### once more, with feeling

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Mature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>No Archive Warnings Apply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>M/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Criminal Minds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Aaron Hotchner/Spencer Reid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Aaron Hotchner, Spencer Reid, Haley Hotchner, Derek Morgan, Emily Prentiss, Jennifer &quot;JJ&quot; Jareau, Jason Gideon, Alex Blake, Penelope Garcia, Maeve Donovan, David Rossi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Time Skips, Pining, Fix-It of Sorts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2017-02-07 Updated: 2017-04-29 Chapters: 3/? Words: 21594</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### once more, with feeling

by soloecal

**Summary**

As it turns out, the handsome and very repressed stranger Spencer has been sleeping with is his future boss.

**Notes**

follows canon loosely, especially in the beginning. things are shifted around in some places. spencer is slightly aged up; no jack. line breaks denote time skips.
Chapter 1

Everything changes in an impossible expanse of time, it somehow being the longest period of Hotch’s life and also the shortest. He hasn’t been back here in years; there was no reason to once the divorce papers were signed, and their local friends took Haley’s side. Once things had become more cordial, Hotch was always too busy (as if that wasn’t the entire problem).

Nothing’s really changed in the neighborhood. The Robinsons a couple blocks over still had the lopsided tree house that violated every housing code the Neighborhood Association drew up. The Hayes had recently repainted their white picket fence, judging by its rare cleanliness. It was always a talking point at the local diner, back when Hotch still needed to pretend.

Morgan is cursing under his breath through the in-car speakerphone, punctuated by Garcia’s sobs coming back from Quantico. Hotch can’t hear either of them very well, over Foyet.

“I need you to remember,” Haley says, her voice audibly drenched in fear even through the tinny sound of Hotch’s cell, “of how you were when we first met. You weren’t so serious then, Aaron. I need you to – ”

The gunshot pierces into a still silence; the sounds of the road and the cars beside fade away, as do the cries of denial from his team. Hotch slams his phone onto the car dashboard, where it bounces against the windshield before falling beneath his feet.

And then –

“Oh my god,” Haley’s voice says, which can’t be right. Hotch tries to scramble for his phone while maintaining control of the car; he hears Garcia gasp, her breath holding like a lifeline.

And then –

“Ms. Brooks?” Spencer says. “You’re going to be alright.”

There are so many questions Hotch has, questions that will probably lead to discoveries of breaches of protocol that need to be investigated, that’ll lead to piles of paperwork that will keep him away from where he really needs to be. He’ll need to know how Spencer knew about the investigation, how he was one step ahead, how logically, someone in his team must have stayed in contact with Hotch being none the wiser.

But for now, this is okay. However it happened, Haley lives.

*

They get Haley into an ambulance where she is fussed over by two EMTs. None of the blood on the side of her face is hers; she’s shaky, and terrified, but otherwise fine. A few steps away, Spencer watches agents process his revolver.

“Reid,” Hotch says, and stops. He has no idea what to say, which happens rarely. He’s a negotiator, a lawyer; all the training he’s ever done in his life prepares him for finding words in the hardest of situations, but somehow he’s always speechless around Spencer.

“Morgan uses me as a sounding board,” Spencer says quietly. “He doesn’t tell me all the details, but sometimes, you just need a second opinion. Your search for his alias tipped him off; we have other methods.”
“Reid,” Hotch repeats, takes him by both arms, and tugs him into the empty alley beside his old home. “I don’t know how to thank you.” Which is just the start of it, really.

“I would have done the same for anyone,” Spencer says. “She just happened to be Haley.” He steps back from Hotch, “you should go see her.”

“Wait, Spencer.”

“Please don’t, Hotch. You’re vulnerable now, and you feel indebted to me. I don’t want to make the same mistake – “mistake” – again. I wanted to help people. I’m glad I could help you.”

This is how they meet:

They agree that Haley gets the house in the divorce settlement, along with the car, the wedding china, and the white leather couch that is only used when they have guests. Hotch gets the antique storage cupboard that belonged to his mother, and the not-actual-ownership of the bar a few miles away that Haley never particularly liked.

Too seedy, she always said, though it was never really that. Reminds me of the opening minutes of an NBC crime show.

But the drinks are strong, and more importantly, fast, and the bartender doesn’t ask any outright questions, even though he had cut off Hotch’s quest to do irreparable liver damage about an hour prior. Hotch drains his beer, and motions to his empty glass when he comes back around. Above them, Jim Cramer bangs on bells and whistles and yells about the Nikkei index.

The bar isn’t busy on a Thursday evening, though this bar never really is. There’s a mix of regulars and strangers milling around the dimly lit area; the room buzzes with low-pitched conversations that make for pleasant white noise. At one end of the bar sits a couple that wandered in a while back; at the other end sits a young man who came in three hours earlier, with the physicality of a high school freshman. He’s lanky and unsettled in his own skin, hair terribly cut, and yet – Hotch frowns at the glass in his hands.

Jim Cramer’s now speaking over a replay of the morning’s opening bell. It was conducted by, inexplicably, Hello Kitty. *The Dow Jones Industrial Average closed down 524 points today...*

“Useless,” the bartender says, wiping down two dozen shot glasses in succession, and filling Hotch’s glass with water instead. “What average person understands what that means?” He shuffles down to the couple, who are kissing over their actually alcoholic drinks.

“He’s not wrong,” the young man says, and offers Hotch a shy smile when he looks up. “About the report’s uselessness, I mean. Stocks are a long-term game. The day-to-day is incredibly volatile.”

It’s not difficult to tune him out, at least audibly. The young man continues to talk, hands gesturing through the air as he grows more animated. At one point it looks like he sketches out a graph, his tongue darting out every time he pauses for air. Once, as a child, Hotch’s father –

“Excuse me,” Hotch cuts in sharply. The alcohol has loosened his tongue, at the tip of it all the things that he couldn’t say to Haley, *I tried I wanted this to work for better or for worse*, the things he was forced to swallow. It is late and his patience ran out hours ago, sometime between when Haley
flushed when her cell went off in the middle of their divorce negotiations, and when Hotch stopped pretending he didn’t know, stopped pretending he too hadn’t checked out of the relationship long ago.

“– short-term growth –,” the young man comes to an abrupt stop, flounders, like his mind’s forcibly put the on brakes but hasn’t told his mouth. He blushes under the dim bar lighting, fumbles with his mostly full glass, and runs his fingers through the condensation. “I’m sorry. I just thought - ” He licks his lips.

“I’m not sure why you thought babbling at a complete stranger would be welcomed.” Even in his mostly inebriated state, Hotch is still a profiler that can dissect a target down to their worst insecurities. “I’d appreciate if you didn’t practice making friends on me.”

The young man stares down at his hands, and pulls his glass closer. “Ah, no,” he laughs uncomfortably. “I thought you would like a distraction. I apologize.” He slides off his barstool, and disappears into the crowd before Hotch can ask for an explanation. There’s a certain rehearsed air to it; he has had plenty of practice making himself scarce.

Hotch shakes it off. Haley will be staying at her sister’s for the week, and he has packing to do.

Garcia has decorated Haley’s foyer with dozens of overflowing vases, and bouquets of multicolored balloons tied down to furniture. Haley smiles for the first time since they cleared her house, and cleaned Foyet’s blood off her living room floors. Hotch hovers behind her with a container of chicken soup, and half a gallon of orange juice, like this is something he can fix.

“You can sit,” Haley says, an undercurrent of amusement running through her voice. “You used to live here.”

“You should eat something,” Hotch says instead.

“No offense,” Haley says. “But I’m pretty sure I’ll throw up anything I eat right now.”

So Hotch puts everything into the fridge, and takes a seat next to Haley on the couch. He briefly wonders if it’d be appropriate to put his arm around her, wonders what the protocol is for comforting an ex-wife after she was almost murdered because of him. Dave had offered to talk to her instead. Haley never liked Dave, much.

It ultimately doesn’t matter. His phone rings, and both of them jump a little. Haley eyes his ringing pocket with less distaste than before, but it’s still there.

“It’s instinctive,” Haley apologizes. “Sometimes I have still have dreams where I flush your phone down the toilet.”

Right. “There’s a patrol car outside, in case you need anything,” Hotch says. “I’ll come back later as well. Is there anyone you want me to call?”

Haley shakes her head. “Jessica’s on her way back. Can you bring that agent with you? The one that saved my life? I didn’t get to thank him properly.”

“Reid doesn’t work for me,” Hotch manages.
“Oh. He seemed to know who I was,” she frowns a little, and then seems to decide against whatever she’s planning to say. “Thank him for me, will you?”

Which isn’t surprising, considering.

Hotch meets him again two weeks later, his head clearer, the sting of humiliation and anger somewhat muted now. The young man sits in a corner this time, fumbling with a pile of file folders, and tracing his almost empty glass with a long finger. The jolt in the pit of Hotch’s stomach could be guilt, or loneliness, or something else entirely. Hotch orders himself a whiskey, and gets something from tap that looks approximately the correct color.

“Hi,” Hotch says, when he reaches the table. “Can I…?” He gestures to the seat across.

The young man startles, and almost knocks his files onto the floor before stuffing them quickly into an old messenger bag. “Um, hi.” He tucks his hair behind his ear, and looks probably appropriately wary. “Sure?”

Hotch sits down, and places the beer in front of him. “I wanted to apologize for last time.”

“No need!” he says quickly. “I shouldn’t have assumed - “ His eyes dart to the glass Hotch has placed in front of him, and flicker back to his own.

“You said that you thought I wanted a distraction.” The young man – Hotch reaches across the table. “I’m Aaron.”

“Ah, um. Spencer.” He wiggles his fingers in an approximation of a wave. “Sorry, I don’t really shake hands. The number of pathogens passed during a handshake is staggering. It's actually safer to kiss. I mean,” Spencer flushes. “Not that I’m suggesting that – ah, you – you were playing with your ring finger.”

“What?”

“You were in a bad mood, and playing with your ring finger,” Spencer shrugs awkwardly. “I figured its removal was a recent development.” He goes quiet again, glances once more at the glass Hotch has placed in front of him.

Hotch pushes it closer to him. “Consider it an apology. You didn’t get to finish your drink last time.”

“Was I right?” Spencer asks, a repressed eagerness threatening to break through. His eyes dim once Hotch frowns. “I’m sorry, that was inappropriate.” He flushes again, and picks up the glass, takes a long draw. Spencer coughs, and then sputters.

“I guessed at what you were drinking,” Hotch says, passing over a handful of napkins. “I guess I got it wrong.”

Spencer looks surprised. “Oh. This is,” he touches his glass. “This was apple juice. I try not to adhere to more sad stereotypes than necessary. The social implications of drinking alone –” He stops abruptly, and stares down at his hands. “I’m sorry.”

“Please don’t apologize.” The twist in his gut this time is a familiar sort of guilt. “You were right, and
it wasn’t a good time. I’m not usually so unforgiving.”

Spencer offers him that same shy smile Hotch saw the first night. “That makes two of us, then.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I’m not usually so forward.”

It takes all of Hotch’s self control not to visibly startle. Spencer glances at him again, his smile slightly downturned. “Am I wrong? You watched me, even before I said anything.”

Hotch stands up abruptly. “I have to go.” He throws down a handful of bills, ignores the disappointment in Spencer’s eyes. “I just wanted to say sorry for last time; enjoy your drink.”

Spencer says something from behind him, but Hotch doesn’t hear it over the roaring in his ears. The disappointment that sits heaviest is his own; even after all these years –

*

The next day, Haley serves him papers at work. There are only so many things he can avoid.

Spencer’s sitting on his office’s couch when he gets there the next morning, flipping through a tome that looks like it’s seen better days. Hotch tries to tell himself he doesn’t look too eager when he drops his briefcase onto the floor.

“I’m sorry for not answering your texts last night,” Spencer says, closing his book. “My SAIC wanted to know – quote – what the hell I thought I was doing.”

“I can talk to him, if you’d like.”

“I don’t think that’d help much,” Spencer says mildly. “He spent half of my dressing down yelling about the FBI’s incompetency in general.”

“I’m sorry.” Hotch sits down next to Spencer, careful to keep a certain amount of distance between them. He’s not sure Spencer notices this consideration. “If there’s anything I can do, please let me know. Was it just a verbal reprimand?”

“Three weeks unpaid leave.” Spencer shrugs. “It’ll give me time to finish a paper I’m working on.”

“Still working on more degrees?” Hotch asks, somewhat teasingly.

“Did you expect anything less?” The smile Spencer offers him is blinding. “It’s taken a backseat because of work, but my advisor’s willing to give me an extension, provided that I consider the university again if I pursue another degree.”

Hotch drifts closer as Spencer continues to detail his navigation of the academic world. It’s done subconsciously at first, until he realizes with a jolt that his thigh is pressed against Spencer’s own. Spencer still doesn’t seem to have noticed, now outlining the numerous scheduling conflicts that always seem to arise come dissertation defense.

His hair’s gotten a lot longer, since the last time Hotch had a good look. He looks healthier, happier, Hotch realizes with a certain amount of heartbreak. Spencer’s picked himself back up, patched
himself together; Hotch is proud of him in a way he’s never really been proud of anything else. Spencer probably would be embarrassed to know this. Despite everything, Hotch understands him pretty well.

They could be good together, he thinks. This has been a long time coming. “Spencer – ”

“Right,” Spencer flushes. “I’m rambling again. I actually had a purpose for coming here, believe it or not. Did you want to say something?”

“You first.”

Spencer laughs a little, and Hotch shifts even closer, if possible. “Erin Strauss called me yesterday,” he says. “She mentioned there’s been an opening in the BAU because of – “ Spencer winces, and makes a noncommittal hand gesture. “But with everything that’s been going on, she hasn’t really had an opportunity to fill it.”

There’s a feeling of dread coiling in the pit of Hotch’s stomach. He flexes the fingers in his right hand, moves away until they’re no longer touching, and wills Spencer, selfishly, to say anything else.

“I told her I wanted to talk to you first,” Spencer glances down at his feet, and then back up. “I understood your trepidation when Gideon first brought me in, but I don’t think your previous...concerns,” he shuffles, swallows, and then makes eye contact, “are really an issue anymore.”

The thing is, it goes both ways. Spencer understands him pretty well too, sometimes.

“But it’s your team, and I wouldn’t want the position if Dr. Strauss overrode your wishes. It’s your choice, Hotch.”

In the first few years of his marriage, Haley used to talk about fate and destiny in tones of girlish awe. If Hotch hadn’t gone past the drama classroom that day, they might’ve missed each other forever. He never would have joined the club just to meet her, they never would have started dating, they never would’ve gotten married.

Hotch doesn’t really remember when she stopped talking about it, but it was probably earlier than he’d like. Everything was meant to be, Haley used to say, in the early days. He wonders if she still thinks so, with the images and sounds that are now seared into her mind.

Maybe this was always meant to happen, and Hotch was always meant to –

“Hotch?”

“Sorry,” Hotch says. “Welcome to the team.”

He ends up kissing Spencer the weekend they close the Vincent Perotta case.

Subtlety has never quite been Garcia’s strong suit, though it’s not for a lack of practicing. The strangulation marks around Hotch’s neck are red and angry, and there is only so much chamomile lotion he can slather on under her watchful eye before he starts to smell like an apothecary. Hotch isn’t sure where she got so much on such short notice.
Gideon has been eyeing him since the case ended, steady, piercing looks that don’t turn away when Hotch returns his gaze. Gideon has never really obeyed social norms; Hotch’s glares are mostly useless on him, and at times like these, seem to just serve as proof for something Gideon is trying to prove.

Of course, Gideon is also the only one who knows what Hotch meant by *and some people grow up to catch them.* Hotch wraps a scarf around his neck, and heads out a bit early.

*

Hotch is already a liquor cabinet deep into the night when he gestures for another shot, only to have a hand close over his own. The usual bartender isn’t here tonight, replaced by a just barely legal girl slinging drinks for her tuition. She hasn’t bothered cutting him off, and Hotch resolutely does not think about the fact he needs someone to do so.

“You drove here,” Spencer says, moving into his line of sight. “I’m assuming you’ll be taking a taxi home.” He drops into the stool next to Hotch’s, and asks for two waters. They sit in silence as the bartender sets their glasses down. It’s not until Hotch tries to reach for his does he realize he’s still holding Spencer’s hand.

He doesn’t pull away as quickly as he normally would. The alcohol’s making things fuzzy; Spencer’s hand is cool, nails are bluntly cut, skin around the cuticles dry and cracking. Hotch reaches silently into his briefcase, and passes Spencer a small tub of lotion. Spencer lets go of his hand, and takes it, visibly confused. Hotch finds himself unsettlingly discomforted.

“You’re in a bad mood again,” Spencer says quietly.

“Are you offering a distraction again?” Hotch asks, but he’s caught off guard by his own tone. He’d meant for it to be dismissive, or cold; Spencer is apparently a glutton for punishment and incapable of learning from past interactions. Instead, it comes out teasing, almost flirtatious. Hotch instinctively swallows against the nausea that’ll rise, but finds that his throat is clear. Spencer flushes.

“Just five or more drinks in less than two hours is enough to cause alcohol poisoning in a grown adult male,” Spencer says defensively. Defiantness becomes him.

“You might be a bit late,” Hotch says, turning back around and trying to catch the bartender’s eye. She’d disappeared to the other end after pouring their waters; maybe figured that his night was wrapping up. Spencer grabs his shoulder, and tugs him back to face him.

“You need to stop drinking.”

Hotch is feeling bolder by the minute. He knows all about projection, about how his victory against Perotta was only a small step in the right direction. A well-timed comeback doesn’t erase years of repression, but he’s gone through enough shots that it almost seems enough. He slides a hand onto Spencer’s thigh, squeezes. Spencer jumps.

Spencer frowns, something similar to disappointment settling in his features. He moves his thigh away. “I’m no longer offering.”

The anger that rises is muted, simmering below somewhere that’s too far for Hotch to reach. Hotch gets to his feet, and tries very hard to not look at Spencer. The embarrassment and humiliation are tempered by alcohol, and there are only so many emotions he’s capable of processing now.

Spencer rises to his feet too, takes Hotch’s elbow gently. “Which isn’t to say,” he continues, like he never stopped, “that you should be alone right now. I live above the bar.”
Spencer brings him up rickety stairs, hands him clean clothes that smell like someone used a bit too much laundry detergent, and directs him into a tiny bathroom, suitable only for a child or a very small adult. Hotch bangs around inside, trying to change into already too-tight clothes in a too-small space; when he comes out Spencer hands him a glass of water.

“Drink all of that,” Spencer says softly. He takes a few steps back into what little natural lighting there is from the window; in the apartment, the lights are off.

Hotch does, keeping one eye trained on Spencer, who twitches under the attention and seemingly develops an endless fascination with the carpet beneath his feet.

“Um,” Spencer says. “Alcohol isn’t a very good outlet for your emotions.”

Hotch snorts.

“I guess you knew that already. Do you want to talk about it?”

Hotch has no interest in having a stranger analyze his failed marriage. It’s not as if he hasn’t thought about it once or a thousand times, torn it apart from the beginning and tried to dissect each moment, no matter how insignificant. It’s not like he hasn’t learned anything he didn’t already know, learned anything Haley hadn’t previously thrown at him during their fights.

“Of course,” Spencer says, which is when Hotch realizes he’s been talking out loud. “We can do something else, if you’d like.”

Hotch nods without much consideration. He lets himself get guided over to the couch in the living room, lets Spencer settle him amidst the cushions.

“I can turn the lights on if you want,” Spencer says. “I just thought you’d be more comfortable this way.”

Hotch wants to ask if he’s always this considerate towards the disagreeable strangers he meets. “No,” he swallows instead. “This is fine.”

They end up spending the weekend like this, in mostly companionable silence; Spencer doesn’t say much, just shuffles around his apartment and moves packed boxes from room to room. Hotch offers to help, but Spencer declines, suggests that they watch a movie instead. He puts on a documentary about the migrating patterns of the arctic tern, and promptly falls asleep, his head listing uncomfortably to one side.

Spencer’s apartment is somehow both messy and clean all at once, filled to the brim with sealed cardboard boxes and an incomprehensible amount of packing tape. Hotch can’t tell if Spencer’s moving in or out, and makes a mental note to ask.

The TV drones on about tracking devices and proprietary research. Al Gore is apparently very interested in their breeding habits. Hotch turns the TV off, covers Spencer with a tattered throw blanket he’s found on the floor, and after some consideration, grabs another for himself.

Sunday night comes a bit too...quickly? Hotch isn’t sure what word he’s looking for, but he’s spent two nights with a near stranger who has an apparent fascination with map pins. Hotch holds a hand out when Spencer starts clearing the mismatched plates off the dinner table. “Let me,” he says. “It’s
the least I can do.”

Spencer looks confused. “You made dinner tonight. You made dinner last night too. You tried to make dinner the night before that, but I guess being drunk made you less than successful.”

“I’m sorry about the bowl,” Hotch winces.

“That’s not what I meant,” Spencer says, but he sits down. “It was a gift from a relative. I couldn’t throw it away, and I don’t really have anyone to pass it onto. At least it was used. Sort of.”

Hotch stands. “I shouldn’t intrude on you any longer.” He moves around the table, collecting dirty dishes and stacking silverware on top. He doesn’t know why he didn’t leave Friday night, or Saturday morning, and by the time Saturday afternoon rolled around, the point seemed moot.

“You’re not,” Spencer says. He moves to the sink, and starts filling it with soapy water. “Did this make you feel better?”

Hotch is somewhat surprised to find that the answer is yes, that spending a weekend remembering his manners developed under his southern upbringing was a successful distraction from his finalized divorce; that figuring out methods to stay out of the way of a person who attempted to take up as little space as possible would take more thought than he’d expected. Spencer tended to blend into the walls around him, despite the white wallpaper and his garish outfits.

“Good,” Spencer says quietly as Hotch finishes with the last plate. He’s half hidden in the shadows, half lit by a creaking chandelier with only half its bulbs. He’s incredibly thin, even more so like this, but still somehow impossibly distracting, which is the most Hotch will allow. “Are you still interested?”

“Spencer…” Hotch puts the plate into the dish rack. It’s late, and the events of the past few weeks have settled, filtered, processed through Hotch’s psyche. Hotch wants to say no – should say no, should go back to his empty apartment with his own packaged boxes, should go back to the empty bed he can’t even bring himself to fully make – but he sees the exhaustion in Spencer’s eyes, the kindness and effort he extended to a complete stranger. “Are you sure?”

“I’m very selfish,” Spencer murmurs. “But this is unfortunately as far as my courage will let me go.”

“Allow me then.” He pushes Spencer against the wall, maybe a bit too eagerly, cards his fingers through his hair. Hotch hasn’t gotten so hard, so quickly, in so long. He grinds against Spencer’s front, swallows the moan that escapes his lips. “Tell me no,” he whispers against his lips. “Tell me if this isn’t what you meant.”

“Is that what you want me to do?” Spencer gasps, hands sliding underneath Hotch’s shirt to map an uncertain route.

“Do you always do what other people want?” Hotch murmurs, hands dropping to Spencer’s belt, undoing the button and the clasp. He nips sharply at Spencer’s ear lobe, traces his jawline with his tongue back to Spencer’s lips.

“That’s simplest, sometimes,” Spencer manages.

Hotch files that away to return to later. Right now, he pushes Spencer’s pants down his hips, and holds his hand up to Spencer’s mouth, palm facing forward. Spencer stares at it uncertainly, and presses to it a soft kiss. Hotch doesn’t expect the sudden burst of affection that lances through, but he kisses Spencer before he can think about it too long.
He pulls back, and spits into his palm, wraps his hand around Spencer’s cock. “Is this okay?” he asks, waiting for the dazed look to fade from Spencer’s face.

“Yes,” Spencer whispers, thrusts up seemingly instinctively. “What should I – ”

“I’ll let you know later,” Hotch says, wrapping his free hand around Spencer’s waist. “Let me know if I do anything you don’t like.”

“I don’t think that’ll be possible,” Spencer says, and leans forward, his face pressed against Hotch’s neck. His breath comes in rhythmic bursts, timed to the twist and pull Hotch has built. It’s been a long time since he’s done this to anyone but himself, almost a lifetime ago, but he knows what he enjoys, and Spencer seems easy enough.

“Aaron,” Spencer whines. “Please.”

“Please what?”

Spencer shakes his head, “I don’t know. Just, please.”

There’s something about being wanted like this, the warmth of another human being pressed against him, something about the desperation and desire that culminates into franticism. Even before everything fell apart, he and Haley had been distant, cold. Spencer squirms against him, makes needy little noises; his hands alternate from clutching at air to loosely gripping Hotch’s waist, like he’s not sure what to do. Hotch tugs at the hair at the back of Spencer’s head, pulls him back just far enough to swallow every sound.

Spencer clearly hasn’t been touched in awhile. It doesn’t take long for him to toss his head back, the long column of his neck now bared to Hotch’s teeth; Hotch nips and sucks, drowns in the drawn out moan by his ear as Spencer pulses in his hand. Wet heat splatters across Hotch’s abdomen; Spencer’s somehow gotten to the last few buttons of his shirt.

“What would you like?” Spencer finally whispers, pushes gently at the death grip Hotch has on his waist. “I’m afraid I won’t be very good, but I can try.”

Hotch moans, brings his cum-covered hand up to Spencer’s waist as well. “Can I fuck you?”

“Yes,” Spencer says, with unmistakable eagerness.

Hotch pulls Spencer into the bedroom, and pushes him down onto the bed. He turns off the lamp, draws the curtains, closes his eyes. For a brief moment, something like repulsion courses through him. When he opens his eyes again, the feeling has gone, and Spencer’s still there.

There’s a tightness in his chest that threatens to expand and explode. Spencer sits up with an uncertainty in his eyes that’s frighteningly familiar. “Aaron?”

Vincent Perotta was only a step in the right direction. Hotch isn’t his father. He steps forward, kisses those swollen lips, and lays Spencer back down.

Spencer’s already well acquainted with the team, so there are no awkward introductions or uncomfortable explanations about how Hotch already knows him. Hotch gets the feeling they have
an inkling anyway – nothing concrete, or even remotely close to the truth; the image Hotch presents at the office doesn’t allow for morose, drunken nights, or one-night stands that don’t end at one night. Prentiss had eyed him for a while after the first time Spencer left, and he’s sure she’s collecting info even now.

Hotch watches as Morgan tosses an arm around Spencer’s shoulders, teases him as Spencer tries to set up his desk. Garcia flutters around, decorating his desk with little figures she’s picked up from a local comic shop. JJ tries to set up a team dinner around their hectic schedules.

“This feels right, doesn’t it?” Dave asks, leaning against his office’s doorframe. Hotch isn’t sure how much he knows. “Do you think Gideon knew he’d fit in so well?”

Hotch exhales.

This is how it fell apart:

They return from Wisconsin on a Thursday night. It isn’t a bad case, comparatively. There was a less than average body count even before they were called, and no more deaths once they arrived. The kidnapped women were shaken and terrified, but the FBI’s presence in the town had kept the unsub from doing anything more that would attract attention. The jet has just touched the runway when Morgan decides they’re all going to head to the bar to drink away the week.

From his seat near the cockpit, Gideon resolutely ignores any invitation to join; he’s been working on a pet project for some time that he refuses to divulge, and Hotch has left him to it.

“Hotch?” Morgan asks.

“I need to talk to you,” Gideon answers instead, and Morgan shrugs, turns back to JJ and Prentiss. Hotch nods.

Everyone else heads directly to the bar from the tarmac. Hotch drives silently back to headquarters with Gideon in the passenger seat, flipping through files he’s procured from somewhere.

The bullpen is dimly lit when they get there; it’s late enough that the janitorial staff has already finished up for the day. There’s someone standing in Hotch’s office.

“This is our Unit Chief, Aaron Hotchner,” Gideon says, once they’re inside, but Hotch is still trying to process the sight before him, of Spencer standing in front of him, both hands on a shoulder bag Hotch had watched him unpack, late one night. Spencer’s eyes are wide, and his hands are shaking; Gideon pats him on the shoulder as he finishes introductions. Hotch holds his own hand out, on instinct.

“Dr. Spencer Reid,” Spencer says, just above a whisper, taking his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Beside him, Gideon is waxing poetic about Spencer’s accolades, his 187 IQ, and his 20,000 words a minute reading speed, of all of which Hotch had no idea. He’s just moved here, which answers the question Hotch never asked, he’s been finishing up at the Academy.

Gideon’s pet project is apparently the recruitment of 24-year-old genius with more degrees than
friends – it’s a cruel thought, Hotch realizes, one Spencer does not deserve. Hotch is visibly becoming defensive; Gideon is starting to look at him oddly.

The only thing Hotch can think of right now is the way Spencer brought him off the other night, hesitant strokes that revealed the extent of his experience. His palm had been clammy, sweaty; he’d kept looking to Hotch for guidance, glancing up at him through those eyelashes, biting his bottom lip. Hotch had come, impossibly.

“Can I speak with you?” Hotch asks Gideon. “In private?”

Spencer clears his throat. “I’ll - I’ll just wait outside.”

“That would be best,” Hotch says, not entirely kindly.

He waits for the door to click shut before laying into Gideon about official policy, about the chain of command, about keeping him in the loop in his own unit. Gideon’s expression changes from one of pride to one of confusion, followed by an appearance of understanding that Hotch cannot stand to see. Gideon does not understand. He cannot understand.

Everything Hotch says is objectively true. It takes eight to ten years of experience in the FBI to join the BAU. It takes at least two to three years to make SSA status. Spen – Dr. Reid is young already, and his even more youthful appearance will be an issue for local LEOs. His phenomenal IQ does not make up for his lack of real world experience. His physical exam scores are abysmal, and his lack of muscle mass will make him a detriment in the field. He needs to hold his own; Morgan can’t kick down every door.

It continues in this vein for a while, until he notices Gideon's walked out, taking Spencer with him. Spencer doesn’t look back.

*

And time moves on, though not without a fight. Gideon approaches him a dozen times over, once with a pile of cold cases Spencer’s solved, unfurling maps with thorough geographic profiling across his floor. He leaves the folders behind on Hotch’s desk; Hotch shoves them into a file cabinet for a while, and then reluctantly walks them to JJ’s office for processing. When Gideon can’t persuade Hotch with Spencer’s intelligence he tries for morality.

“He’s had a difficult life,” Gideon says, and taps a folder he’s placed in front of Hotch. “He uses that to empathize. He’s not always successful in his connections, and even though his mind is incredible, it’s not his greatest weapon.”

Hotch knows this from experience, but even the kindest person has their limits. Spencer hasn’t texted him once since, though Hotch isn’t sure if he wants him to. Eventually, Gideon stops trying. He leaves the file behind.

Dr. Spencer Reid, age 24. Graduated from Caltech with a BA and a PhD, before making his rounds on the East Coast. Fast tracked through the Academy on Jason Gideon’s recommendation, with top scores in all exams non-physical. Special exceptions were made for his physical scores due to exceptional ability and/or achievement in other areas. Single child to a father who walked out, and a mother who never did, but was far from adequate. Hotch doesn’t - does not - think about which category he fits into.
And then Gideon disappears.

Hotch is still dealing with the fallout from Elle, inundated by endless paperwork and inquiries that show no signs of slowing down (and in typical bureaucratic fashion, no signs of speeding up). Prentiss is still a somewhat sore point; she’s a more than adequate agent, but her appointment is political at best, and underhanded at worst.

But Gideon’s rarely late, so Hotch calls ten minutes after 9am, leaves him a voicemail that’s almost mocking in all its inadequacies. He offers to talk, to listen, suggests Gideon take time off and offers condolences for Sarah. He spends the rest of the day doing paperwork, and periodically checking his phone. The next day, he goes to Gideon’s apartment, because it’s not like him to not respond at all.

He essentially repeats his voicemail in front of a closed door, and realizes with a jolt that everything he’s saying is what they’re trained to tell families of victims. He realizes, with a heavy heart, that it’s Gideon who taught him how.

On the third day, he opens Gideon’s personnel file, and finds the address of the cabin Gideon had mentioned with such fondness.

Despite all hope, he’s not surprised to see the badge when he gets there, and more than a bit relieved to see the gun. All this fades away when he spots the sealed letter just a bit above, addressed to Spencer.

Hotch is usually first on the jet, but Spencer’s already there when he arrives, nose buried in paper files that Garcia specifically provided. They haven’t really had a chance to talk since Spencer rejoined the team; his lunches were taken up by paperwork and far too many meetings, Spencer’s were commandeered by Morgan and Prentiss and JJ.

“I spoke with Haley last night,” Hotch says. “She’d like to have you over for dinner sometime, to properly thank you.”

Spencer looks up. “I thought that’s what the flowers were for, or the fruit basket she sent last week.”

“She says that’s too impersonal,” Hotch says, amused. He sits down, tucks his feet away from Spencer’s. “She also said you’re too skinny.”

“She barely saw me!” Spencer responds indignantly.

“I told her that, but she said if I hadn’t noticed then it was because I wasn’t keeping a watchful enough eye over my team. I told her I did, she said I didn’t. I told her she was right, she made a jab at my ego.”

Spencer laughs. “Not ego,” he says thoughtfully. “She doesn’t study human behavior for a living, after all. You’re just very quick to take responsibility; it’s not yours to watch our weight. It could be a good thing.”
“Is that an official diagnosis? Will you tell her that?”

“I’m not that sort of doctor.”

“I thought you had a PhD in psychology.”

“Not in clinical. My focus was in forensics.” He offers Hotch a sheepish smile. “I thought it might help.”

“Guys?” JJ says.

The plane is full, suddenly. Morgan’s at the coffee machine with one eyebrow raised, mouthing something Hotch can’t quite make out to Prentiss. Prentiss is smiling in an honestly terrifying way.

Hotch clears his throat. “Do you have anything for us?” he asks Garcia’s grinning face. The laptop has evidently been open for quite some time.

“No at all,” she says cheerfully. “Safe flight, my loves!”

The stairs leading to Spencer’s apartment still creak. Hotch had stopped by the bar first for liquid courage, and found it playing *Dirty Dancing*, which turned out to be a surprising hit with the CNBC crowd. He downed two shots, and refused a third with mild panic when things felt too familiar.

He knocks twice, and then again when no one answers. He briefly realizes he doesn’t actually know what Spencer does with his free time, outside of watching obscure nature documentaries and having surprisingly athletic, if not somewhat awkward, sex. Or maybe that’s just what Spencer did when Hotch was there.

He knocks again, and then bends down to slide the letter underneath Spencer’s door. It opens.

Hotch’s first instinct is that he’s gotten the wrong door somehow, despite visiting consistently over a period of months. He’s clearly suffering from an early onset of senility. The man in front of him is so frail a breeze could snap him in half; his eyes are sunken, framed by strands of greasy and straggly hair. He’s wearing a bathrobe that visibly hasn’t been washed in weeks. Hotch opens his mouth, and finds himself without words.

Spencer stares at him.

“Spencer…” Hotch finally manages.

Spencer twitches, and bumps his head against the doorframe. “Dr. Reid, please.”

Hotch swallows. “Dr. Reid.”

“It makes people take me seriously,” Spencer continues, but his arms are wrapped around himself, with none of his usual enthusiastic gesturing. “The doctorates make people think I’m older than I actually am, and have more experience.” He pauses to scratch at his left inner arm. “And I don’t go out in the field that much – much too skinny for that, not that that seemed to matter when you were fucking me – ”

“Dr. Reid,” Hotch hisses, even though they’re in an empty hallway. Spencer curls into himself even
more, if possible. He scratches his inner elbow again. Hotch inhales sharply.

“I got real world experience pretty quickly; movies always show chloroform acting instantaneously, but did you know it actually takes a few seconds to kick in? I struggled pretty fruitlessly; might’ve been helpful if I had more muscle.”

“Spencer!” Hotch all but yells, dread starting to bubble up from the pit of his stomach. He steps forward into Spencer’s personal space, fights back a flinch when Spencer’s eyes widen, and stumbles backward, tripping over something on the floor.

“Dr. Reid,” Spencer repeats.

“Can I – can I come in?” Hotch asks. He sees the no form before he hears it, so he says, “It’s about Gideon.”

*

The apartment surprisingly doesn’t look that much different from the last time Hotch was here, just messier, in an almost frantic sort of way. Books are scattered on every possible surface; Hotch trips over three in quick succession, each one thicker than the last. The one Spencer tripped over appears to be in Greek.

Spencer deflates. “I’ve been meaning to re-shelve those. Can I get you anything to drink?” He opens a pantry door to reveal it full of alcohol, all untouched and mostly still sealed.

“Spen – Dr. Reid?”

Spencer looks at him for a second. “I don’t know why I told you all of that,” he says quietly.

Hotch inhales. “Did you join another department?”

“No. I’m...somewhere else.”

“I’m sorry.” Hotch means it.

“You were probably right,” Spencer says with a discomforting sort of resignation. “But I didn’t fail.” He pauses, and surveys the row of bottles again. “For a while I considered replacing one vice with another. I thought it might be easier – I don’t particularly like the taste of alcohol, so I thought...” Spencer frowns at them. “It doesn’t work that way. I know that.”

“Do you have apple juice?”

“Please don’t do that.” Spencer doesn’t quite slam the pantry door shut.

“I’m sorry,” Hotch says again. “I didn’t mean it that way. I thought you would be more comfortable with something you liked.”

“You don’t need to do that. I have cranberry apple juice.”

Hotch watches Spencer shuffle around his kitchen, and fumbles for something to say. “You still live above the bar?”

Spencer shrugs. “At first, I had hoped you’d come and find me.”

Hotch looks away, swallows a wave of self-hatred that rises.
“Afterwards,” he pours Hotch a glass, and slides it across the counter. His voice turns hollow. “Drugs are expensive.” He turns around. Hotch freezes with his hand halfway to the cup. “Now you don’t have to pretend.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” Spencer says firmly. “Did something happen to Gideon?”

Hotch stares at Spencer’s sleeve-covered arms, watches as his fingers twitch despite all efforts to keep them still. It’s not his job to ask – it’s not his place to ask. He slides the letter across the table. “That might explain things better than I can. Gideon left.”

Spencer’s eyes fly up to Hotch’s face, widen.

“Would you, do you want me to be here when you read it?”

“No,” Spencer says quietly, which hurts more than it has any right to. Hotch stands.

“For what it’s worth,” he says. “I’m genuinely sorry.”

“For what?” Spencer asks. He’s watching Hotch with wide eyes, and with his apartment’s dim lighting, Hotch can almost pretend the man in front of him is the same one from months before. He still remembers how soft Spencer’s skin was, how smooth and hot and sensitive. He remembers the way Spencer leaned into his touch, moaned and whimpered, his saliva-slick lips pressing wet kisses against Hotch’s jaw, neck, face.

He remembers how he heard his father’s voice inside his head less and less each time, but it was never fully gone.

“It was – “ Hotch exhales. “It was never about your experience.”

“I know,” Spencer says, which is somehow one of the worst things Hotch has ever heard. “Thank you for bringing this. Please leave.”

He ends up having dinner alone with Haley when Spencer bails last minute, citing an emergency with his mother. Haley is far more understanding than she’d ever been in the final years of their marriage.

“Everything was delicious,” Hotch tells her, as she sets a slice of chocolate cake in front of him. “Spencer really is sorry he couldn’t make it.”

“I’m sure he is,” Haley says with mild amusement that Hotch can’t quite understand. They sit for a bit in silence; Hotch finishes his cake and chases crumbs around the plate.

“Does he know?”

“Does he know what?” Hotch asks apprehensively. Haley’s eyeing him the way she used to when he forgot to run an errand. It’s unnerving how she still manages to raise his defenses after all this time. There’s probably a study in an obscure journal somewhere about the emotional hold ex-wives have over ex-husbands. Spencer would know, most likely.
“That you call him Spencer in non-work settings.”

“I don’t – there’s not a pattern to it,” he says without much conviction.

“I’ve never heard you call Morgan Derek, or Prentiss Emily.”

“I don’t call JJ Jareau.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Haley says. “No one calls JJ Jareau.”

Hotch hasn’t been this uncomfortable since – well, no, that would be unfair. He’s had plenty of chances for discomfort in the past few years. He tries very hard not to look at his ex-wife, but fails miserably. Haley sighs.

“Make sure you bring Spencer with you next time. My friends look at me oddly when I tell them I’m having dinner with you alone.” She takes the empty plate from him. “But you’re a lot more tolerable when we’re not married.”

Spencer shows up at the BAU two weeks later, looking marginally less unkempt but still just as underfed. Morgan watches him walk through the way he would track an unsub; Prentiss’s hand twitches towards where her gun would be. JJ comes out of her office with files Hotch knows aren’t ready for presentation. She holds them up anyway, in case they need a distraction. In an alternate universe, Hotch would maybe want to laugh.

He figures he should do something before someone gets hurt. Spencer doesn’t look like he could withstand a pat on the back now, much less one of Morgan’s tackles. “Dr. Reid,” he says, from his office door. “Please come in.”

* 

“Please sit.” Hotch gestures to the chairs in front of his desk. He very clearly remembers the last time they were in this office together. Judging by the uncomfortable look on Spencer’s face, he’s replaying it word-for-word in his head.

Spencer shakes his head quickly. “That’s not necessary. I just came here to give you this.” He places Gideon’s letter down on the edge of Hotch’s desk, nudges it towards him like it burns.

“Dr. Reid?”

“Your team deserves answers,” Spencer says firmly. “There isn’t much, but it’s something. I know –” he swallows visibly. “I know what it feels like to leave something unfinished.”

Hotch doesn’t really have anything to say to that. “Would you like to tell them?”

“No!” Spencer says quickly. “I mean, no, thank you. There’s a copy in there,” he taps the envelope. “I kept the original, I hope you understand.”

“Of course.”

Spencer’s hand twitches at his side, his fingers tapping his thigh incessantly. It’s not nerves, or anything remotely similar to the insecurities Spencer had when they first met. Hotch bites down on
the wave of nausea that washes through him.

A month into when they first met, Hotch had shown up at Spencer’s apartment, irascible after a case involving an angry son projecting familial issues onto father-like figures. Spencer had let him vent, then made him chamomile tea. Hotch drank it, and spent the rest of the night pounding Spencer into his mattress.

“Dr. Reid,” Hotch says, just as Spencer gets to his door. Spencer pauses, his hand on the knob. “If you ever need – ”

“I won’t,” Spencer says quietly.

Through his windows, Hotch can see his team doing absolutely no work at all. He exhales, and powers through. “If you ever need anything, you have my number.”

Spencer shrugs, and leaves. Hotch doesn’t expect to see him again. He’s not sure why the thought is so discomforting but pushes it away. There is work to do, and Hotch, if nothing else, has always gotten things done.

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Spencer walks into the bullpen one day wearing sunglasses that are too large for his face. He’s been quiet lately, ever since JJ left for State. They had grown even closer in the past year or so; JJ’s motherly instincts coming out in full force and surprisingly not rebuffed. Hotch has meant to talk to him, but was always too busy (as if that wasn’t the entire problem).

Which – right.

*Do you have any plans tonight?*

Hotch watches as Spencer unlocks his phone, frowns at the screen. He looks up in Hotch’s direction, and frowns even harder. *Not exactly.*

*Join me for dinner tonight?*

Spencer hesitates before responding, tapping a pen against his comparatively smaller pile of files. Hotch has faced takedowns that were less stressful than this.

*Yes, okay.*

* *

It’s a small, cozy restaurant that could almost be romantic if Spencer didn’t look like he was being held hostage. He still has his sunglasses on, even though Hotch can barely see a foot in front of him with the restaurant’s lighting. He briefly wonders if this was a mistake.

Hotch clears his throat. “How are you doing?”

Spencer starts, and grabs his already empty water glass. “I’m fine. Why do you ask?”

Hotch raises an eyebrow, and nudges the breadbasket towards him. Spencer grabs a piece on reflex, and starts shredding it between his fingers. “I know JJ’s transfer has been hard on you – ” Hotch starts, and then sees Spencer visibly relax.
“It’s not just me,” Spencer answers hurriedly. “It’s been a difficult transition for everyone. She calls every week, wants to make sure I’m feeding myself.” His voice turns a little indignant. “I’ve made it this far without starving to death.”

Hotch knows he’s missed the mark, but Spencer’s talking more openly than he has in weeks, and Hotch can’t let this go. He leans forward, and pushes the breadbasket further into Spencer’s personal space. Spencer gives him a look he can’t really see, but the pout on his face suggests he’s not very pleased with his actions. Hotch has to fight to keep from smiling.

Halfway through the entree Spencer fumbles with his knife and fork and sends a meatball skittering to the floor. He ducks under the table, a light flush covering his cheeks. “Sorry, sorry,” he mumbles. “You’d think I’d be great at using a fork since I’m so terrible with chopsticks.”

Hotch grins. “Are you suggesting utensils are like limbs?”

Spencer pops back up, hair mussed from where it brushed against the tablecloth. “Actually,” Spencer says, and Hotch isn’t surprised at all at how easy it is to fall into a natural conversation. He listens to Spencer ramble for a bit longer, and then lays a hand on Spencer’s arm. Spencer doesn’t jump.

“I know there are a multitude of reasons for you to think otherwise,” Hotch says. “But I’d like you to know you can talk to me.”

Spencer stills for a few moments, and sets his cutlery down. “I’ll keep that in mind,” he says quietly, which is a start.

If only things were so easy. With Gideon gone as well, they’re now down two. They spend a couple cases stretched thin, Morgan heading to crime scenes alone, Prentiss at the morgue by herself. Hotch juggles both the local LEOs and the victims’ families, while JJ tries to herd the press into something manageable. By the time they gather around to discuss their findings, only Garcia is at the top of her game, offering to follow leads they haven’t yet come up with.

Hotch has been on the phone with Dave the past few weeks, but he’s still wrapping up his latest book tour, and the cancellation clause on the contract is a great deal more than the advance. It’s not as if Dave couldn’t afford it, but it’s clear he enjoys the limelight, and he has deserved his retirement. Between the cases and paperwork piling up, Hotch doesn’t have time to interview and sort through HR files.

So against his better judgment, he calls Strauss, and relays his issues. From the tone of her voice he can tell she has been more than aware, and waiting for his call. It is with a great deal of smugness that she says she has found a replacement, and will bring him by the next day.

*  

Hotch doesn’t need to look at the faces of the rest of his team to see their surprise. Strauss is detailing how she went through Gideon’s files in his office, and how lucky they were that he had been in the final stages of securing another candidate. Morgan’s eyebrows are slowly ascending his forehead. He looks like he might tackle someone any minute.

“This is temporary,” Spencer says quickly, while Strauss frowns.
“Dr. Reid comes to us from the CIA,” she says. (“Temporarily,” Spencer interjects again.) “He’s on stand down, due to an injury.” (Spencer reddens.) “We’re very lucky to have him.”

JJ’s eyes are as wide as they have ever been. Hotch knows they recognize him from the two minute walk through the bullpen to his office, and back. Sometimes, he wishes they weren’t so good at their jobs. Spencer is resolutely looking at everybody but him.

A lot has happened since the day Gideon walked out of Hotch’s office with his arm around Spencer’s shoulders. Spencer has had ample chances to ruin his life if he’d wanted to. (Hotch has never really thought Spencer would.) Prentiss looks like she can barely keep her eyes open, despite all the excitement. Hotch holds out his hand, a couple months too late.

“I look forward to working with you,” he says.

*

Spencer looks...fine, Hotch thinks, eyeing him from his office. JJ is warily showing him his desk; gesturing to the empty drawers he can use to store his things. Spencer clings to his messenger bag with both hands, and nods very attentively. Even though he hasn’t put on any weight, he no longer looks in danger of breaking. His hair is still long and messy, but in an almost controlled way. He keeps pushing it behind his ears, and having it fall out of place a few seconds later.

He doesn’t see Spencer alone until later in the day. Spencer’s fiddling with their uncooperative coffee machine, looking at it just as intently as he had files.

“You kind of have to – ” Hotch gestures, “press it at an angle like – here, let me.”

“Thanks,” Spencer murmurs.

“No problem.” Hotch starts the coffeemaker, and they stand in silence for a while, watching it drip.

“I didn’t – ” Spencer breaks the silence, and swallows. “This wasn’t my idea. Strauss found my file in Gideon’s office, and she approached my boss. I was on leave for – ”

“I know,” Hotch says, and finds that he really does believe him.

“No,” Spencer says quickly. “I was on leave for – for – ”

“I know,” Hotch repeats.

Spencer nods slowly, a distinctly relieved slump to his shoulders. “You don’t have anything to worry about. I won’t be a liability.”

“I shouldn’t have said that,” Hotch says, passing Spencer a mug from the shelf.

“No, you should have,” Spencer says. He pours himself a cup of coffee about three-fourths of the way, and fills the rest with creamer. “That might not have been your reason at the time, but you weren’t wrong. It was a valid concern. Gideon has,” (and Hotch doesn’t miss the way Spencer lingers over the word) “always been overeager. He should have told you first.”

Hotch has spent months telling himself exactly this, that Gideon made a mistake, and Hotch ultimately did what was right for the team. He has validation now, from the one person he never thought would give it. It doesn’t quite feel like the absolution he thought it would.
The sunglasses come off long before JJ returns and Prentiss leaves. 

*Leaves* is a...generous term. *Leaves* implies a degree of choice, like she had any option other than the one on the table. JJ makes the announcement to the team through reddened eyes, and Hotch watches his team collapse before him.

They get a week off, which is nowhere near enough, and come back to work looking like they never left. Hotch schedules them all for one-on-one talks, and readies himself to lie to his team.

He hadn’t done this when Gideon or Elle left, had been too wrapped up in his own issues, and too tired to bear the burden of more. Once upon a time, Haley would have called him emotionally inept. For better or worse, that no longer applies.

He and Dave don’t really talk. This isn’t the first colleague Dave’s lost; he’s jaded in a way Hotch hopes he’ll personally never be. Dave pats him a few times on the arm, and suggests that Hotch come over for dinner this weekend. Hotch appreciates the gesture, but Dave has a picture of the team in his living room, and passing Prentiss’ hanging photo in the hallway is guilt-inducing enough.

Morgan spends the entire session talking to his own hands, as if he can still see Prentiss’ blood staining his skin. He describes how he felt the blood seep through his fingers, as hard as he tried to stem the flow; describes how he could feel her fading, even as he begged her to hold on. Nothing Hotch says is remotely adequate. Hotch knows they both know this, but he tries anyway.

Garcia cries, mostly. She clutches a stress ball and tells Hotch how this has always been her worst fear, that she’d see one of them walk through the doors but never come back. Hotch doesn’t tell her it’s his too.

JJ says nothing. She taps her foot against the ground in a beatless rhythm, and Hotch watches as the whole weight of her body sags into the couch. It’s the first time since Prentiss left that JJ hasn’t had to control her emotions or body language around someone else. Hotch offers his office as an escape, and JJ almost laughs. She gets up ten minutes before the scheduled end, and walks to his door on stronger legs. She turns, for a second, and Hotch thinks she’s going to say something. She doesn’t.

At 6pm, Spencer wanders in with two cups of tea, and sets one in front of Hotch. He sits down on the couch, crosses his ankles, and opens his mouth.

“I know, you know.” He fiddles with his own cup. “I know what you look like when you’re feeling guilty. I know what you look like when you’re,” he hesitates, “lying.”

Hotch doesn’t know where to start, and an instinctive feeling of panic spreads through his chest. He hasn’t been able to look Spencer in the eye since the funeral, and it’s felt like any progress he’s made with Spencer has fallen through the cracks. And then there are days when he can’t breathe for how selfish he feels; Prentiss is alone, and away from home, and whatever any of this is isn’t nearly as important as is getting her back. He wonders how she’s doing, now. He wonders when he became so easy to read.

“It’s okay,” Spencer says quietly. “I won’t say anything.”

“That wasn’t – I never thought any of you would.”

Spencer gestures to Hotch’s cup. “It’s um, Christmas tea. Emily gave it to me last year. She said she thought I’d like it, given my penchant for holidays.” He takes a sip from his cup. “It mostly just tastes like tea.”
Hotch lets out a rueful chuckle. “I’d be surprised if you cared about the subtleties, given how you treat your coffee.”

“She wouldn’t let me add anything until I could detect the underlying notes. I never got a chance to.” Spencer closes his eyes briefly. “Is she...safe?”

“Yes,” Hotch breathes.

“Good,” Spencer says. “Then it’s all worth it.” He fixes Hotch with a look. “All of it.”

Hotch inhales so quickly he chokes. Spencer leans back against the couch, and closes his eyes again. “We still have 43 minutes,” he says. “How have you been?”


Spencer frowns. “That’s not what I asked.”

But it’s an all-consuming question. It’s been a long couple of years, each being harder than the last. Things that used to seem so important have faded with time, but Hotch doesn’t know if they’ve faded fast enough. With each passing year he gets closer to the ineluctable onset of age; erectile dysfunction, infirmity, Thursday night bingo tournaments. It was a joke he and Haley had in the old days, when they still looked forward to growing old together. Even now, it’s still much, much too early to consider but Hotch still does sometimes, and realizes with a jolt that he thinks about Spencer old, no longer pretty.

He wants to see that. There's a crushing intimacy there, something he can’t articulate, but it’s something he knows he wants. He’s felt like this before, in the early days with Haley, and in the mid-days too. He doesn’t know when that disappeared.

He doesn’t know when this arose. I’m in love with Spencer, he realizes in a moment of stark lucidity. The irony isn’t lost on him as he stares into his cup, as Spencer sits forward and looks at him worriedly. He’s too many years too late; he’s already caused enough pain in Spencer’s life, made it more difficult than it needed to be. He’ll have to repress better, this time.

“So you graduated high school when you were like, three?” Morgan asks.

“12,” Spencer answers seriously, until he realizes he shouldn’t. Spencer’s steadily grown on the rest of the team in the past couple of days; for all his quirks and their first impressions, he’s someone best experienced firsthand. He blushes, and glances down at his feet.

“Aww.” Morgan teases, reaches out and pats Spencer’s cheek. Garcia coos a little.

They’ve just wrapped up their first case with Spencer as a consultant. Prentiss and JJ spent most of the case with their eyebrows flirting near their hairlines, staring at the speed with which Spencer flipped through files. Can we keep him? Prentiss had asked two hours into their first day, as everyone was heading out to their assignments, but no one stayed around long enough to pick up on Hotch’s instinctive hesitance.

At least not initially.
Hotch has been at the whiteboard for all of five minutes before JJ walks in with a press update and a pile of files. She briefs Hotch on which outlets could be helpful and which ones need to be kept in line. There’s a tabloid here that’s given them issues before, and JJ wants to consider using them to their advantage instead.

“So how long have you known Spence for?”

Hotch’s dry erase marker jerks across the board, drawing a bold line through some of their notes. JJ’s eyebrows rise again.

“Spence?” Hotch asks.

“Oooh, a deflection,” JJ muses. “It’s a cute name. He looks like a Spence. So a year? Two?”

“We have a case to focus on,” Hotch says. “Anything personal can be discussed at a later time.”

“The White House will need a new press sec soon,” JJ murmurs, mostly to herself. She picks up her files, and tilts her head towards Spencer’s chicken scratch, marred even further by Hotch’s errant line. “If it makes you feel any better, it wasn’t you that gave it away.”

And Prentiss comes back, because for all the horror they see in their day-to-day, sometimes things do go right. But it’s a little different now, and they can all feel it, hidden underneath the need for everything to be normal again. Hotch overhears her discussion with Spencer about home ownership, and picks up between the lines her restlessness. He’s sure Spencer does too, but Spencer’s not yet ready to admit it to himself.

In Spencer’s defense, Hotch avoids it too, ignores the way Prentiss withdraws a bit during roundtable meetings, but approaches the team more outside of work, like she’s trying to give herself something to remember. For a while he thinks it’ll never happen if he never acknowledges it, but that’s never how anything works.

* 

“It’s been some year,” Prentiss says, the understatement underscored by the way she sometimes subconsciously holds her hand protectively to her stomach, covering a physical wound that has long since healed. In her other hand she holds a glass of champagne, half filled with the confetti Garcia had tossed over everyone.

Hotch nods, and follows her through Rossi’s ample-sized garden. They’re far away enough now that Hotch can only hear sounds and voices, and nothing discernable. “You’ve done an incredible job this year, especially.” Hotch says. “It’s been an absolute pleasure to work with you.”

“Odd place for an exit interview, isn’t it?” Prentiss grins.

“You’re leaving, are you not?”

Prentiss’ grin widens even more. “Permission to speak out of turn, sir?” she asks with twinkling eyes, but doesn’t wait around for answer. If Hotch were being honest, it’s one of the things he likes best
about her. “It’s this sort of unnecessary seriousness that probably got you here in the first place.”

“Here?” Hotch echoes.

The look on Prentiss’ face can only be described as disappointment. She stares at him, and then at something over his shoulder. Hotch doesn’t turn around, because he suddenly has an idea what she’s talking about.

He’s known for a while that the team talks about these things. He’d caught them a few times after Spencer left, darting inconspicuous looks between his office and Spencer’s vacated desk. The circumstances of Spencer’s return only added to the whispers. Hotch isn’t sure what gets said, or how accurate it is; Spencer keeps the things he loves close to his chest (and what a wonderful, presumptuous, foolish thought that is), and there’s only so much even profilers can discern. Morgan started looking at him differently a while ago. Not in a bad way, just different. Dave is in a constant state of exasperation, mellowed out with the bottle he keeps in his desk drawer.

“There’s nothing,” he says, but means to say it’s nothing, and Prentiss looks positively giddy with delight.

“Present tense,” she says. “Suggesting that…”

“I’m not filling in that blank for you.”

“But there is a blank.” She hums a little, until she realizes that Hotch isn’t going to say anything else. “I almost died,” she says. “You should listen to my advice about living without regrets.”

“Is that why you’re leaving?”

“You’re very good at that. It’s almost infuriating.” She moves so that she’s standing at Hotch’s side, which forces him to turn around. Everyone’s on the dance floor Dave had set up, JJ with Will, Morgan with Garcia, and Spencer, oddly enough, with JJ’s mom, being led around the floor instead of doing the leading.

“He’s a sweetheart,” Prentiss says. Hotch doesn’t say anything. “He doesn’t deal with abandonment well. Take care of him, will you?”

Hotch has just gotten used to Spencer’s presence on the team when the CIA calls. It’s taken an embarrassingly long amount of time for Hotch to fully realize that Spencer’s never going to say anything. In fact, if Hotch didn’t know any better, he’d think Spencer forgot about everything that occurred.

Spencer had insinuated his understanding when he’d come to deliver Gideon’s letter, but Hotch isn’t sure how much he could possibly understand when Hotch can’t even get there himself. He doesn’t know how to reconcile years of fear that led to repression, how the desire for acceptance and stability led instead to self-hatred and impossible goals.

Maybe he had hoped that whatever he and Spencer were, coming so close to the seemingly perfect part of his life he had managed to maintain would be enough to finally scare those feelings away. He thinks Spencer understands a little, the weight of expectations; the need to measure up to what everyone else has in mind.
“We will need Dr. Reid back by the end of the week,” Spencer’s superior says. His tone suggests he knows they poached Spencer from the FBI. Poached might not be the right word for it. It’s Thursday.

In the bullpen, Spencer is huddled behind a wall of files each individually thicker than his waist, looking delighted at something he’s fiddling with. JJ and Prentiss and Garcia are crowded around him, Garcia absentmindedly patting his hair as Morgan laughs from his desk.

“We’re wrapping up a case,” Hotch says. “He needs to finish his report.”

“Reports can be written anywhere,” the voice turns distinctly smug. “I’ll send Reid a note after this courtesy call.” The phone clicks off.

Hotch owes it to Spencer to give him a head’s up. A muffled pop goes off outside his door, followed by laughter and frantic shushing. He catches Spencer’s eye briefly before Spencer ducks his head, shoves a handful of something back into his desk drawer. Garcia pets his head a bit more.

He owes Spencer more than that, but he’s not quite there yet.

Spencer’s been acting odd lately, slipping out more often during lunch hours, but returning looking no more fed than usual. He returns after an hour clutching a takeout bag like a prop, and declines Morgan and JJ’s offers to eat together. If he didn’t look as healthy as he’d ever been, Hotch would be more worried. As it stands, he has no excuse to ask.

And it’s not like his work has suffered; he’s still brilliant, still fits square pegs into round holes and makes it work, pieces together clues in a way that seems unreal. It didn’t take long for Hotch to realize that in his fear, he had done the BAU a disservice. But that wasn’t enough, for a while.

Spencer comes back to the precinct during one case with Blake hot on his heels, looking for all the world like his mother – not Spencer’s mother, exactly, Hotch thinks with a certain amount of pain. Someone’s mother. A mother – with creases between her brows, trying to have a hushed conversation that Hotch knows he’s not meant to hear.

“Can we talk about it later?” Spencer asks in that same tone, before catching Hotch’s eye. “Hotch! I think I know what our unsub’s doing.” He launches into an explanation about hypoplasia, Blake’s expression looking more and more bemused with each clarifying word.

“Reid,” Hotch says.

“Sorry,” Spencer says with a wince. “I think the unsub’s trying to transplant a foreign limb onto an amputee.”

And he’s right, because of course he is, and Morgan makes an appreciative yet teasing comment about Spencer’s intellect as they’re boarding the jet after. Hotch watches Blake instead, who has been glancing at Spencer periodically, the lines in her forehead deepening every time she frowns. Spencer pointedly looks away.

“What do you think’s going on there?” Dave asks in a voice laden with insinuation. Dave chuckles at the look on Hotch’s face. “That’s not what I meant.”
Dave had returned a couple days after Spencer left, the timing impeccable on more than one front. As a result, he was the only one that didn’t spend lunch hours having whispered conversations while eyeing Hotch every time he left his office. It was obvious he was curious, but he was still too wrapped up in his own issues to be the busybody Hotch knew he was at heart.

Once Spencer returned, Dave asked a few times how they met; casual, probing, not-at-all invasive questions about why Hotch kept looking at Spencer like he wasn’t just an agent who provided most of their major breaks while occasionally forgetting to eat.

“You could ask him,” Dave says, waving a hand in Spencer’s general direction. “You could try talking,” he says, voice like he’s just invented the wheel, or discovered fire. Hotch resents the tone.

“There’s nothing to ask,” Hotch says. “He’s my subordinate.”

“No one on this team would say anything,” Dave says, as if Hotch doesn’t know the loyalty of his team, after everything they’ve been through in the past few years; as if Spencer’s continued silence isn’t living proof of it.

“Because there’s nothing to say,” Hotch says, and cracks open his file, effectively ending the conversation before it really starts. Dave sighs, long-suffering, and leans back against his seat, closes his eyes. For every mistake Hotch has made, this isn’t one of them. Spencer deserves someone who can hold his hand in public, someone he can introduce to others without fear of repercussion. Hotch can’t be that person, even if his own walls are finally coming down.

*

Spencer only grows more mercurial as time passes, fidgeting at his desk and worrying at his lip between his teeth. Garcia drops off a couple of tubes of lip balm in his lap not so subtly, and it doesn’t draw forth the sheepish smile it once would have.

It never ends up requiring Hotch’s attention. Blake calls him on a rare Saturday off, asks him to meet her at the BAU.

*

“Maeve Donovan,” Blake says, tapping a picture against an open file. “Single child, lives alone, but has been engaged to a Bobby Putnam for six months.”

Oh, Hotch thinks, this is the reason why Spencer looks a mess of emotions these days, unfocused and constantly lost, this woman with her wide eyes and kind smile, tall and slender just like Spencer.

“What do we have on the fiancé?” Morgan asks. Spencer sits behind him, wringing his hands and staring at the picture on the board. He hasn’t spoken much since Hotch and the rest of the team arrived, letting Blake do the explaining while he pored through maps and files. “Pretty boy, what else do we know?”

Hotch listens as Spencer talks about a woman he’s never met, about how all he knows is the sound of her voice, the way it pitches low when she’s worried. He talks about how he was pretty sure he knew the layout of her house through unrelated conversation, but that was creepy and something too unsub-esque for his liking. He talks about how she was close, but would never be close enough for him to ruin.

It takes all of Hotch’s self-restraint to force back the desperate sound that presses against the seam of his lips. No one says anything about how nothing Spencer’s told them is going to help; they need addresses, names, possible motivations. JJ puts her arm around Spencer’s shoulders, and presses a
kiss against his hair.

“Please help me find her,” Spencer whispers. For a brief moment, he makes eye contact with Hotch. “Please.”

*

Hotch knows it’s going to go wrong the moment Spencer takes off his vest. He makes a protesting sort of noise that gets drowned out by the rest of the team’s arrival, SUVs screeching to a stop and doors slamming as they get out.

“She wants me alone,” Spencer says, handing his vest to Morgan. “Please don’t follow me in.”

“You’re not going in alone,” Hotch says. It’s harder than he’d thought it’d be; Spencer’s been in danger in these past few years, but Hotch has always been able to trust that he was thinking clearly. His compartmentalization isn’t working as well as he needs it to.

“She’ll kill her if I don’t.”

“You know the stats!” Hotch says. “She’ll just kill you both!” He regrets it the moment Spencer flinches under his glare, but still, Spencer resolutely pulls his gun from his holster, and holds it out to him.

“I have to try,” Spencer says.

Hotch steps forward, closes that distance between them. “Don’t do this,” he says quietly. “Let me go in. She won’t shoot immediately. In order to throw an unsub off kilter, you don’t give them what they want. You know this.”


And that’s the whole crux of it, Hotch thinks. How everything started, and God forbid, how everything might end. Spencer stares at him with those large brown eyes; as young as he still is, these past years have taken a toll. There are now crow’s feet around them, perpetual dark circles that sink in deeper every day. The wrinkles that bracket his mouth are more from worry than happiness, and despite the years that have passed, Hotch can still remember how they felt pressed against his own.

“I do trust you,” Hotch says. “It was never about you.”

“Prove it then,” Spencer says.

Morgan makes a sound that’s equally angry, as it is fearful. Spencer’s hand rises, like he’s going to touch Hotch.

“10 minutes,” Hotch says. Morgan makes that sound again. “We’re coming in afterwards, no matter what.”

“Thank you,” Spencer whispers.

*

The warehouse is sweltering when they enter, despite its open layout and the cool night air. It doesn’t look like Spencer’s gotten very far with the unsub, judging by the way Maeve Donovan is still tied to a chair, a gun at her head, and trying to blink back tears.
Spencer’s on his feet, hands above his head. Diane Turner’s gun twitches towards the team before turning it on Spencer. Hotch doesn’t have a clear shot.

Years ago, when Spencer was still just Spencer, and Hotch was still drowning in his own demons, Hotch had knocked on Spencer’s door after every difficult case. Spencer had let him in, poured him a drink, let Hotch breathe him in, a not unfamiliar scent of gunpowder dusting his clothes. There were nights when Hotch wanted to ruin him, wanted to force forward every enticing whimper he knew Spencer was capable of. He started showing up after simple cases too, though nothing the BAU did was really simple; he had to see the worst of humanity on a constant basis, and this – this was justified. Spencer was more than willing. Hotch wasn’t using him, really.

Spencer was always more than willing. Foyet could have killed him.

“You would kill yourself for her?” Diane Turner asks, her voice incredulous and disbelieving. You want someone you don’t have the capacity to understand, Hotch thinks.

“Yes,” Spencer says, and Hotch feels his heart skid to a stop, even though he’s always known what the answer would be. The roaring in his ears drowns out whatever Spencer says next, and somehow, all that goes through his mind is he could have loved me like this.

Spencer is unarmed, unprotected, and willing to give up everything for the woman in front of them. Hotch is not.

Front sight, trigger press, follow through.

***

“I think,” Maeve had said once, “you really have to try to be unhappy as you are.” Which wasn’t really fair at all. It had taken Spencer a while to open up about everything – he’d started with his intellect, the subsequent bullying, the difficulties in his early years. He was a magician, well versed in the art of misdirection. It all gave the illusion that he was telling more than he actually was. He was a child prodigy in a Las Vegas high school. It didn’t take much to connect the rest.

Then came his family, because his father leaving was less his fault than other things; as a child, Spencer had blamed himself. As an adult, he no longer had to manufacture self-hatred. Then came his mother, because there was still an unpreventable component to it all, and he tells Maeve about how his kidnapping and torture almost felt like atonement for her institutionalization.

He doesn’t know what this, now, is supposed to be. Diane has the gun pressed against her own head, adjacent to Maeve’s, and Spencer knows he has to keep her talking, keep her focused. This is all textbook hostage negotiation. Spencer, if nothing else, knows his textbooks.

Spencer thinks about telling her about second chances, about what real triumph could feel like, as opposed to what she thought it did. He thinks about telling her how having things that were never yours never turns out the way you’d like, how Spencer knows that from personal experience. He wants to tell her about all his failures, so she no longer holds him up on a pedestal, even though he knows this isn’t what this is.

Mostly, Spencer wants to tell her about how long he spent by the phone that day, considers telling her about the irrepressible burn of hope that scorched him from the inside out every time it rang, about how it felt like his father leaving him all over again every time it wasn’t him. He wants to tell her how long it took to pick himself back up, how his days and nights spent in a drug induced haze almost felt like relief in comparison. He decides to tell her about how setting eyes on Maeve for the first time, despite everything else, felt like another chance to do things right.
Instead, words fall from his mouth in inarticulate pieces. He pleads for the life of a woman he could have loved, as the wordless roar in his ears obscures even his own words. There is a brief moment when Maeve makes eye contact, and Spencer knows the outcome before it ever occurs.

Behind him, his team shifts. They can read a situation just as well as he can.

Spencer steps forward, the distance between an endless gulf. He’s not sure what he’s trying to do – pull the gun away? Pull Maeve away? Pull Diane away? – but Spencer, for what it’s worth, has only ever tried –
Chapter 3

But it’s not like Spencer just tells Maeve outright. They’re talking one night, Spencer leaning against the glass door of a too-small phone booth, Maeve doing whatever it is she does on her end – sometimes Spencer can hear her moving around, adjusting what sounds like cups and plates. Often, the kettle goes off, and she makes a cup of tea. It’s green tea in the evenings, earl grey any other time.

Spencer’s anecdote tonight is about an incident in ninth grade. It ends better than some of his other stories; there’s even a moral at the end, which is always nice. Maeve already knows all the characters involved; he just has to set up the background.

He loses the plot somewhere in between, drifts off on a tangent about the diverging lineage of *eutheria*. It had been a biology textbook his classmates had taken, he remembers. They did something with it afterward, maybe shoved it into another locker, or tossed it down the gap centered between flights of stairs. He’d found it later, spine broken and pages mussed, flipped to a section on mammal phylogeny. *Clades are grouped by placentation*, he remembers reading. *Those without it are prototherian mammals.*

“Are you...okay?” Maeve asks, hesitantly. “You’ve been a bit off, all night.”

“Of course,” Spencer says, but then he notices it too, in the speed of his response.

He hears shuffling on the other end, like Maeve’s settling into a chair. “Did something happen today?”

“No,” Spencer says. “Not exactly.”

“Not exactly,” Maeve echoes.

“We didn’t have a case today, which is how I’m here – it was all just paperwork.”

“You like paperwork.”

“Yes,” Spencer agrees. “It’s soothing.”

“You don’t sound soothed.”

*

It’d been a good day. They hadn’t had a case all week, not even a request for a consult from a nearby precinct. Spencer went through a few cold cases and made a couple breaks, spent a large part of the morning on the phone with appreciative LEOs around the country. Around ten, JJ dropped a brown paper bag with a freshly baked muffin on his desk with a new cup of coffee. Morgan stole half the muffin, but gave him half his breakfast sandwich, never really as subtle as he would’ve liked to pretend.

For lunch, Emily went with him to a new Indian restaurant he’d wanted to try. They shared plates and went through three baskets of naan, Emily complaining as they left that she’d have to be rolled back to the BAU.

“I’m just saying that we don’t all have the metabolism of a sophomore on the varsity soccer team, okay?”
“I’ve never been on varsity anything,” Spencer said, holding the door open for her.

“It’s a metaphor, Reid.”

“Yes, but many teenage boys have high metabolisms, independent of their after school activities. The addition of a varsity sport doesn’t really add anything of note.” They came to a red light, where Emily rolled her eyes at him. Spencer smiled, and held up their leftovers. “Does this mean you don’t want the rest of the paneer tikka masala?”

Emily made a half-hearted swipe at the bag. “You can’t even appreciate it fully, with you and your Tums.”

Spencer grinned, and lowered his arm. The light turned green, and they walked, Emily moving on to bemoaning Morgan’s physique instead. It was unfair, she complained, the way the muscles in his back rippled every time he pulled off his shirt. It was also unnecessary the number of times a day he felt the need to stretch; Garcia had disagreed once when she’d brought it up during a girls’ night out. Halfway down the block, Hotch walked into a restaurant with an easy smile on his face and a hand at the small of a woman’s back. Beside him, Emily stopped too.

“Reid?” Emily asked. “Reid? We’re in the middle of the street.”

“Oh,” Spencer said, and hurried across. He stopped again, once they were on the sidewalk. Emily exhaled, loudly. After a few seconds of silence, she spoke.

“We all swore on our lives that we would not get involved, no matter how tempting, which is why I’m not actually here, and this conversation never took place,” Emily started.

Spencer fought the urge to bring up Lauren Reynolds and past lives lived; the possibility for a well-executed joke existed somewhere in the ether, but he had never been sure what the societal definition of too soon actually was, and hid a smile that threatened to form. “You’d be surprised how often I’ve heard that line,” he said, somewhat distractedly.

“I don’t know what exactly happened between you two, but I can tell by the way Hotch looks at you that it was probably his fault.”

Spencer spun back to face her.

“You’re...selectively subtle.”

“Nothing happened,” Spencer denied, too little too late. He’d never even told Gideon, though he was sure Gideon suspected. But Gideon was the best profiler he knew, and Spencer hadn’t fully built his walls back then.

“We promised no more lies.”

“That’s not fair.”

“No, it’s not,” Emily agreed. “So was it?” She persisted, despite Spencer’s expression. “Hotch’s fault?”

Emily’d been back for a while, long enough that they could almost pretend she’d never left, but not so long that Spencer didn’t still wake up sometimes and compulsively check half a dozen world clocks. It made him feel better to think he knew something about where she was, even if it was just something as simple as the time. He suspected he’d be checking those clocks again, sometime soon.
“I don’t know,” Spencer said. “I knew what I was getting myself into. Neither of us could have anticipated what would happen, so it’s not like he had planned to…” He trailed off, started walking again.

“That’s…vague,” Emily commented. “Did he hurt you?”

“He didn’t intend to – ” Spencer fell silent at the look on her face. “Yes,” he said, after a minute.

“Did you love him?” She paused, a little. “Do you love him?”

They were almost back at the BAU. Spencer stopped, not wanting to get any closer. "I've never fallen in love before," Spencer said. "I'm not angry at him anymore – I don't think I ever was – but my feelings towards him are complicated. I don't feel the way about him I did before; I don’t know what I felt for him before.”

Emily looped her arm around his, tucked herself into his side. He gave her an odd look, but didn’t try to move away. “It's different for everyone. It’s happiness, security warmth; there's nothing that makes you happier than their happiness – ”

But I feel that way about you, Spencer thought. And about JJ, and Rossi, and Morgan, even when he’s trying to make me demonstrate athletic skills I don't have. That's what I want for all of you, so how does that narrow things down?

"I adore you," Emily said suddenly, and Spencer realized he'd spoken out loud. "Which is why I think you should give Hotch another chance."

*

Maeve inhales. “Is that it?”

Spencer tugs uncomfortably on the phone line. “Morgan was coming up the street just then, so yes, I guess.”

Maeve moves around on the other end. Spencer hears the kettle lid shut, and then the fridge open and close. “I know about Emily,” Maeve says, hesitantly.

“She was the one in WITSEC,” Spencer says, not quite understanding.

“Well, yes. She’s also the one that likes two sugars in her coffee, and learned Russian through sheer osmosis.”

Spencer grins a little; he’d told her that after he and Maeve had discovered a mutual liking for Obruchev. It was always best to read books in their native language, and Russian had taken Spencer quite a bit of time to learn. Emily had professed to picking it up between a couple brief stays in the country, and she’d never let him forget it.

“Morgan drinks three protein shakes a day, but that’s because you refuse to drink the third,” Maeve continues. “JJ likes butterflies and the color green, but only specific shades.”

“She prefers the ones that lean towards blue,” Spencer agrees slowly.

“Rossi only writes nonfiction, but his bookshelves are filled with Stephen King and cookbooks he never uses. Gideon’s attention to detail on cases was only surpassed by his immaculate mise en place. Even Ashley Seaver – her favorite dessert was ice cream, though pie would do in a pinch.” Maeve takes a deep breath. “I don’t know anything about Hotch.”
“He’s my boss.”

“Gideon was too, at one point.”

“Gideon was my mentor. Hotch was always going to be my boss.”

“Going to be.”

“You sound like –”

“Emily? I know.”

An uncomfortable silence falls between them, the first since they started speaking regularly. Spencer sags a little in the phone booth; he’s skinny but tall, and phone booths weren’t ever meant for long-term stays. He thought he’d hid things better, thought the practice he’d gotten as a child was ample preparation for this, at least. Maybe Hotch had been right to worry.

“You don’t have to tell me anything,” Maeve says quietly. “I just,” she sighs a little. “I just don’t think you’re talking to anyone about it, but on some subconscious level, you clearly want to.”

Spencer instinctively wants to protest, but it’s not like he’s had a chance to find out. Everyone he knows knows Hotch too, or they’re Ethan or his mother, neither of whom will ever know more than they already do. Maeve has never met any of his team, and never will. It’s the first time this has been a comforting thought.

“I don’t know where to start.”

“From the beginning?” Maeve suggests gently. “I won’t say anything, if that helps.”

“No,” Spencer says. “Yes. I don’t know. I’ve never considered telling anyone.”

On the other end, Maeve’s floorboards creak as she gets into bed. Spencer listens as she shuffles around, hears her sigh softly as she settles in. “I made a lot of decisions that I’d like to think I wouldn’t again,” Spencer says, uncertain if Maeve quite understands. “But I can’t find one particular thing to regret.”


Well, then.

i.

It starts with Gideon, and for a while, many things do. Spencer meets first him at a seminar, then at the library, then later even, walking home one night. The FBI’s looking for recruits, and someone’s suggested Spencer’s name as a probable agent, despite all the ways he’s lacking.

He’s spent a decent amount of time on the East Coast by this point, but there was always an underlying assumption he’d return home once he finished his dissertation. (Spencer had always assumed too much, his mother often said. For better or for worse.) But the dissertations keep piling up, as do his publications; they’re a who’s who of co-authors, pulled from every major field the university has to offer.

It’s impressive, he guesses. That’s what institutions and agencies around the country think anyway,
as they detail in their offer letters. Spencer’s a jack of all trades and a master of most, but he has no idea what he actually wants to do, and everyone keeps telling him he has so many choices and so many options, and it’s paradoxical, how suffocating that can feel.

But the point is – Gideon. He plays a long game, tracking Spencer down and waiting him out, sending him articles and research he knows Spencer will find intriguing. They start playing chess when Gideon comes around, and Gideon talks at him about Spencer’s future and what he could be capable of in the FBI.

Spencer’s far from lacking in self-awareness, and he knows he doesn’t fit the archetypal idea of a field agent, much less any idea of a field agent. Gideon waves that off like it’s not a requirement to actually catch the suspects they’re after, like just knowing who they are is enough.

“That’s what the rest of the team is for,” Gideon says, with a small smile. He moves his rook. “So have you figured out why he stuttered?”

“No,” Spencer answers, and frowns at the board. Gideon’s been replaying famous matches lately, and with the way the game is progressing, Spencer has narrowed it down to two possibilities. “But I don’t think you know either.” He takes a pawn. “I think you meant it as a distraction, and everything else came after.”

Gideon moves his bishop almost immediately. “Continue.”

“There was a study in 1939 that tested whether stuttering was a learned behavior rather than biological.”

“The Monster Study.”

Spencer nods. “Pointing out evidence of stuttering, even to a group of non-stutterers, can affect their speech patterns. Stutterers are consistent too, there are signs when they’re about to stumble over a difficult sound; you would have noticed.”

“You think I induced it.”

“Didn’t you?”

Gideon’s phone rings, and his answers are short and unrevealing. He looks over at Spencer once he hangs up. “We have a case. Checkmate in four.” He stands up from the desk, and pushes the chair in. “I’ll come by when it’s over.”

“Gideon,” Spencer calls, when he’s halfway to the door. “Was I right?”

Gideon doesn’t say anything, just waves, and walks out. But Spencer thinks about the way Gideon smiled at him, and figures he’s at least sort of close.

*  

Gideon brings him cold cases sometimes, trying to reel Spencer in through his abundance of intellectual curiosity. He introduces the graphic images slowly, and Spencer knows that Gideon’s less trying some perverse method of exposure therapy and more trying not to scare him off, but he appreciates the end result nonetheless.

Usually Spencer scribbles his thoughts down on a legal pad, and if Gideon thinks they’re interesting he’ll send them to the local precincts. They don’t ever hear back; bureaucracy works too slowly and these people are no longer at the forefront of any minds but those they loved, a point Gideon drives
home again and again.

But there’s a case that came out of a precinct in DC, where Gideon has built an overwhelming amount of goodwill. Spencer’s spotted a consistency in the disposal sites; it’s a long shot, two confirmed bodies doesn’t a pattern make, but he thinks he’s right, and there’s still a family that never got answers.

It’s a contradictory wave of relief that flows through him when they find the remains. Despite the family saying they just wanted closure, it’s clear they held onto a certain amount of hope. Gideon pats him on the back, and nods a few times. Spencer’s exhausted, even though all he really did was stay in the precinct and think. The smile he gives Gideon isn’t fully there. “Someone would have figured it out eventually.”

“Maybe,” Gideon says. “Maybe not. They hadn’t for this long.”

“Dr. Reid!”

Spencer’s given only a few seconds of warning before someone barrels into him, latches around his waist, and buries a wet, hot face into his chest. Spencer instinctively panics, but Gideon’s watching him with something akin to pity, and it’s not an expression Spencer’s ever seen. His hands settle awkwardly on the girl’s shoulders, but he doesn’t push away. She’s saying something, something that sounds like at least my sister’s home, and all Spencer can do is try to not cry.

She pulls away, and rubs her eyes against the sleeve of her sweater. “Thank you for being there. Thank you for trying.”

And, oh.

ii.

It’s been a week since Spencer moved to DC. His apartment was above a not-so-terrible bar, though the qualifier was probably in part due to the bartender’s odd penchant for playing un-bar-like shows on their TVs. Spencer had developed a somewhat friendship with him, after spotting a mistake on his books that had been left out on his first night there.

“Don’t look up,” Rick says, wiping down a glass. “But that guy’s been eyeing you for a while between his drinks. Poor bastard. I know his type,” he continues, before Spencer can ask for clarification. “DC’s full of them.” He plops another glass of juice next to Spencer, and shuffles off.

With absolutely nothing clarified, Spencer glances in the man’s direction with as much subtlety as he can muster. By all accounts, Rick has had more than ample experience with...things like this, but introducing Spencer into the equation has to throw him off a bit. Spencer isn’t the sort that gets picked up at bars, or anywhere else, really.

The man is handsome, and more than a little drunk. Gideon’s been teaching him how to observe – don’t piece things together, look as a whole – so Spencer does the quickest onceover he can, and ends up lingering on his left hand. Even in the dim bar lighting, he can see a pale stripe on his ring finger, in stark contrast to the rest of his skin. The man spends a decent amount of time outdoors. He probably works out frequently; maybe running, or hiking. He’s going through a divorce.

Spencer exhales. This makes more sense; the man is lonely in a way he probably is for the first time in his life, and Spencer is...there. He understands, more than a little.
There’s also a quiet warmth in the pit of Spencer’s stomach. Being a child prodigy doesn’t offer much opportunity for intimate connections, and Spencer’s all too understanding of that to turn away from this just because it’s less than romantic. The man is attractive, and inexplicably, wants him.

“Useless,” Rick says, in response to Jim Cramer’s less than helpful cable program. “What average person understands what that means?”

Luckily, Spencer read a book about the stock market just last week. Small talk is a good place to start, or so he’s been told. He slides off his barstool, takes a deep breath, and walks forward.

iii.

Spencer only approaches Aaron the second time because he reminds him of his parents. He recognizes loneliness and helplessness better than most, even when it manifests itself in different ways. The way Aaron tosses back his shot – head thrown further back than his center of gravity would safely allow, the unstable full-body sway when it snaps back – suggests that he’s been at it for some time. It’s in between shifts, and the girl working the bar now won’t be the person working it soon.

He manages to stop him, though not before Aaron propositions him, drunk and in need of comfort. It kind of stings, to know this is the only way he’s wanted, but it’s late, and there’s no way Aaron can drive home in this state. Spencer had been planning to renew his license next week. The timing couldn’t be worse.

But Aaron is a surprisingly agreeable drunk, once he gets past the urge to be more so. Spencer guides him up the steps to his apartment, and eventually settles him on his couch with a NatGeo documentary he’d been meaning to watch.

* 

Spencer has no idea what possesses him to ask. By the time Sunday night rolls around, Aaron’s cleaned up a bit, though a bit is enough to make him worlds apart from the man at the bar. He no longer reminds Spencer of his family; Freud’s theory has little place in psychology, much less Spencer’s life.

Maybe he asks because he never expects Aaron to agree.

Spencer doesn’t expect their (his) first time to be so tender. Aaron takes him like he's trying to compensate, long drags and slow sweeping hands that upend emotions Spencer didn't know existed within him. Aaron's initial hesitation dissipates once he closes his eyes, buries his face into Spencer's neck and doesn't quite inhale. That doesn’t really hurt until much, much later.

His bed's an IKEA purchase, eventually hastily thrown together because the pieces were taking up so much room on their own. He worries briefly it won't be able to hold both their weight; they're similar heights, but Aaron is a solid sort of thing, moving against him, all around him.

He doesn't have to worry. He comes embarrassingly quickly, and Aaron's hips stutter to a stop against him, before a groan escapes and he picks up again with renewed vigor. Aaron ends up tugging off the condom and coming over his lower stomach, hot splashes branding Spencer’s pelvis and thighs; his eyes are still screwed shut, a look of almost pain settled into his features. Spencer gropes for the tissues that sit on his nightstand before he opens them.

“That was nice,” Spencer says earnestly, afterwards. “Thank you.”
It takes him a few confused minutes to realize Aaron’s soundless shaking is laughter. Spencer nudges him gently when it appears that he has no intentions of moving, and wiggles his leg to ward off the impending pins and needles. “You can have the shower first,” Spencer offers. “I’ll clean up here?”

Almost instantly, Aaron’s shoulders stiffen. He pulls himself away as if he can’t separate from Spencer fast enough, and shakes his head. “I’ll just use the bathroom and head out. Thank you for your…” he gestures around the room, and stops meeting Spencer’s eyes.

Spencer makes an aborted attempt to grab Aaron when he turns to roll off the bed. His hand ends up hovering above his arm, and they both stare at it like there’s never been anything else more fascinating. Showers always came after sex, in the books Spencer’s read. Sometimes cuddling happens beforehand, but he’s not sure Aaron will ever be comfortable with that, with him. Spencer’s not so sure he’s comfortable with that right now, if he thinks about it.

“Did I do something wrong?” Spencer asks. “I just thought that’s what happened next.”

The discomfort doesn’t quite dissipate, but he sees Aaron takes a shallow breath, and he gives Spencer a small smile. “No, I just really need to get going. I have a few errands that I need to run before tomorrow. Thank you, for…” he repeats, and hesitates again. Spencer manages a smile back.

“Anytime,” Spencer says.

iv.

But he figures it out pretty quickly, once he distances himself from the immediate haze that settles post orgasm. And what he thought would be a one-night stand becomes a constant thing, quickly developing a pattern that breaks Spencer’s heart to recognize. It sinks deeper and deeper in his chest each time, how swiftly Aaron pulls away after, long before the sweat on their skin has had time to cool.

This is about more than a messy divorce, or being hung up on his ex-wife. Aaron has deep-seated issues he can’t come to terms with, and maybe he thinks he’s rebelling or finding himself, but once he gets past the impulsive act everything evidently hits him like a tidal wave. By this point, Spencer has read more than enough analyses from past BAU cases, and it’s easy to recognize the signs of an abusive father who had certain expectations for what a son should be.

His door opens, because Spencer stopped locking it some time ago. It’s a dangerous act, he realizes, but he doesn’t know how to go back now, and he can’t stop himself from smiling when Aaron walks in with a slight scowl, and a wicker basket which appears to be filled with the contents of a drugstore gift card aisle.

“Is someone sick?” Spencer asks.

“No,” Aaron says, voice somewhat strained. “They’re from my coworkers, for my divorce. It was finalized yesterday.”

“Oh. I was thrown off by the Get Well Soon bear. Though I guess get well could apply not only to physical wounds but also emotional –”

“Spencer?”

“Yes?”
“Please shut up.”

Spencer smiles at him. “There’s an unspoken societal agreement for the window of condolences post-tragedies. Your coworkers are flirting with the usual boundaries.”

“Just one coworker,” Aaron says reluctantly.

“You don’t like the attention.”

“Would you?”

“It depends, I guess. It’s nice to know that people care, but sometimes it’s overwhelming. It’s an unfair balance to expect others to weigh, but I’ve never done well with purely emotionally driven interactions. You didn’t answer my question.”

“You didn’t ask one.” Beneath the kitchen table, Aaron presses his foot against Spencer’s calf. Spencer startles, and glances down at his feet.

“Avoidance techniques,” Spencer says, though he thinks avoidance coping.

“Is it working?” Aaron asks.

Spencer might be doing more harm than good, but no one has ever looked at him the way Aaron does, if only for a little while. It’s a selfish, addicting feeling. “It could,” Spencer says.

v.

His time eventually runs out, though not as quickly as he initially thought it would. When he thinks back, he wishes it had blown up sooner, before Aaron had gotten slightly more comfortable and Spencer had gotten more...attached? Enamored? He wasn’t really sure what he felt, then.

Aaron touches him more, casual brushes against his arm, back, skin bared to the light of Spencer’s bedroom lamp. At first Spencer thinks he’s doing it subconsciously; maybe he’s seeking out comfort, or maybe it’s validity that as a middle aged divorcée, someone still finds him attractive (and he has nothing to worry about, there). Then he notices Aaron glancing at him, and maybe it’s that they’re actually making progress, in whatever this is.

They don’t really talk, which is probably why this is barely a fling, much less a relationship. Spencer isn’t good at talking, not in the way it truly matters. He’s good at listening, but there’s nothing to listen to most days, other than Aaron’s steady breathing on nights when he miraculously forgets to leave. When they do speak, it flirts on the edge of consequential, but never gets there. Spencer’s told Aaron more obscure facts in these past few months than he’s ever told anyone else in his life. He’s afraid he’s running out of useless trivia.

And it’s incredible, the lengths they go to hide who they are outside of this unspoken arrangement. (Neither of them ever really outright suggested this continue. Spencer had said Anytime, and what was supposed to be a platitude surprised even Spencer when it turned out to be an actual extension of his emotions, and Aaron had kept showing up and never stopped.)

Even Spencer’s training files are all classified, so he keeps them in a locked cabinet all the time. Aaron has shown no interest in Spencer’s professional life, and Spencer figures it’s a part of the distance he allows himself. As a courtesy, Spencer doesn’t ask either.
I’ll be late tonight, Aaron texts him one night. It almost feels real, sometimes. Will you be up?

I’ll be out late as well, Spencer sends back with a small smile. Just in case, the spare key’s in the usual place.

Ok.

Gideon had left him a voicemail earlier that day, letting Spencer know he was returning to DC soon. He says that they were in Wisconsin, that it was a comparatively good case, and that this was a good time as any to introduce Spencer to his new boss. They should meet at the Quantico offices; he’s arranged for security to let Spencer in if he gets there first.

Spencer’s still smiling when he locks his apartment door, and tucks his spare key beneath the welcome mat.

vi.

Gideon never asks him directly what happened, but he never gives up either. Maybe he would, if he knew that this wasn’t just about Spencer’s less than impressive Hogan’s Alley scores, or that Spencer couldn’t shoot his way out of a paper bag, but tenacity – or maybe stubbornness – has always been one of Gideon’s most defining traits.

But Spencer’s a pragmatist at heart, and once Aaron – Aaron Hotchner, he should probably start changing the way he thinks of him – doesn’t call that night, or any night after to offer any sort of explanation, he sort of figures that’s it.

But Spencer’s uprooted his whole life, gone to the DMV and updated his state of legal residence; he’s spent months on end trying to build up his endurance even if he’s yet to see to the fruits of his labor; he has images and audio in his head he’ll never be able to erase.

He’d called his mother repeatedly in the past few months, until even she picked up on a pattern between her good days. He’d told her, finally, after so much stalling, that he was going to be working for the FBI, that he’d gotten a job with the government. It being a good day didn’t stop her from breaking down and crying about fascists, how they had brainwashed him and hadn’t she taught him better? She had been so angry, and so, so disappointed.

That can’t all have been for nothing. Two weeks after, Spencer sits down in his living room, and flips through the stack of offer letters on his coffee table. Spencer gives up, but differently.

(“There’s more to this,” Spencer says quietly. “I got hired somewhere else, similar I guess, in what the FBI does. There was this one case – I can’t really talk about it – but I was stupid, and still angry, even though I pretended not to be. I was reckless, and I wanted to prove something to Hotch even though he’d never know it, and I – I made a mistake.”)

(“In your medical files you sent me,” Maeve says, “someone had handwritten allergy to opioids.”)

(“Yeah,” Spencer clears his throat. “That, um, that was me. Just in case you prescribed – ” he shrugs, even though Maeve can’t see him. “Yes.”)

(“I’m sorry,” she says, “for whatever happened.”)

Spencer lets out a breath that almost sounds like a laugh. (“There’s nothing really to be sorry for. I made some decisions that didn’t work out. Can we not talk about this?”)
“Of course,” Maeve answers.

“Thanks,” Spencer whispers gratefully. He clears his throat again. “So I deal with...that...for a bit; it wasn’t really going well. Every time I looked at – ” he pauses, and the rest comes out in a rush. “It was basically affirmation that Hotch was right, and I hated that feeling more than I hated...everything else, and it became this perpetuating cycle that didn’t end.”

vii.

And then Hotchner knocks on his door.

It almost feels worth it to see the shock on his face, but that’s such a disgusting thought that Spencer can hardly breathe. He hasn’t spoken with anyone during his administrative leave; not his mother, who can tell when something is off with him even on a bad day, or Gideon, who had been supportive but disappointed when Spencer found new employment. He considers slamming the door in Hotchner’s face, but the impression he’s doing of a goldfish is the only source of amusement he’s had for months.

Nothing changes when Hotchner repeats Dr. Reid, and a momentary look of hurt flashes through his eyes. Spencer had never really expected anything to, but he also doesn’t expect the combination of pity? sympathy? forgiveness? that wells up inside him, and he feels so weak that he hates himself.

So he tells him what happened in a roundabout way because he still can’t fully face it himself. He wakes up regularly at night, a cold sweat seeping into his sheets, and a claustrophobic tightness in his throat that doesn’t fully loosen until the sun comes up. He tells him because maybe he wants Hotchner to feel the way he does, or maybe he just wants someone else to know, or maybe, despite everything, Hotchner probably understands what he’s feeling best. But even that loses steam halfway through, and he stumbles over a textbook to get away when Hotchner reaches out for him.

“Can I – can I come in?” Hotchner asks, and the no is halfway out of Spencer’s mouth. “It’s about Gideon.”

*

He stares at the letter for hours after Hotchner leaves, and wonders if Gideon waited for him to show, waited for him to come by for one last chess match, for some vague but well-meaning advice. It’s not likely, Spencer knows; Gideon was wrapped up in issues far more important, mourning the loss of someone he cared for, someone he loved.

Spencer raps his knuckles against his forehead a few times, tries to drum out the hollow pulsing building underneath. Gideon left him a letter, despite everything. Despite his heart breaking, and his world falling apart around him, Gideon remembered him, at least.

Spencer sprints, almost, to his bedroom closet, upends practically everything in it to get to the bottom. He pulls out an old sock, its contents clinking together softly. Gideon had expected something of him, had spent time teaching and guiding him, only for his efforts to be for naught.

He looks up, and catches his reflection in the mirror hanging on the closet door. His eyes are far more sunken than usual, his face gaunt and pale to the point of sickness. He doesn’t recognize the man staring back out at him, the mouth slack and eyes wide with fear. It’s a good thing Gideon never saw him like this. Even he couldn’t be so selfish as to burden Gideon with this.

*Maybe Aaron was right,* he thinks, which is a far from unfamiliar thought, but a wave of anger
crashes through him before the thought processes completely. Hotchner wasn’t right, and Spencer had known all along why Hotchner had turned tail and run, but to hear him more or less confirm it tonight reopened wounds Spencer didn’t even know had torn. He hadn’t even had the courtesy to call or email or send around a carrier pigeon, and delivering this letter didn’t come remotely close to making up for anything. Maybe he’d brought the letter out of loyalty to Gideon, or maybe it was because mail by law, has to be opened by the intended recipient. Maybe –

Spencer exhales, and swings the closet door shut. The anger dissipates just as quickly as it came, and Spencer suddenly feels more exhausted than he has in years. The old sock is still crumpled in his hand, and he squeezes it briefly. Everything eventually succumbs to entropy. The least Spencer can do is put up a fight.

viii.

The seasons have changed by the time everything comes around again. Spencer’s been on leave for a while, though it’s on the books as a sabbatical. It’s incredible the lengths they’re willing to go to to keep him, and in another scenario, it’d be a pleasant, warming thought.

But his life is more than unnecessarily complicated, so when his SAIC calls him at six in the morning with a request for the only thing Spencer no longer wants, he’s not too surprised. He agrees, because he doesn’t know how to do anything else.

* *

But it could be worse. He gets to the BAU before anyone else does – Dr. Strauss is meeting him there, and her previous appointment seems to have run long; Hotchner – the BAU team is still midair – and no one really pays him any mind. He’s got his visitor’s badge clipped to his tie, and his credentials in his pocket. He shoves a handful of hair behind his ear.

In front of him, Hotchner’s office door is closed, the blinds open but the room dark, and it was in this same spot, probably down to the exact floor tile, where Spencer stood and listened to Hotchner detail in all the ways he was inadequate. He’s aware he’s started tapping rhythmically against his thigh; had he been sitting down, his foot would have jiggled incessantly.

“I need you to hear this,” Spencer says to the door, quietly. He’s been standing there for a while now, and some of the people in the bullpen are starting to take notice. They probably think he’s just waiting for someone, but it’s admittedly an odd place to do so long-term.

“I graduated from high school when I was 12,” Spencer says. “My mother – I’m sure you’ve read my file by now – tried to be there for me as much as possible, but her illness wasn’t – ” he swallows. “I went to college, and I kept going to college, because that’s what I was good at. Gideon was the first person to approach me and offer me something with purpose, something tangible. You took that from me.”

He takes a deep breath. “But I think I understood. You would have done the same if it had been any other man in my place; it wasn’t personal. It wasn’t really me you were railing against that day; you would have found fault with even the most qualified candidate. I just happen to provide more ammunition than the average person.” He taps his foot against the floor a few times, and lets everything bleed out.

Spencer’s stared at Hotchner’s door for so long the windows and the walls surrounding it seem to blur into a singular mass. He feels like he’s burning, an almost choking sensation building in the back
of his throat, and it’s good, it’s good. “But you ran without saying anything. I wouldn’t have tried to make you stay, I just wanted something. An acknowledgment that I existed outside of your own release, maybe. I think I deserved at least that.”

He hears the bullpen quiet slightly, and the click-clack of heels against linoleum. “But maybe that’s my fault too; maybe I shouldn’t wait for my self-worth to be affirmed by others.”

“Dr. Reid?” Dr. Strauss says, as she approaches.

“Goodbye, Aaron.” Spencer takes a slow breath, and turns around. “Dr. Strauss,” he says, with a smile that’s still awkward. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

ix.

It all ends up okay. It’s uncomfortable for the first few weeks; he and Hotchner – Hotch step around each other in a room full of profilers, but no one’s likely to ask Hotch what’s going on, and Spencer’s naturally odd enough that maybe they write it off as a quirk. And the rest of the team is genuinely nice, once he gets to know them a little.

But it’s over just as quickly as it started, and Spencer finds himself back at his own desk, with his own paperwork and classified intel, feeling somewhat unmoored.

“It’s cause you miss us,” Morgan says, pointing a baby carrot at Spencer’s face. “Admit it.” Morgan had started making the not insignificant drive during lunch up to Spencer about a week after Spencer left. It was sporadic, at first, mostly when his team was on stand down and he had the extra time.

“Oh course I do,” Spencer says, and Morgan groans. “JJ brought around a casserole last night.”

“You’re so earnest,” Morgan says. “Can’t even mess with you properly.” He steals a chip from Spencer’s bag. “Are you still living above that bar?”

Spencer nods. “Moving’s a lot of trouble, and my car’s not really built for it.”

“Your car’s not built for anything,” Morgan says. “But I can get a truck, easy. Let me know if you start looking around; I know people.”

Spencer nods again, and they fall into a comfortable silence. He ends up nudging the rest of the chips towards Morgan, and grimacing when he pours them down his throat with no indication of chewing. “Is everything...okay?”

Morgan’s hand stills, the bag still suspended above his face. He puts it down with a carefulness that Spencer had only ever seen during active cases. “Why do you ask?”

Their lunches together had increased almost exponentially in the past month. It wasn’t odd for Spencer to come out of the building to see Morgan leaning against a wall, waving a takeout box or a brown paper bag. He would’ve needed a security check just to get on the grounds, even with his FBI credentials. Spencer shrugs. “JJ was acting odd when she came by yesterday. She kept lingering, even though Henry and Will were waiting at home.”

“Man,” Morgan scrubs his face with his hand. “We do everything as a unit, don’t we?”

Spencer reaches into his bag, and pulls out another bag of chips. He pushes this one towards Morgan too. Morgan shoots him an incredulous look. “Do what?”
Morgan sighs. “Seek out normalcy.” He rips the bag open. “You’re the only one in our group -” and a certain warmth spreads through Spencer’s chest at this, “who doesn’t know.”

“Know what?”

It takes Morgan the better half of the afternoon to explain, but he tells Spencer about the case in Boston, and the detective who made a deal with the devil. He tells him about George Foyet and how he broke out of prison before even his first meal, how he attacked Morgan and stabbed Hotch, and dumped him in a hospital because he wasn’t content with just him dying. He tells him how Hotch found the “B” page ripped out of his phonebook, for Brooks, Haley.

“How’s Hotch?” Spencer manages.

“How do you think?” Morgan asks. “He’s gonna work himself to death long before Foyet gets another chance.”

Spencer reaches for his water bottle, and misses twice. “Do you guys have any leads?”

The anger on Morgan’s face is palpable. “Foyet’s a fucking ghost. He managed to elude law enforcement for years before we got him, so he’s got plenty of tricks up his sleeve.”

“Howch wouldn’t let his ex-wife stay in WITSEC for years,” Spencer protests.

“You think I don’t know that?” Morgan crumples up the chip bag, and shoves it into his empty takeout container. “Between managing our usual cases and trying to find Foyet, while making sure Hotch doesn’t blow an artery holed up in his office like some…” he sighs. “It’s easier to work outside of the office now. Everyone’s so high-strung and on edge that there’s no way we’re operating at 100%.” He stands up, and pats Spencer’s shoulder. “I’ll see you later, Reid. Thanks for listening.”

Which is somewhat familiar.

* *

Spencer doesn’t really think about it, which is probably a mistake. One day he’s still wrestling with the ethical and legal implications of getting involved, and the next he’s parked on a street in an unmarked car with tinted windows and a siren he can’t turn on. He thinks about being injected and being stabbed, and wonders if there’s any real emotional difference at the end of the day.

It’s all a paralyzing helplessness, probably, even more so for someone who needs control the way Hotch does. Morgan was pretty descriptive in his retelling, like he was still in shock lost Hotch for a couple of hours; we just figured he was running late? Which was ridiculous, because Hotch isn’t, and would never be, the sort of person that is late.

The bulk of the pain comes when being stabbed, but the fear comes once the knife’s been pulled out. For Spencer, it was the push of the syringe, so that’s a little different, he figures. He doesn’t like needles even now, even those that resemble nothing like that one; his annual checkups are an exercise in self-control and compartmentalization, and he’s so constantly tense that his physician’s given up on the patellar reflex test.

Foyet would need meds, probably. There were only so many acceptable substitutes for injuries that severe. Morgan had nodded, thanked him, and left while dialing Garcia. But she’d have to know what substitutes to look for, and that was a bit too close to the chest for Spencer to divulge.

There’s a sudden movement behind the curtains in the apartment, abruptly frantic.
have a legal reason to be here, it’s neither his jurisdiction nor his team’s, and there’s no time to call someone and explain, so when Foyet comes running out the back door and into a car, Spencer puts his into drive, and follows.

x.

(On the other end, it sounds as if Maeve’s stopped breathing.

“It went fine,” Spencer says awkwardly. “I mean, *fine* might be a bit dismissive I suppose, but *well* is an odd word to apply to catching a serial killer, and *good* is just improper grammar - ”

“Spencer,” Maeve whispers.

“I got there in time. It took a while to find a way in, but there was an open window. His back was to me, and there was an inordinate amount of luck involved. You should make sure to close your windows at night.”


Spencer twirls the phone cord around his hand, and stares down at his feet. “I found out later that he’d run because he was notified Garcia had done a public search on his alias. I, um, didn’t do that. Everyone else showed up soon after, and - “ he exhales. “And that’s it.”

And then he’d joined the BAU, and spent every day trying to find a new normal in whatever that was. It was difficult and confusing because Hotch seemed to send mixed signals, but there was no way Spencer had been anything to him other than an outlet, and it was an impossibility that that would change now. They’re colleagues, superior and subordinate; all of Spencer’s reports have Hotch’s neat notes and neater signature; his annual reviews are almost perfunctory in their brevity; it was best it ended when it did.

Off in the horizon, the sun’s starting to rise. Spencer coughs a little. “Thank you for listening.”

The shot is like an explosion in his ear. Somewhere in his mind, Spencer takes the trajectory of the bullet and puts it together with the angle from which it came, and realizes it’s Hotch who pulled the trigger. It’s a close shot, one Spencer never would have tried; it’s the sort of shot that would lead to inquiries and investigations and suspensions had it missed, a shot that a millimeter off, would have killed the wrong person.

It’s a shot Hotch never should have taken, and wouldn’t have, in any other circumstance. Spencer currently doesn’t have the emotional capacity to deal with anything else; later, he’ll have a mild panic attack at the realization that Hotch is in love with him, that his unit chief is compromised by his presence. He’ll dig up emotions he’d repressed long ago, and have an existential crisis trying to bury them all over again.

But for now, Maeve lives, too.
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