experience taught him nobody'd notice, and he was ok with that, he could deal with it. The risk of being noticed, however, was still there because his team mates weren't teachers, they were trained in observation. Reid really, really didn't want them to find out about it. For now it was best not to draw any attention to himself, so he didn't bother with answering Morgan at all. In fact, everybody seemed to share this sentiment of keeping the friction between them to a minimum, and the rest of breakfast passed in relative quiet. They piled into the van, all seven of them again, and headed for the station.

Chief Matthews greeted them in the station's bullpen. "Good morning, agents. I have two people picking up Midnight Raynes right now, they should be back in a few minutes. We're also looking into the other members of the team agent Prentiss contacted yesterday, but until we find their last names there isn't much we can do. We do have Donna German's phone records, though, maybe they're worth a look."

"Great, we'll start there." Rossi nodded. "Let us know when they bring Midnight in."

"Hey, you ok?" Emily asked JJ as they settled in 'their' office. "You're real quiet." Indeed, JJ had barely said three words since they'd sat down for breakfast. The younger girl shrugged. "I'm ok. Just…You were all teasing, and I'm the one who'll have to explain it if it ever comes up again, and just…" She shrugged again. "I wanna go home, Em." Despite a night of sleep she didn't feel energized. This would be her third day on the case with very little actual work to do, since she couldn't really fulfill her role as liaison in her current state, and it was frustrating and draining and getting really, really hard not to just behave as any bored eleven year old would. She wanted a TV, or someone to play with, even a book would be nice, but the one she had with her no longer interested her, and Spencer's definitely didn't. Besides, she didn't want to look like she was slacking off while the others were working. She was sure there was something she could do to help, she just didn't know what. "I feel useless."

Emily hugged her shoulders, "You're not useless, Jaje- not any more than the rest of us are. For the moment it's really pretty much up to the locals, anyway. We could've slept in if Rossi wasn't so damn conscientious about working, and if we didn't need to look serious in front of the locals." It was frustrating for all of them, but clearly more so for JJ, and Emily understood that. She wished she could make it better. "Let's just hope really hard we figure it out today. One way or another, we're going home tomorrow."

"Really?" JJ frowned, "What do you mean?"

"Strauss gave us three days, tomorrow's the last one. Even if we don't solve it, she'll send another team out tomorrow and recall us." Emily wasn't sure whether she'd be more relieved or more upset if that happened. "I mean, I'm sure the guys are hoping she won't have the guts to do it, but with every day that passes that we don't solve this, there's a greater chance that he'll kill again. She can't take that risk."
"Neither can we," JJ agreed. "I don't wanna sound pessimistic or anything, but we're not really at our best right now, are we?" She looked at the others discreetly. Morgan was fiddling with a pen, flipping it over and over distractedly, Hotch was going over phone records, but clearly not focused on the task, and Reid was staring out the window, completely zoned out. "It's like herding cats."

"A bit." Emily smiled slightly. "Let's focus them." She gave a sharp whistle, and all three boys jumped. "Let's get crackin', ok? We have one day to catch our unsub, or at least pinpoint him so the locals can grab him, or Strauss calls us back home and we're stuck this way until the spell wears off. Hotch, what's on the agenda for today?"

"Questioning Midnight Raynes, to start with." Hotch refocused with impressive ease. "We can't sit in on that, not even Rossi because Raynes saw him last night, but we'll watch from the observation room. Reid, you're on phone records with Garcia?"

"Yup." Reid nodded. "We're cross-referencing Midnight and Donna's phone calls over the past six months with Marissa Sainjon's, to see who they all called and whether any of them match the people Emily met yesterday at the study group thing." It would at least give them backgrounds on the other members of the group, in case Emily was right about Midnight not being the unsub.

"Good. Emily, you go over Raynes' records again, see whether there's anything we might've missed." It was make-work, but they really didn't have that many other leads. "When you're done, look into the victims, see if we can tie any of the others to Raynes. JJ, you'll help her?" This actually was important, as far as motive went, and he wanted to involve JJ who was looking a little forlorn. She nodded, brightening up a little. "Dave, you me and Morgan are watching the interview?"

"Yup." Dave nodded, "And since you didn't bother to wait for me to have out assignments, as temporary team leader, I'll just sign off on yours?" Hotch looked uncomfortable, having once again forgotten that he wasn't in charge, but Rossi chuckled. "It's what I would've said anyway, relax. We're all good." Just then, the locals came in, escorting Raynes, who was looking calm, but a little confused and worried. At first glance, he didn't look like someone who'd been caught at something he'd actually done. Emily quickly scooted out of sight, and Rossi took a cautious step back as well. Raynes wasn't looking in their direction however, and when he was out of sight in the interview room they all seemed to relax together. "Let's go, guys." Rossi motioned for Hotch and Morgan to follow him.

"Phone records?" Reid asked Garcia, who grinned at him.

"Phone records. I'll show you my own brand of magic, Boy Wonder." Moments later they were both engrossed in computer screens. Emily turned to JJ.

"So, do you want to start with Midnight or with the victims? I think looking into victimology will help us more right now."

"Hotch said to start with Midnight..." JJ hesitated. "If we missed something and they're interviewing him now..." She frowned. "You know what, you go over the victims and I'll try to dig a little deeper on Midnight?" She didn't want to look at the victims at all, it made her feel sad and frustrated, and even looking into Midnight's records wasn't exactly thrilling. Still, if it helped them solve this case..."Deal?"

"No problem." Emily brought up the relevant files for both of them, and the room grew quiet for quite a while. Finally Emily raised her head. "I can't find any connection between Midnight and the others vics. None of them were into the occult or spirituality, none of them ever visited the nature store he owns- or if they did they didn't pay in any way we can trace." It was giving her a
headache. "I told them he didn't fit the profile!"

"Emily-" Garcia distracted her, "Can you come look at some photos for me? We're trying to match phone numbers to people you met last night, and I need you to identify them for us." Emily moved to stand behind her and saw JJ drift over out of the corner of her eye. The young girl definitely still didn't look happy. "Here's who we have so far, do any of them look familiar?" Garcia gave her a series of photos.

"That's Jan, she seemed to be closest to Donna in the group- we met her at the library, remember?" Emily pointed her out. "And that's Ben- he's only 19? I wouldn't have guessed, he looks older." She looked at the others, "That's Autumn." She recognized the red-headed girl from the day before. "I don't recognize the others, but look at those IDs- they're all pretty old- I mean, most of them are over 40." When did that become 'old'? Hell, Emily was just past 40 herself, and didn't consider that anywhere near 'old'. "They might be the names on the contract, but signing in for their kids, and paying their phone bill too." She suggested. "You might want to look into that."

"Good idea." Reid started the new search, looking into people's children, and sighed. "Does this always take so long, Garcia?"

"Yeah, it really does." Garcia nodded. "It's just you're all usually off chasing the bad guys and being awesome, so you never notice it takes me hours to dig up the really good stuff." Sure it looked like magic when she did it, but it was magic that needed time to percolate properly. Speaking of…'I'm going to get a coffee. Would you like something, guys?"

"I'll come with you." Reid knew he'd be thirsty later, and going with Garcia meant he could safely get a drink now without risking running into the locals alone again. It was a little embarrassing, but as he was the only one who knew that he was looking for safety in numbers, and why, it didn't matter. He really didn't want another run-in with them, the risk of being caught was greater with every encounter. As usual, he seemed to care more about that possibility than his tormentors did. It was just safer, until they finished this case, not to be alone.

"I wish I could look in on the interview as well." JJ groused, and Emily couldn't help agreeing.

"Wanna go see if we can join them?" She hopped to her feet.

"I don't know…We have our own work." JJ frowned. "No, they'll update us later."

"Spoilsport." Emily settled down again, but most of her thoughts were focused on the interview room and what might be going on there.

Through mirrored glass the three BAU agents watched as the locals sat down with Midnight Raynes. Their suspect was still pretty calm. Morgan, on the other hand, was bouncing restlessly on the balls of his feet. Rossi almost asked him if he wanted to leave, but at the last moment decided not to draw attention to it. It was hard enough keeping them all on track as it was. In the room, things were finally getting started.

"Tell us about Marissa Sainjon." Detective Moreno started. Midnight looked startled, then- to Rossi's mild surprise- hopeful.

"Have you found her? Why are you just starting to look now?"

"Why don't you let us ask the questions, Mr. Raynes." Moreno's voice was mild. "You knew her?"

"We're friends- I've known her for over a year." It took him a moment to catch the verb tense used, "What do you mean 'knew'? Have you found Marissa? Is she-" He stopped, shaking his head a
"Tell me about your relationship with her. We questioned her friends and co-workers, when the missing persons report was first filed, and your name never came up." Rossi had wondered about that himself, although no great efforts had gone to finding her, before the bodies were discovered. People disappeared all the time, and if no sign of foul play came up, they could be incredibly hard to find if they dropped off the grid entirely, as Marissa clearly had, being dead.

"She- she didn't like to show that part of her life." Midnight explained slowly. "She was starting to explore her own spirituality, learning more about neo-paganism, and it wasn't something she wanted to share with her friends yet. Coming out about preferring a Goddess to a God can be as difficult as any other revelation about oneself, in this day and age." He smiled slightly. "Most of her friends didn't know, she thought it'd make them look down on her, since most of them are practicing Christians."

"You were more than friends, weren't you?" It wasn't the way Hotch would've gone about the questioning, and he rolled his eyes and saw Rossi doing the same, but the locals clearly preferred being direct about it.

"For a short time, we were. She was so full of light, so open to new experiences- it was a natural progression of her self-exploration." Midnight's voice was soft, sincere. "She didn't feel ready for it, though. She thought that being with me would disturb the balance of our circle, that it might make people jealous. She didn't believe me when I told her they were supportive of our relationship- or them, when they told her the same. They were glad to see her happy."

"So you were involved intimately, and she ended the relationship." Moreno pressed.

"It sounds so cold when you say it, Detective. We were in love." He sounded very convinced, but in this he was no different from any number of deranged killers they'd all spoken with- or from dozens of love-struck but entirely sane otherwise young men.

"And yet, she ended the relationship."

"As I said, she thought it would disrupt the team. She said it wasn't a matter of not loving me, because she did, and I respected her enough to follow her wishes and hope she realized she didn't have to end it. I was willing to wait."

"Her co-worker at the library said you followed her and bothered her at work."

"That wasn't about me, though." His body language read as genuine- there wasn't a trace of lying anywhere in it. Rossi thought he actually believed what he was saying. "She'd left the group, after she broke up with me. She said she still loved me and it was hard to see me twice a week in the Circle and not do anything about it. I was trying to convince her not to stop studying, she had the potential to lead her own group some day, and teach others if she wanted. It wasn't just a hobby for her, not just a distraction, it was real. Eventually I stopped coming, I saw it was hurting her. The last time I came, it was to give her the name of a woman who runs a Circle about 30 miles from here, if she wanted to go there instead. Leaving a Circle is not as easy as changing churches, you understand."

"You know, I think Emily was right about him not fitting the profile." Morgan said. "Look at him, he's confident, clear-minded, obviously very sociable...And he's solid enough, physically." He wasn't a body builder by any means, but not the sort of guy who'd worry about subduing women, either. And he honestly didn't come across as a guy who'd try to force a woman. Moreno was frowning.
"Do you recognize these people?" He spread the photos of the other victims on the table. Midnight studied them and shook his head slowly.

"I don't think so...No. Why? Are they connected with 'Rissa's disappearance?"

"They might be. You've never seen any of them?"

"Not that I can recall." There was no recognition in his face.

"If he's lying, he's very good at it." Rossi pursed his lips. "They'll ask him about the magic, won't they?"

"They'd better, it's the one thing we're almost sure of." Hotch's shoulders slumped. He'd really hoped this would finally be a little easy. "If they don't, we'll have to."

"So, Mr. Raynes...Tell me what you do exactly, in your little group thing." Moreno leaned forward, and the three agents behind the observation window tensed, waiting.

"So, we have four people we can pinpoint from cross-referencing the phone records." Garcia said, after almost an hour of tedious searching. "Jan, Autumn, Ben, and Raven, real name Marvin." She smiled slightly, "Personally, I totally support his choice of alias. Marvin doesn't sound very New-Age, does it? But we're still working on getting the others. You guys going to build profiles on the four we do have? I'll see if I can rustle up the rest from cross-referencing all six sets of records and seeing who they all called." It was fairly boring work, but it went faster if she did it herself, despite the others' eagerness to help.

"I'll take care of the profiles." Reid volunteered.

"I can do them too." Emily shot him a look. She wanted to see what the others had to say about Midnight, and what he had to say for himself.

"Sure you can, but I'll be faster." Even though he was younger, Reid was sure he could work the profiles better than Emily could, but he didn't want to antagonize her. "Besides, if I do it then you can go look in on the interview, and don't say you don't want to."

"Of course I want to." Emily was halfway to the door before she stopped. "Garcia, can I?"

"I'm not the boss of you, sweet pea. Work it out with Rossi or Hotch." The fewer distractions the better, as far as Garcia was concerned. Reid was the quietest of the group, and she was trying to make some sense out of a lot of data. "JJ, are you with me?"

"No, I'll go with Emily." JJ followed her older teammate, because at least observing was something anybody could do, and the computer systems were incredibly boring. She couldn't remember working with any computers at all before college, and as a child she'd spent most of her free time outside - all this staying indoors was giving her cabin fever. Maybe watching the interview would be more interesting.

When they got to the observation room, Rossi gave them a surprised look but motioned for them to stand back and watch quietly. In the room, the detective was frowning, clearly not impressed by Midnight's story.

"So, you're saying this occult stuff of yours is- what? Candles, crystals and positive thinking?"

"Purification of the body and spirit and learning to direct one's energy to positive channels, yes."

Midnight nodded. "I don't teach 'magic', detective, it's not something that can be taught. We don't
"use a spell book."

"We're getting nowhere." Hotch snarled quietly. "He's not asking the right questions." The detective was a good, capable man, but Rossi had to agree that the questioning wasn't getting them anywhere so far- and that the only thing they'd really understood so far was that it was highly unlikely that Midnight was the unsub.

"Toldja he doesn't fit the profile." Emily nodded, satisfied. "We need to question him about the others, though. Maybe he knows somebody who does use spell books, you know?" She studied the people in the other room and frowned. "You know, the detective's the problem. He doesn't believe in our theory about the magic, despite all the evidence, so he won't ask the right questions because it'd make him look stupid." She crossed her arms, irritated. "Dumbass."

"We should go in there." Hotch was on his feet, pacing, while inside the interview room things seemed to be at a standstill. 

"We can't and you know it." Morgan didn't like it any better than his team leader did, but he understood why they had to stay out. "Why're you girls here, anyway? Done with whatever it was you were doing?"

"Gave it to Reid." Emily shrugged, and Morgan frowned.

"You shouldn't just drop all your work on him, he's just a kid, even if he's fast."

"He offered. Besides," JJ leveled a glare at him, "At least we didn't turn the light off on him at night, right?" Morgan had the good grace to look apologetic about that; no one had told him off about that the previous day, since they'd had a lot on their minds and Reid didn't hold a grudge, as far as Morgan knew anyway- except he had flat out refused to share the boys' suite last night, and obviously he'd told JJ why. Looked like she was done being nice about it, but that fact that she'd waited a full day gave him some leverage for an answer.

"Didn't look like you cared much yesterday- or like he did, either. Is that why you two ended up snuggled together, didja turn out the lights to scare him into a cuddle?"

"Morgan!" Emily and Hotch exclaimed together, but it was the stricken look on JJ's face that really stopped Morgan cold and made him flush a dark red, visible even on his darker skin. The young blonde spun and ran out of the room, and Emily went after her with a final, vicious glare in Morgan's direction. Hotch advanced on Morgan, fists clenched, but Rossi's hand on his shoulder held him back.

"Not the time to fight, Hotch." Still, the disappointment in his eyes made Morgan feel about an inch tall.

"Right." Hotch visibly pulled himself together. "Later, though, we're going to discuss this."

"I'm sorry- I- it just- I don't-" Morgan honestly had no idea how he could've said something that cruel, it had just slipped through. "God, I didn't mean it to sound that way." He'd really hurt her, and felt terrible. "Should I go after them?"

"No, you should sit down and think about putting a filter between your brain and your mouth." Rossi said sharply. "Let Emily deal with this." The tone he used cut Morgan to the quick, and he sat down hard, torn between anger and guilt and misery at the mess he'd made. "Let's just watch the interview, alright?"

"Ok." Heavy-hearted, he made an effort to watch the painfully slow questioning in the other room.
"This makes no sense." Reid glared at the computer as if it could yield answers just by the force of that glare. "There are two people on that group we just can't find, of the eight Emily met last night- I'm counting Midnight in that, of course." He flicked through the photos and browser windows, annoyed. "We're missing one guy and one girl…Garcia, are we only checking mobile numbers?"

"So far, yes. I'm about to start on landlines, on the crazy off-chance that they don't have a mobile. There are far fewer landlines called in general, from all those phones." Garcia put in the new search criteria. "Hm…They all call the same pizza place, Chinese take-out, Thai, do they ever eat real food?"

"Do we?" Reid countered, and Garcia had to concede that they ate as much junk, if not more.

"I cook, though. When I have time."

"So do I." Reid shrugged, "Except I almost never have the time. What's this one?"

"Hm, unlisted, but no list is safe from my questing fingers. Check this one out, it's somebody but I'm not sure who." She sent him the final number. "Ah ha! The unlisted number is an office number, Sharon Lavine's office. I'll bring up everything I can find on her. That just leaves the last guy…"

"Ryan, right? The one Emily could barely remember. She described him as 'entirely nondescript', which is almost the least helpful description I've ever heard…" Reid frowned in concentration. "Ok, the last landline number belongs to a Martha Shane, aged 72, and it's local."

"Why would Raynes be calling an old lady?" Garcia brought her photo up. "She looks so sweet, too."

"Well, she has one son- huh. Interesting." Three new photos came up on the screen as Reid found more data. "Henry Shane, in prison for the past 15 years for murdering his wife and their next door neighbor, both blondes." He pointed out Rita Shane, the murdered wife, who was maybe 25 years old in death, and a very pretty blonde woman. "Their son Ryan witnessed the murder and testified against his father. He was seven at the time. He's lived with his grandmother since…Trouble at school, animal abuse, juvie record…"

"Huh. Might be your unsub." Garcia nodded slowly. "He looks so…boring."

"Yeah, not really your creepy murderer type, but you never know." They didn't have a reason to arrest him, of course, but if they questioned the other members of the study group, it might not be a bad idea to start with him. "I'll go tell the others." Excited by this lead, Reid entirely forgot about keeping safe and not going anywhere alone. As soon as he rounded the corner towards the interview rooms, his way was blocked by the grinning O'Dell.

"Morning, pipsqueak. Told you we had unfinished business."

"JJ, wait!" For a short slip of a girl, JJ was really fast, and made it out of the police station and halfway down the street before Emily put on a burst of speed and caught up with her. "Where are you going?"

"Don't care." JJ half gasped, half sobbed. "Away from 'em all." She kept on running, ignoring Emily, barely noticing the traffic to avoid it, until her legs started hurting and she slowed. Some distance behind her, Emily was panting for breath, but bravely keeping up.

"Jesus, Jaje, d'you wanna- kill me?" She gasped, bending over with her hands on her knees.
"N-no." JJ was breathless herself, and still upset enough that she knew she wanted to lash out at something, but Emily wasn't the target, was she? "Jus' leave me alone, please?"

"I can't." Emily straightened. "Because we can't be outside alone, and, uh-" she looked around them, "because I have no idea where we are, so you probably don't either."

JJ raised her head and frowned. "Oh. I don't, actually." They'd never been in this part of town, it was the opposite direction from the college. "Oopsie. We could ask, I'm sure everybody knows how to get back to the police station."

"We could, I guess." While she was getting her breath back, Emily's mobile started buzzing. "Probably the others wondering where we are." She flipped it open and raised an eyebrow. "Huh. It's Donna, wondering whether I'm ok after yesterday. That's nice of her." She texted back that she was ok, clearly her phone hadn't been confiscated after all, but she was grounded. "Come on, let's start heading back."

They moved slowly, following the signs and a street map they'd found in a bus station, both feeling a little nervous to be out alone, without the protection of being armed adults. Emily's phone buzzed again a moment later. "Hey, Donna wants me to come meet her, if I can sneak out. She says they're having a Circle meeting because Midnight was taken in for questioning, they want to help him, I guess." She showed JJ the text. "What do you think? It's practically one street away."

"I think we need to get back before they come looking for us, Em. And that we're not allowed to be out alone." Now that she wasn't quite as angry anymore, JJ was pretty anxious to return to safety.

"Yeah, but this could be really important, Jaje. If we know Midnight isn't our unsub, then one of the others might be, and we need to start looking into them. We'll be saving the police the time." Emily's eyes were bright with excitement, eager to charge in and win the day. JJ looked uncertain, and she decided to play dirty- if only because she couldn't just abandon JJ, and never would. "Don't you want to be useful? You're great with people, plus you're cute and people won't look past the pigtails. They'll be putty in your hand."

"If one of them's the unsub, we shouldn't go in there alone." JJ said reasonably, but Emily wasn't interested in reason, at the moment. She glared at her.

"Listen, I want to close this case and catch the asshole that did this to us. This may be the fastest way to do it. Come on, we'll let the others know where we're going, ok?" She quickly texted Donna back to say she was coming. "They'll never even notice we're gone, they're too busy being big important male agents." It was manipulative, but it worked. JJ scowled and nodded, and moments later Emily was leading the way back to the warehouse they'd met at the previous night.

"So what you're saying is, there's no more to your group than peaceful meditation." Moreno said for about the 17th time in the interview room. Morgan groaned quietly, Rossi cursed under his breath and Hotch's temper finally snapped.

"That's it. He's about to lose this lead for us." He was on his feet and out of the observation room before Rossi could react, and by the time the older agent followed, he'd already burst into the interview room.

"Hotch, no!" But it was too late. The teen faced Midnight squarely, glowering, and slapped a set of four photos on the table.

"Look at these, Raynes." His voice was cold, and despite his youth it was authoritative enough that Raynes did look down- very briefly. He looked up, wide-eyed, looking sickened after even a brief
"What is that? And who're you?"

"I'm SSA Aaron Hotchner of the FBI." Hotch flipped open his badge, and spread it on the table. "Three days ago I looked like that. I'm 47 years old. I have a son. This-" he pointed at one of the photos, "Is Mark Leibgott. He was 34 and a college professor. This is how he looked when his body was found. This is how I look now. So tell me, Mr. Raynes, do you have any idea who might've done this, since you deny anything more harmful than meditation and candles?"

"Oh." Midnight was stunned, speechless for a moment while Rossi and Morgan filed into the room, and detective Moreno glared at Hotch in irritation for interrupting his interview. "I- Just-" He blinked very quickly. "You mean this, don't you? You're serious?"

"Dead serious, if you'll excuse the choice of words." Rossi agreed, standing in silent support behind Hotch. There was a reason the FBI needed older, calmer and mature people- but occasionally a reckless teen was exactly what got things unstuck when they were stuck.

"This is very, very bad." Midnight closed his eyes again, and when he opened them, it was with renewed determination. "How much can you tell me about exactly what's been going on?"

"How do we know you didn't do this yourself?" Morgan asked from behind Rossi.

"I teach the path to inner peace, not to violence and death. Whoever did this is a very twisted, disturbed soul. And I never, never would've hurt 'Rissa." He took a deep breath. "Did the same thing happen to her?"

Rossi discreetly slid the photo of Marissa's body off the table and covered it so Midnight wouldn't have to see it. "I'm afraid so." The man seemed to fold into himself, one hand pressed tightly to his mouth to stop a sob, but pulled himself together.

"Tell me everything. We need to stop whoever's doing this."

"You know, in every horror movie ever made, the part where the two chicks go into the warehouse alone ends badly." JJ commented as the girls did just that.

"Yeah, but we aren't in a horror movie, Jaje. Besides, people don't make horror movies with kids, we're not even college age." Ok, it was a little dim and creepy here even mid-morning, but it wasn't dangerous. "I'm texting the others where we are." She typed in the message, but didn't send it- no point in having the cavalry show up too early, was there? "It does look a bit empty, considering Donna said there'd be a meeting…We should go downstairs, they'll be there."

"Are you sure we should go? I mean, we could call Rossi, or…"

"We don't have time." Emily interrupted with a sharp gesture. "And we don't want to scare them, right? Bad enough that my kid sister's tagging along."

"We don't look even remotely alike." But the words resonated in JJ, 'my kid sister'. She desperately wanted someone to call her that again, and to complain about her tagging along, even if it was just pretend…If she could pretend to have an older sister, she'd take that chance. "Ok. I'll be your kid sister. Let's go." She took a deep breath, and they walked down the stairs together. The room below was cool and empty, holding only the furniture with no sign of Donna or anybody else. "Emily…"

"Shh, it's ok." Emily reached out and took her hand. "They're not here, so we'll go back to the station. Maybe she meant another warehouse."
"No, she meant this one." The voice behind them came along with the ominous slamming of the door leading up and out. Both girls spun around, automatically reaching for guns that weren't there anymore. "Or rather, I did."

"Uh…" Emily searched her memory. "Ryan? Ryan from yesterday's meeting, right? Why are you using Donna's number?"

"Donna misplaced her phone yesterday." The young man smiled at them and JJ felt a shiver crawl up her spine. "Surprisingly, it ended up in my hand. Funny how things happen, doesn't it, FBI agent Emily and her little friend?"

Emily hit 'send' right before the darkness came up to surround her.
Chapter Summary

The girls are in very serious trouble.

Chapter Notes

Additional warning on this one, guys. This chapter and the next one get dark and nasty, and if you have triggers relating to sexual abuse, you might want to skip this one. It was hard for me to write, and I want to thank LadyWolf for holding my hand through it. Still, be assured that I try not to break what I don't know how to fix, and that I didn't cross any of my own red lines here, although I came damn close.

"I don't do this kind of magic." Midnight said after Hotch, assisted by Rossi and occasionally Morgan, filled him in. "Even if I could- and I'm nowhere near powerful enough, I'd never use my powers for anything this…" He shivered. "I'd call him an animal, but animals would never do something like this. Not even ants, and ants are vicious creatures."

"Ok, so who do you think might do this? Anybody in your little group? It looks like you were Marissa's main social group, and you have more access to this sort of thing than most others." Rossi asked, hoping Hotch would keep his temper, because he could feel the frustration radiating from him in waves.

"Look, there isn't anyone that I know of for sure- it's a small town, you know? Practitioners tend to hang out together, unless they're from wildly different disciplines. And- this isn't something you think about people, right?" He gave them a half-distraught, half-pleading look. "You don't look at a fellow human being and think 'sure, this guy would rape and kill children'. I can't think of anybody who'd hate enough to do something like that." He shook his head, at a loss.

"You know what, you guys keep doing this." Morgan got to his feet with a huff of annoyance. "Hotch, why don't you give him the profile? It might help him refocus his thoughts on the really negative people he might know. And I'm going to see if maybe Reid and Garcia have anything new, and where the girls are, ok?"

Hotch raised his head, intrigued. "Why didn't I think of that? I'm an idiot. Go ahead, Morgan, we'll look at the profile." It wasn't something they normally did with civilians, especially the former-suspect types, but it might actually help. "Great idea, thank you."

"Anytime." Grinning, Morgan left the oppressive interview room air behind him and headed to their allotted office. "Babygirl?" Garcia was the only one there, and he paused. "Where's everybody else?"

She looked up from the computer. "What do you mean? Weren't you all observing the interview? Reid left like fifteen minutes ago, and the girls even before then." She got up to join him at the door. "They didn't get to the interview room?"
"The girls did, but then I- uh- I said something I really shouldn't have, and JJ ran off with Emily after her." He was getting seriously worried. "I haven't seen Reid since we went in to observe the interview. Come on." On edge now, he didn't even wait to make sure Garcia was following him, sensing her behind him. "He's not in the bullpen…" The break room was empty as well. Morgan plowed ahead to the offices at the back of the station, his fear and worry growing. "I swear, if they're just playing hide and seek, I'm going to kick their asses so hard their heads'll spin…"

"Derek, look-" Being slightly taller, Garcia spotted the open door before he did. It was probably a storage room, but through the slightly open door they could see the flash of uniform, at least two people, and hear muttered threats and a younger voice talking quickly, urgently, until it was cut off with a soft whimper. Morgan put in a burst of speed and pulled the door fully open violently, slamming it against the wall so that everyone in the room jumped. A quick look revealed two cops looming over Reid, who was on the floor, backed up against the wall in a huddle, but didn't seem to be obviously bleeding or otherwise injured-at first glance, at least. A first glance was all Morgan got before rage suffused his vision with red and he didn't slow down, barreling into one of the cops and knocking him against the wall.

"What the FUCK is going on?"

The local shook him off embarrassingly quickly. "None of your business, kid."

"None of my business?" Morgan squared off against him, getting in front of Reid to cut off their access. "This is my friend, my team mate, and an FBI agent you're harassing, in order of importance of the reasons I'm about to kick your ass." He didn't really stop to think that the two cops had half a foot on him in height, several dozen pounds in weight and that his wrist was still wrapped in an Ace bandage and achy after the fight yesterday. "Reid, you ok?"

"Y-yeah. Th-they just, uh, shook me up a little. A lot." Literally, held him up like a kitten and shook him until he thought he'd bite his tongue in half, or do irreparable damage to his neck. Combined with shoving, threats and one backhanded slap when he'd finally managed to wriggle out of O'Dell's grip that fetched him against the wall, they'd left him dizzy, a little bruised and a lot freaked out, but he wasn't actually hurt, was he? "Don't make a big deal of this, Morgan, please." He didn't want the team to know, it'd be too embarrassing. He was ok now, wasn't he? "I'm fine, really."

"No you aren't. These two been bullying you? Found someone you could push around because you're bottom of the food chain here, huh?" Sure, Morgan teased Reid all the time, but nobody, nobody got to hurt his friends like this. Never. "How 'bout you pick on somebody your own size?"

"How 'bout we do?" They turned from Reid to face Morgan, and for a moment, he faltered, realizing just how much bigger than him they were. Fighting Hotch was one thing, but to take on an adult? Two adults, preying on helpless children…He couldn't let that happen again. With a snarl of anger, he threw himself at the larger one, kicking and clawing- and found himself thrown the short distance to the wall and hitting it hard, the breath knocked out of him. Above him, he heard a high-pitched shout as something flew over him, and the local cursed, his fist flying out.

"Everybody STAND DOWN." The bellow was followed by a stark silence, and Morgan slowly pulled himself up, sucking in air with an effort. At the door were Chief Matthews and Rossi, with Garcia glowering behind them and Hotch trying to push through to get to them. Reid was also trying to stand, across the room, looking dusty and wobbly.

"The little bastard bit me."

"Hope you've- had your shots." Reid's voice was shaky and he wiped his mouth with the back of
his hand. He looked at the sudden audience they'd acquired, and leaned back against the wall with a sigh. He really wished the floor would open up and swallow him, and tried to calculate the chances of an earthquake coming in right when he needed it. That he was a little too dazed to manage it worried him, but the final result was moot anyway, the chance too slim to matter.

"What's going on here?" Chief Matthews took the lead again, and he looked thoroughly pissed off.

"Those two guys were harassing Reid." Morgan accused, glaring at them.

"We were just talking to him." O'Dell protested. "About the case."

"Two of you, in an out of the way room? Right." The look Rossi gave them would've made braver men hesitate, and those two were far from brave.

"He was on the floor when we came in, sir. And then I went to get you, I guess things got-physical. Derek, are you okay?"

"Um." Good question, actually. As the adrenaline rush receded, Morgan quickly realized that no, he wasn't. He'd hit the wall all wrong, his face hurt, and his wrist was burning in agony. "No. I think." He held up his left hand and tried to close it into a fist, only to stop with a grimace of pain. "Now it's probably broken. Tried to break my fall with it, I guess. They were harassing him, slapping him around and pushing him and-" he saw the exchanged looks between the two cops, "it wasn't the first time, was it? Damnit." He turned his glare on Reid, who flushed and looked down, arms going around himself protectively. "Why didn't you say something, kid?"

"Derek, this isn't the time for that. Let's take care of your hand, ok? Reid, you too. Come here." Garcia kept her voice quiet and calm, and Reid swallowed hard and managed to slide out of the room and get to Garcia's side without coming near anybody else, no mean feat in the cramped quarters of the room. Reluctantly, Morgan joined them as well.

"You gonna make them regret the day they joined the force, right?" He asked Rossi, and the older man gave him a very unpleasant look in return.

"The day they were born, actually. You go ahead, we'll deal with this...these things here."

"It's not just them." If he had to be found out, might as well make sure nobody got out without consequences, so Reid dared to talk despite the glares leveled at him by O'Dell and Fletcher. "Perry was with them, guess he had better things to do today than bully kids."

"It's his day off." Matthews nodded. "Come on, you two." He grabbed both of them by their upper arms and marched them out.

"Hotch- wait." He was safe now, and they had a case to work, didn't they? Reid had almost forgotten the reason he'd left the safety of their office originally. "There's someone in the group, in the occult study thing, he matched the profile pretty well. Loner, terrible with women, history of animal abuse and petty crimes, abandonment issues-"

"Ryan, right?" Ok, that was surprising.

"Yeah, Ryan Shane. He doesn't have a mobile phone so it took us a while to track him down. How did you know?"

"Midnight matched him to the profile, said he was the only one in the group almost nobody liked, the 'disruption of their positive energies', he said." Hotch explained, "Also, apparently he'd been asking questions about how to gain more power, rather than more insight. They'd had several
arguments about the application of magical powers towards good or evil, and the doing of 'real magic'. Midnight said Ryan was disdainful of the positive thought circles and more interested in practical applications, until about two months ago all that stopped, it was like he no longer cared."

"So maybe he found a way to get what he wanted without Midnight's help?" In pain or not, Morgan's mind was working a mile a minute.

"That's what we're thinking, yes. There's also the fact that Midnight thinks that Ryan was looking at Marissa way too much, and in a way he, as her boyfriend, really didn't like. But then they broke up and he couldn't do anything about it, he felt. That guy has some very set ideas about honor." It all matched, and it was all worrying. "Reid, have you seem Emily or JJ?"

"Not since they went to join you..." Oh, this was bad. "But they probably went back to the hotel or something. Have you tried calling them?"

"Not yet. I will, though. Right after we take care of this little issue here." Hotch glared at where Matthews and his two men had disappeared. "Reid, are you hurt?"

"A little banged up, but nothing serious." He shrugged. "Just..." Slapped into a wall, pushed around, nothing he wasn't used to. "They were sorta...bigger than my usual class of bullies."

"They're a disgrace to their uniforms and we'll file a formal complaint." Hotch said firmly, and Reid shook his head quickly.

"Please don't. This case is going to be hard enough to write up without this added in. Please, it- it doesn't matter, ok?" It'd be too embarrassing, he couldn't have it in writing. "Please?"

"Why were they even after you? You haven't done anything." Morgan asked, still angry but also a little baffled. Reid shrugged.

"Bullies don't need a reason, other than that somebody's smaller and weaker than them. O'Dell applied to the FBI and was rejected, I'm guessing that's what gave him the initial reason." Talking back and insulting them hadn't helped, probably, but the others didn't need to know that. "We should call Emily." And forget this ever happened, please.

"We're not done discussing this." The least reassuring words Reid could've imagined, coming from Hotch, because he knew the older boy would follow through on that promise. The hand on his arm was less than expected though. "Whatever happened back there, Reid, it's not your fault. You know that, right? It wasn't your fault?"

"I know." He was just a bully-magnet, there wasn't much he could do about it. And knowing it hadn't been his fault didn't make it any easier, but he wanted to end this and move on, they had a case to solve. "Call Emily."

"We're going next door to emergency services." Garcia motioned for Morgan to follow her. The hospital was on the other side of town, but there was a paramedic team stationed next door to the police station, for emergencies. "You'll be ok here? I'll get a detective to come with us and smooth things over, the fewer questions asked, the better." They didn't need to start thinking up cover stories now, there was no time for it.

"Go ahead, we'll go back to Midnight and call Emily." Hotch nodded. "Reid, you need a minute?"

"I'm good." It would be either a few hours or nothing, since a minute was unlikely to help. Better to throw himself into something that was actually important. Reid dialed as they walked. "Straight to voicemail." He reported, worried. "And JJ left hers here."
"Damnit. I'll have the locals put out a BOLO." Hotch stopped outside the interview room to do just that, and Reid walked in, glad that the others had already talked to Midnight and he wouldn't need to explain his age.

"Mr. Raynes? I'm Dr. Spencer Reid with the FBI." He started, but didn't get any further before Rossi joined them, holding his phone up and looking as worried as Reid had ever seen him.

"Just got a text from Emily- sent over half an hour ago, apparently it got held up in traffic or whatever- they went to meet the rest of the occult group at the same warehouse they used yesterday, something about a special meeting because you'd been arrested." He told Midnight. "Makes sense to you?"

"It shouldn't…Nobody knows I was brought in this morning. Almost everybody has classes, it's the middle of the week." Midnight frowned. "We should go there immediately."

"No, we should go. You're staying here." Rossi corrected. "Reid, you're staying as well. I'm not taking any of you into a potentially dangerous situation."

"We don't know how dangerous it is." Reid argued. "It's all speculation so far." But the evidence was piling up, and his investigative instincts, still sharp, was pretty certain they had their guy. Now they just had to find him…before he found Emily and JJ.

When the darkness receded Emily found herself flat on her back on something hard. She could feel rough rope at her wrists and ankles- and neck, which was worse, because she couldn't move her head much. Also, her head hurt and- ok, she didn't seem to be injured otherwise. She could see a plain grey ceiling above her. When she turned her head she saw JJ tied up across the room, just like she was, to what looked like folding field beds. She wondered whether they were attached to anything, because field beds were pretty lightweight things and she might be able to move then-

"I wouldn't do that." The voice came from behind her when she started to twist around, trying to flip herself and the bed over. "They're welded to the floor."

"Ryan, I'm not sure what you think you're doing, but you're in more trouble than you can handle, believe me." Oh, how she wished she had a gun right now, or that she didn't feel entirely like a kidnapped teen, rather than a full-grown agent. JJ was still unconscious, or at least Emily hoped to hell and back that she was only unconscious. "Let us go."

"You know, I don't think I will." He moved so she could see him now, and there was very little sanity left in his eyes. "Not after I've gone to all the trouble of catching you. Not that I was planning on it, but…" He leered at her. "I wasn't sure it was you yesterday night, didn't really hang around after I cast that spell on your team the other day. It was only after the old geezer came in to get you out that I was sure, figured you'd get to me eventually, so I had to move fast." Emily closed her eyes but opened them quickly. This was no time for despair, she had to keep an eye on Ryan.

"You're not my type, you know? Your little friend, though…She's a real beauty." His hand ghosted over JJ's arm possessively, and bile rose in Emily's throat.

"Don't touch her, you sick bastard!" She struggled against the ropes and felt them cut into her arms. "They'll find you and kill you, you know that, right? You'll be dead by lunch."

"You sound so sure of that." He snickered. "I've had you for hours, agent Emily. It's well past lunch, and nobody's come for you. You've both been unconscious, at my mercy, do you want to imagine what I might've already done to your friend? Do you?"

No, no, she really didn't want to. If anything happened to JJ, it would be Emily's fault. She had to
trust that Ryan was lying, and the others were on their way. The profile said he limited himself to
the town limits, so at least she could be pretty sure they were still in town and not out in the woods
somewhere. "Don't you dare touch her, I'll kill you myself." She snarled quietly, with deadly intent.
"You've already got four counts of kidnapping, rape and murder against you. Don't make it any
worse."

"How much worse could it get, really?" She had to admit he had a point. "Four death, or six, or
nine, or thirty, who cares? It's their fault. Your fault. All of it." From somewhere he drew a knife,
long and sharp and none too clean. It chilled Emily's blood. "They made me do it. They wouldn't
see."

"Wouldn't see what, Ryan?" She'd talked down crazy unsub before, but never from this position,
ever when they had complete advantage over her. She knew she had to keep her cool.

"That we were meant to be together." He said in all seriousness, and Emily almost groaned. Why
did it always come down to this? And people wondered why she didn't date. "She was meant to be
with me. But she made me hurt her because she didn't see, if only she'd seen…I need to find the
right one. All the others were broken. They were mistakes." He waved the knife in the air, or
maybe his hand shook, Emily couldn't tell. From the other bed came a questioning mumble, then a
cry of distress.

"Emily? Emily, help! Somebody-" JJ's voice was high with fear, and a flash of terror shot through
Emily when she thought that Ryan really might've done something to her while they were both out.
"Emily?"

"I'm here, JJ. It'll be ok." She tried to sound reassuring. "The others are coming for us, ok? We'll
get out of this." Turning her head she could see JJ across the room, looking at her, and saw her bite
her lower lip and brace herself. "Just be brave, ok honey?"

"Yeah." She was cold and terrified and her head hurt, but JJ knew she couldn't lose it right now.
They'd get out of this. They had a team and the team would save him. I'm exactly his type of
victim, she thought, and against her will her eyes filled with silent tears.

"Oh, don't cry." The man- the unsub was standing right over her, and he had a knife. She
whimpered, shrinking as far away as the ropes would let her. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm going
to love you."

"I don't want you to!" She couldn't breathe, and the knife was getting closer by the second, "I can't!
I don't! I already have someone who loves me! I don't want you- let me go." She struggled as best
she could, but it wasn't enough, and she fell back, exhausted. "Please…"

"She needs to want to love you back, Ryan." Emily was far less confident now, JJ's panic echoing
in her own mind. What if they couldn't get away? "They all did. And none of them loved you, did
they?" Maybe reminding him of past failures wasn't the best idea, but she didn't care about the
procedures for handling psychotic killers right now. The best she could do was to get a confession
out of him. She wondered whether her phone was still on her, and whether they could track her
with it.

"Rissa loved me. She loved me, but she was blinded by that idiot Midnight. The poet, the bleeding
heart vegan aswipe." The knife slashed violently through the air, but thankfully nowhere near JJ.
"So noble and caring with his positive thinking crap. He didn't know what real power was. What's
the point of power if you can't use it?" A note of pride crept into his voice as he continued, "But I
found out for myself what he wouldn't tell me. I got the book, I worked the spells- I'm more
powerful than that geek would ever think of being. I can take what I want. I took 'Rissa, when she
got smart and kicked him to the curb."

"We know you took her, Ryan." Emily wanted to keep him talking- while he was talking he wasn't hurting JJ, and that was the most important thing. They had to buy time for the others to find them. "You killed her. You killed her, and Nadine, and Mark, and Melanie- did you love them all?"

Ryan wavered slightly, the point of the knife dropped dangerously close to JJ's face. The younger girl whimpered again and tried to pull away from the blade. "I wanted to show her how happy she could be with me. How much I loved her. You have to start early, you know? Get people used to you while they're still- young? But little girls, you know they can be kinda fragile? But she loved me. They all loved me. They just didn't know it." He looked on the edge of tears. "So fragile. Breakable." His hand stroked down JJ's shirt-covered torso and she couldn't pull away, frozen with terror. It was Emily who cried out when the knife slid under JJ's shirt and cut it open, sure she was about to see her friend killed in front of her eyes. The truth, as it turned out, was almost worse.

"I can't let her escape, you see." Ryan explained almost conversationally. "She's so fragile. Need to keep her safe. The spell won't last unless I make it last. Takes a lot out of me, you know? Magic's hard work." He tugged the flaps of fabric aside, exposing JJ's stomach. "I need to have her grow up with me, so she's used to me. So she'll really love me." He flipped the knife over in his hand so the point was down, and drew a symbol with his finger on the bare skin in front of him. JJ started thrashing and screaming.

"Please, you don't need to do this." Emily knew they didn't have much time, and she was afraid JJ would struggle right into the knife's path and impale herself by accident. "She'll love you anyway, right JJ? You don't need to be a little girl forever to love Ryan, do you?"

"N-n-no." JJ sobbed. "Please, no."

"Can't take that risk, baby." Ryan crooned as a first line of red was drawn on JJ's abdomen, and she started screaming with no intention of stopping, ever. "Women are awful about changing their minds. Gotta be sure, when it's love."

"They aren't here." The voice coming over the radio brought a release of tension, but not a renewal of hope. Gathered at the police station, Morgan, Hotch and Reid slumped slightly, and Garcia made a choked sound of distress. Midnight, who was listening in with them, shook his head.

"I called Donna, her phone's turned off."

"So is Emily's." Morgan supplied. "We can't track either one of them."

"Have we tried any of the others?" Reid asked quietly. If only he'd gotten to them with the information about Ryan sooner, he thought, they might've warned Emily in time. He acknowledged they probably wouldn't have, but somehow that didn't really help.

"I tried Jan, she didn't answer. She has class at this hour, but…" Midnight checked the clock on the wall. "I'll try again in ten minutes, she should finish."

"Dave, is there any sign they were ever there?" Hotch asked Rossi over the radio. As the only adult member of the team certified for field-work, he'd joined the locals in the search.

"None that I can see. The door was locked from the outside when we came in, and there's paving so no tracks we could see." Rossi sounded tense, almost angry. Hotch knew he was just worried, but the tension in his voice only increased all their nervousness. "But if we're dealing with a magic user, that doesn't mean much. I swear to you, Hotch, if they show up safe and sound I'll-"
"Be really glad, sir." Garcia interrupted softly. They all heard his deep sigh.

"Yeah. Yeah, I will be. We'll call in again if we get anything from searching the area."
Unfortunately it was remote enough that at this hour of the morning it was unlikely anybody'd seen anything.

They returned to a tense silence. Chief Matthews came in, looking grim.

"We've heard back from the team I sent to Martha Shane's house. She hasn't seen Ryan since yesterday, and she assumed he was at work, she says he comes and goes without telling her, he's a grown man. His boss at the coffee shop says he hasn't shown up for work since Monday."

"Since we arrived." Since the spell. Morgan frowned. "Think he might've been suffering from that spell backlash your friends mentioned, babygirl?"

"Might've been." She agreed. "Did you get me his computer? Any records?"

"His room was as clean and empty as a hotel room. Just clothes and a few classical music CDs, no other personal belongings. Not even a computer." Matthews reported, and Garcia's face fell.

"That makes no sense, though. He had to have some sort of work space, if he's our guy." Reid tried to keep an open mind, but they were all fairly certain by now that Ryan was in fact 'their guy', and that he probably had Emily and JJ. "Wouldn't he?" He directed the question at Midnight.

"Yes, and I know he has a computer because he's sent the group emails."

"Could've done that from the library or an internet café." Hotch argued, and Midnight nodded.

"True, but I've also seen him with a laptop once. He'd need a work room or a Circle, somewhere he could regain power. I'm not sure where he goes when he's not home, he's not really close to the rest of the Circle. And he hates my guts." Midnight's face was apologetic. "He thinks my refusal to seek out more power makes me weak, I disagree. It's a matter of perspective, I suppose."

"Or a matter of him never having had power, and wanting to regain control he never had." Reid added. "His record shows him as taking on larger kids at school, trying to run with the strongest gangs... He's always lost though. Always been rebuffed. I'm guessing he's very angry, and now he can finally feel power over someone..." He shivered. "Even if they're only kids when he overpowers them. It makes him in control."

"Which means if we threaten that control, he could snap." Hotch concluded.

"He probably already has snapped, though. Given that he's killed four people and all." It was more of a question than a statement, since Garcia was never really sure of where the 'snap' point was. It seemed to be different for different people. "I mean, we know he goes for blondes."

"He gets very upset when women turn him down." Midnight said. "And in the time I've known him it's happened maybe once a month. He'd get fixated on a woman, moon around and follow her and declare his love and such, and they'd threaten him with a restraining order. He got beat up a few times by angry boyfriends, it hasn't made him stop yet." He swallowed hard. "He was like that with Marissa, before we started dating, but he was afraid of me so he stopped. When she broke up with me..." He choked, raised a hand to his face, "I should've realized."

"You had no way of knowing." Hotch tried to sound comforting, but he was worried, verging on scared, and helpless, which was making him angry. "We'll get him. In the meantime, let's focus on how we can find him."
Midnight's phone rang and he immediately looked brighter. "Jan? Yeah, I'm ok. Listen, have you seen Donna or Ryan today? Oh, she is?" He shook his head slightly, no longer bright. "Yeah, I called her earlier- oh, she did? Sucks, ok. Well, I'll see you both. Listen, if you hear from Ryan tell him I'm looking for him, ok? And call me. Bye." He put the phone down slowly. "Donna lost her phone yesterday after the meeting, neither one of them's seen Ryan since then."

"Hell." Morgan's quiet exhalation seemed to sum it up neatly.

"Can you actually work magic, Mr. Raynes?" It was Garcia who asked, and the others gave her looks ranging from disbelief to 'why didn't we think of this earlier?' "I mean, spells. Good spells. Can you?"

He hesitated. "I know the theory, but I've never tried anything beyond the most basic… I mean, I've charmed bugs away from my garden, but that might've just been luck, or my organic pest control doing its work, you know? I think- I probably could. Maybe. But you shouldn't count on it."

"It's worth a shot." Reid was more open to the idea than the others, maybe. "What did you have in mind, Garcia?"

"A- a locator spell. To find Emily." She suggested. "They always do it in movies and such."

"It's possible." Midnight nodded, but he didn't look at all confident. "I mean, I know how to do it, I guess. But it'll take time, and I'll need- something of hers to focus on. And a map. And about half an hour to meditate."

"We may not have half an hour." Hotch said tightly. "But it's worth a try. We'll try tracking Ryan through his financials, maybe he's paying rent on his own place, or has a second job somewhere- where did you say he worked?"

"A café just outside the community college." Morgan supplied. "No storage facility there that we could find. He'd need somewhere remote and private, where he could drag children and not be seen. I'm going to assume he can't just… go invisible or something?" God, this magic crap made everything harder.

"He might be able to, but probably not if he's already expanded a lot of power de-aging you all." Midnight shook his head slightly. "I mean, he's getting extra power from somewhere, or something-" a grimace of disgust crossed his face. "Try calling animal control, see if they've had any reports of dead cats and dogs, he might be using their life force to recharge. He's already doing blood-magic, I wouldn't put anything past him."

"That's just…" Garcia got up and supported herself with one hand on the desk. "I need a moment, ok?"

"I'll come with you. When you've taken that moment, we'll contact animal control." Morgan stood up as well. They may be kids, but he still wanted to protect his baby girl from all the evil in the world- as represented this time by Ryan Shane.

As they left, Reid leaned back in his chair. "I hate not being able to do anything. Do we have anything of Emily's here, or do we need to go back to the hotel? Wait." He straightened. "We're going to assume she and JJ are together, right? JJ left her mobile here. Can you work with that?" This last was directed at Midnight, while Hotch watched them both intently.

"I- I guess? I've never tried this, I told you already. But I can try. Give me some time to prepare, I need to meditate, gather my energies…"
"We'll go find you a map." Finally, something to do.

"Of the entire town, and as accurate as you can get it." He requested. "And please, don't disturb me until I'm ready. You all carry a lot of negative energy around with you, it's surprising in children."

"That's because we aren't children." Hotch reminded him. They went to get things for him without waiting for a response.

"We'll find them in time, right?" Alone with Hotch, Reid allowed himself to show just how scared he was, and he wasn't at all reassured by the way Hotch seemed to shrink a little as soon as he didn't need to keep up a façade for the adults around them.

"If I tell you that we will, would you believe me?"

"Maybe."

"Then yes, we'll get them in time. He held the others for at least a day, so we have a window of time to get them." Hotch tried to sound confident, and knew he didn't, and couldn't. Because they both knew what Ryan had done to his victims in the time he'd held them, and the thought- no, it was unthinkable. Reid was trying very hard not to think about it, too. His voice shook slightly.

"We have to keep it together, right?"

"Yeah." Hotch nodded as firmly as he could. "Remember all the kids we've saved in the past. We can do this. They're not kids themselves, you know that and they know that. They'll hang in there." They had to trust in Emily and JJ to survive long enough for the team to find them, or the locals, and in themselves to keep that time to a minimum. "It's everything we have at the moment."

"We also have the best minds in the FBI, and a guy who can maybe use magic." Reid reminded him, and Hotch felt his shoulders un-tense just a little.

"Right. Unbeatable team?"

"We'll have to be."

"Yeah."

JJ's steady sobbing rose into a high-pitched whine of pain when the knife finally rose and Ryan swiped a ball of cotton wool soaking in disinfectant over the cuts he'd made. There was very little blood, surprisingly- and that one rune had taken him long minutes of painstaking tracing. Emily remembered there's been five different marks on the victims…she just hoped one alone wouldn't be enough to leave JJ stuck as a child forever. And what did 'permanent' mean, anyway? Would she age at a normal rate back to adulthood, or would she be stuck forever at the age she now was? Emily pushed the thought away firmly, feeling hysteria bubbling just under the surface. She couldn't lose it right now, she had to stay calm, she had to, for JJ's sake.

"There we go, beautiful." Ryan crooned. "Now, let's give that some meaning, shall we?"

"What can it mean beyond you being a fucked up crazy person?" She didn't care if she drew his anger, as long as his attention wasn't on JJ. Also, any information she got out of him would be good.

"Tsk. Such language from a girl your age." Unfortunately, Ryan seemed more amused than angry, and not all that distracted. "Alone, the marks are just marks. To have an effect, they need to be imbued with my own magical energy."
"Gotcha." Emily nodded as best she could, lying down. "You know, that's the first time I've heard 'imbued' used in a spoken sentence, and I'm way older than I look." Maybe it was a requisite for psycho killers, that they sound as pompous as possible.

"New experiences enrich you. Now hush, I must concentrate." She opened her mouth to make as much noise as she possibly could and he stopped her before any sound came out. "Distract me and I'll hurt your little friend, agent Emily." That shut her up real quick. JJ was quiet now, either fully withdrawn, unconscious or in some kind of trance, as a blue glow surrounded Ryan and reflected from the rune he’d etched on her.

It took long, tortuous minutes in which Emily hardly breathed, but finally the glow faded and Ryan stumbled back from the bed, breathing hard, and collapsed inelegantly on the floor. Emily, who besides being terrified had also spent those minutes trying- without success- to loosen the ropes holding her down, gave him a filthy look.

"Serves you right."

"Shut up." He hissed, trying and failing to push himself up. Sweat stood out on his face, which was pale and drawn. "Shut up, you nasty little bitch. You can't stand to see- anybody- finding true love. Can you?"

"This isn't true love, Ryan. This is sick. You're sick." And there was no way to help him, and Emily didn't want to, either. Her adult self would've maybe found a shred of sympathy for the man-right now, she wished she was free and could rip out his eyes. "And it's killing you, isn't it? Using up all this power?"

"That's none of your business, little girl." He was leaning against the table JJ was on now, stilling up but not on his feet yet. "I'll just take a little break, and then we'll continue. And then you'll be mine, you'll grow into it." He smiled in true joy, and Emily against suppressed a gag reflex. "You'll grow with me, and when the time comes you'll have no other thought than to love me and please me and be with me always. My love. Only mine."

"I didn't know you went both ways, though." She wasn't sure where that came from, but the words clearly had some effect- Ryan's eyes opened sharply. "Mark Leibgott wasn't exactly your usual type, was he?"

Ryan spat. "Oh, him. He had the gall, the sheer nerve to lay hands on my love. And she rejected me! Because of that- that- clean as soap idiot who already had a woman of his own!" His face twisted in rage. "I had to get him out of the picture. But she mooned after him, she didn't know how good it would be with me, I had to show her-" He shuddered. "So fragile. The police were never supposed to come. But they came, and now I've finally found her, my love, the one who's meant for me."

The guy was definitely several sandwiches short of a picnic basket- but he was still talking, and still not touching JJ, and the spell was clearly not done yet. All good things. Emily just had to stall him long enough to be rescued.

*Guys, where are you…?*
"There." It'd been a nerve-wrecking few minutes, silent and tense while Midnight sat with one hand on JJ's phone and the other on the map, staring intently at a blue glass pebble they'd appropriated from a decorative vase in the break room. Adept as he was at sleight of hand, Reid couldn't see how he'd managed to make the pebble move across the map, unless it really was through magic. It had taken several minutes of circling, spiraling ever more tightly around a single point before Midnight finally opened his eyes and relaxed. "She's there. At that address." It was out of town, but just on the edge of the boundary, almost at the highway. The map didn't show a street there, just a dirt road. Reid brought up Google Earth and looked up the coordinates.

"Electric company maintenance building." He reported.

"Ryan used to work for the electric company until they fired him for sexual harassment." Hotch looked more hopeful than he'd looked in a while. "He'd know how to get there, and when it would be visited."

"It's outside the city limits." Garcia tapped a finger on the map. "Might be we why haven't found any rise in dead animals. We could widen the search to county authorities."

"You can do that while Rossi and the locals head there." Hotch glanced at the radio, looking for reassurance. Rossi and the police detectives had been circling, and hadn't returned to the station yet. "Dave, you got all that?"

"Yeah, Hotch, we're on our way there now."

"Good. Good luck, and get that bastard, ok?"

"Oh, we will." Rossi promised, and he clearly didn't mean he'd limit himself to non-lethal force. "We'll get him."

"Good." Three youthful faces exchanged looks around the room, and Midnight slumped back, tired.

"This magic thing takes a lot out of you." He announced. "I hope it's the right place. I hope they're there and safe."

"Yeah, we do too." Morgan agreed. "Nothing to do but wait now, right?"

"Pretty much." Garcia nodded unhappily. "Welcome to my life."

"Your life sucks." He informed her, and she flashed him a tight grin.

"You just remember that next time I'm sitting alone, waiting for you." And they all hoped there'd be a next time.
Ryan was on his feet, looking none too steady but mobile again, which meant he'd get ready to start on JJ again. Emily couldn't let that happen. She swallowed hard, knowing that she might have to do something desperate, a last resort she truly didn't want to reach, even though she'd done it before, many times, but never when his life was really on the line. She'd done it for popularity, for favors, or occasionally for fun. Now she'd do it to save JJ, and possibly herself. Her adult mind shrank away from the very idea, but her teenaged awareness knew only that it had worked before, and crazy killer or not, Ryan was just a man. Men could be manipulated.

She remembered Italy, remembered barely speaking the language but learning fast, being an outsider at school the first week- but that week was the length of time it took her to pinpoint the most dominant boy in the senior class, and focus her full attention on him. She hadn't tried for subtlety back then; she hadn't cared if the other girls thought she was a slut, as long as her mother didn't hear about it. As soon as she had the boys wrapped around her finger, gaining the upper hand with the girls hadn't been too hard. She was an old hand at it, and if she hadn't used those skills much since joining the FBI, her fifteen year old self remembered them very clearly. She could do this.

"You know, I'm sure you can find something better than a whiny little girl." She said, trying to sound calm and mature, but not too mature- she couldn't come off as threatening or too assertive, after all, and unlike the boys in her class, he did want little girls. "I mean, what's this hang-up about blondes? Why don't you try a brunette for a change?" She'd never tried this on someone that much older than her- the seniors in her school hadn't been older than 18, and Ryan was at least 22. She could do it, she thought, but she'd never tested that theory. No time like the present though, was there?

He hesitated, frowning slightly, but his eyes were on her, not on JJ. She plowed ahead before he could object.

"I get the idea of raising your love to love you from a young age, but why wait? Like you said, they're so fragile. Maybe you want to try someone…just a bit older. Less fragile. Someone who won't break at your first touch." She prayed to God she wouldn't have to test out her own sturdiness with him, because she wasn't certain she wouldn't break. "Someone who understands you enough to love you like you deserve to be loved." The words tasted like ashes. "You're wasting your time with the kid. She's just like the others, she doesn't understand. Look at her." The stark terror in JJ's eyes, now she was awake and aware again, supported her words. "She's not good for anything now. And I could be yours without all that hassle. I can give you what you want." If they survived this, she'd never feel clean again. But it looked like just maybe it was working, like maybe he was turning away from JJ and towards her.

"I like blondes." His voice was dull, confused- he was still weak from the magic, she realized, and that made him vulnerable.

"I can be a blonde for you. All it takes is some time and the right hair dye." She was practically drawling, putting every seduction trick her fifteen year old self knew into this, considering that her use of body language was limited. "If you untied me…I could show you."

"No!" His shout made her jump, and JJ whimpered again. "No! I want my love. I want the one who's meant for me! I don't want any cheap substitutes!" He was advancing on her, and she fought not to show fear, and kept talking.

"You'll have your love, Ryan, but why wait? Try me, and if you're unhappy, you'll still have her. Maybe if I show her how good it can be with you, she won't break as easily.” She was getting even more desperate. It had been hours, and most kidnapping victims didn't last the first day…And she
knew Ryan was completely unhinged, now. She just had to keep him distracted. "What are you, scared?" The words just slipped out, as natural as breathing, because that had been her strongest card back in high school- what red blooded male wanted to live with the knowledge that a girl had come on to him and he'd turned her down? As soon as she said it she knew it'd been the wrong thing to say.

"NO!" He kicked the table she was on, rattling her in her ropes and making her cry out in alarm. He was far too close, and so much at an advantage that she was sure he'd just kill her first and be done with it. Damnit, it had always worked before…But after that first burst and anger, he grew quiet. Maybe it was working after all.

"No." He repeated, but it was clear he was struggling with the decision now. "I have to be true to my love. I have to. True love, you know, you can't betray it. That'd be cruel. She'll wait for me." Still, he was coming closer, his hand reaching out to touch Emily and she forced herself to hold still, not to draw back from his touch. Unexpectedly, his knife flashed down. Later, she'd curse herself for not even noticing he was still holding it. Before she had a chance to make a sound, he'd cut through her shirt, exposing the sensible black bra underneath. "You- you're too old to train."

She had to lick her lips twice to form words properly, but the flick of her tongue might add to the overall effect. He was too far gone to notice her terror anyway. "I need less training. I'll love you without you having to explain it to me. Try it."

His hand landed on her shoulder and started to draw down, and she held her breath and prayed, not sure whether she was praying for success or failure. Mostly, she was praying to be rescued in time. His fingers on her made her soul crawl, but he was there, pushing the strap of her bra aside. She closed her eyes.

"Freeze! Police!"

Maybe there was a God after all. Emily released her breath in a long sigh that ended in a sob as she heard Rossi's voice somewhere above her.

"Ryan Shane, you are under arrest for murder, kidnapping and rape. Move away from them and put your hands on your head." Rossi's tone made the tag of 'go ahead, give me a reason' redundant.

"Y-you can't." Ryan was backing away, at least, but his hands were at his sides, and he looked completely pole-axed. "You can't interfere, I'm in the middle- she loves me! I have to stay with her!"

"She doesn't love you, Shane." It was one of the local cops talking now. Emily closed her eyes and tried not to move. Let him forget they were even there, left him be distracted, and above everything, let them get him already. "None of them loved you, you sick fuck. Get on the floor with your hands over your head."

"No! They did love me!" Ryan screamed, throwing himself at JJ. Two shots rang out and he crumpled to the ground, and in the space of two heartbeats the place seemed to be crawling with cops. Emily felt frozen, numb and shocked, and she barely noticed when the ropes holding her down were cut. On the other bed Rossi held JJ when she was released as well, both of them trembling and JJ sobbing into Rossi's shoulder.

Emily tried to stand, holding her shirt closed with one hand, and the room twisted wildly around her. She walked a few steps away from the locals and threw up, falling to her knees on the cold floor. She just couldn't find the energy to move. A cop knelt by her and she flinched away, pulling herself to her feet by sheer force of will. She couldn't let another stranger touch her, it wasn't an
option. "I'm ok." Apparently for now it was enough. The cop handed her a blanket and she drew it tightly around her shoulders, relishing both the warmth and the protection it provided. Everyone was staring at her, she was sure of it, they'd all seen her like that, with Ryan's hand on her-

"Is he dead?" The question penetrated the haze in Emily's mind and made her raise her head, in time to see the local cop at Ryan's side shaking his head.

"Not yet. Doubt he'll make it to the hospital, though." He paused and gave Rossi a meaningful look. "We need to call him an ambulance."

"We already have." As much as Rossi wanted to see the guy dead, they'd done their best and he wouldn't be hurting anybody else for a long time, if ever. There was a growing pool of blood around him. The paramedics started streaming into the room, one of them heading towards Emily, another towards JJ and Rossi, and the rest converging on Ryan. Emily was still numb and frozen, walking blindly out. She stopped, blinking in the harsh sunlight. That it was still the middle of the day came as a shock- she was sure it had been hours and hours. The sun intruded on her brooding and forced her forward. Refusing all help from the locals, drawing away from gentle hands trying to help, she found herself ensconced in the back seat with Rossi next to her, JJ still in his lap. "Emily?" He had to repeat it twice before he got her attention.

"Mm?"

"You hurt?"

"I- don't think so?" Her tongue felt heavy in her mouth. "I- I just-" Tears welled in her eyes, and she leaned against the door and pulled the blanket up over her head. Wisely, Rossi didn't try to touch her or talk to her.

Things seemed to be no less tense now, despite the rescue. If anything, they'd gone from tense, infuriating waiting to something even worse- being right there and unable to help.

JJ clung to Rossi at the hospital and wouldn't let go, going into hysterics when a nurse tried to pull her away to examine the cuts on her stomach. Rossi, seeing that she was in no danger of bleeding out, as the marks had already stopped bleeding and looked reasonably clean, motioned for her to go away. "This can wait."

"But."

"It can wait." The steel in his voice, over the sound of a young girl wailing in terror, was pretty convincing.

Emily was withdrawn, sitting on a bench in the waiting room of the hospital, still with the blanket around her but not feeling any warmer. The room felt over-crowded to her, mainly with cops, as Ryan was rushed into surgery. Then it became ever more crowded, as one adult analyst and her three teammates entered at a dead run. Reid immediately looked around for JJ, radiating worry, while Hotch and Morgan headed right towards Emily. She forced herself to look at them.

"Emily, you ok?" The question, from Morgan, almost made her laugh, and she knew that if she started laughing she'd move on to crying, with no end in sight, so she just nodded tightly.

"Fine." Physically, she was. Whatever knockout spell he'd used on them, it didn't seem to have any lasting negative effects. And she didn't want to explain, or debrief, or talk to anybody, period.

Garcia, meanwhile, had followed Reid over to where Rossi and JJ were. The younger girl had calmed down a tiny bit, but she was still wrapped around Rossi with no signs of letting go any time
soon, sobbing and sniffling occasionally. He was stroking her back, trying not to react with too much protectiveness even though instincts he didn't know he had were screaming at him to get her away from here and somewhere safe. He knew she needed to be checked over by a doctor, but just then he really didn't care.

"How is she?" Garcia asked, and Reid just stood at her side, looking seconds away from crying himself.

"In shock, but he didn't- didn't do- we got there in time." Mostly in time, anyway. Not early enough to spare them the trauma of being taken, not fast enough that they weren't hurt, but at least he hadn't had long enough to- well, Rossi's mind didn't want to go there. "Garcia, can you do me a favor? Get a shirt from someone, I'm sure the staff here has a spare set of scrubs, and see if you can talk Emily into changing? He- he cut her shirt open." He could see the horror in Garcia's eyes and hurried to reassure her, for what it was worth, "That's as far as he got, but- you understand." She nodded, understanding more than he did probably, about how a young woman would feel with her body exposed to strangers.

"Sure, I'll see what can be done." It would help relieve her own worry and angry and frustration, Garcia knew. She liked being helpful, and her job, now the unsub had been caught, was pretty much done. But she was about as freaked out as the kids, and she had to keep it together at least until they calmed down some. Maybe going to deal with something practical and relatively easy would calm her down. "Be right back." It was hard to sound cheery, even with the danger over, but she tried.

"What's wrong with her?" The plaintive question drew Rossi's attention back to Reid, who he'd almost forgotten was standing there as well. The boy blinked at him through those ridiculous glasses. "JJ?" He reached out a tentative hand to touch the part of her that was easiest to reach- her leg, since Rossi and her were both on a gurney.

"No-" That was all Rossi had a chance to say before JJ shrieked and flinched violently, almost pulling away from him and falling, and started whimpering loudly again. "Don't touch her!" He was surprised she wasn't too worn out to scream.

"What's wrong with her?" Adult analysis was fully out of the window, and all Reid knew was that there was something badly wrong, again, and nobody was telling him anything. He was still smart enough to guess, though- "Is she hurt? Did he- did he hurt her?" He stuttered over the flood of questions but didn't bother to stop and regroup, "Did you kill him? Was that him I just saw going into the OR? Did he do that spell with the runes? Is she going to be a kid forever now? Is she stuck this way?" He asked with genuine, well-intentioned worry, but the words just made JJ freak out more, her whimpers turning into bitter, exhausted weeping. "Oh my god, she is, isn't she?" Reid pressed a trembling hand to his mouth, and tears rose in his eyes as well, as JJ started to struggle in Rossi's arms. She knew, intellectually, that the spell wasn't finished, that there was only one rune on her, but Reid sounded so sure, and she knew he was smarter than her even if he was younger- what if he was right and she was wrong? What if she'd really stay a child forever?

"Reid!" Rossi's sharp rebuke froze Reid in his tracks. "You're making things worse! Go find somewhere out of the way and sit down and be quiet, before you do any more damage." The older agent didn't mean to be so harsh, but he had his own worries about the spell and what had been done to JJ, and Reid was definitely making her almost hysterical again. He let go of her only to gesture for Reid to leave. "Go!"

Reid's lower lip trembled, and the wounded look her gave Rossi made the older man want to kick himself, but JJ was his first priority right now. "Shh, honey, shhh..." he held her more tightly until
she relaxed against him, still sobbing.

"He d-d-din't fuh-finish." She cried, "S-said fuh-five. Onl-ly did o-one."

"Are you sure?" He'd gotten a glance at her stomach earlier and knew there were far fewer marks there than on the previous victims, so there was a fair chance she was right, but still... She nodded hard into his chest, and he stroked her back. "Good. That's good, kitten. You're safe now, he can't hurt you anymore." As soon as she was a little quieter, he motioned Morgan over from where he'd been standing, looking lost and helpless. "Go find Reid, ok? Tell him the spell wasn't finished and she's going to be ok, and- hell." He sighed. "I'll apologize myself later. Just make sure he doesn't do anything stupid, ok?"

"Ok." The teen nodded quickly Like Garcia, he was glad to have something to do. "JJ..." His face twisted, but he shook off whatever came over him. "I'm sorry, kid." He muttered quickly, then turned and ran after Reid. Rossi watched him go, chalking up yet another kid who'd need to be talked down from guilt and trauma later. It was going to be a very long day, and it was- he glanced at his watch and did a double take- just after three pm? It'd felt like days. At least Hotch was ok.

A resounding 'slap!' and a cry of pain from the other side of the room corrected that idea. Hotch had stumbled back away from Emily, one hand to his face, and Emily herself was holding on to Garcia for dear life, finally wearing a pink scrubs shirt. With another, deeper sigh, Rossi called Hotch over as well. "Stay away from her until she calms down." He suggested, and Hotch winced and nodded.

"I was only trying to help. Guess I blind-sided her a little." He'd just wanted to make sure she wasn't physically hurt- he hated not being able to do anything, when his teammates were so clearly in distress. He gave JJ a deeply worried look. "Can I- can I do anything, Dave?"

Rossi considered this. "Maybe. Hold on." He pulled JJ away so he could look at her properly. She made a protesting noise and tried to burrow back into him. "Kitten, would it be ok if Hotch held you for a bit? I need to go talk to the doctor. I'll stay in the room, you can keep your eyes on me."

JJ thought about it. She definitely didn't want to be left alone, it felt like Rossi was the only thing keeping her from flying apart, and he was barely managing it, too. But would Hotch be ok? She liked Hotch, he was like a big brother, and a big brother was almost as good as a big sister...Oh, if only her sister was here...Or Emily, but Emily was also hurt, although JJ was pretty sure she wasn't injured in a way you could see. "Emily saved me." She whispered, apropos of nothing the others understood, but Rossi nodded.

"I know she did. You both did really good, kitten. You wanna sit here with Hotch and tell him about it?"

"No." That, she was sure of, and Rossi looked very tired suddenly, a flash of the worry and fear he'd felt showing in the face of this sudden refusal. She paused and thought again. "I could...sit here with Hotch and not tell him about it?"

"Oh. Sure, kitten. You don't have to tell him. Come up here, Hotch." The older teen hopped up on the gurney next to them, and Rossi carefully shifted himself away from under JJ and moved her so she was curled up against Hotch with his arms around her. "Ok?"

"Uh huh." She was so tired, still shuddering with occasional after-sobs, and her stomach stung. She didn't want to think about it. Hotch was warm and safe and comforting under her, she could think about that instead.
"Good. I'll be right back." Making sure he kept himself in JJ's sight, Rossi found the nurse who'd tried to treat her earlier. "Excuse me?"

"Yes? Oh." She turned to him. "Agent Rossi, right? I see you're free to move around now."

"Within limits, yes. I'm sorry, but she's been through a lot today." He glanced back at JJ. Hotch was stroking her back, and she looked half asleep. "I think we can get her calmed down enough for a doctor to look at her soon."

"Good." She nodded. "It might be wise to give her a mild sedative, if not now than this evening, to get her through the night. The old wives' tale about sleep being a great healer is pretty accurate."

"I'll consider it." He would, too, despite being generally opposed to drugs, especially for kids. He knew they just needed to tide JJ over until she became an adult again and could maybe deal with it, her and Emily both, but that could be as long as three weeks...Which brought him to his next question. "What about the gunshot wound we brought in with us?"

"One to the head, one to the abdomen. Amazingly, he's still hanging in there." She reported, her tone cooling considerably. "He the creep that kidnapped the two girls?"

"Yup." Rossi bit off the reply, "And not just them, as far as evidence shows." Privately, he regretted not having killed him outright, especially because any testimony would be seriously problematic if it came to trial- if everything went well, the two prime witnesses would be back to adulthood by then, and it would be a lot harder to convict him, unless they had a very open minded judge. But that wasn't the top of his priority list. Garcia had taken Emily away somewhere, and Morgan and Reid still hadn't come back...A twinge of worry made him pull out his phone and text Morgan to see where they were. Seconds later, he received a reply that they were safe under a gurney, with a photo of Morgan and Reid- and a gurney, with Reid sitting under it, attached. Smiling despite his tension, Rossi went back to Hotch and JJ, almost walking right into a young female doctor who was also on the same trajectory. "Sorry."

"It's ok. You're Agent Rossi?" She was young- ridiculously young to be a doctor, with soft brown hair neatly pulled back, and she smiled reassuringly at him. He liked her immediately. "I'm Dr. Amanda Clew, from pediatrics. Hello." She smiled at Hotch and JJ. JJ ignored her, focusing only on Rossi, and Hotch nodded with a quick 'hi', both his hands being too busy to wave.

"JJ, the doctor needs to have a look at you now." Rossi said gently but firmly. JJ screwed her eyes shut and buried her face in Hotch's shirt. "Please, sweetie?"

"Do you have to?" Hotch asked, holding JJ even more protectively. "She's- really upset. She was- you do know what happened to her, right?"

"I know she was kidnapped by a killer, and rescued after four hours or so of being held by him, along with- her sister?"

"Not my sister!" JJ shouted, muffled but clear. "But she saved me. She- she kept him from-" She hiccupped a sob.

"He's not just a child killer." Rossi explained quietly. "The victims were raped as well." Dr. Clew went a few shades paler, but set her mouth firmly.

"Then it's even more imperative that I examine her, Agent Rossi. I'll need to run blood tests, a trauma exam-"

"He didn't do anything." JJ knew she had to explain, because she didn't want anybody's hands on
her. Not a stranger's. Besides, her adult self knew how victims were treated. She didn't want to be that. Bad enough to be the girl with the dead sister, that everyone in town looked at funny, that adults pitied and schoolmates feared because maybe she was bad luck. "He c-cut me." She could feel the tears starting again, and she was so tired of crying, hoarse from it. Maybe it was a good thing they rarely saw any of the kids they rescued after they were rescued. "Just that."

"Cut you where, honey?" The doctor's voice was careful, but not condescending. JJ appreciated that.

"M-my tummy." She swallowed hard. "He cut m-my shirt." She sighed, absent mindedly wiping her nose on Hotch's shirt. He didn't even twitch- he had a kid of his own after all, and his shirts had seen much worse than some tears. "He was a meanie. He wanted to- to-" she hiccupped again and couldn't continue.

"But he didn't, kitten. You're safe now, and he can't hurt you anymore." Rossi reminded her.

"He can't?" She turned her head slightly, just enough so she could see him.

"Nope." He promised. "I shot him." The doctor cleared her throat, disapproving.

"Agent Rossi, is that really-"

"Good." JJ said decisively, and turned her head back to rest on Hotch's shoulder. "I'm tired."

"Is it ok if Dr. Clew looks at you before you sleep, JJ? She needs to make sure that cut isn't dangerous."

"Not…bleeding anymore." She mumbled, but didn't resist when the doctor pulled a privacy screen around them and Hotch lowered her to the gurney carefully. "You'll- stay?" She blinked sleepily at her two teammates.

"We're staying." Hotch promised firmly, his tone challenging the doctor to say otherwise, a challenge she wisely didn't take him up on. Her hands were swift and capable, clinical, and JJ held Hotch's hands tightly as they touched her skin.

"You were tied down, JJ?" She asked, examining the raw places on her wrists, the forming bruises where her socks protected her ankles from being cut.

"Rope." Was the laconic answer. JJ was concentrating very hard on every breath, trying not to spiral off into panic again. It helped that Dr. Clew's hands were cool and soft and delicate, not too-hot and demanding.

"I'll give you some antiseptic cream for her wrists and those cuts- they're not very deep, but you need to keep them clean and dry for a couple of days. They should heal without a scar, even." She paused. "JJ, I need you to open your eyes for me a moment, to check your pupils."

"Don't have a- conc'shion." All she wanted was to sleep. The doctor chuckled.

"Why don't we let me decide that, ok? Just for a moment, please-" she shone a light in JJ's eyes, prompting a hiss of discomfort and a tightening of her hand on Hotch's, but she was too tired to struggle anymore. "Well, I believe you're right. We'll keep her for a few hours for monitoring?" She asked Rossi, and he frowned.

"We're all trained in first aid, and I'd feel easier with her in a protected environment, with me…I'm her legal guardian." One thing Garcia had done, while the cops were out on their rescue mission,
was create identities and insurance for the team, and make Rossi the guardian for them all, to save up on red tape. "Could I sign her out before evening? If no complications arise, of course." He didn't want to make the doctor suspicious, but he also wanted everyone back at the hotel where they wouldn't draw any unwanted attention.

"We'll see. Right now- well, I was about to offer something to help her sleep." Dr. Clew smiled slightly, "But it looks like she doesn't need any help." Indeed, exhausted by the ordeal and emotional strain, JJ was fast asleep, still clutching Hotch's hand. "You should probably let her sleep."

"Yeah." Rossi nodded. "You gonna be ok for a few minutes, Aaron? I'm going to round up the troops, make sure everyone's in one piece. I'll bring you something to drink on the way back?"

"Please." Hotch nodded gratefully. Actually, now that things were calmer he realized he was starving, as they'd all flat-out skipped lunch in all the excitement, and it was getting towards mid-afternoon already. "No chance of a snack, huh?"

"Not here, sorry." The doctor shook her head, "But I'll see if I can rustle you up some jell-o, that ok?"

"That'd be great, thanks." Hotch hated jell-o, as much as he disliked any other hospital food and then some, because it was kind of slick and slimy and didn't look like food at all, but he was hungry enough to eat just about anything. "Got your phone, Dave?"

"Yup. You?"

"Yeah. Let me know what's going on, ok?" Hotch settled into a chair Rossi dragged over, still keeping hold of JJ's hand. "I'll keep an eye on her." He wouldn't let anything bad happen to anyone on his team right now, on top of everything bad that had already happened. "Anybody needs her, they'll go through me first."

"Good. I'll be back as quickly as I can." Rossi refrained from tousling Hotch's hair, or otherwise offering physical comfort. It wasn't the time or the place for it, was it? Time enough for it later. Thank God, they'd have all the time they needed now.
Clean Up

Chapter Summary

At the hospital, it's time to pick up the pieces.

It took some looking to find Reid- he moved fast, for a kid, and was small enough to scrunch himself into places. Morgan was actually getting worried when he finally found sitting under a gurney in an unoccupied alcove, hugging his knees. He'd almost missed him, a moment's instinct making him look under it instead of moving on. "Hey, kid." Reid didn't answer and didn't look up. Morgan wasn't sure he could fit under the gurney himself, so he did the next best thing and sat on the floor next to it, his back against the wall. "What's up?"

No answer. Reid didn't even look at him. Ok, he wasn't really expecting a response there. "JJ told Rossi that Ryan never finished the permanence markers on her." He said, as if Reid was keeping up his side of the conversation. "So to answer your question, she won't be stuck like this. And Rossi didn't mean to yell at you, he's as worried and scared as we are. Well, maybe a little less." There were advantages to being an adult and having a cooler mind in a crisis. "C'mon, at least let me know you heard me, here." He was tempted to nudge Reid's shoulder but something told him it wouldn't be a good idea.

Reid didn't want to look up. He didn't want to answer, he wanted to disappear and never be found again. Derision and occasional violence from people his own age he could handle, but harsh treatment from adults always felt like a betrayal, and cut a lot deeper. Rossi had never yelled at him before, as far as he could remember (which was less than he wanted to, a fact that didn't help his state of mind any). The news about JJ was good, he guessed, but she'd looked so- so broken- that they didn't reassure him much. Because they were all still kids, and now the unsub had been caught they needed to deal with the aftermath, clean up and dust off and- damnit. He hated that part even as an adult, and he couldn't explain any of it to Morgan and his mind was running in circles and-

"Hey-" Morgan found himself momentarily at a loss when Reid's shoulders shook for the first time. This was something they did in private, not in front of other people, and usually if someone looked like they were about to crack the others tactfully retreated and gave them the space to deal with it, but this time…He couldn't just leave, could he? Hell, he wasn't much further away from complete breakdown than Reid was. "Hey, it's ok now. We're safe. The girls are ok, we're gonna finish this and go home soon." There was no reaction again. "C'mon, kid, if you keep it up I'll start as well, and think about how it'll look, two FBI agents crying their eyes out in the corridor? Ridiculous, right?"

That actually prompted a snort of laughter through the tears, because it was a ridiculous mental image, and Reid shook his head and tried to steady his breathing enough to talk. "I j-just- he was- and J-JJ, and-" he sniffled and remembered with an inward grimace of disgust that his pockets were empty, not a tissue to be found. Damn. "Sorry."

"It's ok." Morgan said, because he felt like he should be the one apologizing- to Reid, to JJ, to Emily and everyone else, too. "You don't need to apologize, I get it." He really did. "I'm sorry too."

He guilt in his voice was clear enough even to Reid, who was pretty focused on himself just then. He swallowed hard and struggled for self control. "Wasn't really your fault."
"Wasn't it? If JJ hadn't run off, Emily and her wouldn't have been out to be caught!" His voice rose, self accusing but also hurt, because he hadn't meant it, and now it was all his fault. "Anyways, I'm sorry about turning off the lights the other night. I didn't mean to freak you out, I just-" wasn't thinking, too tired and uncaring and unsympathetic to anybody else's fears because he had too many of his own, but the dark wasn't one of them. "I'm sorry."

"You broke your wrist defending me." Reid managed a shaky smile. "I think you've- apologized. Right?" He took in a long, unsteady breath and let it out slowly. "How is your wrist, anyway?" He'd been so caught up in Emily and JJ being taken that he'd barely even noticed Garcia taking Morgan to the emergency station earlier. "Is it even really-?"

"Broken? Yes." Morgan raised his left arm, encased in a bright blue cast and restrained by a sling, by way of demonstration. "Six weeks, or however long it takes us to go back to our own bodies, if that theory about things disappearing when we change is right." He liked to think that it was, for JJ's sake if not his own. "Hurts like hell." There was a text from Rossi, and he half-smiled seeing it. "Rossi's wondering where we are."

"They didn't give you anything?" Reid wiped his eyes and nose on his sleeve, looking embarrassed. The last thing he wanted was for the others to worry about them, on top of everything else.

"Painkiller. Either it hasn't kicked in yet or the adrenaline burned it off real fast." His wrist was throbbing, but he welcomed the pain. "Doesn't matter. Wipe your face real quick." Morgan quickly snapped a photo of himself and Reid and the gurney, and texted it back to Rossi.

"Sure it does. And look, it wasn't your fault. That text Emily sent Rossi- that was about a study group emergency meeting. She would've gotten it even if they'd both still been at the station. And odds are, she would've gone." Now that he was calmer, Reid felt like an idiot. Maybe cheering Morgan up would help. "It wasn't your fault." He paused and added "You should apologize to JJ though. When- you know, when we're outta here and really ok again."

"I'm gonna." Morgan didn't believe Reid, but at least the kid looked calmer now, less likely to run away or cry again, which was good, because the crying thing had been really awkward. "Damn. Reid, promise me something?"

"What?"

"That when this is over, and we're all back to ourselves, we never ever talk about this case again."

Reid laughed, still a little unsteady but a lot more rational, his adult mind reasserted. "I wish I could promise you that, and I'm sure we'll all do our best."

"But?" There had to be a 'but'.

"But Garcia took pictures. Lots and lots of pictures."

Morgan put his face in his hands and groaned. Then he looked up. "Wanna go back there? There might be food involved."

"Hospital food?" Reid screwed up his face. Hospital food, even if you bought it at the cafeteria, wasn't at the top of his food preference list. Still, he was hungry. "What time is it, anyway?" He checked his watch and blinked. "Whoa. Late. No wonder I'm starved." He crawled out from under the gurney and got to his feet. "Um, you won't- tell anybody. Right? I'm in enough trouble as it is."

"You're not in trouble." Morgan stood up as well. "But I won't tell anybody. You need to clean up a bit though, if you don't want them to figure it out."
Reid knew he was in trouble, because he'd need to talk to the police chief and those bullies of his later, and it was plenty of trouble (and the last thing he wanted to do right now, too), but if Morgan chose not to mention that, that was just fine by Reid. "Ok, let's go back and find a bathroom on the way." He sighed as they started walking. "I wanna go back to being able to live of energy bars and coffee."

"I wanna go back to seeing over the wheel of a car." Morgan nodded. "But hey, we'll get there pretty soon, right? Case over, we're free to go, and we'll change back soon. Until then, it's vacation time!"

Reid had to smile at that thought. "Hey, think Garcia was serious about Disneyland?"

"Come on, honey, let's see about getting you some privacy." Garcia hustled Emily as best she could without touching her. The girl seemed to be back into silent numbness after slapping Hotch, who was really only trying to help, but Garcia couldn't blame her- and she didn't think Hotch would either. At least she didn't argue when Garcia led her out of the waiting room and into a small private room the doctors had indicated they could use. "Sit, ok? I'm going to see about getting us both something to drink."

"Vodka?" It was the first clear thought in Emily's mind. Alcohol would help. Alcohol numbed the raw edges of what had happened and what had almost happened, which was worse. Her voice sounded faint and croaky and made her regret she ever opened her mouth.

"I'm afraid not, sweetie. I don't support intoxicated minors. But I'll see what I can do about tea." Really hot, really sweet tea- Garcia'd read it was good for shock, and she knew it helped her after bad days. "It'll be hospital tea, but we'll survive."

Emily didn't want tea. She wanted vodka and some weed, or cough syrup or sleeping pills or something, anything to make the memories fade for a while. Still, she took the paper cup Garcia handed her and gulped it, burning her throat and coughing. "Jesus, PG- this isn't tea."

"Hospital tea out of a machine, best I can do on short notice." Garcia had no intention of leaving Emily along for more than a minute, and fortunately there was a vending machine across the hall from them. The tea was disgusting, but it was hot and very sweet, so it would have to do. "Eat this." She dropped a chocolate bar in Emily's lap. "Also good for shock."

"I'm not in shock. I wasn't even injured." Her wrists burned and her ankles felt raw, proving that claim at least partially false. She hid her hands between her knees, feeling the solid back of the ugly orange chair she was on and drawing some grounding and comfort from it. "So what- now you're going to keep me apart until- until when?"

"Until you're safe for human company." Garcia replied honestly. "And until you decide you can deal with all those people out there, or with the team, when we leave. Eat your chocolate." She leaned back in her own chair and sighed. "I'm glad you and JJ are back and safe. I'm sorry you were taken. But I'm really glad you're back." She didn't close her eyes, but she didn't say anything else, nibbling on her own chocolate bar instead. Emily let the silence stretch for long minutes, her mind floating, carefully empty of thoughts, snatches and flashes of memory swirling in the void, threatening to tug her down along with them. But it didn't look like Garcia was going to do anything further. The paper cups were emptied, and the chocolate was long gone. Garcia got up, in silence, and returned a minute later with two bottles of water and another cup of tea, well before Emily started to worry about being left alone.

"I don't want it." She said when Garcia put it by her hand. The older woman shrugged and sat down. Emily couldn't remember ever seeing her silent for so long, and it was starting to freak her
out a little. "Aren't you going to say anything?" She drank the tea anyway, because it was hot and she felt chilled to the bone. Maybe she was in shock, after all.

"I'm not a shrink, sweet pea." She didn't know what to say in this kind of situation, because Emily was a friend, not one of the bereaved families she volunteered with, and she was a teenager, and volatile, and Garcia didn't know exactly what had happened to her and wasn't sure asking wouldn't send her clean off the edge. "I don't think I can talk you better. I analyze machines, not people. But I'm a very good listener. If you want to tell me what happened back there, it might be easier going through it with me before you have to explain it to the locals. They'll want to interview you, later."

"Of course they will." Deep sarcasm laced Emily's voice. She was the victim, and victims were interviewed, after all the shit they went through with the unsubs, if they lived, they had to go through it all again. "JJ as well?"

"Uh huh."

"They shouldn't. I mean, she shouldn't have to go through it again." Emily's blood ran cold at the thought of having to describe it to strangers. "She was so scared, Garcia. She kept making these tiny sounds like a frightened puppy, and she screamed when he touched her..." Her voice trailed away. Emily had been scared too, but she hadn't screamed, or whimpered. "I'm not a victim. Neither one of us it." That was important. They weren't damaged, they weren't weak. "I didn't even see how he knocked us out, you know?" Garcia made an encouraging noise so she continued. "We were at the warehouse, and he came down the stairs, and- I sent a text-"

"We got it. Rossi got it. About half an hour too late, it looks like. The mobile provider around here tends to delay text messages, the locals said. Very unreliable."

Emily clenched her fists in her lap. "And it all went black. We woke up, tied to- to tables." Her wrists throbbed with the memory of the rope, in tune with the too-fast beating of her heart. "And he- he wanted JJ. I couldn't let him have her. He cu-" she stopped, bile rising in her throat again, tasting chocolate and tea and nausea together. "He cut her. Cut her shirt open, and marked her with the knife. She kept screaming." Her eyes were close, reliving it. "And then he- he tried to- to make the mark magical. To make her- to do the permanence spell. It knocked him out for a while, he said it's tiring. And I tried to get out while he was down, I tried an' tried and I couldn't." Her voice rose and her eyes opened, seeing only what had happened and not the hospital room she was in. "He- he wanted her. He wanted to raise the perfect lover who'd want him because she had no choice." Garcia's hand slipped into hers and squeezed, and she squeezed back. "I couldn't let him. I- I distracted him. I had to." She blinked tears out of her eyes, not sure when she'd started crying but not really caring, either, and when she opened her eyes again she saw only the hospital room, and Garcia next to her. "I had to. I'm not a victim. And I'm not a slut. But I was."

"Oh, honey..." The silent treatment was thrown out the window as Garcia drew Emily into a solid hug. "You did what you had to do?"

"I kept him talking, I kept him distracted, I got a confession out of him for why he'd done it. I almost- almost ha-had him con-convinced that it d-didn't have to b-be bl-blondes." She was stuttering, sobbing, feeling his hand on her again, the cold of the knife against her skin, the shock when he kicked the bed.

"Oh, sweetie..." She knew Garcia was crying with her, and somehow that made it ok. Garcia understood.

"He n-never got to where he wanted to be." She said that quickly, in one breath. "Never f-finished the spell. A-and then Dave came in- just in time."
"Knight in blue tac-vest." Garcia said shakily, and Emily nodded. "And you're safe now. He's in a hospital room with a thousand tubes in him, I looked. And you're safe and sound and you kept JJ safe, too. On your own. No gun, no SWAT team."

"Look ma, no gun." Emily's smile dissolved into more tears, because she was safe, after all. Safe from everything besides the memories. Garcia held her and let her ride it out, making soothing noises but not trying to draw any coherent words from her. Finally, she grew quieter. "Are you sure I can't have a drink of something good?"

"Surer than sure, honey. Maybe we can talk them into a valium to help you sleep later. But nothing stronger. Not until you're legal again. Then, I'll take you drinking myself. I'll even pay." Which was generous, since Emily had once drank Morgan under the table.

"I had a lot more fun the first time 'round, being fifteen." Emily grumbled. That reminded her, and she sat up fast enough that her head spun. "Shit. PG- they can't give me a full checkup. They'll notice-"

"There's no reason to do anything invasive, hon. They'll see about those cuts on your wrists, and otherwise- he didn't hurt you, did he?"

"N-not physically." She shuddered. "I don't want to tell the locals all this."

"I know. But just in case that monster survives, you'll need to." Garcia replied seriously. "You gonna be ok out there now? I'm sure Rossi's pulling every possible string to let us out of here soonest."

"I need a shower. And a drink, still." Emily felt disgusting, and not just because of the memory of Ryan's clammy hands. The starched hospital cotton against her bare skin itched and reminded her with every motion why she was wearing it. "I want my own clothes and a shower. A really long one."

"Maybe we can arrange that. After a doctor looks at you though, ok?" Garcia got to her feet and held out a hand to Emily, who used it to stand. She felt about as lively as a sack of potatoes. "The faster we get through with that, the faster we get out of here. Ok?"

"Ok." Emily nodded. "I can hold on for a bit. No promises about after we leave here, though."

"Not asking for any, sweetie. Let's go." Hopefully, they could be done and gone inside an hour or two- or Garcia would spring them away. She didn't like hospitals.

"Garcia?" Emily stopped as they left the small room.

"Hm?"

"Can we- can we go see him?" She looked pale and red-eyed, but resolute. "Ryan, I mean."

"You sure, sweetie? I don't know if they'll let us-"

"Just a look." Emily took a deep breath. "I need to know he'd really out of commission. I need to be sure." She knew it would help. "I need to know that he's lying half dead and JJ and me are still standing."

That, Garcia understood. She nodded. "Ok hon, just a quick look. This way." Emily deserved as much closure as she could get, because the case was over, but its effects, the analyst thought as her teenaged colleague walked a little straighter next to her, and still barely reached her chin, were far
from done with.

By the time Garcia and Emily got back, Rossi was back as well, and Reid and Morgan reappeared a moment later. Rossi gave Emily a carefully searching look, and she returned it— it was a look he was familiar with, that said she would deal with it all later, in private, and for now would keep her mask on successfully. For now, it was good enough. JJ was still asleep, and the others didn't look particularly alert, either.

"Emily, and doctors want to have a look at you—"

"I'm not injured." She cut him off, and he nodded.

"I know, but they want to be sure. It'll be quick and painless, I promise." Her mouth twisted, half amused and half bitter because they both knew he couldn't promise either, but she nodded her agreement. "And they want to keep JJ for observation for a few hours more, until she wakes up. The doctors tell me Ryan's comatose in the ICU."

"He is." Emily supplied. "And cuffed to the bed, on the off-chance he recovers." Seeing him had been terrifying, but liberating in its way. She was glad she'd done it. "I hope he doesn't." She added fiercely, because for once they didn't have to be professional about it and hope 'justice' was done. Justice, in this case, was for him to never wake up.

"Well, I'll need to work on my aim." Looked like Rossi agreed with her, but that didn't surprise anybody. "In any case, once we tie off all the loose ends with the locals, we can leave in the morning. I've updated Strauss, she says we all have one week's medical leave with pay, and she'll consider giving us longer if you don't return to yourselves by the end of that week." There were a few faint, relieved smiles around the room, but not as many as he'd expected. "First priority, though, is to get back to the hotel. Garcia, why don't you take the boys to have lunch? Late lunch, anyway."

"Very late." She agreed. The three boys looked very happy about the idea, though. Emily made a face.

"I don't deserve lunch?"

"You get hospital food." Rossi countered and she pulled yet another face.

"Don't eat the blue jell-o." Hotch advised. "Dave, you'll take over here?" He still had JJ's hand in his, and she stirred and made an unhappy sound when he let go for a moment. Rossi nodded and moved in to replace him, and she settled back to sleep with a sigh. "Bring you anything?"

"Yes, whatever as long as it's food." He'd grabbed a few energy bars, but they didn't help much. Any type of take-away would be better than hospital food. "Bring Emily something as well."

"Yes, bring Emily something as well." She agreed. She'd eat hospital food in a pinch, but something else sounded more appetizing.

"We'll be back soon." Garcia herded the others out, and Emily was swept away by a nurse. Rossi leaned his head back in the chair, feeling like decades had passed since morning, and tried to relax, now that it almost felt safe to do so.

They were all quiet until they were sitting at the diner, all four of them facing loaded trays. Garcia had taken a look at her three young charges and decided not to suggest vegetables, or anything healthy. They all needed comfort food. Even so, Hotch had something green on his tray that wasn't jell-o, and she hid a smile— for all his anger, he was a good kid. They all were.
"So…” She looked at them. "I'm guessing we're going to concentrate on eating?"

"I am.” Morgan's mouth was already full, and Reid just nodded and started cutting his chicken into what appeared to be equal-sized cubes. Hotch pursed his lips and shrugged.

"It's been a- a very long time since breakfast." He explained. Long, and it felt like longer. The table felt empty with only four of them there, but he was really hungry, enough so that the strangeness of it didn't slow him any. "I mean, you can talk if you like, but I can't promise we'll answer." Having made that nod in the direction of good manners, he dug in with the sort of dedication that made him such an excellent unit chief. Garcia chuckled.

"Nice try, fearless leader, but I'm about as hungry as you are." And as much in need of apple-pie comfort. She scanned her tray, shrugged at the terrible example she was giving impressionable young minds, and started with dessert. Hotch gave her a look. "What? I'm a grown up, I'm allowed to eat cake as a starter."

"Am I allowed to as well?" Reid eyed his brownie with interest, while Morgan simply shrugged and didn't bother to wait for permission, digging into his own pie with a grin. Hotch gave him a disapproving look- the whole point was getting through a meal and dessert being a reward, didn't Morgan know that? Garcia laughed and ruffled Morgan's hair, since he was closest.

"Do whatever you like, guys. Entirely up to you." In her mind she was already planning how she'd talk Rossi into taking them all to Disneyworld tomorrow, or maybe the day after, if they needed another day to recover. It'd be interesting, having five kids tagging along behind them...She figured they'd both be a decade older by the time the rest of the team returned to their proper ages, anyway, so why not go all out and really enjoy? Give them the full kid experience- the good parts only, of course. In Garcia's book that included junk food and candy without thinking about calories or cholesterol, frequent hugs, toys and TV and a lot of running around and laughing. This was why she made and excellent aunt and godmother, but never wanted kids of her own- they'd grow wild and crazy. While she was thinking all these very deep thoughts, Morgan had demolished his pie, while the other two were making respectable inroads into their plates as well. "So you're waiting with dessert?" She winked at Reid.

"Brownie's cold anyway. Chicken wasn't." Apparently when hungry and distracted he wasn't as prone to long speeches. Garcia made a mental note of that for future use.

"Fair enough, kiddo. We'll get you all back to the hotel, wrap things at the police station, and then…” She smiled. They didn’t, and she grew serious again. "Why the long faces, all of you?"

"We wanna eat." Hotch crossed his arms, "Not plan. Can we plan later?" He didn't want thoughts of the upcoming days to kill his appetite.

"Yeah, babygirl. The next week's not gonna be much fun." Morgan agreed, and Garcia's frown deepened.

"Why not? You get to be kids again, and on vacation. People dream about doing this, you know."

"We have responsibilities. That we can't uphold them doesn't mean they aren't there." Hotch shrugged. "I still have Jack."

"I have Clooney."

"I- uh- I need to water my plants? And I'm supposed to lecture at a seminar on Thursday." Reid had only just remembered- it wasn't an engagement he'd wanted, but he still had to be there, since he'd
agreed as a favor to a friend. But Hotch's problem was definitely the most difficult, his and JJ's. "I mean… I think we'll stop worrying about it soon. Unless we're reminded." They all looked at him like he'd grown another head. "Morgan, what was the name of your favorite college professor?"

"Mr. Davies." Morgan answered promptly, then stopped, his eyes narrowing. "Wait, that's not right. He was my favorite teacher in middle school. Geography. Shit." He dug through memories, immediate past and more distant events merging, and shook his head at last. "I know it was my Crim Law 401 professor, but I can't recall his name." Now he looked scared. "What's going on, Reid?"

"We've been losing more and more of our grown-up selves. I don't know about you guys, but the case helped keep me focused. No case, no focus, no way to keep a hold on our adult minds." He shivered. "I hope we change back before it happens all the way." He hadn't liked himself at ten. He didn't want to go back to that time.

"We'll just keep reminding you of what and who you are." Garcia said firmly, glaring at Reid because he'd depressed everybody again. "Cheer up, guys, please? I'm sure we can keep you focused if you want to be. Hotch, I could have Strauss call you twice a day to remind you, if you like."

Morgan choked on his drink, giggling, and Hotch gave Garcia a death glare. "I'll manage. Thanks." He didn't want to forget himself, or his son or his job. He'd worked too hard to protect his world to lose any of it, anymore than he'd already lost. Why did Reid have to be such a pessimist? "It- it might be easier when we get home?" At least they'll be in a familiar environment.

"I'm sure it will be." Garcia intended to make sure they didn't return home anytime soon, because she knew (and she was pretty sure they knew, too) that returning would be far from easy. From Morgan's expression, he was visualizing the lack of driver's license, the neighbors' questions, the boredom—vividly. "Ok, enough gloomy-talk. We closed the case and got the unsub, so we celebrate that. Finish up and we'll get something for the others and go spring them from the hospital." They were all a little nervous being away from the others now, after the morning's events, so there was very little talk and almost no delay in doing exactly that.

When they returned to the hospital JJ was awake, still holding Rossi's hand but looking a lot calmer than she had before. Emily was clearly done with her checkup, looking sullen but not outright rebellious about staying for a few minutes more. She swooped down on Morgan when they entered, zeroing in on the take-away bag he carried. "I smell pizza. Gimme."

"Sheesh, here, go ahead." He handed the bag over without a fight. "Just don't eat me."

"Pizza tastes better." Was all Emily said before practically inhaling her two slices without stopping to breathe.

"Slow down, Em- the pizza's not gonna run away." Morgan snatched his hands away defensively, but he was smiling, and there was no tension in the exchange, which Rossi thought was a good sign. He took his own pizza from Garcia gratefully.

"JJ, we have some for you as well if you're hungry." The older woman offered, and JJ nodded silently and accepted her food without a comment. Reid gave her a very cautious look, alternating between her and Rossi; he'd stayed strategically hidden behind Garcia, just in case anybody felt like freaking out again or yelling at him, he wanted to be in a good escape position.

"The doctor's ready to sign them both out." Rossi reported, and everyone relaxed a little more. "And I talked Chief Matthews into coming to debrief you at the hotel, so we only need to stop by
the station and pack up all our equipment tomorrow morning before we go home."

"That's nice of him." Hotch nodded. "But he does owe us one. Or several." He didn't want to go back to the station, and he had less reason not to want it than JJ, Emily or Reid, so he figured they wanted it even less. "So we go back to the hotel?"

"Yup." Rossi nodded. "We have all the forms ready, I'll just let Dr. Clew we're leaving and get her final ok."

"No change in Ryan's condition?" Morgan asked, glancing at Emily.

"Nope. I'd have texted if he'd done us all a favor and died." Her voice was cold, even though she was feeling a lot better after the pizza and knowing they could leave the hospital soon. The doctor had been really nice, too, not at all intrusive or condescending. But she wanted to go- well, home if she was honest, and knowing that was impossible upset her. The hotel was a pale replacement to her own linen and her own kitchen and- and being tall enough to reach the top cabinets, damnit. Garcia noticed her expression change and shook her head slightly.

"I know that look, Em. Don't- all of you, don't stress about going back home yet, ok?"

"How can we not?" Reid asked from behind her, and she pulled him close to her side. He wriggled away, but it still counted as a very quick hug.

"You have enough to stress about that doesn't involve tomorrow. Besides, I have an idea, but we should go to the hotel and discuss it there, alright? None of us are members of the 'we love hospitals' club."

"She's right, you know." Rossi stood up and tugged JJ along with him. "Come on, let's go."

While Rossi headed off to find Dr. Clew. JJ took a hesitant step towards Reid, who looked at her like she might erupt at any minute. "Why do you look like you're scared of me?" She asked, her voice raspy and raw-sounding.

"Because I am. A little." Reid didn't even consider denying or softening his confirmation. "Not of you- as you. I don't want to hurt you again. I- you- I didn't mean to freak you out- I just- I wanted to know-"

"You're babbling." She pointed out, "Again."

"Yes." He stopped. "Are you going to freak out again?"

She considered that with due seriousness. "Not right now. I don't think so." Despite her nap she was still tired, and she knew horror waited for her if she'd only turn her attention on it for a moment, but she didn't think she was about to cry or scream again. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"It wasn't your fault. I was scared because you were, but you didn't do it on purpose." He tried a smile, and she mirrored it at him- faint, but present.

"I really didn't. I just- I couldn't stop. It was scary." She moved closer to him and he didn't pull back. "I'm not gonna be stuck this way, you know. He- he didn't finish." Talking about it made the horror that much closer, and she took Reid's hand for comfort. He squeezed her fingers.

"Morgan told me. I'm really glad, JJ." His smile widened a little, and for a moment his adult mind reasserted itself, "I think I'd have ended up fighting with Will over sending Henry to piano lessons when he turned four, if I had to exercise my full godfather duties."
She giggled and pushed his arm, and he grinned at her, and for a moment everything was almost alright again. Garcia, watching them, felt just a little more certain that they could make it through the night.
Tag, You're It!

Chapter Summary

Back at the hotel, it's time to put people back together and tie up lose ends.

Half an hour later, they were safe back in the hotel. Chief Matthews met them there, and Garcia went in with JJ and Emily to keep them company while he took their account of what exactly had happened, just in case they ever needed evidence against Ryan Shane. They both pointed out that they wouldn't be able to come back and testify, but protocol was protocol, and Matthews promised to keep it brief.

In the main suite room, the four remaining members of the team were unwinding, each in their own way. Reid was sprawled on the sofa, pen in hand, writing something. When Rossi went past him, he saw it was row after row of numbers. Across the room Hotch was sitting at the small desk, writing as well, but his looked more like a case report, while Morgan was sitting on the floor with his eyes closed and his earphones on, clearly trying to lose himself in the music. What Rossi most wanted was a double scotch, no ice, but that would have to wait. He sighed and decided that since he had some apologizing to do, he might as well do it. Reid hadn't been this reticent towards him since his first week on the team, and Rossi knew he needed to deal with that soonest. Then, he'd have to talk to the others. Guiltily, he hoped at least one or two of them could be put off 'til morning. He hovered just outside of Reid's bubble of extended personal space until the boy looked up- and immediately looked wary. "Got a moment?"

Reid frowned. "My calendar's free." He sat up, shuffling back a little without even noticing and holding the notepad close.

"Case report?" Rossi asked, even though he knew it wasn't- and he suspected Reid had noticed him reading over his shoulder. The boy shook his head quickly.

"I'll have it finished by the time we leave." He promised.

"No rush, we're officially off-rotation and standing down- on vacation. That means we can put off the reports." Rossi raised his voice slightly, aiming it at Hotch, who squarely ignored him. "Reid, I wanted to apologize for yelling at you earlier."

"And you hate apologizing so I should just accept and we'll move on?" Reid raised an eyebrow. Frankly, Rossi would've liked that, but he shrugged.

"I shouldn't have yelled at you. I was stressed and JJ was hysterical, and there was a lot going on-"

"JJ reminded me of my mom during one of her attacks." Reid interrupted. "Nobody explained anything then, either. But I had books then, that explained things. And doctor's cases nobody knew I found and read." He looked down at his notepad, then up at Rossi. "I just- I needed to know she was ok, and you couldn't tell me she was because she wasn't. I'm glad you didn't lie."

"I wouldn't have." The older agent confirmed. Instead, he'd just not answered. "I'm sorry I snapped at you, anyway. You were asking legitimate questions, it was just a really bad time for it."
"Usually is." Reid smiled ruefully. "Morgan explained, anyway. I'm really glad Ryan didn't finish that spell."

"You and me both, kiddo." Rossi's agreement was heartfelt. "And I'm glad we're all safe and about done with this insanity. Are we ok?"

"We're ok." Reid nodded seriously. "Could we- do we have to see those three guys at the station again? I mean…They don't matter. Let the chief deal with them."

Rossi gave him a searching look. "You sure?"

"Very sure. I don't wanna see them ever again." Unless he was his normal age again, and armed- in which case, it was them who wouldn't want to see him. "Please?"

"Ok. I'll talk to Matthews." He nodded. "What are you writing there, if it's not a report?"

"Oh. Uh- pi." Reid tilted the pad so Rossi could see the numbers. "I'm up to the 200 place after the decimal." It helped him relax. "Like meditation."

Rossi laughed, shaking his head. "You go ahead with that, if it helps."

"You should try it sometime." Reid smiled slightly. "Morgan's feeling guilty over JJ and this morning. If you're doing the rounds, I suggest you make him your next stop."

"Yeah, I think I will." And he had no idea what to say, either. "Any brilliant insight?"

Reid tilted his head. "Whatever you say won't really help much until he talks with JJ. Just make sure he does it today instead of being chicken and putting it off."

"Hm." That made a lot of sense, actually. "I'll keep that in mind. Thanks." When he started moving towards Morgan, Reid was already scribbling again. Hotch looked up from his report.

"Want me to go? There are other rooms." He'd been following the conversation, not because he intended to eavesdrop, but the room wasn't very large and sound carried easily. "Reid's probably tuning the world out, but if you want privacy…"

"More up to Morgan than me, really." Rossi shrugged. "I don't mind either way." He touched Morgan's shoulder lightly and the teen's eyes snapped open as he jerked back, startled. The music was loud enough that he hadn't heard Rossi move, and he was actually making some progress in his attempt to forget there was a world outside his music collection that needed to be dealt with. He looked up at Rossi, almost accusingly, and made a questioning noise without taking off his headphone. Rossi mimed removing them, and Morgan did so with a sigh. "Can we talk?"

"Do we have to?" Morgan didn't want to talk. He wanted to go home and never think again, and he didn't want Rossi to lecture him, because it had all been his fault and he couldn't even defend himself, because there was no defense. Rossi gave him a long look, until he stood up reluctantly. "Fine. Other room?"

"Yup." Rossi looked over his head in Hotch's direction. "Don't think just because I've left you alone so far you're getting off without one of these later, Aaron."

"Get the hard ones out of the way first." With any luck, something would come up and distract him in time. Hotch didn't think he needed any kind of counseling, he just needed a good night's sleep. Maybe Emily'd be willing to share the sleeping pills he was sure she'd talked the doctor into prescribing.
"I'm a hard one?" Morgan asked as he stood in the other room with the door closed behind them, feeling a little lost. He didn't want to sit down on one of the beds, but there weren't any chairs and staying on his feet made him feel confrontational. Rossi sat down on one of the beds and motioned for him to sit on the other. Shrugging, he did.

"Hotch's words, not mine. How're you holding up? How's your hand?"

"Better now." The painkiller had finally kicked in, and he barely felt it now. "I feel kinda stupid about the whole thing." Charging in like that- but what else could he have done? Those cops were bullies of the worst kind.

"You shouldn't." Rossi shook his head shortly. "You did good back there, Derek. Reid wouldn't have told us if you hadn't caught those guys red handed." Just thinking about it made Rossi furious, but he'd respect Reid's wish in this. "That was all the beatdown they're going to get for it- physically, at least. You did a good job, protecting your team." He was driving towards a point shamelessly and ruthlessly, and even if Morgan was aware of it he reacted just as Rossi wanted him to.

"Did I?" He asked bitterly, his expression darkening. "I sent JJ right into the hands of that- that creep. Emily too."

"You didn't tell either of them to go meet people without backup," Rossi replied evenly. "Or to run off and not come back."

"I made JJ run away like that. Me and my big, idiot mouth." And he hated himself a little for it. "And look what he did to her! To both of them! He could've- could've-" his breath hitched and he couldn't even say it, turning away on the bed so Rossi wouldn't see his eyes fill up. Rossi, wisely, gave him a moment to collect himself. "It's my fault."

"It's not your fault that Ryan Shane is a sexual sadist who prefers little girls with blonde hair." He pointed out calmly. "You hurt JJ's feelings, yes. But you didn't hand-deliver her to him, or Emily. That's not yours to take on yourself." He was too young to feel that kind of guilt, not that any adult should, either. "If anything, I'm to blame for letting them run off like that." There was really plenty of guilt to go 'round in this case, but Rossi knew he couldn't blame himself too much; if Emily'd wanted to go, she would've gone, with or without his agreement. Or Ryan would've taken JJ, or another child. "We got him in time, that's the important thing."

"Doesn't make me stop feeling like a total asshole." Morgan shrugged and scrubbed his face with one hand. "And I don't even know what I'm gonna say to them. I mean, if Emily wants to kick the crap outta me, I'll let her, you know?" If it helped her forgive him, he was willing to even bleed a little.

"I doubt it'll come to that." Rossi had to smile a little. "Why don't you start with saying you're sorry, and that you're really glad they're mostly ok?"

"It's not enough." 'Sorry' just wouldn't cover it this time. "Sorry? Just for what I said, maybe an apology would cut it. For the rest...Hell, I can't be sorry enough."

"Start by apologizing for what you're actually personally responsible for, how's that as an idea? Apologize for insulting her and implying things you knew weren't true just to tease." Rossi suggested. Those were things Morgan definitely owed JJ an apology for, even if not the rest. "Work your way up from there, after she forgives you for that."

"What do I do if she doesn't?" Morgan's voice was anguished. "She's a friend, Rossi, what if I've
lost her? Both of them?"

"I think your friendship can survive this, kid. I really do." He replied seriously. "And the girls are going to need all of our support over the next few days. We're going to need to stick together even more than usual. Until you're back to yourselves, we're all we've got."

"Reid said we're going to forget we were adults before, if this goes on much longer and nobody reminds us." Yet another worrying point, on a grander scale.

"Reid's a pessimist. We'll remind you and you'll remind each other. Besides, you all need a bit of a break from the weight of the world. Maybe being kids again will be like a vacation."

"Rossi, age fourteen's not really my ideal vacation spot." Morgan frowned. "Just... Keep reminding us, ok?" Maybe he'd take Garcia on that suggestion about having Strauss call.

"I will. And you'll talk to JJ and Emily tonight?"

"If they're even willing to listen to me, yeah, I will." The longer he put it off, the harder it would be. A knock on the door interrupted them, and Garcia's voice came through.

"Guys, Chief Matthews is done and wants to talk to Rossi."

Morgan looked relieved by this temporary save when they both got up to get back into the main room, but he still couldn't look at JJ, other than tiny darting glances that were a lot more visible than he'd have liked to believe. JJ herself, looking worn out and unhappy, got on the sofa next to Reid and curled up against him, as he shifted without comment so she'd be more comfortable. Emily wasn't with her, and when Morgan frowned, Garcia shook her head slightly and mouthed 'shower'. He nodded, relaxing again. Rossi and Matthews were shaking hands.

"I think I have everything I need, Agent Rossi. You'll stop by the station in the morning?"

"Just to pack up all our equipment, yes." Rossi nodded. "About nine, I'm guessing. If that changes I'll let you know." He didn't want them to linger here, there were too many bad memories and way too much tension, still. You'll handle the loose ends?"

Matthews sighed. "I'm still not sure how to explain this to the families. I'm not even sure I understand it... but they deserve closure." He sighed. "We'll figure it out. If any of you have any bright ideas..."

"See if you can find their clothes at his house, or that place he used." Reid suggested, again without looking up from his writing. He didn't want them to linger here, there were too many bad memories and way too much tension, still. You'll handle the loose ends?"

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"See if you can find their clothes at his house, or that place he used." Reid suggested, again without looking up from his writing. He didn't want to draw Matthews' attention, but none of the others seemed to have any ideas. "You could tell them he disposed of the bodies, but you have the clothes as evidence. And the DNA matches."

"We'll give that a try, thanks." Matthews nodded. He gave Reid a strange sort of look. "Fletcher and Perry are going to be working traffic for the next six months." He said with almost no inflection, "And I've started O'Dell's termination process. This wasn't the first incident of abuse of power for him, but he's gone too far this time."

"Oh." Some response was expected, clearly, and Reid finally raised his head. "Good. Thank you." It felt like the wrong thing to say, but it satisfied Matthews, who shook Rossi's hand and left as quickly as was decent. As the door closed behind him, Emily rejoined them, her hair curling wet around her face.

"He's gone?"
"Yes, finally." Hotch nodded. It wasn't even very late- not quite 8 pm- but they all looked ready to fall asleep on their feet. "Are we going to plan tomorrow morning, before people start dropping off?"

"We should, shouldn't we?" Emily sounded reluctant. Like the rest of them, tomorrow seemed like too much to handle after the day she'd had.

"Actually, I have an idea about that." Garcia held up a finger, her eyes sparkling. Rossi frowned.

"No."

"I haven't even suggested it yet!" She protested.

"I know, and I still say no. We'll both be nervous wrecks by the time we're done."

"If you don't want to join us I'll just take them myself." Garcia declared. "Of course, I'll probably need to be committed immediately after, so start looking for a new technical analyst of my astounding and otherworldly talents…"

"Um, excuse me?" Hotch, again, spoke for the group. "Take us where, exactly?"

"Disneyworld." She replied gleefully, and Rossi buried his face in one hand with a suppressed groan of dismay. "Did you think I was kidding about that? We have a week off, all of us, and while Disneyland may be a bit of a stretch, distance-wise, we can definitely do Florida." They all gaped at her. "Think about it- it's the happiest place on earth, you all need a break, and it means at least a couple of days before you all have to go home and deal with the fact that you're kids for a while. I suggest you enjoy being kids, just for a few days." She knew that putting off returning home was her strongest argument. "It'll be fun."

"Running after five kids at Disneyworld?" Rossi asked sourly. "Not my definition of fun."

"I'm not sure we should…" It was tempting, but Hotch couldn't just leave Jessica with Jack for two or three extra days and go off to (supposedly) have fun.

"I've never been to Disneyworld." Morgan actually really liked the idea. Garcia's mouth dropped open.

"Seriously?"

"We never had that kind of money, and mom couldn't take all three of us alone anyway." He shrugged.

"I've never been either." When he'd lived in California, Reid had been tempted to go to Disneyland, but he'd never really had anybody to go with, and school took up most of his time anyway.

"I've been." Emily tilted her head a little, "Or- I will be? I went with friends after we graduated high school, so I haven't been yet- it's too confusing. Anyway, I'm for it."

"I've been. Two years ago." JJ's voice surprised Hotch, who was sure she'd already fallen asleep again. "Or, uh, when I was nine, anyway. Not two years ago. The whole family went, it was great." One of her last truly happy family memories.

"You see? They all need to make up for not going as actual children!" Garcia told Rossi triumphantly. "Hotch, have you ever been?"
"No, but…" Family vacations weren't something his family had ever done.

"You owe it to yourselves." She sounded very definite on that count. "Come on, it'll be great."

"I'm in." Morgan nodded. "I'll even pay for my own ticket."

"That was never up for discussion, you're all paying for yourselves." He was being voted down by teens and an overly-excited geek. Great. "Garcia, if we lose them in Florida I'll hold you personally responsible."

"They're big kids, Rossi, they can take care of themselves." Victory! Garcia just refrained from a fist-pump to celebrate that. "Right, guys?" Five perfectly innocent faces nodded solemnly. "Great. So it's decided. I'll need all your credit cards, we'll get tickets online to save time. Fly out tomorrow, we can get two and a half days in, easy. You'll love it."

"I'll let Strauss know." If they were very lucky and she was feeling generous, they might even get to use the jet for it. It'd save the hassle of getting them all IDs that'd pass inspection at the airports, and none of them wanted to draw that kind of attention. Rossi picked up the phone and prepared for yet another short battle.

The room emptied slowly. Reid and JJ disappeared in the direction of one of the bedrooms, and Rossi made a mental note to check on them, just as Strauss answered and he was distracted. Morgan hesitated for several minutes, then followed the two younger kids silently. JJ was curled up under the covers, and Reid was sitting on the bed next to her, clearly reading something out loud from memory. He paused when he noticed Morgan. "Hey. Wanna join us? We're reading Little Women. Or rather, I'm reading it to JJ."

"Figures you'd have that memorized as well." Morgan looked at JJ, who turned over to face him but didn't say anything. "Actually, I wanted a word with JJ. Can you give us a moment?"

"Sure." Reid stared to move off the bed, but JJ grabbed his hand.

"Stay. Derek, is it ok if he stays?" She asked quietly. "It's- it's not that I don't wanna be alone with you." She added quickly, seeing the hurt look on his face. "It's just that I- I just want him to stay. Sort of- safety in numbers." The truth was that she would've called someone in to join them anyway if Morgan hadn't come, because Reid was a friend, and comforting, and remembered half a library, but he wasn't much as far as protection went. Two were better than one. "I'd be happiest if everyone was here with me, anyway."

"We can manage that, maybe. The bed's huge." It didn't sound like she hated him, which was reassuring. "JJ, I'm so, so sorry for what I said. I didn't mean it and it was nasty and mean and I shouldn't have even opened my mouth." He said it all in a rush, just in case she wanted to interrupt. "I'm really, really sorry."

"Apology accepted." She blinked sleepily. "It was nasty. And you know it wasn't true."

"I know. You just wanted to feel safe, and that makes sense." He agreed. "I'm sorry I made you run away, it let that- that- it let him grab you."

"No, that was me and Em. And him, the guy." She refused to say his name. "Morgan, I just went over it with Matthews- he made us tell him everything that happened. We could've called for backup, or gone back and told you, or just ignored that text. We chose not to. That wasn't your fault." There was enough bad feeling going around, she didn't want Morgan to beat himself up over it. "Just…Try not to tease, until this is over? I'm younger, so I'm not as good at it." She was getting
"Sure, kid. I'll try." He promised. "Reid, you'll remind me?"

"I guess, yeah." The younger boy nodded. "Want the rest of your story now, Jaje?"

"Yeah." She nodded.

"Ok. Uh, actually, I'll be right back. Morgan, keep an eye on her? I'm just going to brush my teeth." Just in case he didn't feel like moving later, he wanted to get into pajamas as well. Morgan sat next to JJ on the bed, and to his surprise she was still awake when Reid returned a few minutes later. "I told Rossi we're probably going to sleep, so they shouldn't worry if we close the door." He explained, and started the story again. Morgan wanted to ask him when and why he'd had a chance to read such a girly book, but refrained, since his promise not to tease was still fresh. He was getting pretty sleepy as well, plus the story bored him.

Ten minutes later, JJ was fast asleep, and Morgan poked Reid gently to shut him up, and nodded towards her to indicate he could stop. Reid nodded. "I think I'm gonna go to sleep as well. You don't have to stay."

"Might as well." Morgan decided not to think about the fact that it was pretty early and nobody'd told him to go to bed yet. In fact, not being told made it easier to just decide on his own. Besides, he was tired. "Gonna need a lot of energy at Disneyworld tomorrow." He grinned, and Reid smiled back.

"No teasing." He reminded his older friend, and unselfconsciously crawled into bed next to JJ. "She didn't take those sleeping pills the doctor gave Rossi, so if she wakes up and there's nobody there…" He shrugged. Morgan nodded.

"No teasing." He'd get up and move to the other bed when he was sure the others were alright, he told himself. Just as soon as they fell asleep, he'd totally move. Absolutely.

In the main room, Rossi finished his call with Strauss and collapsed in the armchair he'd claimed as 'his' earlier. "Well, we have an ok on Disneyworld- a reluctant one, and mainly because I reminded her we're on vacation and she can't actually forbid it, and that we can't coop everyone up for however long it takes for the spell to end. We're on her strict orders not to get into trouble, though-her exact words were 'don't make me come down there to bail you out, I hate Florida.'" He smirked. "On the good news side, I reminded her that going through airport security with five kids who technically aren't mine could be a bitch, and might involve more illegal computer-related activities than she's willing to authorize-" This time Garcia was the one who smirked- "so we can use the jet, just this once."

"Really? Score!" Done with hotel and ticket reservations, Garcia put all the credit cards aside to be handed back to their owners. "That's good." She turned and looked across the room and exchanged a thoughtful look with Rossi, both wondering what was going on, and where it would lead. Then they both resolutely turned away to their own business, giving the other side of the room a sense of privacy, if not the actual space they might need.

The TV was on, since Emily had turned it on at some point, but it didn't look like either she or Hotch were paying it a lot of attention. However, Emily had slowly edged closer and closer to Hotch, until she was next to him on the couch. He looked up from his reports.

"You're not fooling anybody, Em." Still, he closed the folder and put down his pen. "But I'm done. What're we watching?"
"Pirates of the Caribbean. The first one." It'd been playing on one of the hotel's many movie channels. "I figured it'd get us in the mood for tomorrow." She wanted to talk, but she wasn't sure he'd want to listen, or whether she should talk to him. It'd be easier, though, than to talk to one of the adults. "What were you writing?"

"My report." As if she didn't already know that. "Might as well get it out of the way while the details are freshest."

"Yeah." She nodded. She knew he wouldn't ask even though he clearly wanted to, so she started. "How much do you know about what happened back there?"

"What JJ told us- and she was fuzzy about some of the details. She couldn't see you." Not Emily's face, at least, as far as he'd understood it. "And what the locals and Rossi said about how you were when they came in. I haven't seen the notes Matthews took when he interviewed you yet." He paused. "I don't have to read them when we get them, if you'd rather I didn't. Technically Rossi's in charge of compiling the full case report." He looked up at the older agent and saw him and Garcia both apparently busy, each with their own laptop.

"No- you can read it. It's not- he didn't-" She trailed off, her lips quirking in a bitter smile. "It's funny, you know? We pull people out of much worse situations every day, and we expect them to be rational and coherent and tell us exactly what happened, and then testify about it." She sighed. "I think I'll be a lot nicer to them in the future."

"You're usually pretty good with victims." Hotch replied without thinking, and Emily shot him a full-on death glare.

"I'm not a victim. Neither is JJ. No more than I ever was when an undercover mission went wrong." She wasn't going to be a victim. "I did everything I could to keep us both safe, I delayed him, I bought us the time until the locals came in with guns blazing!" She spoke in a furious whisper, not wanting to draw the attention of the adults on the other side of the room. Hotch gave her a neutral look.

"I know that, Em. Are you trying to convince me, or yourself?" She punched his shoulder hard and he winced. "Would a fight make you feel better? Because I don't actually mind hitting a girl if she hits back, but I think Dave and Garcia might object."

On one hand, the thought was tempting; on the other, Emily was pretty sure Hotch could overpower her easily, so either she'd lose, or he'd let her win, both options she didn't care for. And she knew that even if they went into the other suite to do it, one of the others would notice and nix the idea. "No. Any other day, sure, but…No."

"Good answer." He smiled a little. "I'd have really worried if you'd agreed." Emily wasn't usually the most violent of them, although he knew she kept in shape and attended hand-to-hand classes and the shooting range regularly. "How about we play chess? It'll distract you." He brought it up on his laptop and turned the screen towards her.

"I wish we had one of those video games that involve guns." She grumbled quietly. Shooting things might help her work off some anger and frustration in a way she doubted chess would. "I'll kick your ass, you know."

"Have you ever seen me play chess, Em?" He asked, amused, and she realized she hadn't, actually. Gideon and Reid, definitely, and even Rossi once, but not Hotch. She felt a little less sure of her victory, faced with his slightly smug smile. "Come on, it'll help take your mind off things."
For about ten minutes, it did, and they played in silence. Hotch was aware of Rossi and Garcia looking at them, but they weren't disturbed so he didn't mind being watched. Ten minutes was enough for Emily to realize he was no novice at chess, even though he was pulling on a lot of adult knowledge which was getting harder to access, and she seemed to be more comfortable with the game than he was. They both opened in careful, searching moves, studying each other as much as the board. "So." He said after a while, "What happened after he caught you?"

She'd been expecting a question along those lines but it still made her hand falter, reaching for the mouse to move her pawn. "Tied us to tables. Threatened some. Said some really sick things about his twisted idea of eternal love and destiny and other crap." Her fingers twisted in the cushion, gripping tightly. "This game is a lot less fun without real pieces to move."

"Yup." He took up the mouse when she let it go and contemplated the screen. "He wanted to do the same thing he'd done to the other three female victims?" He hoped she wouldn't bristle again-the'd been kidnapped, and while she might resist being called a victim, he had no better word for it that didn't mean exactly the same thing.

"Pretty much, yeah." She shuddered. "Didn't get very far with it, though. Further than I'd have liked." She admitted when he gave her a meaningful raised eyebrow. "But- he didn't- it could've been worse." She could still feel his hand on her shoulder, sliding down towards her chest, and she shuddered. Hotch deliberately moved his rook in a way that endangered his queen, and she didn't even notice, lost in the memory. "I'm scared to go to sleep, Hotch. I'm scared to talk to JJ, or to any of the others. They look at me like I might explode."

"Well, you did slap me." Hotch pointed out, and Emily's cheeks heated a little.

"Sorry about that. You touched me."

"It's ok. I'm grateful it was just a slap." Morgan had had worse, after all. "You should talk to JJ. She's in a pretty fragile place right now." He hadn't had a proper talk with her yet, but watching her sleep, having her hold his hand, felt like it had helped them both more than talking.

"And whose fault is that?" Emily asked, her voice harsh with guilt. "I dragged her in with me, when we should've called for backup. We should've let you know before we went in, or- hell, we shouldn't have gone, period."

"If you hadn't gone it might've taken us longer to catch Ryan, and he might've gotten away because he knew we were closing in." Personally Hotch thought they shouldn't have gone in, but lecturing about it when Emily was clearly feeling bad enough already wouldn't have helped. "In any case, you went in, and there's no point wishing you hadn't. We need to deal with it and move on. All of us." He put his hand on hers, covering the mouse even though he couldn't remember whether it was his turn or hers. "Waiting and being helpless sucks. I wonder- I think I'd have preferred to be where you were and not where I was."

Her jaw dropped. "Then you're completely batshit crazy."

"Really? At least you knew what was going on. You knew where you were, and where we were, and exactly how much danger you were. Our imaginations are usually much worse than what real life provides. The waiting was a bitch, Em." His own mixed up emotions about the day were finally starting to bubble up. "We couldn't do anything, you know? We had Ryan, sure, but we didn't know where you were until Midnight did some kind of locator spell. And we couldn't help. We could just sit there, and wait, and listen in on the radio." He hated being helpless while people he loved were hurt. Listening in on the rescue op had thrown him sharply back- or forward?- to his final conversation with Haley and Foyet, and to the cold terror of being about to lose somebody
else who was practically family. The relief when they were saved had been heady, dizzying, and he wasn't quite over it yet. "It was-" He couldn't put his thoughts into words. Emily, bless her, understood.

"Bad?"

"Really bad." He nodded. "But you're right, it was probably worse for you."

"Uh- yes." She may have known exactly where she was- or at least, who she was with, but she hadn't known for sure that a rescue was on the way. "I wasn't even sure how long he had us for. And when he started cutting JJ…" She swallowed the lump of fear-fueled emotion that rose in her throat. "Are we still playing?"

"I don't think so." He shrugged and moved her queen into a check-mate. "You win."

"We should've gone off to the other room and tried to beat each other unconscious." Maybe then she'd have had an excuse for how close to tears she felt now. "I hate this. I hate being helpless and scared."

"If it's any comfort, we're all feeling pretty much the same, I think. Hey, did Garcia tell you what happened with Reid?"

"No…" Emily's ears would've pricked up with interest, had they been able to. Trouble shared was trouble lessened, however little she might've wished trouble on her friends, and she'd barely registered what Matthews had told Reid before leaving, but she knew something had happened. "Spill."

Hotch outlined the situation in several short sentences. Emily's fists clenched in rage. "We are going back there tomorrow and kicking their asses, right?"

"They're being taken care of internally. Well, the ringleader's getting kicked off the force. Reid wants as little fuss made over this as possible. Guess he hates feeling like a helpless victim too."

"That sucks, Hotch." Emily crossed her arms. "For him and for all of us. Is that how Morgan broke his wrist?"

"Yeah, he charged in to the rescue." Hotch flashed a brief smile. "So consider our collective honor defended. Although Reid was the one who actually drew blood…"

"He did?" That made Emily feel oddly better.

"Yeah, bit the one who grabbed him." She giggled at that, and Hotch immediately felt better as well. "Feeling a bit less like kicking my butt?"

"A little bit less." She nodded. "Thanks." She felt a bit more stable, less about to fly apart. "I'm still afraid to go to sleep."

"I don't think anybody's going to have a quiet night tonight." He nodded. "Didn't the doctor give you some kind of pills to help you sleep, though? You and JJ."

"Yeah…But I don't know whether I should." The last thing she needed right now was a dependency. Besides, a pill would only help her fall asleep and keep her from waking up if she had a nightmare, which wasn't always the best option. Sometimes she wanted to wake up. On the other hand, she was exhausted and even a bit of sleep would be nice.
"You're not going to develop a habit from one or two pills." Hotch could follow her trail of thought without too much trouble. It was something they all carried around in the backs of their minds during long, sleepless nights and the days that followed them. "They gave you the kid version anyway. It'll at least help get you started in the right direction." They only needed to hang on until they all became adults again, and had normal outlets for stress again. "Besides…Share a room with someone, it'll make things easier." There were advantages to not sleeping alone.

She thought about it for a long moment, then nodded with a huff. "Fine. Come with?" She didn't want to be alone right now, even though she also didn't feel like talking anymore. She hoped Hotch would understand that without her having to tell him. He nodded and put the laptop down, following her silently towards the bedroom she'd left her bag in earlier.

They both stopped in the doorway, Emily's eyes round with surprise until Hotch chuckled, pushing her gently forward. "Guess they figured it out, too."

"Shh." Emily tiptoed across the room, carefully skirting the bed on which Morgan, JJ and Reid were all sleeping in a tangle of sheets and limbs. JJ stirred, whimpering as a nightmare started, and Morgan reached across without waking up, pulling her against him and humming a reassuring sound. With a sigh, she settled her head on his chest and her breath evened out, the nightmare forgotten. Emily felt a sudden and painful twitch of jealousy at JJ's ease in receiving comfort. She wanted a hug as well, but to ask was to show weakness, which she'd barely learned to do as an adult. Hotch leaned against the wall, silent, while she gathered her toothbrush and pajamas, and followed him like a silent shadow until she gently closed the bathroom door in his slightly sheepish face. When she opened it again ten minutes later, dressed for sleep, he was still there, waiting. "I can take it from here, Hotch."

"Did you take that sleeping pill?"

"Yes, dad." She sighed. She just hoped it'd work. Hotch half-smiled.

"I'm not dad, Rossi is. Good night." He turned away and left the room before she decided where she wanted to sleep, giving her the chance to choose without a fully-aware audience. She looked at the empty bed on one side of the room, then at the full one on the other. There was still plenty of free space there…When the bathroom door closed behind her Morgan opened his eyes.

"Wanna c'mere 'fore the kids wake up?" He was still mostly asleep, but he'd heard the other two talking and drifted towards wakefulness. He held out his free hand. It took Emily all of a second and a half to make up her mind- she grabbed the cover from the free bed and brought it over with her, climbing in next to Morgan.

"No teasing in the morning." The pill was already starting to take effect, or maybe it was just psychological, because there was no way it was really working that fast, but the last thing Emily remembered was Morgan hugging her, just the way she'd wanted.

Going back to the main suite room, Hotch found himself pinned down by two near-identical stares. "What?"

"Everything ok back there?" Garcia asked, getting up and heading for the mini-fridge in the corner. "People keep going in and nobody's come out yet except you. Is there a dragon or something?"

"Yeah, a bed-shaped one." He replied, thinking he was pretty close to losing the fight with that particular dragon himself. "Garcia, are you supposed to be having ice cream this late at night?" It was actually almost legitimately bedtime now, too.
"No, and neither are you, but we're still having it." Three paper cups were filled and Rossi took his without protest. Hotch really wasn't sure- on one hand, they really shouldn't, but on the other he really wanted to, and it'd been a while since the strange extra-late lunch they'd had, so…

"Oh, what the hell." He'd had more ice cream in various forms over the past three days than in at least the three or four years before that put together. "I don't even like ice cream, you know? As an adult, I mean. It's too sweet."

"You haven't been eating the right ice cream then." Garcia licked her spoon clean between mouthfuls. "Remind me to take you to my favorite place when we get home." She looked at him, then at Rossi, and waved her spoon between them. "I'm gonna leave you two to your guy talk and go back to planning the perfect Disney trip for us. Three days should be just about enough."

"Enough to leave us all nervous wrecks." Rossi grumbled good naturedly when the analyst matched actions to words and disappeared back behind her laptop. "Wanna sit down?"

"I don't mind sitting, but…why are we having a Talk?" Hotch sat, but mainly because eating ice cream standing up felt even more wrong that just plain eating it. "I'm not guilty or traumatized."

"You aren't? So you didn't feel helpless and worried and freaked out earlier?" Rossi raised an eyebrow and Hotch scowled.

"Not nice to eavesdrop, Dave."

"I didn't have to, Aaron. I saw your face, it was enough. This was one of the bad days, buddy."

"It wasn't, though." Hotch argued, still fairly calm (the ice cream was helping). "We saved them and got our guy and closed the case. It'd call it a pretty good day, even." Sure, he'd been worried and scared earlier, but there was no reason to anymore. "And I'm not helpless anymore."

"Not when it comes to saving the girls, at least." Rossi agreed, but his tone implied volumes of further meaning. Hotch's scowl deepened.

"Dave, why are you pushing this? I'm tired and I had a shitty day, and so did you. At least you got to shoot the bastard." He didn't want to think about how helpless they still were. He leaned back into the sofa and eyed his empty cup balefully, as if it was to blame for everything. "It's kind of a shame he's in a coma, you know? We could've at least tried to get him to break the spell."

"I think I prefer him in a coma." Rossi reflected drily, and Hotch shot him a dirty look.

"Sure, because you can buy yourself a drink, and drive a car, and carry a weapon and use a credit card." All things they couldn't do, for now. "God, Dave, how're we gonna do this?" They would have to go home eventually, and this could take as long as three weeks…"What happens when we forget? What if we never change back after all?"

"You'll change back. And we'll keep reminding you." When the expression on the youthful face opposite him didn't change, he added, "Practically, though, we're gonna do it like this- Reid goes with JJ and Will makes sure they don't run too wild, Garcia takes Morgan and Prentiss and hopes they don't accidentally-on-purpose kill each other, and you and Jack stay with me for however long it takes for you all to get back to normal."

"Oh." Hotch hadn't even considered that possibility. "You don't like kids."

"I like you and Jack. If I can handle my sister's kids over Christmas, I can handle you two running
underfoot for a few days." The tone made his words a lot warmer and more affectionate than they'd have normally sounded. "Your job is to try to stop worrying, ok? For the next few days, in public at least, you need to pass for real kids. Let yourself go a little, Aaron. Loosen up. Be a kid."

"I wasn't 'not worried' as a kid." He pointed out. In fact, he'd spent the better part of his childhood very worried, occasionally afraid and usually angry or confused.

"So try to be as unworried as the kid you never got to be." Because Rossi knew he was right. "No case, no bills to worry about-"

"We're paying for the park." Hotch had looked over Garcia's shoulder briefly and nearly told her to cancel the whole thing when he saw how much admission to the parks cost. Not that they couldn't afford it, but still…Rossi snorted.

"The park, the hotel, and three meals a day, but that's it. No school, no reports, no PTA meetings or soccer practice or Strauss on our heads. For three days, Aaron, no psycho killers, no dead people, no sick and twisted humanity." He raised his empty ice cream cup in a mock-toast. "Just the happiest place on earth."

It sounded too good to be true, and Hotch said as much. Rossi waved him off.

"My responsibility to make sure it's true. I'll put in for my own vacation when you're back to normal, and go somewhere very remote and very quiet." Rossi put his considerable powers of persuasion into the next words, trying his hardest to get through to his friend. "Let us take care of you. Of all of you."

Hotch closed his eyes, fighting back an unexpected wave of emotion. He had to be really tired to be this volatile. "Ok." He said quietly, a little chocked. Rossi squeezed his shoulder.

"Ok?"

Hotch took a deep breath and pulled himself back together with an effort. "Ok." He repeated, more firmly. Then he opened his eyes and let his shoulders slump. "Can I go to sleep now?"

"Yeah, go ahead." Rossi grinned. "Gonna be a long day tomorrow."

"Oh yeah." Hotch nodded. He tossed his empty cup neatly in the trashcan. "By the way, do we all have to go to the station tomorrow?"

"Not really, I guess. It won't take more than one or two people to take out set-up apart." They didn't really have much more than the computers, most of which were already here with them, and the whiteboard with the photos. "Why?"

"We need to do laundry, for one thing." It had already been three days, and he at least was out of clean shirts. "And I think it might be better if Reid and the girls don't have to go in. Too many unpleasant memories."

Rossi considered that and nodded. "We'll discuss it in the morning, ok?" They might all want the closure of going through the post-vase routine, keeping things normal, but he'd give them a choice about it.

"Fair enough, yeah." And now, bed. "Man, I'm tired."

"We've all had a rough day. Sleep in tomorrow, we don't fly out until noon anyway. Jet's gonna drop us off in Orlando, and fly home. I'm going to send your guns with the pilot in a locked box to
be delivered to the office, we shouldn't be carrying those around where they can't be secured properly."

"Good idea." Hotch nodded, all business again. "I'm going to bed before anything else comes up. Night."

"Good night." Escorted by the same from Garcia, Hotch disappeared into the room already occupied by the others. There was a perfectly good empty bed there, after all, and he still wanted to be close to them during the night, just in case he was needed. Emily had joined the pile, he saw, but there was still room…No, he was way too old to share with the kids, wasn't he? When he finished his bedtime preparations, he walked purposefully to the empty bed and collapsed into it with a grateful sigh.

For long minutes he lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. The room was dim, the door mostly closed now they were all here and just the bathroom light holding back the darkness. He could hear the others breathing, but felt oh so far from them. The big, comfy bed seemed very remote and lonely all of a sudden.

"Will you stop being an idiot and come over here?" The piercing whisper made him jerk almost off the bed. Across the room, Reid glared at him. "You're thinking loud enough to wake the dead, and we aren't dead, so just…" He scooted back a little closer to JJ. "Come on." Hotch didn't move, and Reid rolled his eyes. He'd woken up when Hotch came in, and found he couldn't get back to sleep with the team leader so far away and so clearly unhappy to be. "Oh, for- say it's for our sake, alright? Not because you need it as much as we do."

"It'll be too crowded." Hotch wasn't used to being wanted.

"This bed's as big as Texas. We have room." Reid argued, glancing guiltily back in case he woke the others, but they didn't seem to be disturbed. "Well, it's not really as big as Texas of course because we're in Missouri, and nothing as big as Texas can fit into a hotel room unless it's a really big room on some other planet- or in the desert, or at the bottom of the sea in a gigantic hotel, or-"

"Reid?"

"Yeah?"

"If I come over, will you shut up?"

"Sure." Reid grinned to himself, mission accomplished, as Hotch trudged across the space between the two beds.

"Ok. Happy now?" He crawled under the covers next to Reid and immediately felt better. The younger boy made sure he had enough pillow space.

"Overjoyed. Good night, Hotch."

"Night Reid." Why had he ever wanted the other bed, anyway? This one was clearly a lot more comfortable. Both boys were asleep in under a minute.

"Finally all quiet on the Western front?" Garcia asked when Rossi peeked into the bedroom a few minutes after.

"For now, yes. Looks like it might even stay that way." With all five of them together the night might prove to be uncomfortable physically, but he had no doubt they were doing the best thing for all of them. "Is it too early for us to turn in as well?"
"I don't think there's any such thing as 'too early', after the day we've had." She tilted her head back and rubbed her temples. "Really."

"Can't argue with that. Here." Garcia found a paper cup with a generous measure of amber liquid pushed in her direction. She raised an eyebrow and Rossi hefted a bottle of scotch by way of explanation. "I don't know about you but I need one of these, and I don't like drinking alone. At least keep me company.

"Where did you get that?"

"Hospital gift store. It's not exactly my top choice in alcohol but it'll do the job." Rossi tossed his shot back with a grimace and poured himself a second. "I'm stopping with this one, promise. The last thing I need is to be hungover tomorrow." The scotch warmed his stomach and he waited for the pleasant thrum of mild inebriation to begin. Garcia bravely gulped her shot, coughing only a little.

"You're right, it'll do the job." She took a deep breath and released it slowly. "Sir, can I ask a favor?"

"I think you're more than allowed to call me Dave, under the circumstances." He corrected her gently. "But sure, you can ask."

"Every time you promise one of the kids we can get through this, promise me as well?"

"Only if you do the same for me, Penelope." He looked as exhausted as she felt.

"Deal." She clinked her empty cup with his half-full one, ignoring the distinct lack of actual clinking between paper cups. "We can do this. Disney World will do them good."

"As long as it doesn't kill us, I don't mind going." Rossi shrugged. "I've heard the horror stories, though, and there are five of them! We'll be lucky to find one ride we all agree on."

"Work it like a case, s- Dave. Send them off in pairings you trust together, and check in every hour. They're all pretty mature, sudden bursts of temper notwithstanding." The alcohol was taking effect and Garcia felt her eyes starting to close. "Oh, I'm about to become very bad company. Shouldn't have gotten me drunk, Dave."

"I think you needed it as much as I did. It's nice to be just adults for a few minutes at least."

"By Christmas we'll look back on this and laugh." She'd said it before and she still believed it.

"Christmas is eight months away."

"I know." And wasn't that a depressing thought. "Should I take the couch, or do you want to use the other suite the Bureau's paying good money for and is standing empty across the hall?"

"I'll take the couch, you take the other bedroom. I want to have as few doors between me and them as possible tonight."

"Roger that." She felt the same. "Good night then."

"Garcia- you did really good today."

"So did you, sir."

"Dave."
"So did you, Dave. So did they. We all did pretty good." She managed a smile. "We've all earned a night's sleep."

"And three days in parental hell?" He asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Oh, we've all more than earned that. We deserve a real vacation. I expect the only dead bodies I see for the next week to be at the Haunted Mansion."

"Amen to that, Penelope."
A Family Vacation

Chapter Summary

It's a roadtrip with five moody teenagers. Not what Rossi signed up for when he came out of retirement...

The click and flash of a camera drew Hotch out of possibly the best sleep he'd had in years, and he rolled away from it- and found himself on the carpet, very unpleasantly awake, a little chilled and already grumpy. "What?" He didn't yet have the mental energy to finish the question.

"Aw, what'd you have to move?"

"Ow." Why was he on the floor? "Why'm I on the floor?" He pushed himself back on the bed and rubbed the last traces of sleep from his eyes. Now that he could see, he realized why he'd fallen-there were more people on there than the bed was designed for. Warm arms latched on to his legs, and frowned. "Uh, Reid?"

"Shhh, don't wake him up. Go back to sleep." Garcia didn't even look guilty, and she definitely didn't try to hide the camera. He held out his hand for it. "No."

"Garcia." He really wanted to get back to sleep, but he knew he was too wide awake to manage it now. Might as well save the others some grief. "Give."

"Hotch, come on, I only took a couple of pictures. As a souvenir." She hedged. He held firm, and finally she handed the camera over. He flicked through the photos- she was right, there were only two of them- but both showed all five of them curled up on and around each other like kittens in a basket, and would make excellent blackmail material. "Don't erase them!" She protested when he started working the camera's controls. He ignored her and deleted both photos. "Hotch!"

"Mm-what?" Morgan jerked awake, letting go of Emily- Hotch vaguely remembered her waking up in tears and all of them crowding around her until she calmed down again- and sat up. "What's with the yelling?"

"Hotch deleted my photos!" Garcia snatched her camera back. "You're a spoilsport, sir."

"Oh." Morgan blinked. "Thanks, man."

"Don't mention it." Hell, now everyone was waking up. Hotch checked the time and did a double take. "It's after nine! Shit." They were supposed to be on the jet by noon, and they still needed to do laundry and pass through the station to collect their stuff- "We have to get going."

"Hold it, cowboy." Garcia made a 'relax' motion with her free hand. "First of all, we'll make a noon take-off, easy. Second, laundry was dropped in the laundry room in the hotel basement half an hour ago when Rossi went out for coffee. We'll stop by the station after breakfast, pack up our things and continue straight to the air strip from there."

"Oh." It made a lot of sense, really. "Ok." He lay back down, and JJ, still mostly asleep, curled into him with a soft sigh. "No more photos."
"Fine, Mr. grumpy-before-coffee." Garcia pouted. "But you guys do need to get up, if we want to get half a day in the Magic Kingdom today." As she'd guessed, that was enough to get them all moving, even Reid and JJ who'd had the least amount of sleep, as they'd both woken up from nightmares- or woken each other up- every few hours. Still, they'd managed twelve hours of down time which is more than any of them ever got outside of a hospital, so they all felt a lot less frazzled than they had the day before.

By the time they were awake, dressed and washed, Rossi returned with a box of morning pastries and coffee and juice for everybody, and reported their things should be dry by the time they were ready to leave. The adults looked a lot less drawn and stressed as well, for which Hotch was grateful, because he didn't expect the coming day to be easy for any of them. Then again, he never expected things to be easy.

Breakfast passed in relative peace, and most of the pastries were actually eaten. Two were used as missile weapons between Emily and Morgan, but then Reid swept the remaining muffins off the table and deposited them in JJ's lap, covering her with crumbs but securing the food.

"Hey!" Morgan was having fun, why did Reid had to spoil it?

"That's breakfast, not paintball." Reid replied primly. "You'll have to ask JJ for any more, and if you throw them you won't get any. Right Jaje?"

"Uh huh." The young blonde took a raisin danish and bit into it. It was a fairly effective way to end the fight before it started, because nobody'd dare try to physically overpower her, and Reid knew that pretty well. Morgan gave him a dirty look.

"Killjoy."

"He's right though." Rossi supported the youngest agent. "JJ, can I have a muffin? I promise not to throw it." Smiling beatifically, JJ handed him a muffin. "Thank you. So, are we all going to the police station to break things up there?"

There was a short silence before Hotch replied. "I'm going with you, but we don't all have to, right?"

"No, I think two r three people can get everything done in fifteen minutes maybe. Garcia, I'll need you to make sure all our computer gear is packed properly."

"You got it, sir." She smiled and looked at the others. "What about you four?"

"I'll go." Morgan shrugged, "But I won't be much help in packing." He only had one hand available to work with, after all. "I can take things down from the board, that's pretty much it."

"I don't wanna go." JJ shook her head. "They'll all stare at us again, even worse than before." She shivered and hugged herself. Next to her, Emily nodded.

"If it's ok I'd like to stay here as well, or even wait in the car, if you don't want to come back to pick us up."

"Me too." Since he wasn't the only one who didn't want to go into the station. Reid figured he could safely voice his opinion. "Unless you need the extra help..."

"No, we'll manage." Rossi wouldn't force anyone to come with him- he could manage the entire dis-assembling and packing of their equipment alone, but it would go faster with a few more people. "Would you be ok with waiting in the car though? It'll save time, and we do need to be on
"the jet by noon."

"Sure, we'll be ok." Emily nodded. It would only be half an hour, at most, right? The other two nodded as well.

"Good, then let's get everything packed here. We'll stop on the way to pick up our laundry." Rossi finished off his coffee and got to his feet. The others moved fast, motivated by the need to wrap everything up and the promised meeting with the Mouse, and fifteen minutes later the van was idling outside the police station.

"Sit tight, don't move, and keep your phones handy." Rossi instructed. He hated having any of them out of his sight, frankly, but he didn't want to treat any of his teammates as fragile or vulnerable, either- he wanted to build up their confidence, not reinforce their anxiety. They all nodded obediently, and when he looked back at the van before going into the station they were sitting calmly and, as ordered, not moving.

As soon as Rossi and the rest were out of sight, Reid started feeling uncomfortable with being left alone in the open like that. From the way JJ moved closer to him on the seat, he wasn't alone in that feeling.

"Maybe we should've gone in." Emily said with an uncertain frown. "I mean…" She looked out at the street, which was pretty empty at this hour of the morning, "What if Ryan was working with someone?"

"We didn't profile him as having a partner." Reid reminded her, despite a shiver of fear that ran down his spine at the suggestion. "And he'd have said something about not working alone when he had you, right? He- from what I understood he's not the kind of guy to keep something like that quiet, if he thought he had someone he could call a friend." He'd read the report Chief Matthews had sent Rossi earlier that morning, glancing over the older agent's shoulder and absorbing the important parts of it with that glance. Emily glared at him, and JJ shook her head.

"He didn't say anything. Can- can we not talk about him? Like, ever?" She asked in a small voice. Reid immediately felt bad about even bringing him up.

"Yeah, we won't talk about him anymore." Not until they were old enough to go through the Bureau's mandatory psych counseling that came after these kinds of incidents. Reid smiled at the thought.

"What's so funny?" There was almost nothing funny Emily could see in this case.

"Oh, I was just thinking about how we could explain this case and what happened to us to whichever psychologist they assign us without getting committed for…well, delusions and paranoia, at the very least." He thought it was a good sign that he could see the humor in it. JJ giggled.

"Maybe Garcia's photos might come in handy, and not just as blackmail material."

"Hey, yeah. We have solid evidence of this." Emily nodded, finally relaxing a little. She still kept an eye out through the back window, as Reid was doing for the front one. "They can't call it a shared dream or hallucination or whatever."

"Exactly. So I think they'll let us get out of counseling free this time." Yay for silver linings, Reid thought wryly. "Not that we don't usually talk circles around the guys that get assigned to listen to us, anyway." One less slightly abused shrink, it was definitely a win-win situation.
"I always thought that whoever pissed Strauss off that week gets us." JJ nodded. The BAU team had written most of the standard questions on the mental health checkup, and they all definitely knew the answers needed to be cleared for action, whether they meant what they said or not. Emily grinned her agreement with that thought. "I'm gonna get bored by the time they get back." Even if that time was four minutes from now.

"We should've gotten you a book that's age-appropriate." Reid, who hadn't read 'age appropriate' since about the age of four, still knew what was and wasn't interesting to girls his age. "Hey, you're finally the right age to get the full effect of Twilight." After being teased about it he'd read all four books and decided they were incredibly terrible and liable to contribute to the development of several violent offenders in the future, but he still knew girls loved them. JJ pushed at his shoulder.

"You'd let me read that? I thought you liked me."

"I do like you." Reid half-smiled. "I could go on reading Little Women? We were barely past Christmas when you fell asleep last night."

"You know Little Women?" Emily raised an eyebrow. "But you're a boy."

"My mom gave it to me when I was six and said it was a children's classic and a social commentary on women's liberation in the 19th century." He shrugged. "It was a nice break from Chaucer and Shakespeare, at least it used words people around me spoke." It had kept him occupied for a few days, anyway. "It's not a bad book… Juvenile and a little preachy, but what can you expect?"

"I haven't read it in years." Emily figured she should be used to Reid knowing some really strange things by now. "JJ, will that keep you distracted?"

"I guess." The younger girl nodded. At least until the others returned. "Or we could play 'I spy.'" She didn't feel comfortable not knowing exactly who and what was outside the car. "Don't think I can concentrate on a story." She was too twitchy with nerves, still.

"We can do that, sure." Emily nodded. "But we can't pick anything too easy, like the road or cars or sky, ok?"

"As if we would." Reid's expression made JJ giggle and Emily smirk. "I'll start?"

"Are we about done?" Rossi straightened, feeling his spine crack. He was used to hotels after years of constant travel, but he did start to miss his own bed. He missed sleeping a full night without waking up twice at least to count everybody and make sure they were all safe and sleeping even more- had it really been less than a week? It felt like forever. "Computers?"

"In their cases and ready to go sir." Garcia reported cheerfully.

"Photos and paperwork?"

"Packed. We'll put them in order on the jet." Hotch zipped the final briefcase shut. "Final wrap-up talk with Chief Matthews?"

"Done, thank god." Rossi indicated the locals in the other room with a tilt of his head. "They don't think we should be leaving here."

"What do you mean? The case is over, we're done here." Morgan frowned- did they miss anything? Was it possible that there was a second unsub after all? There was a cold sinking feeling in his gut, and Hotch's expression echoed the same feeling.
"We're done, yes. Ryan Shane is still in a coma in critical condition, and none of the evidence point to an accomplice, relax. They don't think we should be taking you back home, since you are- well, kids, for all intents and purposes." Rossi explained. "I didn't tell them about Disney World, I didn't think it'd add to the Bureau's image to know that our best and brightest are about to go ride in giant tea cups." He added, grinning.

Morgan relaxed, smiling a little. "So it's out of concern for our well-being? Some concern they showed yesterday, when those creeps were after Reid." He shot a glare at the other room. "Are you sure I can't go there and beat the crap out of them?"

"Yes." Rossi ignored Hotch's snort of derision, because he know both boys agreed on wanting to get some kind of revenge on the cops who'd bullied Reid. "Because a., you're injured and b, they aren't here, any of them. Suspended without pay for a week." Or, he suspected, only until the BAU team was good and gone, but maybe the Chief really had been angry with them. Rossi didn't want to speculate and didn't much care- they'd all remember the kind of attitude they'd had from the locals, next time they were called in. They're return prepared- and fully adult. "Let's go, I want to get back to the car." His phone beeped and he checked it, smiling when he saw a text message from Emily- *Still ok, playing I Spy, can we Spy you already?*

"We're good to go." Garcia checked the final pieces of equipment, and loaded Hotch with two more cases, which Morgan was getting out of carrying because of the cast on his hand. He did carry a briefcase in his good hand, though. Between them, they bid a hasty goodbye to the locals and were out of the station- and into a minor argument as soon as they entered the car.

"That's not fair, it's not the rules of the game!" Emily stated firmly, while Reid scowled. 

"I spy is too easy if you don't shake the rules up a bit!" He crossed his arms defensively. 

JJ sided with Emily, "You could've told us you were changing the rules, at least."

"If you'd been listening you'd have noticed I said 'something that started with', instead of 'starts with'."

"Ok, then you should've said 'started with a seed' instead of just 's'." Emily argued as the others packed the car, a little confused by the argument. "How were we to guess you meant 'seed', and specifically the seed that started those flowers there?" She pointed out a window box full of peonies. "Garcia, d'you think that's fair?"

"I'm not getting into that argument, sweetie." The older woman replied, getting into the front seat. "But we're about to leave, so why don't you find another game to play?"

"Fine." Emily huffed, but it was the best way to end the argument.

"Fine." Reid seemed no happier than she was with that solution, but didn't resist either. "They didn't give you any trouble at the station?"

"No, they'll send us the final report to file along with ours. If you need something to do, taking notes for your reports might be just the thing." Rossi suggested pointedly. "At least when we get on the plane." It might help keep them focused on their adult selves, too. There were several groans, and nobody looked like they were about to start typing a report.

"I remember what we used to do on fieldtrips." Morgan's eyes sparkled with dangerous mischief. He started, and Emily joined in almost immediately. Two bottles later JJ caught on and was singing along with them, and by the fifth bottle even Hotch had joined in. Only Reid remained resolutely
silent.

"C'mon, Spence, sing with us." JJ poked him in the side gently as the others went on and even Garcia joined in, while Rossi looked a little tortured.

"That song makes no sense." He scowled at her.

"Why? It teaches math."

"Why would they pass a bottle around? And what's the point of counting backwards from 99, anyway?" As game-songs went, Reid thought it was one of the sillier options. "I mean, it doesn't matter how light the beer is, they'd all be drunk before the tenth bottle down, and they'd need a bathroom break well before that, if we're counting pint bottles, and-

"God, Reid, you take all the fun out of things, you know?" Emily stopped singing to stare at him, and the others slowly trailed into silence around her. Rossi breathed a discreet sigh of relief.

"I don't see why you considered it fun in the first place." Reid shrugged. "If you have to sing, sing a song in which something interesting happens."

"Oh, you want a song with action and a plot?" Morgan grinned. "Ok, sure." He took a deep breath, "I've got a song that never ends-" again, JJ and Emily joined in enthusiastically. Garcia pinched the bridge of her nose, and Rossi groaned audibly. Reid shrugged and opened his book- they'd get bored soon enough.

"Are we there yet?"

"JJ, we just took off." Rossi gave her a truly exasperated look, and she chortled.

"I know, but you should've seen the look on your face." She even had Hotch laughing, the little imp. Rossi had to smile as well, because at least they'd stopped singing that awful song, and settled down without arguing on the plane. Morgan was even dutifully typing up his case notes.

"We could watch a movie." Garcia suggested. "Emily gave me the idea yesterday- we already have Pirates of the Caribbean movie, and it'll get you guys in a Disney mood."

"Isn't it kinda scary for kids?"

The question hung in the air, in the dead silence that followed, and Hotch covered his mouth with one hand as he realized exactly what he'd asked, and about whom. He was so used to asking it about movies Jack watched, though…

Reid was the first who started snickering, followed by Emily, then Morgan and everybody else until they were all laughing, a touch of hysteria in the overflow of emotion, but still, laughing, and free and easy about it because- honestly, he was worried about a movie? Even Hotch had to laugh at himself, on that one.

"Thanks, I needed that." Rossi wiped his eyes, still chuckling.

"I'm sorry." Even though he'd joined in the laughter, Hotch was red with embarrassment. JJ threw a pen at him because it was the only lightweight thing she had on hand, but more to get his attention that to hurt.

"Don't apologize. We needed a laugh." She shook her head, "You're total doof, Hotch."
"It shows I care, ok? I wouldn't want you to see, uh- something really awful and scary and- like- a horror movie."

"I wouldn't want to. We see too much of that at work." And sometimes they lived it themselves, which JJ was trying very hard not to think about, thank you.

"I like horror movies." Reid piped up.

"You would."

"Morgan, you watch them with me."

"Just to keep you company, kid."

"Uh huh. Sure."

"Guys! Jeez, focus. Movie?" Garcia waved the laptop, and when she got some random nods from the still-recovering team, she quickly connected the computer to the jet's screen, and started the movie. As the music started, Morgan reached over and tapped Reid's arm.

"Reid?"

"Yeah?"

"Try not to be a genius for a few hours, ok? Just…It's a fantasy movie based on a park ride. Don't nitpick."

"I'll try." If things got too bad, Reid knew he could just go back to his book and ignore them all. He'd been about as bad at watching movies and not being bothered by the illogical, scientifically incorrect or downright stupid things that happened in them, even as a child. But he'd try, to avoid another argument. If nothing else, he could keep a mental tally of the historical mistakes, without disturbing the others. Good. He pulled up a pad and pen to take notes on, and settled down to watch.

"Damn. Sword fighting is so cool." Morgan breathed as Captain Jack and Will dueled on the screen.

"I love a man with a sword." Garcia agreed.

"Orlando Bloom is so hot." The swordplay wasn't all that interesting, but Emily planned to take full advantage of being at an age when lusting over young actors was par for the course, rather than cougar-ish.

"Shh, I'm trying to hear." JJ shushed her. Reid stayed obediently silent- he'd lost track of the movie several minutes earlier in favor of his book, after filling two pages with the historical errors in the first twenty minutes of the movie. It would be easier to accept as a park ride, he hoped. Rossi looked at him, aware that he wasn't exactly happy.

"You know, it's ok if you'd like to get some sleep. We've still go a long day ahead of us." He said quietly, and the others, if they noticed the exchange, tactfully ignored it.

"It's early." Young or not, Reid was way too old for an afternoon nap. Still, ten minutes later he saw that Morgan and JJ were asleep in their seats, and put his book down. Napping always made flights pass more quickly, anyway.
This chapter calls for a shout-out to the great people on the little_details community on LiveJournal, who gave me invaluable resources, personal impressions and other information about DisneyWorld, which I've never actually been to…

"Are we there yet?"

"JJ." Rossi rolled his eyes. "I know you love annoying me, but seriously?"

"No, I'm serious!" JJ bounced in her seat as they settled in the Disney hotel shuttle at Orlando airport. "When are we getting to the park?"

"Well, it's about 25 miles from the airport to the park," Reid answered before Rossi could, "so factor in our average speed, early afternoon traffic, and- Garcia, are we going to the hotel first?"

"Yup."

"Then add a stop at the hotel, and I'd say…” It was 2:30 pm. Reid thought hard, trying to dig in his mind for traffic patterns he knew as an older man, but couldn't access right now. "About 4:30, I'd say." He finished lamely. "45 minutes to the hotel, with traffic, and at least half an hour to settle in, and then the shuttle into the park. And that's if we don't stop on the way to buy snacks, play any games or explore the hotel." He planned on doing at least two of the three, himself. JJ's face fell.

"That means we won't get to do much at the park today. Animal Kingdom closes at 6."

"Magic Kingdom closes at 10 though. We could start there." Hotch suggested, and she brightened momentarily.

"Can we start with the Magic Mountain?"

"I'm in, definitely." Morgan nodded.

"If there isn't too much of a line." Emily shrugged.

"I'll just wait for you guys outside, alright? I'm not going on that thing." Rossi didn't really like long drops. "I'll join you for other things."

"You chicken, Rossi?" Morgan smirked, and Rossi reached across and slapped the back of his head lightly.

"Respect for your elders, kiddo. At least in public." It was a gentle reminder that they really had to act the part of teens, and not draw any undue attention to themselves. Morgan rubbed his head ruefully and nodded with the others giggled. They were quiet for about half an hour, each busy with their own entertainment, until they were almost at the hotel. Rossi started to notice the changing scenery around them and his eyebrows rose. "Garcia, where did you say you put us?"

"For them, it's Disneyland." She grinned at the vegetation outside and the colorful themed
buildings. "For us it's Aruba. Or technically, the Aruba building in the Caribbean Beach Resort, complete with pools, restaurants, shops and other things pretty much guaranteed to keep us all busy even if we never make it to the parks."

"It's all so...Fake." Reid's eyes were huge behind his glasses as he took in the buildings, the riot of colors, and that fact that a lot of it was plastic. "Reminds me of home." He added with a pleased smile. "Except there's less neon." Unpleasant childhood or not, he still loved Las Vegas, glitz and glitter and all, and the Disney resorts weren't all that different.

"I think it's awful." Emily said quietly, but she was pretty excited as well- the place was huge, and it looked like there'd really be something for anybody here.

"Sure you would, there's too much color for you." JJ grinned. Indeed, there didn't seem to be any black at all except for a few pirate flags on boats in what looked like an oversized lake.

"It's kid paradise." Garcia gave her final opinion on the subject. "And not all bad for adults, either. There's a bar." She winked at Rossi, who shook his head in mild disapproval even though the idea had a certain appeal. He in turn looked at Hotch, who was unusually quiet.

"You ok, Aaron?" Rossi was aware that they were all, teens and adults, still on a hair-trigger and fragile after recent events, and he didn't want the potential sensory overload of the park to send anyone into an anxiety attack- especially not Hotch.

"Fine." The teen agent in charge replied thoughtfully. "I'm going to have to come back here with Jack sometime. When he's a little older, though." His son wouldn't be up to a whole day of walking around the park, not quite yet. "In a couple of years."

"We're going to need swimsuits." Emily declared, eyeing the pools and the lake. "Oh, it's gorgeous!" Yes, there was too much pink happening, but it was pretty nice all the same. "And it's warm enough to swim." There were certain advantages to Florida, after all.

"I'm sure there'll be something in the resort shops." Garcia promised. "And you all have money, spend it however you like." They'd stopped by an ATM on the way from the police station and everyone had stocked up on enough cash that they could avoid having to use credit cards for at least a week. It made them all feel a lot more independent, and besides, they had money so why not use it? Emily tried not to think about how much this unexpected vacation was costing all of them, she'd seen the ticket prices for the various parks, but they all deserved it and they could all afford it.

"We're here!" Morgan bounced out of the bus before it fully stopped, and the driver shouted out a warning but Morgan ignored him, vibrating with excitement. "Oops, sorry man." He stumbled, recovered his balance, and shot the driver his best grin. The driver, well used to excitable young people at the resorts, shrugged in resignation while Rossi made his way out and over to Morgan's side at a more decorous pace.

"You're having a bit of trouble with the 'draw no attention' thing, aren't you?"

"Dave, this is how kids act. Trust me, I know. A too-quiet teenaged boy draws a lot more attention than a loud, energetic one." Morgan had his own youth experience to draw on, as well as his work with other at-risk teens. Behind him, Reid nodded.

"He's right, you know. We're supposed to be impossible and intractable." The angelic smile on his face was in odds with his words, and somehow more worrying than the words themselves. "But we'll be good. Right, Morgan?"
"You betcha, kid. We'll be good." Morgan grabbed his own bag and JJ's, one handed as he was, and the others got all their luggage as well. "Relax, Rossi. We're pretty safe here, as safe as anybody can be anywhere public." They thanked the driver and headed towards the reception building, pink and blue and Colonial-looking. "Just... Let's all forget what we know about the dangers to children specifically and people in general in amusement parks for the duration- can we do that? It'll be really hard to enjoy if we don't."

"He's right." Hotch agreed. "If we spend every minute worrying and looking over our shoulder, this won't be any more relaxing than a day at the office."

"You know what, as I'm the responsible adult, I'll worry for all of us." Rossi suggested, only half-joking. "I'm not here to enjoy, anyway."

"You aren't?" JJ stopped walking, looking scandalized. "Why not?"

"Because..." He couldn't think of a reason. They all stared at him. Did he really come here just for them, or was this for his own sake as well? He needed a vacation as much as any of them. Garcia's face was sympathetic, and eventually Rossi heaved a deep sigh and tweaked one of JJ's braids. "Ok, fine, I'm here to enjoy myself as well. Just try not to destroy my fun by getting lost, kidnapped or injured. Deal?"

"Deal." Six voices answered together, and Rossi finally let himself relax.

"Ok, then let's go check in. You kids can go wait over there if you like." There was a nice garden with gravel walks and benches and tropical vegetation outside the reception building, and it would definitely be more interesting than sitting around the lobby while he and Garcia took care of the check in. "Just don't get out of sight, ok?"

"Of course." Emily nodded. JJ simply shook her head, grabbed Garcia's hand and stayed with the adults when the others all headed away towards the garden.

"I'm not scared." She explained quietly, "But I'm not about to get lost again, and you know exactly where you're going. They don't." Garcia put a hand around her shoulders and they walked up to the check-in desk like that, half-hugging.

"That's fine, kitten. Means you get to pick which room you're in." They'd taken two rooms with king sized beds, since Garcia was pretty sure the kids would all want to be together again, her camera notwithstanding.

Rossi's mobile buzzed with a text message as they finished the paperwork and received a set of key cards. He checked it and his fingers tightened on the phone. "This is why I never wanted kids." He showed the screen to Garcia, who sighed.

"'Found the gaming arcade, come join us here'? I guess the garden was too quiet for them." She looked back towards the path where they'd left the rest of the team. "Well, they're out of sight but I can see the arcade sign from here. We can go join them."

"I should've given him a duress word and an all-clear word." Rossi grumbled, frowning when he saw the anxiety building up in JJ's face and body language. "Come on, let's join them, I have some yelling to do."

"No yelling." JJ's hand tightened in his, which she'd taken up without even thinking about it when they started walking again. "They're just bored. As long as they're all together, and I'm with you... If anybody'd tried something, we would've heard by now." She was worried, but she knew the
others were all alert and wary now, and wouldn't be caught out again. "But you can remind them. Just without yelling."

"I'll try not to yell." It wasn't like Rossi enjoyed it, after all, but he really didn't like letting any of them out of his sight, and knew it would take him a while to relax that particular attitude. On the other hand, he knew JJ was probably right, too.

"I'll yell if you like." Garcia promised, but Morgan waved them into the arcade, where all four teens were clearly just fine, and immediately planted a large blue teddy bear in her arms, stopping any and all planned yelling. "What's this?"

"It's for you. I won it on one of those grab-a-toy machines." He gestured to the machines, where Hotch and Reid were maneuvering the grabbing claw with an intensity of concentration worth of SWAT ops. After a few near-drops, Reid managed to snag a pink elephant and drop it neatly down the chute that delivered it into Hotch's waiting hands. He turned and presented it to JJ with a triumphant flourish.

"That's teamwork for you!" He smiled at her, and she laughed, cuddling the elephant. "Uh, sorry we disappeared…we could still see the reception building, and I did text…"

"You did." Rossi nodded, his face stern. "Now try to stay put for five minutes, next time, or I'll just make you follow me around everywhere like ducklings and never let you out of my sight. Clear?"

"Clear." Hotch nodded. "Right guys?"

"Yes." Emily nodded quickly. "Are we all checked in?"

"Yeah, we can go up." Garcia waved the key cards, holding the bear with her free hand. "Unless you guys want to stay here and play instead of heading down to the Magic Kingdom?"

"No, no, no, we wanna go to the park!" JJ hopped in place, then stopped. "But I want lunch first. Or, uh, whatever meal you have when it's almost five and you've only had an apple for lunch."

"It's called a snack to tide you over 'til dinner." Garcia informed her, "And we'll get something on the way. Reid, we're going."

"Just a sec." He was still manipulating the controls of the toy machine, delicately inching it forward, and then up- and down. "Yes!" He reached into the machine and straightened, looking happier than they'd seen him in a while. With a wide grin, he held out a crumpled ball of black and silver in Emily's direction. "I saw you looking at it."

"Oh…" Carefully, Emily straightened out the velvet wings of a jaunty black, silver and purple bat, stretched on wires around a furry body. "Oh, he's so cute!"

"Isn't he? I wish there were two, but I can't see another one. I thought you'd like it." Reid looked very pleased with himself. "I could work one of those machines when I was seven, they were really popular in the parts of the hotels I could get into as a kid, in Vegas." He explained, looking a little sheepish.

"Thank you." Emily hugged the bat to her chest, and then hugged Reid, which made him blush wildly and everybody else laugh. Still laughing, they made their way up to their second floor rooms.

"We're in the Aruba part of the hotel, so we're pretty close to the main part of the resort, with restaurants and the playground and the arcade and shops." Garcia explained as they walked. "And I
got a room with extra-big beds, so we can all be in two adjoining rooms."

"Great." Still, Emily looked around distastefully. "I just wish things around here weren't so…pink. And cheery." It wasn't garish, in fact it was even pretty tasteful, but there were certainly many colors, and a whole range of pinks, greens and blues. When they entered the room, she dropped her bag on the bed and froze. "There are fish on the covers. Really bright fish."

"Oh, a Finding Nemo bedspread." Garcia grinned. "I'd love a set for home, it's a fun movie." She thought the rooms were great, and had everything they'd need for a few days' stay. Rossi was already starting the coffee maker, obviously intent on staying in the room at least long enough to refuel before braving a huge amusement park with five hyperactive teens and a no less excited grown woman. "These rooms are nice."

"I like them." JJ found the extra-huge bed and claimed it as her own, although of course she'd let the others share it with her, because who wanted to sleep alone? Not even Hotch. "Can we go eat now?"

"Yes, we're going." Garcia counted heads and checked the time. "Dave, why don't you hang around here and have your coffee? We'll bring you something back. Take this time as the last quiet and peaceful minutes you'll have for a while."

"If you're sure you're ok with taking them all." Rossi gave her a look of profound gratitude.

"Sure. Just leave me some coffee. We might stop by the shops, so…No more than half an hour. We do want to get into the park today." She thought it'd be a bit of a waste to go in on a full day ticket for three hours, but there were no half-day tickets, and she didn't think she'd be able to keep them out of the park today, no matter how tempting the resort itself was.

And it was pretty tempting, she had to admit as they reached the main Old Port area, where the shops and restaurants were. "Nothing heavy, kids- we're going on the rides soon, and if you throw up you're on your own after." She informed them, and they all nodded obediently. They did in fact get snacks- fries, cotton candy that they shared even though Emily got to hold it and so had more of it than the others, and some juice. To her surprise nobody went for the ice cream, not even Reid, so she guessed they were taking her advice about the rides seriously.

"Can we go in the shops for a bit? Just a few minutes." JJ asked, shooting curious looks at the array of Disney branded goods in the window. "We won't get lost, I promise."

"Promise only what you can deliver on, honey." Garcia held up an admonishing finger, "But yeah, go ahead. I'm warning you though, I may end up buying you all Mickey Mouse underwear."

In fact, they all left the store with new clothes some fifteen minutes later. Although Garcia didn't act on her warning, Morgan got some boxer shorts for himself, Reid and Hotch bought t-shirts, Emily some Aladdin themed pajamas, and JJ a full-length Wendy nightgown, complete with frilly lace. Everything was expensive as hell, but the kids didn't care, and it was their own money they were spending, so Garcia didn't try to hold them back- and bought two t-shirts as well. They all got a few more small things, and stayed a while to browse through things that could only appeal to actual children without an adult mind to back them up.

"If we don't head back up now, there'll be no point in going to the Magic Kingdom today." Reid looked at the time and frowned. "Actually, I'm not sure there's any point to it now. It'll be after six by the time we get there."

"So? We can get a lot done in almost four hours." Morgan didn't want to wait, and the others
agreed with him, all except Reid who still looked uncertain but didn't offer any further arguments. They rushed back up to the room, got some fries into Rossi and coffee into Garcia (and Reid and Hotch, who both snuck half-cups without being noticed), and were on the shuttle to the Magic Kingdom not long after.

"Ok, everybody have their maps?" They were at the front gates, just past the ticket check point, all of them armed with bottles of water, maps of the park, and a card with details of how to return to the hotel- and their phones, and the distress and 'all clear' words that went with them. "All set to start exploring?"

"So set. Ready." Emily was excited despite herself- the atmosphere was so thrilling, so charged with potential fun, that she was carried along with it. Reid and JJ looked around, wide eyed and barely holding back from running off, and even Hotch looked excited, so Emily figured she was allowed to be as well. "Space Mountain?"

"Space Mountain!" Reid crowed, already moving. "Come on, that way!" He'd already memorized the map, and discarded his to have both his hands free. They all moved as quickly as they could through the crowds- not too crowded, actually, as it was evening and the summer vacation hadn't started yet, but still pretty busy- until the ran into the snaking line leading to the ride. "Half an hour's wait." The boy's excitement drained visibly.

"Come on, half an hour isn't bad." Morgan dragged them all into the line. "Besides, it's not like we'll be bored." It didn't look like they would be, because any number of Disney characters were around to meet and greet, and there was a small Pirate themed show on the far corner involving knife jugglers and some fire tricks, and they didn't even notice the time passing after they got into the building, with the stars and neon lights on the walls and ceiling around them. To JJ it seemed like an awfully short time before she was strapping into the ride.

"You know- maybe I should wait with Rossi, outside." It was a really long drop and really sharp turns, and her stomach was already fluttering with nervous excitement.

"Come on, Jaje, it'll be fun." Emily loved rollercoasters- she loved anything that went really fast. Behind her, Reid carefully took off his glasses, folded them and tucked them inside his shirt for protection. Garcia did the same in her own seat. "Here, I'll sit with you and you can hold my hand."

As the train started moving, climbing, Emily started to be doubtful about the wisdom of this whole idea as well. JJ was already breathing too quickly, and they couldn't actually hold hands because they were sitting in a single-file rocket. Well, too late to change their minds, wasn't it?

Two and a half minutes later, it was over. Reid hopped out, wobbly but brimming with excitement. "Let's go again! I wanna do the second track, there are tiny differences and the other one's longer!" The flashing strobes and bright lights in the darkness of the ride had nearly been enough to make him nauseous, but it had been too much fun not to try again.

"You totally screamed, man." Morgan had done his own share of howling, but he'd never heard Hotch let go like that, and intended to make the most of it.

"I did not scream." Hotch insisted, even though he totally had, and his eyes were full of the wonder and joy of the ride. "But I'm willing to go again."

"You ok, Jaje?"Garcia was breathless and a little dizzy, but she'd had fun. The young girl grinned at her.

"It wasn't that scary! I had fun!" She bounded up to Rossi, who was waiting patiently outside. "We
had fun! Didn't we, guys?"

"Yeah, we had fun." Morgan nodded. "It was awesome!"

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself- Emily?" Rossi straightened, alert again, at the slightly glassy look in Emily's eyes when she came out of the Mountain, took a few stiff steps away from them, and threw up quietly in the bushes. She stayed crouched down and he could see her trembling. "Shit. Emily?" She was stiff, and flinched violently when he touched her, her face white as a sheet and her pupils too big, almost hiding the iris. "Emily, it's ok. Nothing's wrong. You're safe, Em, you're safe, we're all safe. We're ok. We're at Disney World." He drew her to him and very slowly she relaxed in his arms, and he could feel the trembling intensify into wracking sobs.

"J-JJ was screaming." Her voice was muffled in his shirt. "Screaming, and I thought- I was sure-" Sure that she'd only imagined or dreamed the rescue, sure that Ryan had them again, or still, and was cutting into her friend. "Oh God."

"Oh, Emily…" The others were standing back, worry written large on their faces, before JJ scrambled forward and got to her knees at her friend's side. "Emily, I'm ok. Look at me-" Red, tearful eyes rose obediently. "I'm ok, see? You kept me safe, and the police came for us, and we're ok now. I didn't scream because I was hurt. It's just…you're supposed to scream on rollercoasters."

"Well- I don't wanna ever hear you scream again." Emily said weakly, still shaky, but she pulled away from Rossi. "Ugh. I hate throwing up."

"Here." Garcia handed her a bottle of water. "I'm pretty sure they're used to it around here. Especially after that one."

"Let's- uh, let's not go on rides that make people scream anymore, maybe?" Hotch suggested tactfully. They were all shaken, thrown back to the violence of the previous day, and their happy, easy mood broken. "Let's find 'It's a Small World'. I hear it's relaxing."

"It's for babies." Morgan wrinkled his nose at the suggestion.

"Well, JJ and me still count as babies, and the rest of you are coming with us," Reid said reasonably. "So we're going there next. And then maybe to the spinning tea cups, those are supposed to be fun."

"Fine, whatever." Whatever made sure none of them had another flashback today, thank you. Morgan was pretty willing to spend the rest of the evening in stupid singing boats if that's what the others decided. "Can we do the Haunted Mansion, too? There's nothing scarier there than what we see at work."

"I love the Haunted Mansion." Emily, back on her feet and regaining her composure quickly, found the right direction on the map and started leading them.

"Your choice, kids." Rossi shrugged and followed. He noticed that most of the others parents around the park looked a lot like he felt.

"Hang in there, sir. They'll be out of energy…eventually." Garcia's impish smile and consoling words failed to reassure him, somehow.

Three hours later, they'd been on Space Mountain twice more (Only Reid and Morgan the third time), on the Pirates ride, in the spinning teacups until Garcia declared she absolutely refused to try it again, and in the Haunted Mansion, a particular favorite of the girls', three times. Rossi was
exhausted, and the kids were showing no sign of slowing down, even after sitting down for pizza in one of the park cafes. It was full dark, and the park was due to close soon, he thought gratefully. At the hotel he'd feel better about letting them roam while he rested a little.

"We can't go on Splash Mountain." Garcia was mid-argument. "I told you, it's too chilly and you'll come out of it soaking wet, and then you'll have to get on the shuttle like that. You'll all catch colds."

"You do know that's a mistaken belief, right? It's been medically proven that colds have-"

"A way of taking hold when your system's weakened by cold, Spencer. Don't try that one with me, you're not going on Splash Mountain today and that's it." Garcia glared at them, then softened when she saw five sets of puppy eyes turn on her. Hotch's were particularly effective. "Not tonight, guys. But you have tomorrow and the day after as well, and it should be pretty warm tomorrow morning. You may have not noticed this yet, kids, but you should be pretty tired by now. It's been a busy day."

"I'm not tired." JJ declared, then yawned and clapped a hand on her mouth. "Not tired." She repeated, muffled. "The park doesn't close for another 45 minutes. We should make the most of it."

"Totally. There's a whole pile of rides we haven't done yet." Morgan nodded. "There are shuttles back to the resort after the park closes, right? I mean, we won't be stranded her overnight or something."

"That could be kinda cool, you know?" Reid's eyes brightened. "I bet I could make the rides go, hotwiring a rollercoaster can't be too different from a car, right?"

"You can hotwire a car?" Rossi raised an eyebrow.

"Sure. Can't you?"

"I do, but I'm not ten."

"Oh. Uh, well...Mom had a way of misplaced her keys and then freaking out." He shrugged. "I learned young."

"So I see. You never tried to drive, did you?"

"Not until I was tall enough to see over the wheel and reach the gas pedal at the same time." The boy replied sourly, "So not until I was thirteen or so. There are many empty roads outside of Vegas where the police don't go. I needed to know, in case of an emergency." Also, it had been cool, back then.

"Sometimes I really think my childhood was somehow missing some elements, you know?" Garcia ruffled his hair. "I mean, granted, I was hacking classified systems in high school, but I only learned how to drive in my senior year. We didn't have back roads, so I guess that could be a reason."

"Don't feel deprived." Hotch snorted. When he'd been in high school personal computers had still been pretty rare, and he hadn't really needed one. "It's a generational thing."

"Isn't it? How does it feel to be a child of the 90's suddenly?" She grinned, then laughed at his scowl. "Aw, it's just temporarily. You'll go back to being a Boomer in no time."

"I'm not that old." He frowned.
"Well then, act like it! Now hush and let's find a ride to go on that doesn't involve a waterfall, ok? We're wasting precious Disney time." On a whim (and with extreme courage) she reached over and ruffled his hair as well. He ducked away.

"Watch it, Penelope."

"Yes sir, sorry sir." There was general laughter at Hotch's put-upon expression and Garcia's complete lack of repentance. "Magic carpet ride?"

"Sure." Emily nodded, "Just as long as nobody starts singing again." She shot a glare in Morgan's direction, and he shrugged defensively.

"I told you, I didn't even notice I'd started. That song sticks in your head."

"It really does." Reid nodded, "That's why I refused to do Small World more than once. That song is very…catchy. In a bad way."

"No, it's just that Morgan sings it- in a bad way." Emily laughed and JJ giggled and Morgan tried to throw his popcorn at both of them at once and only managed to hit Garcia with stray kernels.

"No- no food fight. No way." Rossi stepped between them quickly, "Either decide on a ride, or we can catch an earlier shuttle back. You kids may be riding high on adrenaline, but I'm seriously tired."

"You're showing your age." JJ giggled again, and he wagged his finger in her direction.

"And you're not too big to spank, young lady. I'm sure your husband will forgive me."

"He might." The boys drew up in front of JJ, with Hotch as spokesperson, as usual, "But we'd give you hell."

"Yeah, I guess you would." They were finally at the magic carpet ride, though, which distracted them all reasonably well for the next 25 minutes or so. The park was finally starting to empty. They did manage to fit in two more ride, although none compared to the Space Mountain or the Haunted Mansion, before Rossi finally managed to herd them all, with Garcia's help, to the exit gates.

"Bet you they're all asleep by the time we get to the resort." Garcia whispered as they settled on the bus. He smirked.

"Why bet on a sure thing? They're a lot more tired than they think."

"Actually, I'm exactly as tired as I think I am." Reid told her, yawning halfway through the sentence. "Which is very, but not enough to fall asleep on the bus." There were other people here besides the team, and as much as he (finally) trusted them to keep him safe, they were outnumbered, so he had no intention of dozing off.

"We'll see, kid. We'll see." Rossi smiled. Morgan's eyes were already closed, and JJ pulled Hotch's arm around her like a human blanket and snuggled into his side. Reid shrugged, confident in his ability to stay awake, and pulled out his phone. Soon, he was absorbed in some sort of complex game, which as an adult he'd considered boring but was just right for the age he was now. In any case, it kept him awake the full half hour it took the bus to drop them off at the resort again, just in front of their building.

"See? You should've taken that bet." He told Rossi with a proud smile while the others roused
themselves enough to get off the bus. "Might've won something, if you'd bet money."

"I don't bet money, it's a bad example to you kids." Rossi lied without a twitch of remorse. "Come on, up and let's get you all into bed."

"I wanna go back to the arcade." Emily, refreshed after the short nap, gave the main resort area a longing look. "There's a lot of exploring around here that we haven't done yet."

"I wonder if the pool's still open." Morgan added, and Emily shook her head.

"Even if it is, we don't have swimsuits."

"I could just go in my shorts, I don't mind." Morgan shrugged, but then shook his head as well. "Never mind. It's too cold, right?"

"Too right, my little chocolate bunny." Garcia agreed. "I think almost everything's closed at this hour, including the arcade."

"Open 'til midnight." Reid contradicted. "It's in the resort brochure."

"Which you memorized as soon as we arrived, right?" Sometimes, awful as it was, Rossi could understand why Reid's mother was insane- even though he knew her condition had started well before he'd been born, but it was the principle of the thing. "I think you've all had a long enough day, and there's going to be a line for the bathroom as it is. Come on."

"If we're going to have to wait, we might as well wait down here." Hotch suggested reasonably. "We can hang out by ourselves, it's safe enough. Please?" Again with the puppy eyes. Rossi was made of sterner stuff than Garcia, though.

"You're not staying out here alone. And midnight isn't very far away. Really, how can you not be tired?"

"We are." Emily explained for the group, "But the arcade's really cool. I promised Hotch I'd kick his ass at air hockey, now I have to prove it. Besides, those rooms are too bright and cheery. Just... call us when the kids are done with their showers and we'll come up, I promise."

"Why are you assuming we're not staying?" Reid had no problem with the fact that he and JJ were in the same grouping of 'kids', because that was pretty much a given and socially reasonable, but the assumption that they didn't want to play irked him.

"JJ, am I assuming wrong?" Emily turned to the younger girl, who wasn't exactly fully awake, swaying a little on her feet and holding Garcia's hand.

"I'm goin' to sleep." She replied shortly, and Reid sighed.

"Fine, we're going upstairs first, then." He was tired, and not all that interested in a video arcade really, with or without air hockey.

"I'll stay with them, Dave." Garcia was tired as well, but not as much so as Rossi, and she'd really enjoyed the park as well. "I'm pretty sure we won't stay very long."

"Fine." Rossi gave in gracefully. "Keep your phones close and don't take candy from strangers."

"You know as well as we do that most assaults on children are made by people who know them already, why do you still use that idiotic warning?" Reid asked as they walked up to the room.
"Because you're as safe with Garcia as anyone could be, and warning children of danger is what we're supposed to do," Rossi shrugged. He'd meant it mainly as a joke, anyway, but Reid was so literal-minded sometimes…

"We're aware of the dangers, thanks." Reid scowled a little. "Let them enjoy. Besides, there aren't any strangers around that I could see."

"Maybe they're all off buying candy." Rossi suggested, and JJ laughed before her hand tightened in Rossi's and a note of worry crept into her voice.

"Ryan was a stranger. I mean, he knew us, sort of, but we didn't know him. Does that count?" Her free hand touched her stomach, where the shallow cuts made yesterday still pulled and stung under the bandage if she moved too quickly. "Are we statistics now?"

"No, kitten. You're not statistics." Rossi replied quietly. Reid, sober, nodded as well.

"If ever another group of FBI agents turn into children and run into a magic using killer, then maybe we might have a solid start on statistics. Until then, we're pretty special."

"Are you trying to make me feel better?" JJ gave Reid a neutral look, and when he nodded she sighed. "You're not very good at it yet, but thanks. It does kinda help."

"Oh, good." He grabbed his bag. "I'll go shower in the other room?"

"Yeah, and no more statistics until you're grown up again, ok? Not where other people can hear and wonder whether we feed you an encyclopedia for breakfast every day." Rossi shooed him away, and gave JJ a search look. "You gonna be ok, kid?"

"Yeah…I can have Garcia help me change the dressing later, if I need a hand. It's pretty much just a large band-aid, really. I can do it myself."

"That's not what I meant, JJ." Well, he'd meant the physical aspects of her injury as well, but more than that. She nodded again.

"Eventually. We'll all be ok."

"Good. Now go try out that Disney Princess shampoo thing you got."

Twenty minutes later, both younger children were washed and in their pajamas, in the king sized bed with the TV showing…Something Rossi didn't recognize but reasonably assumed to be by Disney. It seemed to involve talking animals, anyway. The others trooped up, laughing and talking, but Rossi could see they were all running on fumes. At least it wasn't due to the demands of a case this time, and really, when was the last time any of them had had a chance to do something fun until they were too tired to continue?

"Had fun?"

"Yeah." Hotch was practically beaming. "I beat Emily at air hockey, and Garcia."

"Oh? Not Morgan?" Rossi raised an eyebrow, amused.

"He wouldn't even try. Said the video games were more fun anyway." Hotch smirked. "Didn't dare to challenge me."

"As if. I just wanted to let you enjoy your victory without wiping the floor with you." Morgan was
already making a beeline to the shower. "Don't believe him, Rossi."

"I'll keep my beliefs to myself and stay out of this, thank you." Rossi replied without looking up from his coffee and the newspaper, which he'd retreated into as soon as he was sure they were all back and safe. "Go wash, if you want an early start tomorrow."

"We do." Emily slipped under Hotch's arm and closed the bathroom door practically in his face. He crossed his arms and glowered at it, then thumped it with an open palm.

"At least don't take an hour, Em! And there'd better be hot water left." He turned, still scowling. "Girls. They're just…impossible." And his mind, less under his control that he was used to, was producing very interesting images of what Emily might look like in the shower…He flushed slightly and turned away from the door, pushing the thoughts away. Maybe it'd be better if there was no hot water left for his shower. "What're you guys watching?"

"Enchanted." Garcia had joined the others on the bed, though not under the covers as they were. "It's actually pretty new, and not all animated."

"Oh." Hotch sat down, cautious as if the movie (or the bed) might bite him. "Chick flick?"

"Very." Reid replied cheerfully. "But you can say you're watching it for the pretty lady actresses if you want to defend your honor."

"Uh…Ok." It was as good a reason as any. Still, he was careful to have a book on hand and to look completely absorbed in it by the time Morgan finished his shower, to avoid getting teased over it.

"How are we sharing tonight?" Garcia asked when Emily had also returned, her hair twisted in a braid and pinned up for the night. She was in her Tinker Bell pajama, just as JJ was in her Wendy nightie.

"I'm not moving." Reid really wished they'd all just go, so he could turn the movie off and fall asleep. Next to him, it looked like JJ was more than halfway there already, "And neither is JJ, I think."

"I'll take the other room, if the other guys want to join me there." Rossi suggested.

"Bed's big 'nuff for all of us." JJ muttered into her pillow, and it was, but one night could be excused- should they do it again? Morgan and Emily exchanged looks.

"You know what? Why don't you and Rossi take the other room, babygirl? That way we'll just…mix and match whatever way works. I promise no monkey business." Morgan suggested. He wasn't sure they should be sharing, but admitted it'd be nice, and it would save on getting up if anybody had nightmares. Rossi and Garcia had a moment of silent consultation, and finally Rossi nodded.

"Fine, you're just young enough that I can maybe trust you with that."

"Young enough and smart enough." Emily gave him a dirty look. "As if I would."

"As adults you might."

"No, you might. We have self-control."

"Well…" Morgan coughed. "Most of the time we do, anyway."
"Inside the team?" She raised an eyebrow and Morgan blushed. "Seriously?"

"No, never." He promised, while inwardly admitting that as an adult he wouldn't have minded sharing a bed with his female teammates- but he knew it might damage their working relationship. "Besides, we all need our personal space, as adults. We barely even share rooms, never mind beds."

"True enough." She agreed, mollified. "Anyway, I wanna sleep. Make some space, Reid." The younger boy moved closer to the center of the bed and Emily slipped in next to him. "Turning off the TV?"

"Yeah." Garcia did just that, and took up her own bag. "I'll see you guys in the morning. And I'm leaving the door between our rooms open, ok? Don't think twice about calling if you need anything."

"We have each other, we'll be ok." Morgan assured her. He settled on the free bed, determined to have some space tonight after all.

An hour later, when Garcia peeked into the kids' room, all five were in the same bed in an untidy pile, covered with three different blankets and with far too many pillows taking up space as well. She grinned and half-closed the door.

"Puppy pile again?" Rossi asked as he poured them both a drink- red wine tonight, she noticed, but then they were both pretty tired as well. She had no idea where he'd gotten it, but possibly he'd gone out while she was in the shower. Or he had a personal stash somewhere; she wouldn't put it past him.

"Yup. I wonder if they'll make a habit of it until they change back- or beyond." She winked. "Although possibly they'll need a bigger bed if they do." The bed was barely big enough for five kids. "Especially because if this becomes a regular thing when they're back to normal, I'll want in as well."

"Kevin won't mind?" He handed her the glass of wine.

"He's welcome to join us. You think Will won't?"

"Actually, I'd rather not think about that at all. Even as adults, there are some situations one doesn't want to experience, with the team. Even if you call it a bonding exercise, I'm not a fan of over-full beds." Two was quite enough. Three at most.

"Yeah, it's probably just wishful thinking on my part anyway. Hotch is way too uptight to share a bed with anyone on the team." She toasted that and sipped her wine. "It's nice to see all of them letting go a little. Especially him."

"Yeah. We can hope they retain some of that sense of fun when they change back." Although it would also be nice to stop counting heads at every turn, or feeling so responsible for all of them. "Whenever that is."

"Not for at least another five days or so, even with our most optimistic estimates." She hadn't heard from her magic using contacts since the previous day, so she assumed nobody'd found anything that could help them- or they were all too busy saving the world, which some of them claimed to do on a regular basis. Sometimes she even believed them. "I figure we'll stay here for two more days or so, and then we'll figure out how to keep them from going insane or driving us crazy until they change."

"Sounds good." Rossi nodded. "Would it be really irresponsible of us not to think about that part
"Probably. And also, we're both thinking about it right now, so that open's a bust, I think." It wasn't something either of them could ignore. "I think we can be forgiven for not thinking about it actively, or discussing it, until at least tomorrow afternoon. Besides, we have the initial set-up all worked out."

"We know where they'll sleep." Rossi drained his wine and contemplated a refill. Garcia, seeing where his eyes were going, refilled his glass and topped off her own. It wasn't like wine was going to affect either of them as much as scotch could, and the kids were sleeping the sleep of the just and exhausted. "I'm more worried about what they'll do when they're awake. School's not an option, and neither is going to work. And our options for working from home are limited."

"I know." She sighed. "We'll figure something out. Send them out to the Smithsonian to be educated or something. Movie marathons, I don't know. They're resourceful kids."

"That's half of what worries me. The trouble they could get into without even trying." He shook his head. "I never want to go through another day like yesterday, Penelope."

"Me neither, Dave. Let's try to avoid insane kidnappers for at least the upcoming week? And we'll think about what to do with them when we get to that bridge. We'll be fine."

"Have I ever told you how much I love and appreciate your optimism?" Rossi smiled at her, letting the tension drain from his shoulders.

"No sir." She grinned, pink rising in her cheeks. "Thank you. I try."

"You're doing a good job, Penelope, and it's very much appreciated."

"So are you, sir, so are you."

"I told you, we're well past 'sir' at this point." Rossi stood up and stretched. "I think I'll go get ready for bed."

"I think I'll do the same. Let's hope for a quiet night." She looked in the kids' room again before turning in- there were all sleeping peacefully, Morgan half on Emily, and Emily hugging Hotch which the two younger kids clung together. "Poor kids." She sighed. "It's going to be ok. Really."
Epilogue- The Morning After

Chapter Summary

And then they woke up.

Chapter Notes

This is it, you guys- the final chapter of my overgrown baby. It's been a wild ride, and I hope you all enjoyed reading it as much as I have writing it. I am immensely grateful for the warm and positive feedback I've received for this story, it's been amazing.

"The things which the child loves remain in the domain of the heart until old age. The most beautiful thing in life is that our souls remaining over the places where we once enjoyed ourselves"

Kahlil Jibran

"Morgan, if that's your hand on my leg you're a dead man."

The voice penetrated Morgan's sleeping mind and he carefully flexed both hands, testing what they were on. Fabric in both cases, it felt like. Why was Emily pissy, then? And how could she wake up annoyed?

"Not mine." He muttered. There was something heavy, but pleasantly warm and soft, on top of him, so he was careful not to disturb it when he moved.

"Mine, sorry." There was a rustle, and something moved, but Morgan froze.

"Hotch, say that again?" There was something strange going on.

"Say what?" Slightly louder and less mumbled, and Hotch seemed to realize what Morgan meant. "Oh."

"Oh." Morgan sat up abruptly, dislodging the person draped on him (Emily, as it turned out), and making her tumble to the floor from the bed that was suddenly way, way too small.

"Hey- what the hell?" She glared up at him and froze as well. "Oh." She looked down at herself, Tinker Bell pajamas and all, and breathed "Oh, thank God."

"Missed them, huh?" Morgan smiled, lightheaded with relief at how much deeper, how normal his voice sounded. He agreed with her general sentiments though, stretching his legs hesitantly- and encountering somebody else's on the way. Damn, the bed really was too small.

"Morgan-" Hotch sounded a little choked. "Could you- I can't move them."

Morgan looked over to his left and could help a surprised burst of laughter- Hotch, fully grown as well, was pretty much buried under Reid and JJ, all three of the cuddled together and extremely
tangled, in each other and in JJ's long nightgown.

"Is it all of us?" Emily asked from the floor, and Morgan reached down to help her up.

"Yeah, it is. Sorry Hotch, but you three are kinda cute like that. I think I'll wait for Garcia and her camera to come…"

"No!" With a shove, feeling only a little bad about it, Hotch forced his way up- and pushed Reid off the bed as he did. "Oops. Shit, sorry Reid."

"Wha?" The young (but not, thankfully, as young as he'd been the previous night) agent blinked, reached for his glasses and overshot by a good margin, as his arm was longer. "What's going on?"

"We're-" Emily's voice cracked, "We're back to normal. Back to- to us."

"We are?" Reid finally located his glasses, discovered they no longer fit, being too small, and cursed softly. "Ok, we are. Can somebody get my bag please?"

"Here." Emily got to her feet, swayed a little at the no longer accustomed height, and passed him his bag. He fished out his glasses and put them on. A cautious swipe of his tongue on his front teeth confirmed that the braces were gone. Relief flooded him. "Hey Morgan-" Emily had noticed it when Morgan had reached for her, but he didn't seem to've noticed himself, "your cast is gone."

"Huh? Hey, yeah." His left arm was perfectly fine, and the blue cast had disappeared. Other than that, he noticed he was wearing an adult-sized set of the clothes he'd gone to bed with, which meant- yup. "That Tinker Bell outfit looks good on you, Em." He grinned and she scowled, tugging self-consciously on the hems of her shorts, which barely reached to mid-thigh.

"Shuddup." She reached up and pinched him, and he pulled back with a hiss.

"What was that for?"

"Wanted to make sure we weren't still asleep." Emily explained, and Morgan pinched her right back, prompting her to slap his hand.

"You can't prove you're not asleep by pinching me- that makes no sense."

"Well, now we've proven we aren't dreaming." She glared at him.

Reid picked himself up off the floor, his mind spinning in tight, almost hysterical circles. "Are you sure? I mean, I'd be willing to write off the past week as a terrible dream, but we were clearly under a Finding Nemo bedspread, here, and-"

"Reid? Shut up for a sec." That cut him off- and the words were Reid, no different from the previous day or from two weeks ago, which was actually reassuring. It meant they were still themselves.

"Why're you guys so noisy…?" JJ had somehow managed to sleep through that entire conversation, people falling off the bed and all. She turned over and reached for Hotch, who took her hand and reached over to shake her shoulder.

"JJ, wake up- we've changed back." She was definitely back to her old (older?) self, albeit still with her hair in pigtails and wearing the long nightie. She groaned and pressed against him.

"No time f'r jokes, Hotch…" But he didn't feel right anymore- more solid than bony, and larger,
and what was she lying on? Aw, hell. They weren't joking. JJ jerked awake and sat up fast enough
that the world tilted and shifted wildly. One hand reached for her chest, and she blushed and put it
down quickly when she realized what she was checking. "We're back?"

"We're back." Hotch confirmed. And he was still in shorts and a Mickey Mouse t-shirt, and feeling
more uncomfortable about it by the second. "And still in Disney World, as far as we can tell. And
it's..." He checked his watch. "Only seven. We could just go back to sleep, and hope we're still
ourselves when we wake up again."

"I'm awake. And legal." Morgan said slowly. "I'm not wasting time sleeping. Uh, Rossi and
Garcia?"

"I'll go get them, I guess." Reid stood up and tried a careful step, aware of his suddenly long limbs.
"And I was just getting used to being shorter, too..."

"Oh, you're complaining?" Morgan was too happy to complain, but JJ was looking a little wistful,
and Hotch- Hotch wasn't looking at anybody, actually, as he'd rested his head on his drawn up
knees, a position much more suited to his teenaged self than to the adult they knew, taking a
moment to himself. Morgan chose not to comment on that, giving him the measure of privacy he
could. Reid was already at the door to the adjoining room when it pushed in and he found himself
nose-to-nose with Rossi. The older agent was on his mobile, and almost dropped it when he saw
Reid.

"Thanks for letting me know, Chief. I'll call you back, ok?" He snapped his phone closed.

"We've changed back." Reid informed him, even though it was obvious.

"I can see that." Rossi looked from him to the others, and took two steps that allowed him to drop
into a chair. "That was Chief Matthews on the phone. Ryan Shane died in the ICU about two hours
ago. He never woke up."

There was a short silence, until JJ spoke. "Good."

"Yeah." Rossi agreed, a little thrown by this supposed return to normal. "So... You're back to
normal?"

"As far as I can tell, yes." Reid reported. "Granted, we should probably verify properly, check that
we regained all the muscle memory, full functionality of all our-" he coughed and blushed a little,
"Never mind. Have you asked Matthews about the- the victims? Their bodies, did they change
back?" They all stared at him, wondering how he could even be thinking about the case right now,
and he shrugged. Not like he could really control it when his mind engaged in anything that would
keep him from remembering that it had felt really nice to share a bed with four others. It was a
defense mechanism. "We know the runes made the spell last beyond their death, but I doubt Shane
would've thought to extend it beyond his death, if there's a difference in the runes. And I think
there might be."

"Ok, I'll call him." Rossi stood up. "And wake Garcia up. You five... Might want to get dressed."
He looked pointedly at Emily's pajamas and she glowered at him. "Take a few minutes to get
yourselves together."

"Gee, we never would've thought of that ourselves." Morgan groused and dashed for the bathroom.
Reid's sensibilities aside, there were certain things he really needed to verify that had been restored
to their former- well, he called it glory, and several past lady friends had agreed.
In the room, Reid was rummaging through his bag for adult clothes, and Emily stretched, testing out her regained reach. JJ touched Hotch's shoulder lightly and he jerked, surprised. "You ok?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine. I just-" He wasn't sure what to think. Waking up with the others had felt so good, and his first thought when he realized things had changed was 'we can't keep doing this', and that angered him. Five minutes as an adult and already responsibility and the constraints of appropriate behavior were stifling him. Absurdly, he already wanted to go back. "It's not fair." He didn't even care that the others could probably hear him, they were good at ignoring this kind of thing. To his surprise, he felt arms around his shoulders. To his even greater surprise the bed dipper slights as two more pairs of hands joined, until they were all crowded together.

"It's not fair." JJ agreed softly. "But we missed being adults, didn't we?"

"I sure did." Emily spoke just as quietly. The bathroom door opened- none of them looked up, but after another moment there were five people in the bed again, huddled together to keep from flying apart.

"I missed being me, but I'm going to miss this as well." Reid expressed Hotch's feelings perfectly. Hugging as adults felt so awkward, everything too long and curved and ungainly. It didn't feel as natural as it had. They were all tense around him, aware of the awkwardness.

"We could try doing this- as adults, I mean." Bless JJ's attempts at cheerfulness. Morgan answered for the rest of them, though.

"No, we can't. And soon we won't want to, either. We're- too grown up and fucked up for it." And didn't that just suck. "No more sharing beds."

"No more food fights or movies." Now Emily sounded really glum.

"We can still watch movies." Reid corrected her. "And- look on the bright side- at least none of us are within a pedophile's target preference anymore." He meant that entirely seriously, but JJ still slapped the back of his head.

"You guys look like somebody's died." Garcia stood in the door connecting the two rooms, giving them a puzzled look. "I mean- somebody has died, but that's good news for a change. Are you all ok? Physically, I mean, all there?"

"Yeah, we're fine." Hotch replied as they broke up the huddle, exchanging oddly guilty looks. "Just…Getting used to this."

"You all look like this is a bad thing, you guys- yesterday all you wanted was to be yourselves again." She sat down. "You should be thrilled, you can all go home now."

Going home seemed like an exceptionally bleak prospect. Still, being too miserable over it would be in bad taste, wouldn't it? Garcia was right, they'd wished for this. Morgan nodded. "You're right, baby girl. I'm gonna get dressed."

They were all silent as they dressed, taking turns in the bathroom. Reid had to admit that he felt a lot safer, more confident, in his button down vest and khaki trousers. While dressing he'd recited complex equations to himself, making sure he still had them in his head, and found that he could access all his memories- and that the ones from his childhood were again pleasantly fuzzy. It was better that way.

"The cuts on my stomach are gone. Like they were never there." JJ reported, coming out of the bathroom and dressed once more like herself. Reid couldn't help smiling. "I'm going to call Will, let
him know we're ok." She'd only texted him the previous two days, too rattled and exhausted to explain.

"I should call Jess and Jack." Hotch patted his pockets, looking for his phone.

"Hold on with the calls." Garcia returned, followed by Rossi. "Until we get everything figured out."

"Matthews checked with the morgue- all four victims have turned into adult-sized corpses overnight. The ME may never recover from the shock." He smiled thinly. "But the families will have closure at least, and the case will be much easier to write up now." Especially since, with Ryan Shane dead, it wouldn't come to a trial.

"That's really great." Emily smiled, and JJ nodded. "Guess he really didn't plan on dying before they did, or didn't care what would happen to them."

"He didn't even care much what would happen to them when he was alive." JJ pointed out, remembering the clammy touch on her skin with a shudder.

"I've let Strauss know we've recovered." Rossi continued his report, "She says we still have the week off and to get our heads straight before we come back. You two ladies would normally need to be cleared by psych, after what you've been through, but it'll be pretty hard to explain to a Bureau shrink..." He looked at them all, seeing the stunned, lost expressions, the stances of people still in shock, or in trauma, and shook his head. "I think we should probably all go through psych before we get back to work, but fortunately she didn't ask me."

"That's good, Dave. The last thing we need right now is a shrink digging around our heads." Hotch was glad Morgan had said that, because he felt exactly the same. He didn't want to talk about it, possibly ever.

"So...we're going home?" Reid asked uncertainly, looking around the room.

"Not so fast, boy genius." Garcia held up a finger. "Or is it grown man genius now? No, sorry, the other one sounds much better, I think I'll keep using that. Anyway, since you all look glum enough that you could depress the entire Disney staff, here's what we're going to do." She listed out on her fingers. "JJ, you call Will and see if he and Henry can get on the next flight down here. Hotch, you do the same for Jessica and Jack. He can miss a few days of school. Uh-uh, no talking yet." She said when Hotch opened his mouth to respond. "Next, I'm going to get us a few more rooms, because two are clearly not enough anymore. And then we're going to have breakfast. And then we're going out to the Magic Kingdom, to do everything we didn't get to yesterday."

"But-"

"But nothing. We've paid in advance for a three day pass, and I'm not letting you waste it. The machines won't care how tall you are, they're fingerprint-based, and yours haven't changed enough to matter." Garcia was determined, and a determined Garcia was a force to be reckoned with.

"But we can't-"

"Can't what?" She turned on Emily. "Do you have pressing plans?"

"No, but-"

"Morgan? Anywhere important to be tomorrow?"
"Not really, but-"

"Reid? Plans?"

"I have a lecture to prepare for Thursday?" He tried weakly, then shrugged. "I'd rather go to the Magic Kingdom, though. I'm sure Space Mountain will be different from an adult perspective."

"Hotch, you said you wanted to bring Jack here. We'll all help." Garcia turned her best pleading look on JJ, who tilted her head.

"I've been away from home too long. If Will's willing to fly with a toddler, I'll be happy to have them join us here."

"See? Then it's settled. Dave?" Finally, she turned on the oldest agent, who raised an amused eyebrow.

"Yes? I don't even need to go into the park, you kids can take care of yourselves now. But I will anyway, it might be fun."

"Great." Garcia grinned. "Did Strauss say Hotch was back in charge?"

"Uh…No, actually, she didn't." A smile started to show on Rossi's face, as well as on the others.

"Then-"

"Consider everything Garcia said a direct order." He nodded. "Starting with breakfast. I think this calls for champagne to celebrate the fact that you can all drink it legally."

"And coffee." Reid reminded him. "Lots and lots of coffee."

"Amen to that." Morgan grabbed his phone and wallet. "Hotch? You ok?"

"I'm fine." Maybe, if they were here and not at the office, they could try to relax for a few days more. And Jack would help him retain the childish joy in everything. Slowly, he could feel the tension drain out of his shoulders- just a little. "Guess I have a phone call to make."

"That's the spirit! Come on, let's get coffee and champagne and pretend we're all adults." Garcia grabbed her blue teddy bear and tucked it under her arm. She was wearing a Disney t-shirt, looking like she was ready to play tourist with a vengeance.

"Hold on." JJ flipped her phone open and started dialing. "We need to look a little less like the FBI or we'll scare people. I'm going to change." She had a pair of jeans in her bag, somewhere. She absent-mindedly grabbed her pink elephant with her free hand, waiting for Will to pick up.

"Right." Reid held up his Disney shirt, now several sizes too small. "More shopping?"

"More shopping." Emily said firmly. "But you can have some coffee first."

"Coffee…" The dreamy look on Reid's face made them all laugh, and as the left the room Hotch looked back on the cheery bedspread and the mess of pillows, and thought that maybe staying for a few days wasn't a bad idea after all.

Without consciously thinking about it, he handed Emily her stuffed bat toy, and took her hand. She laced her fingers through his, smiling a little.

"We're still family, you know."

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"We're still family, you know."
"Yeah." He squeezed her hand. "I know."

-FIN-

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