Close our eyes, pretend to fly

by that_1_incident

Summary

As the proprietress of Penny's - unquestionably the best coffeehouse in Quantico, Virginia - California transplant Penelope Garcia relishes her role as bright, carefree hostess while almost entirely divorcing herself from her past. When Supervisory Special Agent Derek Morgan walks into her life with his high-stress career in the FBI and his own personal tragedy in the rearview mirror, her barriers begin to break down amid Doctor Who posters, unsub macarons, and exploding ambulances. But opening up to Morgan - and, by extension, to his colleagues in the Behavioral Analysis Unit - is not without its difficulties, and only time will tell whether Penelope is truly up to the challenge.

Notes

- These characters don't belong to me; I use them respectfully but without permission. Title from Hanson's "Penny & Me." Some elements taken from actual "Criminal Minds" episodes; notably "Empty Planet" (2x8), "Lo-Fi" (3x20), "Mayhem" (4x1), "Omnivore" (4x18), and "Nameless, Faceless" (5x1).
- Written for cm_bigbang over on LJ; my amazing artists were astral_angel and kymericl (click on their names to see their masterpieces). Thanks to Xtina for reading this over.
- This fic came about in part because every fandom needs a coffeehouse AU - if one already exists in this fandom that I don't know about, oh my God, hook me up.
Penny's was one of those establishments that was bigger on the inside than the outside would have led you to believe - which wasn't to say it was expansive, but rather, its layout made optimal use of the limited space available. There were standing bar-type structures against the windows for people-watchers and those waiting for someone, while larger parties and shrinking violets had a variety of tables to choose from - a delightful hodgepodge of different sizes, heights, and types of woods - and even a handful of booths in the back corners, although those were usually occupied by people typing with obscene focus. More often than not, these patrons would have enormous cups sitting beside their laptops - *extra super huge*, according to the sign in the front window, and that was actually what people asked for when they ordered, as the biggest-sized drink that Penny's carried was named as such by the owner, and very aptly, too.

Although a lot of the regulars came for the coffee, which was brewed strong and dark and in any flavor you could have thought to ask for, the real attraction was the bakery. Despite the fact that the owner had no formal training, the flair with which she decorated cupcakes was something that could not be taught, and even the staunchest dieter had trouble turning down her apricot danishes or Fluffernutter cookies.

Penelope Garcia wasn't as tall as she'd have liked to be, but few people considered her short, thanks to her stunning array of heels. She had seemingly endless pairs in a variety of garish colors and patterns - bright orange, deep purple, blue-striped and leopard-spotted - and she often coordinated these with the polish on her nails. As soon as you saw Penelope, you could tell that Penny's was every inch hers; her personality was obviously injected into the place, from the colorful wall hangings to the shabby-chic cushions situated as if at random on certain strategically chosen chairs. Before she'd moved here and opened up the place, no one in her life had ever really called her Penny except for her parents, who died long ago and way before their time, but she'd embraced the name as part of her new start and hadn't looked back since. She didn't generally like to talk about her parents, but she displayed a photo of them on the wall behind the counter nonetheless so they could watch over her from their frame of modest gilt, sandwiched between a print of Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and a mini poster of the fourth doctor from *Doctor Who*, whom she particularly admired for his scarf.

Penelope couldn't remember the last time she took a day off, but she didn't feel burdened by her dedication to her job. The way she saw it, her livelihood wasn't really work if she was doing what she loved. Even on weekends, she was usually up with the sun concocting new recipes, updating the Penny's website, or simply walking along the Potomac River, brainstorming her next business moves as the wind ruffled her blonde hair.

When people think of Quantico, they typically imagine the base and nothing else. Certainly, the area is dominated by it, as it sprawls across more than five hundred acres and houses the FBI Academy, the FBI Laboratory, and the Naval Criminal Investigative Service headquarters, among others, but Quantico is also a settlement in its own right, bordered on three sides by the base and on the fourth by the river. Inhabited by just a few hundred people, the part of Quantico that isn't the base has a sleepy, small-town feel belying its close proximity to Washington, D.C.

In a town of just eleven streets, Penelope's business didn't exactly face a lot of competition. Sure, there was a pizzeria, a bar, and a more upscale establishment named Scarpetta's that served mainly Italian fare and was only open in the evenings, but when it came to grabbing a coffee before work or partaking of a sandwich or sweet treat at lunch, Penny's was the place to go, and everyone knew it.
Penelope regarded customers as being like children in the sense that while she knew she wasn't meant to have favorites, sometimes she couldn't help herself. One regular of whom she was particularly fond was tall like a beanstalk, with long, lanky limbs and tapered fingers. He snagged a booth at the back whenever one was available, drank his coffee without milk but added about a million sugars, and read faster than she thought was humanly possible. She'd asked him about it once, inquiring whether he was actually taking in the words or simply skimming the pages, and he'd handed her his book and recited two paragraphs from memory to answer her question.

She didn't think she was that much older than him, but she still felt protective of him in a motherly sort of way. It was hard not to want to take care of this man, with his huge doe eyes and frenetic mannerisms. Penelope knew he worked as a profiler for the Behavioral Analysis Unit of the FBI and wondered how the sweet, gentle soul she'd come to know managed to handle the horrors of such a career. If she didn't know better, she would have guessed he had a much more unassuming occupation, like teaching assistant or librarian. Even his surname supported this idea, as his name was Dr. Spencer Reid.

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Reid usually frequented Penny's alone, although he was occasionally accompanied by a pretty blonde named JJ, with whom he worked. JJ didn't look like your typical FBI agent any more than Reid, but one thing Penelope had learned since opening up shop near one of the largest U.S. Marine Corps bases in the world was that for every suited-and-booted, stern-faced macho man, there was a member of the Bureau who didn't fit a single one of the stereotypes. In fact, whenever she saw a face she didn't recognize, Penelope tried to make things interesting by placing bets with herself about whether the person was FBI, NCIS, Marine, and so forth. She'd become pretty good at guessing, but there were still those who managed to fool her - something that secretly thrilled her because perfect batting averages were boring, after all.

It was raining the morning Reid stepped into the shop with a stranger, his light brown hair tousled with water. There was a bell above the doorway that tinkled gently every time someone entered or exited, and when Penelope glanced up, she froze. The newcomer was tall and mocha-skinned, with an impressive musculature obvious even from beneath his leather jacket. He looked around for a few moments, taking in the ambience of the place as Reid wiped the raindrops off his glasses with the sleeves of his cardigan, and when the unfamiliar man's eyes met hers, she immediately looked down at the cups and saucers she'd been collecting from a recently evacuated table and hurried behind the counter to take their orders, hoping her blush wasn't as pronounced as the hot sensation on her cheeks suggested.

"Well, hello," the stranger said to her as he approached, his voice deep, pleasing, and laced with flirtation. Next to him, Reid almost imperceptibly rolled his eyes, as if he'd seen this routine enough times to be bored with it.

Penelope smoothed the ruffles of the neon pink apron she'd donned earlier that morning.

"What can I get for you?" she asked - perhaps a little more breathily than she'd have liked, but all the words came out in the right order, so she couldn't really complain.

"Just the usual for me, thanks," Reid responded.

"For here?" she confirmed.

He nodded. Beside him, his comrade shifted his weight from right foot to left and perused the menu boards intently before eventually inquiring, "If I order a blondie, do I get a mini you?"
Penelope felt her face warm up even more and hoped to God that she wasn't blushing to the roots of her fair hair.

"Uh, not exactly. Blondies are like brownies, except they're made with brown sugar rather than cocoa." She pointed to a display in front of the register. "If you sign up for a Penny's Pals loyalty card, I can give you two for three dollars."

He grinned at her, and she was taken aback by the startling whiteness of his teeth. "Brown sugar, huh? You a fan of brown sugar?"

It'd been a while since Penelope had been flirted with like this - well, she wasn't sure she'd ever been flirted with exactly like this - but she picked up on the entendre nonetheless, feeling her heartbeat quicken in her chest.

"You could say I have a sweet tooth," she parried.

Although most of her attention was on the stranger, she couldn't help but notice Reid looking restless and immediately snapped back into her role as gracious hostess, getting the feeling Reid blended into the woodwork a lot when the other man was around.

"I'll get your coffee while your friend here makes up his mind, OK, honey?" she told him gently.

Reid smiled at her and actually held her gaze for a few seconds before glancing at the floor and saying, "By the way, this is Supervisory Special Agent Derek Morgan. I work with him at the BAU."

She felt a frisson of excitement run down her spine as she turned to grab a mug off the rack for Reid. The mugs at Penny's were much like the collection of assorted tables strewn about the space - no two were alike, and each customer had his or her own favorite. On her last jaunt to D.C., Penelope had picked up a Periodic Table mug at a museum gift store, and sure enough, Reid had immediately claimed it as his own.

"So you're based in Quantico permanently?" she inquired of Morgan, trying to sound nonchalant as she carefully poured the contents of her trusty coffee pot into Reid's mug. "How come I haven't seen you in here before?"

When she looked up, Morgan's eyes touched hers like sparks. He grinned again, and she felt her breath hitch in her throat.

"I ascribe to the Roll outta bed twenty minutes late, break the speed limit to get here, then suck down bad coffee in the kitchenette kinda mentality, but Dr. Reid here's been telling me to check this place out for like a month now -"

"Five weeks and three days," Reid murmured as he took the steaming mug from Penelope, and Morgan rolled his eyes.

"For like a month now," he repeated, though not unkindly, "so today I finally managed it, and you know what? I'm very glad I did."

Penelope felt her face heating up again.

"You haven't even tried anything yet," she pointed out, then remembered he'd expressed interest in a blondie and bustled over to the display cabinet. "Did you want that blondie?"

"Make it two for three bucks, and can you sign me up for the loyalty card? As for the coffee..." He
glanced at the menu boards again. "Surprise me. Just not too sweet - unlike Pretty Boy here, I got no desire to give myself diabetes."

Reid bristled. "While ingesting high amounts of sugar may trigger diabetes in someone with prediabetes or other predispositions, it's not a direct cause of the condition," he pointed out, and Penelope sensed he'd had this conversation with Morgan in the past.

Morgan winked at her, then said to Reid, "Yeah, well, I'm already sweet enough on my own. You wanna show me where you normally sit in this joint?"

Reid wordlessly hoisted his messenger bag up on his shoulder and set off for the corner booth, clutching his Periodic Table mug. Penelope's heart skipped a beat when she realized Morgan's attention was now solely focused on her.

"Here," she said, grabbing a Penny's Pals card and scribbling Morgan's name on it before stamping it with a small heart. "Ten stamps earn you a free drink."

Their hands brushed as Morgan took the card from her.

"So you're sayin' I need to come back and see you nine more times?"

"Uh-huh." (By now, her face felt like it was on fire. She hoped it didn't show.)

"I don't think that'll be a problem," he said silkily. The butterflies in her stomach beat their wings more fiercely, and she decided on a goal of getting it together enough to behave like a normal human being in his presence by the time he got his tenth stamp. "I take it you're Penny?"

"Penelope," she blurted, then frowned at herself. Penny had become her alter-ego of sorts - her public persona, if you could call it that, and she wasn't sure why she'd just voluntarily drawn back the veil for a stranger. After all, Penny was the name of the bright, carefree person at the counter who offered every patron a smile and a great deal on blondies, while Penelope was someone else entirely, someone with tragedy in the rearview mirror. Even the name itself was kind of sad: Penelope, Odysseus' wife, faithfully fended off suitors in Ithaca for two decades when her husband was voyaging across the ocean, sleeping with witches and nymphs and all manner of other women. The unfairness of that little juxtaposition had always kind of pissed her off.

"You have a last name or are you just Penelope, like Cher or Madonna?"

Penelope's own laugh took her by surprise. "For better or worse, I've yet to achieve that level of notoriety. It's Garcia - Penelope Garcia."

"Garcia," he echoed as if he were trying on her name for size, tasting the syllables on his tongue. "You mind if I call you that?"

"Um..." She'd never been among those people who went by their surnames at school, at work, or in social groups, but the idea of Morgan addressing her like that was oddly thrilling. "Sure!" she chirped, and Morgan looked pleased.

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Penelope had learned to cherish the lull sandwiched between the hustle and bustle of the morning rush and the encroachment of the early lunch crowd, but the day she met Morgan, the quietness she usually embraced seemed more of an annoyance. Her whole day felt strangely off-kilter, like something had lodged itself under her skin, beneath her consciousness, but she didn't know what or how to fix it. She found herself wondering whether Morgan would drop by later in the day to sample
her lunch fare, and for a couple of hours, she even had a Pavlovian reaction to the bell above her own door, looking up hopefully whenever she heard it jingle.

Closing time was technically five, but as Penelope fully accommodated stragglers, it ended up being more like six on most days. Rather than kicking people out, she tidied up around them, clearing plates and mugs off tabletops and scrubbing down the counter that she spent much of her day standing behind. She would offer half-priced baked goods to anyone who wanted them, and after the last patron had made his or her way out, she would lock the front door, turn off the lights, and either retire to the second-floor apartment she kept above the store or make her way down to the edge of the Potomac, where she'd crumble the remains of the day's bread and feed them to the ducks. She did the latter that day, eager for the cool, refreshing breeze that came off the water year-round. Breathing in the air and soaking up the sunshine of the waning summer day were simple, comforting rituals, and after just a few minutes, she was already feeling more centered.

By the next morning, she'd relegated Morgan to a small recess of her mind and was ready to direct her focus toward piloting her newest creation, Peppermint Pennies, which were pretty much exactly like Peppermint Patties except significantly larger and made with a secret ingredient. She greeted her regulars as brightly as usual, making sure to have Agent Gibbs' order ready and waiting on the counter for when he dropped by at the same time as always - an extra-super-huge, black as the ace of spades. When Reid stepped through the door unaccompanied, she barely pouted, and when she managed to serve him without inquiring into Morgan's whereabouts, she mentally awarded herself a gold star. Her preoccupation with Morgan, she decided, had been a twenty-four hour affliction, like the virus that felled her for a day in third grade before relinquishing its grip as quickly as it had seized her - a passing vulnerability, but nothing more.

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Morgan didn't reappear for almost a week, which wasn't entirely surprising. After all, the bureau had its own cafeteria, and Penelope had learned from various sources including Reid and JJ that there were kitchenettes on every floor, equipped with refrigerators and microwaves for those who brown-bagged it or brought in frozen meals. The very idea of frozen meals made Penelope shudder, as most everything at Penny's was organic and Fair Trade, and a good third of the menu was vegan. She'd rather sacrifice a whole day's takings than ingest something bland and irradiated, a type of cuisine she suspected Morgan was used to eating quite frequently. The thought of this made her sad and a little indignant.

Beyond indulging in vaguely judgmental conjecture about Morgan's eating habits, Penelope didn't have a lot of time to dwell on the agent, as the new Peppermint Pennies were taking her clientele by storm. Her earnings were up, largely due to the number of people accepting her ingeniously named Penny-for-a-Dollar offer when they bought any hot or iced beverage. She even sold one of the sweet treats to Aaron Hotchner, Reid's boss and a stereotypical FBI agent if Penelope had ever seen one, from the stiffly parted hair on his head to the wingtip shoes on his feet. He looked a little embarrassed when he bought it, as if she'd caught him tuning in to American Idol or indulging in some other behavior he no doubt saw as frivolous, but when she smiled at him in reassurance, she was rewarded with one of the brief, sincere grins that he all too scarcely allowed himself to offer.

The fact that her attention was wholly on her customer meant she didn't notice Morgan had entered the establishment until he strolled up to the counter and clapped Agent Hotchner on the back.

"Hotch, my man," Morgan said by way of a greeting, and Hotchner surreptitiously tucked the Penny-containing paper bag into his suit pocket.

"Thank you," Hotchner said politely as Penelope handed him his coffee and Morgan pretended not
to see what he'd just bought. "Good morning, Morgan. I'll see you at the office."

Penelope stood silently next to Morgan as the two of them watched Hotchner walk out, and when Morgan turned back to look at her, he had a smile on his face that made her want to smile too.

"I had a feeling I'd see him here," he told her. "JJ and Reid have been talking about those Peppermint Pennies of yours all week. Made me and Hotch crazy."

Penelope tilted her head. "So how come you didn't drop by until today?"

"The two of us were outta town conducting an interview. In uh, California, actually."

"Really?" she asked excitedly. "I used to live there! What part?"

Morgan weighed her question for a few moments before answering measuredly, "Corcoran."

"Where the prison is?"

She'd asked mainly for a point of reference, but the expression on Morgan's face told her yes, where the prison was, and yes, that was why they went.

"Oh."

She broke eye contact with him, oddly embarrassed. Of course he would have visited the prison. It was his job to catch the people whom the more upstanding members of society had deemed unfit to walk among them, so it made sense for his involvement not to end after they'd been apprehended. Reid had discussed the BAU's role with her once in his typical long-winded fashion, all the while spooning more sugar into his Periodic Table mug than most people would ever be able to handle. He'd explained that determining why the perpetrators of awful crimes did what they did was just as important as figuring out the identities of dangerous unknown subjects (unsubs, he'd called them) and, of course, stopping them from hurting anyone else.

"Um, did you want the same drink I made you last time?" she inquired of Morgan, desperate to diffuse the sudden awkwardness she felt. "The Mocha Surprise? And a Peppermint Penny, right?"

He smiled at her again, but this time, his eyes looked tired. "That sounds great."

He didn't volunteer any more information about the trip, and at first, she didn't ask, but as she fired up the coffee machine, she couldn't help but start searching her memory for why she'd recently seen Corcoran in the news. The answer lit up her brain like a lightning bolt - B.J. Sloane, better known as the Santa Barbara Butcher, had just been incarcerated at the prison after receiving fifteen life sentences, one for each of the teenage girls he'd charmed off the street, abducted, and tortured to death. She glanced up at Morgan with her mouth open, and he didn't look surprised to see that she'd made the connection.

"Was it -?"

"Yeah," Morgan cut her off with a long look, and she realized it wouldn't be the best idea for him to talk about his involvement with a convicted serial murderer while in a busy coffeehouse. He probably wasn't even allowed to discuss the details.

"What was he like?" she asked anyway.

Penelope would've thought she had no desire to learn anything about Sloane beyond what the news had already told her, but she couldn't help wanting to know more from someone who'd met him face
to face. She'd only seen a couple of photographs, including one of Sloane on his wedding day that
the media liked to trot out at every opportunity, delightedly capitalizing on the story of the
quintessential guy next door who'd turned out to be a monster. Indeed, the man who'd stared out
from her television screen hadn't seemed threatening at all. On the contrary, his sandy blond hair and
friendly features reminded her of the guy who owned the pizzeria down the street, and making that
connection caused a chill to run right down her spine.

"He was completely normal on the surface, Garcia," Morgan said with a touch of sadness as he took
his coffee cup from her hand. "Completely normal."

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The exchange with Morgan rolled around in Penelope's head all day, interspersed with remembered
snippets of news reports about Sloane's crimes and images of the man himself. Her mind kept
bringing her back to the look on Morgan's face, and if the eyes truly were the window to the soul,
then Morgan's soul was tortured. She hated the thought of what he, Reid, Hotchner, JJ, and the rest
of the unit all did for a living, hunting down demons and climbing inside their heads. What was it
Nietzsche had said? She recalled the famous quote with a shiver: *Battle not with monsters lest ye
become a monster, and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes into you.*

The grim work of the BAU lingered in her mind at closing time, and she was about to douse the
lights and head upstairs when it occurred to her that although she couldn't do anything about
Morgan's chosen career path, there *was* a way for her to make his job - and the rest of his team's -
marginaly more bearable. She headed back behind the counter and opened her folder of recipes.

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It took a few weeks for Penelope to get everything together, but by the time Morgan had earned the
sixth stamp on his Penny's Pals loyalty card, she was ready to unveil the surprise. Morgan watched
curiously as she bent down behind the counter and emerged with one of the boxes she used for large
orders - a simple cardboard container with the Penny's logo printed on it, which essentially consisted
of the name written in Penelope's handwriting next to a simple rendering of a sunflower.

"What's this?"

Penelope beamed at him. "What I do best. It's for you and your team to take on that fancy jet of
yours. No charge, just something to make your days better as you launch into the sky to fight evil."

"You make us sound like superheroes," Morgan said with a laugh. "And how do you know about
the jet?"

She raised an eyebrow at him.

"...Reid." He answered his own question, and she giggled as he opened the box. "Oh my God,
Garcia... you're a princess, you know that?"

She beamed, not knowing quite what to say, but he gave her an out by continuing. "OK, so what are
these?"

"Macarons." Penelope said the name with a French flourish. "They're something new I'm trying out,
and I'm not sure which flavors to start with, so I figured I could let you guys be my guinea pigs, so to
speak." She pointed to the selection. "These ones are vanilla, the darker ones are chocolate, the ones
with the orange filling are pumpkin spice, then there's strawberry, cappuccino, and lemon."

Morgan stared in astonishment. "If there's one thing my team's good at, it's eating," he declared,
reaching for a macaron.

"Hey," Penelope scolded gently. "Save them for the jet."

"C'mon, one bite?" Morgan cajoled, but there was a twinkle in his eye as Penelope shook her head with a smirk. "You, Penelope Garcia, are a tease."

She tossed her head, secretly pleased by how well she was holding her own in front of a man whose physical presence quite frankly made her forget how to breathe. "I pride myself on it."

He chuckled, then quickly grew serious. "Thank you for this, baby girl. You really are a princess."

The way he was looking at her made her heart flutter, and she recalled the goal she'd set the first time she'd met him - to be immune to his charms by the time he'd earned his tenth stamp and a free drink. It was safe to say she wasn't exactly progressing as fast as she'd hoped.

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It quickly emerged that the members of Aaron Hotchner's BAU team were traditionalists when it came to macarons. Chocolate was the hands-down favorite, although the second-place position was more hotly contested, to the point where every single member (including Hotch, albeit sheepishly) made sure to drop by the coffeehouse and register his or her preference.

Reid, perhaps unsurprisingly, had the most to say. He delivered an oral treatise of sorts that delved into the merits and shortcomings of each flavor and ultimately concluded that while pumpkin spice would be the seasonal favorite, vanilla and cappuccino had the most long-term staying power beside chocolate and were therefore the best options to add to the menu, particularly in light of the present economic instability.

JJ, who'd accompanied Reid to Penny's that day, discreetly rolled her eyes at Penelope during Reid's speech, the corners of her mouth twitching as if she were holding back laughter. Penelope cleared her throat to stave off her own mirth as she reached for the Dalek salt shaker she'd ordered online and repurposed as a sugar container with Reid in mind.

"I wish everyone had your passion for macarons," she said sincerely, handing him the Dalek. He beamed at her while pouring a liberal amount of sugar into his coffee, then turned to his colleague.

"You coming, JJ?"

JJ glanced at Penelope. "I'll be over in a second, OK, Spence?"

Reid shrugged and headed off to his regular booth, and Penelope tilted her head toward JJ, sensing something was up.

Although the other woman dropped by frequently, she tended to keep to herself, so Penelope didn't know her as well as some other customers. That said, she knew people, interacted with them day in and day out, and while she was no profiler, she could sense when they weren't saying what they wanted to, when they were holding something back. Her tried and true technique was to hover in people's general vicinity until they caved and confided in her, but she wasn't above administering the odd verbal prod when that approach didn't work.

JJ probably drank the most coffee out of anybody at the BAU, with the exception of Beth Griffith, who was part of a separate team to the one Agent Hotchner headed. Penelope wasn't exactly sure what JJ's job entailed, but she saw the other woman on the news sometimes when the FBI was handling high-profile cases, hair always immaculate and skin glowing, remaining alert and composed.
even as the press yelled questions from all directions, so all that caffeine obviously agreed with her. JJ gratefully took her cup and eyed the display of Peppermint Pennies that had been placed by the register to catch the attention of patrons.

Penelope glanced at the clock that hung behind the counter, one of those cat-shaped ones with a tail that acted as a pendulum and eyes that counted the seconds. It was hot pink with white stripes.

"You have time to get something else," she noted, because she'd come to know JJ's schedule over the months, as much as anyone could be familiar with the comings and goings of somebody prepared to fly anywhere in the country at a moment's notice. Penelope wondered whether the BAU had handled cases in all fifty states, but thought it would be inappropriate to ask. "And while I ring that up for you, care to tell me what's bothering you?"

JJ looked surprised for a moment, then smiled at her sheepishly. "That obvious, huh?"

"Kinda." Penelope shrugged. "You don't have to be a profiler to know when something's going on with someone you care about."

JJ's blue eyes softened. "I was actually worried about you."

"Me?"

"Well, I heard you met Morgan."

Penelope could feel the blush instantaneously begin to creep up her neck and willed her body to knock it off. "He's been in here a couple of times," she confirmed noncommittally.

"So you're aware of how he can be."

"How he can be?"

"He's..." JJ trailed off as if she were searching for the words, finally settling on, "He's Morgan. With his tight shirts and that silky voice he puts on for all the girls."

Penelope forced herself to laugh. "Uh, yeah, I'm familiar."

"Just..." JJ bit her lip in thought as she considered how to best finish her sentence. "You know he does that with a lot of women, right?" she asked eventually. "But he likes to have fun with them, not necessarily settle down with them. I don't think he means to lead them on, but more often than not, he ends up doing it anyway."

"Sounds like a lot of other guys I know," Penelope said wryly, ignoring the empty feeling inside her that JJ's words had elicited, and the other woman barked out a chuckle.

"You and me both, sister." Her face grew serious. "I just wanted to make sure you didn't get hurt, and to thank you again for the macarons, particularly the strawberry ones."

Penelope's laugh was sincere this time. "I make those for all of you guys, because when you board that jet on any given day, you're usually flying into hell," she told JJ quietly. "I know there's only so much any of you can tell me, but I see some of your cases on the news, and they're horrific, JJ." She shrugged. "If letting you taste-test some of my potential new recipes makes things a little less awful for you, then I'm glad to do it. And as for Morgan, I can give the flirtation right back to him, don't you worry," she assured, printing out JJ's receipt and stamping her loyalty card. "Two more stamps and you earn a free drink!"
JJ winced, tucking the card back into her purse. "That's the second one this month. One of these days, I'll quit caffeine, Penny."

"That would be terribly bad for business," Penelope joked.

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When Morgan dropped by later that week, Penelope had a box waiting for him on the counter as usual. It was the first time she'd seen him since her conversation with JJ, and she was expecting to somehow feel differently about him in light of their talk, but her heart skipped a beat just the same.

"Hey, baby girl."

"Good morning, sweetness," she responded, swatting at him as he tried to open the box. "How many times have I told you not to peek at the merchandise while you're still in my shop?"

He grinned boyishly at her, looking for all the world like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "Does this mean you're gonna spank me?"

She raised an eyebrow. "This is a place of business."

"After hours, then."

"Behave. Oh, and try to get the double-chocolate whoopie pie before any of your colleagues - I made it with you in mind," she told him coyly.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Mm-hm. It's called the Chocolate Thunder."

"I swear you're trying to kill me, woman."

Penelope just smiled.

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The next time Morgan dropped by the coffeehouse, it was during the lull between when Penny's was technically meant to close and the time it actually did. The place was deserted, but Penelope hadn't locked up yet. When she heard the familiar jingle of the bell hanging over the door, she looked up with a smile that only grew wider when she saw the identity of the last-minute visitor.

"Well, hello, hot stuff," she began, but her grin faded when she saw the expression on Morgan's face. "What happened?"

"Hard case," Morgan said simply, and Penelope didn't push him to divulge more. As he walked toward her, he snagged a chair sitting at one of the taller tables in her mismatched collection and pulled it up to the counter. Wordlessly, she fired up the coffee maker she'd been about to wipe down for the day and grabbed the necessary syrup to create his usual.

"Can you make it a double?"

She blinked. "Double espresso? Double syrup?"

"You got a shot of anything harder?"

Penelope frowned at him, worried, and he shrugged in response, the two of them lapsing into silence
as the machine hissed and steamed. When it was done, she grabbed Morgan's favorite mug - one she'd purchased with him in mind after he'd come in a few times, it had the phrase **ONCE YOU GO BLACK, YOU NEVER GO BACK** emblazoned upon it in huge white letters. The syrup heart she drew in the foam raised a slight but unconvincing smile from the agent, and he nursed the mug as if he were sitting at a bar, staring into it broodingly.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

"OK." Penelope pulled on her rubber gloves and reached for the cloth she used to clean the outside of the coffee maker, intending to let Morgan sit in silence for as long as he needed - which turned out not to be very long at all.

A couple of minutes later, he said softly, "I met this woman in Seattle who had a bomb under the seat of her car."

Quietly, Penelope rinsed the cloth, sensing it would be better not to interrupt him. She'd seen the case of the anti-technology bomber on the news and, as she always did when a few days went by without Morgan or any of the others dropping into the coffeehouse, had wondered if the BAU was brought in to investigate.

"We got to her in time, but she was already in the car and we couldn't get her out until we disabled the bomb," Morgan elaborated, his voice remarkably steady until it cracked a little on the last word.

Still, Penelope said nothing.

"So the bomb tech is there and Hotch is telling me to step back, because if something gets messed up somehow then the three of us are gonna be blown to pieces, and there's no reason for me to be involved anymore, you know?"

Penelope nodded.

"But I couldn't do it." Morgan shook his head. "I know I was breaking protocol, I know it was stupid, but she, uh. She reminded me of my mom."

Penelope's stomach lurched at the thought of the situation ending less favorably.

"I don't think it was stupid," she said honestly. "I think it was brave."

This time, Morgan's smile was genuine, albeit small and a little shaky. He looked tired. "We got back a couple hours ago, and Hotch told me to take the rest of the day off. Clear my head, you know?"

"And you ended up here," Penelope observed, trying not to sound flattered.

"Sure seems that way," he acknowledged wryly, and she could see the old Morgan returning piece by piece. He slid his hand into his pocket, pulled out his wallet, and held out his Penny's Pals loyalty card and a few dollar bills. "What do I owe you for the coffee?"

She rolled her eyes, waving away the proffered payment but stamping the card nonetheless. "Please, it's on the house."

He opened his mouth to protest, and she silenced him with a Look.

They fell back into not speaking after that, but it was a much more companionable silence than the
previous one they'd shared that night. Morgan watched Penelope clean, periodically offering to help even though they both knew she'd shoot him down every time, and eventually he took to gazing at the wildly decorated walls, making comments every so often.

"David Bowie, huh?"

"David Bowie forever."

Morgan must have been unable to think of anything to say to that, because he was quiet for a short while before asking, "Why do you have a map of Narnia on the wall?"

Penelope's "Why not?" elicited a similar non-response.

She was nearly done sweeping the floor behind the counter, her last task before she could lock up, when Morgan said "Hey, Garcia?" and tilted his head in the direction of the back wall. "Those your parents?"

"Audrey Hepburn and Tom Baker?" she asked airily, making a halfhearted bid to distract him with her *Breakfast at Tiffany's* print and *Doctor Who* poster.

He looked at her carefully, and she felt silly for hoping that tactic would work with a trained FBI profiler.

"Nah, the two people in the middle," he clarified gingerly, as if he'd realized he was on delicate ground and didn't want to push. "The lady looks like you; that's why I noticed the picture."

Penelope knew from her conversations with Reid that geographic and locational profiling were key components of the BAU’s work, and the team could often gain insight into an unsub's psyche simply by analyzing the spaces where he or she lived and worked, the sites where crimes were perpetrated and bodies dumped. She wondered what the layout of Penny's said about her, whether the variegated selection of tables and chairs reflected an inability to commit or if the photos, wall hangings, and other pieces of art that crowded the walls made it seem like she was overcompensating for the emptiness inside her, staving off her own sadness with as much technicolor clutter as she could.

"Who's the guy?" Morgan continued in the same cautious tone, still watching her closely. "I don't see a family resemblance."

When she didn't reply immediately, he reached across the counter and brushed his fingertips across the top of her hand. The contact made her nerves short-circuit, and she desperately hoped he couldn't tell. Part of her wished she hadn't taken off the rubber gloves.

"It's OK if you don't wanna talk about it, Garcia."

He could sense she was uncomfortable and was giving her an out, which she normally would have taken but for the unexpected and powerful need welling inside her to finally share the burden of what happened to her parents with another human being.

"That's my stepdad," she told Morgan, talking to the hand that had just been touching hers rather than looking at his face. "My mom and dad got divorced when I was a baby, so he raised me. I took his last name."

Morgan nodded slowly, squinting a little at the photo. There was something stamped in the bottom right-hand corner, a date she'd committed to memory as the day the last image of her parents ever captured in life was taken, and she knew he was putting the pieces together in his mind.
"What happened to them?" he asked quietly, and she shrugged.

"A drunk driver, when I was eighteen." She was surprised and a little shocked by how aloof she sounded, saying the words out loud for the first time in as long as she could remember. She wondered if her tone made it seem as if she didn't care, but then she thought again about Morgan's profession and figured he wouldn't be fooled by her flat affect. Haltingly, she met his eyes.

She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting to see in them, but it wasn't what she found, which was a clear, sharp pain that went far beyond detached sympathy and crossed into something even more personal than the experience in Seattle that he'd relayed to her earlier.

"My father was killed trying to stop a robbery when I was ten." His voice sounded rougher, huskier than usual, and she felt the hurt of his admission almost as sharply as she had her own. "I was with him."

"I'm sorry," she whispered after a beat, at a loss for anything else to say.

There was a tenderness in his eyes now, and for a short, electric second, she wondered if he would lean in to kiss her, but he cleared his throat instead.

"I'm sorry too," he said finally, sounding at once like the same old Morgan again, as if a mental curtain had come down and sectioned off the anguish that had been so apparent mere seconds before. "I wouldn't have asked about the photo if I'd known."

"It's OK," she responded quietly, and in an odd way, she meant it.

She'd kind of fallen off the grid after her parents died, lost herself in a series of artists' communes along the West Coast, eventually got a job at a coffeehouse that helped her figure out how to translate her talent for mixing colors and mediums into brewing java beans and baking, then moved clear across the country to found her own business in Quantico, Virginia, using her inheritance as startup capital. She'd chosen Quantico because it seemed safe to her, reminded her of the law enforcement officers who so gently broke the news to her that awful day, and with the childlike logic of someone who was barely more than a child herself, she'd rationalized that the more high-ranking and numerous the law enforcement officers around her, the more secure she would feel. At no point in time since then had she ever really discussed her parents, beyond faux-casually confirming the identities of the people in the photograph to patrons who asked, which didn't happen as often as one might expect. Before Morgan, no one had been sufficiently observant to notice how long ago the photo was dated - or, at least, had never thought to question it, a state of affairs that didn't really surprise her. Although the Quantico community had grown fond of her, the sentiment stayed mostly at a superficial level; she was the blonde behind the counter who always had a cheery greeting for everyone, sold the best baked goods in town, and made your coffee exactly the way you liked it, but she wasn't generally seen as someone with whom to have a deep conversation, and for the most part, she was grateful for that.

"Hey, are you doing anything tonight?"

For a second, Penelope thought Morgan was talking to someone else, which was stupid because they were the only two people in the building.

"Am I what?" she stalled.

"This evening. Do you have plans?"

She thought of the Cake Boss episode on her DVR and the copy of Cooking for Kings: The Life of
Antonin Careme, the First Celebrity Chef sitting on her bedside table.

"Um, no, I don't have plans."

Morgan shrugged. "Seems like we could both do with a pick-me-up, and for once, I'm not working. You wanna hit up Scarpetta's with me?"

Penelope's stomach flipped. "I... OK."

--

Although Scarpetta's wasn't inordinately fancy, it did have a dress code, and at that moment, Penelope didn't meet it. Morgan was wearing a suit jacket and nice jeans, and she felt woefully underdressed in the faded turquoise sundress and lime green cardigan she'd donned early that morning, before the sun had come up.

"I would need to change, though." She hastily tried to picture the state in which she'd left her apartment and was pretty sure it would pass the guest test. "If you don't mind coming upstairs for a few minutes..."

"Like I'd ever deny a beautiful woman a request like that," Morgan teased, and she couldn't help but laugh.

"Slow down, sugar," she told him whimsically, picking up the cash box that contained the day's takings and beckoning Morgan in the direction of an unobtrusive door sandwiched between the women's bathroom and the store room. After she unlocked it, Morgan leaned over and held it open.

"Ladies first, Garcia."

She raised an eyebrow at him, and he shrugged in response. Flirting was something he couldn't help, it seemed.

He climbed the stairs behind her, and it was strange having somebody follow her. Of course, her landlord came to check up on things periodically, and one time she'd needed to call an electrician after a brainstorming session involving new frosting flavors and too many mixers caused a power surge, but aside from them, nobody else had seen the place where she spent most of her time away from the shop.

After she reached the landing at the top of the staircase and unlocked her front door, she saw her wall art and knickknacks as if for the first time and wondered again what Morgan thought of her decorating style and what it said about her. She scarcely had any possessions that predated her move to Quantico, which she supposed Morgan would interpret as an effort to erase her past, but she'd acquired a lot of tchotchkes from day trips she'd taken and eBay auctions she'd won, so the apartment was by no means bare. During her time in Virginia, she'd visited basically everything that could be considered a tourist attraction at least once, and had been to most of the museums in D.C. multiple times as different exhibits came and went. Her favorite exhibit of all was the permanent one in the Popular Culture wing of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, because she loved to look at the original pair of ruby slippers that Judy Garland wore while filming *The Wizard of Oz*.

The only trace of Penelope's old life resided in a frame on a side table by the couch - a photo of her when she was about seven, gap-toothed and smiling, riding a horse on the beach, flanked by her mom and stepfather. Even now, she found it impossible to look at without feeling a twinge of bittersweet nostalgia deep within her chest.
"I won't be too long," she told Morgan, picking up the remote from the side table and holding it out to him. "Feel free to watch TV or something."

"I might just take you up on that. Take your time, baby girl."

Penelope was about to close the door to her bedroom when *DC Cupcakes* crackled into life on the screen and Morgan laughed in delight.

--

For the most part, Penelope lived modestly. Her apartment was the same size as the coffeehouse below but seemed a lot smaller, as the space was divided between the combined living room/kitchen area that Morgan was currently occupying, the bedroom off to one side, and the bathroom beyond that. One would think Penelope's biggest extravagance was the flatscreen television Morgan was currently watching - which, incidentally, she'd snapped up on clearance the previous year - but her real investment was inside her closet. It wasn't that she bought expensive clothes, more that she purchased a lot of them in all different colors of the rainbow, and she fought a losing battle to keep them at least vaguely organized on hangers or shelves, or stacked in neatly folded piles. She regarded her collection now, wondering why, if there were so many individual pieces, she couldn't find a single thing suitable to wear to Scarpetta's.

"Yo, Garcia?" Morgan called from the other room, and she rolled her eyes. So much for letting her take her time.

"I'll be out in a minute!" she shouted back, unearthing a simple mini-dress with a black-and-white houndstooth pattern that had been half hidden behind a heavy leopard-print coat. She regarded it critically. It could work with the appropriate accessories.

"Nah, no rush - I was just wondering if you know how to make banana cupcakes with peanut butter frosting."

She blinked. "...Are you still watching *DC Cupcakes*?"

There was a pause. "Maybe."

Penelope had to bite her lip to keep herself from laughing. She'd been to Georgetown Cupcakes several times, and while she deeply respected the craft of creating so-called designer cupcakes, she hadn't been impressed by how much everything cost.

"I can make you any kind you want, sugar, at half the price they're asking."

She grinned in anticipation, expecting a flirtatious response, and she wasn't disappointed.

"I knew there was a reason I liked you, princess," Morgan called back, and the fact that she could clearly hear the smile in his voice made her stomach flutter.

"I'll be ready soon, OK?" She cringed at the way her voice sounded - a little higher than usual, thrilled and girlish - and hoped Morgan hadn't picked up on the difference.

"Take your sweet time, baby girl. Can't rush perfection."

When she glanced at herself in the full-length mirror that hung on her door, she found she was blushing furiously.

--
Penelope decided to go with the houndstooth dress, pairing it with a classic pearl necklace, matching earrings that reminded her of the ones Princess Diana used to wear, and the soft, tall, white leather boots she loved but didn't wear often for fear of dropping coffee grounds on them. She cinched the dress at the waist with a magenta belt and added matching eyeshadow to her upper lids to complete the look. As she ran a brush through her hair, she critiqued herself in the mirror and was secretly pleased with what she saw. She didn't often have occasion to dress up.

"Hey, Garcia?" Morgan called again, and she felt a warm fondness spreading in her chest at simply hearing his voice - which, she conceded, was probably a negative development. "Would bubblegum frosting be completely disgusting?"

"Bubblegum?" she yelled back skeptically, wrinkling her nose.

"Uh-huh."

She added a touch of gloss to her lips, took a deep breath, and opened the door that led back into her living room.

"Probably, but I can figure out a way to whip some up if you'd like to try it," she said at a normal volume, and Morgan turned to look at her.

He was silent for a second, which prompted her to nervously touch the skirt of the dress, smoothing away nonexistent creases.

"...What?" she asked finally.

His eyes swept across her body, lingering on her chest before eventually settling on her face. "Damn, you look amazing."

The quickening of her heartbeat was instant. "I had to go all out to keep up with you," she shot back, and the grin this elicited made her knees weak. Yeah, she admitted to herself, she was kind of in trouble here.

--

Scarpetta's was just a short walk away, but by the time they arrived, the butterflies in Penelope's stomach felt like they were about to burst out of her body altogether, which would for sure have ruined her dress. Morgan held the door open, and the expression of the man at the front desk - an infrequent customer of hers - metamorphosed from detached politeness to filial friendliness as soon as he caught sight of her companion.

"Derek!" he exclaimed, and Penelope was pretty sure this was the first time she'd seen two men bump fists while wearing suit jackets. "You been busy working? You haven't brought anyone here in a couple weeks."

"How are Angela and the kids?" Morgan asked.

"Fine, fine." The man continued talking as he led them to a table. "You know that science fair Frankie was gettin' himself all worked up about? First place."
Morgan beamed. "I knew it. Tell him I never had a doubt in my mind, will you?"

"Will do." He handed them both menus. "Jane will be over in a second to take your drink orders, OK?"

"Thanks, man."

As his friend walked away, Morgan focused his attention solely on Garcia, and at once, her breath quickened. It was amazing how he could turn the intensity in his eyes on and off like that, and she was a little incredulous about how instantly it affected her.

"I'm really glad you agreed to come out with me tonight," he told her with sincerity - or what she interpreted as sincerity, at least. He'd seemed so open, so unguarded earlier at the coffeehouse, but his familiarity with the staff at Scarpetta's had sparked a sense of cautionary mistrust in Penelope's brain.

"You haven't brought anyone here in a couple weeks?" she echoed, quoting his friend's words instead of responding to what Morgan had just said to her. "How often do you come here?"

He shifted in his seat. "From time to time."

"When was the last time?" She tried to keep her tone casual, quashing the sinking feeling taking root in her stomach as much as she could.

"Uh, about two and a half weeks ago."

"On a date?"

"You could call it that." He tilted his head, his expression somewhere between amused and confused. "You interrogating me now?"

She shrugged. "I'm just interested. Didn't go well?"

"Oh, you know," Morgan, suddenly a master of discretion, was vague. "Things between us... fizzled."

What he meant, she thought, recalling the conversation she'd had with JJ, was that he'd met a pretty young thing, wined her, dined her, sixty-nined her, then lost interest.

"Oh," Penelope said lightly, trying her best not to seem upset. If she were honest about it, her disappointment was directed more toward herself than him. After all, JJ had explicitly warned her against falling for his charms, so when it came down to it, she thought, she only had herself to blame.

"Hey." Morgan's voice was quiet now, and he touched her hand as he'd done earlier that night at Penny's. "You didn't think this was a date, right?"

He sounded genuinely concerned, and although the rational part of Penelope's brain reminded her that if anyone could authentically fake emotion, it would be an FBI profiler, she couldn't shake the feeling that he was legitimately worried about inadvertently leading her on.

For all his flirting and teasing, she'd been quite aware their outing hadn't been a date; it had simply been easy to let her own feelings affect her perception. What was it he'd called it? A *pick-me-up* - two people enjoying each other's company by unwinding at a local restaurant after a trying day's work - but that hadn't stopped her from hoping. Her mind helpfully replayed the moment when she'd emerged from the bedroom and Morgan had stared at her cleavage for a little too long, but she
swiftly banished the memory.

"Of course not," she said breezily, affixing him with the same bright smile she offered her customers. He looked searchingly at her for a moment before finally giving her a slow nod.

"You cool with red wine?"

"Please."

--

When Penelope didn't see Morgan for a few days after their non-date at Scarpetta's, she thought he might be avoiding her, but then she realized she hadn't seen any other members of his team either. In time, the rest of them drifted back, Reid as geeky and loquacious as always, Hotchner austere but unfailingly polite, JJ quietly luminous. (When JJ found out she was pregnant by her boyfriend, a New Orleans police officer she'd met the previous year on a case, she'd told Penelope before any of her colleagues, something that meant more to Penelope than she could put into words.) As the days went by with no sign of Morgan, Penelope felt him slipping into the annals of her life, one more relic of her past, a *what if* never answered. She watched the news sometimes and wondered whether Morgan was involved in investigating a suspicious explosion in Texas, a spate of suicides in Pennsylvania, the disappearance of a child at a mall a mere half-hour from Quantico, and she caught herself looking for him in the background of the footage, peering at the screen of the same TV on which he'd watched *DC Cupcakes* and then called out to inquire about bubblegum frosting.

By the time a series of fatal shootings in Manhattan hit the headlines a few weeks later, Penelope had essentially given up on seeing the special agent again. With Morgan's schedule, things could never work with him anyway, she'd told herself, comfortably adopting the same numbness in which she'd found such solace after her parents died. One thing still bothered her, though, a question she couldn't shake - why had Morgan managed to get under her skin in a way no one else could before? It kept her up at night sometimes, the simple fact that there was a puzzle piece missing, a virus without an antidote, because it didn't fit with the way she lived her life and, in a way, she hated Morgan for it.

Historically, Penelope Garcia was not a mooner. She was a go-getter, a firecracker, someone who made things happen for herself and didn't wait for anybody, because she knew firsthand that even the best laid plans can go awry. She learned that lesson when she was eighteen and hadn't committed to anything more serious than baked goods, roasted coffee beans, and paying her bills on time ever since.

But then, she'd met Morgan.

--

The shootings, it turned out, had been part of a terrorist plot designed to strike fear into the hearts of the people of New York City - as if its residents hadn't already been through enough. The pièce de résistance was to be the detonation of a bomb in an ambulance that would have ravaged an especially crowded part of the city had authorities not foiled the plot and transported the ambulance to Central Park before it exploded. A technicolor photo of the bombed-out crater in the middle of the park's lush greenery was on the front page of that day's *New York Times*, and Penelope winced whenever she caught sight of it on the newspaper rack by the counter, imagining how much worse the whole thing could have been.

In fact, all of Quantico seemed subdued, which wasn't surprising considering the deep patriotism shared by many who lived and worked there. Penelope's takings were down and her customers less chatty than usual - even Reid, who showed back up after an absence of a few days, wasn't his usual
fact-spewing self - and for the first time in the history of Penny's, it looked like she was going to be able to close on time.

She locked the door right at five and had retreated to the back of the store to turn off the lights when a soft knocking caught her attention. She looked up and saw Morgan peering through the glass, a bouquet of flowers in one hand, and her stomach tied itself in knots.

As soon as Penelope un-clicked the lock, Morgan strode breezily into the coffeehouse, the bell unnecessarily tinkling the news of his arrival.

"Hey," he said casually, but something about his demeanor seemed strained. She wondered if he felt as uncomfortable as she did about trying to act like their friendship was still intact after Scarpetta's and weeks of no contact. He awkwardly held out the flowers. "I'm sorry I haven't stopped by."

She gave him a guarded smile as she accepted the proffered bouquet, fully aware that she would have swooned at the gesture just a few short weeks earlier and marveling at how quickly her defenses had repaired themselves.

"You're a busy man," she responded, and the excuse sounded hollow even to her own ears. Why was he here?

He followed her into the store, then hovered by the register as she went behind the counter to find a makeshift vase.

"Listen..."

She stood silently by the sink, studiously watching the water line rise in the jug she'd picked out.

"I should've come around, I know that."

She arranged the flowers carefully in the jug, pulling off a broken leaf.

"I get that I was kinda sending you mixed signals, and that wasn't cool," he continued. "It shouldn't have taken something crazy happening on a case for me to realize that."

Penelope frowned, feeling worry spike in her chest as she turned to look at him. "What do you mean, something crazy?"

Morgan shrugged. "I jumped out of a moving vehicle," he said nonchalantly, but she could tell by the look on his face that there was more to the story than he was willing to tell right now. She boggled at him, setting down the jug and heading back to the counter.

"How are you even here?" she demanded of him, the hostility she'd felt toward him instantly overridden by concern. "Why aren't you in the hospital?"

"I landed on grass; I'm just a little sore, that's all."

Haltingly, she reached over the counter and touched her fingertips to the discolored skin. Morgan's breath audibly hitched.

"Does that hurt?!" She drew back, alarmed.

"Not really, but you can't just go around touching guys like that, you know. You're gonna give
people the wrong idea."

His tone was light, but the words hit close to home. Penelope's gaze wavered and she broke eye contact with him for a moment.

"Penelope..." Morgan said seriously, smoothing his shirt back down over his six-pack. She'd forgotten he even knew her real name. "I'm gonna level with you right now - I'm sorry about before, at Scarpetta's. It's sorta my go-to place where I take girls, and I know you picked up on that."

She shrugged and did her best to seem nonplussed, although she was secretly surprised by his honesty. "Last time I checked, I was a girl."

He made a face at her. "Come on, you're my Baby Girl O.G., bringer of baked goods, maker of coffee, owner of the best smile below the Mason Dixon Line." The present tense and easy bravado he affected made it seem like the past few weeks had never happened, but then he paused, seeming almost unsure of himself. She'd never seen him hesitate like this before. "Would you let me take you out to dinner again?"

"To Scarpetta's?" Penelope asked flatly, only half joking, and Morgan shook his head.

"To this place in D.C. where I go with my mom when she's in town. I've never been there with anyone else. I save it for the best of the best."

She tilted her head at him, ignoring the compliment. "You want to go now? Tonight?"

"Tonight. I want to talk to you about something."

"We're talking right now," she pointed out, and couldn't resist adding, "For the first time in a while, in fact."

"Penelope," Morgan said levelly. "Are you seriously about to turn down a free meal at a very expensive restaurant with the most eligible bachelor in the tri-state area?"

She rolled her eyes. "Modest, too."

He grinned at her hopefully, and she sighed.

"You said you're buying?"

"I sure am."

"I'll get my coat."

--

The restaurant was understated in a classic, old-money sort of way, with dimmed lights and high, wooden booths bearing plaques that showcased the names of famous patrons: congressmen, senators, a former fire chief. It was the type of place where couples conversed in hushed tones at its fringes while groups of affluent, suit-wearing gentlemen who'd likely migrated over from nearby Capitol Hill congregated at the larger tables toward the center of the room, laughing uproariously in a way that somehow didn't carry, or at least not unpleasantly. The heaviness of the place must have something to do with it, Penelope thought, the sound waves muted by the plush drapes hanging from the windows and the patterned upholstery padding the chairs.

Morgan was being more courteous than usual - not that he'd ever really been rude to Penelope, but
that night he treated her as if she were made of glass or porcelain, careful not to chip her edges or nick where it was sore. As the night progressed from hors d'oeuvres to entrées, she sensed ever more keenly that he hadn't told her everything, but it wasn't until dessert that she was proven right.

"So, you know that ambulance that exploded in Central Park?"

Morgan phrased the inquiry as innocuously as if he were referring to the weather, the light drizzle they'd had earlier in the week that didn't even last long enough to leave anything wet, per se, just glistening with a sheen that hadn't been there previously.

"Yes?" Penelope said uncertainly, wondering what that had to do with anything. It would've been hard not to know, given the front-page newspaper coverage and the fact that every news station in the country was running aerial footage of the fiery wreck with a macabre eagerness that, frankly, unsettled her.

"You heard about it?" Morgan persisted.

"They caught the bomb in time and were able to get it to an isolated area before it exploded, according to officials," Penelope elaborated, parroting the phrasing that had been uttered by virtually every newscaster and reporter who'd covered the story over the past few days, their reports filled with buzz phrases like No indications from authorities and A source close to the investigation. "Morgan, why are you asking me this?"

He watched her seriously, a strange expression on his face. "What, I don't look official enough for you?"

Her eyes widened. "That was you? You drove the ambulance to..." She trailed off. "Oh my God, Morgan..."

He wisely gave her a minute, and she didn't speak again until something occurred to her.

"Is that how you got hurt?"

Morgan shrugged. "Collateral damage. Like I said earlier, it could've been a lot messier."

A chill ran down her spine. It really could have.

"You know what I thought about as I was driving that ambulance away from all those people?"

Penelope swallowed hard, stabbed the piece of cake on her plate with her fork, and tried to feel normal. She suddenly didn't want to know, to dwell anymore on what Morgan did, on the danger in which he'd put himself. She couldn't fault him for doing it, for wanting to save hundreds - maybe thousands - of people who would have been killed or injured had the bomb gone off amid the hustle and bustle of the city, but at the same time, she thought him immeasurably brave. She wondered what she would have done in the same position and secretly doubted whether she would have been able to rise to the challenge.

"My mom and my sisters," he continued in lieu of a response, "and then I thought of you."

She froze, a forkful of cake suspended in midair. "...What?" she repeated, sincerely afraid she'd misheard him.

He again allowed her a few moments, and she gaped at him. She didn't know what to say. Thank you was the first thing that came to mind - somewhat ridiculously, as if he'd given her a compliment - but she wasn't sure it was the right response. Would she have thought of Morgan had the situation...
been reversed? Would she have thought of anybody at all? Her parents were dead, she was an only child, and the only connections she'd made in Virginia had been forged across a countertop over steaming mugs and sticky bakery items. She had no living family, no close friends, and as the architect of her own life, she had historically done a superb job of making sure her little snow-globe microcosm of a world didn't brush up too closely against anybody else's. Morgan was her first failure. After he'd disappeared, she'd shored up her emotional walls to be stronger than ever, but now that he was sitting in front of her, she could feel the cracks start to take hold.

"Why are you telling me this?" she murmured, the fork still hovering halfway between her mouth and the table even though she wasn't hungry in the slightest, and Morgan gently eased it back to her plate, metal softly clinking against ceramic as he set it down.

"I've been thinking about some things since then. Near-death experiences will do that to ya, make you see people in a new light, you know?"

Her heart leapt in her throat, feeling at once as if it were being squeezed by an icy hand, and she had the sudden realization that she knew what was coming.

"Don't," she implored him, half a plea, half an order.

Morgan's forehead creased and he opened his mouth to say something, but before he could, Penelope caught the eye of their blessedly passing server and cut him off by asking for the check. At her insistence, she and Morgan split it.

--

They didn't speak again until they were leaving the restaurant. After Morgan held open the door, Penelope inhaled sharply as the frosty night air hit her face, as cold as the chill that had descended between them.

"Are you really planning not to talk to me for the entire ride home?" Morgan's voice was serious, but she detected an iota of a smirk in his tone that made her irritation spike. "I know why you're mad at me, Penelope. I get it."

"I'm not mad," she told him with as much nonchalance as she could muster, opening the car door on her own before he could do it for her. She hated the position he'd put her in by suddenly seeming poised to offer something she'd wanted so much but had already painstakingly drawn a line underneath. Things were safer if she kept him at arm's length, and she knew it.

He climbed into the driver's seat, shrugging as he put on his seatbelt with a click. "I just wanted to tell you that facing my own death made me realize how much I care about you."

He sounded annoyingly calm, and she wondered how he managed it. Internally, she was a wreck.

"That was stupid of you," she chastised him as he carefully backed the car out of its parking space, hand pressed behind the headrest of her seat. She ignored the way the air suddenly seemed to still at the proximity of his hand to her shoulder. "I get why you did it, but it was reckless."

"Nearly getting myself blown up, or telling you how I feel?"

She couldn't answer him.

--

They drove back to Quantico in silence, with Penelope staring firmly out of the passenger-side
window for most of the journey. She gazed at the houses visible from the freeway, their lights winking like fireflies as her thoughts raced faster than the cars outside. Morgan was respectfully quiet, no longer pushing her about her feelings - or, indeed, his own - and she wondered if he'd realized how so not a joke this was, how uncharted the territory of letting someone matter this much to her.

Morgan turned off at her exit and the roar of the other vehicles faded behind them, scooped up into the vacuum of the receding highway to leave the two of them alone with their thoughts. It felt to Penelope as if it took much longer than it should have for them to reach her street, and when the car finally turned onto it, Morgan glanced sideways at her as if he were about to say something but then thought better of it.

He slowed to a stop outside the coffeehouse, the sign out front bathed in the soft glow of the lamps Penelope always left on at night. As Penelope's heels hit the sidewalk, Morgan leaned across the center console and implored, "At least let me walk you to the door."

"Fine," she said lightly, trying to hide her reluctance. It wasn't that he'd really done anything wrong, she reminded herself, other than felt something for her at a different time than she'd felt something for him. Her hang-ups weren't his fault; he'd just been the one to light the touchpaper.

They headed up to the coffeehouse in silence, and Penelope slipped her key out of her purse and slid it into the lock. When the door cracked open, the jingle of the bell had an unearthly quality to it as it disrupted the still of the night. As she moved to cross the threshold, Morgan's fingers gently grazed her arm.

"Penelope..."

She bit her lip. Her heart was hammering like a drum, the staccato vibrations reverberating throughout her chest. "Yeah?"

He touched the side of her face, leaning into the space between them as if to ask a silent question. When he tilted her head up, she didn't resist.

The press of his lips was so soft at first that she questioned whether she'd dreamt it, wondered if there could be any verity to this incredulous diorama of the two of them standing in the darkness, silhouetted by the Penny's sign blazing bright against the night. She found herself pushing up on her toes to deepen the kiss, and it was one of those frozen moments, she thought, a snapshot suspended in the dark and the quiet. Her heart twisted under the weight of how much she'd wanted him, shuddered with the release of finally letting go.

--

It had been - God, it had been a while since Penelope had done this, splayed like a snow angel on her double bed that was far from accustomed to holding two, and Morgan handled her with a gentle strength, guiding her without being overbearing. His stubble grazed her skin when he tongued the hollows of her neck, his fingertips feather-light as he unbuttoned her blouse and kissed her chest. He clasped her hands in his, placed them at his waist and guided them upward, encouraging her to help slip his shirt off. The planes of his torso were even firmer than she'd imagined, his six-pack lean but muscular, the tattoos on his biceps no longer obscured by the fabric of his sleeves. She slipped her fingers through the belt loops of his jeans and pulled him toward her, the firmness of his chest pressing against the swell of hers as their lips met. They moved together languidly until, all too soon, she felt herself coming apart beneath him. When they were both left gasping for breath, he pressed his lips to her cheek and swept her into his arms.
When Penelope's alarm went off at 4:45 the next morning, Morgan thought it was a joke.

"Nobody wakes up this early," he groaned, burying his head underneath a pillow, and Penelope's amusement staved off the rush of uneasiness she'd been expecting to feel.

"Did you think those blondies you like so much just bake themselves?"

"I figured they fell from heaven and you just went outside and picked 'em up," he responded, the words muffled, and she tugged at the edge of the pillow, exposing one eye and the bridge of his nose.

"Good morning," he murmured, his voice a little more gravelly than she was used to, still rough around the edges from sleep. He brushed her cheekbone with the pad of his thumb and she waited for the much-anticipated sense of panic to spike in her chest, but it never came.

"Have you ever baked before?" she inquired of Morgan a little while later, after he'd showered and stumbled downstairs without a shirt on and she'd sent him back up to find one.

He shrugged. "Cookies a few times, when I was a kid. With dough from the store."

She sighed. "I'll take that as a no."

By the time Penny's opened its doors that day, there were baked goods next to the counter as usual, sitting above the refrigerated shelves of cold drinks and yogurts. The muffins Morgan had helped with were a little lopsided, but after critically regarding them, Penelope had concluded that they were the baked goods representation of her mismatched tables and chairs, and doubted any of her patrons would even notice. Agent Gibbs, her first customer of the day, certainly didn't seem to, while Morgan was much too biased as he sat at a table close to the counter and tucked in.

When JJ walked through the door, back from maternity leave and looking entirely too svelte for someone who'd recently had a baby, she caught sight of Morgan and did a huge double-take.

"Why are you here so early?"

Morgan hesitated for a moment, glancing at Penelope before opening his mouth to respond, and JJ grinned hugely.

"Because you never left," she concluded, and Penelope's blush was all the confirmation she needed.

"I actually had something I wanted to ask you," JJ told her a little later, after Morgan had surreptitiously kissed Penelope on the cheek and headed to the office. "Will and I have been talking about who we want Henry's godparents to be," she continued, sipping one of the caffeinated specialties she'd missed so badly while pregnant and relegated to decaf, "and we decided on Reid for the godfather."

Penelope smiled. "That's a great choice, JJ. He'll be thrilled."

"And you as the godmother."
The quip about Henry being able to recite the Periodic Table at an age when most children would still be mastering the alphabet died instantly on Penelope's lips.

"...What?" she asked lamely.

JJ shrugged, then grinned. "With the job I have, someone will have to teach the kid how to bake."

--

It had been awkward at first, informing Morgan's colleagues one by one that the longstanding flirtation he'd shared with Penelope had developed into something more tangible, but nobody seemed particularly surprised. Reid was the one Penelope had been most worried about in the same way a long-single mother might be about her son's reaction to her dating again, but he seemed to be taking it well enough - understatedly, in his stoic Reid way.

"Can I ask you something?" he'd inquired about a week after they'd broken the news, upending the sugar Dalek into his mug and carefully avoiding her eyes. Without waiting for her acquiescence, he'd ploughed forward. "Why Morgan?"

Although the question had been out of the blue, Penelope somehow sensed it was coming, had grown to know Reid well enough to develop a relative familiarity with how he processed things, how he made sense of the world. The realization in itself surprised her - that she'd become sufficiently close to another living human to be able to predict something like that.

"He just showed up one day," Penelope responded honestly. "He carved out a space for himself, and he just never left."

Reid nodded slowly, considering her response as he stirred his coffee. "Do you think he ever could?"

I don't know, was what Penelope meant to say, because she and anticipating the future hadn't been on good terms for years, but "No" was what came out of her mouth.

--

It was strange, Penelope thought, how one aspect of her life could change so tremendously while the rest of it remained intact. She still awoke at the crack of dawn every morning, donned an ensemble she doubted anyone else in Quantico could come up with, prepared Agent Gibbs' extra-super-huge coffee, and, if she had a spare moment, put aside some treats for the members of the Behavioral Analysis Unit to take on their jet or simply enjoy at the office if their work kept them in Virginia that day. The differences only became apparent under closer scrutiny: the bookmark she used to mark her place in Appetite for Life: The Biography of Julia Child (a photo booth printout from the time she and Morgan had shown up way too early at the movie theater and he just happened to have exact change), the smudges of icing on certain baked goods that, over time, grew to be big, bold hearts clearly demarcating particular items as being made with Morgan in mind.

They settled into an odd kind of kinship that was defined as much by its apartness as its togetherness, Morgan's absences routine enough that Penelope never had the chance to become unduly accustomed to his presence - and perhaps, she thought, that was why they worked so well together.

She caught Hotchner smiling at them once, his expression wistful as Morgan ducked behind the countertop to kiss her cheek and she swatted him away because she had customers. In the midst of ordering coffee and a Peppermint Penny, Hotchner, having given up on his efforts to hide his affinity for the latter, murmured something that she didn't fully process until after he'd headed out of the coffeehouse.
"I'm glad he realized what he had," Hotchner had told her, serious as always, and she smiled so hard her cheeks hurt.

--

Penelope had been vaguely aware of the Boston Reaper case when it happened and, if pressed, could somewhat recall the details: A lone predator who attacked couples traveling along deserted Massachusetts highways at night inexplicably stopped killing about a decade earlier, likely due to incarceration, injury or even death. There had been a book about him, she remembered, dimly drawing upon the faint memory of the author appearing on a morning talk show she'd happened to be watching, but as far as she knew, the case had never been solved. Indeed, she hadn't heard the name mentioned in years until the night Morgan slept over and his phone rang at an ungodly hour, long before even the early-rising Penelope was accustomed to awakening.

"The Reaper?" Morgan said quietly into his phone, his body a dark silhouette as he crouched over the go-bag he kept at Penelope's place in the event that he got called off on a case while he was with her. "Wasn't that your first case as a BAU senior?" A pause. "I'll be right there, Hotch. I'm at Penny's."

He lowered the phone from his ear and looked up in the direction of the bed, squinting as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. "You awake, baby girl?"

"Mm-hm." Penelope confirmed blearily, raising her head to offer him a reassuring smile in the near darkness. This was by no means the first time Morgan had been called away at an unreasonable hour. "Go, my sweet. Slay the dragons, vanquish the demons, and I'll bake you something nice upon your return."

"You're the best, you know that?"

"I get that a lot. Stay safe, angelfish."

--

Penelope's firsthand experience with the effects a tough case could have on Morgan preceded their courtship, going back to the night he sat at the counter at Penny's and told her about the woman in Seattle with the bomb under the seat of her car. She was no stranger to seeing him shaken up or spent, but the Morgan who returned from Boston was different somehow, more scarred by this case than she'd ever seen him before. He had superficial cuts on the side of his face and a bandage on his left arm that he wouldn't let her take off, but the true damage, she sensed, was to his psyche.

"I wish you could tell me what happened," she said to him the second night he was back. They'd been watching Top Chef when someone on the show shattered a glass and the arm Morgan had draped over the back of the couch tensed instantly, his hand gripping her shoulder hard enough to hurt.

"You know I can't," he reminded her quietly.

"Is that what happened to your arm? Something broke against it or smashed into it? Something made of glass?"

"Penelope..."

She knew she wasn't being fair to him, but the anxiety that had been coiling in her stomach since Morgan's return the previous day was now taut and jittery and ready to snap. "I'm sorry."
He sighed. "During the course of the investigation, I... was separated from something that links me to the FBI, and if it gets into the wrong hands..."

He trailed off and her eyes widened. "Like your gun or your ID or something?"

He looked away from her for a moment, and she sensed one of her guesses was correct.

"I'm just a little concerned about it, that's all," he said evenly. "And don't worry about my arm, OK? It takes more than a flesh wound to stop Derek Morgan; you know that."

She nuzzled the shoulder of his uninjured arm. "I sure do," she said lightly, but as he absently pressed a kiss to her forehead, her unease only grew.

--

Penelope wasn't a profiler, but she could see what this unsub was doing to Morgan - controlling the agent through his possession of what he stole, cultivating persistent uncertainty over how this part of Morgan might be used against him at any given time. The preoccupation strained their relationship, hanging over the two of them like a black cloud preventing Morgan from being altogether present whenever they were together, so when the missing piece showed up, Penelope's first instinct was relief.

"That's good, right?" she asked when Morgan called to let her know that his credentials were used to drop off a wounded John Doe at a local hospital.

"It's the exact opposite of good." Morgan sounded distraught, and Penelope felt her heart sink. "The John Doe was Hotch."

--

There was only so much Morgan could tell her, but he did admit that the Reaper was stalking Agent Hotchner, had some kind of vendetta against him - and the other members of the BAU were likely to get caught in the crossfire.

"Including you?" Penelope's voice came out high and panicky, and her stomach churned as she put the pieces together. "When you came home with your arm all bandaged up, did he do that to you?!"

Morgan was silent, allowing her to fill in the blanks in her mind.

"Wait, why didn't he just kill Agent Hotchner if he had him?"

Morgan sighed heavily, and she could feel the strain he was under seeping through the phone. "You can't torture somebody who's dead."

Penelope felt sick.

--

In the ensuing weeks, Agent Hotchner's ex-wife and young son went into hiding while the members of the BAU did their best to track down the Reaper. The strangest thing to Penelope was that even though one of their own was in crisis, the team was expected to work cases as usual. She saw a clip of JJ on the news warning against a group of killers with a pack mentality wreaking havoc in southeast D.C. and wondered how any human being could compartmentalize like that. Indeed, Hotch, who by all accounts and purposes should be falling apart, was as stoic as ever, seeming completely unruffled whenever he came into Penny's for coffee or a snack. If it weren't for the telltale
dark smudges beneath his eyes that seemed to grow ever darker as the days went on, Penelope would have been hard pressed to find a single outward sign of the tumult ravaging his life.

Perhaps it was just because she knew Morgan better, but the cracks in his facade seemed much more obvious to Penelope than those of any of his colleagues, serving as a constant reminder of the danger that loomed over him - over them - at any and every point in time. She'd always been aware of what his job entailed, but the reality of it had never hit so close to home before. She could lose him at any time, the first person she'd truly allowed herself to care about since her parents, and she wondered how she could ever have become so caught up in the promise of Morgan, of a future, that she'd made herself vulnerable to another bone-shaking loss.

In a way, Morgan's emotional distance almost made it easier for her. She broached the subject as he was grabbing his go-bag, about to head out the door on another case, which wasn't a fair way to do it but it was the only approach she could stand.

"Derek?" she began quietly, and he stilled and looked over at her as if he already knew.

Breakups, Penelope thought, were like ripping off Band-Aids. It was easier for everyone involved if the severance of ties was swift and sudden, rather than an achingly slow divergence that went on and on. She had no idea of Morgan's opinion on the matter, hadn't talked to him since the day he walked out of her bedroom with his go-bag, and it occurred to her that at some point he might want to come back to grab the clothes and toothbrush he'd left there, but he hadn't reached out to her and she wasn't going to bring it up.

Oddly enough, some of Morgan's friends - hers too now, she supposed - seemed almost more affected than she was. JJ seemed especially saddened by the news, while Reid treated her with the same strained kind of awkwardness she'd seen in him the first few times he'd visited Penny's.

"Hey, Boy Wonder?" she'd asked one day, filling the sugar Dalek to the brim before handing it across the counter. "Just because I'm not with Morgan anymore, that doesn't mean anything's changed between you and me, especially now we're godparents. You know that, right?"

Reid nodded slowly, his doe eyes huge and sad. "It's just weird, coming here and seeing you be so sad, then going to the office and seeing Morgan be the same way, and knowing you both feel that way because of each other. It's like watching a movie, except I'm in it."

She frowned, glanced down at her extra-bright attire, and wondered whether the concerted effort she'd been putting into beaming at every single customer hadn't been enough. "I seem sad to you?"

Reid shrugged. "Maybe not to most people, but I'm a profiler, remember?"

It took Penelope until later that day to process the fact that Reid had said Morgan was sad too.

Penelope hated the word closure. It implied a definitive end to something, the closing of a chapter or maybe even an entire book. Her parents' death would never be closed to her, she'd never be over it, and there would never be a day when she didn't wake up with an ache in her chest because of it. Losing Morgan, if losing was even the right word for a schism she'd initiated, became just another ache - a deepening of the yawning emptiness she fancied people would see if they cut through her skin and broke open her ribcage, looking for the place where her heart should be.

She decided to debut double-chocolate Peppermint Pennies to take her mind off things, and her
takings went through the roof.

--

It would have been all too easy for the other members of the BAU to side with their colleague and patronize the FBI cafeteria whenever they wanted coffee or sweet treats, so the fact that every single one still came to Penny's regularly over the ensuing weeks meant more to Penelope than she was willing to let on. JJ in particular started coming around more often to share pictures of Henry or simply to chat, so it made sense that she would be the one to break the news of a somber development in the Reaper case.

Penelope could tell something was wrong the second JJ stepped through the door, the expression on her pretty face more serious than Penelope had ever seen it. Penny's was mercifully quiet, filled with just a handful of patrons, and JJ made her sit at one of the mismatched tables before breaking the news that the Reaper had murdered Agent Hotchner's ex-wife.

Penelope's eyes instantly filled with tears, and for once in her life, she was speechless. "And Jack?" she managed to ask, referring to the agent's young son.

"He's fine, at least physically. Hotch spoke to him on the phone before it happened, told him to run and hide so the Reaper couldn't find him." JJ took a steadying breath. "The Reaper's dead too, by the way."

Penelope numbly sat in silence for a little while before finally saying, "Good."

--

Penelope had considered attending the funeral - JJ gave her the date and time and directions, and she'd almost gone but thought better of it. She wasn't sure she knew Agent Hotchner well enough that her presence was warranted, and she didn't particularly want to see Morgan either, so she sent over several dessert plates but ultimately recused herself. Three days later, she received a thank-you in the mail printed on good-quality card stock and punctuated at the bottom by Hotchner's signature, and the first time he visited Penny's after coming back to work, she found herself unable to look him in the eyes.

"Sir!" she said, a little breathless with nerves, then, "Welcome back!"

He gave her one of his solemn smiles distinguishable only by a tiny momentary uptick at one corner of his mouth. "Thank you again for sending over all those dessert trays. You must have been baking half the night."

It was the least she could do, and she told him so as she scooped up a double-chocolate Peppermint Penny even though he hadn't asked for one.

"On the house," she said quietly, and she wasn't sure but she thought Hotchner's eyes seemed brighter than usual, maybe even a little filmy with the beginnings of tears.

"If I may..." Hotchner began as she handed him his coffee, "have you spoken to Morgan lately?"

She froze. "No."

"Perhaps this is out of bounds," he said carefully, "but if there's one thing I've learned this week, it's that life's too short not to spend every moment you can with someone you love." He cleared his throat. "And thank you for the Penny."
There were steady gusts of wind coming off the Potomac, and Penelope was the only one walking along the water's edge that evening, letting the quiet put things where they were supposed to be. She thought of Agent Hotchner and Haley, of last minutes and lost evenings and not taking things for granted, and then she texted Morgan.

When Morgan showed up at Penny's later that night, he looked different yet the same all at once. She remembered the first time she'd ever laid eyes on him, the bell above the door tinkling as he'd headed inside behind Reid. As she stood in the middle of the floor, he approached her cautiously, a question in his eyes.

"Remember when you said New York made you look at things in a new light?" she blurted, not bothering with a hello.

"Yeah?"

"Haley's death was my New York."

Morgan let out a measured breath, almost as if he'd been holding it, and waited for her to continue. Her heart was beating so hard in her chest that she wondered if he could see it pounding beneath her shirt.

"I just..." she continued. "I guess it made me realize that I shouldn't let my fears about the future prevent me from enjoying the good things in the present."

Morgan cleared his throat. "What are you saying, Penelope?"

She swallowed hard, willing her voice not to shake. "I'm saying I let my fears push you away, and I'm sorry."

"Penelope, I..." She could sense how badly he wanted to reassure her, but it wasn't fair of him to do that. It wasn't fair of her to ask. "I know we got the Reaper, but I can't promise you that I'm always going to be OK."

She felt a tear slip down her cheek. "I know."

"My job can get dangerous, and if that's too much for you to deal with, I understand and I won't blame you for it. But I also..."

Morgan paused, and something about the way the words dissipated into space made Penelope's breath catch in her throat.

"I also know I love you," he finished, "and I don't want to let you go."

All at once, she felt a lightness rising inside her, as if she were a swimmer and Morgan were the surface of the water. In a way, she thought, despite all her insistence to the contrary, she'd loved him for as long as she'd known him, from the first time he'd walked into Penny's on a rainy summer afternoon and asked if ordering a blondie meant he'd get a miniature version of her.

"I love you too," she finally admitted, and with that, the last shred of resolve crumbled inside her. Morgan caught the pieces.
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