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**A Few Tricks Up My Sleeve**

by notapepper

**Summary**

Take two competing performers on the birthday party circuit in a small town. Add a pinch of false assumptions, a dash of miscommunication, and a smidge of sexual tension, and presto! One hot, fresh, snarky, fluffy Kids' Entertainers AU, comin' right up!

**Notes**

I do not own Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.

See the end of the work for more notes
"Okay, Nadrah. Tell the boys happy birthday for me." Mack frowned, uncapping a thick black marker and exing out a square on their whiteboard calendar. "And thanks for calling." He hung up with a heavy sigh. "Well, that's not good news."

"She give a reason for cancelling?" came Fitz's voice from underneath the large magician's box. He slid out on a mechanic's creeper, screwdriver in one hand, flashlight in his mouth, and peered up at his business partner.

"It's Captain Chemistry. Apparently the guy's doing private shows now." Mack rubbed a large hand over his jaw and went back to toying with the damaged fog machine.

"Captain Chemistry?" Fitz's brow quirked in confusion. "That rubbish Tuesday-afternoon show on Local 3? The man's got to be at least 70, how's he gettin' out of bed to perform at kids' birthday
parties?"

Mack grinned. "Nah, the old guy retired. This is his replacement. Supposed to be a lot better."

"That's not hard to do," Fitz muttered. "Well, I didn't really want to work Mrs. Zaghlul's party. She always requests doves. I didn't fancy having to clean bird droppings from my cape again."

"Yo, next time you want to trade, I'll do the laundry, and you can scrub the pigeon coops," Mack laughed. "Come to think of it, why do I always get stuck with that job…"

Fitz smirked, "Cause I'm the talent."

-o-

Fitz stood in line at 3 Brothers Bakery, bouncing on the balls of his feet as if that would speed up the tea-buying process. He glanced again at his watch just as his phone buzzed in his pocket. "Yep, I'm on my way. Just grabbin' some caffeine first. Honestly, I don't know why you think my voice would be any good for radio. People hardly understand me around here as it is."

Truthfully, Mack's deep voice was probably more suited to enticing bored mothers to book their parties with Fungineers, but his friend seemed convinced that Fitz's accent would charm them. And while Mack was the clear choice if they'd been doing a TV commercial, Fitz supposed his Scottish burr might lend a bit of whimsy to their public façade.

Tea in hand at last, Fitz rushed towards the café door, eyes on his watch and his mind focused solely on racing the last two blocks to the small broadcasting building. Which was probably why he didn't see the young woman who backed into him, the collision popping the lid off his travel mug and sloshing scalding-hot tea down the front of his shirt and trousers.

"Mother-of all things…" he censored himself, head snapping up with a scowl to tell off the clumsy oaf.

"God, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Please, here," she stammered out, reaching for a stack of flimsy napkins and swiping ineffectively at his button-down. "Oh, dear, that's gone and made it worse."

Indeed, now his tie boasted various lint-like patches of soggy, stuck-on paper, in addition to the faint yellow stain spreading across his shirt.

"No, it's fine. Don't- You don't have to-" Fitz stepped back slightly, subtly encouraging her to stop her ministrations, even as his interest piqued at the sound of her English accent. Putting an extra bit of distance between them also gave him a better vantage point from which to look her over. Good God. This woman, to put it mildly, was stunning.

Fitz's jaw seemed to have stopped working at the sight of her: wavy brown hair, pearlescent skin, striking brows tenting over gorgeous hazel eyes - very near the color of his tea before it spilled - and a plump, rosy mouth which was currently twisted into an apologetic grimace.

"At least let me buy you a new cup. Or a scone! They have the best blueberry scones here…"

"Ah, no, no thank you. Those're always sold out anyway." Stupid. Why did he have to be running late? "I've got to be going, but, really, it's fine."

Fitz hopped onto his bicycle and thanked his lucky stars he was still presentable enough for radio.

-o-
"So for all your event rentals, stage setup, and lighting displays, give us a call at Fungineers…" came Mack's honeyed bass voice.

"... and make your party problems… disappear!" Fitz was glad no one outside the booth could see the wince that accompanied his falsely-cheery voice and the "magical" wind chime sound effect that followed shortly after.

"Well, folks, you heard it first on KBUS-FM!" Their host, a greying, stringy-haired man named Dave "Mad Dog" Angar, boomed onto the air. "Book your parties with the Fungineers, and make sure you ask for The Amazing Leopold." He turned in slightly in his chair. "So, Leopold-

"It's Fitz, actually."

"Any chance you can make my mother-in-law disappear?" Mr. Angar snickered, hitting a few buttons on his sound board - first a dog barking its head off, then a nasal woman's voice whining "Mad Dog, you need a muzzle!" in a Jersey accent. The glass-shattering sound effect and random boing that capped off the sequence only served to confuse Fitz further.

"Pardon? Are you asking me to kill somebody?"

Mack shot him an incredulous look before cutting in with a low-pitched laugh. "My partner's just messing with you, Mad Dog. Isn't that right, Fitz?"

"Oh. Eh, yeah, sure."

"But, uh, if you ever want to see him do his vanishing act, hire us for a show!" Unlike Fitz's dealing-with-the-public persona, Mack's easygoing warmth felt 100% genuine. In fact, if it weren't for him, they probably wouldn't have a business to advertise in the first place.

-0-

Between Fitz's gruffness and his sloppy appearance, it was no surprise that the producer asked Mack to stay behind and discuss a possible long-term radio spot, leaving Fitz at loose ends in the studio. After finding the bathroom and making a few half-hearted attempts to clean himself up, he wound up wandering around the building while he waited for Mack to be done.

His feet carried him towards the TV staging area, where his eyes caught on a rolling table tucked away in a side hallway. He glanced over at the variety of items, eyebrows perking in interest. So these are the props for "Science is Super", hmm? Fitz had seen the show during the tenure of the previous Captain Chemistry, a white-haired, Coke-bottle-glasses-wearing man in a sad vinyl suit and a limp cape, mumbling and droning as he mixed vinegar and baking soda. Fitz was a scientist himself, not that anyone would know that from watching him saw a volunteer "in half", but even Fitz hadn't had the patience for an entire episode of the superhero-themed science show.

This new guy, however… Fitz surveyed the table surreptitiously, a circling vulture in the throes of professional curiosity. He recognized a number of kitchen items immediately - vinegar, cola, dish soap - and scrunched his lips at an array of glass containers holding pre-measured amounts of colorful powders. Small, neatly printed labels in front of each stoppered tube indicated the contents, and Fitz leaned over to read in the dim light.

"Sound checks in five minutes on Stage 2. Sound checks for Science is Super." The sudden blare of the PA sliced through his concentration, causing Fitz to jump and spin in place, double-checking that no one was around. Unfortunately, the movement bumped him into the side of the table and knocked over the rack of tubes, scattering them haphazardly across the white nylon tablecloth. The clatter
sounded enormous in his ears, and knowing that people would soon be popping up nearby, Fitz hastily shoved the ingredients back into position and scurried away before anyone started wondering about his presence.

"I can't seem to stop running into you today…"

Fitz's head jerked at the modulated tones of the unfamiliar voice, before turning awkwardly to his right. "Oh! Hello there! You're… here."

He was in the lobby of the broadcast building, still waiting on Mack, having gratefully found the coffee cart after his body reminded him he'd missed his morning caffeine.

"I am." She was smiling, the expression small but refreshing, like a brand-new sprout curling outward from a seed. The woman raised her eyebrows and shot a glance behind him. Flushing, he quickly stepped aside so she could reach the paper mugs. Of course, she wants coffee, he chastised himself. Why else would she be there?

"Thanks…" she hummed a bit as she grabbed a cup and stirrer. They stood side-by-side, ministering to their individual drinks, passing the necessary accoutrements wordlessly between them as Fitz struggled desperately to think of something clever enough to impress her.

Unfortunately, small talk had never been his strong suit, and the best he could muster was a close-mouthed smile as she took the sugar spoon from him and their fingers brushed. Fitz reached into his pocket for loose change to drop into the tip jar.

"Oh, no, let me. It's the least I could do after this morning." She put a dollar in and faced away from the table, leaning back slightly as she stirred, and Fitz found himself floundering again. Everything about her oozed self-assurance, and with his hair still windblown from the ride over to the station, tea stains dotting his shirt and tie, and dried sweat tightening his skin, Fitz felt incredibly unkempt next to her.

So perhaps he should have been relieved when Mack strode into the lobby and spotted him.

"Fitz! C'mon, man, we still gotta load the gazebos into the truck and make it to the consult for the Carters' anniversary party." Mack tossed him the keys to his van, and despite the coffee in his hand, Fitz snatched them easily out of the air.

"Well, that's… erm, I should…" Fitz flapped his arms in the general direction of the door. Smooth. "Thanks for the, er, coffee."

She nodded gracefully. "Not a problem. Perhaps you can return the favor sometime."

Fitz blinked stupidly. Was that… is she flirting? The next thing he knew, she was ambling off toward the TV side of the building, taking her leave with a small wave. She's getting away! Ask for her number! Fitz's eyes went wide, tongue tied for the third time in as many minutes, and he watched her disappear, feeling like a Ferris Wheel on the way down.

Never mind her number. He hadn't even gotten her name.
Chapter 2

Jemma *tsked.* "Look at those boring food coloring drops, how they just sit there in the milk." The camera panned overhead to better capture the reaction. "But all it takes is one *tiny* drop of dish soap," she dipped the glass rod into the Palmolive, "to send those fat molecules scurrying around like they're playing musical chairs." A few of the kids in the audience gasped as the milk swirled the colors around in a madcap tie-dye. "Isn't that fun?" she smiled, moving on to the next experiment.

"Now, children, remember how we talked about endothermic and exothermic reactions? I'm going to demonstrate a small exothermic reaction, and then we'll get our Science Sidekicks up here to check our findings! Ready?" She nodded to the day's volunteers, a pair of eager-faced young girls, adorable in their clip-on capes that mimicked Jemma's own.

"Ready for science, Captain!" they chimed with infectious enthusiasm, and Jemma couldn't help the grin that broke over her face like the tide.

Crossing one arm over her chest and locking her other hand on her waist in a superhero salute, she grabbed the pre-measured tube of liquid and dropped it into the powder.

Jemma touched the outside of the clear container with a gloved hand. "Now, this is going to get briefly warm, as one would expec-*" Crack. The liquid inside began to bubble, hotter than she'd anticipated. "What the-*" Crash. The side of the graduated cylinder lightninged with a jagged, silvery break, before collapsing into a pile of large glass fragments, dumping out the strange solution - which now smelled *distinctly* off - all over the tabletop. "*Bloody hell!* Girls, get back! Skye, get them back!"

Jemma whirled, shouting for help from the backstage manager, trying to assess everyone's position in the room. Luckily, the spill had missed her, but at the moment she was more focused on making sure none of the kids remained on stage or at the front of the audience - she wasn't sure what this stuff was, but it was clear that someone had tampered with her chemicals.

As she spun, though, her stretchy cape snagged on some of the broken glass, dragging the pieces off the edge of the table only to have them tumble onto the floor with a dissonant clash. Jemma jumped clear of the mess and waved the young sisters away, wriggling out of her coat almost instantly, the attached cape dripping who-knows-what down her back and legs. She had a half-second's hesitation about her trousers before kicking off the shoes and stripping down to her knickers. In the face of possible chemical burns, what was a little thing like modesty?

That was how Jemma Simmons, the youngest Captain Chemistry in the history of the show (so, out of three) ended up standing in a TV station in nothing but her underwear and her beaker-and-test-tube emblazoned spandex shirt.

Her very *large* underwear. The ones she wore when she was experiencing a bit of bloat. Jemma looked down at her bare legs, then up into the audience of 4- to 14-year-olds, then past them to the camera, where the tiny "record" light was still blinking red.

*Fiddlesticks.*

"Well, *someone* must've messed with my lab setup. Honestly, it's a television station, and we don't
have footage of this anywhere?"

"Jemma." Skye tried to placate her new friend as she fielded calls and delegated responsibility, somehow keeping her attention in careful balance between her walkie-talkie, her headset, the crew, and the distressed woman in front of her. "Calm down. We'll figure it out, okay?"

Jemma froze as a thought occurred to her. "It might've been that televangelist - the one who hosts the call-in show about creationism. He's been giving me dirty looks every time we cross paths."

"Garrett? Nah, he wasn't here today." Skye flicked through the screens on her phone.

Jemma blew out her cheeks, visibly at a loss. "People could've been hurt, Skye! Children could've-" she cut off, upset. "Who would do such a thing?"

"But no one was hurt. And you said yourself that gunk turned out to be pretty much harmless. The stage just needs a good scrubdown." Skye shrugged, pushing her headset back over her dark curls, and gave her arm a reassuring squeeze. A moment later, she was holding up one finger in the universal I-need-a-second gesture as she moved a ways off down the hall, barking out instructions to her staff about the ads set to air during that evening's primetime lineup.

"I saw someone skulking around set earlier." Their middle-aged intern, Vaughn, had been following silently behind them for a few paces, presumably at Skye's beck and call.

"You did? Why didn't you say something sooner?"

Vaughn pursed his lips at her tone. "Excuse you, I have a life. So do you wanna know who it was?"

"Of course I want to know," Jemma chose her words politely, showing a few too many teeth for a genuine smile. She didn't especially care for the man, but she had learned early on to be wary of getting on his bad side - apparently very easy to do.

"It was that guy you were eye-banging at the coffee cart. The Amazing Leopold Fitz," Vaughn sneered.

Jemma's head tipped in dismayed confusion. The cute young man from this morning? The one and only. Well, around here, anyway," the graying intern harrumphed and started in on one of his long, theatrical tangents. "This town is dead. One of these days, mark my words, I'm gonna run off to New York or LA or Vegas, and I'm gonna make it in this crazy business called show."

"Vaughn - please. I'm trying to make sense of this. Why would that man be mucking with my experiments?"

"Honey, don't you know who your competition is? The Amazing Leopold was the hottest birthday-party performer in Treehouse Falls. Until you showed up."

"Okay, Principal Hand. We'll miss seeing the kids this year." Mack pressed strong, blunt fingers
against his forehead, but kept his tone easygoing and light. "Sure. And we've got you down for the May Play Day carnival. Okay, take care, now."

Fitz stuck his head around the doorframe, storm brewing on his brow. "You're being entirely too nice. You practically apologized to her for droppin' us from Science Day!"

"No sense burning bridges, Turbo. It is what it is," Mack dropped easily down into his chair and reached for a granola bar. "Not like you can really blame her for picking Captain Chemistry, you know? It's Science Day."

"Rude. I've made it a special point to include scientific explanations and optical illusions every year, and this is how they repay us? So, yes, I absolutely can blame that pink-haired Judas of a principal, and I do."

Mack shrugged. "What can you do? Captain Chemistry's hot right now. She's a fresh face, she's got that new lab-safety web series..." At Fitz's look of consternation, Mack leaned forward onto his elbows and gave what he hoped was a confident smile. "She's the flavor of the month. Our regulars'll come back; we just gotta keep giving people a quality customer experience. It'll turn around."

"Web series? What're you on about?" And why's he sayin' she?

"Man, I know you've been focused on your special project lately, but you gotta get out more. This chemistry chick's been all anyone can talk about..." Mack pulled open his laptop and clacked away for a couple of seconds before turning the screen towards Fitz. "See? There's a link up on the Channel 3 website. People can even buy posters for their science classrooms."

Fitz elected to ignore Mack's mention of his "special project" and peered dubiously at the image. It was a young woman with light brown hair in what appeared to be a redesigned, more flattering Captain Chemistry costume, standing fists-to-waist in a heroic pose and gazing off into the distance, though the odd angle of her profile prevented Fitz from quite seeing her face. Next to her, a bulleted list of lab safety guidelines corresponded to short, explanatory video segments.

While Fitz moused over the page, still trying to wrap his brain around the fact that this new Captain Chemistry was completely different than he'd been imagining, a video window popped up. The young woman appeared, speaking into the camera and admonishing viewers to practice safe science, before laughing, "And don't get caught with your pants down!" The video showed her moving from behind the lab bench where she was standing, still beaming that glorious white smile, now revealed to be wearing a comically short lab coat and a pair of periodic-table boxer shorts. The picture faded, replaced by various suggestions for other shows on the same channel.

"Fitz? Yo! You all right, buddy? Don't fade out on me, now." Mack waved his hand in front of Fitz's face, to no avail. Fitz might as well have been wearing blackout goggles. Because as soon as she'd spoken, he knew exactly who the woman was. The gorgeous, flirtatious mystery girl. Tea-spiller and coffee-monger. He exhaled.

But she wasn't some beautiful stranger. She was his rival. And the woman currently trying to put them out of business.
*cringe* I'm so sorry about the ridiculous "science" in this chapter. I looked at several different options for actual experiments that could have happened to cause the explosion, but they were all very much on purpose, and I needed it to be an accident. So, uhhh... just go with me on this one?

:-D
Chapter 3
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next time Fitz saw her, he was sitting at the bar in Scout's Honor, starting his third beer after a particularly bad day on the job, and trying to dodge another forty-minute rant from Hunter about his ex-wife. Fitz's morning had started much too early; he was sore and sweaty from setting up folding tables and chairs for an outdoor wedding that ended up being moved inside, doubling his work. Then his afternoon gig had taken things from bad to worse, when the rabbit had bitten him and the birthday boy had thrown cake at his face.

Fitz sighed into his pint. Why kids always wanted bunnies was beyond him, but perhaps he should have a chat with his animal guy about sending him off to entertain a bunch of 8-year-olds with a violent rodent in his hat. That's unfair. He trusted Ward; the man had kept him supplied with show animals for years now. He couldn't have known the rabbit was vicious. Before his thoughts could go any further down that path, however, a dulcet voice broke him from his stupor.

"Your little plan didn't work, by the way."

He jolted, whipping his head to the left to see the woman - Captain Chemistry, Jemma Simmons, life-ruiner - slipping onto the barstool one seat down from him and signaling for a drink. She looked fantastic, which seemed exceedingly unfair, given what he now knew. You weren't supposed to find your enemies attractive. But it was her insufferably superior attitude that rankled him from the first.

"What plan would that be?" Fitz's tone was full of lemons. The only plan Fitz had at the moment was getting drunk, and she seemed set on spoiling whatever was left of his night.

"Don't play dumb; it's unattractive." She leaned slightly towards him, lowering her voice but keeping the bite in it. "I know you sabotaged my lab table."

Wow. This woman was something else. In one breath, she'd called him stupid, ugly, and a saboteur. The memory of knocking into her table flashed through his brain. Okay, well, technically, that last one might be true. But an unintentional saboteur. She had some nerve, just assuming he was responsible. Besides, she's the one with poor balance - spilled tea all over me. It was a wonder anyone let her around dangerous substances in the first place.

Defensiveness was bubbling up inside him like a tar pit. "Please. You seem fine t' me. And pre-recorded television…'s not like you couldn't edit out any mistakes. Try coordinatin' a full hour of magic tricks, without lettin' anyone behind the stage, smack in the middle of a first-grader's birthday party. Now that takes skill."

Her eyebrows spidermanned up her forehead in indignation. "What I do takes plenty of skill, thank you very much." She took a sip of her pisco sour and rotated on the stool to face him fully, annoyance playing the trombone across her jaw. "And that's not the point. The point is that you're so insecure about your own performance, you tried to interfere with mine." She tsk'd. "It's not very sporting."

Was that a smirk when she said "performance"? What in blazes was her problem? "Me? You're the one who was flirtin', tryin' to soften me up so I wouldn't notice you were stealin' all my clients!" Fitz scoffed quietly into his glass, trying to shake off a spontaneous flush of embarrassment. "If anyone's feelin' threatened, it's you."
He'd just gotten a glimpse of her face, muscles gone rigid, a red wash creeping up towards white-rimmed eyes, when he was suddenly distracted by the sound of an explosion behind him.

Flirting? He thought she'd been *flirting* with him? The very brass. (She quickly suppressed the guilty worm of confirmation that burrowed to the forefront of her mind.) As if she would ever flirt with someone who behaved so horribly. *Ruin my program... those poor sisters never even got to sing the final song!* It was the highlight of the kids' afternoon, and if anyone should understand that, it was another children's performer. Yes, Jemma was certain that this Leopold Fitz was the worst person she'd ever met, and he should most certainly be ashamed of himself.

Before she could open her mouth to explain, however, that she had been doing *no* flirting whatsoever, the television set flashed white and gave off a crackling *pop*. Jemma squeaked, turning her face away from the unexpected brightness in the dim bar, and blinked a few times to try to dissolve the large glowing spot that had set up camp in her field of vision.

The bartender paused in the middle of pouring a line of shots and clapped his hands loudly, hopping onto a wine crate to give him a bit more presence. "Guys! Guys!" he called, over the protestations of a few patrons who were raucously upset at having their soccer game cut off. "Calm down, nothing to worry about, just a few crossed wires. We'll have it sorted before you can say Bob's your uncle."

A few customers got up to leave, one woman in particular muttering in a heavy Russian accent about "this is worst, every time" and "TV at WingStop is perfect". The barman - a fellow Brit, she was pleased to note - watched them walk out, calling, "Marta, sweetheart, come back!"

As they neared the entrance, the exasperation on his face took over and he struck a mocking salute. "That's great, guys! We appreciate your business!" The second the door closed behind them, she heard him mutter, "Bloody casuals."

"I can help," the "Amazing" Leopold volunteered, a bit wobbly as he got to his feet. *Surely they won't want help from a man three sheets to the wind.* "I've got money ridin' on that match."

"Who apparently gambles as well. Charming."

"Right, then, hear that, everyone? It'll be back on in time for the next goal." He thumped the drunken magician on the shoulder. "Cheers, mate, you're a lifesaver."

Another man emerged from the kitchen area, apron on and a dish towel draped over his shoulder. "Hunter," he called to the bartender, holding the toolkit up in his hands. "I heard the bang. You need this?"

"Give it to Fitz, will you, Idaho? He's about to work some of his magic for us."

"Ha, ha, h- ha. Ver' funny." Fitz was looking grumpier by the second, slurring his deadpan retort, and Jemma couldn't help but wonder why this Hunter person would trust him with tools in that state, much less let him near anything electrical.

It wasn't her place to argue, however, so she went back to sipping her drink, eventually chewing up the garnish and crunching the ice. Meanwhile, Hunter was putting out extra dishes of pretzels and peanuts as a mollifying measure.

Fitz, for his part, had wasted no time pulling Hunter's wine crate over to the corner under the television to act as a step-stool, stretching up to fiddle with the panel on the back of the old, wall-mounted CRT.
She had to admit, though it pained her, as she watched him pull his torso up to its full length, he wasn't entirely unattractive. In fact, observing the muscles of his back and shoulders tense and release under the soft cotton of his tee shirt, his jaw clenched in concentration as he held a screwdriver in his teeth, Jemma found herself staring slightly, unconsciously sucking the juice from her maraschino cherry just a bit harder. And — it occurred to her, as he grabbed something from his back pocket — she hadn't even paused to consider the way his jeans hugged his...

"Aspirin..." Skye wheedled, settling into the spot next to her and running a hand through her hair. "Sorry I'm late; I had a crap-ton to do and everyone was the worst. You got any painkillers?"

Jemma chuckled, fishing through her purse. "Here you are. Someday, Skye, you should really get a proper night's sleep."

The corner of her best friend's mouth curled up in a wry grin. "But there're so many fun things to do at night! Speaking of which, I bet you've been fighting 'em off with a stick, sitting here all alone at the bar."

*I wasn't exactly alone.* Though, she supposed, she had been fighting, more or less.

"Actually, hold that thought." Skye pulled out her wallet and handed Jemma her credit card. "I gotta pee like a racehorse. Order me a mojito, okay?"

No sooner had she disappeared into the small alcove that led to the loo than Fitz slammed his palm against the side of the TV set, bringing it back to life in a blare of color and sound. A cheer went up from the sports fans gathered around the counter, and Hunter threw his hands up in the air, mildly surprised. "Hey… that was fast, mate!"

Fitz shrugged. "Used t' have this model - 's not so hard a fix." His disdainful expression, rather than indicating modesty or pride, seemed to imply that anyone with half a brain, even completely blotto, could have restored the television.

Hunter's smile faltered, unsure. "All right, no need to get your knickers in a twist. Everyone," he cupped his hands around his mouth and called out to the room, "you lot have Fitz here to thank for returning the FA Cup to our fine establishment." A few of the men raised their glasses in approval, spurring him on. "And to celebrate, chips are on the house!"

The cook poked his head out of the back room, a long-suffering groan meandering through his next statement. "Did you just- how many people are we giving away fries to?"

"They're just potatoes, Idaho! Don't be such an old woman!" Now that his match was back on, Hunter appeared full of irrepressible enthusiasm. "Chop chop, now! They're not going to fry themselves!"

Fitz tapped Hunter on the shoulder, murmuring something unintelligible with a dark look towards Jemma, before taking his place back at the bar and draining the last dregs from his tankard. After a beat, he turned to her with an onion face. "Well, I can't say this hasn't been fun. Oh, wait - I can."

The smile Jemma pasted on dripped honey from its thorns. "Were you ever planning to vacate that seat? Sooner would be preferable. My friend could use the extra room for her handbag."

"Ahh, yes, your friend. At least now I understand now why Local 3's giving you so much attention." Oh, he had *not* just tried to call nepotism on her success. That simply wouldn't do. "I'm sure I don't know what you're implying, but Skye is my friend, yes."
"Hey, granny panties!" The taunt came from behind her, its owner approaching with a sluggish gait. Jemma flinched at the nickname, though she'd heard it enough times by now to have gotten over her shock, at least. A short, puffed-up man with a large head of receding grey curls stumbled up to the bar, leering at her through the beer-goggle fog of inflated self-confidence. "I saw your video. You got nice legs, girlie. Finest I've seen in a thousand years."

"Piss off, Randolph."

Jemma's eyes widened in surprise. Of everyone in the bar, she'd hardly expected Fitz to come to her defense.

"What? I'm just-" he hiccupped, then grimaced, as if something he'd swallowed had come back up, "paying the lady a compliment."

"Yeah, and I was in the middle of arguin' with her. It's not polite t' interrupt."

The two men squared off, inebriation pulling at their eyelids, swaying lightly through slow inhales and whuffly exhales like a pair of smaller-than-average hippopotami. After a second, Randolph shook himself like a freshly bathed dog and turned his leering gaze on Jemma. He sniffed loudly, reached into his pocket and adjusted himself. "You're missin' out, pretty thing. My 'staff' contains a very powerful ma-"

"Right, off you go, then." This time it was the bartender who intervened, leaning over the counter and motioning to the door before sweeping past them, picking up bits of peanut shell as he went. Randolph looked between Hunter, Jemma, and Fitz, and moved past them, crashing into Fitz's shoulder on his way to the till and ignoring how the crowd's eyes tracked him until he was out of earshot.

"Wanker." Fitz crumpled a napkin and threw it into his glass.

_The mouth on him. And he works with children? Lovely. "You know, I could've handled him myself."_

"Right," Fitz deadpanned. "I forgot, the illustrious Captain Chemistry can take anythin' life throws at her." He continued under his breath. "Big brave superhero, practically wet herself when the TV shorted out."

Did he not realize she could _hear_ him? "At least I'm on television, instead of repairing them."

A winter wind blew across Fitz's narrowed eyes, and he rounded on her, scoffing. "You're on _public access_." His belittling tone left no question as to his opinion. "If it weren't for your connections at the station, the only person watchin' your show'd be that cat-sweater woman who's got the timeslot after yours."

"Um, _excuse_ me?" Skye appeared, sudden and sharp, beside them. Her dark eyes held a dangerous glint and a fresh coat of mascara. "Jemma, I didn't just hear him talking shit. You weren't talking shit, right, David Blaine?"

Jemma smiled, pure iron behind her teeth. "Not at all, Skye. In fact, I believe he was just leaving."

"Gladly." Fitz huffed, slapping down a few bills and weighing them down with an empty beer bottle. Skye grabbed his sleeve before he could escape. "Oh, and just so you know? She's got a friggin' buttload of fans." She held her phone out to him, open to the YouTube video of Jemma's on-stage
mooning. "See that? Eighty thousand views. Thanks to your little stunt with the chemistry table, Lame-opold, our girl here is Treehouse Falls' biggest celebrity."

Fitz seemed flabbergasted, watching events unfold on the phone's tiny screen, but collected himself enough to snipe back, "Well, you'll forgive me if I'd rather not get ahead in life by showin' my arse."

Hmm. He wanted a fight? He'd gotten one.

"I'd rather show my arse than be one."

Skye chimed in almost at the same time. "I'm confused. Isn't your ass that thing above your neck?"

At that, Fitz stalked out, stomping his hnmph into the floor with every step, even as the women pretended to think. "If he wants to keep it hidden, he'll need a hat and a mask, for starters…"

After he'd gone, Skye turned to her with a raised palm and a canary-eating grin. "Up top!"

One triumphant high-five later, Jemma reached over to grab a chip from the greasy, paper-lined basket on the counter.

"Ah, sorry darling!" Hunter slid the dish towards a party of four at the end of the bar. "You see... Fitz didn't charge me for the fix," he grimaced in apology, "and his only request was, 'Don't give her any.'"

Chapter End Notes

More AoS cameos and references! Can you catch 'em all?
"He implied that I was getting preferential treatment at the station, Skye."

"Yeah, that asshole!" Skye hummed distractedly in agreement, fingers flying over her laptop keys as she tapped at her earpiece. "You can't help it if you're awesome and popular."

"He thinks I'm only popular because I showed my bum on television!"

"You do have a pretty great ass." At Jemma's annoyed look, Skye put up her hands. "Not the point, I get it."

"He accused me of flirting with him."

"Ugh, of course he did. You know, the minute girls say hi, guys are like," Skye crossed her eyes, stuck her tongue out the side of her mouth and wobbled her head. Jemma succumbed slightly to her friend's attempts at cheering her, and Skye, seeing her smile, turned off her Bluetooth and leaned forward with a conspiratorial look. "Okay, about Fitz? I heard he was trying to make it as an inventor when his work Visa ran out, and Mack had to offer him a job just so he could stay in the country. Okay?"

"I'm not sure I understand what..."

"I'm saying, he might think he's this big fish who's better than everyone because of some fancy degree, but actually, he's just another small-town guppy who couldn't hack it once he got to the ocean." Skye paused, a tiny frown wiggling in between her brows. "Or something. Marine life metaphors aren't my thing- anyway." She was back to staring at Jemma. "Don't waste your energy on him."

Skye was right, she decided - she should be focusing on other things, other people. Seeing that Skye was once again engrossed in putting out various fires, Jemma took the opportunity to pull up the MoreThanThat app on her phone, browsing the list of potential candidates and their pictures. The dating service had never really worked out for her - most of the men she met simply couldn't hold her interest after a few dinners - but since she'd moved, there was a host of new possibilities to explore in Treehouse Falls and the larger nearby city, Triskelion Heights.

Hmm... Kenneth Turgeon, Sunil Bakshi, Truman Shaw, Grant Ward... Jasper Sitwell. That last one looked promising - stocky, confident, absolutely gorgeous head. She blew out her cheeks, however, when she saw their compatibility rating: only 46%. And on closer inspection, he seemed to exhibit a strange predilection towards elbows. Probably for the best, Jemma sighed, and closed the app.

"Fitz, what did you do?" Mack hung up the phone and turned disappointed brown eyes on his friend.

During his life, Fitz'd had more than enough reasons to master the innocent-but-offended look. "I haven't the foggiest."

"You mouthed off to the executive manager at the TV station? I gotta see those people again, man."

With a defensive scowl, Fitz pushed back from the desk where he was tinkering and started
gesticulating. "Well it isn't as if I had a choice! That Jemma's a devil woman. We've got to stop her."

"Whoa, there, Turbo. Hit pause for a second." Mack moved to stand in front of him, brow slightly furrowed and one hand out. "Why you getting so worked up about this girl?"

"She's ruining our business, Mack, that you started! I should think you'd be more concerned!"

"Our business'll be fine, man, I told you. We just gotta lay low, not get into any fights," he gave Fitz a significant look, "and do a good job, same as we always do. Last I checked, she doesn't rent out party equipment, right?"

"Yes, but the biggest edge we have over our competitors is that they can come to us for the whole experience - setup, entertainment, break down. The start-to-finish party bundle. If they start hiring Captain Chemistry to do the show, what's to stop them going to Rent-a-Center for their tables and chairs, or getting some kids from the Theater Department at the high school to wire their lights? I'm tellin' you, we've got to do something about her."

Mack sighed. "So maybe she does a few more birthdays than you. What's the big deal? I thought you wanted to focus on your drone project; you're always saying this whole magician gig's just temporary anyway."

Fitz looked at him as if he'd grown antlers. "Well I can't just let her win, Mack."

Jemma sat on the park bench, letting the wind ruffle her hair. The day was mild, and, like a happy lizard, she let herself bake decadently in the midmorning sun. Skye was right, she'd been letting this rivalry get to her, and she deserved a break. Tipping her head back and closing her eyes, she jolted a bit at the feel of a wet, whuffly nose in her palm.

"Oh, hello, sweetheart! Aren't you a cute one!" Jemma looked around for the dog's owner, but didn't spot anyone who seemed particularly concerned. "Let's just get a peek at your tags, shall we? Quinoa, that's an unusual name… Well, Quinoa, do you want to sit up on the bench with me? Yes you do! Yes you do!"

Jemma clapped her hands on her thighs, encouraging the terrier mix to hop up next to her. The pup wasted no time settling himself on her lap and pushing his head into her midriff, tickling.

"What do you… oh, you smell the wrapper from my breakfast, don't you? Hmm," Jemma regarded the little dog in mock thoughtfulness. "I don't know, Quinoa, I'm fairly sure your owner wouldn't want you eating a bacon croissant. It might ruin you for all other foods."

The cuteness of Quinoa's imploring gaze was matched only by his head tilt, ear quirk, and the long-suffering wheeze he let escape through his underbite.

"Oh, go on then, you little mountebank." She broke off a crumb and let him lick it delicately from her fingers. "Not too much, now, you're already a bit portly."

"Hey!" Jemma's head whipped at the sound of an angry Scottish protest. "You! Hands off that dog!"

She rolled her eyes. So much for avoiding Leopold Fitz. "That dog came over because he was clearly being ignored. And you shouldn't just let him run around like that - what if something happened?"

"Is that a threat? Christ's sake, I know you don't like me, but that's low, even for you."

Jemma flung exasperated hands upwards. "Fitz! I was not threatening your dog."
"She's not *my* dog, all right?" Fitz bent to pick up a discarded soda bottle, mumbling, "And I honestly don't know *what* you're capable of." He chucked the trash into a nearby bin with a bit more force than might have been strictly necessary.

"Fine. Suit yourself." She picked up the creature and returned him - *her* - unceremoniously. Quinoa didn't seem too upset by the hand-off, judging from the way she licked Fitz's face, thoroughly and enthusiastically, as soon as it was in range.

Fitz inclined his head in what might have been a grudging thanks. Yet, when he walked away, she could hear him start up a peevish ramble, the volume fading as he moved farther on. "C'mon, Quinoa, let's get you away from her before she tries to use you in an experiment. Honestly, who does she think she is - *portly*; don't listen to that, you're perfect. *She's* portly. And jealous. She's a jealous, portly, wrinkly old hag..."

Chapter End Notes

Sitwell's elbow thing is a reference to amandajoyce118's fic "Law & Order: MCU" - it's awesome, and you should check it out!
**Bloody Hell.** Fitz drummed his fingers against the steering wheel of Mack's van, trying to suppress the rageful urge to honk. He'd been just about to back into a parking space when some arsehole had crept in behind him and stolen it.

Gritting his teeth, he shifted and prepared to circle around to a less desirable spot, only to find that a supermarket employee was busily (and slowly) collecting trolleys directly in front of his bumper.

**Right. Of course.** Fitz took a deep breath and reminded reminded himself that often, people were not conspiring to ruin his day, and checked his rearview mirror. To his groaning dismay, he saw the sedan half-out of the spot, plainly in the midst of re-positioning itself after overestimating the turn angle. The small Honda crept forward and back, once, twice, and once more for good measure, eventually managing it so the driver's side door was no longer flush against the next car. By then, the line of carts had been pushed towards the store entrance, and Fitz sighed in irritation as he scanned the rows for an available space.

Then he saw her getting out of the little Accord, and everything clicked.

She'd just weighed her carrots and was returning to her trolley when, like a pimple on graduation day, there he was. Worse, he seemed to be stealing her shopping cart.

"Exactly what do you think you're doing?" Surely he wasn't so rude or petty that he would attempt to hide her purchases from her. Or perhaps he would. He had put her name on a chip blacklist for no discernible reason.

"You were blockin' the aisle." He said it slowly, patronizing, as if she needed time to process the words. "Honestly, I saw what a terrible driver you were out there in the carpark, but I thought y' knew enough not t' cause a traffic jam inside the store."

Jemma immediately flushed pink. He'd seen her botched parking job? She was incredibly self-conscious about her driving, more so now that she had to do it on the wrong side of the road.

Of course, his condescending tone set her teeth on edge. She gave him a withering look and jerked her trolley back from his grasp, unable to help the shrill note that invaded her voice.

"Perhaps you should stop following me around and touching my things!" She turned decisively away, irked by the sight of his sputtering, goldfish face.

**Who the Hell does she think she is?** One taste of fame and she assumed everyone who happened to be in the store at the same time was "following" her. The ego on that one, for God's sake! Fitz was glad his mum had raised him better than that.

He watched her flounce off, only to stop after a few paces and begin examining the dairy selection
with far too much aplomb. *What the Dickens is she up to?* Was she expecting an apology? (She couldn't possibly be that deluded.) Was this some show of territorial aggression à la no, *you* leave? Was she waiting around to "accidentally" trip him or roll over his foot? *The manky little sneak.* He was fairly sure she wasn't just standing that way because it made her figure look incredible. Not that he cared two whits about her figure. *She's probably just trying to use her female wiles to distract-*

"Hey, Mr. Fitz." Mike Peterson and his son scooted by in a cart that looked like a fire engine. Ace waved shyly from behind a quizzical *I-know-you-but-I-don't-know-from-where* squint. Normally, it pleased Fitz to no end that most kids wouldn't recognize him without his tux and cape. Still, sometimes it was nice to feel important. "You remember Mr. Fitz, right Ace? He was at your birthday party."

"Nice t' see you again, Ace." Fitz liked the Petersons. They were one of the few families who *hadn't* cancelled on him after Captain Overrated came to town. "What've you got there?"

"My coloring book…" Ace gave him a small smile and held it up.

"Avengers, eh? Who's your favorite? Y'know, Thor's got a *magic* hammer."

Ace shook his head. "I like the Hulk. He's a scientist, but he's also super strong. Captain Chemistry says I can be a scientist too."

Even if Jemma'd been standing halfway across town instead of a few yards away, it seemed to Fitz as if the mere mention of her name would've summoned her. *Like a sexy Voldemort.* She turned and caught Ace's gaze, and the little boy's face went slack with recognition. His eyes went round and wide, hope blooming in them as he gripped his father's sleeve and pointed mutely.

"Captain Chemistry is one smart lady," Jemma tilted her head conspiratorially. "I'd listen to her."

Fitz couldn't help the scoff that took over his face at that. *Really? Butting in on my conversation?* How desperate for attention was she? But Ace wasn't looking at Fitz anymore - his focus was solely on the woman in front of him.

"Where's your cape?" he whispered, starstruck.

"Can you keep a secret?" *Oh, she's loving this.* Fitz wasn't sure his stomach could take any more of Jemma's gloating. She looked to both sides, leaned forward and murmured, "I'm undercover."

Ace nodded, straightening his shoulders before putting a fist to his chest in the CapChem salute. "I won't tell," he promised her seriously.

With a wink at Mike - *what the Hell is that about* - Jemma returned the salute, dropped a box of butter into her trolley and sauntered away. A seething Fitz barely registered the Petersons' goodbyes as they wheeled off in the opposite direction.

It was clear that, in addition to stealing his clients and his parking spaces, Jemma Simmons got her kicks by stealing Fitz's thunder. And if there was one thing he couldn't abide, it was a puffed-up bully. The gloves were off.

*Little Miss Science Sweetheart is gettin' taken down a peg.*

"Yes, they have your brand. Right, ginger *beer*, not ginger ale. Because…" Jemma sighed into the
phone as Skye continued to stress the differences, "... for the weak, you told me. Okay, see you soon." She'd just hit the "end" button on her phone and was reaching for the spicy-sweet brew (which, according to Skye, tasted like slightly alcoholic childhood dreams) when a distinctive, long-fingered hand darted in front of her and grabbed the last six-pack.

"Oh, sorry. Were y' goin' to get this? Blimey, that's a damn shame." Fitz's smirk was palpable in his insufferable Scottish brogue. He settled the bottles into his trolley with a clink before wheeling directly behind her and spoke again, low and combative. "Maybe just grab some Diet Coke and Mentos and see if you can go viral again?"

_Holy mother of-_ Fitz returned to his cart, paper-wrapped bundle of steak in hand, and nearly jumped out of his skin. He looked around accusingly for Jemma, but the saucy little ninja was nowhere to be found.

Still, he couldn't very well keep shopping with a live lobster menacing him from the top basket of his trolley. The smell alone was making him keep his distance; he didn't even want to think about what foodstuffs the monster might've splashed. _Lord, I'll have to replace all the perishables._ Ears red, Fitz hurried back to the meat counter and mumbled out an embarrassed plea for help. The butcher seemed to be biting down a laugh as he hoisted the crustacean and replaced him in the tank. It was only then that Fitz caught a glimpse of the woman herself, a shining example for Treehouse Falls' impressionable youth, snickering at him from behind a tall stack of paper towels.

Jemma eyed the two open registers, noting the way one of them was backed up with bedraggled mothers, crying babies, and at least one person who (by the look of their purchases) had never stopped preparing for Y2K. She counted the items in her own trolley - exactly ten - and with a relieved exhale, slipped into the fast-checkout queue, pleased at seeing only a couple of people ahead of her.

Still, given the way her day had been going, she supposed she shouldn't have been surprised when Fitz came rushing over to the cart in front of her, holding up a package of tea biscuits. "Found 'em!" he nodded to the cashier, before side-eyeing Jemma and unloading his trolley with careful and deliberate slowness - a feat which, perhaps intentionally, allowed her to count no less than a dozen items in his cart.

Jemma gripped the handle of her trolley, fingers clenching white as she debated whether to say anything to the freckle-faced young woman ringing them up. _It's simple rudeness, honestly._ They were all in a hurry, or they wouldn't be in this queue. The fact that Fitz would so flagrantly break the rules, for no reason other than to get under her skin - well, it's unfair, that's what it is! And that awful, cocky smirk! It was perfectly reasonable for Jemma to feel a flush of anger creeping up her skin. She was incensed, of course, not merely on her own behalf but for the other shoppers as well.

"You've got twelve items," she hissed under her breath.

"Sorry, did you say something?" Fitz finally turned to acknowledge her directly.

"Your total. You've more than ten items. You'll have to use the other queue." She was simply stating a fact. _He needn't look so insulted._
Fitz's eyebrows scurried up like a hamster climbing on cage bars, but he matched her hushed tone. "Not that it's any of your business, but these three are the same. They count as one."

Her eyelid twitched with the desire to upend a carton of eggs over his head. "That's not how it works, Fitz!"

He clucked. "Oh, Jemma." He placed his last item, the ginger beer, on the conveyor belt before delivering the facial equivalent of a pitying head pat. "You've not lived here very long yet, but don't worry - you'll get the hang of things soon enough." With that, Fitz curled his lip smugly and turned to their checker, commenting, "Ever tried this brand? It's delicious."

Chapter End Notes

I'm fairly certain that this isn't actually a problem for most people, but just in case, I wanted to point out to anyone reading that the majority of this story is them (very gradually) going from enemies to friends to lovers... And because they started out as relative strangers, I feel like it's important to build them up as proper enemies before I start to unmake all of that. So, yes, please expect a slow build. I definitely ship them, and they'll definitely get there, but we're going to have some good old-fashioned bickering and sassiness first.

:-D

Special thanks to my betas this chapter, amandajoyce118 for helping me think of ideas for supermarket pranks, and memorizingthedigitsofpi for the "Diet Coke and Mentos" burn!

Jemma being a bad driver is a head canon that makes a lot of sense to me (especially if she was so busy at school and living on/near campus that she never really needed to learn til she was an adult, and after that, Fitz was probably content to drive most places so she may not have gotten much practice). I first thought about Jemma's bad driving after reading the fic windscreen wipers by jemmasimmmons

Also, the live lobster bit, I think I got it from one of those "Imagine your OTP" posts on tumblr. I'm not 100% sure - I remember seeing the idea on tumblr somewhere and wanting to incorporate it into the supermarket shenanigans.

FYI, ginger beer is actually delicious - it's just like ginger ale, but much spicier. Alcoholic ginger beer exists also, and is slightly less mind-blowingly good in my opinion (it's less fizzy?) but still pretty good.

Also, can we get some cashiers to weigh in on this? How does the 10-Items-or-Less rule actually work?
"Uh-huh." Mack’s baritone rumble was skeptical at best as he jotted down details. "Can you spell 'minotaur' for me? Okay. Yeah, I got it. Don't worry, my guy's real good with lasers." There was a pause as the person on the phone continued to speak, and Mack looked to the ceiling as he rubbed a strong thumb into his forehead. "Yea- Alr- Okay, thanks for calling, Seth. Let us know if you think of anything else."

He hung up the phone and turned a slightly bewildered expression on Fitz. "That was the lead singer of Ice Machine Apocalypse. Again." He ripped off a page from the notepad and slid it across the tabletop to where Fitz was unloading groceries. "They had a few more 'ideas'… think you can manage this, Turbo?"

"There's not a lot of time, but… I guess so?" Fitz wrinkled his forehead and stared at the list. *A goat with pentagram eyes breathing fire?* "What the-" *A river of blood with a beach made of bones and a ghost ship sailing over it…*

"Captained by a *bare-chested pirate wench* drinking from a skull goblet?" Fitz spluttered, baffled. "Even if I could render an image of, you know…" he motioned at his chest, squeezing the air, "is it even legal for them to commission that?" As far as he knew, Seth and Donnie were still teenagers.

Mack shrugged. "Yo, man. You know me, I stay out of this whole emo-goth-metal mumbo-jumbo. Far as I'm concerned, I'm just there to set up the stage and help you pull off the lights show."

Fitz let out a slow breath, running a palm over his jaw. "Well, we need the money, and Ian Quinn's stepson's most likely good for it." He pulled open his laptop and cracked his knuckles. "I'll see what I can do."

"And *then* - as if he wasn't *purposely* being difficult - he turns to the girl at the register and says, 'This wasn't more than ten items, was it, sweetheart?' Just to show me up! I can't believe anyone could be so blatantly disrespectful. I wasn't concerned for myself, you understand - he was stalling *everyone* who was just trying to do some quick shopping and he just-" Jemma's fingers clenched halfway en route to her hair. "Ugh!"

Skye sipped her zinfandel and made a face. "Eww. He really called her *sweetheart*? I mean, she *has* a name."

Jemma tipped her head backwards against the couch cushions. "Yes, but he said it with that rough-and-tumble accent you Americans find so irresistible, so the poor thing was putty in his hands." She rolled her eyes. "No wonder he thinks the rules don't apply to him."

Skye arched a brow at that, and seemed about to say something else, but Jemma started up again. "I'm sorry, Skye…” she put her palms on her cheeks for a second before dropping them down to rest on her jeans. "I've ruined our girls' night with my complaining."

"No, I get it. You know, I really didn't have a problem with Fitz before all this stuff happened, but he's *totally* being a tool." Skye put her wine glass on the coffee table and tucked her legs up under her. Pursing her lips, she reached over and clicked off the TV before declaring, "We should get him back. And," she stretched her arms up above her head with a self-satisfied smile, "I know just how to
do it."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly..." Jemma gulped down the rest of her wine. "That's sweet of you, truly, but I don't want to involve you in this. It's my problem."

Skye fixed her with the most serious look she'd seen on the younger woman's face. "Not involved? Jemma - that bitch stole my ginger beer."

"Grant!" Fitz ran an impatient hand through his curls and tugged on his bowtie, squinting past a stack of cages in the dim back room of the pet shop. "C'mon! I don't fancy having to explain to the chief of police why we kept his precious babes waitin'." Fitz hadn't planned to stay long at Ward's - the place smelled like a Depression-era traveling circus, and he wasn't keen on hanging about. Still, better to keep the creatures here than have them stinkin' up the workshop.


Fitz fixed him with a slightly panicked stare. "Erm… what the Hell is that?"

"Hear me out." Ward set the lizard gently on a table. "The thing is, Fitz… your rabbit's not here." Ward pulled air in through his teeth, wincing sympathetically in a way that was meant to suggest I'd love to help but my hands are tied. As Fitz's dismay morphed into umbrage, he put his hands up in a conciliatory gesture. "There's a perfectly good explanation for all of this." His tone was even, reasoned. It only made Fitz feel more betrayed.

"Chief Talbot's not goin' to care what the reason is. His daughter's expectin' a fluffy wee bunny dyed to match her dress. So. I have t' ask, Grant, how the Hell do y' lose a hot pink rabbit?"

Ward hunched his impressive shoulders in slight chagrin, stepping slowly towards Fitz. "I'll level with you." His expression was rather less apologetic than Fitz would have expected. "I had a girl back here..."

Fitz groaned mightily. "I do not want t' hear about your sexual conquests right now. That story about the Ukrainian twins still haunts me."

Ward laughed lightly at the memory before turning back to Fitz with a earnest look in his eye. "Look. I messed up." He half-shrugged. "I take responsibility for my actions."

"That's good to hear. So you're goin' to get me a replacement rabbit?"

"One that'll fit in your hat? I'd have to call my guy in Triskelion Heights, lock up the store, drive into the city… you're really putting me in a tough spot here, Fitz." Ward's voice was soft as he retreated to the table and picked up the small lizard once more. "It's either this little guy, or the tank of cephalopods over there, and I don't think you want a hydra." He held out the spiny creature. "Do the trick with the iguana, Fitz. Kids like iguanas."

Fitz wasn't convinced. "This is bollocks, y'know. They wanted a bunny. Bunnies're soft. You can pet them. Not thorny and scary lookin' and possibly inclined t' bite," he added, eyeing the thing warily.

"Mr. Skittles, bite?" Ward tutted dismissively. "He's 100% tame. Aren't you, Mr. Skittles?" He tickled the iguana gently on his side. "Besides, if they want something to pet, you're debuting Quinoa today, right? You've been training with her like I showed you?"
Fitz crossed his arms and stared stonily at his friend. *Friend. Pffft. Maybe in that fun 'Harvey Dent' sort of way.*

Ward knew that Fungineers had been losing customers. He knew how big the Talbots' party was every year. Fitz could still remember the intimidating picture the police chief cut on that first gig - Fitz had stepped in as a last-minute replacement act, trying desperately not to cough or wet himself as Talbot puffed cigar smoke directly into his face. *'Listen here, you magic-wielding freak - you better not fuck up my kid's birthday with your dollar store tricks, comprende?* He shuddered at the memory.

Seeing that Fitz was still angry, a muscle in Ward's jaw flexed, and he smiled thinly. "I have something that'll save this." He went to the corner of the room, dug behind a stack of boxes, and returned in triumph holding up Mr. Skittles, who was now sporting a set of tiny pink rabbit ears. "The Easter stock just came in. Lucky break, huh?" He clapped Fitz on the back.

"Lucky for you." Fitz was still unhappy, but he didn't have time to do anything but go along with Ward's suggestion. He grabbed a cardboard box with air holes and motioned for Ward to stick the lizard inside. "Y' still owe me. This was a dick move."

"Fair enough." Ward remained calm and collected, pissing Fitz off even more as he hurried out the door. Ward stepped to the back entrance and waved. He called after him, "Despite this, Fitz, it's always good to see you."

Jemma snapped the lid shut on her tub of props and finished loading it into her car. Her science demo had gone over fairly well with George Talbot and the other 11-year-olds, even enticing a few of the younger children to stop by.

She headed back to the party, hoping to network a bit. Looking around at the lavish preparations, Jemma crossed her fingers she'd be invited back the coming year. It did seem as if the family had money to spend on entertainment - in addition to herself and Fitz, she'd seen a clown-slash-balloon-artist, a children's musician, and a prodigiously talented puppeteer, straight out of *The Sound of Music*, simultaneously controlling about a dozen marionettes.

Jemma trekked over to the obscenely loaded snack table, chuckling, and snapped a picture of it with her phone. She sent the photo to Skye with the caption "Willy Wonka called - he wants his factory back" and wondered if she could get away with wrapping up a few of the more decadent treats for her friend. She was balancing a plate of gourmet hors d'oeuvres and pondering the logistics of smuggling out some macarons and crab puffs without ruining the inside of her purse, when she noticed the Amazing Leopold setting up his magic show. Fitz was decked out in a black tuxedo, white gloves, red bow tie and waistcoat, heavy black cape with red satin lining. Something about that combination of formalwear and striking color…

*Stop it, Jemma. Magicians are not sexy.* Much less overly competitive small-town magicians who doubled as petty saboteurs. And he looked ridiculous, really, if she sat down and thought about it. So she found an empty folding chair, settled it on the Talbots' impeccably manicured lawn, and did just that.
I typically wouldn't use first names for characters that don't normally go by them, but I figure, this Ward really isn't that close to canon Ward, so let's call him Grant. What can it hurt? (Besides, they're not military in this fic or anything like that, so it'd be a little strange to have everyone going by their last name.)

There's a nod to Agent Carter in this chapter, too! :-) Just because Jemma's such a fan.
Mack’s dog had been doing well, considering they’d only added her to the show as a gimmick. Keep it up, pup, and we won’t need a radio spot. It would be nice not to have to worry about running into certain people at the station anymore. Regardless, Fitz was banking on Quinoa’s cute tricks and high-octane acrobatics to give his performance a bit more flair, and, if he was lucky, impress a few of Treehouse Falls’ more influential Pinterest-moms.

The little terrier mix trotted towards Fitz, daintily carrying a basket in her teeth that held Betty Talbot’s favorite heart-shaped locket. She stopped at his feet and dropped the container, looking up expectantly. "Thank y’ darlin.’ He tossed her a liver treat. "You’re always bendin’ over backwards to help me out.”

Quinoa took her cue and did a backflip. Fitz smiled as the kids erupted into claps and happy noises. Why the Dickens haven’t I added an adorable mutt to my act before this? He used the distraction of the audience’s cheers to discreetly make the necklace “disappear”.

"Errr… Quinoa? Why’d you bring me an empty basket?"

The children gasped when he held up the wicker box and shook it upside down. Betty’s bottom lip started to wobble. "My… my locket..."

Oh, god. Not a crier. Fitz was mostly rubbish when it came to crying, and he blurted out, "Please don’t do that- it’s not lost!” He forced himself to get back to the trick before the situation could escalate. "In fact, I'm pretty sure that Quinoa knows where it is.” Giving the pup her signal, he sent Quinoa to the back of the audience to retrieve an identical basket. As the little dog scampered back down the aisle on her way to Fitz, the party guests craned their necks to see what she was carrying, murmuring with suitable awe at the feat of teleportation they’d just witnessed. Fitz grabbed up the basket and handed the necklace back to its owner. "Round of applause for Quinoa, everybody!”

The children were quick to comply, and Fitz allowed a moment to congratulate himself. He wasn't through with the show, not by half, but so far so good. And considering he wasn't especially keen on children or animals in his private life, Fitz thought he’d done Mack rather proud.

"Now, do you lot want to see her do some tricks?"

Jemma watched as Fitz pulled out a hoop, a low hurdle, and a large, squat section of pipe. He’s a proper Jack-of-all-trades up there. Many amateur magicians she’d seen used the fact that children were easily excited to justify their sloppy sleight-of-hand, but the truth was, kids saw more than anyone gave them credit for. And where Jemma had been expecting a clumsy display of dexterity, Fitz seemed determined to prove he was every inch the showman she was. It was, she had to admit, actually a bit thrilling.

Until she noticed that the little dog was off and running. Towards her. When she reached Jemma, the creature paused, tilted her head, and promptly sat down on the grass.

"Quinoa! Quinoa! Get back here!” Fitz hissed, unamused. The children seemed mildly delighted by Quinoa’s disobedience, and the terrier in question kept her tail firmly planted on the ground, looking stoically back at him. She seemed intent on something, wheezing slightly in restraint and anticipation.
"C'mon, you ragamuffin! Through the hoop with you!" Fitz held it out grandly, as if expecting a running start and a dramatic leap.

Quinoa gave him a decidedly unimpressed sniff, and placed a delicate paw on Jemma's leg, eyes trained on her purse. *Ahh. Skye's mini-quiches.* "No, you don't," Jemma laughed. "You won't sway me so easily this time."

She picked Quinoa up and carried her to the stage. "Found something of yours." The corner of Jemma's mouth crept up, but whether her smile was mocking or sincere, she discovered she had no idea.

Fitz slitted his eyes as he thanked her, grinding his teeth on the words. Still, he reached over and smoothly retrieved the animal from her grasp. "Captain Chemistry to the rescue, everyone!"

"Nothin' in my hat, as you can see." Fitz flipped the hat, spinning it and tossing it into the air. Catching it on the way down, he pulled out a sparkly square of sequined fuchsia fabric and shook it out towards the crowd of kids, distracting them while he carefully placed Mr. Skittles into the well of the top hat in between movements. Fitz laid the cloth across the table and, to prove he wasn't reaching into the table, set the hat on it. Sticking his hand inside, he warned his audience, "Now, my rabbit friend, David Hopperfield, he was actin' strangely this mornin'. Let's see how he's doin'. And… presto!" Fitz pulled out a wad of hot pink cotton and held it up.

"That's not a rabbit!" squealed a particularly helpful party guest.

"What d' you mean, of course it's-" Affecting surprise, Fitz scratched his head. "What's this? Pink bunny fur? Oh, my! I hope Hopperfield's not losin' his hair." A few of the kids giggled. He put his hand back inside the hat and pulled out more cotton.

"Noooo!" chorused the kids.

"What is going on? What's happened to him?" More tittering 5-year-olds. "Ah, there y'are, Hopperfield. Finally!" Fitz pulled out the iguana and held him out proudly towards Betty Talbot. "There you have it, miss, one pink bunny!"

The kids laughed together amid cries of "That's not a bunny!" and "Aww, cute!"

Fitz tilted his head in confusion. He slowly turned the iguana towards him in his hand. "Well, he's got the right ears for it… Wait!" He held up an index finger. "Everyone, shush for a second. I think he's tryin' to tell me somethin'." Fitz put Mr. Skittles near his face, stomach churning against the risk of getting bitten. *I do not get paid enough.* Thankfully, it seemed either Ward had been telling the truth about the lizard being tame, or he'd tranquilized the blasted thing back at the shop.

"Oh, I see. Okay. I'll tell them." Fitz put Mr. Skittles back on the table and turned to the birthday girl. The pressure was on. *If she pitches a fit about not getting a rabbit…* Fitz didn't think Mack would blame him, necessarily, but it wouldn't bode well for the business if they lost this gig.

"He says, and I'm paraphrasin', but he told me…" he knelt in front of Betty's child-size patio chair, smiling mysteriously, "that when he got up this mornin' he felt like bein' an iguana today. The girl's eyes flickered to the lizard and back to Fitz's blue ones. "Y'knock, magic bunnies can change their shape." He said this as if it were the most important thing she would learn all year.

Betty's eyes widened. "Wow…"

Fitz raised his brows in shared enthusiasm. "Cool, yeah? Want t' hold him?"
She nodded mutely, her excitement plain in twitching hands and bouncing feet, and Fitz breathed a sigh of relief.

Even without her best friend at her side, and considering this was technically work for her, Jemma found she was rather enjoying herself. She'd spent the last hour chatting with parents, promoting her show (plus a love of scientific discovery, of course) and taking pictures with her fans. As an added bonus, she'd managed to catch the eye of a few hot men - the children's musician, for instance, had been grinning at her from across the lawn going on several minutes now.

*Oh, why not?* Jemma approached with the confidence that came from being smart and successful at a young age, qualities she saw reflected in the man before her. "Have I got something on my face?"

"A pretty big smile," he returned easily, countering it with a blinding white one of his own. "I caught your demo. You're a real pro with that stuff."

"I've had a lot of practice." She shifted her glass of punch to the other hand and extended her right. "Nice to meet you, mister…" she read the name on his guitar case, "Sunshine."

He laughed, the sound as warm as the thump of little feet down the stairs on Christmas morning, and shook her hand. "Call me Trip." He kept their fingers joined for just a beat longer than necessary, thoroughly distracting her. "Ray Sunshine's my stage name when I play for the kids."

*Oh, my.* "Jemma Simmons."

"Treehouse Falls' newest It Girl. I'm a fan." He'd released her fingers, and leaned an elbow casually on his guitar case, propping himself up as if relaxing were as natural to him as breathing.

"I heard a few of your songs. Wonderful stuff! What was that last one you sang, something about surprises?"

"Sometimes a Person Takes You By Surprise." Trip's smile could power a small city. "Good memory."

"Yes, well." She flushed, looking down, and took a sip of punch.

"If you're interested," Trip reached into his back pocket and pulled out a flier, "My band's playing a gig tomorrow night at Scout's Honor." He chuckled. "I promise not every song'll be about brushing teeth or going to Grandma's house."

"Oh. Well, as long as there's at least one," she joked. She had the sudden and vaguely irrational urge to wink. *Have I ever winked at a man before?* She was fairly certain she hadn't. Either way, to do so at this point would be awkward at best. *Stop imagining yourself winking, Jemma. How long had it been since she'd spoken?*

"Antoine Triplett, you son of a gun!" A smarmy drawl broke into their silence, and Jemma turned to see the preacher from the call-in show. "How are you?"

"Long time no see!" Trip clasped the older man's hand genially. "Jemma, this is my old football coach, Preacher John."

"Hello there." She was willing to give this man - who routinely threw sour looks her way in the breakroom at work - the benefit of the doubt. *Trip seems to like him, at least. *"I don't believe we've officially met."
"John Garrett." His cheeks were stretched in a salesman's smile, but the expression was more cunning than congenial.

"Yes, I've seen you at the station."

He nodded. "You listen to the show?"

She paused, unsure how to respond without offending him. Though he's never been too worried about giving me the stink-eye. "I'm not sure that it's my cup of tea."

"Now, there's something I never thought I'd see," Garrett laughed, something slick and off in the sound, "An Englishwoman unsure about her tea."

Jemma wrinkled her nose in distaste at the stereotype. Tea wasn't the only thing she liked. He's literally only ever seen me drinking coffee in the lounge.

Seeing her expression, Garrett kept up his chuckle. "Humor, Ms. Simmons! You Brits are too serious." Jemma put both hands around her cup to keep them from giving away her slowly building anger.

Trip jumped in, perhaps hoping to distract Garrett from picking at her nationality any further. "Jemma hosts Science is Super."

"Oh, I'm aware." Garrett seemed about to say more, but turned suddenly with a grunt as Betty Talbot slammed into him, tackling him with a hug. "Oof - Easy, now!" Betty stepped back as he continued. "How's my favorite god-daughter? Hold on, princess - I've got a special gift just for you." He grabbed a gift bag from a nearby table, and the young girl tore into it, face lighting up. When she pulled out a pair of glittery red-and-white pom poms, she shook them out experimentally and then put one on top of her head like a wig, a gap-toothed smile visible under the sparkly strands.

"Maybe someday you'll be lucky enough to cheer for the pros," Garrett oozed self-satisfaction. His tone turned expectant. "What do you say, princess?"

"Thank you," the 5-year-old responded dutifully.

"That's more like it. Now, you run along and start practicing."

As she took off down towards the bouncy castle, Trip spoke up. "I'd better get outta here too." He hitched his guitar case onto one shoulder, the strength of his movement making his biceps shift and ripple. "It was real nice meeting you, Jemma. See you around, Preacher John."

Jemma decided it might be her cue as well, but before she could extricate herself from Garrett's oily charm, he stopped her with a quiet indictment. "You've caused me quite a bit of trouble, little lady."

Jemma quirked her head, not entirely certain she'd heard him right. "Come again?"

Garrett breathed in deep through his nose, keeping the politician smile on his face. He gestured towards George Talbot. "This time last year, that young buck over there was over the moon about our church camp. Been coming since he was knee high to a pig's eye - it's a great time, good way to make friends and earn a few points with the man upstairs. So imagine my surprise, Ms. Simmons, when I show up here today, and he doesn't want to talk about camp. In fact, all he can talk about is how you helped him build a bomb."

Her brow was going to need a crochet hook to un-knit. "It's Doctor Simmons, actually, and I assure you, we did nothing of the sort. We did construct a small rocket, which used a contained blast to-"
Garrett nodded as if she's confirmed something, and interrupted, the slight twang grating. "Listen, I get it. You do things different where you're from, but we're a quiet bunch here, Ms. Simmons," at her glare, he corrected himself, "Doctor... and I'd sure as shootin' prefer if these kids learn about God from me, rather than meeting Him themselves after you encourage them to throw a bunch of chemicals in a pot."

She'd lost her temper with him a fair few sentences ago, but kept her voice pitched low so as not to cause a scene. "Mr. Garrett-"

"Please. Preacher John."

"Mr. Garrett, what we do on my show is extremely safe. For goodness' sake, I spearheaded a lab safety campaign in the schools!"

"Which, if I recall, was after an explosion on your set that ended with you mooning the good folks in the audience." Garrett put up both hands, labeling himself non-threatening. "I'm just asking you, Doctor Simmons, to consider the kind of message you're sending our youth. Last I checked, no one got chemical burns sitting in church."

This was absurd. *Does he honestly think I'm endangering children simply by fostering an enthusiasm for science? It's preposterous!*

"At least what I'm teaching them is *tangible* and *useful,*" she all but hissed. "The ideas you spout on your program are no more defensible than, let's say, the mythologies of old. Honestly, Mr. Garrett, how is your wrathful God in the Bible any different from the Greek gods punishing humans for their pride?"

"I don't believe in myths, Ms. Simmons, I believe in miracles."

"And I once believed in fairies and magic, but that didn't make them *real.*"

That was the moment when Jemma realized that a small group of Captain Chemistry fans had gathered behind her, now staring at her in horrified shock.

*Oh, bloody hell.*
Betty Talbot (who is not a canon character) is named after Betty Ross. In the comics, from what I can gather based on the wiki articles I read, Glenn Talbot was in love with Betty, and they were married at one point. So it made sense to me that he would name a daughter after her.

I've got a pretty long list of song titles for Trip's biggest hits. If there's any interest, I'll be glad to share them!

Incidentally, Ray Sunshine's guitar has a sun wearing sunglasses on it. Just in case you needed to know that :-)

Chapter End Notes
"You!" Fitz stormed up to her booth in the back of the bar the next day. "What's this I hear about you tellin' kids magic isn't real?" A young mother sitting nearby shot him a scandalized look, covering her toddler's ears. A few of the patrons perked up at the accusation, no doubt hoping to fuel the gossip mill with stories about the town's only Internet celebrity. A decision warred on Fitz's face for a beat before he slipped into the seat across from her. His voice lowered, spitting venom. "All right, I didn't say anything when you waltzed into town and started making a nuisance of yourself, but this is my livelihood you're messing with, sister."

Didn't say anything?! Talking as if he hadn't started this whole to-do, with his presumptuous attitude and his explosions. The unmitigated gall. Honestly.

"Magic isn't real," she huffed, matter-of-fact. "And I'm sorry if you're offended on behalf of your little rabbit-from-a-hat routine, but I was provoked."

"Hey, now, don't- you don't- my routine is beloved," he spluttered.

"Not as much as my science program, as far as I can tell. Perhaps this town is beginning to realize that trusting blindly in things that can't be proven isn't as important as cultivating young minds?" she countered archly.

Fitz put his fisted hands on the tabletop. "Look," he gritted out narrowly. "I know magic isn't..." his eyes darted around, checking to make sure no one was listening anymore, "isn't real. Okay? I'm not a child, y'know-"

The barking laugh escaped before she could stop it.

"-actually a scientist as well."

"So I heard. A failed inventor." She stated it as simple truth. Which it is.

He stared for a second, brow furrowed, his usual defensiveness gone and something unrecognizable in its place. A moment later he shook himself slightly and pushed up out of the booth. "Never mind, I've got things to do. See you around, Lieutenant Lab Tech."

"It's Cap-" she began, dwindling when she realized he was already out of hearing, "-tain Chemistry..." she finished lamely. As she watched him stalk back over to the bar, Jemma sighed, took a sip of her appletini, and checked her watch. That's what I get for always being early.

Across the room, Mack stood with Hunter, watching the exchange.

"So's he fancy her or what?"

Mack blew out his cheeks, shaking his head slowly. "Beats me, man... I know he's been going through a dry spell."

Hunter snorted. "Things must be pretty bad if he's chatting up the enemy like that. And I'm not being
funny, but I doubt they're whispering sweet nothings over there." He set out a chopping board and started cutting lime wedges. "She looks properly hacked off."

"Well, you know how he is. Busy guy, rubs a lotta folks the wrong way."

"Eh, he's all right. Their loss, from where I'm standing." Hunter started filling small rectangular bowls with cherries, limes, and pickles. "You know, my ex used to--"

"Oh, not this again," Mack groaned. "Do I have to hear about your ex-wife every time I come here?"

Hunter gave him a look between flummoxed and offended, but took the bar towel off his shoulder and slapped it sharply on the counter. "Right, so that's decided then."

Mack leaned his forearm a bit more heavily on the bar and bent his torso down toward Hunter. "What're you talking about?"

"Mack, my gigantic friend, you're going to tell me everything you know about your angry little partner there." Hunter popped an olive in his mouth. "We need to help the lovely ladies in this town see where they've been missing out!"

Jemma's head jerked in annoyance as someone once again slid into the booth across from her, her expression relaxing when she realized it was Skye.

"This place is packed! The band must be good," Skye set a bottled cider in front of Jemma and plunked down a beer for herself.

"I should certainly hope so. Since when does Scout's Honor charge a cover at the door?" At this point, she needed Trip's show to be good to make up for having to suffer through that little encounter with her least favorite local Brit.

As for her least favorite Yank… "Oh, no," she breathed. "What is that man doing here?"

Skye turned and craned her head to look. "Garrett?"

Jemma nodded. "It's 70s-style music, Skye. There's bound to be sensuous beats and provocative dancing--" she gasped, "Do you think he's here to picket?"

"Easy there, Footloose." Skye chuckled, sweeping her hair back and fanning her neck in the warm room. "He could just be eating dinner."

"Nah, love."

Jemma'd been so focused staring daggers at the condescending Southern prick that she hadn't noticed Hunter bringing round their food.

"Idaho invited him," he sighed, setting down the baskets of burgers and crisps. "And I think the drummer might be his protégé or something."

Jemma looked up. "You don't sound as if you care for him," she encouraged in a leading tone.

Hunter shrugged. "Man like that's got a lot of friends… in my business, I can't afford to be picky about my customers. At least, not if I want to hold onto my little green reasons for getting out of bed." His mouth settled into a grimace and his voice lowered to a whisper. "But I tell you what… his
tipping's crap." Hunter glanced around and then lingered for another moment by their table. "He's
got these little slips of paper, one side's a Bible quote and the other looks like a $20. Sticks it under
the plastic tray so you can't tell the bill's fake." Picking up their empty bottles, Hunter shook his head
defeatedly. "Made a waitress cry once with that trick."

"Wow." Skye pursed her lips in disbelief, and Jemma recalled that she'd spent a few years waiting
tables in some cantina that Skye described as 'a wretched hive of scum and villainy'. "Damn. That is
so not cool."

"Yeah… no idea what Idaho sees in him." Hunter was back to his usual demeanor, winking at Skye
and grinning. "But you didn't hear that from me, yeah?" With a final arch of his eyebrow, he moved
on down the room to sweep the area in front of the stage, where the band was currently setting up.

"Wait. Jemma." Skye's gaze had followed Hunter, and she now appeared a bit panicked.

"Hmm?"

"The cute guy in the band, the guy that told you to come tonight, what did he look like?"

"Erm…" Jemma turned to look out of the booth at the band members, but couldn't spot Trip. "He's
not up there. Perhaps he's been delayed?"

"You're sure that's not him over by the amp?"

"Skye, please. I only met him yesterday, I think I'd remember what he looks like."

"Oh, thank God."

"Why? Who is that?" He wasn't quite in Trip's league, but still very attractive. Cheekbones to die for.
Come to think of it, she might've seen him on MoreThanThat. Hard to tell from the profile picture.
In it, "EveryonesType" had been naked but for a pair of sweatpants, flexing and showing off his abs,
face partially hidden by a beard - which, in hindsight, had contrasted oddly with his baby-smooth
chest. Jemma stared, trying to puzzle it out, and nearly missed what Skye said next.

"He's just someone I…" The rest of Skye's sentence was muffled as she took an enormous bite of
fried pickles, refusing to meet Jemma's eyes.

"Pardon me?"

"I, uh…" Skye swallowed. "I might've kidnapped a rabbit from him?"

"Skye!" Jemma admonished. Then something clicked in her brain. "That's why your car smelled like
a petting zoo?"
Happy Easter! I know this is going up later than usual, and short, but it's been a busy day - of fun! Hope y'all had a great holiday (if you celebrate it)!

I've seen those little Bible-verse fake-money things on a couple of picture-posting sites. Seemed like the kind of stunt Garrett would pull.

And... finally... let's play spot the Star Wars reference!
"A failed inventor, Mack." Fitz pounded back his fourth shot and dropped a heavy palm on Mack's arm, stumbling over his words. "Hah," he chuckled sourly. "So, so then, so- was Da Vinci a failure, just b'cause he couldn't get a helicopter t' fly?" He grabbed a fistful of pretzels and messily shoved them into his mouth, talking around a mouthful of spraying crumbs. "You mark m' words, Mack." He swallowed, grimaced against the dryness of the salty snack, and lifted two fingers to signal Hunter to refresh his whisky. "Highway SkyTray's goin' t' be huge."

"Yo, man, maybe slow down on the booze, okay?" Mack's large face wrinkled in concern. "I gotta share a bathroom with you."

Fitz continued as if he hadn't heard. "Wha's… what's not t' love abou' it? It's food." He thunked his finger against the bar to emphasize his point. "Delivered by drone, t' your moving car. By drone, Mack." Going by Fitz's expression, this was apparently the best argument for anything. "It's th' wave of the future! It's gonna take off, I jus' know it." He giggle-snorted. "Take off, Mack. B'cause drones." At his friend's blank look, he sighed. "No one understands me…" Fitz cradled his empty glass and looked at it like a pessimistic crystal ball.

"Aw, don't go gettin' all sad, now, Turbo." Mack clapped Fitz on the shoulder. "You have a lot of good ideas - helped me redesign pretty much every machine we use at the business. And you always know what's wrong with the broken equipment just by looking at it. I gotta read the instruction manual." Seeing Fitz's despondent pout, Mack let out a sympathetic breath. "Don't worry about what anyone else thinks, okay buddy? It'll happen when it happens."

"Get you something else, mate?" Hunter appeared at Fitz's elbow, reaching under the counter for the Glenlivet.

Mack gave him a discreet cut-him-off wave. "I could use a couple extra olives for my martini, though. You know how I like three."

Hunter regarded him, forehead screwed up in thought. "I don't… actually have olives, anymore. I think. Idaho? Olives?" he called.

Idaho stuck his head around the kitchen door and frowned at Hunter. "Dude, seriously? Quit snacking on the damn garnish!"

"It's my bar, Idaho! I'll snack on whatever I bloody well want!"

Idaho pointed a warning finger at his friend. "Next time I'm buying the habanero flavored ones."

Mack sighed. "Ahh… on second thought, hold the olives. Maybe some fries?"

Fitz, whose eyes were now grinding firmly into the heels of his hands, perked up at the sound of that. "Wait. Wait, Lance!" His head bobbed unsteadily as he took a few seconds too long to focus on Hunter. "Chips."

There was a pause as Mack shrugged a silent Hell-if-I-know.

"Chips, Lance!" Fitz motioned towards Jemma's booth and flattened his palm firmly on the counter.
"Tell me you haven't betrayed me?"

Hunter seemed to be having some difficulty controlling his amusement, but Fitz was in no state to notice. "No worries. Your vendetta's safe with me."

Fitz breathed out, shoulders sagging in profound relief. "You're a true friend." Over his head, Hunter and Mack shared a double eyebrow raise.

Then Fitz had a thought that made him chuckle, though as it turned out, chuckling, and indeed moving his body in any particular way, was a terrible idea. Should everything be spinning? Wait. He'd been thinking of something. Something vengeful. Right, that's it. "Lance. Laaance." He waved in Hunter's general direction, managing to paw him across the nose and jaw.

Hunter swatted his hand away, ducking, and took away the empty glasses within arm's reach. "You all right?"

Fitz fixed him with an intent gaze. "Your ex-wife's Bob-hic!-bi Morse, yeah?" She definitely was. With how much Hunter mentioned her, Fitz didn't think he'd ever be drunk enough to forget her name.

"The hellbeast herself!" True to form, Hunter's enthusiasm for discussing his troubled marriage meant he was easily distracted. "Did I ever tell you about the time she-"

"Lance. Lance." This is gonna be great. "You know who I heard loves divorce stories?"

"Ugh. My hair's super cute tonight, and now nobody gets to see it." Skye was slouched down in the back corner of the padded booth, the high back of Jemma's seat hiding her from view as she sucked angrily on the narrow straw in her Long Island Iced Tea. "I mean, why am I the one who has to stay out of the way? He's the asshole."

"Skye…" Jemma sighed, watching where Ward was hovering over an incredibly pretty brunette in a flowered dress. "You did technically steal from him."

"I know that," Skye jutted her chin out, "but he's a jerk, and it was for a good cause." At Jemma's wry glance, she protested, "He is! Yesterday it was all, you and me baby ain't nothin' but mammals so do you wanna see the back of my pet shop if you know what I mean" she paused in order to breathe, "and today it's, my anaconda don't want none after you jacked my bun… I mean, I knew he was a creep, but that's just gross, Jemma." She took another sip of her drink, then snorted in disbelief. "He's gross, right? Screw all this hide-and-seek bullshit. I should go warn that girl."

"Oh, she looks like she can handle herself." Jemma was torn between wincing and laughing as the woman in question upended her vibrant blue cocktail onto Ward's perfect hair and sashayed away, looking back once and smiling enigmatically up at his flabbergasted face. Across the booth, Skye clapped both hands to her mouth, holding in a guffaw.

"And to be fair," Jemma continued, "you have no idea how Grant feels about you, because you've been hiding back here all night. Why not go talk to him?"

"Eww… no." Skye crossed her arms on the tabletop. "Ugh, he's on the prowl again." She pointed with her head towards the bar, where Ward was attempting to simultaneously chat up a leather-clad older woman and a striking redhead in a chunky necklace. "Like I said. Gross."
Jemma waved a hand, conceding the point.

Skye tapped her mouth with an index finger as she surveyed the dance floor. "Although..." she crushed her greasy napkin with slightly excessive force. "There are a lot of fine guys here... and Miles was months ago." She puffed out her cheeks. "I need to get laid so bad, if I have to wait any longer, I might just book a flight to Hawaii."

Jemma just rolled her eyes, refusing to acknowledge that terrible pun, and stole a fried pickle from her basket.

-o-

Jemma carefully reapplied her lipstick and sharpened a tiny smudge of liner on her brow. Perfect. Nodding at herself in approval, she rinsed off her hands in the bar's tiny single-person bathroom, moving quickly out of consideration for the queue of waiting women just outside. She was just blotting her lips' berry-pink top coat when the alert chime went off on her phone's MoreThanThat app. New potential match? This town wasn't that big, and she thought she'd weeded out most of the candidates by now.

Pulling her mobile from her purse, she just about choked on her own breath when she saw the Amazing Leopold's head shot staring up at her. 97% compatibility? That's got to be a mistake. Certain there must be something wrong with their algorithm, Jemma made up her mind to complain to the company - I'm not paying an exorbitant monthly fee to be subjected to computer errors - and walked out of the bathroom. She needed a drink.

As soon as she opened the bathroom hall door, the rhythmic bass hit her like a croquet mallet. Jemma pushed her way through the swaying, gyrating throng towards the bar, pausing when she arrived to squint at - isn't that Fitz's business partner? The massively built man seemed to be coaxing a staggery Fitz towards the exit by jingling a set of car keys. As he stumbled past Jemma, Fitz suddenly whirled, catching onto the top of her arm and staring oddly into her face.

"Why're you so pretty?" He seemed upset by this. "Can y'... jus'... not-"

"That's right, buddy. One foot in front of the other. Here we go." His partner dropped a hand onto Fitz's shoulders and maneuvered him away, unperturbed by the exchange - though, if she were being paranoid, she thought she might've caught him biting down a smile.

By the time she turned to face the bartender, there was no mistake. Hunter was laughing at her, and quite openly too. She wrinkled her nose in mild offense as she hopped up onto the stool. "Is something funny?"

"I haven't got a clue what you're on about," he grinned infuriatingly.

Whatever comeback she might have had died in her throat, as she heard the last strains of the music fade out behind her and Trip's voice boom across the microphone. She turned in her seat.

"That's our set, y'all! Show some appreciation for Grant Ward!" Applause erupted across the room. "You murdered that drum solo, man!" Trip grinned his easy, blinding smile and gestured toward his other side. "Cal Zabo on the cowbell! We call him Doctor Groove!" A slightly smaller response from the audience this time as the older, slightly crazy-eyed man took a bow. Well, he seems to have one fan. The flower-dress girl from earlier was jumping up and down in the front row, whooping his name in adoration and screaming 'I gotta have more cowbell!' while Cal coughed and pretended not to see her. "Izzy Hartley on the bass, give her a hand!" The woman in question raised a fist to the
crowd, tipping her head in acknowledgement. Then Trip lifted his guitar in the air and called out, "All right, everybody, I'm Trip, and we have been The Noise & The Funk! Good night!"

Clapping along with the crowd, Jemma cut off cheering when she heard Hunter asking a question, and spun back to face him. "Yes?"

"Just curious if you were planning to order a drink, or if you were just here for the pleasure of my charming company."

"Considering the company, I'm definitely here for a drink." She arched an eyebrow, and he raised his palms in submission.

"So what can I do for you? Bellini? Cosmopolitan?" Hunter let out an abruptly loud titter, seemingly recalling a private joke. "Maybe a small single scotch?"

"No thank you…" Her forehead quirked at his strange behavior. "Erm, amaretto rocks, please. And another of whatever beer Skye was drinking."

"Coming right up, sweetheart." Hunter bent down to shovel a few ice cubes into a short cocktail glass. "But if you ask me, it looks like your friend's found someone else to buy her drinks." He indicated the corner of the room with a tilt of his head, and Jemma craned her neck to see Skye, standing far too close to Trip, running her fingers down his arm as they clinked bottles in a toast.

Jemma sighed, wishing she'd remembered to point him out to Skye before so she could call 'dibs'. _Jemma Simmons, you stop being selfish this instant_, rang her mother's voice in her head. She breathed in, shook out her hands and resolved to be a good sport about it. Still... sometimes it just felt like there was no one in this town for her.

She blew out her cheeks in disappointment, catching sight of her phone on the bar in front of her and rolling her eyes at a certain photo still up on her screen. With options like that, it was no wonder she was focused on her career.

"Ugh!" she whined. "Why is dating such a massive pain in the arse?"

"Preaching to the choir, love." Hunter wiped his hands on his apron and leaned his forearms against the counter. "Did I ever tell you about my ex?"
Quite a few cameos and show references in this one! (Not to mention nods to things outside the show, like song lyrics and SNL skits.)
The whole “I don’t actually have olives” bit is kind of an inside joke from tumblr, harking back to the #idaholives campaign. Thanks to tumblr user agents-of-frickle-frackle for getting that whole thing off the ground :-)!
The 97% compatibility is a tip of my hat to May Our Stories Catch Fire by theradiointukysherd.
Ward as the drummer was inspired by quibbler’s a concerto for two.
And, I'm sorry, I know y'all know already, but can we just give memorizingthedigitsofpi a hand for that Musician!Trip photo manip? I honestly don't know if I can stop looking at it.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Fitz was in the workshop the next morning, tinkering away at one of his drones, when he heard the front door clang. Did Mack forget to lock up last night?

"Mack? Is that you?" Fitz called, peering into the other room and squinting through his safety goggles against the bright light of the office. Ouch. The speed at which his eyes snapped shut made him powerfully and immediately aware of his hangover. C'mon, liver, you shoddy bastard, where's your moxy. If Fitz had been in charge of quality control for the human body, well - suffice to say, things would be pretty different. Not that he thought he could do better than God… Mum'd box my ears if I ever-

A loud, metallic rattle jumped him out of his dizzying stream of consciousness. The ensuing flinch staggered at his dubstep brain, and his stomach roiled as he swore under his breath at the intrusion. Someone - not Mack - was making their way towards the connecting doorway. Fitz swallowed his bile long enough to shout, "We're not open yet! You'll have to come back in an hour!"

The sound of their footsteps getting nearer had him huffing in irritation. Did I stutter? This was hardly the time to come round uninvited. And on a Sunday, too. "I said we're closed!" If he had to deal with a customer in this state, he'd almost certainly cost Fungineers some of their hard-won goodwill.

The person finally came into view, and Fitz dropped his soldering torch with a groan. "You."

There was very little justice in the way Jemma Simmons managed to look so fresh-faced and put together first thing in the morning, when his mouth tasted like one of the fart bubbles in the Bog of Eternal Stench.

She held up a paper bag and a tall to-go coffee cup, lifting them in front of her like a shield. "Scone? I got there early so I could grab some of the blueberry before they sold out."

This is a trick. "What, did they fall on the floor or something?"

"Of course not." A flash of indignance sparked in her eyes, and she shut them, breathing deep. When she spoke again, it was with forced composure. "I'm not here to fight with you." She took a tentative step forward. "I got you tea and ibuprofen… I thought you could probably use it, after the way you were wobbling last night." She set down the bag on a clear spot of his work table, ignoring the way he stiffened at her intrusion.

"I can take care of my own blasted hangover, thank you very much." He grabbed the bag anyway and gave the contents a suspicious sniff. Buttery and delightful. He couldn't remember the last time he'd made it down to 3 Brothers Bakery before all the scones were gone; they were so good, everyone wanted to know the Koenig triplets' secret.

Fitz pushed his goggles up onto his head, reached behind him and grabbed his bottled water off the shelf, before turning an expectant stare on Jemma. She was standing precariously close to his tools, peering down with interest.

"What kind of drone is this?"
"Don't-" it came out a bit too sharp, "touch anything. Please," he finished, a mite more quietly for the sake of his own ears.

She took a step away, placating him, but continued to eyeball his schematics. "A petrol tank, really?" She wrinkled her nose. "Even ignoring the rather prohibitive weight issue, shouldn't we be trying to progress beyond our barbaric reliance on fossil fuels?"

*God, but she's condescending.* He started to roll his eyes at her, but stopped when it felt like he'd shaken loose the boulder from *Raiders* instead. "Is this what you do now? Come down to people's workshops and interfere with their business?"

Her eyes widened in peevish disbelief. "Fitz. You literally went to my place of work and sabotaged my lab."

"I didn't-" he squeaked, then paused, mouth hanging open as he tried to think. "Okay, technically maybe I did, but-" His mouth snapped shut. "You don't owe her anything, champ. "Look, did you just come here to take the piss out of my 'failed' inventions, or what?"

She rolled her eyes and bulldozered on. "I'm only saying that if you switch to a lightweight battery, perhaps mono-molecular graphene, or even the right nickel-metal hydride, you could-"

"Yes, thank you," his eyes narrowed, "I'm well aware of what I could do, but some of us aren't Elon Musk with our billion-dollar battery factories. All right?"

She clapsed her hands together and pressed her mouth primly into a line. "It was just an idea," she miffed.

So now she was trying to micromanage his personal projects under the guise of looking out for him? *Sure, she has my back... like Brutus had Caesar's.* After checking the tamper-resistant seal on the ibuprofen to make sure it was a new bottle, Fitz popped two into his mouth and washed them down with a sip of water. "Mmm." He was done playing nice. "Why're you here?"

She chewed on her lip, dragging it under her teeth and releasing it with a tiny sigh. "Stop it. Ever the traitor, Fitz's limbic system started making suggestions that would've earned him a few Hail Marys back in his churchgoing days.

"Well, I actually... I wanted to apologize. And say thank you."

*That can't be good.* There was no way he was drinking that tea now. "For... what, exactly?"

A wash of guilt screwed across her face. "Okay, first of all, I had no idea Skye was behind this, but..." She hurried into the other room and came back with a large wire cage housing a faded pink rabbit. "Ta-da!" she offered weakly.

Fitz's jaw refused to close. "What. The Hell."

This was raising far too many questions for his current mental capacity. Ward was... in cahoots with Skye and Jemma? For how long? He scoffed. *More fool him.* Skye hadn't even spoken to Ward at the concert; not that Fitz had been keeping tabs on either of the women. Of course not. *What do I care about those two she-devils?* He doubted he could even guess Jemma's favorite drink. And it had nothing to do with the fact that she'd never ordered the same thing twice, because he certainly hadn't been counting.

"Fitz?" She shuffled forward and set the rabbit hutch at his feet. "For what it's worth, I couldn't tell
you were missing this little fellow at all."

He gaped. "That's hardly the point, don't you think?" *Wait. She was watching my act?*

Jemma's brow twisted cutely. *No, not cutely. Evilly.* "Look, she only meant it as a bit of a prank. And the bunny is here, unharmed-"

"Yeah, and what exactly am I meant to do with it?" His voice climbed as he gestured to the workshop. "Does this look like a zoo to you?"

"Well then tell me where to take it! Unless that's too much trouble for you." Ah, there was that fun defensiveness she always liked to regard him with. "So, what-" she raised both eyebrows, "back to the Talbot mansion?"

"Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you." So she could do her superhero schtick, give the little girl her bunny and save the day? Fitz would be damned before he'd let that happen. "All of the show animals stay at the pet shop."

"All right, that's fine, I'll just-" she reached for the cage handles.

"Wait, wait! Just let me think," he snapped. Maybe he should let Ward stew for a bit. And Betty Talbot never had gotten to play with the creature. *Maybe I could swoop in like a goddamn superhero for once.*

Fitz bent over to grab the handles himself, and got a head full of vertigo and a noseful of rabbit stench for his efforts. His hands flew up to cover his mouth as his stomach did a soccer-stand wave, and he careened desperately towards the trash bin. Breathing deep, he held up a hand, nausea receding just in time. "On second thought, if you could deliver that to Grant for me, that would be very helpful, thank you."

She nodded once. "Roger that." There was a beat of waiting, a strand of hair being tucked behind one ear. "Well, I suppose I'll be off, then, shall I?" She hefted the cage into her arms.

Fitz hobbled back into his chair. His legs, apparently, had decided they were on strike. In fact, his entire body was forming a picket line of reasons not to move. He grabbed the paper bag from the bakery. *Screw it.* He was hungry.

"Jemma!" he called, as she neared the door to the front room.

"Yes?" She turned her torso as best she could without bumping the cage into anything.

"Yes?" She turned her torso as best she could without bumping the cage into anything.

"There are two scones here. Didn't you want one?"

"Oh!" She hesitated for a long moment. "No, those are for you and Mack. Or, I suppose, both for you, if you were feeling peckish." She gave him a small smile. "I *did* say I was sorry."

She actually hadn't, but Fitz decided he could let it go, just this once. "Hey, erm, Jemma? What was the second thing?"

She paused just inside the door and turned once again, fumbling a tad as she tried to brace the hutch between her hip and the doorframe. "Excuse me?"

"Well, you said- you said you wanted to apologize *and* thank me. What, er, what was the thanks for?"
Her grin, wider this time, bloomed like the spread of watercolor on crisp, clean paper. "Ah, yes! Well, Lance was telling me all about Bobbi last night."

"Uhuh…" Fitz's gut churned like fish gravel. *Shite.* She knew he'd set her up? Good thing he hadn't drunk that definitely-poisoned tea.

Jemma didn't seem upset, though, as she carried on with her upbeat chatter. "I just wondered how you knew that I was looking for someone to guest spot on the show? With her background in biochem, and well, I don't have to tell you how camera-ready Bobbi is!" Jemma laughed, "She's amazing. And to think I might never have known about her!"

Fitz boggled a bit as Jemma swept out of the room with a wave. *Well, that revenge scheme went straight to crap.* Of course, sparkling conversationalist that she was, Jemma'd be the one person who'd welcome Hunter's rants about his ex. And *of course* Fitz's attempts to annoy her had only helped make her brilliant, popular show even more brilliant and popular. Fitz shook his head slowly at the closing door. *Story of my bloody life.*

"You owe me about four favors," Skye groaned, resting her arm on the car window to let the breeze slide through her fingers. "I still can't believe you dragged me along for that."

"Well, as it was you who stole the rabbit, it did seem rather fair." When Jemma'd called the pet store to arrange to come by, Ward had been willing to work out the return in a friendly fashion, though he insisted he would only deal with Skye.

"But it was so uncomfortable! You heard what he said, right?" Skye squinted and put on an exaggerated politician's smile, complete with finger guns. "'Anything for you, Skye.' Ugh! I mean, I know I'm a good kisser," she smirked, "but I barely made out with the guy - it's like, why are you so obsessed with me, buddy?"

"Aww." Jemma reached over and patted Skye's arm reassuringly. "Well, it's done now. You never have to see him again if you don't want to." She pulled up to a red light and turned to her friend. "So, lunch? I'm starving, I haven't eaten since half six."

Skye gave her a wry, appraising look. "You know it's the weekend, right? What were you doing?"

"Oh, erm. I, er…" she flushed, "Just buying a few scones before the mad rush."

Skye made a noise a bit like a lovesick rhinoceros. "Oh my god, and you actually got some? Those scones are like crack!" At Jemma's silent agreement, Skye pursed her lips and looked at her knowingly. "So… why today? Special occasion?" Her eyes snapped open. "Jemma Simmons, did you take a guy home last night and have to buy him breakfast?"

"No!" Jemma reached over and turned up the air conditioning. "I was just… normal things…" Jemma realized she was blinking far too often. "I mean, I also had to go down to Fungineers and apologize for your bit of borrowing, so." *Stop blinking.* "You're welcome, incidentally… for that…" She cut herself off with a sharp inhale.

"Wait. You talked to Fitz and Mack?" She blew out a low breath. "How'd that go?"

Jemma ran her fingers along the steering wheel. "Just Fitz, actually. And surprisingly, fine." She returned Skye's skeptical eyebrow raise with a wide-eyed one of her own. "While he was less than welcoming at first-"
"-super bitchy, got it-

"-I did have the opportunity to take a look at his technical work. It's quite impressive!"

Skye shrugged. "Okay, so… what. You like him now? You do remember about the ginger beer, right? And, you know, that whole 'being a butthead' thing he's got going on?"

Jemma laughed lightly. "No, no. Like him? Don't worry." The very thought was absurd. "Even if he were my type, his MoreThanThat profile is completely preposterous." Jemma nearly swerved into a curb when Skye punched her arm.

"Get out. He's on MoreThanThat?! Oh, you gotta show me. This is going to be awesome."

Jemma clicked her tongue. "Really, Skye." But she pulled the application up anyway and handed the phone over.

Skye swiped through the details, loud chortles breaking through smaller giggles as she read select bits aloud. "Okay, this guy is way too into monkeys."

Chapter End Notes

For more discussion of how the human body is super crappily designed, see badscienceshenanigans' RP thread Haute Stuff.
"Got it. Yes, Seth, I wrote it down." Fitz paused on the telephone, his forehead pulling together like a drawstring, and tried to keep his tone pleasant. *We need the money, we need the money,* drummed the motto in his head.

"Read it back?" Fitz gritted his teeth. "All right. I've got…" he rolled his eyes, "a gigantic Nordic troll-beast stomps on a church, snaps off the cross and uses it to pick his teeth after eating the congregation. Now, is that before the topless gladiatrix battles the minotaur? Oh. Oh, yeah, no problem. Nope, I'm sure you'll be pleased. Right." He breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth as the call came to an end. "Yep, see you then. Thanks for calling Fungineers!"

Fitz replaced the handset in the cradle a bit too energetically, muttering, "Teenagers." He tromped downstairs to the front office. "Mack! Just had a fun chat with Ice Machine Apocalypse - now they want, and this is verbatim, 'big-ass flame jets' to come out from either side of the stage."

"All right, my man!" Mack stood, raising a hand for a high five, which Fitz returned without much enthusiasm. Mack's accounting software was still open on his computer screen, and he gestured to it, smiling bluntly. "Remember, the more elaborate this gets, the bigger Mr. Quinn's bill is gonna be." He gripped Fitz's shoulder. "Trust me, this is a good thing."

"But," Fitz craned his gaze upward, imploring, "they asked for a *busty skeleton*, Mack. How the *Hell* am I supposed t' do that?"

Mack whistled, and shook his head slowly. "You'll figure it out, Turbo. You got this."

Fitz, warmed by the show of confidence, began tapping his index finger against his lip. "Well, I suppose I could do a skeleton in a *breastplate.*" He snapped his fingers and pointed to Mack. "Yeah, no problem. Molded cups."

Mack chuckled, "There you go! Now you're thinking like a 15-year old boy." Motioning for Fitz to follow, Mack headed into the kitchen and reached up on top of the fridge, barely needing to move his arms. The terribly deceptive and eternally disappointing blue-and-white biscuit tin that he pulled down, in Fitz's professional opinion, had never actually contained biscuits. Mack popped the lid off and handed Fitz a small piece of paper. "Hey, uh, I've gotta finish up that paperwork so we can head out to the airfield and set up the stunt course for the May-Hill wedding… you mind taking this check down to the station for me?"

Fitz frowned. *To KBUS-FM?* "Erm… I… they don't exactly like me over there."

"Sorry, buddy, but they need it today and we're on a tight schedule as it is. All you gotta do is drop it off in the manager's office." Mack's expression was sympathetic, but firm. "Okay?"

Fitz shook off his paranoia. "Yeah, all right."

*No big deal.* It was actually a good thing that *Science is Super* started filming in twenty minutes. After all, if Jemma and Skye were busy all the way over at Stage 2, he wouldn't risk running into them at all. *Right?*
Fitz stepped carefully into the office, his gaze flitting around until he spotted the payment drop box. He'd been lucky enough not to run into anyone yet, and he didn't intend to start now. He darted forward, slipped the check through the slot, and turned to go.

His eyes caught on a flicker of light through the door to the main video editing room, currently standing ajar. Easing it open, Fitz peeked in and spotted the control operator - Akela Amador, according to the nameplate - tipped back casually in her chair, headset in place, supervising a handful of video feeds simultaneously.

Science is Super was up on the main screen, and Fitz allowed himself a minute to observe Jemma in her element. Heh. Her element. He'd seen the show before, of course, and had watched the YouTube clip of her granny panty mishap a few times - purely out of a sense of spite and mockery, of course, not because her legs happened to be fantastic. It's just lovely seeing her humiliated, that's all. Nothin' creepy about it. Still, he had to admit, watching the live feed from his spot behind the door, there was something special about the way she bounced around that stage, full of life and music even when he couldn't hear a sound.

He watched as Bobbi helped Jemma illustrate combustion in several different ways and orchestrate a couple of controlled explosions, one inside a Pringles can and another in a balloon. The reaction shots, interspersed with Jemma's explanation, showed delighted children full of a fearlessness only the young could own. Bobbi and Jemma appeared to banter easily onscreen, laughing and smiling and generally being disgusting.

It was hardly fair, that she should be so well-loved and so talented, while he and Mack were constantly trying to compete. Over the last month, Fitz had even begun taking requests for his magic act - from letting the client choose what animals they used (that made for some interesting cleaning at the end of the night) to more dangerous routines (sword juggling? Mack had nearly lost an ear) to the sort of obnoxious card tricks he usually made fun of (incredibly, it was a grey elephant in Denmark… every time!) to trying his hand at snake charming (and not in the way Hunter had implied). Not to mention the fact that Fungineers, a company Mack had built from the ground up, had been reduced to working for a pair of boob-obsessed adolescents just to make ends meet.

She owes me, Fitz decided. Jemma would never even have heard of Bobbi Morse if not for him. And she is good with fire…

Fitz snuck back out the door, found a Post-It note, and made what might have been a rash decision.

Once the credits had rolled on Science is Super and they'd cleared the stage to make room for Gramsy to host her infomercial on handknit pet jumpers, one of the grips ran up to Jemma and pressed a pastel paper square into her hand.

"Thank you, Carl." Jemma stared at the chicken-scratch note in quiet shock.

Saw part of the show. Not bad if you like that sort of thi You owe me for Bobbi, I could use your help w/ sthg. 555-616-3489 Fitz

She snorted. Presumptuous arse. Pulling out her phone, she quickly tapped out a response.

[To Drama King: Glad you liked the show. Feel free to take home a promotional poster next time you're at the station.]

After about a minute, her phone buzzed.
She rolled her eyes.

[To Drama King: Scones, remember? :-) I owe you nothing.]

[From Drama King: The scones were an apology for your atrocious interference with my show. Poor Rosie Rabbit was traumatized.]

The speed with which Fitz was responding made her wonder what he did all day. *Maybe I did take all his customers.*

[To Drama King: I said sorry! The apology was the apology.]

*Honestly,* she thought to herself. He was the one asking for her help. He could at least *try* to be nice.

Five minutes later, he still hadn't texted back, and Jemma was getting impatient. Whatever this mysterious favor was, and as difficult as Fitz himself could be… she'd never been able to resist a challenge. Taking a deep breath, she hit the *dial* button.

It picked up on the second ring. "Yeah?" His voice was gruff, and the roar of wind and a variety of engines whipped through the background.

"Oh! It's, erm, it's Jemma Simmons?"

"Right! Hold on, let me get inside!"

A moment later she could hear him much more clearly. "Hey. I, er… thanks for callin' back. Look, there's-"

He was interrupted by a breathy female voice whose words she couldn't quite make out and the sound of a door slamming.

"Jemma? I've got to go." He lowered his volume to a hard whisper. "The florist for this wedding is being a real nag, keeps complainin' about wanting to go into the city. Mack's getting a bit pissed off."

"Oh… well, I just wondered what you needed my help w-"

"- yeah, I can-"

"- send me the details?"

"I'll do that. Listen, I'd better go before there's any bloodshed." He chuckled humorlessly, and then must have held the phone away as he shouted, "Ey! We need that motorcycle ramp over- arrgh! I've got to- these idiots-" *Click.*

Jemma stared at the phone, open-mouthed. *He hung up on me.* She really couldn't remember when she'd met someone with such atrocious manners. An hour later, when the particulars of Fitz's project came buzzing onto her phone, and she had more or less already decided to help, Jemma knew she couldn't let him think he'd won her over *that* easily.

[To Drama King: Intrigued. Will discuss further.]
[To Drama King: And Fitz?]
[To Drama King: :-) Don't start thinking this makes us friends.]
Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to thelatenightstoryteller for helping me think of some combustion experiments for them to do on Science is Super!

The "grey elephant in Denmark" card trick, if you've never had it done to you, relies on math and mental prediction to guide the audience into a series of conclusions.

Fitz's phone number is simply 555-616-FITZ, just in case you were wondering if the last four digits had any special significance.
:-)
"But surely you've worked with pyrotechnics before? Given you're in the party business?"

"Sure, but nothin' bigger than, say, smoke bombs and things to use as a distraction in the magic show. Nothing on this scale."

They were sitting at a café table by the window, and Fitz was trying not to notice how her eyes turned agate in the sunlight. He could also swear she smelled like cookies. *Don't be an idiot; everything smells like cookies. You're in a bakery.* He shook his head quickly and tried to focus on what Jemma was saying.

"… assume you'll want to construct your own flamethrowers, so you'll need-" she cut off as their sandwiches arrived. "Oh, thank you, Billy!"

"I'm Eric," the waiter corrected amiably, with the air of having done it a thousand times. He set down two platters and winked. "You kids have fun on your date."

"It's not-"

"-really just for work…"

"-she wishes." *Shit-quacking bollocks! Why did I say that?* As expected, Jemma had snapped to face him, the affront heating her skin and her words.

"Excuse me? You wish!"

Eric had already waved his hands good-naturedly and ambled off, not bothered in the slightest by either mix-up, and Jemma was left staring at Fitz, wordlessly demanding an explanation while he turned entirely crimson.

He dug into his food to avoid meeting her eyes, though he could feel the sting of her stare on his neck. "Whatever. It was a joke, all right?"

He sneak a glance over when she began stabbing at her own meal, and saw a rapidly spreading blush to match his own.

"So as long as you use the correct nozzle, you'll actually be able to change the shape of the flame itself."

"Excuse me, Doctor Simmons?" A bespectacled white-haired man approached with a Sharpie and a rolled-up tube of paper in his hand. "Could I trouble you for an autograph?"

"It's Doctor," she muttered automatically, before starting in surprise. Jemma paused with her pickle spear midway to her mouth and shot Fitz an apologetic glance, but held out her hand. Thankfully, the man was holding one of her lab safety posters, and *not*, as she'd unfortunately come to expect from men past a certain age, a printed still from her YouTube fiasco.
He jumped in again, words tumbling over themselves. "I just loved your experiment with carmine milk last Tuesday. Thank you so much for this, by the way. I'm sure you get approached all the time."

"You're too kind!" Someone who appreciated her work. "No problem, I'm happy to comply. Who should I dedicate this to?"

He looked slightly flustered, and steepled his hands together before answering. "Just make it out to Daniel."

"And Daniel is your… son?"

The man paused, his mouth opening and closing. "Yes. Of course, because your show is for children."

Jemma wasn't about to judge his slightly strange behavior, though she did notice Daniel stitched on the man's pocket. *His little boy must be named for him.* It was sweet. She wrote in her loopy cursive, *Dear Danny Junior, A passion for science will keep you forever young! - Love, Captain Chemistry.* After a moment, she fanned the poster to dry the ink and handed it back. "There you are!"

The man's head bobbed up and down as he thanked her. After he'd backed away and gone back to his own table, still shooting her quick excited glances every now and then, Fitz leaned over and announced under his breath, "Well *someone* certainly knows your name."

"You don't know the half of it," she said, picking up the last bite of her sandwich and popping it in her mouth, to conceal the fluster that had clenched in her stomach at feeling Fitz's voice so close to her ear. After she'd swallowed, she kept on. "I'm just grateful he was nice."

"Oh? I thought everyone *loved* you." His waspish tone held just a hint of rancor - or as Skye might've put it, he sounded "totes sour grape jelly."

"Hmm. Well, the *kind* of love often depends on where they've seen me before."

Fitz's face fell, and he looked decidedly uncomfortable. "Ahh… do you often get asked about-"

"-the other thing, yes." She wiped her fingers on a napkin. "I mean, it isn't- it's dying down, now." Her hand came up of its own accord and she found herself playing awkwardly with her necklace.

"I, ah…" Fitz scratched at his stubbled jaw. "I suppose I should apologize for my part in that. Unless… it's old news and you've let it go?" he finished hopefully.

"Fitz." She fixed a condemning gaze on him.

Fitz was no longer meeting her eyes. "Sorry," he mumbled around a mouthful of chips, and set about chewing and swallowing for as long as humanly possible.

It was a terrible start, an apology stalled by mastication and possibly tinged with more resentment than sincerity - but, she supposed, it *was* a start. Jemma sighed, tossed her garbage onto the plate, and reached for her tablet. "Right. Well. On the subject of explosions you *want* to be blamed for," she shot him a pointed look, "let's discuss pressure regulators, shall we?"

Somewhere in between a debate on the pros and cons of building a custom flame bar versus setting
off enormous twin fireballs, Fitz found himself inadvertently chatting about his inventions. Perhaps it was a need to make her rethink her (completely false) assumptions about his work. Perhaps it was the fact that, outside of Hunter and Mack, hardly anyone spoke to him at length - and even when he talked shop with Mack, his partner would often chuckle something about needing "sheet music" and ask him to slow down in his explanation. Or perhaps it was the way her nose crinkled when he made a particularly bad physics pun. *She's an odd bird, that one.*

So, yes, Fitz had to admit it felt a bit nice, babbling on about his tech to someone who could keep up and didn't ask silly questions. But considering the way she was biting down and trying - *not very bloody hard* - to conceal her laughter, Jemma's kindred brain wasn't why he was defending the HighWay SkyTray to her. It was because she was *wrong.*

"Fitz. You are going to cause *so many* traffic accidents." She shook her head, highly amused, and patted his hand in mocking pity. "Please tell me you haven't tested it yet… or, that you'll warn me when you do, so I can stay off the roads?"

"You-" he pointed a grouchy index finger, "should stay off the roads anyway, you menace." She thought he was going to cause an accident? "Honestly, you and everyone in this blasted town, *no* vision for the future whatsoever." He grumbled and snatched up another snickerdoodle. "It's like you hate progress." He took the most peevish bite he could, as if to spite the cinnamony goodness melting on his tongue.

"Aww," she clucked. "It's not a *terrible* idea…" She reconsidered. "No, it *is* actually. Horribly unsafe. But the drone is good!" she conceded. "You could do a lot with that. Things that wouldn't involve eight-car pileups."

"Oh, gosh, you really think so?" he scoffed. *Talking as if I need her bloody approval.* "Thanks, I hadn't realized until this moment that drones have a number of applications." He brushed the sugary crumbs off his hands. "By all means, why don't I completely change the direction of a project I've been workin' on since I was sixteen bloody years old."

Jemma rolled her eyes and pushed his hand away from reaching for a fourth cookie, but kept her fingers on his. And when she spoke, he thought he detected a note of actual sympathy, though he couldn't have guessed what for. "Oh, Fitz. Maybe it's time you *and* your ideas grew up a bit."

"Invisibility. Who hasn't wanted to turn invisible at some point? *That's* a good magical ability." Fitz tapped the tabletop with one finger, oozing confidence. Not that she was watching his hands. *They're just hands. With perfectly normal fingers. Nothing to stare at.* She cleared her throat.

"And I keep telling you, almost everything that you can *fake* with tricks, science has *actually* discovered." Jemma sat back, matching his attitude. "You want to talk about invisibility? Octopi and squid are so good at camouflage, they vanish seamlessly into their surroundings. Or how about quantum entanglement revealing invisible pictures? Aren't 'spooky particles' *much* cooler than whatever you do with your silly magician's box?"

He frowned at her characterization of his prop and parried, "Right, but magic's been inspiring people since long before anyone could make sense of the world." Fitz's tone made it clear he thought he was winning this argument.

"I bet you can't name *one thing* you think of as magic that doesn't show up in the natural world." She took a sip of her lemonade. "Regeneration? Psychic connections? Levitation? That's *science*, Fitz.
The Earth is full to bursting with amazing things, and all *you're* doing is distracting people from that reality by linking some metal rings together."

"Well, sometimes people *need* to be distracted from reality. Some children," Fitz's retort was cut off as a Koenig brother stepped over to their table.

"I'm sorry, guys, but we're closing up in about five minutes."

Jemma stared at Fitz for a second before snapping her gaze up to the clock on the wall. *How did it get so late?*

"Eric, we are so sorry," she stammered. "We'll get out of your hair straightaway."

"I'm Sam." He looked fairly easygoing about it, patient but firm. "Sorry to kick you out - of course, you're welcome to come back first thing tomorrow morning."

"Oh! My goodness, you don't have to apologize, we should've been more conscious of the time!" She'd started shoving things into her purse, face going red.

Fitz was watching her with more than a little glee. "Jemma Simmons, outstaying her welcome." He *tsked.* "And all because you just couldn't concede that *magic* is far cooler than science. See what happens when you argue too much?"

"I beg your pardon, I don't believe the argument or the delay were one-sided," she hissed. "And this conversation is far from over."

"C'mon, Jemma," Fitz was entirely condescending as he held the door and they stepped out into the street. "Give it up. Magic is books and television and the stuff of dreams. Science is school and homework and standardized testing. I mean, it's just a bit ridiculous that you're even fighting me on this."

"Oh, *I'm* the ridiculous one? All right," she murmured, smirking, "MagicMonkey69."

"What are you on about?" Fitz unlocked his bike, shielding his forehead against the afternoon sun before wheeling it under the 3 Bros. Bakery sign. Which, on second glance and based on a faded paint outline, might have once read *13 Bros.*

"Your profile on MoreThanThat?" She laughed slightly, to show *she* didn't put stock in any of that rubbish, and decided to tease him. *He deserves a bit of teasing, after all the shenanigans he's pulled.* She cleared her throat and deepened her voice, affecting a rather terrible Scottish accent. "Turn-ons include showing off my hardware, frequent pretzel breaks, and Doctor Who lingerie."

Fitz stared at her, their earlier conversation momentarily forgotten. "Have you *officially* gone mental? Y'know, it'd be a load off my shoulders if *you* recognized what a nutter you are instead of my havin' to point it out all the time."

With an exasperated sigh, Jemma pulled out her phone and brought up the app. "See?" She swiped over the details of his profile. "And according to this," she lowered her voice in faux arousal, "you're very good with your bare hands."

Fitz gaped at the screen. "I'm gonna kill Lance."
Pssst. Purposely-OOC fanboy Whitehall is the best Whitehall, pass it on.
(I mean, at this point, what's one more mischaracterized AoS bad guy cameo? As long
as I'm doing it on purpose? Ehnh?)

:-) And yes, it's long been my headcanon that Jemma smells like fresh baked cookies.
Not that that's the only reason Fitz likes her.
"Mack!" Fitz stormed into the kitchen, his curls still askew from the angry bike ride over, and stopped short when he saw Mack's upraised finger and the phone in his hand.

"Thank you again, Mayor Coulson. We definitely will."

"Always a pleasure, sir. Take care." After he hung up, he capped the marker he'd been using to label their calendar for the Treehouse Falls Children's Day Spectacular, underlined twice in thick bold slashes. "Okay, Turbo, shoot. What's going on?"

"Why don't you tell me." Fitz stalked over to the counter and yanked open his laptop. "Mm-hmm," he hummed as he brought up MoreThanThat.com and searched for himself. Whirling the computer screen towards Mack, he put on his most no-nonsense face. "Know anything about this?"

Mack moved to grab an orange from their hanging fruit basket, his face breaking out in a gleaming white smile, and a small laugh escaped his throat. "Yo, man, that was Hunter's idea. I'm on your side!"

"Oh?"

He's got a right bit of explaining to do. Fitz put his hands on his hips. "And how exactly is goin' behind my back and making me look like a fool on the Internet, being on my side?"

Mack reached for his water bottle and took a long swig, wiping off his mouth with his forearm. "I bet him we'd actually find you a nice girl. He bet you'd only get attention from men over fifty."

"I bet him we'd actually find you a nice girl. He bet you'd only get attention from men over fifty." Fitz goggled, incensed. "I should hope I'd get attention across the board!" He was a catch for anyone at any age, thank you very much. "And that's hardly the point!"

Mack finished his orange in about three bites and tossed the peel overhand into the bin. "Hey, man, you know I think secrets don't help anyone. I should've just come clean." He gave Fitz a commiserating look. "But you gotta admit, with the business not doing so hot, you've been a little jumbled lately." His face turned serious, and he rubbed his hands together absently. "I just thought it might be good for you. Y'know… go out, have some fun, meet someone nice. Maybe get you un-jumbled."

"Yeah, well," Fitz scratched at his eyebrow. "I don't need your help in that department, all right? Next time, worry about yourself."

Mack's face broke into a pained guilt. "Sorry, buddy."

As much as Mack liked to claim all his exes were awesome, his last relationship had ended over two years before in a drag-out shouting match that had left the normally calm entrepreneur curled up on the couch for days, cuddling Quinoa as he tripled his Call of Duty kill count and exhausted his repertoire of angry curse words. Really, if anyone should understand why I don't try to date, it's Mack.

"It's okay," Fitz relented. "But I'm still deleting the profile."

Mack nodded, tapped a few keys on Fitz's laptop, and pushed the machine back towards him with the profile editing page on the screen. "You can delete it if you want, Turbo. Or you could use it to show people the real you. This guy who's… yeah, I mean, he's a little weird," he chuckled, "but who
isn't anybody but himself." Mack put his hand on Fitz's shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

With that, Mack left Fitz at the counter, staring down at a string of world-class absurdities that Hunter had used to describe him:

**Abraca-do me!**

*Looking for a lovely assistant to join me in the ultimate trick - falling in love!*

**Name:** Leopold "Magic Fingers" Fitz  
**Age:** 28  
**Profession:** part-time magician, part-time inventor, full-time sex machine  
**Likes:** monkey puppetry, only shaving 1x/week, my favourite sandwich (available at Scout's Honor Bar & Grill - 202 Merc Rd)  
**Dislikes:** superior football teams  
**Special talents:** some real Houdini-level stuff (escaping from locked boxes, evading certain death, holding my breath underwater - *hello ladies*)  
**Special interests:** Italian guns, cardigans  
**Hobbies:** arguing with fit brunettes who are smarter than me, SCUBA diving, having excellent taste in friends

It just kept going. *Yeah… definitely getting rid of this.* As the pointer hovered over the delete button, however, Fitz noticed the blinking notification in the upper right-hand corner.

It couldn't hurt to *look.* It wasn't as if he couldn't *briefly* check out the options before deleting this atrocity of a profile forever. Taking a deep breath, he pulled up the list of recent matches.

Anne Weaver - she looked lovely, but slightly too old for him. Hannah Hutchins - not to be picky, but he couldn't imagine dating someone who believed in ghosts. Sally Webber - ran a website that pranked people and filmed it. *Not very mature.* Karla Faye Gideon - sexy manicurist with a cutthroat sense of humor? *Now that was interesting.* Then again… using her mugshot as the profile photo was probably a bad omen. *Moving on.* And… Jemma Simmons. *Well, well, well.* A slow smile spread over Fitz's face as he quickly scanned the page. *Turn-ons include: cardigans, heterostructure transistors.* His smile bubbled into a barking laugh, sitting loudly in the quiet room. *Nerd.*

Fitz snorted with self-satisfaction. Jemma thought she could take the mickey out of *him* for *his* online profile? *Well, Doctor Simmons, revenge is a dish best served immediately.* Fitz shook out his fingers to loosen them up and clicked on the small envelope by her name.

*Time for a little payback.*

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- To: NubileYoungPhD@morethanthat.com  
  Your dream vacation is Zloda, Belarus? Really? Why not just go to South Ossetia, if we're naming terrible places.

Jemma blinked at her phone in surprise, then tapped out a quick reply.

- To: MagicMonkey69@morethanthat.com  
  Like you're any better, Mr. Death Wish. A monkey-scouting walking tour of Peru? Do you even know how many species of snakes would kill you there? And that's assuming the earthquakes and guerrillas don't find you first.
The shushupe really does have a fascinating venom, though. Neurotoxic, proteolytic, and hemolytic? Perhaps Peru wouldn't be so bad after all…

- To: NubileYoungPhD@morethanthat.com
  "Looking for the Watson to my Sherlock"? First of all, it's a bit uninspired. Second, you do realize you've just admitted to being a sociopath.

And she insisted on being called Doctor but refused to be Watson? She needs to sort out her priorities.

- To: MagicMonkey69@morethanthat.com
  Well we can't all be looking for "a bonny wee lass tae cook me neeps and tatties just like me mam used tae make" (though I'm surprised to see you enjoy any dish with vegetables in it).

Fitz's jaw clenched in irritation. He thought he'd gotten rid of all traces of Hunter's "contributions" to his profile. Either Jemma had taken screen shots before the changes, or… Fitz went into his account and reset the password one more time. Just to be safe.

Jemma bit the inside of her cheek in disapproval as she browsed Fitz's freshly updated profile. It was one thing for a grown man to behave like a child, another entirely to advertise it. And on a dating website, no less. It was like he was asking Chris Hansen to pop by for a chat.

- To: MagicMonkey69@morethanthat.com
  I can't believe you described your ideal date as a game of Minecraft over a bowl of leftover Halloween candy.

- To: NubileYoungPhD@morethanthat.com
  Leftover Halloween candy is the only kind I buy. And you've clearly never played Minecraft or you would agree with me.

- To: MagicMonkey69@morethanthat.com
  Not only do I play, I run a rather nasty mob.

- To: NubileYoungPhD@morethanthat.com
  Please don't say zombies.

- To: MagicMonkey69@morethanthat.com
  Zombie pigmen. :-) 
  What server are you on, again?

It was important to note that they were not friends, Fitz insisted, to anyone who would listen.

They were just a pair of acquaintances who, due to their professional interactions, were forced to tolerate each other's company occasionally. Because children were watching, and it wouldn't do to call each other names in front of impressionable young ears.
Texting, however, was completely silent.

[To She-Devil: Spying on me? I saw you skulking about earlier.]

[From She-Devil: Just making sure you didn't burn down the hospital parking lot. Since when is fire breathing a part of your act?]

[To She-Devil: Since a terminally ill little girl decided Lilo & Stitch was her favorite movie.]

*Take that*, Fitz thought to himself smugly. He'd like to see Jemma mock him for making sick children happy. Never mind that she was here doing the exact same thing.

[From She-Devil: Awww. That's adorable. And now you've given me an idea for how to do the big finale at the Children's Day Spectacular.]

[To She-Devil: They gave you the finale?! Inconceivable.]
[To She-Devil: Please tell me you at least had to show your underpants to get it.]

[From She-Devil: Hilarious.]
[From She-Devil: Try not to burn your cape off today. Or anything else.]
[From She-Devil: Or people. Don't burn anything or anyone.]

[To She-Devil: What makes you so sure I'm going to cause an accident?]

[From She-Devil: I watched you practice. Let's just say it's a good thing you're already at the hospital.]

Later, as Fitz was getting his hand bandaged, Jemma happened to catch his eye on her way out. One look at her insufferable I-told-you-so face and he felt his own skin heating up, singed fingertips momentarily forgotten. And when she raised a snippety eyebrow and pulled out her phone, he knew a snarky text wouldn't be far behind.

[From She-Devil: Didn't I tell you to be safe? Enclosed, please find a copy of my printable pamphlet on working with flammable materials.]
[From She-Devil: firesafety.pdf]

*Hmmph.*

[To She-Devil: Enclosed, please find my middle finger.]
NAME: Leopold "Magic Fingers" Flage
AGE: 28

PROFESSION: Part-time magician
Part-time inventor
Full-time sex mach

LIKES: monkey puppetry
only shaving 1x/week
my favourite sandwich (available at Scout's Home & Grill -- 202 Merc Rd)

DISLIKES: superior football teams

SPECIAL TALENTS: some real Houdini-level stuff (escaping from locked boxes, evading certain death holding my breath underwater - hehe ladies)

SPECIAL INTERESTS: Italian guns
cardigans

HOBBIES: arguing with fit brunettes who are smarter than me
SCUBA diving
backing up my files (and dat-ass)

GREATEST STRENGTH: excellent taste in friends

GREATEST WEAKNESS: forgetting where I hid my castash

FAVOURITE MOVIE: Snow White

TURN ONS INCLUDE: showing off my hardware
frequent pretzel breaks
Doctor Who lingerie
Quite a few references in this one! Besides show nods, we've got I Love Lucy, Harry Potter, The Princess Bride, and To Catch a Predator!

Also, on the show, Mack says he can't relate to anyone's dating troubles because all his exes were awesome. And I will gladly believe that Mack canonically has only had super-cas mutual breakups where everyone stayed in touch and it was friendly and rad. In this fic, Mack's dating backstory with an angry breakup where he got stuck with the dog (or perhaps refused to give up the dog) is my nod to the fact that Mack's not ultra-chill 100% of the time - he still has his moments where he gets upset. And we know there are painful moments in his past, so *shrug* difficult breakup was where I decided to go with it.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jemma was standing in a queue. She had been there for about an hour, and she expected to continue for at least another two. The wait, much like the drive into Triskelion Heights, was a small price to pay to get a copy of her favorite comic book - *Tales of the Black Freighter* - autographed by the artist. She had her gum, her water bottle, and a fully-charged phone, and as for entertainment, well. *I'm sitting in a bookstore.* She was perfectly content, just as she was.

Until, of course, she took her headphones out so she could hear an announcement by the shop’s proprietor, a fierce-looking bald man with an eye patch. As the people in the queue shifted to better see and hear, nine or ten places ahead of her in line, a familiar profile caught her attention.

"What in the world?" she breathed, taking in the sight of Fitz in full ghoulish pirate gear, one of a handful of fans dressed to the nines for the event. Tattered clothes, zombie makeup, the whole bit - it was no wonder she hadn't recognized him earlier.

Smiling to herself, she sent a quick text.

[To Drama King: Leopold Fitz, one of the damned souls on the Black Freighter? Why am I not surprised.]

As he read her message, Fitz's head shot up, whipping around until he spotted her. "You have got to be kidding me." His exclamation, though not quite a shout, carried well enough to where she stood, earning him a couple of curious looks. A second later her phone alert pinged.

[From Drama King: I can't believe I'm saying this, but ]

[From Drama King: you can cut in up here if you like. There's a guy in front of me that actually does smell like his flesh is rotting and I could use a buffer.]

Jemma pursed her lips. First he played fast and loose with the 10 Items or Less rule, now he was encouraging her to sneak forward in the queue? How a person could show such horrible disregard for social convention was beyond her.

[To Drama King: I most certainly will not! That man probably arrived ages before me.]

She frowned at Fitz, who was gesturing at her to come over - oh, god, *they'll think I've planned this with him* - and shook her head forcefully, mouthing no. Just to make the point plain, she rotated a bit to lean against the wall, turning her back to him, and replaced her headphones. *There.*

Less than a minute later, there was a distinct jostling behind her, and there he was, brow furrowed in genuine confusion. His makeup, up close, was a mite sloppily done, and she had a sudden image of Mack heaving a long-suffering sigh as he brushed black eyeshadow on his friend as best he could.

Makeup which, instead of making Fitz's eyes look sunken and creepy, really only served to highlight their color. *Well that's just not fair.* Why couldn't her eyelashes be that long? Men didn't even appreciate things like that. Not that she was appreciating Fitz's eyes.

He motioned to her earbuds, and once she removed them, dropped his bag by the wall near her feet. "I swear you love rules more than life itself."
She scoffed. "As if I forced you to follow me back here."

"You didn't smell him."

Jemma eyed his bag dubiously and scooted down the wall to sit by it. "Suit yourself. To me, a few minutes saved on wait time isn't worth giving up basic human decency."

"That's what I get for tryin' to be nice," he grumbled. "You make it sound like I told an entire orphanage Santa doesn't exist." He immediately blanched, eyes darting around in a panic, before relaxing into a cross-legged seat at her side. Reaching into his bag, he retrieved what could only be described as a "ship-christening sized" sandwich. "Want some? Hunter made it. Well, he made Idaho make it."

"Put that away!" she scolded. "The last thing I need is to miss the signing because of you and your ungodly appetite." She made a big show of making sure her comic book was far away from the food, safely wrapped in its zip-top bag.

"Lighten up, Jemma. Look." Fitz unwrapped half and took an enormous bite, pointing with his elbow and talking around the mouthful. "That guy over there's got candy bars in his jacket pocket; those two kids left a lollipop stuck inside that magazine, and the woman by the board games? I'm pretty sure her water bottle's nothin' but gin."

"Son." The two started as the shop owner stopped in front of where they were sitting. He leaned down, his long leather jacket brushing the floor, to peer directly into Fitz's face. The overhead light shone dully against his bald head, his wrinkles more like battle scars than markers of age. "Do you see that sign on the door?" He pointed. "It says..." his good eye was steely, "no outside food."

Fitz swallowed loudly, staring up in trepidation. "Oh hi there, sir!" His hands tightened on the bag that held the remainder of his sandwich, cautiously tucking it behind him in a futile effort at concealment. "I, erm, what?! Nice eyepatch. Is that for the, ah, the pirate thing?"

Oh, no.

Jemma was aware that Scotland could get cold, but she didn't think anything had ever prepared Fitz for the Arctic glare the shop owner gave him next. Slowly, agonizingly so, he lifted his hand to his eyepatch and flipped it up. Fitz nearly passed out.

"No. Outside. Food."

Jemma was aware that Scotland could get cold, but she didn't think anything had ever prepared Fitz for the Arctic glare the shop owner gave him next. Slowly, agonizingly so, he lifted his hand to his eyepatch and flipped it up. Fitz nearly passed out.

"No. Outside. Food."

Fitz pulled his knees to his chest and tried not to think about his growling stomach or the sandwich now burning a hole in the bottom of his knapsack. He also managed not to pout at Jemma's eye-roll, taking the proffered stick of gum and shoving it into his mouth a tad peevely.

"Chewing gum tricks your body into suppressing hunger, Fitz." Under her breath (but not out of earshot, what the Hell she added, "And as long as it puts an end to your complaining..."

"Yeah, that's a myth." He pulled out his phone. Fine. She thought he was whining? I just won't talk at all.

If only Hunter had let him eat in the car, none of this would've happened, but no, it was, all "a man's got to have pride in his vehicle, Fitz" and "that service light's been on for months now, stop worrying".

As soon as he saw the email Mack had sent him, though, any thoughts about Hunter left his head.
"Oh, no. No, no. What the-" Fitz's voice got sharper as he skimmed the details. "Buggering shiteballs!"

Jemma turned to him with a displeased set to her lips. "Fitz! Language!" Her eyes careened around the store, checking for small children.

"Sorry, it's just…" *Should I be telling her about work?* She was, after all, his competition. *Screw it.* She knew about this project already, and Fitz needed to vent. "You know the flame jets you were giving me pointers on?"

"For the Ice Machine Apocalypse concert? Mm-hmm…" She arched an eyebrow, teasing. "You're welcome, by the way."

"Yeah, yeah." Surely he'd thanked her for her help. *Didn't I?* It wasn't important at the moment.

"Well, y' see," he took a deep breath, trying to calm himself down, "that job was a lot bigger than just the flames, and I'd been workin' on it for ages."

"Okay… and, what? They want something different now?"

Fitz laughed, just the tiniest bit hysterically. *Different* didn't begin to cover it. "They've cancelled the entire thing. The lead singer had a heart attack."

Her hands flew up to her mouth. "Oh! Is he all right?"

"Yeah, he's fine, the little tosser- but he's convinced he's got a 'new lease on life' so he's decided to become a Christian rock singer instead."

"Oh…" She seemed to be struggling for what to say. "That is quite the transformation."

"You're tellin' me. Apparently they've got a girl in the band now, they practice in the church basement, and they've renamed themselves *Revelations*."

"Well, that's just silly."

Fitz stared, befuddled. *Which part?* The whole thing had gone so tits-up Fitz honestly couldn't think at the moment.

"They changed their name from *Apocalypse* to *Revelations*?" She crinkled her nose. "That's-"

"-the same thing, yeah. You're right." Fitz let out a dazed, hopeless chuckle. "This is all such bollocks." *He and Mack'd really been counting on that big check from Mr. Quinn."

"Aww, Fitz," she chucked in sympathy, reaching over to squeeze his forearm. "It'll be fine. You're performing at Children's Day, yeah? And who knows, maybe after those boys figure out their new sound, they'll hire you again!"

Fitz tipped his head back against the wall, defeated. "If Seth was still in charge, maybe." His face soured. "But it sounds like Callie Hannigan-Garrett's making all the big decisions now."

Jemma's eyebrows flew up. "Garrett? As in-"

"Preacher John's stepdaughter. Yep. And I'm not his favorite person."

"Nor I," she hummed in commiseration. "Wait. Why doesn't he like you?"
"Oh, Hell if I know." Fitz sighed. "Somethin' about Harry Potter corrupting our kids. The man's a knob."

"Believe me, I'm well aware." She was nodding along, and it made her normally pulled-back hair bounce prettily. "Next he'll be scaring everyone off Disney movies."

"You, er, you like Disney, then?" He pointed to her chest, where her fingers had moved to play with her necklace. He'd seen it before, at the café, but it hadn't dawned on him to comment.

"What?" She leaned back, mildly scandalized, and he realized he'd probably been gesturing a little too close - and to make matters worse, he might have been staring down her top. Just straight down the hatch. Right at her creamy, smooth... oh, jeez.

"I wasn't lookin' at- I meant-" His face turned to lava. "Your necklace! It's, er, it's one of the seven dwarves, right?"

"Oh, yes, it is!" She flushed as well, pulling on the chain to free the pendant from the neckline of her jumper, where it had gotten caught. "I got this when I was twelve. Even then, I felt a sort of kinship with Doc."

Fitz snorted. Apparently, her fixation with the title had started early. "Fair enough. I can't say I find the prospect of bein' a dwarf that bad... someone to do all the cooking and cleaning? Plenty of brothers around? Working a job that makes you happy?"

"Okay," she nodded. "I could see you as a dwarf."

"Hey! That had better not be a short joke."

She swatted the his knee in admonishment, but then peered at him, pressing her lips together in a discerning frown. After a few beats, she apparently decided to say whatever it was she was thinking.

"You don't enjoy your job?"

"Oh, she's crafty. Trying to get him to admit he preferred working with adults to children. Probably has a recording device somewhere on her, just waitin' to turn this around on me. Not down her front, though, at least. God. Just the fact that he knew that made him feel like a pervert.

He must've been quiet too long, because she blurted, "I'm just... to be honest, I'm wondering how you ever got started doing the whole..." she gestured vaguely in a showman's stance. "It doesn't seem to have much in common with your other skills."

He shrugged, trying to keep the defensiveness out of his voice. "Most kids go through a magic phase. I just happened to be good at it."

"Oh, you misunderstand!" Her eyebrows tented. "Your act is more than adequate, I simply... well, I've never gotten the impression that performing was what you'd set out to do."

He stared, jaw working soundlessly. More than adequate. Fitz had never been any version of adequate in his life. He was torn between being offended at the qualifier and frustrated that he still wanted to keep talking to her when he was totally, mostly, probably sure this was a trap of some kind. Maybe she's got magic powers. That certainly seemed in keeping with her whole "anything you can do, I can do better" personality.

"If you don't want to tell me..." she trailed off, and shook her head quickly. "I didn't mean to pry."
Well, that was no better. Now he just felt guilty. She's the one tryin' to get me to say on-camera that I hate children, but nooo - I'm the arsehole. He rubbed the back of his neck. "It was, erm, it was a favor for Mack, you know?"

She smiled, just a small one that popped up on her face like a prairie dog, but suddenly the words were tumbling out of his mouth before he could stop them.

"We were workin' a job, and the clown never showed up. So there's Carla Talbot blowin' a gasket about her perfect boy's perfect birthday ruined, and Mack turns to me and says, 'Don't you have a clown costume in your closet?' - and well, at that point he'd basically volunteered me for it, so I couldn't very well say no, and they did offer to pay us extra for the short notice, so I just…" He spread his hands helplessly.

Jemma looked just a touch taken aback. "And then, what. Word of mouth?"

He scratched behind his ear. "I guess so? I mean, obviously I didn't play at bein' a clown any more. Well, not that I ever was, really - the costume was my Sixth Doctor getup for a con I'd just been to, and I've told Mack it's not a clown suit-" he realized he was talking far too much, "er, well, you don't care about all that."

"Fitz." She sounded… impressed? "You were able to significantly expand your business based purely on a good first performance." She bumped her elbow to his. "There aren't many people who could've pulled that off."

He felt a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Does that mean you accept that my show's better than yours?"

"Oh, not in the slightest," she deadpanned, "I definitely could have pulled that off. I'm just saying there aren't many other people."

He chuckled, just as the queue shuffled once again and they got to their feet. Jemma grinned at him as she hefted her bag from the floor.

"So… Sixth Doctor, hmm?" She smirked at his current pirate costume - I suppose now she thinks I make a habit of dressing up in outlandish clothes. "Well? Are you going to show me the pictures I'm sure you've got on your phone, or am I going to have to hunt them down?"

He ought to make her do the work. It would serve her right. But he should also eat fewer carbs, and that wasn't very likely either. "Oh, fine, damn you."

Fitz pulled up the correct album and showed her the one he was most proud of, standing in a park with his multicolored umbrella, and tried not to be too pleased by the squeaky giggle she let out. "Leopold Fitz, you are a proper nerd."

He rolled his eyes, shifting his own bag further up on his chest, and she brushed past him to stand ahead in line. Looking back over her shoulder with a saucy hair flip, she added, "For what it's worth? I far prefer you in the tux."
Chapter End Notes

Tales of the Black Freighter is a comic-within-a-comic from the Watchmen universe.

Making Callie Garrett's stepdaughter was more of a convenience thing than anything - I wanted Callie in the band with Seth and Donnie, and it's a Christian band so there's a Garrett connection (and Fitz and Simmons can bond in their mutual dislike) - besides, I could easily see those boob-obsessed lil noobs letting Callie basically take over and run
the whole shebang.
Jemma got Skye's text just as she was heating up her lunch during one of her rare days with no public appearances whatsoever.

[From Beeeeef: omg im freakin out]
[From Beeeeef: srsly boned]
[From Beeeeef: why do ppl suck]

Jemma blinked at the barrage of messages and immediately dialed the number. Skye answered almost immediately. "Jemma?"

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"More like what isn't wrong?!" Thankfully, Skye just sounded flustered, a little frazzled, but more irritated than upset. "So, I got here this morning, and a few lights were out on Stage 1. No big deal, right?"

Jemma didn't know what to say, so she simply clucked sympathetically.

"But when I tried to contact the handyman who's supposed to be on call for our building, Mr. Levi, he's not answering his phone! And, like, he's contracted by the city, so he should be around. Right?"

"Definitely…" Jemma encouraged her.

"Turns out, Levi and a couple other people, including Mad Dog, who has a show today by the way, just up and… went on a road trip! To Wisconsin! No warning! Just out of the blue!"

Urgency was starting to spur her words on, and Jemma interjected, "Okay, breathe."

"Yeah." She could hear Skye bringing herself under control. Skye was remarkably good at staying calm when she needed to. "Right."

"Hmm… doesn't the city have a backup contractor who can fix the lights?"

"Yes. Some guy named Daniels. But I can't seem to find him either." Jemma heard the rustle of papers on the other end of the line. "It's like he got exploded into a black hole or something."

"That's not how… never mind." This wasn't the time to correct Skye's scientific misconceptions. "Well…" Jemma searched her brain. "Then, how much do you need Stage 1 today?"

"Uhhh, a lot. We're supposed to be doing a pledge drive in a few hours. And I called around to Triskelion Heights, the soonest anyone could get here is after five."

"Oh."

Skye sighed into the phone. "I'm sorry, I know it's your day off, and this really isn't your problem, I just… needed to bitch about it to someone who wasn't gonna judge me."
"Of course, Skye, any time. Truly. I only wish I could help! But it's not as if I know that many people who are mechanically inclined…" Then it hit her. "Fitz! Fitz does stage lights for Fungineers." One of his numerous talents.

"Well, that doesn't exactly help me." Jemma paused, confused, but Skye barreled on. "I mean, he's not gonna want to do me a favor when I stole that stupid rabbit and messed up his show."

"But he still owes me a favor." Considering the Ice Machine Apocalypse situation, she was certain he would agree. "He might be a bit of a knob about it, but I'm sure he'll do it."

"I mean… that'd be great, but are you sure?" She could hear Skye's indecision. "I don't want you to have to call in a favor for me, especially not with Fitz. I know he's not exactly your favorite person."

"No, no…" she laughed nervously, unable to explain why he wasn't her least favorite person anymore, either. The truth was, somewhere along the line - and she couldn't have said when, exactly - Fitz's bad-tempered grousing had become more of a friendly back-and-forth. After all, I've held my own against him, haven't I? It wasn't as if their bickering was entirely his fault, or hers, it was more as if they both enjoyed-

"Hey, you still there?"

Jemma shook herself and turned her attention back to the problem at hand. Really, Jemma. The details of her rivalry with Fitz could certainly be pondered another day. At the moment, a friend needed her help.

"Yes, of course! I'm here. Listen, I don't mind, honestly. I'll ring him straightaway."

Skye's palpable relief was all the thanks she needed. "Holy crap, you're really saving my ass. I'm so gonna owe you a girls' night after this!"

"Not a problem. Call you later!"

She pressed the button to hang up, called Fitz's number, and tried to ignore the swoop in her stomach when he answered on the first ring.

"Jemma! What a lovely surprise," Fitz tried to hide the actual surprise in his voice with his favorite defense mechanism. "To what do I owe this pleasure?" His tone changed to one of knowing confidentiality. "Did you forget how to make a right turn again?"

"I'm surprised you think yourself the better driver, since I'm the one of us who actually has a car," she parried.

"Touché." He grinned into his mobile. "So what's up?"

He heard her inhale. "I have a proposition for you. Well, Skye does, actually."

She was making this far too easy. "My God, well, I'm flattered, but I barely know Skye! This is all happening so fast."

"You're a child," she huffed. He thought she might be smiling.

"Nah, but I hope Skye likes children, because I want at least a good half dozen. You know, to help out on the farm and such. Oh, tell her we're gonna live on a farm. I assume that's the American dream."
"Keep this up and I won't tell you what it is."

"Fine," he relented. "What do you need?"

"The lights are out on one of the stages at the station, and they can't find an electrician. You've wired lights for Mack before, yeah?"

_Huh._ That was probably the last thing he'd expected her to say. "Yeah, I've done a few. Can't guarantee anything, but I could take a look. When's she need them by?"

"As soon as possible."

He moved to grab a pen. "And what does that mean, exactly?"

"In the next three hours?"

"Bloody Hell, Jemma! Give us a bit of warning next time, will you?"

"Well I only just heard about it myself! She's spent all morning calling around, and the poor thing's desperate."

_Ouch._ "So, she'd have to be desperate to want my help, eh?"

"Oh for Christ's sake," she muttered. "Don't take it personally! Besides, given that you need the money…"

"What's _that_ supposed to mean?" Sure, funds were tight, but did she think he couldn't manage a budget?

"Nothing!" She huffed again, this time in earnest. "I only _thought_, since you lost the Quinn job, that-"

_Whoa._ He hadn't lost the Quinn job. "I'm not a charity case, Jemma." She could keep her pity-job if the price was listening to her emasculate him.

"Fitz, I'm only trying to help," she chided him.

"Well maybe I don't _need_ your help!"

"But Skye does! Good grief, did you ever stop to think that maybe this isn't about you?"

His mouth dropped open. "Rude!"

"I am _not!_ How is it rude for me to want to help out my friends?"

Fitz was silent for a beat, until he realized what she'd said. A quick smile sparked into the corners of his lips.

"Did you- did you just call me your friend?"

"What?" she dissembled. "No! Don't be ridiculous."

"You did." His grin widened, enjoying her discomfort. "I heard you." If he could have seen her face, Fitz would have been pointing at it.

"I don't know what you _think_ you heard, Leo, but now is hardly the time for this nonsense. Why are
"You making nonsense!"

"Fair enough." He did only have a couple of hours to contend with a brand-new lighting system he'd never worked on before. "I'll get my tools."

"Thank you." She sounded a tad subdued.

"Oh, and Jemma?"

"Hmm?"

"Only my mum calls me Leo. Do it again and I'm tellin' Skye you said we were friends."

"Coming to my rescue twice in one day?" Skye quipped as she gratefully accepted the enormous blended coffee Jemma handed her. "You really are a superhero."

"It was no trouble, I promise. Just glad to be of assistance." Jemma looked around quickly, tucking a strand of hair behind one ear. "Is, erm… is Fitz here yet?"

"Yeah!" Skye pointed to the tall ladder a ways off to the side and then to the rigging above the stage. "He showed up really fast. What did you even say to him?"

"Oh, nothing, I'm sure," Jemma let out a small laugh and played absently with her necklace, craning her neck up so she could spot him. "Dear god! Is that safe?"

Fitz was perched precariously on the catwalk, leaning over the edge far beyond what Jemma considered prudent.

"I know! Scary, right?" Skye took a huge slurp of her coffee shake and shook her head in disbelief. "He's been doing that the whole time; for a minute he was even hanging off the rails. It's like he's part monkey."

"Mack!" Fitz called down. "I need my big spanner!"

"I got you, Turbo!" Mack climbed up the ladder partway, reaching a large wrench over his head to a dangling Fitz, who took it easily.

"Stay there for a minute," Fitz instructed his partner. "Just got to," he heaved himself even farther out, holding on to the railing by his forearm and one gripping leg, "give this old thing a couple good screws, and then we can test it out."

"Hah!" came a snippy voice from behind Jemma. "Wish someone would give this old thing a good screw."

Hearing Skye's snort, Jemma didn't need to turn around to identify the speaker, but she did anyway. "Hello, Vaughn." Discreet as ever, I see. "Enjoying the show?"

"Honey- at my age, you see a man looking that good in a tank top?" Vaughn sipped at his Diet Pepsi. "You stop and appreciate the view."

Mack certainly did have an impressive physique. Displayed as he was, one leg bent up onto a step and the other pressing straight onto the ladder rung below, cleaning rag sticking out of his back pocket, Mack presented the very picture of a well-muscled handyman. Jemma, Skye, and Vaughn stood for a moment in silence, just taking him in. Him and his arms.
Vaughn sighed. "Too bad about his partner, though."

"Fitz?" Skye peered up with a skeptical look, shrugging. "I don't know… it's not like he's ugly."

Quite the opposite, actually. Jemma watched as Fitz scooted himself along a beam, his white tee and unbuttoned overshirt bunching around his chest, exposing most of his torso. Not that she was watching for that reason, of course. She was simply worried for his safety; it was very nerve-wracking to see him engaging in various acts of dexterity at such a height. In fact, before long, Jemma's pulse had sped up. Out of concern.

"Not ugly on the outside, maybe." Vaughn bent his head with a gossipy twist of his lips. "Let me tell you chickies exactly what is wrong with Leopold Fitz."

Jemma grimaced, aware of how easily Fitz took offense, and unsure whether he was within earshot. "I don't kn-"

"Picture this." Vaughn spread his palms, fluttering fingers and looking off to the side at no one. "The year was 2013. The world was reeling from the fact that it hadn't ended in 2012. My mother's 70th was fast approaching. And Fitz and his so-called business absolutely ruined that poor old woman's birthday party."

Jemma cringed internally. A few minutes later, she'd given up trying to stop the old man's anti-Leopold rant and had settled for making sure he kept his storytelling to a reasonable volume, while keeping a watchful eye on Fitz. Just to avoid an unpleasant scene, that's all. Thankfully, the sound of Fitz's labor seemed sufficient to prevent him from overhearing anything.

"And of course I'd hired Fungineers - I love a man in a cape," Vaughn winked outrageously. "But the Amazing Leopold was supposed to do this big magic trick, the showcase of the entire performance, and I was going to pop out of the box. My interpretive dance teacher said it was the perfect way to pay homage to my mother for bringing me into the spotlight of this world."

Jemma and Skye looked at each other, eyebrows raised, while Vaughn sighed mournfully. "Next thing I know, that Scottish tramp is letting my five-year-old niece steal the show! Just because I was a little late-" he scoffed, incredulous, "Hello, what was I supposed to do? I was the star! I had to look good!" He pursed his lips angrily. "And you can't tell me that guy doesn't know the importance of good grooming!" He held up an index finger. "The man's a hypocrite, and I'm just so--" he broke off, tearing up slightly, "so happy there are other people in this town who see him for the upstart little attention whore he really is."

Vaughn fanned his face for a second before choking out, "I need a minute."

Skye came to his aid. "Yeah… no problem. Uhhh…" She cast around, seemingly at a loss for words, and suddenly sparked to life. "Right! We need someone to fill in for Mad Dog on the radio! Would you mind findi-"

"Oh my stars and stones, do you mean it!?" Vaughn was staring at Skye, hands near his mouth and shaking… and if he hadn't been about to cry a second ago, he was now. "I promise, I won't let you down!"

"What?" Skye started to explain herself. "No, I just wanted you to-"

"Yes!" Vaughn was smoothing down what little hair he had, tugging on the waistband of his trousers and jiggling his arms and legs. "Take that, haters! It's Vaughn's time now!" The man was literally giddy, staring at Skye with unfettered gratitude. "As god is my witness," he put a hand to his chest,
"I will be the best deejay this one-toilet town has ever seen!"

"Right, that should do it." Brilliant job of it, too. Fitz chuckled at his own pun as he wriggled back onto the ladder and lowered himself down, then jumped the last three steps and gave Mack a wave where he stood by the breaker box.

Jemma moved to stand by the fire extinguisher - she of little faith - and Mack cautioned for everyone to step back, calling, "All right, man, let's light 'er up!"

Within seconds the stage was flooded in searing light.

"Friggin' yes! Finally!" Skye groaned in relief from the sideline, looking exhausted. She turned to share a high-five with Jemma, and as he headed their way, he heard Skye breathe out, " Seriously, I owe you one, for real."

"You owe her?" he grumbled, nearing the two women. "I fixed the bloody thing." There was no heat in his complaint, though. And speaking of heat... those lights had been more than a little heavy. Fitz had spent the last hour or so straining all his major muscle groups in order to get the job done, and the building's A/C wasn't impressive to begin with, much less up in the ceiling. Fitz wiped his sleeve on his brow and curled his lip in disgust when it came off in a smear of dust and sweat. "Ugh. I need a shower." And possibly a scented candle.

He wasted no time stripping down to his tee shirt, using the plaid button-up to towel off his hair and face. "...What?" he asked, noticing that Jemma and Skye were watching him closely. "Have I got a cobweb or something?" He twisted and craned, trying to swat it off.

Jemma looked a bit flushed - perhaps the A/C was lacking at floor level too - but she was quick to reassure him. "No, no... don't worry!" She stepped around him to check his back, her expression firmly cheery. "Not an arachnid in sight, it would seem. You're fine!"

"Damn fine," Skye added, not quite quietly enough. What the Hell? Maybe Skye did want to marry him.

"Yeah, okay... I'm just gonna... go to the main office." Who could puzzle out women, really?

Fitz beckoned for Mack, and they went down to the accounting department to sort out how to bill their services. On the way, they passed the broadcasting booth, where Fitz was startled to hear a pissy voice on the radio going off, oddly enough, on a vehement rant against Scotland for "bogarting" the unicorn as its national animal.

By the time Fitz and Mack reached their destination, though, the tone of the show had changed to something slightly more uplifting.

"But listen to me, going on and on about how hideously tacky golf pants are... Let's get back to the music! For all you dreamers out there, here's CeCe Peniston's Finally. Because if it can happen to me, it can happen to you! This has been your host, the Vaughn and Only, saying... stay fab and don't let anyone dim your sparkle!"

Chapter End Notes
So the big question is, is Fitz aware that he actually has two arch nemeses? Spoiler alert: OTT crack!diva!Vaughn (diVaughn?) isn't even on Fitz's radar. Poor Leopold's probably just like "why is that guy glaring at me? *shrug* must just be his face" every time he comes down to the station. And you can imagine how much Vaughn likes being ignored.

So in this fic, my headcanon is that Skye input her number into Jemma's phone and saved her contact as Beeeeeef because that is how Skye likes to pronounce BFF. (I mean, in case you needed to know, hehe.)

Credit to starbrightnights for making me give Fitz chances to use his "big spanner" whenever I can.

:-D

The "good screw" line can also be seen in Law & Order: MCU by amandajoyce118. (I've plugged it before and I'll plug it again! Seriously one of my favorite AUs.)

"Stars and stones" is a reference to the Dresden Files by Jim Butcher, which is a lot of fun, and contains various creative curses like that one. Besides, Vaughn seems a little obsessed with stardom, and also probably his stones.

Shout out to memorizingthedigitsofpi for her help with the direction of FitzSimmons' phone bickering and the name of Vaughn's new radio hour, "The Vaughn and Only" - she is a funny duck, that Pi.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Heads up!
This chapter leans about as far in a smutty direction as I'm comfortable going for this fic (there's talk of boners and sex stuff). I still think it's T-rated and nothing worse than you probably saw in Out of the Lab-yrinth or A Kiss-mas Story, but regardless - if that kind of thing is not your bag, please feel free to skip this chapter. I'll be happy to include a note at the beginning of Sunday's chapter to let you know what you missed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When she came out of the dressing room, Fitz felt as if his lungs were curling up like a spent matchstick. Oh, holy Mother. Jemma was in a sparkly sequined red leotard, cut like a Baywatch bathing suit, and a red-and-black top hat to match his own. Good Lord. He'd known about her legs, but… Good Lord. Added to the elbow-length white satin gloves and impossibly tall black heels, and Fitz wasn't sure there would be enough oxygen in the room for everyone. What the fuck did I do to deserve this?

She walked up to him, a catlike saunter that might be illegal, and Fitz couldn't help but feel his arteries start working overtime as nearly all the blood in his body rushed to one specific destination. For Christ's sake, control yourself. There are children here! Oh, bloody Hell. There were children here. What if one of them saw him become… compromised? I'm gonna get put on a list. There went his day job. And he was hungry, too. Keep it together, man! Wait a second. He was in Scout's Honor. It was a bar. There's no kids at a bar. But there were sandwiches.

Fitz's breath whooshed out in relief, and he staggered slightly. Jemma caught his arm, steadying him, and he couldn't help but observe how tightly her costume fit around her chest, pushing the tops of her breasts out in a decidedly unladylike manner.

"Ready, boss?" she asked with a brazen wink.

Professional. You're a goddamn professional. Fitz bit down on the side of his tongue, hard enough to draw blood, and positioned himself behind the sawing table so that if he was lucky, the entire crowd wouldn't be privy to what was going on in his head. Either one.

Jemma bowed to the audience - Jesus Christ, does she have to bend at the waist? Is a curtsy too much to ask? - then swept the hat off her head and let her shiny brown curls fall out with a flourish.

"Nice peaches!" came a vulgar shout from the audience. Fitz squinted and peered. Elliot bloody Randolph. Jeez, what planet is this guy from? The cretin just kept going. "Girlie, I wish you were a differential equation, so I could do you-"

"Oh, I'm sorry, do you not do complex maths in your head?" he sniffed dismissively. "Someone get this man a slide rule on his way out."

"In your head?" Fitz interrupted, giving Hunter a wordless signal and a chin tilt towards the door. What kind of chat-up line is that? Next he'll offer to show her his 'natural log'. "Oh, I'm sorry, do you not do complex maths in your head?" he sniffed dismissively. "Someone get this man a slide rule on his way out."
Amid the applause, Hunter gripped Randolph by the collar and strong-armed him out the door. Meanwhile, Jemma made her way over to where he was standing, leaned up and kissed his cheek just next to his ear. "My hero," she purred.

Fitz startled, head ricocheting as he turned towards her, but she was already climbing onto the smooth wooden table to lie down. As she gazed up at him with her hair spilling out around her face, Fitz felt his stomach tighten.

"Thanks again for doin' this." It was the first time Fitz had pretended to saw someone in half, considering his usual assistant was far too large for this particular trick. *Put Mack on this table and it'll be like Goldilocks in here.* But staring down into her wide, amber-glass eyes, her tongue darting out to add sheen to that unconscionably sexy red lipstick, Fitz felt like everything was *just right*.

As he leaned down to buckle her into the ankle restraints, reciting Euler sequences to himself so as to avoid noticing quite how smooth her legs were, she beamed at him across her body and teased, "Now, remember, I'm rather attached to my feet."

He shot back a smile. "Not for long!" The assembled guests tittered politely.

He came around to secure the cuffs around her wrists, and quietly checked, "Tight enough?" The raspy quality of his voice surprised him, and Fitz had to stop and clear his throat. At her quick nod, he raised the volume. "You know, I was shopping at the magic store earlier. You'll never believe what I," he lifted the relevant blade, "*saw* there. Everything was *half off!*"

"You were shopping?" she tossed back easily, amid the audience's groans. "Don't you mean *chopping*?"

"I'll thank you to keep your *cutting* remarks to yourself," he joked, as he began snapping the walls of the box in place around her body. As he slotted the stocks around her neck and arms, she blinked up at him, eyes round.

"Just like we practiced, yeah?" she whispered.

*God, she's beautiful.* Dangerously so, like a boa constrictor wrapped around his heart and squeezing so tight he could barely speak. "Don't worry, Simmons. I'll take care of you."

---

She came up to him after the show, as he was disassembling his props and methodically putting each part away. "Need any help carrying this out to the van?"

He flashed her a smirk and handed her a large duffel. "I don't know, think you can handle it?"

She stumbled a bit under the weight, but scoffed, "I'm out of those stilts and back in my trainers. I can handle anything."

"Hey, don't put that on me, I didn't pick your outfit." If anything, she was sexier now in jeans and a V-neck. "But, ah, tell Bobbi I said thanks."

Jemma rolled her eyes. "She and I have different ideas for what constitutes stage-appropriate apparel. I think she just wanted to get me into the tallest heels she could because I made a joke once about *the air up there.*"

They reached the van and arranged everything in the back, though Fitz had to climb in to situate a few things so they wouldn't get too badly jostled. He'd just turned around to scoot back out the rear
doors when he was surprised to see Jemma blocking his path. She held onto the frame of the vehicle, one hand on the side and one on the roof, and when she spoke, her voice was pitched low. "But I'll make sure to pass on your appreciation."

His mouth suddenly felt like an old toothbrush, and he swallowed. Hard.

"I meant what I said before, Fitz. I like you in that tux."

Fitz glanced down at the suit in question, then back up to her face, a flintbox beginning to spark in his abdomen. "Yeah?" It was nearly a growl.

She nodded slowly, tipping her chin lower to drag her eyes over him appraisingly before reaching out to grip his waistcoat. She kept her face tilted south and looked up at him through full lashes. "Mm-hmm."

"Prove it."

They came together like molten iron meeting the forge, fingers grasping, unbuttoning, pulling hair and tugging at cloth. She threw him roughly back onto the floor of the van and climbed on top of him, pinning his legs, tangling them in her own as she pressed their bodies together. He craned his neck, meeting her measure for measure, sucking her bottom lip into his mouth and digging his fingers into her thighs. Their chests were heaving a reckless rhythm, breaths coiling together in a wild rumpus of hazy lust.

"Fitz!" she cried out, writhing against him. "Yo, Fitz!"

"Turbo, buddy, wake up!"

Fitz sat up as if electrocuted, eyes flying open in the darkness and blinking furiously. "Wha-?"

There was a disgusting whuffling sound about two centimeters from his face, and then a flat, small, horrible-smelling tongue was on his chin, licking away - not for the first time, judging by the drool-soaked state of his cheeks.

"Gluurrgghnnnghh!" Fitz recoiled in disgust as he jerked his head out of Quinoa's reach, removing the little dog from her perch on his chest and setting her onto the floor, where she stayed, her tail beating a happy thump-thump-thump into the carpet.

Mack was standing in the doorway of his room, nearly filling the rectangle with his backlit outline. His normally practical voice was laced with concern. "You fell out of bed. You were, uhh, thrashing around pretty bad. Everything all right?"

"Yeah." He started to catch his breath, even as he extricated his legs from where they'd become cocooned by the comforter, drawing his knees up to his chest in an effort to hide the evidence of exactly what sort of dream he'd been having. "Yeah, sorry to wake you."

Mack thumped his hand against the doorway as he moved to leave. "It is what it is. Get some sleep, man."

"Right, thanks. Good night."

Fitz gathered up his bedding and put it back, flopping down onto the mattress face first. Almost unconsciously, his hips pushed into the cushions, and he groaned, wondering whether he could take care of the situation quietly enough to avoid alerting his recently-awoken roommate, or if he'd need to wait until the morning shower. *Curse that Jemma Simmons, anyway. Curse her and her stupid
perfect face and lovely proportions. And curse his turncoat brain for making him dream about her when Fitz understood perfectly well that the *only* reason she’d played such a starring role was that he’d been browsing (memorizing was such a strong word) her profile before bed, looking for something to mock. *Nothing mysterious to it; it doesn't mean anything.* He was pretty sure some very learned men had proven repeatedly that dreams were never "about" what they were about, anyway. *Exactly.* This was simply his anatomy responding to an inconveniently attractive woman.

Tomorrow night, he was going to look at pictures of Hollywood starlets before bed. *Hedy Lamarr. Yeah.* Even in his notoriously unreliable subconscious, which stubbornly refused to cooperate when it came to Jemma, Fitz was sure that staring at footage of the world's most beautiful inventor would set him to rights. *Good.* It was good to have a plan.

Now if only the rest of his body would get on the same page.
This chapter is dedicated to MechBull, who gave me the idea for it.

Special thanks to memorizingthedigitsofpi, for her help with the math-related pickup lines and sass, and as usual, the excellent photo manip of Sexy Magician's Assistant Jemma (man, if you like sexy photos of FitzSimmons, just freaking wait till Sunday).

Other stories that include sexy psych-out dreams (and I'm sure I'm forgetting a bunch of great fics here but you guys should definitely read these ones):
Loyalties and From Right to Left by MechBull
Well Formed and Symmetrical by agentverbivore
Copenhagen by badscienceshenanigans (and maximum props to her for providing an extra pair of eyes on this chapter)

The "gotcha" dream still isn't my favorite trope, but I thought it would work okay here (I did try to throw in a couple clues that it wasn't real). I hope no one feels disappointed, betrayed, or bamboozled!
In case you skipped the last chapter, Fitz had a sexy dream about Jemma, but he still refuses to acknowledge that he actually likes her. That was all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Ooh, eggs! Are we eating breakfast?" Bobbi grinned, rubbing her hands together.

"It's two in the afternoon," Jemma chuckled.

"It's never a bad time for breakfast, Captain," Bobbi countered easily. "Most important meal of the day."

"Good point." Jemma turned to her audience with a smile. "Children, Bionic Bobbi is right. Your growing bodies need breakfast to recharge your batteries, so that you can pay attention in school, and have lots of energy to play!" She faced Bobbi once more. "But these aren't here to eat..." She beamed brightly. "Today, my intrepid super-friend, we're doing eggs-periments!"

Bobbi flashed a grin. "I hear... is that... hopping?"

"Why, yes! Because it's our Easter Eggs-travaganza!" The screen behind Jemma lit up, showing the title of the episode, and a lab-coat-clad Easter Bunny bent over a microscope. Amidst the title fanfare, and the children's applause, Jemma and Bobbi headed to the "closet" on the wall of their set, which held lab coats, goggles, and gloves. When the noise had died down, Jemma spoke again.

"Now, boys and girls, before we can start our show-

Bobbi put a hand to the side of her mouth, adding in a stage whisper, "-and maybe get a visit from a special guest-

"-what do we need to do first?"

"Safety check!" the kids screamed happily.

"That's right!" Bobbi said. "If you want to do science safely, you need to look the part!"

"And that means...?" Jemma added with a significant look.

The children answered, yelling, "No capes!"

-0-

"And once the calcium-rich shell has completely dissolved in the vinegar, we've got a bouncy egg! Ready, Bionic Bobbi?"

"I'm ready! Ready, Gordon?" Bobbi nodded to the day's Science Sidekick, a little boy wearing glasses under his goggles.

"Ready for science!" he agreed with a buoyant salute.
They each picked up their shell-less egg and proceeded to drop it a short distance onto a mat. Except for Gordon. He held his egg carefully, fidgeting.

"Gordon? What's the matter, sweetie?" Bobbi asked from where she was standing next to him.

He looked up at her with big, round eyes. "I don't want to break it," he admitted in a small voice. "What if it splatters me?"

"It's okay," Jemma murmured, walking around to crouch by him. "We'll show you the way. Take my hand," she told him calmly, as he placed his free hand in hers, "and we'll do it together."

They counted down - this time, Gordon dropped his egg, watching the way it jumped slightly. With his eager smile

"Boing! Boing!" the audience cheered, as Gordon gave Jemma and Bobbi a high-five.

"Did someone say boing boing? That's my line!" An enormous Easter Rabbit wearing polka-dot pajamas came hopping onstage from the side entrance. "Hi, kids!" she waved.

"It's the Easter Bunny!" Bobbi exclaimed, as Gordon ran over to give the new arrival a hug. "And what's your name?" Jemma asked, smiling.

"I'm Mrs. Carrot! And I always wear pajamas!" She let out a silly giggle.

Bobbi held out a pair of huge lab goggles to their visitor. "Hi, Mrs. Carrot in pajamas, we're so happy to see you! Aren't we, kids?" She waved her arms, prompting the children to clap wildly in support.

"And you're just in time to help us with the rest of our eggs-periments! We're going to learn how to make an egg shrink, and grow, and spray, and float!

"Oh, that sounds like an egg-shell-ent time! I can't wait!" The Easter Bunny's voice came through surprisingly well, considering the mask. Then again, Jemma mused, Kara's no stranger to masks.

The kind-hearted woman was an acquaintance of Jemma's - she'd been burned in a freak accident and now took on jobs like this one, refusing to allow her disfigurement to stop her from bringing happiness and laughter to children. Jemma had nothing but the utmost respect for her.

"In that case..." Jemma marched over to the lab table and started gathering the different supplies they'd need. "Let's see what we can learn, shall we?"

-0-

"Should we add one more book? What do you think? Will it hold... ten books?"

The children shrieked their assent, and Jemma balanced one more of Dr. Seuss's best on the stack currently sitting atop four half-eggshells. As the Easter Bunny flipped their "book counter" to read 10, a burst of music exploded into the studio, indicating that the show was nearly over.

"So, Gordon, what have we seen?" Jemma asked the little boy.

"Ummm... that the shape of the egg-" he shot a quick look at Bobbi, who nodded her encouragement, "- the dome, is strong?"

"That's correct!" Jemma turned to the audience. "And what else have we learned? Yes, you there, can you give me an eggs-ample?" She pointed to a pre-teen girl.
"The membrane lets water through because of osmosis, and you can make an egg bigger or smaller depending on the solution you put it in," the girl declared confidently.

"Absolutely right. Anything else?" This time she called on a much younger girl.

"If you put an egg in salty water, it floats!"

"Because of density," Bobbi added. "But a rotten egg floats because of the stinky old air inside. Yuck!" The audience called out a chorus of ewwww, and from offstage, Jemma saw Skye giving them the "wrap it up" gesture.

"Well, gee, Captain Chemistry, this sure was fun!"

"We had fun too!" Jemma said, and the rest of the people onstage quickly added their agreement.

The Easter Bunny hopped in place. "But now… I've got to bounce!"

-o-

After they'd ended the show and Kara and Bobbi had taken their leave, Jemma looked over the stage again, and pulled out her phone.

[To Grumpy Dwarf: Don't forget, this weekend is Easter :-) Better make sure you've got enough rabbits!]

[From Grumpy Dwarf: To celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and Saviour? Not exactly a big demand for magicians, but thanks so much for your concern. I'll tell Ward to keep the bunnies under lock and key.]

Remembering how the children had loved Kara, Jemma couldn't help herself, and typed out a follow-up.

[To Grumpy Dwarf: Have you ever considered dressing as a rabbit yourself? Personally, I think it would be adorable. Let Mack pull you out of a hat. He looks more than strong enough. :-)]

Mack really is quite a lot of a man.

[From Grumpy Dwarf: Oh no, help. My sides have split from how funny you are.]
[From Grumpy Dwarf: In case you were wondering, this sort of thing is why we aren't friends.]
[From Grumpy Dwarf: Also Happy Easter.]

"Hey, Cap," Skye popped the p, "who're you texting?"

"Skye!" Jemma jumped, putting her hand up to her throat and quickly pocketing her phone. "Where did you come from?"

Skye gave her a dubious once-over. "Umm… I work here."

"Right, yes, of course, I meant- is that a new leather jacket? It looks lovely on you!"

Skye peered closely at Jemma's face. "You're dodging the question. Who were you texting that's got you all giggly?"

"No one!" At her friend's disbelieving expression, Jemma insisted, "And I was not giggly. If you must know, I was actually poking fun at someone."
"I don't buy it." Skye tapped her lip. "You're much too polite to make fun of anybody… except for… oh my god, Jemma, are you texting Fitz?" She made a swiping pass to try and snag Jemma's phone, unsuccessfully.

"Hey- hey!" Jemma dodged, then lowered her voice. "Look, yes, I've been texting him, but it's not- it isn't like that, all right?"

"Like what?" Skye's lips shrugged into a blameless pout and her hands came up placatingly. "I didn't say anything."

Jemma lifted her nose a bit. "We aren't even friends, he and I. We've agreed very firmly on that point."

"Uh, yeah," Skye commented wryly. "Pretty sure we are friends, and you've never once commented how you'd like to get your hands on my 'big impressive tech'..." She did the air quotes.

"Shhh! Skye!" To be fair, she wasn't sure what she was shushing Skye for, exactly, but there were a few kids straggling around the stage.

Skye grinned good-naturedly. "Okay, I'm dropping it. But whenever you do wanna talk guys, I've got some news of my own."

Blessedly grateful for the topic change, Jemma raised an eyebrow. "Yeah? Who's the lucky man?"

"Umm," Skye's smile turned slightly shyer, less sure, but still happy. "Trip? You know, the singer…"

Jemma saw the brightness in Skye's eyes and felt a surge of vicarious pleasure. It had been weeks now, and any trace of regret she might have had over not securing Trip for herself had long since faded. "Of course! He seemed lovely."

"Oh, good." After a relieved pause, Skye coughed. "I mean… I kind of figured it out after talking to him for a while, that he was the one you'd been flirting with..." She squinted, earnest. "I really like him, Jemma."

"Skye." Jemma faced her fully, putting her hand on Skye's arm and squeezing. "I'm glad. You deserve to be with someone wonderful."

"He is pretty great. Did you know his grandfather was a famous musician? One of The Howling Commodores." Skye was quiet a moment. "Sorry I was teasing you about Fitz. You know I'm just on your side, right?" She offered an easygoing smile. "If you say there's nothing going on, then there's nothing going on."

"There is nothing going on," Jemma asserted. And she meant it. But for a second, though… Oh, poppycock. What did it say about her, that she wished she were lying?

A week or so later, Jemma was walking out of Principal Hand's office at the end of the May Play Day carnival when she heard a pained cry from the nurse's station two doors down. As she got closer, she recognized Fitz's telltale whinge. What's he gone and done to himself this time? Curious, she peeked in, being careful to stay out of sight, and saw Mack patiently pressing a wad of gauze to his palm from where he sat on the raised bench, and Fitz, pacing the floor a few feet away - cape thrown haphazardly over the back of a chair, bow tie undone and hanging down around his open collar. He ran his hands through his curls for what looked like the hundredth time, judging by the state of his hair, and gripped the ends of the bow tie, pulling against the back of his neck.
"Christ's sake, Mack, why were we even throwing knives at a children's carnival? They were supposed t' be blunt!"

Oh, he had not just maimed his friend in a dangerously unnecessary display. What is wrong with this man? The hubris, I swear. Her mouth quirked in amusement. This could be excellent fodder for a mickey-take. Before she could act on it, though, Mack cut in.

"Don't worry about it, Turbo. Look." Mack lifted his hand and started to tug up the gauze, before Fitz's dry heave stopped him. "I caught the thing before it could hit me. The cut's tiny. It's not a big deal."

"Tiny on you, maybe!" Fitz's distress kept ratcheting higher. "I just- I'm normally a crack shot. You know how good my aim is." He dropped his arms to the counter behind him, the rolled-up sleeves making the tendons in his forearms stand out. "Obvisously not as good as your reflexes." He exhaled, all in a rush. "I swear, never again. No more knives. Hell, I'm never playing darts again."

Mack chuckled, "I bet Hunter'll love not getting humiliated in his own bar every week, but seriously- I'm good, man."

She could see the pulse jumping in Fitz's throat, his chest heaving in worried breaths despite Mack's reassurance. It made his waistcoat bunch up slightly, the way he was leaning back against the counter, and she found her fingers twitching to smooth it down. Ahem. She quashed that thought almost as soon as it blipped into her head. It was probably just her natural sense of order and neatness, wanting to correct his disheveled appearance. Yes. That's it. Jemma was merely uncomfortable with Fitz's sloppy appearance, that was all, and it would be a terrible shame if he ruined his tux or stretched it out. Considering how good he looks in it.

Her eyes closed briefly as her brain supplied that last thought. All right, so she found Fitz attractive. That's not so bad. Shame, really, that he was so good-looking, given that the day they met, he'd trespassed onto her set, ruined her show, and then let her pay for his coffee without a word. Probably had a good laugh about it with Mack afterwards. When it all boiled down, no matter how much she occasionally enjoyed their repartee, those weren't the markers of a trustworthy person. Jemma sighed and tipped her head back against the tile wall of the elementary school building. Why are the hot ones always such arseholes?

She suddenly felt very odd about standing in a hall, eavesdropping on her gorgeous sort-of-nemesis. Gorgeous? That seemed a bit excessive. Better check again. One quick glance back in the room had her blowing out her cheeks in frustrated confirmation. Not only was he still gorgeous, he was also still very much upset. I can't very well tease him for something he's already berating himself over. And the last thing she needed was for Principal Hand to catch her skulking about out here. Nodding at her decision to leave Fitz be - just this once - Jemma eased back from the door, tiptoed down the hallway and headed out to the parking lot.
Chapter End Notes

The idea of bouncy eggs came from thelatenightstoryteller’s fic Try This At Home. The other egg-related "eggsperiments" can be found at Science Sparks.

Fun nod to The Incredibles here :-)
The manip of "300% done with everything" Fitz (aww, poor baby, nearly stabbed his friend) comes to you courtesy of the inimitable memorizingthedigitsofpi as I'm sure you know by now!

:-D For a variety of Fitz-in-a-rumpled-tux photo manips, you should definitely check out her tumblr page!
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fitz looked up from fixing the wonky blower for the moonbounce when his phone dinged to signal it had finally finished charging. Mack had dragged him to some mind-numbing small-business seminar in Triskelion Heights the night before - "The Real Deal: Keeping Your Confidence in a Competitive Climate" - with a rather unnecessary remark about how Fitz could learn a thing or two. Personally, Fitz had no idea why Mack was so impressed by the Real Deal business series, but he'd wisely kept mum on the subject.

The net result had been that Fitz was bored out of his skull and had almost immediately used up his phone's remaining battery power playing Kwazy Cupcakes. He'd been so tired after the drive back that plugging in his charger had completely slipped his mind.

An oily sense of trepidation ran through him, though, when he saw his notifications. Five missed voicemails? No one ever left Fitz voicemail except his mother. Fitz tried not to let his hands shake too much, his mind running through every terrible scenario as the mounting dread threatened to overwhelm him. As quickly as he was able, he dialed the number and sat down to hear the news.

"Leo, this is yer mam." His heart clutched in his chest. The very next moment, though, her familiar banter kicked in, shaking his fear loose like grime in the dishwasher. "Ye'd better not be screenin' my calls, hear? Now I know ye t' be a good boy, so I'm gonna trust ye're jus' sleepin', and if so why are y' so damn tired, my wee cactus! Are y' feelin' all right? I hope ye've not been stayin' out late again, y' know I don't like ye gallivantin' about at all hours… ye'd better give us a ring, Leopold Fitz, or so help me I will hop on a plane and box yer ears, ignorin' yer ol' mam like this, so close t' death and frail as I am…"

Fitz's breath came out of him in a relieved gust as he listened to his mother ramble on for another couple of sentences, sounding exactly like her usual self. He shook his head with a chuckle. She really thought he was sleeping when she'd called at - he checked the timestamp - smack in the middle of the seminar? More like wishing for the sweet sleep of death. Speaking of which… Frail. Mum, please. Lorna Fitz was as hale and strong as they came, and quite probably going to live another hundred years.

The next message, however…

"Fiiiiitzz…" His eyes flew open. That's Jemma's voice. He hadn't heard from her in a while, and he tipped his head unconsciously to listen around the upbeat music blasting through the phone. She sounded absolutely hammered. "Skye's got something to teeeelll yoouuu…"

"Sorry I stole your rabbit!" Skye called from the background, equally slurred. "Not sorry Jemma decided to make it up to you!"

"Skye!" A third woman, laughing. "C'mon, this is embarrassing enough for her."

Straining to hear the voices in the background, Fitz jumped at the sudden loudness of Jemma shouting-snorthing in his ear, "She's talking about the scones! It's- scones. That's all she means…"

"I really don't!"

"Shhh-"
He waited, curious but wary, for the next voicemail to play. When it came on, it was clearly an accidental dial, a bit muffled but still intelligible. Fitz felt a wisp of guilt creep up his spine at the idea of listening in, but... well, after all, they did call him. He leaned forward, feeling a bit like he used to watching soaps with his mum.

"-anybody from that site?" That was Skye, and the third woman overlapped the tail end of her sentence.

"Yeah, isn't it pretty expensive? Why are you paying for it if it doesn't work?"

Now Jemma was getting defensive. "I went on a date!"

Skye again. "Yeah, with that guy who was old enough to be your dad..."

"Doctor Hall was fascinating to speak with. Though, his manner was a bit too grave for my taste."

"Okay! And you haven't gone on another one since! What happened to your big plan, Ms. Hot Stuff, slutting it up in a new town?"

Jemma made a noise that most likely meant she was choking on her drink. "I wouldn't put it quite that way... anyway, can you blame me? The choice of men in this town is terrible! And I'm fairly sure their compatibility maths are horribly off." She sighed. "Ninety-seven percent? That's clearly a mistake."

"Okay, but... we all know your thing with Fitz is-"

No! No, no, no. What "thing with Fitz" was Skye talking about? He held his breath, fingers drumming on the surface of his workbench, as the next message clicked on. All three women, if possible, had gotten even more drunk.

"Skye, stop! Bobbi, tell her to stop. Look, it's leaving a message right now."

"Okay, then ask him!" Skye cheered giddily.

"My god, next time I'm picking Truth." Jemma cleared her throat, slowing her words and overcorrecting her pronunciation. She sounded less like she was sober and more like she was impersonating the "upstairs folk" from Downton Abbey. "Fitz, old chap! I've, erm, I've got to ask you... if it's true about what... if you... do you have a..." She dropped back into her inebriated warble, "Oh, for heaven's sake, I can't, Skye!" He could picture how red her face must be.

"Nope! No takebacks!" Skye was emphatic in her drunken glee, and Bobbi echoed the sentiment.

"Fine! But don't expect any mercy from me next round!" Taking a deep breath, with an audible wince to her words, Jemma huffed out, "Fitz-do-you-go-naked-underneath-your-kilt?"

What in the buggering blazes? Fitz's entire forehead had become a game of Cat's Cradle. He didn't even own a kilt. He hadn't worn one since he was a tiny pageboy in his cousin's wedding. He began pacing, holding the phone to his ear and shaking out his other hand while the message switched over.

The music on this one was muted, with nothing but the driving bass coming through. Jemma,
however, was as sloshed as ever.

"Okay, so… all right…" The deliberate slowness was back. "Here's the thing about you." She hiccupsed plaintively. "You appear to be this cute, funny guy, but I thought the same thing when—" Was that a burp? "we first met! And then! Imagine my surprise when, when you…” Jemma seemed to be having some difficulty nailing down her train of thought, "you weren't shy at all, you were just nursing some kind of awful grudge against me," her words picked up speed, "and I didn't even know who you were, so how—"

"Jemmmaaaaa!" Skye wheedled, suddenly close by. "Come on, the movie's starting! Time to watch Channing Potaters take his pants off!"

"Yes, of course, I'll be right there!" Jemma cleared her throat thickly, though the jolt of the interruption seemed to have cleared her head a bit. "Erm, you should… can you- you might delete this, actually. I, er… I shouldn't have called? Oh, god. Have a good night!"

Click.

Fitz flumped back into his chair, eyes staring blankly. His mind was reeling, but one thing stood out. She thinks I'm cute? His mouth split into something of a manic grin.

Oh, this was going to be fun.
This is one of the shortest chapters, but it's one of my favorites!

There's a fun nod to B99 for those of you who watch.

Fitz's mom is based on the same Lorna Fitz from Oh To Be Young, but just a little more obnoxious, to show where maybe Fitz got some of his sauce from.

The "under the kilt" thing is also inspired by amandajoyce118's fic Law & Order: MCU.

I personally use all of the following to refer to Channing Tatum: Channing Taters, Channing Potatum, Channing Potaters, Channing Tatertot, and Channing PotatoFace. That was just for fun, and I mean no disrespect; the case could certainly be made that he in fact bears no resemblance to a potato. :-D

Also, as a treat for my careful readers, I did end up writing Jemma's MoreThanThat
profile. Many thanks to memorizingthedigitsofpi for her suggestions and help with that, and of course for putting it into a lovely visual format for y’all!
“Yep. Okay, mum. No, you don’t have to send me a new charger— no, please don’t— we’ve got different plugs here— all right, mum, thanks.” It would be simple enough to modify for an American electric outlet. *Not worth the hurt feelings.* “I’ve got t’ run, now, but I’ll talk to y’ tomorrow. Yes. Sorry again. Love you.”

Hanging up, Fitz packed his tech case, grabbed the leash, and whistled for Quinoa. Today was gonna be a good day.

-0-

Clear skies and a pleasant temperature had drawn out the standard crowd, but even with the foot traffic, the park in the town square was nice enough at this time of day. Fitz set his case down on a bench and checked his watch. *Should be late enough.* He might be a right bastard, but he knew how important a lie-in was after a night of hard drinking. He pulled out his phone and dialed.

“Hello, this is Jemma Simmons!” chirped her bubbly recorded voice. “Please leave a message!”

“Jemma… it’s Fitz. Er, Leopold Fitz, from—” *She knows, you numpty.* He coughed. This wasn’t starting off the way he’d intended at all. He forced his tone back to familiar ground, introducing a note of mockery. “So I learned some *very* interesting information last night… just wondering if your phone keeps a record of your sent voicemails? If not, I’ll be *happy* to go over everythin’ in *great* detail. Or, y’know,” he teased, “I *might* just decide to make things up as I pleas— oh, horseshite!”

He was suddenly yanked forward, stumbling, and dropped his phone when Quinoa lunged against her leash and pulled it from his grasp. “The Hell’s gotten into you? Come back here, y’ little fleabag!” he scolded, bending to retrieve the phone from the grass and cursing his apparent lack of upper-body strength. *Can’t even properly hold onto a 20-pound dog.*

Then he happened to see what Quinoa was running towards -- Jemma, striding across the grounds, barely recognizable in some kind of jogging outfit and a huge, floppy hat. At the same moment, she lifted a hand to the side of her sunglasses, scrunching her face at him. For a second, Jemma seemed about to walk off without so much as a wave, but as the dog reached her and started yipping, she squared her shoulders and called out, “Fitz?”

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*Ug.* Jemma could not understand how Skye had convinced her to drink quite so many White Russians. It was the sugar -- Jemma didn’t realize how drunk she was getting until it had happened, and well… who could argue with Kahlua and cream? Didn’t mean she had to like it the next day, however.

She’d woken to the sound of her phone ringing, and picked up to hear Ernesto, her stylist, talking a mile a minute. *Damn.* She’d forgotten about her appointment that day. Since Jemma’s Spanish wasn’t the best, she could only guess at what he was saying, but she heard the word *mediodía* a few times. She’d glanced at her alarm clock -- eleven twenty -- and blessed her constitution for allowing her to power through almost any hangover (and premenstrual cramps as well, now -- *thank you,*
The clock tower at City Hall now showed a quarter to noon, and Jemma cursed as she cut through the park to save time. Then out of the blue Quinoa was jumping up her legs and Fitz was shouting from across a low hill. *Crums.* Because of course, after more than a week of not running into him anywhere, he would see her when she was feeling terrible, running late, dressed for comfort, still sporting last night’s smudged mascara behind her sunglasses. And naturally, she hadn’t had time to shower (Ernesto was going to wash her hair anyway) so between her skin still tacky from the glitter lotion Skye had insisted they try, the coffee breath, and a messy bun under her *don’t-look-at-me* hat, Jemma was certain Fitz would find something to make fun of.

He was floundering for something on the ground, and she debated for a second whether she could just walk off and pretend she hadn’t noticed him. Though that was rather hard to do with Quinoa making such a racket, and—yes, all right, damn it, now he’s seen me.

“Fitz!” she called out, grabbing Quinoa’s leash and walking her back.

She couldn’t quite place his expression — he seemed caught off guard, and for a moment (unsurprisingly) appeared to be laughing at her. Then he was beckoning her over, opening the bulky metal suitcase like a street peddler hawking his wares.

“Jemma! I was actually just—” Fitz lifted a small quadcopter from its compartment and began setting up the accoutrements. “You know what? It’s not important. I’m glad you’re here, though.”

“Oh, I really can’t stay…” She couldn’t help peeking around his torso at the little drone. “That’s not the same one I saw last time.”

“Yeah, that’s right.” Fitz grinned like a little boy at the science fair. “I took your advice. Made some modifications, decreased the size. And look.” He reached into his bag and pulled out a Ziploc bag of dry dog food, pouring it into a compartment on the copter. “Highway SkyTray, Pet Edition!”

Toggling the settings on his controller pad, tongue poking through his teeth in concentration, Fitz started up the drone and let it hover in the air. Quinoa hopped on the bench and watched the proceedings curiously. One push of the joystick and a few taps on the buttons and kibble started dropping onto the wooden surface beside them.

Quinoa sniffed, scooted forward, and licked one of the kibbles experimentally. Then she all but exploded into a frenzy of full-body wiggles and greedy-pup fun, leaping off the bench and barking excitedly at the flying food dispenser. Fitz turned to Jemma and offered her the joystick pad. “Want t’ have a go?”

*Do I ever.* Fitz’s enthusiasm was contagious; the redesign was elegant, and the device itself seemed easy to control even in a slight breeze — though that could be the result of Fitz’s practiced hand. *Still…* she wasn’t exactly presentable at the moment, and she’d spent far too long chatting already. “I… can’t,” she sighed. “I’ve got to get my hair cut. I’ll be late as it is.”

“What?” Fitz craned his neck and peered quizzically at her bun. “But y’ don’t need— Never mind, it’s not my business.” He shrugged, quite obviously affecting nonchalance. “If you have to go, I won’t keep you.”

“No, that’s not what I—” *Oh, bother.* “I really would like to! It’s just… the PR department’s asked me to change my look. They want me to wear my hair down. Said it’ll make me more approachable.” But what they’d really meant was that a pretty host would sell more merchandise, and Jemma hadn’t been willing to compromise on taking off her goggles or losing the lab coat.
“Well, that’s absurd.” He squinted, trying to look under her hat, and her hand flew up to her neck self-consciously. “What’s your hairstyle got to do with anything?”

“Yes, that’s what I said! But they insisted, and, well… it would be a safety violation to leave it loose at this length, so I thought…” Now it was Jemma’s turn to shrug. It was a small price to pay, to do the job she loved and inspire hordes of young girls and boys towards scientific pursuits.

“Jemma. C’mon.” That wry little grin was back. He picked up Quinoa and held her up by his face, putting on an odd, garbled voice. “Remma! Ron’t ro! Ray in the rark and ray with me!”

“Oh, god.” Jemma’s hands instantly moved to her mouth in vicarious embarrassment. “Is that what you think Quinoa sounds like? And why is she Australian?”

“Hey!” Fitz set the dog on the bench and sniffed. “My Scooby Doo impression is bang-on and you know it.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” She nodded skeptically. “Must be a hit at parties. Do you also imitate snails?”

He narrowed his eyes humorlessly. “Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

She laughed at his sudden turnaround, and made a decision. “Give me a second; I’ll see if I can reschedule.”

Jemma moved away and hit redial. “Hola, Ernesto? Oh, Karla, it’s you, thank goodness. Look, I spoke with Ernesto earlier and I thought he said to come in at noon? Ah, he did? Oh, no, not a problem -- actually, that’s perfect! Yes! Thank you so much. I’ll see him at three.” She smiled into the phone, listening to the nail technician relay greetings from people in the salon. “That’s so sweet! Well you tell Jiaying I think she’s beautiful. All right, I’ve got to run! Thank you again.”

She jogged back to Fitz, enjoying the way the sunlight reflected off his curls, or the light sheen of sweat that had stuck a few of them to his forehead in the midday warmth. He held the control pad out to her, clearly proud of his cool new toy, and she got a bit lost in the way his breath came and went in fast, eager puffs. When she took the controls and their fingers brushed, he bit his lip into that smirk again, the one she’d come to associate with his insufferable, arrogant, deluded, completely annoying personality. Only, it didn’t look quite as bad on him as she’d once thought. Fudgesicles. She might be in trouble.

Fitz’s mouth curled as if he knew what she was thinking. “Good choice. And I promise,” he murmured, stepping close behind her so he could show her which buttons to push, “this’ll be a lot more fun than sittin’ in a barber’s chair.”

Good God. All he was doing was standing near her. He wasn’t even touching her, but she could feel the heat radiating off his body, how his quick breaths tickled her skin, and the way her own breathing sped up in response.

She was definitely in trouble.
"Okay, so y' just- careful!" Fitz's hand reached quickly to steady hers. "This is a prototype, mind, it's not that durable." Though, it wouldn't really bother him if she broke it. *Then she'd have to owe me another favor, which... could be good.* Maybe they'd rebuild it together; she could make some more suggestions. *She'd be a perfect beta tester.* Okay, he needed to stop that line of thinking before he ended up breaking his own drone and framing her for it.

Jemma startled a bit when his fingers landed on hers, glancing over. "I am being careful. Excuse me if I didn't spend my formative years flying remote control aeroplanes."

"No, you were probably far too busy doing your homework and thinking up extra rules for everything." Fitz gave her another sideways smile and watched her swallow, as their joined hands jiggled the joystick. Some yards away, Quinoa had joined forces with a small pack of assorted townspeople's dogs to chase down every wayward kibble.

"Gentle grip, now," he cautioned, letting his words blow across the fine hairs at the back of her neck - Is that glitter? - and making a mental note of how she shivered and stilled.

This was fun. He congratulated himself again on the brilliant notion of throwing Jemma off guard by flirting with her. A classic strategy, and one that would surely stack the odds in his favor the next time he needed the upper hand. Of course he hadn't planned on seeing her today, had simply meant to tease her over the phone in their usual way, but teasing Jemma in person was turning out to be a lot more entertaining. *And it's so embarrassing for her!*

It was becoming a bit of a game, to learn exactly what kind of responses he could coax out of her, how many times he could make her voice catch and her hands shake. Fitz was nothing if not thorough, and at the moment, he was curiously, methodically cataloguing the evidence of just how "cute" she found him. *Cute, pffft. If by cute she means a Tazmanian Devil of raw sexuality."

"All right, give it a bit of a nudge. Y' can go faster than that. Might want t' get your hand all the way around." He was on a roll.

Jemma darted a quick look over, mildly scandalized, if he was going by the set of her mouth. *Oh, fine.* He'd give the poor girl a break. Fitz stepped back and flopped back onto the bench. "You seem to have the hang of it. So, are you all set for next week?"

"Mm-hmm," she nodded, not taking her eyes off the drone. "It's going to be the best finale the Children's Day Spectacular has ever seen."

She'd only just moved to town that year! "How would you know?"

"Well, you didn't have me in charge before," she smiled.

*This woman, I swear.* "Was that your pitch when you begged Mayor Coulson to let you take it on?"

"Please, Fitz." She shot him a saucy grin. "The mayor called me."

Fitz shook his head, rolling his eyes. "Either way, if you're doing this, at some point you're gonna need a few pointers from a seasoned Children's Day veteran."
"Oh, I wouldn't go that far."

He watched her flying the copter for a handful of seconds, lightly tracing his finger on the arm of the bench. "I'd be happy to offer you some tips. Maybe teach you a couple magic tricks, give y' some stage presence."

She narrowed her eyes in mock condescension. "I'm fairly sure I've got it." She angled the drone back and plucked it from the air before turning to him. "Although, I do have a two-year-old neighbor who's easily amused. You could show me a trick for her."

Whoa. Jemma "I know everything" Simmons was actually asking him to teach her something? Fitz's mind blipped through the possibilities at lightning speed before landing on the perfect choice. Assuming he could get through it without getting distracted, of course.

Come on, Fitz. Confidence. Right. "Get out your quarters." He pointed at her purse with his chin. "And prepare to be amazed."

"See, I've got four coins in my hand." He held them, palm up, so Jemma could see. Yes. She was definitely looking at the coins, despite the twitch in her thighs calling her a liar.

Fitz flipped his hand over and dropped the small stack of quarters into his other hand, opening his fist once so she could see the change still there. "Now I'm gonna put them in my pocket. Although in this case, we're gonna have to use your pocket."

He leaned forward and carefully slipped his hand into the pocket of her zip-up, and Jemma focused on keeping herself steady while he dropped the coins with a heavy clink. God, he's even more handsome up close.

Fitz had been uncharacteristically attentive that morning, even suggestive at times, and she would have loved to sit back and enjoy it. If only I weren't feeling so foul. As it was, though, her brain kept turning over reminders of her missed shower, ratty hair and coffee breath. Of all the luck, honestly. Jemma didn't believe in Murphy's law, but it did explain why Fitz would decide to invade her personal space the one time she saw him at less than her clean-and-pressed best. His scalpel-blue scrutiny, which might have been flatteringly welcome under different circumstances, only made her feel naked, and not in the nice way. Not in the way she'd perhaps like to be.

When Fitz plucked at the material on the front of her hoodie, pretending to pull out a coin despite their being no opening in the fabric, she could barely focus on the sultry smile he was sending her way. He was simply too close for comfort. And - a horrifying thought invaded - what if she'd started her period since that morning? If the smell of blood could attract sharks and bears… well, okay, that was a ridiculous argument, but Fitz was incredibly detail-oriented nonetheless. Dear god, no. Jemma needed a minute to herself. Now.

Fitz had known for some time that he enjoyed winding Jemma Simmons up, but armed with his new outlook, he was finding out just how much fun it was to make her turn red from blushing rather than anger.

At least, so he thought until he brushed his fingers against her jacket pocket, completing the magic trick, and Jemma coughed uncomfortably. Fitz's gaze immediately flew to her face, searching, but it was hard to read her expression behind the sunglasses and hat.

People cough. She'd asked him to show her this. It was fine. "Right," he carried on, "so now that
you've seen it done at full speed, I'm going to break it down for you step by step, okay?" Fitz reached for her hand, dropping the quarters into it and curling his own around hers. "We start by-
This time there was no mistaking it. Jemma flinched, shrugging her arm away and wriggling her hand out of his grasp. Shoulders hunched, she slapped the change onto the bench and mumbled out a hurried "Excuse me!" before jogging off towards the water fountain.

What in the seven Hells? Fitz's rib cage contracted like a salted slug as he began to calculate exactly how horribly he'd misinterpreted the entire situation. He'd assumed she was reacting to him based on attraction, but all at once he remembered her other voicemail, talking of the complete lack of dateable men in town. Was she including him among her options when she said that? Did she think of him that way at all? She certainly hadn't seemed to think they were compatible. Oh, God. She'd said she thought he was cute. Past tense. Oh, no. I've cocked this all up, haven't I? Retreat!

Fitz had been so sure he had the advantage in their little power dynamic, but if she really didn't think of him like that, then he'd just spent the last hour making an absolute fool of himself. Damn it. He dropped his face into his hands for a beat, then grabbed the drone control pad and started packing up. He needed to regroup, figure out the best way to save face after this fiasco.

"Fitz?"

He looked up to see her striding back, wiping her mouth with the back of her arm.

"Are you leaving?" She sounded… he didn't know.

Bugger all. Why had he ever thought he could read Jemma's signs well enough to tease her about them? Fitz shrugged, scratching at his jaw, and didn't look at her. "Just gettin' a bit too warm out here."

She stayed standing, brushing off a bit of oak tree debris that had landed on her yoga pants. "It is warm… and the drinking fountain reeked of old pond water." Her lips pursed in distaste.

Fitz grunted something noncommittal, and clapped his hands, whistling to coax Quinoa back. Her movement from the side of his vision caught his attention, and he turned his head to see her bent down, tying her sneaker. Oh, for the love of- Why in blazes was she doing that? His mind took an express train, unbidden, back to a certain dream, and he all but staggered under the déjà vu.

She had to know what she was doing, bending over like that. She definitely knows. Fitz's breath came out of him in staccato thunks. She also literally just ran away from you, you pervert. But if she found him so awful and didn't want to be near him, why was she presenting her bottom like a mating baboon? Unable to tear his eyes away, it took his mind a second to catch up to the fact that she'd just spoken. "Sorry, what?" Get it together, man.

"I was just thinking of getting us something cold from the corner store, if you don't mind waiting."

When he turned, she'd picked up the drone and was carefully inspecting it from all sides. "I never really got a chance to look at the new design. Is that all right? I don't want to bother you if you've got somewhere to be."

Wait. So she'd found an excuse to escape his company - probably disgusted by the way he'd been mooning at her - but at the same time she was offering to buy him a drink? Women are impossible. Thankfully, Jemma didn't sound as if she'd noticed anything strange about his behavior either. She just sounded… normal. Well, if she was going to be normal, so could he. Of course, for Fitz, normal meant one thing.
"Hmmph," he scoffed, teasing. "Don't want to bother me? That'd be a first."

Fortunately for him, Jemma simply rolled her eyes in amusement and reached for her wallet. "What did you want from the store?"

If he said an ice cream sandwich, would she get him an ice cream sandwich, or would she try to make him eat something terrible, like vegetable jerky or bran? "You know what? I'll go. Then you'll have plenty of time for a peek at the drone while I'm gone."

Jemma raised her head to peer at him over the top of her sunglasses. "You would leave me here alone with your dog and your prototype? My, my, how trusting we've become."

He chuckled and started counting off on his fingers. "First off, still not my dog. And second, I think you'll want to hang around till I get back."

"Oh?" she challenged. "And why is that?"

*Now I play my ace in the hole.* Fitz flicked up a smug eyebrow. "Check your voicemail."

Chapter End Notes

The coin trick Fitz is showing her.

(Spoiler alert: he did not "have to" use her pocket.)
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

What in the world did he mean by that? Jemma chewed at her lip, wanting to find out what was on her phone - sod it, there'll be time for that later. Any curiosity was promptly replaced by a frantic grab at opportunity as Fitz trotted out of sight. The instant he was far enough away, Jemma tugged open her purse and thanked her lucky stars she excelled at preparation. Her clothing she couldn't do much about, but everything else? Pulling out a moist towelette, an eyeliner pencil, lip gloss and a hairbrush, she yanked off her hat and sunglasses, buckled down and set to work.

Several minutes later, fresh-faced and feeling quite like the self-assured young woman with an above-average fashion sense she knew she was, Jemma pulled her hair into a high ponytail and sighed in relief. It was impossible to ascertain without being indiscreet, but after a quick sniff test, she was confident in both the strength of her deodorant and the relative cleanliness of her knickers. No visiting aunts today, thank heavens. Her luck just might be turning.

She sat on the bench and retrieved the drone, ready to finally examine it at her leisure. Fitz would be back any minute now, and she wanted to be able to talk to him about the upgrades he'd made to the little machine. As she turned it over, recalling the way Fitz had been making what Skye would deem "sex eyes" at her all morning, a bit giddy at the prospect of having them on her now that she'd gotten herself together, one last idea cropped into her mind. Jemma debated for only a second before pulling the zipper on her hoodie down halfway, reaching into her bra and settling "the girls" a bit higher. There. She doubted Fitz would tease her about a missed spot of glitter lotion now.

"Jemma?"

"Fitz!" Jemma jumped in alarm. How much of that had he seen? "You're back!" Her heart was shaking like a cold star in the night sky, and her hands fluttered without destination. "What, er, what took you so long?"

Fitz was looking at her oddly, panting as he leaned on the back of the bench and hooked the plastic shopping bag from the convenience store on the wooden corner by her shoulder. "What d' you mean? I just ran both ways."

Indeed, his T-shirt was damp at his collarbone and under his arms, and his forehead was practically steaming. After handing her an icy bottled water, Fitz hauled the hem of his shirt up to mop at his face. Jemma boggled at the casual flash of his pale, toned midsection, decorated by a tantalizing line of hair trailing down from his navel into the waistband of his trousers. She uncapped her water and gulped down about a third of it in one go.

Fitz let his shirt fall back into place and started unwrapping an ice cream sandwich. "Hot as Satan's nutsack out here."

Jemma was still reeling from the gratuitous show of skin she'd just seen, but Fitz's crass assessment helped snap her back. She couldn't seriously be considering kissing a mouth that dirty, could she? "Yes. Hot." She nodded. "It is that. Thank you for the water."

Her eyes closed briefly as she remembered what was hiding under Fitz's tee. Mmm. Perhaps she could kiss that mouth. In fact, she might know a few ways to get it even dirtier.
Fitz bounded back to the park bench, carrying Jemma's drink and wolfing down his first ice cream sandwich so she wouldn't notice he'd actually bought two. So judgy, that one. As he drew near, he could see the back of Jemma's head wiggling about; she seemed to have lost her hat. Probably took it off when she checked her phone. His brow furrowed as he watched her ponytail dip forward and disappear, popping back up nearly as quickly. Some sort of calisthenic warm-up? What a strange duck she was.

He rounded the bench, breathing hard from the exertion, and saw her pulling her hand out from under her jacket, where she'd been… tucking something into her bra, perhaps? Why would she do that? She had pockets. Although, Fitz reasoned, if he had breasts like that, he'd pet them every chance he got too. And really, why on Earth hadn't he noticed those little beauties yet today? That seemed like a huge oversight on his part. Unless she'd… Now wait just a red-hot second. She had done something. To her hair, maybe. And with her - oh God, her boobs. She'd done something to her cleavage to make it utterly fascinating. (How in the Dickens could she do that and then claim not to believe in magic?) Bloody Hell. Clearly, she'd listened to his voicemail and was planning to use her crafty feminine wiles to wrestle the truth from him about her drunken confessions.

Hmph. Good thing he'd spent most of his time at the store preparing for her reaction. You'll find me a tougher nut to crack than you think, Jemma Simmons. Even if she did currently resemble something out of a fitness magazine, while he… well, he probably still had chocolate crumbs stuck to the sides of his mouth like a supper-spoiled child… and why is it so hot out here, good grief, he was sweating harder than a politician at the pearly gates, and he should've gotten Jemma a snack to go with her drink and damn it, how did everything get so turned around? Stupid magic breasts. Fitz quickly did what he could to wipe off his face, snagged the last ice cream sandwich out of the bag before it could melt, and tried to play it cool.

"Want a bite?" He held out the frozen treat, ignoring the way it was already dripping down the side of his hand.

Seeing her nose wrinkle, Fitz mentally began preparing himself for a lecture on nutrition, but the next thing he knew, Jemma had gripped his wrist and was leaning forward - eyes up, Fitz - to take a delicate bite from the frosty dessert still in his hand. Her gaze locked on his as her mouth closed around the chocolatey exterior, and when Jemma swallowed and licked her lips clean, Fitz wondered how much blood actually needed to reach his brain for it to stay functional.

To give himself a second before he had to speak, and in no small part to cool himself off, Fitz shoved the rest of his ice cream into his mouth. Blast it. He'd forgotten napkins.

Jemma watched in a breathless daze as Fitz licked a line of melted ice cream off his forearm, her abdomen clenching instinctively when he sucked on his fingers to rid them of the sticky sweetness. Index… middle… and… yes, there he goes with the thumb. She shook her head. Incorrigible. He was prattling on about something, the layout for the Children's Day venue perhaps, but Jemma honestly couldn't be bothered to focus on that. Not when she was busy thinking up numerous other uses for his mouth. Jemma Simmons, you absolute tart. What would her parents say, if they could see what she was thinking? More to the point, what would Fitz say?

It was a valid question, after all. Goodness knows we haven't been each other's biggest fan… could she really see herself making the first move? Perhaps I won't have to. The way Fitz had been acting towards her - the small touches, the sexy smiles, the insinuations… it definitely felt as if he'd finally decided to start flirting in earnest. Considering how long it had been since a man she liked showed her this type of attention, though, it was entirely possible she was imagining things.

"Jemma?"
"I'm sorry, what's that?"

Fitz grinned at her. "You're off in the clouds today," he teased. "I was just asking if you've ever been to Hyde Park before. If not, you might want to scout it out before you have to perform next week."

"Right! Yes, no, that's a wonderful suggestion. I'll make sure to do that." She started to tuck her hair back, and realizing she had no loose strands, ended up playing with her earlobe instead.

Fitz sat on the bench next to her, stretching out his legs in front of him and crossing them at the ankle. "I think I can guess what's got you so distracted…"

She bolted upright. Could he read her mind? Time to find out. She turned to him with her best bedroom eyes. "And?"

He smiled. "Go on. I can see it eating away at you."

Her gaze flicked to his mouth, which was curling up in that far-too-knowing way.

"Jemma. You've obviously listened to the voicemail, so just-"

"Oh! That's right!" He had mentioned something about checking her phone, hadn't he? Amid her frantic personal grooming, rampant speculation and drone perusal, she'd forgotten all about it. "I'll just listen to that now, shall I?"

Fitz seemed surprised, but after a pause, he shrugged. If she'd had to guess, she would say he appeared… excited? Nervous? Both? Oh, good gracious, what if he's left me a message to ask me out?

No wonder he'd been on his best behavior, inviting her to spend time with him, running off to fetch her a beverage, offering her his own snack! He's waiting for an answer! It was adorable. Well, now she had to listen to the message.

Beaming, she dialed the number for her voicemail while Fitz bounced his foot in anticipation.

"Jemma… it's Fitz. Er, Leopold Fitz, from-" Aww, bless his cotton socks. He'd been so shy! Hearing his nervous cough on the phone, Jemma reached over and put a reassuring hand on Fitz's elbow. Here it comes! He couldn't possibly have thought she'd reject him that badly, could he?

"So I learned some very interesting information last night…" Wait. What was happening? She'd done what last night? Jemma's mouth dropped open in horror as she listened to the rest of the message. The hand on Fitz's arm turned into a fist, and that fist punched him in the bicep.

"You tosser!"

"Tell me what I said!" Jemma crossed her arms in front of her - ahem, yep - and glared at him. Forget what he'd said earlier about seeing her blush. This. This was fun.

"You just hate not knowin' everything, don't you, Doctor Simmons?" Fitz mentally browsed his choices. This was a delicate balance. Too much and she'll just storm off. "All right, well seeing as I'm in a sharing mood, you might've admitted somethin' about…" he watched her fingers tighten around her elbow, "how magic totally kicks science's arse."

She looked to be biting the inside of her cheek. "Really."

"Hand to God! You said, and I quote," he affected a falsetto, "'Oh, Fitz! If only I'd gone to magic school instead of wasting my youth on all that biochemistry malarkey!'"
"Ugh. That's not even how I sound!"

"Or, wait, maybe it was something about how Highway SkyTray's the best idea you ever heard, and y' wish you could be as clever as me."

She cocked her head in annoyance. "You know I can just call Skye or Bobbi, right?"

"Assuming they remember anything. That's a big if, Jemma. How you ladies can drink that much..." he tsked disapprovingly.

She snorted. "This coming from a man who spends most of his free nights at a bar."

"Yeah, that my friend owns. That's just me being social." He smirked. "Besides, no matter how hammered I was, at least I never called anyone at one a.m. singing the Thong Song at the top of my lungs. What's your excuse?"

"Oh, you insufferable- ugh!" Two petite hands came out to shove him, not as hard as they probably could have. "Where's your phone? I'm calling your mother." She made a grab for his messenger bag. "She should know what kind of man her son is!"

"Ah-ah-ah, you don't! Private property!" His phone wasn't even in his bag. Fitz dug it out of his back pocket and held it up, trusting his longer limbs to keep it out of reach. "What would you even say to her? Gonna ask about my kilt again?"

Jemma drew her arms back as if he'd suddenly sprouted quills. "What?"

"Oh, nothin' much. Just somethin' you said last night," he shrugged, brows wagging in amusement.

"No..." Jemma's eyes saucered in trepidation, unfocusing as the memory hit. "That one actually..." Her hand flew up to cover her mouth. "Oh, god, I did, didn't I?"

He quirked his lip, chin tilting in assent. "You really shouldn't stereotype people like that, you know." I don't go asking her what she wears under her Beefeater uniform. Oh, good. Now he was going to have that image in his head for the rest of the day. Brilliant.

Jemma had pulled her knees up onto the bench and thunked her forehead into them. "If you'll excuse me, I'll just be over here wondering how best to let the ground swallow me up." Her groan was muffled, but pitiful, and Fitz reached over to chuck her gently on the shoulder.

As entertaining as it was to know he had something she wanted - information, that's what I mean, just information - it was time to set her mind at ease. "Jemma, hey."

"Exactly. You've got nothing to be embarrassed about."

She raised her head, something in her gaze like a pinned butterfly. It made Fitz want to go back to his workshop and fix broken things.

"I'm just jokin', you know? I promise. I'd tell you if you did anything really horrible."

The corner of her lip crept up gratefully, and his chest untied. "Now that I believe," she allowed.

"Exactly. You've got nothing to be embarrassed about."

She smiled back, bumping his elbow lightly with her own.

"I mean," he hedged, "for someone who likes movie Ron better than book Ron."

Her face dropped back onto her legs with a huff, but he could see the sides of her eyes crinkle.
"You're the worst."

Chapter End Notes

Hey all, I have a super busy weekend coming up, and a ton to do before then, so I'll be posting Friday's chapter fairly late on Saturday. Sunday's chapter will go up in the afternoon as usual.

Thanks to memorizingthedigitsofpi for her help with wording/direction of some moments in this chapter, and for suggesting the "I'm calling your mother" threat. Thanks to starbrightnights for being a font of information about all things British.

And thanks to y'all for sticking with this story! I know it's long and they still haven't gotten together yet, but I like to think the buildup is the most fun part. :-)

Also, if I had to guess (because I'm still writing it so estimating is hard) I'd say we're about 70% of the way through the fic at this point. #exciting!
"Skye!"

"Hnnghnn?"

"Oh, sorry! Are you… sleeping?" It was four in the afternoon.

"Nap." There was a throaty cough, followed by a rustle of sheets. "It's okay. I needed to get up."

"Good, because I could use your help. You see, I've just spent the day in the park-"

"Seriously? I can barely move today," she croaked.

"C'mon, girl," chuckled a deep voice in the background. "You know that's not from the hangover."

There were more muffled sounds, a whispered squeal and a quick kiss from Skye to her boyfriend before Jemma heard a door close.

"Okay, we can talk now. What's the matter?"

"As I was saying, I've just spent the afternoon with Fitz-"

"Umm, no, you did not say. Jemma, that's big! Did you tell him how much you wanna 'uncap his Magic Marker'?"

Jemma let out a pitiful whine. "I was hoping you could tell me."

-o-

"Bobbi, how much do you remember of last night?"

"Hey, rock star!" She could hear the smile in her friend's voice. "Uhh… most of it?"

"Oh, thank god." Jemma explained the situation as quickly as she could. "Please, just- can you recall any specifics?"

"Huh. There was definitely a conversation about scones." Well, that's not so bad. "And then you asked him about his penis," Bobbi added matter-of-factly.

"What?!"

"Truth or Dare? You made me to do a baton twirling routine in an adult onesie. Now that I remember."

Jemma pressed the pads of her fingers to her eyes and gave her head a minuscule shake. "Right, I'm sorry, could you just go back to that last part?"

"The under-the-kilt thing?" Ah. So that's what Fitz had meant. She'd been hoping her own fuzzy memory was a false one.

Bobbi continued breezily. "I wouldn't worry about it. The whole thing was pretty obviously a joke;
can't imagine he'd hold it against you."

Fitz? Hold his under-the-kilt thing against me? Never mind. Still, despite Bobbi's nonchalance about the situation, having confirmation of what she'd said was twisting her gut into knots. "The next time Skye suggests a girls' night, I want you to lock up my phone. And the vodka."

Bobbi laughed. "Are you kidding? I haven't had that much fun in weeks! Talk about a roller coaster ride." At Jemma's sigh, she added encouragingly, "For what it's worth? If Fitz is anything like Hunter, he probably thought it was hot."

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Fitz woke early the morning of the Children’s Day Spectacular, a brightness to his mood that matched the early sun streaming onto his bedsheets. Rolling over, he unplugged his phone from the charger and bit his lip to control the smile that appeared as soon as he saw the message.

[From Doc: Big day!]
[From Doc: Thanks for the driving directions :-) ]
[From Doc: And no jokes about how my driving needs direction.]

Pulling himself up to sit cross-legged on his bed, he sent one back.

[To Doc: Me? Insult your driving? :) You clearly have me confused with someone else.]

He kept typing, professing his sarcastic love for anyone who routinely went ten miles below the speed limit, but his finger stilled over the send button and went to the backspace key instead.

[To Doc: See you there!]

Jemma was unloading the fireworks from the boot of her car when she heard the thunderclap. She shaded her eyes and looked up. No, no, no! That did not look like a "scattered shower". A wheeled trunk lay at her feet, not to mention the large wooden crate of fireworks, and it was a good five-minute walk yet to the main stage. "Damn."

She tugged the miniature umbrella out of her purse and debated the odds of successfully carrying everything she needed in one trip. She craned her neck towards the Hyde Park entrance, trying to spot one of the teenaged volunteers. Perhaps if I just pop over there and ask…

"Jemma!" Fitz jogged up from the other side of the parking lot, carrying a suit bag over his shoulder. "What're you doing? It's about to start pourin' down out here."

Frowning in impatience, Fitz handed her the nylon garment bag. "Here. If it rains, hold that above your head." He bent to heft the crate up by the cable ties at each end, grunting as his back straightened.

"I'll be fine. But if it starts to rain, that" she pointed to the crate, "really oughtn't get wet." As quickly as she could, Jemma draped the makeshift poncho over the top of the wooden slats.

"Then we'd better run!" Fitz chivvied, while Jemma flipped the trunk onto its wheels, grasping the handle behind her with one hand and holding up her map with the other. "Let's go!"
They took off at a good clip, and she let herself follow behind Fitz, focused on not tripping and trusting that he knew the way. As it was, fat drops had already started to fall by the time they ducked under the shelter next to the outdoor stage. Before long, water was drumming the roof at a punishing rate.

"That was close," Jemma panted, taking a grateful seat on top of her props trunk. "Thank you. All the fireworks for the finale are in there."

Fitz had his hands braced on his thighs as he tried to catch his own breath. "Fireworks, eh? You sure it's not bricks?"

She shot him a flat look. "Come on, help me raise it up."

They each grabbed an end and lifted the crate so that it sat atop a pair of cinderblocks, and Fitz found a plastic dropcloth to drag over the top. He grabbed his garment bag and brushed a few drops off of it.

"Is your tux all right?"

Fitz let out a wry huff. "It's seen worse." Reaching into the protective bag, he pulled out a handkerchief and offered it to Jemma. "You, er, might want t' dry off…" he gestured vaguely towards her shoulders.

"Ugh." She took the cloth and ran it gently over the top of her jacket and her new, carefully curled shorter hair. "I should have known better than to trust the weather report," she sighed, lightly patting her cheeks and forehead before returning the pocket square. If the rain kept up, she was liable to end up looking like a drowned cat by day's end. Where's that "feminine appeal" now, producers? At least before, she could have salvaged her ponytail. "I don't suppose you've got a mirror?"

"Fresh out of mirrors… only smoke left, I'm afraid." Fitz squinted at his own joke, taking back the handkerchief with murmured thanks and rubbing it against the back of his neck. "But you look-" he swallowed, "erm, what I mean is, you hair's- it seems okay?"

"Okay," she repeated slowly, scanning his face for more information. The diffuse light in the lean-to, filtered as it was through the rain, picked up the tiny droplets in Fitz's curls, refracting across them like glittering sand.

"Not- it was fine before, too, just-" Fitz shifted from one foot to the other, "You know, it's short now, so… that's good. For you."

She blinked up at him. Based on this reaction - quite the break from his usual swagger - her hair either looked gorgeous or utterly catastrophic.

He balled up the cloth in his fist and stammered on, "What I'm tryin' to say is, for a superhero, if you're in a fight, obviously longer hair isn't very pract-" The sound of a phone ringing cut him off mid-ramble, and Fitz pulled his mobile from his pocket with a quiet "Oh, thank God."

"Hi, Mack. Yep. Just got caught in the downpour, didn't have my umbrella. No, it's all right - I'm heading back now. Okay."

Hanging up the phone, Fitz scratched sheepishly at his jaw and picked up his tuxedo. "I'd better get back, finish setting up. I sort of left Mack with all the work."

"Oh." Jemma fought down her disappointment by offering a bright smile. "Take this, if you like." She held out her mini-umbrella.
"Eh, these spring showers never last long." Indeed, the sky was already starting to clear, bursts of sun beginning to scatter the ground at random intervals. "Well, good luck with your…" Fitz motioned to the accoutrements taking up the small shed. One last tug at his ear and he was on his way out. "Okay, then, bye!"

Jemma saw him off with a small wave, half-wanting to keep him there but wholly unsure what to do about it. As soon as he'd gone, she dragged a hand down her face. What the hell was that?

Fitz groaned into his chest. What the Hell was that? In his defense, he'd barely been able to think, much less string three words together in the Queen's English, not when Jemma had somehow found a witch to cut her hair and make her even more astonishingly beautiful. How am I supposed to contend with that? Watching her dab at her dewey skin, spiced-rum eyes sparkling and cheeks still rosy from their run through the rain, it was like some twee scene from a romantic movie, and Fitz couldn't help feeling just the slightest bit angry at himself. Because he was supposed to be in charge of his own brain. Not some… some sneaky, conceited, overly competitive… talented… quite genius really… surprisingly thoughtful… Hmmph. There went his scumbag brain again.

"And you're sure you don't need me to come down there?"

"Skye, I promise, it's all perfectly in hand. There's plenty of event staff around." Skye was certainly needed at the station, though several of the county's popular children's television shows were represented in booths around the park. "But I'll make sure to let you know, should anything come up that needs your attention."

"You better. Bring me back a funnel cake!"

Jemma laughed. "I think I can manage that."

"Oh, and… about that thing that we were discussing earlier?" Skye was being cagey, meaning Vaughn was likely listening in. The Vaughn and Only had actually become quite popular - Skye'd even gotten fan mail for it that described the host as "professorial" which had given them both a good laugh. Despite his new fame, however, Vaughn remained an incorrigible gossip and eavesdropper around the station.

"You're referring, of course, to the very important manscaping issue I asked you about?" On occasion, it was convenient to have a code word in place for important conversations.

"Oh my god, so dumb. Yes. The manscaping."

"What of it?" Her hand wrapped just a bit tighter around the phone.

"You have, uhh, 'full approval' on that."

Jemma breathed out a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Skye."

"Hey - if it's what you want. Now go get 'im, tiger."

Biting her lip, Jemma opened up Fitz's contact screen.

[To Grumpy Dwarf: I'm scheduled for lunch at 1:00. You?] She barely needed to wait before the response popped up.
Fitz frowned at the message. She needed to schedule a face-to-face, just to ask him a question? *That's rather ominous.* Either that, or Jemma had just asked him to lunch. *Like a date.* It was hard to know which option terrified him more.

He wasn't stupid; he still remembered how it had felt *months* ago when he thought she'd been flirting with him over coffee. Back then, though, she'd been a lovely stranger, someone he *could* like, but ultimately a hypothetical fantasy. *Everything's different now.* Now they had a rocky start to overcome, a fat file folder of insecurities and arguments and dirty tricks to flip through for emotional ammunition.

Poring over Jemma's drunken voicemails had made it fairly obvious that their enmity was rooted in miscommunication, but really, what did a few initial mistakes matter when all they'd done *since* then was muck things up? Even if he could allow himself to admit that maybe Jemma Simmons was 97% perfect for him after all, at this point it seemed as if they'd doomed themselves before they'd even begun. And, honestly - outside of the occasional urge to pull her hair aside and nibble on her neck - Fitz thought he was doing pretty well in his dealings with Jemma. Did they really *need* more than what they had?

*Only one way to find out.*
"Mack, cover for me? I'm goin' to lunch."

Mack unfolded a stapled set of multi-colored pages and held it up. "Our break isn't til 1:30."

"I know. I've, erm. I've got a meeting."

His partner's easy smile puffed readily into the side of his mouth. "Is this 'meeting' with Captain Chemistry?"

Fitz glanced warily over and declined to answer. "Do you want me to get you anything while I'm out?"

"Nah, I'm good." As Fitz started to leave, Mack went back to arranging the Fungineers brochures neatly at the front table of their station. "Hey, Turbo?"

"Yep?" Fitz turned. Probably wants a protein bar. Possibly a dozen eggs and an entire cod.

Mack gave him a once-over, then shook his head with a knowing smile. "Never mind. Have fun at lunch, buddy."

Not long afterwards, Fitz was sitting across a rickety table from the woman in question, digging into his own ham-and-cheese hero sandwich while she went full-tilt on a styrofoam plate of fish tacos. That looks messy. He grabbed a napkin and handed it over, brushing her hand with his. She looked up oddly, keeping her hand near his. Oh, what the Dickens. This was a date, wasn't it? Does she expect me to hold her hand? He reached for it, but fumbled when Jemma unexpectedly coughed into her opposite fist.

Wee baby Christ's nappies, I'm bad at this.

Jemma was just working up the words she wanted to say something when suddenly, Fitz's hand had stumbled onto hers, awkwardly brushing the back of her wrist and pulling back within seconds.

"You, er, you had a bug on you," he mumbled, at the exact moment that she started with, "The reason I wanted to meet-"

They both paused, feeling a bit like strangers standing in an elevator door, until Jemma blurted out, "Do you want a job on Science is Super?"

Fitz's head bolted up, an indecipherable gaze snapping onto hers. "That's why you asked me to lunch? You want me to work for you?"

"I want you to work with me. Similar to Bobbi's role, but you'd provide a physics perspective rather than a biology one." She rushed ahead, "I wouldn't be your boss."

"Who, then? Skye?" His face twisted dubiously.

Jemma tamped down the flush of annoyance at his tone. If she was being honest, she'd expected him to say yes immediately. "Skye does have quite a lot of input in daily operations, but technically, the
woman in charge is Melinda May - she heads up the broadcasting division for the entire region."

Fitz eyebrows jetpacked to his hairline. "Melinda May! Well, that's very alarming. I've never met anyone so scary, and that was on the happiest day of her life."

"Shhh!" Jemma glanced around in alarm. "She's here somewhere - I saw her talking to Mayor Coulson." She tucked a strand of hair behind an ear, slight disapproval schooling her features. "And she's not scary, Fitz, just quiet. She's been grooming Skye to take over the station, so I doubt you'd have to see her much either way."

She waited, but Fitz seemed dedicated to shoving as much food in his mouth as possible. Jemma let out a sigh. "You could even do behind-the-scenes consulting, stay off camera completely. Though I certainly won't mind if you appear as the Amazing Leopold - or perhaps, his long-lost twin?" She arched an eyebrow invitingly. "Just think about it? I've been approved to recommend whomever I like, but they need a decision soon."

Fitz was staring at her, licking his lips against the juice dripping from his food, his face puzzling her out like an equation. "I'll think about it," he landed on finally.

"Good!" She nodded, then cleared her trash into the nearest bin. "Well, I've got to get back. No rest for the wicked smart."

He cracked a smile at that. "Explains my trouble sleepin'."

After busing his own side of the table, Fitz brought his hand to hover just over the small of her back as they walked out of the picnic area next to Taco Tuesday's. "I mean it, Jemma. I'll let you know."

Jemma stared after him as he walked in the direction of his own booth, noting the shape of his arse inside his trousers but being far too sophisticated to snap a photo. Disappointment tapped lightly at her chest like a slender tree branch in a storm window, and she forced herself to take her hand off her mobile and put it back into her purse.

Don't think too much about it. Do something else.

Thankfully, her afternoon was meant to be busy - and she didn't need to spend her time worrying over a man, even if it was technically work-related. I'm better than that - I'm a superhero, for goodness' sakes. Belting her resolve into place, she put Fitz out of her mind; then Jemma Simmons, certified genius and beloved children's icon, went back to kicking science butt for her fans.

Fitz walked back in something of a daze. Jemma wanted to hire him. Not date him. As soon as the question had left her (gorgeous, plump, irresistible) lips, like the first blast of hot air after opening a car door in August, he wished it'd been the other way. The reality of his feelings crashed down, a falling piano in an old cartoon, and he couldn't even do anything about it anymore. Fitz flashed back to the previous week, the town square park and his atrocious attempt at "flirt-warfare" - the sting of seeing her recoil under his touch still echoed against his teeth. After all, though he covered it admirably, Fitz was no Casanova. It was no wonder he'd misread her completely.

And now he had a choice to make. Could Mack help him talk through things? God, what do I even tell Mack? Well, if he was going to bring up the possibility of abandoning his friend to go join the enemy ranks, he should probably bring the man some food. Jogging back to the restaurant stands, he got in line at Lai Shi Grill. Mack had a weakness for their Spicy Beef Noodle. As he stood in the queue, though, bouncing his heel to release some energy as he thought about this new conundrum, he overheard a couple of young men in front of him talking.

"Ethan, I just thought of the perfect name." The speaker, a twenty-something with a vague approximation of a beard, tapped his friend's arm to get his attention. "I'd be the electricity superhero,
so maybe… The ElecTrickster?"

"Elect-Rickster? You'd sound like a senator. Just use your name, doofus. I'm sure you can do something with Lincoln."

Lincoln chuffed placidly. "It's called a secret identity; all superheroes have them."

"Hmm, let me think about that." Ethan pretended to consider. "She hired some lady named Bobbi to play Bionic Bobbi, so no, sorry, your argument is invalid."

Lincoln hummed appreciatively. "Man. Bionic Bobbi, Captain Chemistry… that's a hot cast. And Skye…"

"Dude. Skye." Ethan agreed. "Too bad she's not around today."

"I'm just happy they asked me to rig sets for this thing. I'm hoping if I impress Simmons, she'll offer me the new guest spot."

"You really think she's gonna give you a shot? No offense, dude, I see you as more of a techie than an actor."

Lincoln shrugged. "They like taking chances on new people over at KBUS. I still can't believe Skye got her job without going through any of the proper channels."

"Hey, man, when you're good, you're good."

Lincoln shook his head with a wry laugh. "Guess I better be great then!"

Ethan and Lincoln reached the front of the queue and stepped up to order their food, and Fitz realized he was drumming his fingers nervously against his thigh. Great. So now not only did he have to worry about choosing whether or not to take the job, he had to worry about competing against entitled-sounding little electricians who couldn't even come up with anything better than ElectRickster for a superhero name. Honestly, it's not that hard. ShockJock. Static King. Lightning Bug. And those were just off the top of his head. As he placed his own order for takeaway, Fitz forced himself to relax. Jemma had all but offered him the position. All he had to do was figure out if he could really see himself working with Jemma of all people, instead of Mack. Fitz snorted.

Maybe my on-set name can be Major-General Anxiety.

-o-

"I mean… you know how grateful I am, Mack." He'd been the only person to believe in Fitz back when he needed it. "If you want me to stay at Fungineers, there's not even a question."

"Fitz, buddy." Mack, inexplicably unconcerned, dug into his noodle bowl and swallowed a large bite before answering. "I ran things on my own for years, you know."

"Yeah but that was before-"

"Before we started offering entertainment, yeah, I remember." Mack looked thoughtful for a moment. "Look, I appreciate everything you've done for the business, but it's never been your dream job."

"Neither is this," Fitz rushed to add. "I mean, I'd love to be working in a top lab somewhere, part of a development team, that kind of thing. Working with Jemma would just be," he shrugged, face pinking, "a lateral move at best." Wouldn't mind seeing her lateral moves. Fitz groaned to himself.
He'd have to stop thinking of her that way, probably, if this was going to work out.

Mack grinned as he stuck his chopsticks up in the leftovers, setting the takeout box on the table. "Why aren't you happier about this? She said you could feature your gadgets on the show, right?"

Fitz made a noise of assent as he scanned the e-mail Jemma had just sent him with various (admittedly very tempting) responsibilities he'd get to choose between if he accepted. He was mostly looking at it for Mack's benefit, though. Much as he had with Jemma's dating profile, he'd committed the information to memory almost as soon as it had become available.

"In that case, Turbo, I don't see how you can pass up the opportunity."

Fitz grimaced. He didn't know why he was making Mack have to convince him to leave. "Could I really work with her, d' you think?" Fitz stole a spring roll, but simply held onto it for a moment. "As much as we argue?"

One of the best things about working with Mack was how steady he was. How well would Fitz do if he was constantly around someone who riled him up? And what if we get into a proper row? And what if we get into a proper row? He wouldn't be able to just walk out.

Mack let out a low guffaw, grabbing a napkin to clean a bit of splattered broth from between his fingers. "Look, I know you two had a rocky start. But from what I've seen, the only thing that's gonna make it worse," he gave Fitz a knowing look, "is you."

Fitz tried to bite down the retort that immediately sprang to his lips, deciding to take a bite of the spring roll instead. He means well. And, if he was thinking about it, he supposed that between the two of them Jemma did seem a bit more forgiving. She's not above saying sorry.

Fitz thought back to the discussion in 3 Brothers, when Jemma'd reminded him that her video - the explosion that he inadvertently caused - often earned her unwanted attention. He'd been so ashamed of himself, he could barely look at her as he muttered an insufficient apology, and hadn't felt he had any right to try and explain the situation. Why should he get to try and absolve himself, to say he never meant for any of that to happen, when she'd spent weeks or months dealing with judgment and harassment?

But perhaps he did owe her the full story, or at the very least, a little honesty. It was the least he could do, if they were going to be working together.

-o-

Between three mini-shows, running the booth, advertising Fungineers, trying to think of exactly what he wanted to say to Jemma, and the requisite minor disasters that seemed inevitable at events like this (a number of goats escaped from Ward's petting zoo, but Fitz refused to help hunt them down on the basis that they had crazy eyes and they almost unanimously looked pregnant) it was quite late in the afternoon when Fitz finally had the chance to walk back towards the main stage.

She was nowhere to be found, though. It felt strangely impersonal to accept her job offer over the phone, not when she'd set up a lunch meeting in order to extend it. Besides, she hasn't texted you back since this afternoon. Fitz wandered around the side of the stage and rounded the shed they'd ducked into that morning, surprised to see Hunter's friend and cook hanging around nearby.

"Idaho? Are you lost?" He'd not had many opportunities to get to know the man, but Idaho seemed an okay guy. Though one who apparently startled easily.

"Fitz! Hey, man! Snuck up on me!" He laughed, the sound hanging around in the isolated air of this
section of the park.

"Just, uh, I'm just doing some catering at this thing! I think I probably am in the wrong place, actually. Huge turnout, huh?"

"Yep, it seems like it gets bigger every year," Fitz agreed. "You haven't seen Jemma Simmons, by any chance, have you?"

"Ahh, sorry, can't help you there." Idaho checked his watch. "Well, you know, it was good running into you! Have a good night!"

"Yeah, all right then, see you." Fitz waved and kept moving down the path. He didn't need to speak to Jemma immediately, but she'd soon be busy with her big finale and he wanted to try to see her before that guy from the Chinese food queue had a chance to work on his pitch.

When one more circuit of the Children's Day Spectacular grounds still didn't produce any sign of her, though, Fitz came back to the shed. She'd be coming back here soon to get her fireworks anyway, so she'd notice if he left a note. Hastily scribbling out "I thought about it - Fitz" on the back of an event map, he walked over to the crate of fireworks and lifted up the dropcloth to tuck the note underneath so it wouldn't fly away.

Which was right around the time Fitz's mouth fell open in shock. Because outside of a few empty cardboard boxes to preserve the crate's shape, it was completely bare. And nestled at the bottom of the container, he spotted a greenish slip of paper.

Fitz swallowed the hedgehog in his throat as his fingers reached down and closed around it. On one side, in the dim light, he was able to make out a short message.

"So that you would not light useless fires on my altar. I am not pleased with you," says the Lord. - Malachi 1:10

The other side looked like a $20 bill.

Chapter End Notes

The reference to eggs and cod is based on a hilarious [article on the Toast](https://example.com/articles/a/) about Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson's diet. Thanks to [badscienceshenanigans](https://example.com/users/username) for bringing that very important information to my attention.

Kudos to [memorizingthedigitsofpi](https://example.com/users/username) for the superhero name Lightning Bug. #socute
Jemma rinsed off her hands and ran another couple of damp paper towels over her now-dusty Captain Chemistry costume. Next year, she would make sure the showrunners kept a backup superhero outfit on hand. *It'll be dark soon, anyway.* Even if people could see the grass stains on her clothes in the evening dim, she doubted anyone would care. But really, what was she *supposed* to do when she saw a veritable stampede of baby goats running past? *Not* help? *I just wish animal wrangling wasn't such a sweaty business.*

While she had a moment, though, it would be worth checking her phone to see if she'd gotten a response from Fitz. It wasn't as if she'd been waiting by the phone - in fact, she'd successfully avoided dwelling on the possibility that he'd refuse her, or the jump in her pulse at the thought that he wouldn't. Skye had been teasing her, of course, with predictable jokes about how Jemma just wanted to see him in a spandex bodysuit. But she really did want the chance to *work* with him.

Of course, when she pulled up her missed calls hoping to see one from Fitz, she wasn't expecting to see *three*, plus a text claiming an emergency that needed her attention. Jemma broke into a run on the way out of the restroom, dialing as she went.

"Where are you?" she panted, when he picked up. "Stay there. I'm on my way."

-0-

"It appears that they only took the fireworks, nothing else." That was something of a relief. She could still carry off the same performance she'd been giving all day, which was a minor consolation. "What's the next step? Have you alerted the authorities?" Jemma was remaining calm. She certainly was not flying into a panic at the prospect of botching the biggest show of the year. "What did they say?"

Fitz shook his head, a bit shamefaced. "The first thing I did was try to find you."

"Park security's headed down here." Mack stepped in, his tone sympathetic, but pragmatic. "Look, I'm sorry to bring this up, but, uhh…" He sighed. "I mean, we can call the police if you want, but it won't do much good." He ran a hand over his head, eyes narrowing in commiseration. "Preacher John's got a lot of powerful friends. He and Chief Talbot go way back. Mr. Quinn, too."

*Of course.* Garrett was the Talbot children's godfather, she remembered that now. "So they get together and smoke cigars and plan out how to set back minority rights a few decades?" she bit out, startling slightly at her own words. *Skye's been rubbing off on me.*


Mack stepped over to the empty crate. "Point is, we need to focus on what we *can* do. What time does the show start?"

Jemma nodded, brow creased. "Less than an hour." She was busily dry-washing her hands to keep them from flying up to her neck. "Even if I could get Skye to sort out a replacement for what they stole, there's no time for her to drive them out here!"

"Let me take your car," Fitz volunteered. "I'll go to Triskelion Heights and find you something."
"Oh, Fitz." Her mouth turned down in pained gratitude. "You're sweet to offer, really, it's just—even if we knew where to find someone who was open, and even if I were comfortable making a purchase like that unapproved, it would still take entirely too long. We have to try to track down the original fireworks."

Fitz snapped his fingers with a sound almost like a squeak. "Idaho! He was here earlier. He might've seen Garrett hanging about, or seen where he went." Whipping out his mobile, Fitz tapped in Hunter's number. "Lance? Good, I'm glad I caught you. I need to get hold of Idaho, can you give me his number?"

His eyes unfocused, and he brought his hand up to press the heel of his palm against the bridge of his nose. "You're not serious. Oh, for—Lance, I'm gonna have to ring you back." Fitz hung up with a punch of one button and turned baffled eyes to the other two. "Idaho…" he shook his head, blinking, "He told me he was here catering. Lance says he went out tonight with his church group."

Jemma bit down an expletive. She'd been friendly towards the fry cook, and had supposed the feeling went both ways. But now… He's dead to me.

"And what proof have you?" The head of Hyde Park security, some lady named Sif, had an oddly stilted manner about her. She almost sounded British, but not quite. It was driving Fitz a little mad.

"We found this at the bottom of the crate." He handed her the fake $20, and she took it with a pair of tweezers, turning it over and looking closely at both sides before turning her attention to Jemma.

"You have a history of conflict with this man?"

"Yes," Jemma's voice shook only slightly, and Fitz felt an absurd rush of pride. "He's antagonized me on several opportunities, but I never thought he'd stoop to something like ruining an event aimed at children."

"I am saddened by your plight, Captain of Chemistry." Sif stood very tall. "And I will pledge my assistance in righting the wrong that has been done to you." She turned to nod at Mack and Fitz, and did some kind of warrior salute with her fist. Seriously, where in blazes is she from? "As guard of this park, I shall hunt the man responsible for this transgression across the nine campgrounds. He cannot have gone far."

She put her hand on the holster in her belt that held the tranquilizing gun and taser, turned on her heel and stalked off purposefully. Mack let out a low whistle, watching her leave.

"Well I'd say if anyone's going to get your fireworks back," he raised his eyebrows, "she can."

"We need a contingency plan." Jemma was certain that Ms. Sif would do what she could, but if she was being honest, she didn't think they'd get any kind of real justice. They had no witnesses to the theft, no one had been physically harmed, and they were going up against a highly influential man. Jemma had never been one to dilly-dally, sitting on her thumbs and hoping for the best. "I need to come up with something to end the show. Preferably related to pyrotechnics, or I'll have to rethink the entire final section."

"Erm." Fitz scratched his jaw. "I might have an idea."

Anything, at this point. "Yes?"

He shifted his weight, pulling on his sleeve.
"Out with it, please!" This was not the time for dawdling.

Fitz looked at Mack. "The flamethrowers for the Quinn job, are they still in the van?"

Mack's look was flat, and frankly disappointed. "You never took them out for recycling, did you?"

Fitz reared up defensively. "No, okay- I didn't, but- you see, it's a good thing that I didn't, because now…"

"I could set off the fire jets for the big finale!" Jemma breathed out. A smile rushed over her, sweeping across her face like a sandstorm.

"I mean, it's not ideal- it's not as impressive as what you." Fitz was trying to downplay the gesture, but she was having none of it. She gripped his hands and squeezed, trying to convey her thanks.

"It'll be perfect. I really appreciate this." Before she could lose her nerve, she planted a quick kiss on his cheek. "And thank you too, Mack."

"No problem. Any friend of Fitz's." He reached out, almost as if he were going to ruffle her hair, but apparently thought better of it and clapped her shoulder instead. "Well, I'd better go grab that stuff out of the van, huh?"

"Oh, take Lincoln with you!" Jemma volunteered. "He's helping me with the set today, and he can carry quite a lot." She pointed the young man out and Mack set off, calling him along.

"I guess I should head back to the Fungineers booth," Fitz frowned. "It's probably been sitting abandoned."

Jemma tamped down the prickle of disappointment that came with Fitz's impending departure. "Oh, yes of course. I've got to set up for the show, as well. Okay," she went in for a hug, at the same time that Fitz extended his hand for her to shake. It resulted in an awkward half-embrace, with Jemma's free hand hovering strangely until she patted at his chest like she was blotting a stain. "All right, then, thanks for all your help. Take care. See you later."

Fitz bobbed his head from side to side. "Good work. Sleep well. I'll most likely kill you in the morning." At her confused squint, he immediately backtracked. "It's a quote- it's from a mov- you know what, never mind. Later, Jemma."

He took off down the path, several yards away by the time she called out after him, "The Princess Bride!"

He looked back, shading his eyes against the descending sun, then winked and gave her a thumbs up.

Arrgh. Jemma was probably the best person on the planet, even a cave fish could see that. She deserves more than some half-assed flame jets. Not when she'd been expecting to launch a grand display of lights across the sky.

Fitz was no amateur, even if he couldn't "carry quite a lot" like some people. That half-beard's not even as tall as Mack, he scoffed. What good is he? Fitz could put something together for the finale, something that would impress her. A show of good faith to kick off our working relationship. Perhaps a nice cartoon of Captain Chemistry flying across the heavens, handing out fire extinguishers and locking up dangerous chemicals? Maybe I could- no, he really shouldn't make this about his own feelings. Something friendly, though. Welcoming. 'Treehouse Falls Welcomes Captain Chemistry -
Thanks For a Great Year!' Something like that. After all the practice he'd gotten with this sort of thing while working for Ice Machine Apocalypse, he doubted it would even take him very long. *Thank you, Seth and Donnie.*

Of course, he told himself, it would be wonderful if it helped advertise the business - just something small he could do for Mack while he was still in a position to. And surely Jemma would give Fungineers their due; she'd been surprisingly easygoing today, even stressed out as he knew she must be. *Bodes well, that's what.* And, well, if she was the sort of co-worker who kissed her fellow employees on the cheek, he supposed he could probably live with that.

Fitz got to the Fungineers booth and unlocked it, flopping into the chair at the front. He tugged his phone out of his jacket. "Mack? Make sure you get the stuff for the laser lights too, will you? I've got a plan."

Chapter End Notes

In honor of the Agents of SHIELD finale, I decided to give y'all a bonus chapter! Hopefully for those folks (like me) who don't get to watch in real time, this will provide some distraction, at least. And I can 100% guarantee nobody dies in this fic! :-D

And yes, "bonus chapter" does mean that the next one will be up tomorrow, as usual. :-) Have a good day, fellow fans, and good luck tonight!
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

:-D How about that finale, folks?
I posted an extra chapter yesterday in honor of Season 2 ending. So, if you missed that, go read it now!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fitz tapped a final key to save the file and quickly closed his laptop. He looked up to see Mack striding towards the Fungineers booth and breathed out a quick sigh of relief.

"Perfect timing. Man the front while I go drop this off?"

"Sure thing, buddy." Mack plopped into a chair and stretched out his long legs. "Hey, you're going to the main stage?"

Fitz paused, already on his way down the path. "Yep."

"If you're going to talk to her…” Mack looked a tiny bit uncomfortable with the topic, but determined nonetheless. "Listen, Turbo." He planted his feet under him and leaned forward, elbow resting on his knees. "I'm real glad you two are getting along. Thing is, second chances… sometimes they've got an expiration date." He raised his eyebrows knowingly. "You want something in life, you gotta grab it."

Fitz scoffed silently at the platitude. Is that all it takes? Really? He'd always been more partial to earning his achievements through hard work. Though the option of grabbing Jemma didn't sound unappealing.

But speaking of work, he doubted that sort of thing would be welcome in the workplace. Huffing out a sigh, he waved goodbye to his friend and went to find his new coworker.

Jemma was pacing behind the stage, going through her pre-show ritual. Deep breaths. She took three of them. In, out, in, out, in, out. Nothing was going to go wrong tonight. Well, nothing else. "You are Jemma Simmons," she repeated under her breath. "You are Jemma Simmons, and you are not small."

"I don't know about that, five-foot-four."

She jumped, hand coming up to her chest in an attempt to tamp down her surprise. "Fitz! What are you doing here? Mack brought the flamethrowers by a while ago."

"Yes, but, erm," he held up his laptop bag, "I set you up a laser lights show? Is that all right?"

Her brows knitted together. Did he change his mind about the fire display? "What? Why?"

"It's nothin' big, just- just so you'll have something more than a pair of flame jets." He lifted one shoulder self-consciously. "And this way it's all hooked up together, the entire sequence'll be automated, the fire too, coordinated to your theme song.-" he broke off, catching her expression, and
a worried frown took over his face. "Sorry, is that okay? I suppose it was a bit, ah..."

"Fitz..."

"Didn't take long, it's not a big deal, you don't have to use it if you-"

"Fitz." She stepped closer. This guy. How could she ever have disliked him? He kept babbling, gesticulating, looking down and twisting the strap of his bag, and all she wanted to do was grab his hands and keep them still. And thank him. Jemma stepped nearer, resolved to do just that.

"Hey, CapChem, need anything else?" Lincoln came around behind the stage, spinning a pair of pliers in one hand.

"Oh!" she startled. Suddenly Fitz was looking straight at her, apparently surprised by how close they'd gotten while he was rambling, and she panicked, taking his laptop case. "Yes, Lincoln, actually, there is something you can do."

"While he's setting that up, could I talk to you for a second?"

Fitz watched as that pissant kid walked off with a wave, his laptop, and a brown-nosing little 'Anything for you, Simmons!' That punk's got some nerve. Who the Hell did he think he was, calling her by her last name like that - no title, no honorific, nothing. She prefers Doctor, you undiluted twat.

"Fitz?"

Ah, crap. She was staring, waiting. Forcing his thoughts back to the woman in front of him, he coughed out, "Yeah. Sorry, what's up?"

"Oh," she shrugged, expression uncertain. "I just wondered if you'd decided about the job?"

Fitz very nearly facepalmed. Apparently, amid all the excitement of the day, he'd neglected to even respond to her job offer and had simply been acting on the assumption that he had. Good goin', genius. He was really firing on all cylinders today.

"Right, yeah. Yeah! I meant to tell y' but I, erm," he tossed a weak thumbs-up in her direction, following the gesture with an anticlimactic "I'll take it!"

Oh, balls. A thumbs up? Forget Lincoln, I'm the twat.

She seemed not to notice his consternation, though, as she beamed up at him. "Good! I suppose it's not much of a surprise..."

Lord, am I that obvious?

"Given that you've gone well out of your way to help me today, which... you really didn't need to, you know." She reached out and brushed her fingers down his forearm. "There were other candidates, true," she said quietly, glancing back the way Lincoln had gone, "but we were only going to consider them if you turned the position down."

Fitz shifted his feet, his shoes suddenly made of marbles as he wondered how much he could get away with telling his - let's call a duck a duck - his new boss. "C'mon, Jemma. I didn't help you because I was hopin' to secure the job." She raised her eyebrows, and he forced out a breath. "I mean, I kind of still owe you for the show I ruined. Consider this payback."
Her shoulders dropped and her mouth twitched downward. "Ah, I see. Well, I guess that's settled, then."

*And also I might love you.* He scratched at his eyebrow. "Yep. Wouldn't want to start off working together with something like that hoverin' over my head. This way, I don't owe you anything, you don't owe me anything, it's all fine. Yeah?"

Jemma unnecessarily smoothed down the Spandex front of her Captain Chemistry costume. "Yes, of course. Well." She smiled quickly. "Cheers to new partnerships!" Suddenly, her hand was coming up for what he assumed was a high five. *Either that or she's asking permission to speak freely.*

He went to return the gesture - *mustn't leave her hanging* - and realized at the last second that she'd apparently intended to rest her hand on his shoulder. He did *not* realize this until he was already swatting his open palm into her curled fingers, awkwardly close to his chest. *Criminy.* He swallowed and bobbed his head in some sort of acknowledgement.

"Right. Anyway," she continued, starting to lean in for a second before evidently thinking better of it, "I do appreciate everything you've done."

The fleeting whiff he got of her hair smelled of baking spices, or something equally wonderful, and then she was pulling away. "Yeah. Yeah, no problem, Jemma."

Fitz shuffled back, turning to wiggle his fingers at her in an insufficient wave. "Good luck - erm, break a leg." A few steps farther and he turned again. "I mean, I want to make it clear that if you *do* break a leg, I had nothin' to do with that. I swear, I haven't sabotaged anything."

She rolled her eyes good-humoredly. "Bye, Fitz."

Jemma's mantra seemed to have worked. The final performance had gone off without a hitch, though at one point she'd nearly spilled her reagents when a strong gust of wind blew her new hair straight into her face and she'd had to spit out a few curls. She'd taken a moment to count her chickens - at least the stage didn't have any curtains to flap about, just solid wooden beams, and the event wasn't televised, so she could afford a few embarrassing moments. *Be grateful for the small things in life, I suppose.*

"So the last thing we're going to do, everyone," she announced brightly, her beaming face projected and magnified on the huge screen behind her, "is see a few examples of chemical reactions in the form of pyrotechnics."

At the audience's cheers, she smiled impossibly wider. "Yes, that means explosions." Jemma wandered to the side of the stage and grabbed her handy fire extinguisher. *I should really name this thing.* "Now, when people hear the word pyrotechnics, most of us think of special effects, fireworks, or stage shows," she started, walking back to the middle of the stage. "But what you may not know is that pyrotechnics refers to any self-sustained exothermic reaction that creates," she set the extinguisher on the lab table surface and started ticking off on her fingers, "light, smoke, sound - heat, obviously - or even gas!" She adjusted her lab goggles, indicated the fuel canisters at the front of the stage. "So that *does* mean things like smoke bombs, but it also refers to safety matches, airbags, and blasts used in mining and construction."

Looking around, Jemma started to sweat at the thought that her audience might be getting restless. "So, who's ready to see a demonstration?"

The thunderous applause was as good a reply as any. "I hope you've all had a lovely time today - I
know I did!" Whoops and happy shouts were coming from every side. *This is thrilling.* She'd have to try to earn this assignment again next year. *Perhaps with Fitz and Bobbi at my side next time.*

Her eyes flew wide as she remembered Fitz and realized she'd neglected to mention his participation in the finale. "And let's give an especially big thank-you to the Amazing Leopold Fitz and the helpful guys at Fungineers, who put this pyrotechnics display together!" She peered into the crowd for Fitz, but couldn't spot him. *He may not even have left his booth.* Jemma tried not to feel too glum at the thought; it wasn't as if he *owed* her anything. After today, it was quite the opposite.

The audience cheered even louder, and Jemma gave Lincoln a quick signal where he sat, far off to the side and a ways behind the stage. Fitz's laptop was in Lincoln's hands, ready to set off the sequence that would combine music, lasers, and ultimately trigger the electronic match in the flame jets. He tapped a few keys, set the laptop on the chair, picked up his own fire extinguisher with a nod, and started heading her way as quickly as he could through the crowd. Because really, one couldn't be too careful - if anything went wrong with the flame jets, she'd want backup.

The speakers crackled to life, the lights dimmed automatically, and the lasers began to spin and swirl onto the projection screen behind her.

*Here we go.*

Chapter End Notes

*Dun dun dunnrn.*

I can promise y'all that a) nobody is going to die in this fic, b) no one gets tortured or put through any Terrigen mist AT ALL, and c) very soon. *big spoiler Marvel-style* *Fitz and Simmons have a talk.*

The new chapter will be up on Friday!
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fitz jogged towards the main stage, cursing the time it had taken to pack up the Fungineers equipment, but ultimately glad he'd helped Mack with the task. He'd been all but ignoring his friend that afternoon, and while Mack had accommodated and even encouraged him to pay attention to Jemma, he still felt as if he owed the business a little more than that. *You won't get too many opportunities later on.* Well, that wasn't true. He and Mack would doubtlessly continue rooming together for the foreseeable future, after all. *But it's the principle of the thing.*

He got up there just as Jemma was starting to go into her last couple of experiments before the big finale. Sure, he couldn't see perfectly from the back of the crowd, but he could watch her lovely face light up the big screen, and that was good enough.

Until it wasn't. Fitz shuffled around, trying to get past one especially tall man blocking his view, and when he finally nudged his way through, was greeted with a soft, "Hey, Fitz. How've you been?"

Fitz's head whipped around and up to see Ward standing to his right, arms casually crossed as he watched the stage.

"Grant!" A thought occurred to him. "Have you seen John Garrett anywhere? We're tryin' to track him down." *They're friends, after all. He might've spoken to him today.* Fitz stood practically on tiptoe, holding his arms out for balance as he tried to scan the crowd for the preacher.

"Put your arms down, son. You look like a West Texas cheerleader at a pep rally." Garrett stepped into Fitz's line of sight from where he'd been standing, a few feet away on Ward's opposite side.

"You." Fitz's eyes narrowed in accusation, and he rounded on the older man. "What've you done with those fireworks?"

Garrett looked askance from Fitz to Ward. "You know this chucklehead?" he asked Ward.

Ward smiled tersely. "Fitz. The magician. You've met before."

"Ah, I remember now. One of those fortune-teller types." He held his hand out to shake. "John Garrett."

Fitz had no patience for this charade. "Enough. Where are the fireworks?" He drew himself up to his full height and stood as squarely as he could in Garrett's eyeline. "Where've you hidden them?"

Garrett held up his palms patiently. "A blameless man has nothing to hide, Mr. Fitz."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he bit out. "We all know you stole them!"

Garrett's face hardened. "Tread lightly, kid." A second later, he was back to the same insincere façade. "If there's been a theft, I'd be more than happy to provide a witness to my whereabouts for the day. I've been blessed with many gifts, Mr. Fitz, but even I couldn't be in two places at once."

"Oh, right," Fitz scoffed. "Just like that, you're gonna find an alibi for the *entire* afternoon?"

"I'm a bit of a sweet talker when I need to be." Garrett looked at Ward with such pride that Fitz felt
he might be sick. "You wouldn't believe what I could talk this son of a gun into."

Everything clicked in Fitz's head. First Idaho… now Grant?

"What's he talkin' about? Did you have something to do with the missing finale fireworks?"

Ward looked mildly surprised. "She's your competition, Fitz. She and her friend tricked me into losing your rabbit - into ruining our friendship! The least you could do is thank me."

"No, no…" Fitz backed away slowly. What have I done? "She's not- I'm gonna be working with her!"

"You're on the same team?" Ward tutted. "I'm disappointed in you."

"Stop. Just- It was you-" Fitz's head was spinning, trying to make sense. Then he turned, stumbling slightly, and pointed to Garrett, still looking at Ward. "It was him! You don't have to listen to him anymore, Grant. He's a megalomaniac, and a thief." Fitz pressed on, words falling out of his throat, looking Ward straight in the eye and trying not to blink. "Just admit he made you do it. You can choose, right now, to tell the truth. Do the right thing, Grant."

Garrett put his hand on Ward's arm, drawing his attention back. "You see, son? That Captain Chemistry's poisoned his mind. She's setting the people of this town on the wrong path, but you and me, we're on a mission to change the world."

"Fitz, listen to me." Ward's words were insistent, rushed. "I helped you, remember? I gave you that iguana- gave you a fighting chance to do a great show, like you always do - like you did!"

Fitz staggered backwards. "No- that's not what-" It was Ward… wasn't it? He'd been thinking with his libido and he'd lost the rabbit. Right?

"Leave him alone, son." Garrett's voice remained even, measured. Smarmy. "He can't see the big picture, not like we can. It's not his fault he's weak." Fitz's mouth dropped open in umbrage, but Garrett kept on smoothly. "But you can't let his weakness become yours. Let's go."

Ward's brow was still furrowed in pity as he and Garrett started backing away. "We had some good times. I'm sorry, Fitz."

Just then, Fitz spotted Ms. Sif doing a perimeter sweep, not far away in the grand scheme of the universe, but given the size of the Children's Day crowd, far enough. Doesn't matter. He had to try.

"You'll be sorry," he called after them hotly, pulling out his phone so he could text Sif their location. Garrett'll pay for what he's done. Fitz planned on being a big part of that.

He'd just hit send when he suddenly heard his name over the speakers, and his head snapped to face the stage once more, mouth breaking into a huge grin and his heart muffin-topping with affection as she gave Fungineers some free advertising. Gosh, she's the best, isn't she?

"You there! I received your plea for help." Ms. Sif appeared at his elbow. "Have the miscreants fled? Quickly, we must give them chase!"

"Yeah, they went that way," Fitz pointed. Then, apologetically, "Running's not exactly my strong suit, any chance I could just-"

Sif had no patience for his excuses. "If I am to apprehend these men, I will require your assistance in identifying them. Now, make haste!"
Sif pushed past the crowd, many of them parting easily in front of her, whether it was her commanding presence or the heavy-looking flashlight she carried. Fitz trailed behind, doing his best to keep up, when he began to notice, amidst the typical audience noises, angry mutters, perplexed curses and through it all, a jackhammer drum beat with an electric guitar wail. Suddenly Seth's barely-pubescent voice screeched in with the lyrics.

"In the ancient halls… we fight! To save the manticore…"

Oh, no. No, it can't be. Liquid nitrogen gripped his heart as he turned stiffly to look at the huge white screen at the front of the stage, and time stilled for a second as the edges of his world shrank in.

Projected in massive scale behind Jemma, candle letters had just finished spelling out *Ice Machine Apocalypse*. The letters dripped wax… which became blood… which fell into a chalice held by - oh, God, knowing it's gonna happen does not make it any easier - a tophavy Medusa wearing only a chastity belt. Fitz ground the heels of his fists into his eyes in an attempt to wake up from this living nightmare. It didn't help.

"Sif! Ms. Sif!" Fitz called helplessly after the security chief, now too far ahead to hear him. I can catch her if I hurry. Onstage, Jemma had realized what was happening, and was gesturing wildly to someone in the throng, trying to convey a message over the very loud display going on around her. *Oh, for God's sake- Lincoln, you fucking clownfish.* Her mic had been turned off to route the audio to the song.

*And what a song it is. "And the manticore, his quest requires…"

Donnie's voice chimed in, grunting monstrously, "The blood of a virgin!" He carried on word-burping the refrain over and over, while Seth's over-the-top lyrics shrieked and clashed with the drums and guitar. *Well, if they're lookin' for virgins, Fitz thought wryly, look no further than the mirror, boys.*

Fitz gave one last, long look at the back of Sif's disappearing head, and made a decision. Running might not be his forte, but neither was politeness. *"Out of my way! Bloody move!"

He'd made it almost to the front when he all but collided with Lincoln, who was jostling his way past the spectacle-goers with a heavy fire extinguisher in hand. "What are you thinking, man?!" he screamed. "Turn this off!" Fitz jutted a finger frantically upwards in the direction of the screen. The nearly-nude Medusa had boarded her skeletal dragon and set off, its tattered, leathery wings flapping impossibly against a black background, pumping higher and higher into a laser-light sky.

"What? No, Captain said start the show, then get up there with her." He hoisted the fire extinguisher. "Why, what's wrong?" Lincoln squinted up at the display. "Are the colors wrong or- whoa, are those *tits*? Uhhh, I don't think Dr. Simmons would be too happy about you putting this in her finale."

Fitz stared dumbfounded at the younger man. His next statement, in contrast to normal human speech, came out like the primeval yowl of an alley cat standing his ground above a dumpster. *"This isn't the finale, you idiot!"

He grabbed the fire extinguisher out of Lincoln's hands and wrenched it away, hissing out instructions to go back and shut it down, you incompetent muttonhead. For his part he started running along the front of the stage, looking for any wires or cables that led to the lasers. *If I can just spot them, disconnect them…*

He wished he had an axe or something to chop with; at this point, he'd sever the cables rather than let the little ones in the audience watch - his head tipped up - a mass of icy brambles growing up out of a
skull's eye sockets, breaking through the bone and rising upwards as a spiky wall of vegetation. Fitz shook his head and kept his eyes down, looking for the cords. He knew what happened next, and he didn't really need to see two implausibly muscled, broadsword-wielding versions of Seth and Donnie hack through the thorns and save the manticore.

Fitz reached the edge of the stage, the small set of stairs leading up, and there they were, winding up a beam and secured by cable ties. Fitz's eyes nearly rolled back in relief as he started tracking the wires along the ground to their origin.

"Fitz!"

Jemma'd clearly had a similar notion about taking matters into her own hands, and was jumping in place underneath the projector screen, attempting to catch the edge and send it rolling up with a snap. Atta girl. No screen, no laser show. Unfortunately, Jemma was just a few inches too short to accomplish what she was trying to do. And that tall bastard Lincoln's just left her in the lurch. Fitz set his fire extinguisher down with a dull thunk and sprinted to her side.

"I've got it!" Fitz flexed his knees and leapt, his fingers hooking onto the pipe-like lower edge of the screen and yanking it down sharply. He released the thick material almost instantly, watching as it sped up and away, the metallic bottom crashing into the casing at the top with a resounding crack. And then it seemed as if the world stopped, the sound of splintering wood monstrous in his ears. Fitz watched, heart suspended in his throat like a Jello salad, as the huge tube above them creaked, and the long, heavy projector screen detached from the stage's top beam.

The far side came down first, and somewhere in the reaches of Fitz's memory he expected a Looney Tunes character to call out timber. He had just enough brainpower left in him to realize that Jemma was standing at his side, eyes trained upward and blown wide in horror.

"Fitz! Get back!"

All at once her arms were grabbing at one of his, her cries urgent behind him, pulling with a strength he wouldn't have predicted. When his synapses finally shot into action, it was all Fitz could do to throw his arms around her and launch them out of the way, twisting his body in hopes he'd pad her fall, instead of the other way round.

He nearly managed it. Fitz's shoulder hit the floor first, a jarring blow that left his teeth rattling around inside his skull, but at least he'd kept his arm wrapped around Jemma, absorbing most of the impact. A heartbeat later, gravity and momentum rolled Fitz onto his back, Jemma half astride him, and he found himself staring up at her dinner-plate eyes, breaths coming in like gunfire, mind still reeling from the fact that a part of the stage had nearly crushed them, and the rest of his body slowly becoming aware of the gorgeous woman currently on top of him.

The shouts from the audience melted away, everything outside the two of them fading back for the span of an epiphany.

"Fitz." His named puffed out of her and gusted past his cheek. Her fingers, pressed into the floor on either side of his head, scooted inward to feel along the sides of his skull. "Are you all right?"

She saved my life. Or more likely, saved him from some broken bones - let's not go overboard. But if he was being honest, Fitz was already a man overboard, and he was happy to drown.

"Jemma..." He scanned her face, telling himself he was checking for injuries. His hand came up to sweep the curtain of hair back up off her face, tucking it behind her ear, and her eyes slipped closed for a moment. When they opened, she stared at the spot on his throat that jumped like cloth on a
speaker. She scrutinized his open mouth, panting in speedy train-track rhythm, and it seemed she might be getting nearer when Jemma's gaze finally met his. Her cheeks were pink, a trick of the light, perhaps, but all the more welcome because it meant they matched.

"Jemma, I…"

Whatever Fitz would have said was lost when the twin canisters at the front of the stage roared into life, blasting them with the scent of fuel and a searing wall of heat. They clutched at each other, gaping at the sight before them, as two huge jets of flame streaked proud and yellow into the evening sky.
Chapter End Notes

Hehehe. So, there you have it! Really, compared to the finale, this was nothing. NOTHING. Right? :-D

For my money, Lincoln was only supposed to be kind of careless in this (they were rushing real hard, after all) and not intentionally petty over not getting the job, but you can read it how you'd like.

Also, I really enjoyed putting in all the Garrett and Ward quotes, from these TV scenes that were dealing with life and death issues, massive betrayals, the fate of the universe, etc. - into a scene about a rabbit and an iguana and a box of fireworks. Like, chill out you guys, nobody is going to jail over this, LOL. Gah! So dramatic all the time!

Once again a massive thank-you to memorizingthedigitsofpi for her bomb-ass CD covers of *Ice Machine Apocalypse* and *Revelations*. I swear, you guys, Seth and Donnie's guyliner I cannot.
"What were you thinking? Do you have any idea what a PR nightmare this is?" Mayor Coulson was standing behind his desk, leaned over with the pads of his fingers pressing white against the varnished wood, while Deputy Mayor Hill stood off to his side.

Jemma opened her mouth to speak - needlessly, it turned out - as the very next second the mayor filled the pause with another outburst. *Ah. Rhetorical, then.*

"I've got angry parents up the wazoo, telling me they don't need their kids seeing a half-naked woman."

"Technically, sir," Fitz tried to interject, "it was a half-naked drawing-" at the same time that Jemma protested, "It wasn't his fault-"

"among a whole lot of other disturbing images," Coulson glared. "This was supposed to be a family-friendly event. Now I've got the school board breathing down my neck, telling me I oughta ban both of you from next year's Spectacular!"

"Sir," Jemma started, "it really was more complicated than-"

"And that's not even taking into account the damage to the stage. The Hyde Park Recreational Association is furious. Doctor Simmons, you should count yourself extremely lucky that you have such a fan in Daniel Whitehall."

She and Fitz darted confused looks at one another.

"As the head of Hyde R.A., Mr. Whitehall is in a position to sue the city, the broadcasting station, and the Fungineers." The mayor straightened and traded a glance with Deputy Hill. "Yet for some reason, he's offered to waive all claims. Said he'd hate to punish a woman who," Coulson turned to face Jemma, "has done so much to promote discovery through experimentation." He sighed. "I've authorized Mr. Whitehall to call on either of you for anything he might need - and make no mistake, you two will be assisting with the renovations."

They both nodded dumbly, still processing everything they'd heard. Then Coulson turned to Fitz, eyes trained on him like missiles.

"As for you."

Coulson unbuttoned his suit jacket and sat down in the massive leather chair, effortlessly keeping his authoritative stance. "I nearly gave you the finale this year. Is this the kind of show I would've gotten from you and Mack?"

Fitz bristled, still proud of the work he'd done for Ice Machine Apocalypse, despite everything. *And the flamethrowers went off perfectly.* He forced himself to swallow his building frustration. "Mack had absolutely nothin' to do with this, sir. It's on me."

"You're damn right it is." Coulson picked up a pen and clicked it in irritation. "Never thought I'd need to lecture you about quality control." He faced Fitz sternly. "Protocols. Preventative steps. Ever
Fitz's face had gone stormy, but he nodded. "Yes, sir." _Bugger._ This was _not_ how he'd planned to spend his Saturday night.

"Good. Don't you ever pull a stunt like that again." Coulson reached over to the old-fashioned rotary phone on his desk, and grabbed the glossy black handset. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to get in touch with the TV station and see how they want to handle this mess. I wouldn't be surprised if they rebrand your entire show." He directed the last comment at Jemma before tipping back wearily in his chair. "Deputy Hill," he held up the phone, "please get your wife on the line."

Hill stepped forward and took the receiver, then hooked her fingers into the base of the old telephone, scooting it closer to her and beginning to dial. "You didn't have to scare them, Phil," she murmured, lips quirking in what might have been amusement. As she lifted her head and put the handset to her ear, she gave Fitz a quick _I've-got-your-back_ wink. "Thanks for all your help with the wedding."

-0-

They sat on one of the benches inside City Hall, letting the throat-wringing they'd just gone through wash over them before heading home. Jemma let out a wry huff. "So..."

He shook his head. "Yeah. Not every day you get chewed out by the mayor." He scratched his eyebrow, risking a glance over, only to find her eyeing him with a barely suppressed smile.

"Wish I could see Garrett's face," Fitz started, picturing the preacher's eyes bugging out at the sight of a laser-lit pentagram goat, "when he realizes that because of _him_, most of Treehouse Falls' highly impressionable youth were just treated to, erm," he chuckled, the absurdity of the situation catching up to him, "to..."

"A parade of skeleton breasts?"

Fitz coughed, something like a shocked guffaw, and after a beat of silent staring, they both broke into a fit of giggles.

"That does sound fun," Jemma laughed, pressing both hands to her cheeks to calm herself down. "Though _I'd_ rather see his face when I ram my foot into it."

_Oh, come on._ That was just unfair. Fitz swallowed, peering at Jemma as he tried to sort out how serious she was. Either way, the idea of Jemma going all Tarantino on Preacher John was more than a bit sexy. Needing a little breathing room, he tugged off the tie he'd been wearing (it _was_ a meeting with the mayor, after all) and stuffed it into his pocket.

"Fitz..." she started, and the after-hours lighting in the building didn't quite let him see it very well, but... _is that a blush?_ "You know how you're always saying we're not friends?"

"Uh-huh." _We're always saying._ It wasn't _just_ him. Somehow, he couldn't find it in himself to correct her. Or to stop staring.

"I was thinking..." her fingers came up to play shyly with a curl of her hair. "Do you maybe want to... go _not_ be friends over a drink?"

His brain stuttered. She was asking him out? _Okay, don't get ahead of yourself._ He'd been in this situation before, thinking they were on a date, only to be disappointed. "Yeah, we could do that. And..." Could he drink around Jemma without letting on how much he liked her? That was too much
pressure, probably, for a pair of co-workers. *Food would be better.* "Or breakfast, even."

She raised one eyebrow. "You want to have drinks, then breakfast?"

Too late, Fitz realized how it sounded. "No! No, oh, God, not like- I just meant, it doesn't *have* to be drinks. I know how you like scones, and it's not as if I'm a drunk-" *Stop. Talking.* "Well, I am at Scout's quite a lot, but I- and if I'm being honest, you're no paragon of sobriety-" *Seriously. Stop now.* Especially since Jemma was nodding her encouragement, chin on her fist and face a perfect mask of hermetic amusement. Mortification battled offense, and his mouth finally snapped shut.

"No, no!" she protested. "Don't let a scone-loving alcoholic like *me* stop you. You were saying?"

His eyes narrowed. *Laugh it up, sweetheart.* There was no way he was going to the bar with her now; the last thing he needed was Jemma and Hunter ganging up to take the piss. "You know what? I've got just the thing."

He grabbed her hand before could think about what he was doing and dragged her down the hall to the ancient vending machines. Pulling out his wallet, he said, "Pick your poison."

Jemma shot him a quizzical look, but pointed to the unsweetened Nestea.

"Ugh," he joked, as he fed a couple dollars into the machine. "Cold tea? Where are you from, Georgia?"

She poked him in the ribs with one well-placed elbow and a dry, "Beggars can't be choosers."

"Hey! Is that a dig at this five-star selection of snacking options?"

"Not at all!" she mocked adorably, before assessing the contents of the machine again. Jemma bit her lip as she surveyed her choices. *Probably making Excel sheets in her head over a few pieces of junk food.* "In fairness," she allowed, "this is almost certainly more than I have in my refrigerator at home right now."

"Aww," Fitz clucked. "I wouldn't go shopping either, if I didn't know how checkout lanes worked."

"And if you'd ever listen to someone else's voice," and she didn't even bother to face him, "long enough to ask a cashier about the 10 Items rule, you'd find they all agree with *me.*"

He chuckled. "Why'm I not surprised that you've been surveying supermarket employees over this?"

After getting himself a Coke and an extra bottled water for good measure, Fitz punched in the code for a couple of candy bars and a packet of crisps. When he offered her first pick and saw her nose wrinkle, he heaved a sigh and turned back to the machine.

"Honestly, Fitz, it's not that I don't appreciate-"

"Shhh," he waved off her objection. "I know. We'll find you somethin'."

They both stood in front of the glass, silently searching for anything that could conceivably have originated in the ground. *Ahh, there at the bottom, with the gum and the other garbage choices. "Trail mix all right?"*

She nodded, uncapping her tea and taking a sip. "Oh, dear, that is horrible."

"Told you." He plucked the Nestea out of her hands and shrugged. "Waste not, want not." Fitz choked down about a quarter of it before he had to toss it in the bin. "Wow - that is vile," he brought
up his fist to stopper a burp, "I thought only the machines were from the 70s." He handed Jemma the cold water to make up for it and grabbed a bag of dried fruit and nuts out of the dispenser. "Now come on!"

This time, her hand slipped easily into his, and Fitz tried not to let it show on his face just how much it delighted him. He tugged her up the broad stairs at the end of the hall, trying to ignore the twinge in his shoulder from where he'd hit the stage. When they reached the fourth floor, he yanked open a door painted "Staff Only" and kept going up another, narrower stairwell.

"Fitz, where-"

"Almost there! Just trust me."

And then they were at the top, standing on the wide wooden platform that ran along the walls inside the clock tower, both of them blinking up at the enormous reversed clock face. The way the spotlights hit the frosted glass threw the room into odd swaths of brightness and shadow.

Fitz found himself saddled with a conundrum. Sit down in a well-lit patch, keep things professional, or slink into a darkened corner and hope for the best? As it turned out, Jemma made the decision for him.

Jemma got to the top of the stairs, breathing a tad heavily, and of course - of course - he'd brought her to a clock tower at night. Because, what, all the lakeside gazebos were taken? There weren't any rooftop gardens festooned with fairy lights within walking distance? Jemma spun slowly, taking in everything she could. This was the sort of fantasy-movie scene that made her want to write in a diary.

Fitz turned to her, pride in his posture, and grinned, "See? Told you it was cool."

She had to give it to him. "And you were right, Fitz." She stepped delicately across the old boards and found a nook that wasn't quite so directly under the beam of the spotlights, and set down her things.

He caught her arm before she could lower herself down to sit, pulling off his button-down and laying it on the floor in front of her like a beach towel. "It's, erm, it's dusty," he mumbled in apology, as if he hadn't just brought her to what was, arguably, the most romantic spot she'd ever physically set foot in.

Jemma dropped into a kneel and shifted about, eventually ending up sitting crosslegged with her back to the wall. As he settled himself next to her, she found herself staring, trying to discern from his demeanor whether he'd brought many girls here… and promptly decided she didn't care. If this was Fitz's usual move, it was a good one. And it's working.

Fitz stretched his legs out in front of him and took a rather large bite of one candy bar, then stuffed a couple of crisps into his mouth, humming in satisfaction at the combination.

Jemma rolled her eyes and shook a handful of trail mix into her palm. "How did you even know about this place?"

He crunched for a few seconds, then glanced sideways. "It's not the first time the business has been in trouble," he shrugged. "Mack and I've had to take odd jobs before."

A rivulet of guilt trickled into her chest. "How long have you worked with him?"
"Professionally, only about five years, but we met back in school." He scraped his hand over his stubble. "I was shy, bit of a loner. And the youngest one in my class. Mack was the only one who treated me like a regular person."

Her brow knitted. "But you're not a regular person."

His mouth twisted wryly. "Erm, thanks?"

_Not this again._ She brushed her hand on top of his where it rested on his leg, pulling it back just as fast. "I don't mean that in a bad way."

"Me neither." He shook his head quickly. "I'm sayin', Mack treats everybody the same. He needed help with the coursework, and he wasn't afraid to ask a kid." Fitz coughed, and averted his eyes. "And later, after I... well, you've already heard how," he took a deep breath, and his tone turned overly light and cheery, "I wasted all my savings and 'untapped potential' on a pipe dream!" When she didn't laugh, he gave up the façade and picked at a scuff on his jeans. "Mack gave me a chance after everyone else gave up."

"He sounds like a good friend." She willed him to look at her, and by some coincidence he did. "And you are too." She rested her hand gently on his knee. "Fitz--" she inhaled, letting it out slowly. "I don't want you to feel as though you're giving anything up by working with me."

"What? No, no- I don't." His eyes darted to her hand, and he covered it with his own. "Jemma, thank you for the job offer. I'm lookin' forward to it."

"I am too," she squeezed lightly. "I just... you don't have to worry, you know? You could keep doing magic-"

"Nah," he interrupted good-naturedly. "It's about time I retired the Amazing Leopold."

_But the tuxedo! _"You're quitting? It's just, you never..." She licked her lips.

He quirked his head, questioning.

"You never finished explaining that coin trick."

Fitz's eyes rounded, and his mouth burst into a wide grin.

"Yeah? Yeah, all right," he nodded enthusiastically. He stuck his hands into his jeans pocket and his expression wavered, blushing pink. "Erm, Jemma?" He grumbled something under his breath that sounded like _I hate change._ "I don't suppose you could spare a few quarters?"

_Oh, god, his hands._ Fitz's hands were works of art and she wanted them on her. Jemma watched, drums pounding wildly in her chest, as he hid a quarter by pressing it between two fingers and dropped the other three coins into his opposite palm. _Nod. Nod like you're paying attention._ The trick was really quite run-of-the-mill, if she was being honest, but she leaned forward, transfixed by the interplay of muscles in his palms, the way the tendons in the back of his hands jumped under his skin.

"Okay, now you try."

She inhaled, nodded, and tried to recreate what he'd shown her, conscious of her quickened heartbeat and the way her own hands shook when she felt his eyes steel into her. After the fourth quarter fell out partway through the trick, he snickered, and his expression took on a much more relaxed,
That's all right, Jemma, no one's good at *everything,*" he teased. "But y' might want t' keep your day job, just in case."

"Hey!" She elbowed him. "We have the same day job now, you plum."

"Sure, until the station realizes they're wasting my *considerable* stage presence and *impeccable* comedic timing and decide to give me my very own show. Then we'll see whose ratings are higher."

She sniffed. "Well I certainly didn't ask you to work for me so that you could Game of Thrones the entire thing, and if *that's* how you—"

"Hah!" he pointed. "Work for you! See? I knew it." His head bobbed in satisfaction. "All that nonsense about workin' *with* you and all the while you've wanted me to be your trained monkey on set."

She laughed, "Oh, my god, stop talking."

He smirked. "Is that a direct order, *Captain*? Because I'd rather *keep* talkin', but since I work *for* you, I suppose I don't have much choice if that's a direct—"

Her hand came up, fingers splayed, and pushed into his cheek, nearly tipping him over until he caught himself with an arm on the floor behind him.

"I warned you…" she giggled, as he grimaced in disgust at a cobweb stuck to his hand and wiped it on his jeans.

"You're gonna be a terrible boss, you know that?" He picked up his bag of crisps and shook what was left into his mouth. "I should file a complaint," he said in between chews, then bit off about a third of his candy bar for good measure.

"Ugh." She wrinkled her nose. "I could file a complaint about your eating habits; I swear you've got the diet of an unsupervised five-year-old."

"Jemma…" he looked at her, disbelieving and more than a little judgmental. "You've never had crisps and chocolate together?" When she shook her head, he *tsked* in condemnation. "You have to fix this."

She chuckled and indicated his empty packet of crisps and flattened candy bar wrapper. "I don't know *how,* Fitz, seeing as you ate it all." Her gaze immediately flicked to the salty crumbs on the corner of his lip and the way he was sucking a bit of chocolate off his index finger. *Hmm.* Perhaps she did know *one* way.
Chapter End Notes

So I decided to make this chapter longer by about an extra thousand words :-) I think I'm still in emergency-fluff mode after the finale. Let me know what you thought!

(Also, I don't think I need to tell you, but eating chocolate and potato chips together is really an excellent idea and you should all try it.)
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fitz looked down and abruptly realized he was licking chocolate off his finger. A finger that had most recently been covered in cobwebs. "Urrmgh!" he grimaced, completely revolted and more than a little sad that he'd done this to himself, and tried to wipe his tongue off on the back of his wrist which was at least a bit cleaner. "Blagh. Blaghghgh," he whimpered, unable to shake the thoughts now running amok in his brain. *Oh, God. Can spider eggs survive inside the human body? Lord have mercy; I'm gonna become a breeding ground.*

"Fitz? Are you all right?" Jemma's face was twisted in a combination of concern and amusement.

*Good going, man, very smooth.* He probably looked like a kitten who'd just been given antibiotics. Fitz did his best to shake off his disgust and lean casually against the wall. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just, er, y'know, wrong pipe." *What.* That didn't even make sense. She was going to think he was insane. His brain grasped wildly for something to say, and finding nothing, landed on the next best thing - a dignified escape.

"So, *clearly* I have to go back down and get more crisps and chocolate," he groused. He started to heave himself onto his feet, and she tugged on his shirt to stop him.

"Fitz, if you think I'm going to eat something that *just* made you gag…" She grabbed his hand and pulled him back to sit on the floor. "And it's a funny thing, you being so keen to share food," she teased, "considering you once devoted yourself to making sure I couldn't order chips."

Fitz tensed. *Because you were impugning my character, you test-tubing harpy.* He was stressed enough after practically vomiting in front of her, and dredging up a months-old complaint wasn't helping. "So- so now we're bringin' up the past? Let's compare notes, shall we?" he started, yanking his fingers away so he could tick them off.

Then his mouth snapped shut, taking in her expression, the way her eyes rolled in a wave of here-we-go-again, shoulders tight and hackles rising. Fitz could see in his head exactly how this conversation would go, and it wasn't the way he wanted it to. He swallowed, and let his body relax, leaning back on the heels of his hands as he thought about what he actually needed to say to her. She settled a bit as well, watching him warily.

"There's, erm, there *is* something you should know." He couldn't keep eye contact, and tipped his face down, scratching at his sideburn. "That day we met, I," he huffed, "I didn't recognize you. I mean, not- I didn't know you were Captain Chemistry. To be honest I was expecting a younger version of the last one."

"Oh." She was silent, until he risked peeking over. Her brow was knitted, arms wrapped around her waist and fingers clutching at her elbow while she sorted things out. "Then it *wasn't* personal, what you did." He nodded meekly. "But you still sabotaged a complete stranger's programme… as part of, what? A pissing contest?"

"No," Fitz tried to make his response as emphatic and sincere as he could. *She'll never believe me. I've left it too late.* He leaned forward earnestly. "That was an accident. If you can believe it."

She tipped her head, mouth flat and skeptical.
"I know. I know it sounds ridiculous, but it's true. And I should've said somethin' back then but, "I was drunk and you were attacking me, "I was being stubborn. And I'm sorry."

She looked a bit less unconvinced than she had a second before - which still wasn't good enough for Fitz.

He took a breath and barrelled on. "Jemma," he wiped his hands on his thighs, "I know I could have been, er, a bit more forthright-"

She chuckled tunelessly. "Forthright. Fitz, as understatements go, I think that qualifies as an instant classic." Her hands clasped primly, and she pressed them to her lap. "The entire foundation of our problem with each other was a mistake all along. You lied to me. We could've-

"I didn't." His eyebrows elevator up his forehead. "I didn't lie! I simply didn't bother to correct your assumption that I'm a horrible person." She opened her mouth to keep arguing, so - in the interest of keeping things reasoned and civil, mind you - he cut her off. "Be honest, would you even have listened back then? You'd made up your mind before you ever walked up t' me at the bar."

She blinked quickly. Ah, fartknuckles. Was she going to cry? Damn it. He'd been doing so well this time.

"You're probably right." It was quiet, but she wasn't crying, at least.

"What?"

"I might not have listened. I might not have believed you." She looked at him again, inscrutable. "But I wish you'd tried."

He sighed, whether in relief or regret, he didn't know. "I'm, ah, I'm tryin' now."

A ghost of a smile skated over her mouth, and she seemed to agree from the side of her eyes.

"I know it's probably useless to speak up at this point-" he ran his hand over the back of his neck, "but I- I mean, I thought you should know. Since we're goin' to be working together." He cleared his throat. "Just so you're not worried I might do something like that again."

"Right." She edged a bit closer. "And since we are going to be spending more time together, I think it's good to clear the air. Be honest with each other." Her gaze locked on to his mouth. Fitz's heartbeat seemed to stop, the last lub-dub reverberating inside his brain as he stared back. Somewhere in his consciousness, Sebastian the crab was encouraging him to kiss the girl. He should, shouldn't he? She'd been holding his hand a lot. That was a good sign. But then again... Are you daft? She's your boss? Except she'd told him specifically she wasn't. Fitz dug his fingers into his thigh as he warred with himself. He couldn't make the wrong call, not about this. If he'd kissed her all that time ago when they met, she might've slapped him, but he'd have been all right. He didn't have that option anymore. He was in too deep. Which is precisely why you should kiss her. He told his crab-conscious to put a cork in it.

After a moment, Jemma shook herself, nodding once as her voice took on a more businesslike tone. Now look what you did, you turtle.

"So, then, in the interest of honesty," she started off with brisk words and still palms, "I didn't know who you were either. When we met."

"You mean when I took a bath in your morning tea?" He kept his tone light - Jemma had a bad habit
of taking things personally.

Her cheeks flushed prettily. "That was an accident," she pointed out. "But I actually meant later, at
the station. I had no idea until that afternoon that we were even in the same line of work."

He remembered her drunken message indicating much the same thing. "Right, yeah."

"So," she continued, speaking slow, "we were simply two strangers who met by chance."

"Okay." Where's she going with this?

"And," her hand fluttered by her neckline, "since we're being honest…" Her fingers closed over her
pendant. "You should know that I, erm… well." She inhaled, and her eyes seemed to have trained
themselves deliberately on his the collar of his tee shirt. "You once accused me of flirting with you."

Gulp. "That's true. But I was just tryin' to get a rise out of you." Fitz's pulse had picked up, though
he was keeping his expectations completely in check. Hold steady. Just because Jemma'd asked him
for coffee once upon a misstep, that didn't mean anything now. Right?

"You... may not have been completely off the mark." She tuck a piece of wayward hair behind her
ear, and Fitz's fingers twitched with the impulse to smooth over the same strand. "And, in the interest
of honesty…" She moved up onto her knees and scooted a bit closer.

"Yes?" His tongue felt disused, as if he'd just woken up.

Her eyes flicked up to meet his, and her voice was satin laid over sandpaper. "I might be flirting with
you now."

Fitz exhaled hard through his nose, his brows coming up even as his eyes closed. "I, uh, good," he
croaked. "That's good."

When he opened his eyes again, Jemma seemed to have teleported, angling her body towards his, her
face not much more than a wishful thought away. Fitz's breath caught and his gaze swept over the
shadowed outlines of her face, thrown into detail by the tower's odd lighting. Jemma's hooded eyes
beckoned, and he swallowed as he leaned infinitesimally forward.

This is not a drill. This is
happening - hands, mouth, man your stations! Repeat, this is not a drill!

His thumb came up to trace her jaw, and she inched closer, until he could feel the breath from her
parted lips running soft over the skin of his neck. His disbelieving eyes continued their trek over her
features, setting out bravely to wander the tempting line of her throat and the curve of her shoulder.
Fitz and Jemma approached each other like a mathematical function, slow but inevitable, shrinking
the distance between them with every new intersection of x and y. Her lashes fluttered shut, and Fitz
could have sworn he felt the wind of that small movement on his forehead, a tickling thrill that
traveled down his cheek, almost like…

Like a spider. There was a spider crawling on his face.

Chapter End Notes

OH MY GOD YOU TWO, GET IT TOGETHER. HOW MANY MORE KISS-HANGERS CAN WE HAVE?
(Spoiler alert: it's zero. This was the last kiss-hanger.)
Also, kittens are adorable after you give them antibiotics, which makes sense, because kittens are adorable at all times.
Jemma let her eyes slip closed, knowing Fitz would meet her halfway, trusting in the gentle press of his hand to her neck, the desperate bob of his Adam's apple, and the darkening want in his irises to guide him. A heartbeat-skip later, she felt Fitz's hand drop to her shoulder and push back, stopping her in her tracks. It was followed by her name, whimpered and painful, like the sound of a stuck door in an old house. "Jemma? Help?"

She took one look and sighed. "Oh, Fitz."

Reaching out, she let the daddy longlegs crawl onto her palm and up over the back of her hand. Fitz immediately put his fist in his mouth to muffle what she was sure would have been a Home-Alone-level scream, his head nopeing right and left like he was watching the world's fastest tennis match. "I've got him." She squinted in the dim and picked herself up, walking over to the spotlight to get a better look. "My, you're a lovely one, aren't you?"

A few paces away, Fitz paused from shaking out his dusty button-down to pout incredulously at her words. "Are you cooing?" he gawked. "That little poison factory just tried t' murder me!"

"Ugh, honestly." She looked back over her shoulder at him. "First of all, venom factory. Second, he's harmless. Isn't that right, sweetheart?" She put her hand by the wooden beam surrounding the stairwell and let the little creature crawl off before going back to where Fitz was putting his overshirt back on. Pity. "And really," she continued reasonably, "this is more his habitat than yours, so if he had bitten you it would have been in defense of his home." Never ignore a teachable moment. She nodded in self-satisfaction.

He narrowed his eyes. "Oh, so we're the trespassers." He screwed up his face in disgust. "Well, that's enough reason for me; I say we take off." Fitz shrugged and motioned to the stairs with a questioning head tilt.

Take off what, exactly? She sighed, running her hands over her neck, and tried to compose herself. I can turn this around.

Fitz shook himself out like a wet dog, ruffling his hair and batting at his clothes, then bent and picked up their discarded trash, stuffing the crumpled wrappers into the empty bottles. "So…"

"So…" she smiled, stepping into his space expectantly.

"Ready to head out?"

She fought the irritated huff that strained against her throat. Must I do everything? "Absolutely," she hummed. "Just one last thing before we go." She lifted herself up onto her toes, gripped Fitz by the shoulders to keep her balance, and deliberately fused her lips to his.

When she pulled back, his eyes were wide open, hairline as high as it would go, and a slow smile starting to tug at the corners of his mouth. His lips curled around a silent whaaaat? and Jemma barked out a laugh at the sight.

"Don't look so surprised, Fitz," she chided softly. "Or is that not why you brought me up here."
"Oh, sure," he muttered sarcastically. "A filthy nest of eight-legged face-crawlers. Perfect place for a picnic!"

She rolled her eyes. "Well," she tried again, snuggling closer and wrapping her arms around his waist as she tipped her head up to watch him. "Call me crazy, but I thought it was kind of perfect."

Fitz's expression softened, going a bit goofy in fact. "Okay, crazy." She heard the plasticky thud of the soda bottles hitting the floor, and shivered as the anticipation zipped up her spine. Fitz raised his fingers to her hair, sweeping back a curl that had fallen out of place, and dropped his nose down to rub against the top of hers. "Just so you know, in the interest of honesty," he brushed his lips to her cheek, just under her eye, "I resent the implication that I would ever," he grazed her mouth with a barely-there peck, "bring a girl up here with an ulterior motive."

He kissed her again then, with pause, with intent, with parted lips and just a hint of tongue. Jemma basked in that kiss, a cat stretching in a sunny window, wishing she could make a bed of their bodies, blanket his caresses over her, and feel the weight of him dip into her like a mattress. When they broke away and she caught sight of his face - whether it was the clock behind them, or the spotlight shining on him just right - she could've commissioned a portrait.

She bit her lip and stepped backwards, letting her hands drift over the soft plaid covering his ribs and stomach until distance forced her to release him. "Still want to get that drink?"

"God, ye-" He cleared his throat and hooked his thumbs into his belt loops, affecting (as best she could tell) a sort of suave disinterest. "I mean, if you want to."

**Mister Cool.** She resisted the urge to scoff, mostly successfully. "We could go to Hunter's bar, or…" her eyes frisked him down, then up, "there's beer in the fridge back at my flat. I also have tea."

"Those are both drinks," Fitz agreed with an emphatic nod.

They beamed at each other rather stupidly for a long moment, until Jemma finally broke the silence. "Well, then, what are we waiting for?"

Fitz was trying to focus on what Jemma was saying, and not just the way the glow of the traffic lights set off her porcelain skin. The restless trace of her fingers on the steering wheel belied her mood as she rambled on about how lucky she'd been to rent her flat when she did, how she'd been about to go stir crazy living in a motel for the first month or so after she'd gotten the job and moved to town.

And, to be honest, if anyone was going to make real estate sound fascinating right now, it was Jemma, but he was far more entranced by soft play of red, yellow and green dancing over the contours of her face. He still felt the ghost of her lips on his, warm and pliant, her subtle curves snuggling into him as he kissed her. **Holy Swiss cheese on a biscuit. Don't bollocks this up.** Truth be told, if he'd been a cat he'd have been on his ninth life by now.

"How times have changed…" he muttered to himself, more than a little in awe. He was about to go back to Jemma bloody Simmons' apartment. For a drink. **Erm, among other things?** He swallowed down the flutter of nervous excitement that thought conjured. He'd be happy even if all she wanted to do was sit on the floor and eat alphabet soup from a can.

It wasn't as if he believed he had nothing to offer. He had friends, after all, so he must be doing something right. And there had been plenty of women in the past who'd told him what a catch he was. **Mainly mum and her old lady friends from church, but. Even so.**
Just… looking at Jemma, he knew she could have her pick, and he wasn't… he couldn't flirt like Hunter, he didn't look like Mack. What if this was just the aftermath of a very intense day catching up to them? Shared adversity and all that rubbish? Or - oh God - some sort of twisted gratitude forcing her hand. And now she'd invited him to drink with her. **Probably needs the alcohol to find you tolerable,** whispered his horrible traitor brain. He ground the heels of his hands into his forehead as he tried to dispel the dark bent his thoughts had taken.

"Fitz? Everything all right?" It took him a second to realize she'd stopped talking and was now sizing him up, the dip of her throat tensing slightly in concern.

"Yeah, no- nothin', just… long day." He smiled ruefully.

She didn't seem terribly convinced. "You're awfully quiet over there." Her glance flitted over to him before refocusing on the road. "If you'd rather get to sleep, I can drop you by yours."

**Drop you.** Fitz told his head angrily to shut it, as he gripped and twisted the safety belt across his chest. "No! No, a drink sounds great," he insisted, trying to convey his very real enthusiasm. "Besides, I already texted Mack not to wait up. How much of a loser would I be if I-" **Oh, Hell.** "Not that I'm expectin' - and there's nothing wrong with going home early, just- oh, jeez."

Not only had he implied he anticipated staying a while, now she was going to think he was making her the subject of gossip. "I didn't say anything about, er," he coughed, "you know." He tipped his head descriptively.

A muffled noise clued him in that she was trying not to laugh, and his lungs unbuckled a notch.

"What do I know, exactly?"

"Eh, well…" he could feel himself blushing from crown to navel, and trusted the car's dark interior to provide some cover. **Tryin' to embarrass me. We'll just see about that.** Feeling a bit ridiculous but doing it anyway, he leaned towards her and lowered his voice. "I might be persuaded to tell you…"

He ran a finger along the bicep of her sleeve. "Once you've gotten a few drinks in me."

He was rewarded by a hitch in her breath and a slight shiver.

He hummed deep in his chest and settled back into his seat. "Oh, and Jemma?"

"Yes?"

"You ran a stop sign back there."

After ascertaining that she had, in fact, broken the laws of traffic, and explaining to Fitz that it didn't matter whether any policemen had noticed because it was the **principle** of the thing, Jemma was determined not to let him distract her any further. Fitz could distract her all he wanted once they arrived back at her flat, she promised herself. Of course, that didn't take into account the shy, pensive quiet he retreated into once she'd actually parked and they were climbing the hollow-ring stairwell to her floor. Finally, once they were in front of her door and she gave him an inviting smile, Fitz broke the silence.

"Why me?"

"Why you what?"

He leveled her with a flat look. "Jemma." He blew out his cheeks. "I've been a real prat to you."
"That's true," she agreed, without any malice, pulling out her keys to twist the locks open. She couldn't understand his tone. *He's already apologized.* "And yes, in future, I'll thank you to dial it down a bit when you've made up your mind to take something the wrong way, but really, Fitz-"

"Look, you're," he waved his hands formlessly in her direction, "not... unattractive." *Oh, bestill my heart.* His vulnerable expression grounded her, however, as he fought to pick his words. "You could go home with anyone you like. And I know you said that there weren't any decent guys to choose from, but..." he chewed at his thumbnail, "I'd rather not think of myself as a lesser evil."

*What?* She snapped her head to the side, staring at him dubiously.

His mouth twisted. "You called our compatibility score a mistake. So... why me? Not that I'm complaining," he rushed to add.

Jemma tipped her head, eyeing him with one of those *are-you-serious* looks. "First off, I'd rather stay single than settle for any kind of evil, so you can nip that line of thinking in the bud." She continued matter-of-factly, tugging him through the door and nudging it closed behind them. "True, I might be slightly out of your league-"

"Hey!"

"-but honestly, you'd impressed me even before MoreThanThat paired us up."

"Yeah?" he prompted, starting a lopsided smile.

"Mmm," she nodded. "Dogs and children, as you may know," she stepped close and ran her palms down the front of his shirt, pretending to smooth it down, "are excellent judges of character."

"I could say the same about you." He drew his arms around her, smiling into her hair. "So I impressed you, eh? How so? Please be specific."

"Ugh, Fitz," she laughed, cheek resting against his chest. "I'm not going to sit here and list why I like you."

"Hmm. Yeah, that's for the best," he said seriously, pulling back to look her in the eye. "We'd be here all day."

"Oh, shut up."

Then she went up on her tiptoes and made sure he did.

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Chapter End Notes

The spider was originally only supposed to be crawling up one of their legs. It ended up on Fitz's face because that happened to me at the Renaissance Faire (one fell from a tree) and it is just as creepy as it sounds. Thank goodness it was just a daddy longlegs!

I dig stories where Jemma loves creepy crawlies and Fitz hates'em.
TheLateNightStoryTeller is a crack shot at incorporating elements like that; check her out! Also, TheWholeDamnTime once wrote me a lovely prompt titled Spiders and Soup!
They ended up sitting on her couch, hip to hip with barely an inch between them. Her left foot was stacked over his right on the coffee table, their clasped hands resting on his thigh as they sipped their beers and chatted about everything from the mechanics of the TARDIS to their ideas for the new season of *Science Is Super* to whether or not Hunter had a shot with Bobbi anymore. Fitz's thumb ran a sandcastle groove over the soft, taut skin of her palm, and her head was forever leaning over to dip against his shoulder. And whenever either one got the notion to do so (which was often) they would drop fleeting kisses on whatever skin they could reach.

-Fitz?- Jemma mumbled sleepily from her spot against his shoulder.

"Mhmm?"

"When did I talk to you about our compatibility score?" At least, that was what she meant to say. It came out as a garbled string of syllables, breathed into plaid cotton as her head drooped farther towards his chest.

Fitz transferred the hand he was holding hers with, settling his arm around her shoulders and snuggling her tighter to him. "What's that?"

She craned her neck back, trying to meet his gaze. "You said I complained about there being no decent men around. And that I called our 97% a mistake." She blinked away the drowsiness. "I still think so, by the way - it should be *much* higher." She couldn't really see much more than his jaw, but that was enough to catch the peak of his smile. "So when did I say those things to you?"

"Ahh… I might've… sort of… overheard them?" She pulled away fully, and Fitz squinted, sheepishly running a hand through his mussed hair. "On your voicemail?"

*Oh, not this again.* "Fitz! You told me I didn't say anything embarrassing!"

At least he had the decency to turn pink. "Well, it wasn't embarrassing… for me." She caught the spark in his eye that signaled he was about to start riling her up, and god damn it, she oughtn't find that so attractive.

"Really, Jemma," he drawled, "so what if you told me how *cute* you think I am," he ducked out of the way of her shove, "and *funny*," he dodged a pinch, "and how you had a thing for me," he chortled gleefully.

"Did I say that?" He was never going to stop taunting her with those stupid voicemails. She needed to hear them for herself. "I don't know," she tsked, "it's not very believable, is it?"

"I can assure you-"

She cut him off mid-retort, surprising him by bracing herself on his shoulders and throwing a leg over his lap to straddle him, only losing her balance a little in the process. "I think," she managed, voice faltering when he grabbed her backside to steady her, and missing his hands immediately when they hot-potatoed off, "I think you might have a thing for me." She ran her own palms down his
chest and around, kissing him languidly as she slipped her fingers into his back pockets.

And then drew back in annoyance. "Ugh, Fitz! Where is your phone?! I need to hear those messages!" She was certain his mobile had been in his pocket, because, well - it wasn't as if the curve of his butt had gone unnoticed, nor the shallow rectangle marring its perfection.

Fitz was breathing harder than usual, but otherwise seemed his standard canary-eating self as he chided, "Jemma, please. You really think I didn't know what you were up to?" Christ, he's insufferable. "I've put it somewhere you'll never find it."

"Don't be an idiot, this is my apartment." Easily sorted; she'd just call him and listen for the ring. She went for her own mobile, and gritted her teeth. "Fitz! What the Hell did you do with my phone?"

He wiggled his fingers with a flourish. "Magic!" He tugged at the back of her neck and drew her face down for a kiss. "Shame I never went into the pickpocketing business," he nuzzled against her throat.

"Never say never, Fitz," she teased. "I'd be more than happy to," her head tipped back as he discovered a really lovely place along her jawline, "hire someone else next year," - was that a growl? bloody hell - "so that you can follow your dreams of petty thievery," she laughed breathlessly.

That earned her a nip to the soft part under her chin, and well - after that she forgot to say anything for some time.

- o -

They ended up sprawled across the cushions, Jemma's head pillowed on Fitz's forearm as he held onto her hand like she was a parachute and he was the safety harness. He hovered over her, eyes closing reluctantly, as if she were too dazzling to watch but too tempting to ignore. And he kissed her. Like a sculptor crafting in clay, like a swimmer cresting the water, like a thrillseeker finally finding his foothold in the cliff face, he kissed her. Her hands were small and a little cold, but they traveled his back, rucking up his shirt, and everything she touched - lips, skin, shirt - felt like soft indulgence as her mouth found his time and time again.

- o -

"We should have done this months ago," she murmured into the quiet room, and rubbed her bare foot against his socked one.

"Nah." The sound came from just behind her ear, where Fitz was sandwiched between her body and the back of the sofa, and he shook himself before bringing their laced fingers up to kiss her knuckles. "I mean, yes, obviously, but in my defense, I had no idea your place was this nice."

"Fitz," she tutted. "Besides, I thought you liked me for my car."

She could feel his smile against her temple. "Well, that too." His hand traced a lazy path up her blouse from where it had been tickling at her hip, counting her ribs before moving back down, fingertips burning her skin through the silk despite staying respectfully (and a bit regrettably) outside her clothes.

She'd been willing enough to follow his lead - no sense scaring him off before they even had a proper date - especially since, considering she'd started the day without a boyfriend, her legs were only shaved to the knee. And he's sporting quite the bruise from cushioning your fall onstage. She giggled silently to herself, still somewhat in awe of the memory. World's most considerate
trampoline.

Still, the longer he lay there, curled around her petite frame, petting her chastely with those wide, warm hands, the longer she felt like telling her self-imposed restrictions to take a hike. There was nothing wrong with stating an interest, after all, even if she didn't necessarily intend to act on it that very minute.

"That feels good." The sultry tinge her words took on was mostly accidental.

"Mmm?" He rested his stubbled cheek against her hair for a second. "And how's your arm?" A feather-light finger tapped lightly at the side of her torso she'd landed on.

"Not as bad as it could be." Thanks to you. Her neck was getting a bit sore from lying on the couch, though, and she rolled her head as best she could, reaching up a hand to massage at the spot where she could feel a crick forming.

Fitz was shifting uncertainly behind her, as if trying to decide whether to let go of her waist. "Do you need anything? Ice? Ibuprofen?"

"Actually, we should put something on that bruise you've got, or your shoulder'll be a mess tomorrow." She debated a moment. A modern woman goes for what she wants. "And I'd love a neck rub."

She heard his inhale, felt him still. "Ehh, yeah." He started to sit up. "Okay. Sure. Where-"

"I'll get them." She maneuvered herself off of the couch and went to the bathroom, grabbing a tube of athletic muscle cream, some arnica gel, and a bottle of witch hazel. She walked back into the living room to see Fitz standing rather nervously by her coffee table, the plaid already off and hands like talons clutching at the hem of his T-shirt. God, but he's cute. And possibly somewhat shy, although Jemma could remember vividly what his chest looked like under there, and he really didn't need to be.

"You'll want to take that off, this could stain." She kept her glances and tone straightforward, trying to put him more at ease. It didn't work.

She could see the glottal stop before Fitz finally got his tongue working again. "Right. On it." He started to bring up the fabric, paused, cleared his throat. "So, er, ah, I'll just sit on the floor and you can sit on the couch and then we'll switch?"

It was difficult to focus on his words with Fitz's belly button in her eyeline, but the question registered eventually. "Oh! No, we should go in the bedroom, I'd rather not lay facedown on the sofa."

Fitz's voice was like the squeak of a rusty hinge. "You, uh… what?"

It wasn't apprehension in his body language, not quite - and he'd been eager enough earlier - but Jemma was suddenly rushed by a hint of panic. Am I pushing too far? She flashed back to watching Fitz and Mack repair the stage lights, how she and Skye and Vaughn had sat there joking and ogling the two men. Just a bit of fun at the time, but - oh, god - she was just as bad as those creeps on the Sexual Harassment And YOU! videos, wasn't she? What if Fitz didn't want to be in her flat at all?

"I'm not trying to sleep with you!" she blurted a tad desperately. "Oh, goodness." She shook her head. "No. I'm not not trying to sleep with you, but for tonight, most likely, I would imagine… not."

Her flushed cheeks and furrowed brow pleaded with him to understand. "Don't you think?"
Fitz's neck, ears, head and probably a good deal of the chest she couldn't see were a bright tomato red. "I'm... I wasn't..."

Like many people with a tendency to ramble, when faced with the possibility of an awkward silence, Jemma kept going. "Because I do find you attractive, and... yes, all right, that may have played some part in my suggestion to massage your shoulder, but in fairness you did hit the stage with quite a bit of force, and you're liable to wind up completely stiff." Fitz's eyes widened, and she revisited her word choice in her head. "Oh. Oh, yes, I hear it now."

She was making an absolute mess of this. Puffing out her cheeks, she waited, biting her lip into silence and eyes slightly downcast.

"Okay..." Fitz's shirt was still being held aloft in an odd nudity limbo as he thought about his response. "So, okay. That's fine. Are we still..." his eyes squinched, "erm. Backrub?"

Her face came up and morphed into a relieved smile. "Yes! Of course," she smiled, nodding quickly as she ducked into her bedroom and invited him in with a tilt of her head. Setting the various ointments on her nightstand, she faced him squarely and gestured that he should sit on the bed. "Fitz, I know we haven't always-" She winced and changed course, looking above his head at a point on the wall. "I don't want to ruin anything," her hands found their way onto the sides of her chin, and she met his eyes, "between us. Is that- do you know what I mean?"

"Hey. Hey," Fitz reached out and pulled her to him by both hands, close enough that she had to stand between his legs as he sat on the edge of the mattress. He tugged on her arms until she looked straight at him, and he grinned. "There's nothin' to ruin, Jemma." Fitz brought her right hand up to his mouth and kissed the back of it, before doing the same with her left. "You said it yourself. We're not friends, remember?" He accompanied the statement with a bemused eyebrow tilt, and placed her arms on his shoulders before wrapping his own loosely around her waist. Looking up at her with - she'd have to be a fool not to see it - undisguised infatuation, he kept on. "So whatever we make of this? It'll be better than what we had before."

Jemma could sense her nerves receding as she processed his words and the hint of challenge that lay within them. "Well, that's good then," she teased, trailing her fingers down his hairline. "I didn't want to be your friend anyway."

"Oh, really?" His retort was full of rampant speculation as he pulled her flush to him. "What did you want?"

She bent her head to give him a sweet, lingering kiss. "Let me show you."

Chapter End Notes

The fic is very nearly over, so from now on, updates will arrive every other day. Meaning the next one will be on Tuesday, not Wednesday, for whatever that's worth. :-D Thanks for coming along with me for the ride! I really appreciate the support I've
had for this fic so far.
They ended up in a no man's land of touch and temptation, attempting to define the lines between them, tracing them into each other's skin. Jemma's attention was sure and efficient, no less affectionate for having the weight of practice behind it. The sting of his injury sparked and soothed under her ministrations, but Fitz would have bruised every joint on his body if it meant having her pressed against him, whispering her actions into his ear and describing the chemical and biological effects of each remedy she used. Jemma's voice was pure nostalgia, sun glinting through the rainbow spray of a garden hose and young feet running bare on new grass - and safe in the gentle, scientific hum of her words, Fitz let his head drop forward and was simply, gratefully happy.

-Jo-

Jemma was driving him batty, and he didn't mind a bit. Although, honestly, it was a tad unfair - she'd just told him nothing was going to happen tonight, and here she was, unbuttoning her blouse with a very sexy glint in her eye and a throaty "my turn" that left him with boiled celery for knees. He still wasn't convinced this wasn't all an elaborate prank. He'd survived earlier when she straddled him, hadn't he? And he'd even gotten a handful - for the purposes of pilfering her phone, that's all. He could be a gentleman. He could be whatever she needed.

Right now, the way she was biting her lip had him fairly glad he'd changed out of his tux and into jeans after the Spectacular. He had a feeling he might soon appreciate the coverage that the thicker fabric provided.

Fitz rubbed his hands together and wondered anxiously how many massages Jemma'd had in her life. Probably loads. A flutter of bright silk caught the edge of his vision and he jerked his head up to see Jemma pulling her blouse from her jeans and off her shoulders. Oh, bless me, Father. He ducked his chin to his chest, silently repeating the names of every Willy Wonka character until he felt her stretch out on the mattress behind him. Only then did Fitz allow himself a look, and in fairness, it had been a few years since he'd been this close to a topless woman, but he could safely say his heart stopped. Jemma's back was pale and creamy, spotted with freckles at the shoulder and a couple of light brown moles farther down. And by God, she was perfect.

"Did you want to unclasp my bra?" she asked, slightly muffled from where she'd rested her head on her arms.

The noise that left his throat next could only be called a whimper. That settles it. Jemma was clearly intent on murder via sexual frustration. He positioned his hands on the back of her waist, just above the tuck of her hips, and moved them up slowly, dragging his palms around her rib cage and kneading at the muscle on either side of her spine with his thumbs. "Better not," he murmured, "I might get too distracted t' be of any use."

"Ah, well in that case," she taunted, laughter bubbling to the surface, "perhaps I ought to put my shirt back on."

Please no. Of course she could do what she wanted, but that was as bad as hearing his favorite author had died or his favorite show had been cancelled.
"No, no but- Jemma, remember?" he rushed in, "That stuff'll stain, you said." He punctuated his objection with a deep press against the wide muscles at the join of her shoulder blade and neck - Lord, she was tight - not like that - and was rewarded with an honest-to-goodness moan. "And I'd hate to ruin your shirt," he finished, a bit more gruffly than perhaps intended.

"Mmm? You like it?"

Despite the sleepy note her voice was taking on, he could sense she was gearing up for another terrible, wonderful joke at the expense of his libido, but couldn't bring himself to care. "It's," he cleared his throat, "it's a very nice shirt."

Jemma twisted just enough to throw a mischievous smile his way.

"Just think how good it'll look when it's on your bedroom floor."

-0-

They ended up falling asleep on top of the duvet, lying back-to-front like a pair of bananas, curled up and possessive. After Jemma nodded off, Fitz dropped down beside her, too exhausted from the day's events to do much more than drag up a blanket over them, wrapping her arms tight around his middle and nudging his legs safely over her bent knees like a mother hen. It was late enough that the air had begun to take on an aura, lightly rainbowed halos around every object, but it was also early enough that Fitz had an idea.

-0-

Jemma was not freaking out. True, it was a bit disconcerting to wake up, tangled up in sheets that still smelled of the minty athletic cream she'd rubbed into Fitz's shoulder, and to find a hastily scrawled note where she'd expected to see his curly head.

you looked very peaceful sleeping
didn't want to wake you
back soon
- Fitz

But she was not freaking out. For one thing, Jemma was secure enough to know that only a supreme idiot would walk out on her, and Fitz was no idiot. Perhaps he'd been called away by Mack? Perhaps he wanted a set of clean clothes, or something to eat that wasn't - she checked her refrigerator - kale or sriracha? Perhaps a lot of things. It did no good to speculate.

After all - she exhaled in relief when she spotted it - would he have left his button-up and his tie if he'd been planning to stay away? Or - she heard a muffled ringing and tugged at the couch cushions - would he have forgotten to retrieve either of their phones from the sofa before he left? Certainly not. She had nothing to worry about.

In fact, this could be the perfect chance to tidy up a few things around the flat, pop in a load of wash, and - she was feeling optimistic - boost her self-esteem with a bit of personal grooming. Truth be told, if she was going to bring out the good china, she wanted it clean enough to eat off of.

But first, Skye was insistently calling. "Hello?"

"Oh my god I heard what happened at the show! Are you okay? I've been calling all morning!"

Jemma couldn't help but be touched by her friend's concern. "I'm fine. Fitz-"
"Yeah, it's all over the station! Vaughn's telling everyone how Fitz set you up with some weird porn show in the finale? Ugh, and you liked him, too! Asshole!"

"No, you don't."

"I'm really sorry, Jemma. We're sure as shit not hiring him now."

"Skye, I'm tryin'."

"Hey, Trip's grandma owns a joke shop, you want me to get something to prank him with? Joy buzzer? Exploding cigarette?"

Skye's mile-a-minute commiseration was sweet, but it was setting Jemma's teeth on edge as she fought to get in a word.

"Skye!" She finally got the pause she needed. "Fitz was not to blame for last night's debacle. He went out of his way to help me, in fact, but if you want to sack someone, please take Lincoln to task for his carelessness."

"Wait, what?" Skye practically screeched. "Lincoln messed up your show?"

"I doubt he meant to; as you know, it was John Garrett who."

"Snaked your fireworks, yeah, I got your message."

"Yes, and while Lincoln is very earnest, I'm afraid a mistake of that magnitude simply."

"Oh, don't worry, Jemma. As soon as I talk to May, we're going on a firing spree." Skye's tone was fierce and vengeful. "I've been wanting to get rid of Lincoln ever since I caught him trying to see me naked, and Garrett - that guy just creeps me out."

Jemma smiled. Skye could be a tad overenthusiastic when she found a cause to believe in, but she was loyal to the people she considered family. "That's fine. As long as it's clear that Fitz stays."

"Yeah, yeah, okay, sorry I misjudged your boyfriend." Skye meant to tease, but little did she know how right she was.

"I can hardly fault you for that; it's not as if Fitz hasn't made mistakes. Why, just last night, he picked my pocket." She chewed on her lip. "Perhaps I should get him back…"

"He picked your pocket?" Skye snorted. "Okay, Oliver Twist. Did you tell him you needed a good deep Dickens?"

"No! Honestly, Skye." Jemma blushed. "But that reminds me, he's due to return any time, so I should go."

"Holy crap! Jemma!" she shrieked. "So when you said 'last night' you meant, like… last night!" She squealed straight into Jemma's ear. "Oh my god did he pull out his wand? Did he ask you to do your Hermione thing?" Skye was having far too much fun with this. "It's wingardium levi-oh-sa, not wingardium levio-saaaa… aahhhhh, just like that, god, yes!"

"I'm hanging up now!" Jemma sang out.

"No, no, but I have so many more."

"Toodles!"
Jemma shook her head as she ended the call. She wasn't a prude - in point of fact, if she had her way, Fitz would soon discover that not tonight really was the opposite of not today. But that didn't mean she wanted to discuss all the tawdry details before the fact. The first text came buzzing in less than a minute later.

[From Beeeef: so did he make ur legs open sesame]
[From Beeeef: did you rub his lamp]
[From Beeeef: did he make ur panties disappear]
[From Beeeef: oh damn did he stick his hand into ur top hat]
[From Beeeef: did he shuffle ur deck]
[From Beeeef: did u charm his snake]
[From Beeeef: omg did u swallow his sword]

Some of those are rather good. Jemma clucked her tongue against the roof of her mouth thoughtfully, making a mental note of her favorites before scrapping the idea. She doubted she'd need puns or innuendo to seduce Leopold Fitz.

By the time he got back to Jemma's place, Fitz was tired and cranky and incredibly hungry. As it turned out, the croissantwich he'd gotten at 3 Brothers wasn't enough to make up for the previous day's activity-level-slash-sleep-deprivation. And of course he'd forgotten his phone and had no way to let Jemma know what he was up to, or if he wanted her to come pick him up, which after a mere two hours of sleep, he definitely did want. Which was why, after walking all that way with his paper sack and two large coffees (and one extra special surprise) Fitz was more than a little miserable. But as he climbed the stairs to her apartment, remembering everything that had happened there, his mood started to pick up.

Jemma Simmons, though. Jemma Simmons was waiting for him, and she liked him, and she was probably going to kiss him. Unless she's pissed off at how long I've been gone. She probably wouldn't stay too angry, though, once she saw the lengths he'd gone to to make up for her Mother-Hubbard-esque fridge. And if he'd done it mostly because his gnawing stomach refused to let him sleep, well, she didn't need to know that part.

Fitz unlocked the door with the spare key he'd found that morning and eased it open.

Greeted with an empty living room and the sound of a shower running - don't think about it, you massive perv - Fitz put up the food and flopped onto the couch, where he tipped his head back against the cushions and closed his eyes. The notion of falling over sideways flitted through the fog inside his skull - might be nice to lay down - until he decided that even that small amount of movement would be too much work. Fitz groaned, reveling in the complete, melty sweetness of the exhaustion overtaking him. His body could've been contorted like a police chalk outline and in that moment he wouldn't have cared.

The next thing he could remember was Jemma speaking above him. Fitz screwed his eyes shut at the sound, far too comfortable to come out of his stupor.

"Where did you go?"

He may have been too sleepy to open his eyes, but he was never too sleepy to wind her up. "Dunno
what you mean. Been here the whole damn time."

"Oh, I see." She snorted. *At least she's playing along.* "Well, I suppose if you prefer the couch, I can have the bed all to myself."

Eyes still closed, Fitz let out a quiet "Noooooo…" at the implication, and she snickered before cautioning, "Just so you’re aware, the next time you run away in the middle of the night, someone had better be dead."

"Aww, Jemma," he cooed, "did you *miss* me? You sap."

"Not at all." The sly smile in her voice set off a warning bell. "In fact, your little disappearance gave me a *golden* opportunity to… catch up on a few missed voicemails?" Fitz’s eyes flew open, his hands fumbling around the cushions, trying to remember where he’d tucked his phone away the night before. "By the way, you *really* ought to lock your screen."

Fitz twisted in his seat to glare at her where she stood behind the couch. And promptly felt his face stop working. Because Jemma was standing there with wet hair and bright eyes, holding out his phone, wearing nothing but a smirk and a towel.

Chapter End Notes

From now on, chapter updates will be every other day. So, you should have something new on Thursday!

:-D
"Jesus!" he spluttered, leaving Jemma with a pleased flush at her ability to make him drop his teasing in the space of a second. *That's right, mister. Taste of your own medicine.* "You're- y' can't just-" He gestured vaguely at where she stood, his eyes darting between her face and everything else.

"Of course I can, Fitz," she said, deliberately misinterpreting his comment. "They were *my* voicemails, after all. And," she brought her shoulders up innocently, "it's possible I *may* have changed a few autocorrects while I was in there." She beamed. "You probably shouldn't curse in your texts until you've figured it out. Or, well," she tutted, "good manners would imply you shouldn't curse at all."

"Why, you-" Fitz's hand had shot forward and snatched his phone back, and a gratifyingly aggrieved look took over his face. "Jemma! You cannot just break into a man's personal mobile device! That's like-" he faltered, "messing about in his sock drawer!" He narrowed his eyes. "You're gonna try to organize my socks, aren't you?"

Jemma couldn't stop the satisfied laugh that bubbled out of her chest. She might be pushing it, but it was just such delicious payback to see Fitz flustered for once, considering how often he did it to her.

"Incidentally, Fitz, your mother says hello. *Lovely* woman. So willing to share embarrassing stories about her only son!"

"*My mother!*" Fitz stomped over to the breakfast nook and grabbed the bag from 3 Brothers with a scowl. "That's it. No scone for you!" Fitz jabbed the pastry in her direction. "I mean it, Jemma. I'm holding this hostage until you tell me *exactly* what you did." He disappeared around the counter into the kitchen, grumping under his breath. "Honestly, can't do anythin' nice without bein' punished for it. 'Oh *great* idea, I'll just get up at the arse-crack of dawn and wait in a bakery queue for a goddamned fortnight, it'll be *fun* - and this is what I get?"

She rounded the corner and saw him scowling into the door of her refrigerator, one hand on the small of his back and her breakfast still waving wildly in the other.

"Damn Koenigs playin' us all for fools; 'Two per customer! No pushing! Where's your lanyard!' - hmmph! Most likely get the things frozen in bulk at Costco and spend the rest of the day laughin' at anyone stupid enough to-"

"Is that for me, darling?" she purred, stepping closer.

"*Sweetheart,*" he sniped back, "Just because you're naked and gorgeous, don't think y' can just walk in here and-"

She plucked the scone out of his grasp and took a large bite, enjoying the way his mouth dropped open in mighty offense. After chewing and swallowing, she set it, napkin first, on the counter. Jemma ducked under Fitz's arm, not bothering to close the refrigerator door, and leaned her head back against the freezer, looking up at him uncertainly from under her lashes. "Gorgeous?" After months of *fine* and *nice* and *not unattractive,* she expected him to say he'd been exaggerating, taking the mickey with *gorgeous* the same way he had with *sweetheart.* But her voice caught slightly on the question, and she felt exposed in a way that had nothing to do with her lack of clothing.
"S' what I said." His eyebrows drew inward, and he dropped his head to bump his forehead against hers. "It's not a compliment," and there it was - just making a joke, same as always - until he kissed just next to her nose and mumbled, "when it's true."

The smile that sneaked past her teeth was tiny, but she thought he picked up on it as he brought his fingers under her chin and kissed her properly. Within moments, Jemma had forgotten the cool air at her back, lost in the warmth of Fitz's unselconscious regard. His hands cradled her face, lips moving over hers like a violin bow, and her tiptoes lifted her into him without thinking. She grabbed for his neck, one hand clutching at his hair while the other tried to keep her towel and her modesty from slipping. Please be as good as you seem, Fitz. The wish crept into her mind, fragile hope snagging a seat between deep-set pragmatism and stubborn self-reliance, and she sighed into his mouth. It would appear that when it came to protecting her heart, a towel wasn't very good armor.

Fitz broke away first, his lungs screaming like he'd won a marathon. His hand untangled from her wet hair and he hugged her fast against him. "You shouldn't keep your refrigerator open like this," he murmured without much conviction.

"There's nothing in there to spoil," she countered, lips brushing against his Adam's apple. "I had meant to do some shopping later. Care to join me? Maybe help me choose a lobster for dinner?" She snickered at the shudder that immediately ran through him.

"Don't even joke about that. Do you know how long it was before I stopped smelling phantom seafood everywhere?" Fitz pressed his cheek to her temple. "You must be freezing." He ran his hands over her shoulders, keeping her chest pressed to him. "This is terrible for your electric bill. And the environment, probably."

Jemma nosed at his jaw. "Then you move."

He called her bluff, tightening his arms around her back and lifting, and ignored the way she squeaked in his ear. Stepping away from the fridge, he nudged it shut with his toe and set her down on the linoleum. "Go on, eat your breakfast," he urged, pushing the scone at her and trying to focus his eyes anywhere but the pale peek of hip where her towel had gapped slightly. "You're nothin' but skin and bones."

She readjusted her grip on the terrycloth edge, then tapped her scone against the tip of his nose. Gorgeous skin and bones, according to you."

He rolled his eyes and refused to think about what a cliché it was to be falling in love with his arch-enemy. "Eat your breakfast," he repeated gruffly, "and if you expect me to go shopping with you, you'd better put some clothes on." He softened his words with a kiss to the top of her bare shoulder on his way past her into the living room. "Not that I'm complainin'."

"You, complain?" She took a bite of her scone, following him, and they sipped at their coffees together. Fitz's brief nap on the couch had perked him up slightly, but just then, his lukewarm caffeinated lifeline was everything good in the world.

"You know, the shower's free, if you'd like one, and the laundry." She polished off the last few crumbs and popped a wayward blueberry in her mouth. "A clean set of clothes might be nice."

"Excuse you, I am a very rugged, manly man, and if I want t' stink all day, I'll- yeah, okay." Between the clock tower, which had been a veritable spider arcade, and trekking to 3 Brothers and back, Fitz was definitely sporting that not-so-fresh feeling.
After Jemma'd shown him the laundry machines and handed him a spare towel, she ducked into her bedroom to change. Fitz stood by the washer, measuring soap and checking the instructions on the inside of the lid. A thought blipped into his head and he stuck his neck into the hall, trusting his voice to carry the short distance to her door. "Hey, do you still have my plaid? I'll toss it in."

"No need," she called back. "I washed it this morning; should be in the basket."

Crossing his fingers that it hadn't shrunk, Fitz picked up the plastic latticework bin sitting on top of the dryer and rummaged around for a second before all concern for his shirt flew right out of his brain. He carried the basket the few steps to Jemma's bedroom and knocked lightly. "Oh, Jemma," he sang, "is this what I think it is?"

Two seconds later, she was craning her head around the edge of the door, eyes widening like inkstains as he held up a very familiar pair of white cotton underpants. Large ones.

"Y' know, if I'd realized how incredibly hot they would look up close, I'd've-"

"Oh my god, Fitz, not another word-" she groaned.

"-the infamous granny pan-"

"-don't you dare-"

"-can't wait to see them on y-"

"Fitz!" Jemma's bare arm snaked out and she yanked the panties from his grasp with enough force to make him wobble. "Leave the basket. Take your shower." She raised her eyebrows in a mask of incredulity. "And I really shouldn't need to tell you this," her voice had gone quite high, "but don't touch people's underwear without permission!"

Something heavy hit his face before the door slammed in front of him. It was the towel she'd had on, still a bit damp from her skin. Sweet onion soup, that's sexy. Fitz ran his hands through his hair, assessing his options, before rapping his knuckles once more against the wood. "So… can I have permission?"

"Sod off!"

Fitz looked around the bathroom, completely out of his depth. Bath salts, bubble bombs, and shower gels stared back at him from the counter. Weird porous stones and little mesh scrubbers sat neatly next to the tub. Her vanilla-scented shampoo seemed to judge him from its metal caddy. Doesn't she have any normal soap? He didn't want to come out of this smelling like a candle store.

He could text her, just to ask. Unless she's still sore at me. Realistically, though, if she'd let him see her in a towel, she probably wasn't too bothered that he'd seen her underpants. It was hard to tell.

He grabbed his phone from the counter - he'd refused to let it out of his sight since getting it back - and had just pulled up her contact when he stopped short. Did she really…? With a smile almost too big for his cheeks, Fitz sank into the hot water, deciding he really wouldn't mind smelling like Jemma.

-o-

"Jemmmaaa!" he shouted past the bathroom door, scrubbing at his head with the hand towel. "What
am I meant to wear until my clothes dry? Not all of us look as good in next-to-nothing as you."

"There's a robe on the hook! It should fit!" Her reply was quick, and close, and the mischievous giggle that followed ought to have worried him, but really only made him wish he could see her when she laughed.

Stepping back, Fitz looked around for the hook, while the memory of her towel-clad body resurfaced with a vengeance. "I'm not being funny, but is there a petition I could sign for that to be your new Captain Chemistry costume? Because-

He finally pulled down the robe, which - ah, yes, that makes sense now - turned out to be a belted silk dressing gown, peach-pink and predictably embroidered with flowers and hummingbirds. Brilliant.

Her voice came ringing in a moment later, far too innocently. "Tell me again how you're a rugged, manly man?"

-o-

"Jemma?" Fitz peered around the dividing wall in the kitchen. He knew he looked a bit silly per her intention, but if he was being honest, the silk felt divine against his skin. I might never give this back. Serve her right, really. He popped back into the living room and then ducked his head into the laundry alcove. "Where are you?"

"Bedroom!"

He was there in seconds, but hesitated. She certainly didn't sound as annoyed as the last time he'd stood in that spot, but it didn't hurt to be cautious.

"Oh! And I've still got your shirt and tie," she carried on, a bit muffled, from just on the other side of the door.

"Thanks, that's great, I'll just-

The door creaked under his hand, and for the second time that morning, the sight of Jemma Simmons him hit like a hundred punches to the stomach. She turned around, his open button-up barely covering her breasts where she'd pinched it closed, and his loosely-knotted tie sitting jealous around her throat. After a few stunned seconds of silence, her nose wrinkled, and a light pink dusted over her cheeks and chest.

"Too much?"

Fitz's hand came up to rub at his jaw, willing it to work again. I must've been so unlucky in another life. In this one, however, Jemma was peeking up at him with a secret in her eyes, shifting her weight like a cat, and for the love of all things holy, she was wearing his shirt, his tie… and most decidedly her panties.

-o-

They ended up standing in her room, with teasing demands to return each other's clothing and a whispered "make me" that set the world in motion. Their kiss felt like the beginning of an argument, raw and stubborn and full of bravado. With every round, the intensity climbed: each side striving to make its point, accepting what the other offered and building a rebuttal out of tongues and breath and fevered skin. And once their debate lost all moderation, the final score was both unknowable and
unnecessary as Fitz and Jemma surrendered to the pull of the blankets.

Chapter End Notes

I did say Thursday, but life got in the way, and I suppose it's Fitz Friday now :-) I hope you'll forgive me for having taken a little longer than I promised.

So, next chapter'll be up on Sunday!
"Really?" she laughed when he appeared in her bedroom doorway holding up a bag of crisps and a large bar of chocolate. "That's your idea of a post-workout snack?"

"Y'know, I went to great lengths to get these for you-"

"Mmm, for me, I'm sure-"

"Yes, for you, in order to correct the terrible oversight in your snacking experience." Fitz ripped open the bag. "It's a travesty, that is, and there I was, traipsin' all over creation, at great personal inconvenience, the least you could do is say-"

"Thank you. It's a nice surprise." As a still-surly Fitz climbed back under the sheets, she reached over to break off a square of chocolate and muted her inner neat freak shrieking about crumbs in bed. "You're very sweet." She brushed her nose against his. "And cute. Adorable, really." She ruffled his hair, her eyes dancing when he frowned suspiciously beneath her fingers. "And snuggly, too. Like a friendly chinchilla."

"Stop that," he grumped, not quite ready to let go of the apron strings of his peevishness. "I'm very imposing." He swatted her hands away. "Quit- none of this chinchilla nonsense, you." His tornado face reddened at her giggle. "Hey!" He shoved a handful of crisps into his mouth and pointed accusingly at her. "You're supposed to be overwhelmed with passion right now."

"Oh, Fitz," she relented. "It's not that I don't appreciate your great lengths," she looked down tellingly, "but I'd much rather have woken up with you in my bed." Jemma sat back and pushed her foot against his thigh. "I like having you here. You know that, yeah?"

"Wow." Fitz sucked his teeth in mock judgment. "Clingy. And after you changed your contact in my phone to Doctor Girlfriend, too." He wagged his eyebrows. Adorably, the berk. "Bit presumptuous of you."

She threw a pillow into his chest. As if he hasn't gotten attached, Mr. Drinks-Then-Breakfast.

"Right," she narrowed her eyes in gentle ribbing. Jemma knew her value. "Because you could do so much better. In fact," she tossed a crisp into her mouth and cocked a brow, "shouldn't you get going?" She gestured expansively towards the door, smirking. "That field's not going to play itself."

A second later, Fitz had her pinned against a mountain of cushions, his hot breath fogging up her neck as he kissed a path along her collarbone.

"I think I'm good right here."

-o-

"Mmm," Jemma moaned, smacking her lips. "That really is fantastic."

"I can't decide what's sweeter: this," he sucked his fingers clean, "or havin' you admit I'm right." Fitz's smug grin was interrupted by his tongue darting out to lick a streak of chocolate off the corner of his mouth. "They make brownies and ice cream with crisps in them too. It's a whole culinary
movement."

"Ah, yes, what a shocking discovery." She rolled her eyes. "Sugar, fat, and salt all taste good. Call the papers, we'll be rich!"

Fitz's chuckled at the sarcasm, but his face fell upon seeing both packages empty. Pouting, he balled up the crinkly foil and binned the bags in the small can next to her bed.

"Still, I suppose," she stretched, arching her back before brushing a few grains of salt off her blanket, "we did end up needing the carbs."

"Hey, anytime you want to eat junk food, in bed, and burn it off, also in bed," Fitz started, flopping onto his stomach and throwing an arm over to tangle their fingers together, "I'm your man."

-I-

"I didn't actually mess with your phone, by the way." Jemma's face was tucked in between his shoulder and his neck, trying to remind herself why, exactly, it was important that she leave the flat at some point that day. "Just the name change. That's it." She bit her lip. "Well, and I listened to my messages. They were far more humiliating than you let on." She wasn't sure if she should yell at him for lying or thank him for sparing her.

"Well, that's because I can actually lie convincingly," he muttered into her hair.

She squinted, pulling away slightly to watch his face. "You are aware that's not something to be proud of, aren't you? If I'm a bad liar it just means I haven't had much practice. Because I'm honest."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it." His nose seemed to curdle as he conceded the point. "Even your flaws are qualities in disguise."

Her mouth split in triumph. "Oh, don't feel bad, Fitz. Really, all magicians deceive people for a living. You've never known any other way. We scientists, on the other hand," she twisted out of reach as he tried to catch her in a kiss, "are paragons of knowledge and true- mmph."

His lips were barely on hers before she was pressing back, wondering if she'd ever tire of Fitz's hands sliding around her waist to haul her close, that warm-pyjama feeling that made her want to burrow into his arms and leave the dishes in the sink. Her head started to swim, and she let Fitz topple her back into the pillows, smiling against his mouth.

There was a new and very tolerable sort of strangeness that came from grocery shopping with Fitz: his shoulders brushing hers as they pushed one trolley, the juvenile barbs aimed at each other's impulse buys, that distracting urge to shove him against the freezer case and snog him silly. For his part, Fitz kept using sleight-of-hand to sneak junk into the cart and seemed to think the mere fact that she'd tried chocolate crisps meant she now considered Pop-Tarts a viable meal replacement.

"I'm happy to keep a few things on hand to satisfy your sweet tooth-"

"You satisfy my sweet tooth," he declared gallantly, turning a bit pink when she rolled her eyes at his ridiculousness.

"-but just because it has a sticker that says 'A Low Fat Food' on it, that still doesn't make licorice a food." She plucked the one-pound bag of candy out of his hands and eyed it with distrust. "Well, at least it's not the sugar free variety. You'd never leave the bathroom." She put it in the cart. "Now, please help me pick out a few things we can actually eat for dinner. Possibly foods with one
"How can someone so short," he said, amusedly watching her reach for a bottle of olive oil on the top shelf, "be so bossy?"

"You say that like it's a bad thing." Before he could come to her rescue, she stepped up onto the trolley, balancing on the rack between the wheels, and used the extra height to grab the oil.

Fitz grabbed her arm on her way down, helping to steady her, and when she glanced over she found him staring, lips quirking like a new take on a classic fairy tale. He put his hands on the cart handle on either side of hers and circled his arms around her while his chin fell to her shoulder, and she felt his smile on her neck. Jemma looked around, grateful that no one seemed to be paying them any attention, as Fitz's whispered words tickled her ear. "Let me take you out to dinner."

The baffled laugh that came out of her was sharp and quick, and he stepped back with a muttered, "It's not that funny."

She whirled and grabbed his hand before he could get all Fitz about it. "No, no, of course I'll go out with you. It's just," she kept snickering, but tried to tamp it down. "Bit late to be asking, isn't it?"

His face bent in a blushing grin, his free hand coming up to rub at the back of his neck. "Hey, that's-I was tryin' to be respectful, and you."

She traced small circles on the inside of his wrist with her thumb. "You were very respectful," she reassured him quietly.

He met her eyes, looking at her the way Wall-E might look at a newfound videocassette, and it was all she could do to hold in the things she wasn't quite ready to say. A second later that wide smile she loved was back. "Yes, well," he crowed smugly. "Best boyfriend ever."

"Mmm," she went up on her tiptoes, kissing him briefly - they were still in the middle of the supermarket - and jumped when she felt her phone vibrate in her pocket. "All right, then, boyfriend, do you want to talk to Skye, or should I?"

He held out his hand with a small gimme crook of his fingers. "Hello, Skye? Yeah, it's Fitz." Jemma bit her lip in commiseration when she saw Fitz's face turn an alarming shade of crimson. "Erm, ah, so… I was just wonderin' what brand of ginger-beer it is you like? No, nothin' like- I thought I could get you a sixer?" His tone had gotten a bit desperate, but he nodded. "To make up for last time." He coughed then, pummeling his chest as he tried to catch his breath. "Yep. No problem," he wheezed. Fitz practically threw the phone back at Jemma with a swallowed "I'll just… go find that."

Jemma kept her eyes on his retreating form and lifted the device to her ear. "Do I even want to know?"

"Jemma!" came Skye's delighted squeal. "So that was fun. Probably not as much fun as your night, though, huh? Tell me- did he set a fire in your pants with nothing more than his big brain? Did he levitate your bra off of you?"

"Again, Skye? Really?"

"Did he make you have to presto change-o your underwear? Did he handcuff himself to your bed and then totally not escape? Did he saw your special lady in half?"

Jemma wrinkled her nose. "Ugh, Skye!"
Skye sounded inappropriately proud of herself. "That last one was pretty gross." *Only that one?*

Jemma sighed heavily. "Okay, if you must know." A small smile bloomed on her cheeks. "It was…" She sighed. "He just has the biggest-"

"Whoa, I do not wanna hear about Fitz's magic peen," Skye laughed over the line. "I gotta work with that guy."

"Heart! I was going to say, he has the biggest *heart*, he's just so considera-"

"Biggest *heart-on*, maybe." There was an indistinct *thump* and the sound of something spilling. "Oh, crap, I gotta go. Later, babe!"

Jemma twisted a curl of her hair around a finger as she tucked her phone away, looking up when she saw Fitz bounding back in her direction.

"Found it!" He held up the ginger-beer victoriously. "I hope it's enough to make Skye forget what a twat I've been."

"I told you, she's already on your side." Jemma looped her arm through his and made for the front of the store. "And it's not as if either of us were always the perfect model of civility."

"You could be," Fitz mumbled.

"What?"

"You *could* be a model," he raised a rather rakish eyebrow.

It was difficult to look stern when he was so pleased with himself. "I think you're missing the point."

He spread his hands innocently. "Just sayin'."

It wasn't long before they were back in her car and Jemma was reaching over to tug his face forward, fully conscious of the way he was staring at her and loving every minute.

Because Fitz looked at her like an art student examined a painting at the Met, and his hands moved over her as if she were marble and he meant to carve a statue. When they kissed, the leisurely stroke of his tongue in her mouth was a paintbrush, carefully swirling out her watercolor name. Jemma relaxed into his hold, knowing that it had only been a weekend but feeling like it had been a decade, and trusted that between the two of them, they would make something beautiful.

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Chapter End Notes

Doctor Girlfriend is a character from *The Venture Bros.* (I couldn't help making the reference.) Seriously, watch *The Venture Bros*. What am I saying, you all know that already.

Also good knowledge for life-ing successfully: DO NOT eat too many sugar free
gummies or sugar free candies. You will poop forever. (By the way, if FitzSimmons pooping is your bag, I've got a fic rec for ya.)

This is sort of the ending. It's like the pre-ending. The rest is going to be time-jump stuff, and that's not all written yet, so I'll do my best to get it to you soon, but I'm going to aim for Wednesday. Thank you for bearing with me!
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

A day late, but twice as long as usual and there's a buttload of pictures at the end!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

ONE MONTH

"And his poor mother just looked mortified," Jemma laughed, grabbing a pretzel from the bowl in Fitz's hand as she sipped her mai tai. Sandwiched between her and the bar, Fitz busied himself drawing shapes into the back of her dress with his fingers. He'd heard the story earlier that day anyway. "But you know how children that age are," she continued, "so this boy just turns to me, quite cross, and says, 'If you're an alien, where's your spaceship?'

Skye was well into her third shockingly blue hurricane (which she had insisted Hunter "class up" with a cocktail umbrella) and this was apparently the perfect number of drinks to render everything and everyone hilarious. "Aliens!" she guffawed. "Epic. I knew something was up with you two!" She flapped her hand between Jemma and Fitz. "Is that why Fitz is always phoning home?"

Fitz pulled his chest up with a start. Being a good son is nothin' to be embarrassed about. He didn't get a chance to voice his objection, thrown off course when Jemma patted his ear absently and ran her hand into his hair. "I think Fitz and I would be brilliant as a pair of extraterrestrials." Her cherry smile loosened his brow, flushed cheeks from the alcohol and shiny eyes that could steer a nighttime sailor back to shore.

"What do you say, Fitz? Shall we beam up to the mothership?" Jemma scratched her nails into the short curls at the back of his neck, which was mildly unfair - he'd carry on any ridiculous conversation she wanted so long as she kept that up. She knows it, too, the minx.

She leaned over on her barstool and giggled. "It's the most perfect opportunity for us to see the galaxy!"

Fitz rolled his eyes and stepped a bit closer to steady her. "Sounds like we'd be fools to pass this one up!" When Jemma was adorably tipsy, who was he to spoil her fun? "I'll upgrade our, erm, flying saucer so it can make a decent showing of the Kessel Run. You can be in charge of any, ah, alien autopsies or..." His stomach roiled. "Body probes."

A tiny umbrella hit Fitz's cheek and landed on the floor with a papery paff. "Hey! You two!" Skye snapped her fingers about five inches away from Jemma's head. "Stop being cute, it's gross. Ooh, food!"

Fitz stiffened when he saw Idaho carrying their plates out to the bar, and wrapped his arms a bit tighter around Jemma's shoulders. Things were better now, ever since the bar's cook had turned himself in to the Hyde Park authorities and outed Garrett as the mastermind behind the theft, but Jemma still bore a massive, totally justified if we're being honest, grudge against Hunter's right-hand man.

At least she'll still eat here. It had been touch and go for a while, with Fitz thinking he'd need to find
a new place to hang out or wondering if Jemma'd learn to make his favorite sandwich. (She had, of course, and in his biased opinion, it was even better than the ones at Scout's. The Platonic ideal of a sandwich, really. The exact right amount of aioli and everything. Hunter disagreed vehemently, though never to Jemma's face.)

Skye picked up on the tension, looking sharply over as they muttered thanks for the appetizers, and as soon as Idaho disappeared through the swinging door into the kitchen, let out a low, "So… that's still weird, huh?"

Jemma gulped at her drink, back ramrod straight. "I don't know what you mean. My behavior was perfectly appropriate."

Skye snorted. "Okay, Jemma. You're super chill all the time." She twisted her little red straw around her finger. "Actually, Garrett came in to the station this morning to pay back the fireworks."

Fitz's jaw clenched. "He ought to be in jail."

Skye shrugged. "Okay, Jemma. You're super chill all the time." She dragged her fingertip down the condensation on the side of her glass. "Man, I wanted to punch the smarm off his face."

"Which one?" scoffed Jemma.

"Right?" Skye crunched the ice from the bottom of her glass. "He made this big show of signing the check and was all, 'Consider it a donation.' Dick." She huffed. "So glad I don't have to see him every week anymore."

They nodded silently, lost in rancorous contemplation as they munched on the artery-busting hors d'oeuvres in front of them.

"Still," Skye conceded, "Couple hundo, that'll buy a lotta tote bags at the next telethon."

Jemma grimaced around a bite of fried mushrooms. "I'd hoped he'd suffer a slightly worse fate than merely being made to pay for stolen goods."

"Yeah, but this is a small town- I mean, local preacher, big scandal? Trip says church attendance in his congregation dropped by almost half." Skye chewed idly on an orange wedge.

"No, that's not right," Fitz cut in bitterly. "People were flocking to his sermon after you kicked him off the air."

"Yeah, at first, because bad publicity is still publicity, and then everyone realized what a slimeball he is. I told you, word gets around." Skye reached over and stole one of Fitz's mini egg rolls. "Garrett's doing damage control, but he's gonna have to put on a lot of Christian rock concerts to get people onto his wackadoo version of the 'right path' again."

"You lot gossiping about Preacher John?" Hunter appeared behind them. "Can't say I miss seeing that old scrote's face around here." He breezed behind the bar and started tidying up empty dishes.

"He hasn't been in lately?" Jemma asked, watching Hunter wipe up a spill a few seats away.

"Oh, he's not come round since he and Idaho fell out." Hunter smirked. "Quite considerate of the man, too. It's made it much easier for me to single-handedly turn the entire town against him."

Hunter paused dramatically, staring expectantly at the trio. He was rewarded with eyebrows raised in tipsy confusion and the sound of Skye scalding her tongue on a cream cheese popper.
"Oh, come on, guys!" Hunter threw his hands up in exasperation. "People ask me things!" He pointed to himself. "Trusty neighborhood barman, remember?" He flipped a defeated tea towel over his shoulder and stalked off into the kitchen, muttering, "I'm a big deal!"

THREE MONTHS

"Are you nervous?" Jemma whispered as they stood behind the fake door to their brand-new set. Above them, they heard the PA system come on. "Lighting check for Super Sleuth Science Squad. Lighting check, stage 2."

"Give me some credit, please; I have entertained children before." Fitz laced his fingers with hers and nudged her shoulder. "What, are you nervous?"

"I don't know." Jemma's fist was bumping against the pocket of her detective's trench coat. "It's a new show, anyone would be a bit apprehensive."

"Aww, Jemma," he grinned, clucking. "If I had your track record, I'd be worried too. In fact - what knickers have you got on?" He slid his hands down her hips and stepped in behind her, brushing his lips against the shell of her ear and turning his voice to gravel. "I hope it's your lucky pair. You know what they do to me."

"Fitz!" She squirmed, shushing him. "We're about to go on, for heaven's sake."

"Mm-hmm," he kissed her neck, sending heat pinging involuntarily down her torso. "If I'm being honest, I don't know how I'm gonna keep my hands off for an entire hour."

"I'm sure you can manage." She was trying for dismissive - it came out a bit breathier than that. "After all, we're both professionals, even if one of us has the impulse control of a child and the maturity level of a frat boy."

"Oh, Jemma," he tsked. "You shouldn't put yourself down like that."

She rolled her eyes and turned so she could scold him to his face. Of course, that did put his face very close to hers, a powerful reminder of how unfairly sexy his new costume was. That tweed jacket with the leather elbow patches and those horn-rimmed glasses were bringing up every naughty library fantasy Jemma'd ever had.

"Tell you what." She leaned in and nipped at his jaw, voice like velvet. "Play your cards right, and you'll find out exactly which panties I'm wearing." She grabbed at the lapels of his blazer, and it was her turn to whisper in his ear. "If any."

Fitz's grip tightened into the back of her coat. "Good thing I'm a magician," he rasped, before smoothing out his features. He wiggled his eyebrows and bent his head to hers with a cheeky smile. "I always play my cards right."

"Psst! Nerds!" Skye was hissing loudly at them from the side of the stage. Odd. Jemma listened for the theme music, and confirmed to herself they weren't meant to go on just yet. Whether or not she was snogging her favorite person in the world backstage at a children's programme, she was still far too responsible to miss her cue.
Then she saw Skye point to her headset and hold up a large white sign with block lettering. Craning their necks, Fitz and Jemma squinted to read it.

*UR MICS R ON*

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**SIX MONTHS**

"Merry Christmas, Jemma."

"Merry Christmas, Fitz."

She scooted further into him, burrowing under Mrs. Fitz's - *Lorna's* - handwoven blanket to fend off the Glaswegian chill. Eventually trusting the press of Fitz's chest against her back to warm her, she flipped eagerly through his gift: a veritable portfolio of blackmail material, or as he called it, The Shoebox of Shame. School pictures boasting early-90s fashions, embarrassing testimony from old teachers and classmates, various rejection letters regarding Highway SkyTray, a couple of traffic tickets and a police report, a wincingly explicit breakup email from an ex, and finally, a series of never-released Amazing Leopold head shots (each more ridiculous than the last).

Jemma chortled and cringed in equal measure, and though most of Fitz's secrets were known to her by now, she still managed to find a few surprises. When she'd finished, she snapped the elastic back around the box, then let her fingers skim over the intricate lettering he'd painted on the lid: *In the interest of honesty.*

She tipped her head back to rest on his shoulder, the corners of her eyes still wet from laughing. "I'm sorry, it's just... *a mullet*, Fitz? You looked like Michael Bolton!"

"Bite your tongue, that was my 'really cool musketeer hair' phase, thank you very much." With a small pinch to her side, Fitz reached around her and moved the box from her lap to the nightstand. His lighthearted words might have fooled her on their own, but his chest was taut behind her, strumming with the unsaid fear that he'd given away too much and lost her good opinion. *Silly Fitz.*

Jemma twisted her neck to kiss him the best she could from that angle. It was one of the most heartfelt gifts she'd ever received. "You must really trust me, to show me all that."

She felt him shrug. "You trusted me first."

Jemma turned, curling herself around his larger frame. "And here we are because of it. Now open *my* present!"

She grabbed the tiny blue-and-green-wrapped box and bulldozed it into his hands, making him chuckle.

"Eager, are we?" He shook it next to his ear. "Come on, dirty pictures!" He crossed his fingers, prompting an eyeroll from her.

"Fitz, and I say this with all the love in my heart, but you're an idiot. Also, my gift is going to *blow yours out of the water.*" She was beaming, a tuning fork of barely-contained excitement.

He raised his eyebrows in challenge and undid the ribbon, moving purposely slow to make her dig
her fingernails into the bedspread covering her legs. When he finally took out the apartment key, she burst like a cracked dam. "Let's move in together!" She clasped her hands in front of her and waited for his reaction.

His mouth had dropped open and he was nodding with what was, frankly, a ludicrous degree of baffled amazement. "Let's immediately move in together!" He surged forward and kissed her, too quick and pleased to make it anything but a clumsy peck. "Yes. Fantastic. Wait, Jemma-" Fitz stilled, fingers drumming against her shoulder, eyes flickering with dragonfly thoughts. "Jemma. Jemma Jemma Jemma Jemma-"

"What?"

"Why not just get married?"

"What?!"

Fitz clutched at her upper arms, slightly manic. "If we're gonna share an apartment, why not go one better? Mum can get us in to see the priest in two, three days, tops." He bit his lip in thought for a split second. "We're here already; your parents can come up for the wedding instead of us visiting them for New Years." He sat back, clearly pleased with himself. And fully insane. "It's perfect! Think how much we'll save on airfare!"

"Fitz!" Her brain started working again. "You cannot propose in order to economize on a plane ticket!"

"Two plane tickets, Jemma, and have you seen what they cost? It's highway robbery!"

"I don't care." This wasn't happening. "I'm not marrying you just because it's convenient!"

"Oh, don't be like that! Is this because I didn't have a ring?"

"No, it's because we've barely been dating for-"

"-could've asked your father's permission, but I hardly think-"

"-ridiculous, completely spur-of-the-moment-"

"-being spontaneous, but maybe you're more traditional than-"

"-get engaged just so you could one-up your girlfriend-"

"-not gonna change my mind about you-"

"-there are steps to this sort of thing, Fitz, a proper order-"

"-love each other, what's the problem?"

She gaped at him, his eager eyes tarsier-wide. "Fitz," she started, "you know how I feel about you, but-"

"At least look at the ring first." Oh, lord. His sense of competition was out of control. He held up a postponing index finger, and she sighed.

Fitz was already banging his fist on the wall, shouting, "Mum! Have you still got Nan's ring? I need it!"
Lorna Fitz's voice came barrelling back through the wall. "Leo, y' precocious thing, did ye propose? Jemma, love, welcome t' the family!"

"No, she said she wants to live together first!" Fitz gestered to the wall in affront.

"Och, well y' know how th' Church feels about cohabitation, dear."

Fitz turned to her and spread his hands victoriously. "God's on my side, Jemma."

"You can't be serious! You don't even go to chu-"

"But ye cannae jus' ask the lass t' marry ye like that without givin' her time t' take a breath!"

Jemma stabbed a finger in the other bedroom's direction. "See? Too soon. Your mother agrees with me."

"Aye, 'course I do, hen! Ye've got a good head on yer shoulders."

"Thank you, Lorna!"

"Mum, what the Hell?"

"Leopold Fitz, you watch your language!"

He gritted his teeth. "Sorry!"

"And in front of yer lady friend, for goodness' sake! It's no wonder she doesn't want t' marry ye!"

"Oh, that is-" Fitz looked down with a grumble before facing the wall again as if it had personally insulted his fashion choices. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, mum!"

"He gets that from his father, Jemma dear. Did y' know, David proposed t' me after a fortnight?"

"So why're you gangin' up on me for doin' it then?" Fitz whined.

"I made your father court me a year before I accepted! Sensible lass, that Jemma. You hold on t' her, boy."

Fitz stuck his hands in his curls. "I'm trying!"

-o-

A half hour later, when things had settled down a bit, Jemma was snuggled up to her not-fiancé, whispering small encouragements while mindlessly running her thumb over his sternum. With each hypnotic rise and fall of his chest, another wave of her own tension crashed and dissipated.

"It wasn't a no."

"Yeah, that's- I know that."

"I just don't think getting engaged should involve that much yelling." Her fingertips tapped against his clavicle before scratching at his stubble. "And we'd really never talked about it before."

"Yep. You're right."

"And eloping would just be irresponsible."
"Probably."

She pushed herself up over him and kissed his nose. "Try again in a few months?" Her wishing-well voice hardly carried past his ears, and she cleared her throat for a sideways smile. "Perhaps with a modicum of preparation next time?"

"Oh, I will." Fitz ran his hands down her back, peering up at her speculatively. "And you're never gonna see it coming."

**Good grief, not this again.** "It's not a prank, Fitz-

He was already off and running. "You'll just be goin' along, mindin' your business, and someday when you least expect it- bam! There I'll be."

She rolled her eyes and brushed her lips to his. *There you'll be.* "It's a date."

---

**ONE YEAR**

Fitz peeked out at the larger-than-average audience gathered in Stage 2, spotting several familiar faces among the crowd who'd come out to watch their last taping of the year. He took a long breath and let it out slowly. *Piece of cake.*

As Jemma sidled up to him and ran a slender arm around his middle, he checked that his mic pack was turned off before leaning down. "I have 't say, I'm gonna miss seeing you in that Sherlock kit during the hiatus." He dropped a quick kiss just under her ear and grinned. "Though you could wear just the coat for me sometime…"

She arched an eyebrow. "Only if you promise to wear your tuxedo again."

"Done." His answer was out of his mouth before she'd even finished talking. "I'll wear it to Scout's tonight if you want." He might look out of place, but he had a feeling Jemma would make it worth his while. And he knew where Hunter kept the key to the storeroom.

She snorted. "Tempting." She relaxed into him, slipping her hands under his tweed blazer and rubbing a calm sea breeze along his spine. "But tonight is supposed to be about Trip, remember?"

"Isn't everything these days?" he scoffed lightly.

"Fitz…" Her rebuke was gentle. "I'm surprised Mayor Coulson even asked us back to Children's Day. You can't possibly have thought we were going to get the finale."

"No, I know that. I know." He pressed a kiss to her forehead. He'd wanted it mostly on her behalf, anyway.

"And with Ray Sunshine booking bigger shows, that's good news for Mack, as well," she reminded him unnecessarily.

"Yes, yes. Trip is a treasure and his facial hair should have its own insurance policy." He'd heard it enough times from Skye. "He could restore the dwindling bee population with one perfumed fart, and when he sings, nightingales hide their beaks in shame-"
"Sounds like someone's got a crush," she needled with a smile. "If you like Trip so much, why don't you just marry him?"

"Ah, see," Fitz reached down and grabbed her left hand, slotting his fingers between hers and relishing the cool scrape of her ring against his palm. "There's this girl…"

Jemma's lips cut him off, warm treacle melting on his tongue, and he soon forgot himself in the summertime promise of her mouth.

-o-

"Sounds like a job for the Science Squad! But who would take all the forks from the kids' cafeteria?" Jemma asked, raising her enormous magnifying glass to peer at an evidence bag containing a spear of broccoli. So goddamned cute.

"An excellent question." Fitz lifted one finger. "Only a dastardly villain would try to keep children from eating their vegetables!" Pffft. Jemma thought she was so subtle, giving his character lines about proper nutrition. Fitz tucked his thumbs into his suspenders as he pretended to think. "I did notice something peculiar at the scene of the crime." He went to the cupboard on the side of the stage and brought out one of his working prototypes. "I found this high-powered electromagnet in the ceiling. Now, on its own, it won't cause too much mayhem, but give it bit of current and…" He flipped a switch, and the metal handle of Jemma's magnifying glass yanked on her arm, affixing itself to the magnet among titters from the crowd.

"So that's why the kids thought their forks had flown away! Professor Smartbrain, you're a genius!" She pecked him on the cheek, garnering a few enthusiastic oooohs from the children, and Fitz told himself his blush was just good acting. You've kissed her thousands of times by now. For God's sake. He made a slapstick mess of turning off the electromagnet, hamming it up as his watch band got firmly stuck.

"Don't thank me yet, Detective - we've still got to catch this flatware felon!"

-o-

After the episode wrapped and the audience had started mingling, Mike and Ace Peterson made their way over to say hello. Mike had his arm linked with Kara Palamas', and Fitz smiled to himself as the former schoolteacher greeted Jemma before excusing herself to go catch up with Bobbi.

"Mr. Fitz! Dr. Simmons! Great show," Mike offered, turning to his son. "Right, buddy?"

Ace had already scrambled up onto the stage and was examining the electromagnet with interest.

"Pretty cool, eh?" Fitz sauntered up to the lab table and stood next to the boy. "Want me to turn that on, see what it can do?"

Ace was nodding and reaching out a timid hand. "Will it suck me into it?"

"Not unless you're made of metal," Jemma jumped in cheerily, handing him one of the prop forks. "Now, hold that steady."

Ace watched, fascinated, as the utensil tugged out of his grasp and eventually reunited with the magnet.

"And if you want t' see something really good, I can reverse the polarity." Fitz hefted a wide metal plate and held it over the prototype, switching the settings and letting the plate hover in mid-air.
"What do you think?"

Mike chuckled at his son's fascination. "Bet the dishes at your school cafeteria never did that."

Ace's eyes were miniature planets by the time he finally touched the floating plate. "It's like magic," he whispered.

Jemma was quick to interject. "Yes! It's like magic-"

Fitz looked at the woman who'd become his hearthstone.

"But it's science."

THE END

Fitz in (well, more out of) his tux, at Scout's.
Amazing Leopold head shots and promotional photos.
Click [here](#) for full size.
And the last and most embarrassing Amazing Leopold picture is pretty much NSFW so click here
and be forewarned that it is not sexy in the slightest. Which is why it's such great blackmail material,
if Jemma ever wanted to make such use of it.

Chapter End Notes

There you have it! I've had the whole range of feels about this fic, mostly just because it
spent so much time as a WIP on my computer and later on the site, and I've worried
over it so hard, it's a little bit like having a kid. But let's say, a kid that takes up all your
attention and occasionally makes you ignore your actual kids, so... mostly, it's a good
thing that it's finished. LOL. Thanks again to my awesome betas, amandajoyce118 and
memorizingthedigitsofpi, for helping me mute my own scumbag brain when it comes to
stuff not being perfect.

That said, I'm still always really impressed that anyone is actually interested in anything
I wrote, so, y'know, thanks to y'all that have read this and commented and kudosed and
reblogged. This behemoth took forever and you guys are troopers! (obligatory "you go
Glen Coco!")

For this chapter specifically, here are my notes though:

MechBull, I did something a little differently for that "they get caught kissing backstage"
suggestion, so that it would work with a couple other ideas I already had. Hope you still
liked it!

Michael Bolton? Showing my age there. Kudos to y'all if you knew who I was talking
about. I literally could not think of more than two celebrities with mullets, and certainly
no one too current. Also, and I fully don't expect anyone to have noticed this, but the
"really cool musketeer hair" comment is a nod to Disney's Three Musketeers and Chris
O'Donnell's awful, cringeworthy, did-its-best-to-ruin-his-hotness, 80s-perm-lookin' mullet.

Thanks to memorizingthedigitsofpi for her feedback on the botched proposal scene - I was nervous it was too cracky, but she was like, "do the thing" and helped me out and ultimately I think it worked not too badly?

"Super chill all the time" and Professor Smartbrain is my nod to Parks & Rec because, ugh, how can anyone resist referencing that beautiful cinnamon roll of a TV show, and because sometimes FitzSimmons remind me of Ben and Leslie, and because Fitz in a professorial getup makes my heart do the thump-thump thing.

-o-

Also, I was thinking I might do a clippings/extras chapter, like I did with Gone Soft. It would include a few extra photo manips of Fitz in rumpled tuxes (big hell yeah to memorizingthedigitsofpi for making those and letting me coast on her talent by including them), some deleted snippets of scenes, headcanons that didn't make it in, and Trip's song titles. Let me know if there's any interest for that, and I'll put it up this weekend.

:-) Thanks again! Y'all are awesome.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

The clipping room floor.

Rejected Skye Euphemisms
(be warned, many of these don't even make sense)

- Did he show you his Hairy Houdini?  
  (I think there was something about Harry Potter too -- Hairy Porker, maybe?)
- Did he get trapped in your box?
- Did you let him *pick any card*?
- Did he stick his hands into your top hat? Did he pull out a Rabbit?  
  (For reference, a Rabbit is a type of vibrator.)
- Did he show you his Three-Card Full Monty?  
  (Talking about Fitz showing her a card trick.)

Trip's Song Titles

- *Ray Sunshine*

  Sometimes a Person Takes You By Surprise  
  No New Toys  
  I'm the Special-est  
  Just Tryin' to Keep Things Light  
  Lucky to Have You  
  Every Day Another Brother

- *The Noise & The Funk*

  Girl, I'm in Your Corner  
  Back From the Brink  
  Bring the Noise  
  I Wanted to Be the One  
  Girl, You Know I Look Good

Deleted Scenes

- From *Super Sleuth Science Squad* in the one-year flash forward.
"And just think - the answer was there all along, we just had to find it using science!" Jemma sighed. "If only we hadn't run into that pesky reporter…"

"Who's talking about me?" Bobbi swept onto the stage, followed by a couple deliberate strains of ominous music and a chorus of boos from the children.

"Miss Information," Fitz said frostily.

"That's Ms. Information," she sniffed. "And according to my research," she whipped out a small notebook, "42% of people believe the forks disappeared because of ghosts, 17% are convinced it was telekinesis, and 33% say it was a conspiracy by the school. Only 8% believe the explanation could be scientific." She flipped the notebook closed with a haughty roll of her shoulders. "So you see, you can't possibly be right. I've got the facts on my side."

- o -

- Originally, the scene where Fitz fixes the TV at Scout's, I'd written that the entire bar's electricity was shut off and everything went dark - you know, for mood lighting and stuff - so this is a piece from that version of the scene.

The bartender quickly sparked up his lighter, setting a few candles out on the counter and hopping onto a wine crate to give him a bit more presence. "Guys! Guys!" he called, over the protestations of a few patrons who were vociferously upset at having their soccer game cut off. "Calm down, nothin' to worry about, just a little short-circuit in the fuse box. We'll have it sorted before you can say Bob's your uncle."

Another man emerged from the kitchen area, apron still on and a dish towel draped over his shoulder. "Lance," he called to the bartender, and held up the box of tea lights in his hands. "Told you we'd need these…"

"And I told you we're not a candlelit-dinner sort of establishment. But fair is fair, Idaho - I will concede their usefulness in this one very particular scenario."

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**Epilogues & Head Canons**

- Mack believes in second chances, and with Fitz moving on from Fungineers, he needs someone with similar skills to replace him. Mack hires Lincoln; Lincoln does not fuck everything up terribly a second time.

- Raina ends up with Cal. In this world, Raina is pretty much Cal's #1 fan and she's in love with him (when I was writing it, it wasn't quite so blatant yet that she was trying to surrogate-daughter him, so just… she's in love with him; it's fine) but Cal had never been interested. However, Cal gets amnesia, and Raina is there in the hospital and she totally takes advantage and says she's his wife and pulls a While You Were Sleeping/Overboard on him. It works out though, because it turns into The Vow because he never realizes it was a trick, so they're both happy.

- Ward eventually pisses off enough women in Treehouse Falls that he has to spend his Friday and Saturday nights helping Gramsy knit dog sweaters - which he doesn't mind, because family is so important. (That sounds like I'm implying he then set fire to Gramsy's house or something, but I'm not, you guys. He's honestly a pretty good grandson because she's the only woman who actually wants him around, so… he values that.)
I like the idea that the Ice Machine Apocalypse lights show would've given Fungineers some sort of edgy/rebellious street cred with the adolescent crowd. Possibly, Donnie might've even tried to get the band back together.

**Coulda Been**

- *Super Sleuth Science Squad* went through *sooooo* many possible names/themes. The biggest contender was probably *Sparkle Spaceship Science Squad*, where they were on a spaceship and they all had glittry costumes. Also, I was going to have Robert Gonzalez cameo as the villain on *Super Sleuth Science Squad* - "No one knows his name. They call him The Admiral." (Little *BSG* ref in there. Oh well! Sometimes you just have to rein in some ideas and just finish the dang story, y'know?)

- I tossed around quite a few naming options for the town of Treehouse Falls, references to SHIELD, like Buston, Hubberg, Shieldville, Providence, etc. Treehouse Falls just sounds so picturesque, though. Plus, it's punny. (Oh! And incidentally I came up with some of the history of Treehouse Falls, but I'll save that in case I write the one-shot where they actually visit the historic treehouse the town is named for. Spoiler alert: there is also a waterfall.)

- Originally, Captain Chemistry was going to be Chemistry Queen, and the show *Science is Super*, instead of superheroes, was going to be a sort of castle/medieval theme. I liked the superhero thing better, because it allowed for the mistaken identity thing in the beginning, and obviously there are Captain America comparisons and well, "No capes." Gotta love *The Incredibles!* :-D

- Fitz's magician name was at one point going to be The Fantastic Fitz; also, Mack was going to be shown more often as Fitz's comically tall magician's assistant, and occasionally I wanted Mack to pick Fitz up and carry him around. Initially, their company offered all sorts of party performers, they (Fitz and Mack) themselves would dress up as whatever they could (Power Rangers, etc.) but they also offered temp jobs to people like Skye and Bobbi and Raina to show up to parties dressed as whatever the customer needed. So there was a scene slated in the beginning, where Fitz shows up to Jemma's workplace and tries to intimidate her with a "this town's not big enough for the two of us" type speech and very magnanimously offers to hire her out as part of his company and Jemma's like "... pretty sure I'm okay; I'll take my chances." Hehehe. But "Leo Fitz: Party Pimp" was ill-conceived and too complicated and, fortunately for y'all, got thrown out.

- As many clichéd tropes as I put in this thing, I had even more tossed around that I ended up chucking. Just… as kitchen-sinky as this fic is, it could've been a lot worse. So, thanks, betas!

**Extra RumpledTux!Fitz Pictures**

Most of these work as Fitz in his rumpled Amazing Leopold tux after a long day of turning magic tricks; happily, though, the first one works really well as Fitz getting into his Professor Smartbrain costume too.
I plan to post every Friday, Sunday, and Wednesday, and I have a fair chunk written already, so no worries about an unfinished WIP (Have I ever? C'mon, baby. I wouldn't do that to you.) However, I am still writing this as I update, so I may occasionally ask you to be patient
with me.

Many, many thanks to my beta amandajoyce118, for being available at all hours, just supportive as the Dickens, and did I mention she is excellent at everything? Seriously, read Conversation Hearts.

Massive shout out to memorizingthephotofpi, for additional beta help, being my comedy muse during some brain-blanking moments, and for creating fantastic graphics to go with this story (y'all, that Fitz one is amazing and just wait, you are gonna flip). Plus, An Elaborate Proof made me laugh out of my trachea. Check it out.

All the kudos to starbrightnights for the initial idea, as well as helping me do quality control on making sure I keep those British characters appropriately British! And if you haven't read Back to the Beginning, you are lucky, because that means you get to read it for the first time, and that is a wonderful gift.

Finally, mad props to thelatenightstoryteller for the inspiration of having Jemma be a kids' science show host, as seen in her fic Try This At Home, which is adorkable, just like everything else she does ever.

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