Who We Are

by ladygray99

Summary

Sometimes life makes you look in the mirror and if you don’t like what you see there are only a couple of options.

Notes

Warnings: Attempted Suicide and the after effects there of.

Spoilers: Pilot, Uncertainty Principle, Vector, Prime Suspect, Sniper Zero, Obsession, Protest, Janus List, Trust Metric, Graphic, Black Swan, Checkmate, Atomic No. 33, When Worlds Collide, Scan Man, Charlie Don’t Surf, Fifth Man, Disturbed, Greatest Hits, Angels and Devils, Hydra, Ultimatum, And the Winner is..., Growing Up

Notes: Originally written for choc_fic's 100 Days of Color due February 10. Unfortunately the fic got a little away from me. I know David/Charlie aren't the most common or popular
pairing but even if they're not your usual thing please just give this first bit a quick look over and tell me what you think. It’s written completely from David’s POV which is different for me and I’d love all your thought on it. Also please heed the warnings.
David sat up to the blaring of his building’s fire alarm. He jumped out of bed and pulled on pants as quick as he could, then grabbed his gun, badge, keys and phone from the bedside table. Then the sprinklers went off. David ran.

Outside his building, he watched as water poured from the front doors, what he didn’t see was fire or even smoke. The fire trucks arrived about the time someone figured out how to turn off the alarm. It took several more minutes to turn off the water. Long enough for every inch of his apartment building to be soaked.

The building manager told all the tenants milling around outside that an insurance adjuster would be around in the morning.

David shook the water off his phone and made a call.

“Hello?” a voice mumbled after several rings.

“Mr. Eppes, it’s David. I need some help.”

~

The front door to the Craftmen opened and a towel was instantly placed around David’s shoulders and a cup of hot chocolate was pressed into his hands.

“Oh you poor thing, you’re soaked.”

“Thank you Mr. Eppes. I would have called Colby but he’s at Quantico this week.”

David found himself being quickly ushered up stairs to the guest room. “Now what happened?”

“I don’t know. Alarm and sprinklers just went off for no reason. The whole building’s soaked. I’m going to have to get everything replaced.”

“You have contents insurance, right?”

David sat down hard on the bed. “Yes, and my comics are in water tight containers but still...”

“Well stay here as long as you need.”

“It shouldn’t take too long to dry out, right? A couple of days?”

David felt his stomach drop as Alan slowly shook his head. “I’ve seen those kind of things happen before. They’re going to have to replace all the carpets, ceilings, and drywall. I can almost guarantee the electronics are fried. And anything they try to salvage is liable to grow toxic mold.”

David put his face into his hand. He didn’t need this. He liked his apartment. It was close to the office but not too close, and right around the corner from a great comic shop.

Alan sat down next to him and patted his shoulder. “It’ll be okay. We can go salvage your comics and your clothes in the morning.”

“I have work in the morning.”
“Don’t worry about it. I’ll call Donnie and make sure he gives you the day off.”

David smiled a little. He could only imagine that conversation. It didn’t matter that Don was a fully grown FBI agent leading one of the most bad ass teams in the Bureau; Alan was still the boss at the end of the day. “Thank you, Mr. Eppes.”

“You know, I think you can call me Alan. Now take a shower and get some sleep. Things will look better in the morning.”

~

The next morning Charlie didn’t seem surprised to see David sitting at his table eating breakfast. He just listened to David’s tale of woe then vanished into the garage. He figured Charlie must be in the middle of some big idea until a few hours later when he brought back the first load of wet belongings.

Charlie took a box of his books and papers and marched right into the garage. David found the chalkboards pushed aside and the garage strung with drying lines and fans set at angles for optimal air flow. Charlie carefully pinned up each sheet of paper and stood David’s books up on the air hockey table before turning it on.

David looked around at the fluttering paper. “This is brilliant, Charlie.”

“Well there are reasons I’m an applied mathematician. And I flooded my first apartment trying to settle a debate with Larry over plasma to partial conversion rates. So I know your pain.”

~

David was slightly amazed at how easily he fell into the routine of the Eppes household. Not that there really was a routine. It was more an improvisational, free form dance that never stopped. Days twisted around class schedules and cases. Nights could be early with everyone wandering off to bed or sometimes they would drag on ’till dawn the discussion covering the great mysteries of the universe.

And yet after a few days David realized there was trouble in paradise. There were nearly silent hissed fights that would suddenly stop and every so often Amita and Charlie would look at each other in ways that didn’t feel right. Amita would go to bed early claiming early classes and Charlie would take a bottle of some flavor of alcohol and a fresh pack of chalk into the garage and not emerge until morning. If Alan or Don noticed this they said nothing.

~

It was four in the morning when David dragged himself into the house. It was dark and quiet but he expected that. Amita was at some computer conference and Alan was fishing and David was considering just looking for a new apartment rather than arguing with his insurance company any more over his old one.

He got to the top of the stairs with every intention of falling into bed when he noticed the light was on in Charlie’s room. The door was open a little and it sounded like one of those quiet, hissed fights was coming from the other side.

He approached carefully. There shouldn’t be anyone else in the house for Charlie to be fighting with.

David peeked through the slightly open door and promptly tried to order his feet to retreat but they were locked in place. Charlie was spread out naked on his bed furiously working his cock.
He tried to squeeze his eyes shut, tried to look away but he’d had a steady, low grade crush on Charlie since pretty much the moment they had met. Charlie, naked, playing with himself was straight out of a fantasy.

Though as David continued to watch his mind started to point out things that weren’t out of any fantasy. For one Charlie wasn’t hard. Not even close despite the frantic stroking. Then there were the tears squeezing their way from Charlie’s eyes and rolling down his face. And his words. “Please, god, please, fuck, please, please.” Charlie was begging.

Now David really didn’t know what to do. If he saw Charlie crying at any other point it would be an easy decision. Finally he saw something that made him move. Streaks of red were running along Charlie’s cock and spreading with each stroke. Charlie had managed to rub himself until he bled.

David rushed forward brushing aside some antique looking Playboys. “God, Charlie stop!”

Charlie’s eyes flew open and he let out a yelp but before he could do much more than that David grabbed a reasonably clean looking corner of the sheets and pressed it down into Charlie’s lap. “I’m sorry Charlie but as a fellow dude I can’t let you keep doing that.” He took Charlie’s right hand next and looked at it. The skin was red and raw but all the blood seemed to be transfer.

Charlie sat up but hadn’t said anything. There were thick dark rings under his eyes and his hair was limp around his face.

“Seriously, Charlie, what the hell are you doing?” Charlie tilted his head then let out a bark of manic laughter. “Okay, stupid question. Another stupid question, are you alright?”

Charlie laughed again and kept laughing curling in on himself. Then he began to cry. Great heaving sobs came out. David rubbed a hand along Charlie’s back in what he hoped was a soothing manner. He really wanted to check to see if Charlie had stopped bleeding but that would be a little awkward.

It took a good five minutes for Charlie to start to calm down. David used the time to have a firm discussion with himself about taking advantage of friends. “Okay, come on Charlie, tell me what’s wrong.” Charlie waved in the general direction of his lap. “You know, that happens to all guys, you get stress, tired…”

“For six months?” Charlie cut in.

“What?”

“Six months, David. I proposed to Amita six months ago and there’s been nothing.”

David couldn’t contemplate the idea of going six months without at least getting a little relief from the company of his own hand. “Nothing?”

“Nothing, nada, zilch, zip, zero. Nothing.”

“Have you been to a doctor?”

“Of course I’ve been to a doctor,” Charlie snapped. “I’ve been to doctors, specialists, shrinks, acupuncturists. Two months ago I drove to Nevada and gave considerable money to a professional. At the end of the night she gave me a 50% refund and a hug!”

David didn’t know what to say. Charlie was facing every guy’s worst nightmare and he couldn’t think of a thing to say. He just knew as a friend, if nothing else, he had to do whatever he could to
help. He picked up one of the ancient Playboys.

Charlie shrugged. “Figured I’d try going back to the basics.”

“Where’d you even find these?”

“Don threw those at me when I was thirteen and told me to get the hell out of his room and never ask him a question about sex again.”

David dropped the Playboy. “So those girls were your first objects of lust?”

Charlie looked away with a little shrug. David was pretty sure they wouldn’t be having this conversation if it wasn’t four in the morning, but Charlie looked drained and half asleep. Whatever defenses he had were probably gone. David had been heading for bed after a never ending stakeout and was more than a little exhausted himself. David pressed on. “They don’t seem like your type.” Charlie just made some little half chuckle of a noise. “Come on. First real crush, first person to rock your socks, make you want to fall in love?”

Charlie closed his eyes. “Jesse Presman,” Charlie said, his voice barely a whisper.

“Okay. Tell me about Jessie Presman.”

Charlie took a deep breath and looked David dead in the eye. “He was the star batter on Don’s baseball team in high school, he was nice to me, and he saved my life.”

A huge part of David psyche crowed with absolute joy. Charlie was gay or at least once long, long ago had, had a crush on a guy. A smaller but rather more annoying part of David’s brain pointed out that Charlie was engaged to an extraordinarily attractive woman and was still in the middle of a personal crisis and was probably waiting for David to judge. David kept his face neutral. “How’d he save your life?”

“End of freshman year a couple of guys were trying to take my books from me. We got into a tug of war and they let go. I went over sort of backwards and sideways right down a flight of stairs.” David winced but Charlie continued. “I must have hit the stairs just right. Two of my ribs broke, went right into my lung. I wanted to get up and run away, figured they’d be coming after me but Jesse was at the bottom of the stairs. He was already tall, shaving. He just held me down. Wouldn’t let me move. Even rode to the hospital with me. Don was home sick. If I had gotten up the ribs would have possibly rupture my pericardium. I wouldn’t have made it three steps.”

“You’re pretty lucky he was there, then?”

“Yeah.” There was a quiver in Charlie’s voice. He touched his chest and David noticed some old scars under the chest hair.

“Sounds like a guy worth liking.”

“Yeah,” Charlie said again softly his eyes fluttering shut. David took a quick peak down and there seemed to be the tiniest bit of movement under the bloody corner of sheet.

“When did you start crushing on him?” David asked carefully.

Charlie looked like he was falling asleep sitting up, almost half in a trance. “Just before I turned thirteen,” Charlie answered. “My brain started obsessing, every time I closed my eyes. Same dream. Over and over.”
David looked down, there was definitely strings happening. “What was the dream?”

Charlie swallowed hard, his eyes were still closed. “It was stupid.”

“Tell me,” David half whispered.

“After some game,” Charlie mumbled. “I’d have to go to the locker room for something. And he’d be sitting there.” Charlie swallowed hard again as the tears started back up. “He wouldn’t say anything, just touch my face, then pick me up, hold me against his chest while I touched him.”

David’s heart broke. It was all so horribly innocent in its way. It wasn’t even sex, not really, not at that age, just touching and being held by someone stronger, but Charlie was finally, after six months, erect and didn’t seem to be aware of that fact because he was too busy crying. David got the nasty feeling that he was, in fact, looking at a twenty year old identity crisis that was never dealt with. Or, if Don’s old Playboys were anything to go on, Charlie went to just the wrong person and got all the wrong kinds of advice.

David took a deep breath. Charlie obviously needed to get past this. He probably needed to talk to a professional but sometimes when you’re the guy in the room you’ve just got to wing it.

David reached out and laid a hand against Charlie’s cheek. Charlie leaned into it squeezing his eyes tight, his breath ragged and gasping. Then David pressed his free hand to Charlie’s chest. Charlie’s body jerked as if hit by an electric shock. David knew he should say something. He knew he should walk away and leave Charlie to just finish jerking off. He knew that he really shouldn’t do what he was about to do.

Charlie pressed his body hard into David’s hand. David kept one hand against Charlie’s cheek and the other hand he let slowly slide down. His fingers brushed Charlie’s cock through the sheet. Charlie’s eyes sprung open, his head jerked back, and he came.

David could feel his own hands shake and his own cock was pressing agonizingly against the inside of his jeans.

Charlie blinked a few times. David braced himself for Charlie’s loathing. He’d just taken advantage of a friend in emotional distress. Charlie blinked a few more times then launched himself forward. David opened his mouth to say something and found it instantly filled by Charlie’s tongue, and his arms filled with Charlie’s naked wriggling body.

David carefully pushed Charlie away kicking himself as he did. “Charlie, Charlie, we can’t.”

Charlie’s face collapsed. “I’m sorry,” He choked out. “I...” Charlie quickly crawled to the far side of his bed, wrapping the blanket around himself and curling into a ball. David could hear the sniffing. “I’m sorry,” Charlie said again. “I know you don’t...You’re not... you were just... I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

David went around the other side of the bed and sat down by Charlie. He carefully lifted Charlie’s chin so they were looking at each other. “Charlie, it’s okay, believe me, if the situation were different... you are very desirable.”

Charlie rolled his eyes, “Yeah, yeah, published with tenure, I’m a catch.”

David hit a whole new level of confused. “Charlie, you are gorgeous.”

Charlie snorted. “Thank you David, if I pull the other one do I get a prize?”
David tried to work out what people had been telling Charlie his whole life if he was unaware that he was a walking ball of sex. “Charlie, you are gorgeous. You are sex on two legs.”

“Wrong Eppes.”

“Nah, your brother’s just a slut in tight jeans.” A laugh burst through the tears that had yet to properly dry up. “Charlie, you are gorgeous, and sexy, and exciting and I’ve been wondering what kind of a kisser you are for damn near six years.”

“You’re being very nice, David.”

Nice? You think I’m faking it?” David took Charlie’s hand and put it down right on his hard on. Charlie’s eyes went wide but he didn’t pull his hand away, instead he rubbed along the fly of David’s jeans. David had to close his eyes. “I’ve wanted you for a long time, Charlie and believe me I want you now, but I’d never forgive myself if I took advantage of you and that’s what this would be. I’d much rather have you when you know what you want.” David removed Charlie’s hand before he lost complete control. “You have a lovely fiancée who’s going to be home tomorrow afternoon.”

Charlie squeezed his eyes shut. “Oh, God.”

“And I know you love her.”

“Yeah, I love her so much that six months after proposing I can apparently only get off by thinking about my male, high school, crush.”

David tried not to cringe. “Maybe you just needed a little jump start.”

Charlie gave a tiny sob that was loaded with more despair than David had encountered in a long time. “I can fix it,” Charlie said softly, talking more to himself than David. “I fixed it the first time. I love Amita, I can fix it again.”

David threw an extra heap of worry on top of the confusion. “What do you mean you fixed it?”

“Cold showers, a sharp compass point, mental discipline, Don was right, I’m enough of a freak as is, don’t need to give everyone another reason to kick my ass. I love Amita. I can make Dad proud, I can fix it again.”

David locked his jaw driving back nearly blinding rage. He and Don were going to have words, that much was certain, he only prayed that he’d have enough control to not just pull back and knock his boss on his ass.

“Don told you to fix it?” David asked carefully.

Charlie gave a twitch that might have been a shrug or a nod.

David lay his hand against Charlie’s cheek again. Charlie’s eyes closed again. “Charlie, I know you don’t believe in God or any greater concept but I do believe that you are exactly how you were meant to be. I do believe that there is nothing wrong with you, that there is no part of you that needs to be fixed. Don gave you some crap advice probably because he was young and an idiot and I am sure if you asked him now he would tell you to be true to who you are.”

‘And if he didn’t I’d shoot him.’

“What do I do, David?” Charlie whispered.
A hundred answers rushed through David’s head. Half of them involved him, Charlie and a tropical beach. David steadied himself. “Decide what you really want out of life, what will make you truly happy, then go get it.”

Charlie gave a sleepy nod.

“But first, you need to get some sleep.”

~

David shut the blinds in the conference room as Don leaned against the table.

“May I ask what it is you don’t want everyone to see?” Don asked.

“This is so no one will see if I decide to hit you,” David answered truthfully twisting the last blind shut.

Don straightened up but didn’t say anything. David opened a file folder and pulled out Don’s old Playboys. He tossed them on the table. “They’re yours, take them back.”

Don looked at them. “Where the hell did you find those?”

“Got them from Charlie, and you have no idea how much damage you’ve done with them.”

“David, if this is some kind of feminist lecture on the evils of pornography believe me my mother beat you to it a long time ago.”

“That’s good to know but this is about Jesse Presman and the fact that you need to apologize to Charlie.”

Don blinked a few times. “What the hell do you know about Jesse Presman?”

David could feel his hands balling into fists. “I know that Charlie came to you for advice. I know that you told him he was a freak and that he needed to fix himself, and that you threw some porn at him and left him confused and alone and you would not believe how bad you have screwed things up.”

Don stepped in close to David. “First off Jesse was 18 going 30. Chuck was twelve, he was jail bait. And secondly Chuck’s fine, he’s engaged to a hot genius and is going to have lots of little genius babies.”

“If Charlie’s so fine why did I spend an hour last night watching him cry himself to sleep?” Don went very still. “Every word you said that day, Don, he remembers and still believes. Every. Word. Twenty years ago he fixed himself because you told him to and now it’s ripping him up and the first thing he’s going to need to hear to even start repairing the damage is you taking back every word you said on the subject. Oh and try not to be too surprised when his engagement falls apart.”

Don took a half step back. “What do you know?”

“I know there’s big trouble in genius paradise and frankly if you haven’t seen it you should turn in your badge because those two have been miserable since the minute I walked through the door and I know it’s been going on a lot longer than that.”

~

David ran his fingers across the book shelf. Most of the books seemed to be family photo albums. David had finished up a little early and had gotten back to the house to find Alan home from his
fishing trip and Charlie off picking up Amita from the airport.

Don had promised to talk to Charlie when they had a private moment but it had still taken most of the day for David to calm down. He’d spent the night with images of Charlie trying to fix himself in his head and it just wouldn’t stop bothering him. Colby hadn’t even asked.

“Looking for something?”

David whipped around. Alan had an amazing ability to sneak around the house without a sound.

“Just looking for Don’s old year book. Senior year.”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s here somewhere. Looking for incriminating photos of the boss?”

“Nah, Don was just bragging about some girl he used to date and we’re pretty sure he’s all talk.”

Alan chuckled, pulled a book from the shelf, and handed it to David. “Have fun.”

As soon as Alan was gone David flipped to the section with all the sports teams and found varsity baseball. There was a big picture of Don as team captain. David scanned the names at the bottom of the team photo. Jesse Presman, back row center. The biggest guy on the team he also stood out for being the only African American in the group.

David quickly thumbed through the senior pictures. By the looks of things Jesse was the only African American in Don and Charlie’s year. David wondered if perhaps Jesse had empathized with Charlie’s separation, a sense of otherness. David also wondered just who it was Charlie kissed last night. If it was really him or if for a second Charlie found Jesse in his bed and took his chance.

He slid the yearbook back on the shelf. It had been one hell of a kiss and David could not even begin to pretend that he didn’t want more. He wanted Charlie in a dozen ways. He desperately wanted to introduce Charlie to his own body. He had a theory that Charlie was sensual and tactile and probably starved for the touch of another man.

He took a deep breath. In the morning he would start looking for a new apartment. Charlie was most likely going to try to get things back on track with Amita and David knew that the last thing either he or Charlie would need would be to be living under the same roof.

David heard the hum of Charlie’s Prius then the slamming of car doors. A few seconds later the front door opened and Amita dragged in with Charlie hauling the luggage behind.

“Hey, Amita. How was the conference?”

Amita gave a quick, polite, smile. “It was great but I’m dead on my feet. I just want to go to bed.”

“It’s six in the evening.”

Amita started climbing the stairs. “Tell that to my body clock.”

Charlie followed Amita up the stairs only throwing a quick look over his shoulder at David. He didn’t smile. David decided to hit the net and start looking for a new apartment tonight.

~

David moved a pawn.

“How goes the apartment hunt?” Alan asked quickly moving a bishop.
“I’m looking at a place during lunch tomorrow,” David answered while studying the board. His chess game had improved slightly under Alan’s regular tutelage. He still lost every single game but not quite as quickly. Still Alan and Don had spent the night taking turns thrashing him. David reached for his knight.

“I wouldn’t,” Don said from the other side of the room.

“Don’t kibbitz. He needs to make his own mistakes.”

David moved his bishop.

Alan moved a rook. “Check mate.”

“Yeah, don’t move your bishop either.”

David groaned and began resetting the board. There was a sudden thump from upstairs. Everyone looked up. It had been three days since Amita got back from her conference and she and Charlie had gone to ground somehow managing to avoid the other people they shared a home with.

There was the sound of rapid steps and Charlie’s voice which became clear as he and Amita reached the stairs. Amita had a bag over her shoulder. Charlie was in his shorts and an undershirt.

“Please Amita, please.” Charlie was begging as he followed his fiancée down the steps. “Please, I can fix this, just give me a little time, please? I can fix it.” David could see the tears running down Charlie’s face. His heart managed to break and rage in the same moment. Don and Alan seemed frozen in place as the drama neared the front door. “I love you,” Charlie begged clinging to the back of Amita’s shirt. “I can fix this.”

Amita turned around and slipped off her ring, pressing it into Charlie’s hand. “Here,” she said softly. That got Alan and Don to their feet.

“What’s going on?” Alan asked quickly but was flatly ignored.

Charlie shook his head and tried to give the ring back. “No, Amita, please, give me a little time, I can fix things, really, I did it before, I can.”

“There’s nothing to fix, Charlie. I love you. I want you to be happy.”


David heard the tiniest hiss from Don.

‘I warned you.’ David thought.

Amita gave the ring back to Charlie again. “Figure out who you really are Charlie. Then decide if you really want me to have that.”

Before anyone could say anything else Amita took four long quick steps to the door and was gone.

“Charlie, what did you do?” Alan snapped.

David dug his nails into his palm trying to control the rather surprising urge to actually hit Alan.

Charlie’s legs went out from under him and he hit the hard wood floor. Amita’s ring fell from his hand and bounced away.
Don was the first one at Charlie’s side with Alan a step behind. “Hey, Buddy, it’s okay.”

Charlie pushed at his brother. “It’s not okay!” He screamed from the floor. “You told me to fix it!”

“Fix what, Charlie?” Alan asked.

Charlie went silent and began to shake. David had enough. He pushed past Alan and scooped Charlie right off the floor. Charlie didn’t fight as David carried him upstairs. Instead he clung on shaking as if with a fever. David tried to put Charlie into bed but Charlie wouldn’t let go. He really had no choice but to sit down rocking Charlie like a child.

Don came in quietly. David could see Alan lurking just outside the door. Don crouched down and gently touched his hand to Charlie’s head. Charlie flinched turning his face from his brother. He was crying into David chest. “Buddy, I’m sorry. I think I know what this is all about and I’m sorry, I am so sorry. I was young and a complete idiot and I never should have said what I said and I know it’s way too late to take it all back but I am sorry.” Charlie didn’t respond. Don looked up at David. David tipped his head a little towards the door. He would take care of Charlie tonight.

Don left shutting the door behind him.

David started running his fingers through Charlie’s hair in what he hoped was a soothing manner. Charlie’s tears were nearing hysterical levels and David just knew Charlie was going to make himself sick if he kept going. After several minutes of just making soothing, nonsense noises David felt his arms start to go to sleep. Charlie’s tears were calming down a little but they were still coming in waves. They’d start to settle then obviously some new distressing thought would crash into Charlie’s mind and they’d ramp back up again.

David lifted Charlie a bit and twisted him around so they were in a more comfortable position. He was holding out hope that maybe Charlie would cry himself to sleep because while David was sure he was the better person to be taking care of Charlie at that moment he still had no idea what to say to make him actually feel better.

Charlie’s tears were starting to settle again when David became aware of a localized heat.

‘No, no, no.’ David thought to himself. He could feel Charlie growing hard against him. ‘Don’t do that to the guy.’ David prayed as Charlie hiccupsed, certainly unintentionally, driving himself against David. Charlie gasped through the sobs. His body jerked a second time. David closed his eyes and held on to Charlie tight. He knew he was screwed. If he pushed Charlie away it would only amplify the rejection he was feeling that night and if he let Charlie’s body do what it was trying to do it would undoubtedly only lead to greater self loathing on Charlie’s part.

Charlie’s body jerked again and again even as he wept.


Charlie’s body obviously had little care as to what was going on in Charlie’s mind. Like a teenager Charlie slid his body against David’s until with a groan and a shudder he came.

“It’s okay,” David whispered one more time, Charlie sagging in his arms still weeping.

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David was exhausted and he wasn’t sure if breakfast could get any more uncomfortable. He had held Charlie for several hours the night before. They hadn’t talked. They probably should have. Finally
Charlie had passed out in what must have been pure exhaustion. David had stripped him, cleaned him up and tucked him into bed before finding his own bed where he failed to sleep.

“Would you like some more coffee?” Alan asked Charlie. No one had mentioned the events of the previous night.

“No, thank you,” Charlie replied politely. Charlie had come downstairs reasonably calm. He’d showered, shaved and was wearing one of his nicer suits. The shirt was even tucked in. David resisted the urge to tell him he looked nice. Not after what happened between them.

“You have class this morning?”

“Yes, Advanced Set Theory.”

“Ah.”

David was pretty sure if the conversation got any more stilted he would have to shoot something. “I’m looking at an apartment this afternoon,” he said. “You can finally get me out of your hair.”

“Well there’s no rush. It’s nice to have someone I can beat at chess.”

“Alan, you don’t beat me at chess, you slaughter me. You leave my pieces bloody and broken across the board.”

“You’re getting better.”

“Yeah, another twenty years I might be able to get you to a stale mate.”

David heard Charlie make a noise that just might have been a chuckle.

“I have to get to class,” Charlie announced.

“Okay, try to have a good day.”

Charlie nodded. He gave his father a kiss then briefly laid his hand on David’s shoulder and walked out.

David looked at Alan. “I’m sure Charlie will be fine,” Alan said. “For a brain full of logic he’s always been the emotional type.”

David wanted to argue but couldn’t without reveling thing’s that Charlie still wanted to keep secret.

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David was pretty sure his day could not suck more. The ‘great’ apartment he went to look at turned out to be such a shit hole he was tempted to arrest the real estate agent for some sort of fraud. Then he and Colby had chased down a suspect right into a small lake of spilled oil. It didn’t show up too badly on his suit but he could feel it clinging to his skin and he needed a shower. Luckily the house was closer than the office.

David trudged upstairs, trying to avoid getting oil on anything. He pushed open the bathroom door. The first thing he saw was Charlie. The second thing he saw was the blood.
Chapter 2

David paced the waiting room with Don and Alan. He had ridden to the hospital with Charlie and could feel Charlie’s blood tightening as it dried against his skin. When Don and Alan arrived they were put in a privat waiting room. The ones where they put the families of people who aren’t going to make it. Don had locked his jaw and everything else, refusing to show any emotion. Alan, on the other hand, couldn’t stop crying.

David was kicking himself. He should have seen it coming. Charlie was too calm, too together and there was no math. He knew how Charlie reacted to stress. Math. Deep, complicated, possibly unsolvable math. There had been no math.

The door opened. A small, exhausted looking, Indian doctor stepped in. “Eppes?”

“Yes,” Alan said.

“Hello. I am Dr. Patel. First let me say Dr. Eppes is alive.” Don let a long breath and Alan a hard sob. David felt his legs go out from under him and he sat down hard. “We have him stabilized at present. He is unconscious. He lost a lot of blood and did considerable damage to his left arm. He will need serious surgery on it if he ever wants to use it properly again.”

“Whatever it takes,” Alan instantly replied but Dr. Patel looked grim.

“Mr. Eppes, I see a lot of self inflicted injury come through here. A lot of it is drugs...”

“Charlie’s not on drugs,” Don snapped.

“I know, I know. I can tell,” Dr. Patel said. “A lot of it’s drugs and a lot of it’s a cry for help. I need to tell you this was neither. There were no scratches on Dr. Eppes arm. No hesitation marks. Just one cut in just the right place. He had every intention of dying today. Before we wake him up and make him deal with the fact that he is still alive do you have any idea why he has done this?”

Both Don and Alan shook their heads. “No,” Alan said. “I mean his fiancée left last night but, I mean they’re just taking a little time...”

“It wasn’t that. Not really.” David reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled sheet of paper. He had snatched it off the sink and read it in the ambulance. In it Charlie laid everything out. From Jesse, to Don’s bad advice, to Charlie’s medieval self inflicted sexual reprogramming techniques, to attempts to fulfill his destiny, to Amita leaving. The only thing he left out was David’s part in the mess. David wasn’t sure why. He apologized in it to Alan but since he wasn’t going to be able to properly fulfill his duties as a son it would all be for the best. He apologized to Don as well but made a point to name several other mathematicians and scientists who could take over his case load. He thanked David for being a friend. There was no message for Amita or Larry.

David handed the blood streaked sheet to the doctor who read it over quickly. “Oh, I see,” the doctor sighed. “Well, at least he’s in LA.”

The doctor handed the letter to Alan. Alan’s sobs, which had just begun to abate, started again as he read, a hand pressed over his mouth. About half way through he turned around and punched Don in
“Oww.” Don rubbed the spot. “What did I do?”

Alan thrust the letter at Don. Don began to read. He sat down and kept reading. After he got to the end he hung his head between his legs his shoulders shaking.

Dr. Patel folded his arms. “Now I am going to ask and I want a completely honest answer; do either of you have a problem with having a gay person in your family?”

“No,” Alan’s voice was insistent. “Of course not. I wouldn’t have cared. If he’d just said something. He’s my son. I love him.”

Don lifted his head. “I thought Chuck would just go crying to mom. I didn’t think he’d listen to me. I wouldn’t have given a shit. I mean since when has Charlie ever done anything in the curve anyway?”

The doctor sighed. “Like I said, Dr. Eppes had every intention of dying today. Now he is a smart man. My brother teaches engineering at CalSci so I know just how smart Dr. Eppes is. Unless he wakes up to the absolute love and acceptance of his family and friends he will try this again and I am sure he will do it in a way that will leave no room for error. Am I clear?”

Don and Alan both nodded. “Yes.”

“Good. I hate seeing my better stitching go to waste. Now everyone chin up, wipe your eyes. Let’s go see Dr. Eppes.”

Don and Alan followed the doctor. David invited himself along. No one told him no. Charlie was in a far corner of the ER. He was sickly pale even against the white sheets. His left arm was thickly bandaged and tubes with blood and fluid ran into his right arm. What was truly disturbing and made David’s stomach lurch were the heavy restraints keeping Charlie bound to the bed.

Alan turned away for a moment. “God,” he whispered.

Dr. Patel looked over Charlie’s chart and vitals then put a hand on Charlie’s shoulder and gave him a bit of a shake.

Charlie’s eyes fluttered a little and opened. He looked around and his face collapsed. Alan rushed over and gathered him up as much as he could. “Oh, god Charlie. Oh god,” Alan sobbed. “I would never want to lose you, for any reason. You hear me? I love you. You are my son and I love you and don’t you ever, ever try this again. Ever.”

Charlie tried to raise his hand but found it strapped to the bed. He patted his father’s leg instead.

Alan pulled back a little and Don crouched down next to Charlie. “Hey Buddy,” Don’s voice crack. “You’re an idiot you know that? You’re not supposed to listen to me. You’re supposed to take everything I say and prove me wrong.” Charlie didn’t answer. Don pressed his forehead to Charlie’s. “I can’t lose you, Buddy. I can’t lose you. Not when we’re just working out this whole brothers thing. Just tell me what you need. Anything. Okay? Anything.”

Charlie licked his lips and swallowed a few times. “Could somebody scratch my nose, please?” His voice was dry, cracked and paper thin.

Don laughed through some tears and carefully scratched the end of Charlie’s nose.
“Thank you.”

David just reached out and took Charlie’s hand. After a moment Charlie gave it a little squeeze.

David stepped out of the way and the doctor grabbed a chair and sat down next to Charlie. David had a feeling it was more out of exhaustion than anything else. “Good evening Dr. Eppes my name is Dr. Patel.”

“Any relation to the cricket player?” Charlie asked.

“No, Patel is a very common name...” The doctor froze for a second. “You know cricket?”

“I was trying to bond with my fiancée’s father,” Charlie explained, his voice still thin and his eyes half glazed. “They like cricket in India.”

Dr. Patel looked at Alan. “You were going to let him..? Oh dear.”

“He wanted me to ride a white horse,” Charlie mumbled. “I don’t like horses.”

“That is very sensible. My brother fell off his horse, spent his honeymoon in traction.”

“They’re really not going to like me now.”

The doctor patted Charlie’s hand. “It’s okay. They can’t get to you now. No white horses.” A tiny smile ghosted across Charlie’s face. “Now. You gave your family a scare today I don’t think they deserved. Any idiot can see they love you very much no matter what.”

Charlie turned his head away from the doctor. Dr. Patel picked up Charlie’s note. He waved it a couple of times.

“And this? You are in L.A. and it’s the 21st century. This is not a problem. I have two orderlies on the floor who are already referring to you as the cute one and believe me you don’t look that cute right now.”

A tiny chuckle came from Charlie’s throat and his eyes began to clear a little.

“Now, Dr. Eppes you did a lot of damage and it’s going to take a lot of work to put you back together so I’m going to ask you a serious question, should we bother?”

Charlie looked at the doctor. He opened his mouth but no sound came out.

“You’ve done your little dance with death. Your family has been beside themselves. They love you and that is not going to change. Your friend here,” he nodded to David. “That is your blood he is covered in and it took a hell of a lot to throw him out of the room when we were working on you.”

Charlie looked David over apparently just noticing the rust red covering David’s shirt.

“My brother is one of your colleagues,” The doctor continued. “So I know who you are. You are at the top of your field and rising, you have got the cool office, you have a book, you get priority on the super computer, you get to run around and play cops and robbers and have exciting adventures while everyone else is stuck at home on Saturday nights grading papers. So. Are you willing to accept the fact that you hit bottom and you’ve got no where to go but up or shall I just sign you out now and let you walk outside and step in front of a bus?”

Charlie closed his eyes and went deathly still. David held his breath. Finally Charlie shook his head.
“No bus?” Dr. Petal asked.

“No bus,” Charlie repeated almost silently. David let out the breath he’d been holding.

Dr. Patel gave a firm nod. “Good. Now. Here’s how this is going to work. Your system has been through a nasty shock so once there is room you will be moved to the ICU for 24 hours. Once you are fully stable a surgeon is going to look at your arm and see what can be done for it. You may need nerve grafts and I don’t even know what else, you did a real number on it. Once you go through surgery and are cleared to leave you will be transferred to an inpatient psychiatric facility.”

“No now hold on...” Alan tried to object but Dr. Petal just waved him away. Charlie’s face went still.

“You can either go voluntarily or involuntarily. Voluntarily will look better in the long run, but frankly you have a ruddy great gash in your arm and left an impressively detailed if poorly spelled suicide note. There is not a judge in this town who is going to believe that you are not a danger to yourself.”

Charlie swallowed hard and nodded. “Okay.”

“You have insurance through CalSci?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I will recommend you for St. Clare’s across town. It’s not a resort but it’s private and a hell of a lot better than the state set ups. Now, Dr. Eppes, at that point you will have another important decision to make. Are you listening?”

Charlie nodded.

“You are a very smart man. I have no doubt that you will work out the system within days. You will learn what to say, which boxes to tick, which doctors to flatter, you can be out of there in a week. And if you are I am willing to guarantee you will be back here or in the morgue within a year. Or... You can take a deep breath and let them actually help you. You have been hurt and I am not just talking about your arm. You have been bashing the inside of your head about for most of your life and you need to take some time and let yourself heal and let people help you get back to a place where you actually feel comfortable in your own skin instead of just faking it. Do you think you can do that?”

Charlie gave another small nod.

“Alright then. Which one of these men is allowed to make medical decisions for you?”

“Don.”

“Well I’m going to take him away for a while and make him sign lots of bits of paper he’s probably not going to actually read.”

Charlie smiled a little. “Our mother was a lawyer.”

“Well then it’ll take him even longer. Your friend and your father can stay for a bit but not too long.”

Charlie gave a small nod. Don squeezed Charlie’s good hand then followed Dr. Patel.

Alan sat down next to Charlie and picked up his hand. “I’m so sorry, Charlie. I should have seen. I shouldn’t have put all that extra pressure on you. I...”
“It’s okay,” Charlie whispered. “Not your fault.”

David could see Charlie was beginning to fade out. He crouched down and ran his hand across Charlie’s face. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Charlie repeated blinking slowly with impending sleep.

“Don’t do that again.”

“Okay.”

“Promise.”

Charlie’s eyes closed and his lips moved. David told himself Charlie was making his promise. He watched Charlie breathe for several minutes before he could bring himself to take his hand from Charlie’s face.

David realized Alan was looking at him. “If he wakes up again tell him I’ll come and see him tomorrow.”

“Okay.” David moved to leave but Alan caught his wrist. “Thank you David.”

“I got lucky.”

“I’ll take that luck.”

“So will I.”

~

David became aware of the fact that he was shaking as he stood in front of the hospital. Colby’s truck pulled up. He got in but nothing felt quite right. The handle of the door didn’t feel quite real under his fingers. The sound was muted and the colors seemed faded. Something was nagging the edges of his hearing.

“David!” Reality slammed back in full force and David jumped.

“What?”

“Whose blood is that?” Colby carefully enunciated every word.

“Blood?”

Colby grabbed David by his shirt. “Shirt, hands, blood, whose?”

David felt slightly drunk as he spoke. “Charlie.”

“Charlie?”

“Yes.” Reality was beginning to fade out again.


“He’s alive.”

Colby finally let him go. “What the hell happened? You were going to grab a shower then Don
vanished. What happened to Charlie?"

"He..." David suddenly couldn’t find the words. If he said it out loud it meant it really happened. "He, tried..." The answer must have been on his face because Colby closed his eyes.

"Jesus, fuck," Colby breathed. "He tried to kill himself?" David tried to nod but it came off as more of a twitch. "Why?"

David opened his mouth but not even air came out. All the feelings he’d been holding back for the last several hours were rushing up and choking him.

"Okay, okay. Are Don and Alan still in there?"

This time David did manage a nod.

"Okay, then let’s get you back to my place, you can clean up, get changed, and get drunk."

‘Clean.’ David shook his head. "No, no. I need to go back to the house. I need to clean."

"David, man..."

"Please, Colby just drive me back to the house."

Colby put the truck in gear. "Okay, but you are not leaving my sight."

~

David pushed open the front door of the Craftsmen. He’d forgotten to lock it on his way out with the ambulance crew. He was half surprised he’d even managed to close it. He looked around. Nothing seemed to be missing. The TV was still there.

He noticed there was a drop of blood on the hardwood near the door. A drop of blood and a small smear of oil. He walked slowly upstairs following the trail of blood drops, Colby right behind. The bathroom door was open but the sun had gone down long before and the room was dark. David knew what he would see when he turned on the light. He did it anyway.

The room was smeared with blood. It was pooled on the floor dark red and sticky and drying to brown where he and the EMTs had stood in it and knelt in it. There were bloody hand prints on the sink and walls where David had grabbed or leaned.

"Holy, shit," Colby breathed. "He really did it didn’t he?"

There was a small, sharp, bloody pocket knife sitting on the edge of the sink. The note had sat next to it.

"I need to clean this up."

"You need to rest, I think you’re in shock man."

"No, Alan wasn’t here, he didn’t see this. I can’t let him see this." David felt Colby’s hand warm and heavy on his shoulder. "He can’t see this."

"Okay, where’s the cleaning stuff?"

David tried to remember. "I think most of it’s in the kitchen."
“Okay, wait here. I’ll be right back.”

David stood next to the puddle of blood as he waited for Colby. ‘I’m sorry, Charlie.’

He heard Colby coming back down the hall. He had trash bags, rolls of paper towels, sponges, a mop, bucket and a bottle of dishwashing powder. “I heard it’s good for getting up blood ‘cause it’s designed to break up fats and proteins.”

David shrugged, grabbed the paper towels, and got on his knees to start soaking up the blood that was still damp.

David found time began to slip as he cleaned. He and Colby didn’t talk. They just filled bucket after bucket with soap and water and dumped it away as it went pink.

He dipped a scrub brush right into bleach and scrubbed at tile grouting until it was whiter than it had been in the morning. The bleach burned his eyes and his lungs but he kept scrubbing.

Finally David stood in the middle of the bathroom and spun around looking for spots he missed.

“I think we got it all,” Colby said from where he was leaning in the doorway.

‘No.’

“Do you have your evidence kit in your truck?”

“Yes?” Colby answered carefully.

“I need... I need luminal. I missed some. It’s still here. The luminal...”

“No, man.”

“I...”

Colby stepped forward and firmly took the scrub brush firmly from David’s hand. “No. You don’t get to go Lady MacBeth on me. The bathroom is clean, so let’s put all the cleaning stuff away, then you are coming back to my place and getting yourself cleaned up and don’t even think about trying to argue with me.”

David looked around the bathroom. He’d never be able set foot in here again. Not without seeing the floor covered in blood. “Okay.”

“Alright. Come on.”

David let Colby led the way as they squirreled away most of the cleaning supplies and threw away anything stained pink.

They were just about to the front door when it opened and Don and Alan came in. The four of them stared at each other for a moment as if they were all strangers.

Colby moved first and pulled Alan into a hug. “Thank you,” Alan whispered. Colby hugged Don next. Don actually hugged back clinging to Colby for a few seconds and probably only pulling away out of some residual sense of propriety.

“How’s Charlie?” Colby asked when Don finally let go.

“They got him a bed in ICU for the night.”
“Good.”

There was quiet again.

“We cleaned the bathroom,” David said to fill the void.

Alan looked confused and David could spot the moment of pain when he realized why the bathroom would have needed to be cleaned. “Thank you.”

Colby pointed to David. “I’m taking this guy home and getting him cleaned up and drunk. Do you two need anything?”

“We’re fine Colby, thank you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, we’ll be okay.”

Colby gave a maternal scowl and slightly suspicious squint. “Okay, but if you need anything at all, call.”

“We’ll call. Thank you.”

“Ohkay.” And with that quick word Colby grabbed David by the arm and dragged him out.

~

David was handed a pair of clean sweats, a black trash bag, and a towel and was propelled into Colby’s tiny bathroom. “Scrub.” Was Colby’s order as he shut the door. David wasn’t sure if he’d have the energy. He already felt like he was falling asleep on his feet.

He stripped dumping all his clothes into the trash bag. He’d liked the suit he’d been wearing but if the oil hadn’t ruined it the blood and the bleach did. David was horrified to realize just how much blood had soaked right through and was coating his skin in places. He kicked his shoes to the side. Colby’s shower had a removable head with hose attachment. David started at the top and held the shower head an inch from his skin trying to power spray the day off his body. The water that ran down the drain was pink. He turned Colby’s bar of soap pink as he scrubbed at his legs and chest. When he tasted salt he though he might be bleeding himself somehow before realizing there were tears joining the shower spray.

David stayed in the shower until the tears dried up and the water was going down the drain clean. By the time he put himself together enough to emerge from the bathroom the small apartment smelled like pizza.

“I was about to come in there and make sure you weren’t scrubbing through your own skin.”

“Thought about it.” David collapsed on Colby’s couch. It could have been the end of a hundred different days but David could barely remember ever feeling this exhausted.

“Eat some pizza.”

David looked down at the pie with all his favorite toppings. “I’m not hungry.”

“You’re going to be drinking in a second. Put something in your stomach.”
David grabbed a slice and put it in his mouth. He barely tasted it but he chewed and swallowed. It took less energy than arguing with Colby would have.

Colby got up and came back with a bottle of Johnny Walker and two glasses. David was sure Colby must have learned to drink whiskey at his father’s knee. He splashed a little into his glass and considerably more into David’s.

He lifted his glass. David followed suit.

“To Charlie’s long, happy, healthy life.”

David chuckled darkly at that but drank. Colby filled up his glass again. “I’m relief supervisor. If we get a call...”

“If you get a call me, Liz and Nikki can handle whatever it is until morning and if anyone asks you and Don were working late, ordered Chinese and got mutual food poisoning.”

David looked for any hint of joking in Colby’s face then knocked back the whiskey. It burned going down but felt like it was cauterizing something in his throat that had been bleeding since he found Charlie.

Colby poured him a third big drink.

“So. How long have you had a thing for Charlie?”

David almost spit out his drink. “What makes you think...”

“Spy,” Colby answered simply. “I’ve seen your porn collection in an effort to find anything that could be used for blackmail or recruitment purposes.”

David tried to think if there was anything incriminating in his bedside collection.

“I also found that set of very anatomically correct comics.” David felt the blood rush to his face. He’d spent almost as much time working on that particular collection as the rest of his comics. And those were quite incriminating.

“For what it’s worth I’ve nosed around Don’s collection as well, Megan’s too.”

“Megan had porn?” David didn’t believe it.

“No. She had lots of novels with phrases like ‘heaving bosoms’ in them.”

David drank his whiskey. “I wouldn’t have guessed.”

“Everyone’s got a secret, but you didn’t answer my question.”

David poured himself another drunk. “Charlie’s a friend. You know that. He’s part of the team.”

“Yeah, yeah he is. How bad have you got it for him?”

David sagged in on himself. “I’m never going to have him so there’s no point in carrying a torch.”

David looked at Colby. “You don’t mind. I mean...”

“Nope and if I did we wouldn’t have gotten this far.”

David thought about Charlie. He usually didn’t let himself dwell on his attraction to his presumably
straight friend. He told himself he was just glad to have Charlie as a friend and crime fighting partner. Still, sometimes on the particularly lonely nights after really bad cases a fantasy Charlie would crawl into his bed and babble math softly while David took pleasure in Charlie’s body.

David let out a long sigh.

“Do you know why he did it?” Colby asked.

“Yeah,” David mumbled into his glass.

“Can you tell me?”

David grabbed the bottle and drank straight from it. “Nope.”

“Is he going to be okay?”

“I have no idea.”

Chapter End Notes

I was both sickly and accident prone as a child. By age 18 I’d broken a dozen bones, twisted everything, nearly drowned, and had just about every non lethal bacteria or virus out there. Not to mention chronic strep throat until I was 12. Because of this I spent a lot of evenings and nights as a child in the local emergency room. Our local ER was one of those chop shops that mainly dealt with gunshot wounds, stabbings and drug overdoses. And for reasons I’m still not entirely sure of every doctor there was Indian. And they must have all been from the same little corner of India because they all had a very specific accent and way of speaking that I’ve only ever heard one other time as an adult and I simply can not replicate on the page but can still hear in my head clear as day. They also always looked like they were at the tail end of a triple shifts. Dr. Patel is a loving homage to all those incredibly exhausted doctors who made sure that all my limbs grew straight, all my joints bent correctly and pumped me full of enough antibiotics to ward off the Black Death. I hope they all moved on to better jobs at slightly less shithole hospitals not run by Kaiser.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Charlie’s in the hospital, David’s on the couch.

David could barely see through the steam. His shoes echoed off the cement floor. He wandered down each row of lockers. Beneath the echo of his shoes he could just hear soft, thin, sobbing. He found the showers at the end of the last row of lockers all running hot. A small, thin body, curled into a tight ball was huddled under the streams of water. The sobs echoed off the tiled walls and seemed to come from everywhere now and the water running down the drain was tinted red.

David opened his eyes and fumbled with his phone trying to turn off the alarm. His head was pounding and it felt like something had died in his mouth.

Once the incessant beeping of the phone’s alarm was turned off David picked up the note that had been sitting by his phone along with a glass of water and what looked like a couple of Tylenol.

*Hit the office early.*

*Talked to Don.*

*You have the day off.*

*Colby*

David blinked at the note a couple of times then checked his phone. There was a message from Don also telling him not to come in. David was willing to believe that Don was not following his own advice however and was probably already nose deep in the day’s paperwork.

David swallowed the Tylenol and tried to think through the day to come. His car was still at Charlie’s place along with all his clean clothes. He knew he couldn’t avoid the house but he wanted to. He didn’t even want to think about the previous day. It would be a toss up as to which image haunted him the longest. Charlie on that bathroom floor, Charlie surrounded by doctors and nurses barely viable, or Charlie strapped to the hospital bed like some prisoner.

He closed his eyes and for a second and hoped sleep would over take him again but years of discipline won out. And a shower, a cab ride, and a change of clothes later David was flashing his badge at the duty nurse in ICU.

Charlie was still in his bed, presumably still asleep. He looked almost peaceful except for a little crease between his eyes. There were still tubes and wires hooked up to him and David could see the straps running from under the bed up under the blanket. Alan was sitting quietly by Charlie’s side just staring at his son. David couldn’t imagine what Alan must be thinking. He’d probably spent years preparing himself to get a call about Don, but that was the situation every FBI parent was in. David wasn’t even sure what he was supposed to say to Alan now. When Don had been the one laying in ICU at least he could tell Alan they were on the case, they would find the person who hurt his son and bring them to justice.

David grabbed a spare chair and sat down next to Alan. “How is he?” he asked softly.
Alan just shrugged. “I think they’re keeping him sedated.” He reached out and brushed an errant curl from Charlie’s forehead.

“Have you slept any?”

Alan shook his head. “I just keep going over everything. Every moment of Charlie’s life, trying to figure out what I missed, what I said, what I didn’t say. A father should know these things. How he could have thought...”

David saw Charlie’s face give the smallest twitch. “Alan, why don’t you go get yourself some coffee. I’ll stay with him for a while.”

Alan ever so softly touched his son’s face then got up. “Thank you.”

David watched Alan walk down the row of the injured, sick and dying.

“He’s gone, you can stop faking it.”

“How could you tell?” Charlie mumbled keeping his eyes shut.

“You have a lousy poker face.” Charlie opened his eyes. “How’d you sleep?”

“Didn’t. I can’t sleep on my back. Always feel like I’m suffocating. Then my back starts to ache and itch.”

“Need anything scratched?” David offered.

“Actually,” Charlie pushed himself up on his elbows a little. “If you could just get right between my shoulder blades?”

David stood and reached behind and under Charlie. He didn’t scratch too hard and Charlie’s head rolled back.

“Oh god, yes, right there.” David gave as much of Charlie’s back as he could reach a good scratch before Charlie collapsed back down again. “Thank you.”

“No problem.”

Charlie stared at the ceiling for a bit a slight smile on his face before frowning suddenly. “Why aren’t you at work?”

“Don gave me the day off.”

Charlie closed his eyes. “I’m sorry David,” he said his voice suddenly small again. “You weren’t... It wasn’t supposed to be you.”

“Who was it supposed to be then, your father or your brother?” Charlie turned his head away from David. “It would have killed either of them and you know it.” Charlie didn’t say anything. David remained silent himself just watching Charlie. David wanted to gather him up more than just about anything. Hold him close, fulfill that adolescent fantasy of touching and being held.

David kept his hands firmly in his lap. It seemed like every time he touched Charlie things just got worse.

“Yes?”

“I’m scared. I am so scared.”

David swallowed down the pain that crawled up his throat. “Scared of what?”

“Everything.”

He reached out and let his hand settle on Charlie’s curls. “I’m here. It’ll be okay.”

Charlie’s body trembled for a moment. “What am I supposed to do now? I can’t...”

“You’re supposed to get better.”

“Tried that. Didn’t work.”

A long sigh escaped David’s lungs. “That’s because you were trying to fix something that wasn’t broken and you know that. You are an educated, open minded adult. If... If Colby came in here and announced he was gay you wouldn’t have a problem with it would you?”

“No,” Charlie answered quickly.

“Fine, so why do you have a problem with yourself?” Charlie didn’t answer but finally turned back to look at David. “It’s something you should think about.”

“Thank you Dr. Sinclair.”

David snorted but took sarcasm as a good sign. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a folded up magazine. “I brought you a math journal, for when you get your hands free.”

Charlie pulled at his straps a little. “That’s not going to happen anytime soon.”

“I’m sure they’ll let you up later today.”

Charlie shook his head. “One of the orderlies told me they unstrapped a guy about a year ago and he managed to get a hold of a scalpel. The hospital just settled out of court with the family for like 60 million or something so there are orders not to let any crazies go until they’re someone else’s problem.”

David cringed. “Well, I’ll come by every day to scratch your back.”

Charlie smiled. “Willing to take a crack at reading me that journal while you’re at it?”

David looked at the journal in his hand. “Only if you tell me what all the little squiggly math bits are called ‘cause it all looks Greek to me.”

“Most of it is Greek.”

“Well, that would be why then, wouldn’t it?”

~

By the time Alan got back Charlie had David making notes in the margins of the first article while giving a running commentary on why the authors of it were idiots. It was a little surprising. David had seen Charlie snipe at that Penfield guy but from the sounds of it Charlie did not have any great love for many of his fellow mathematicians.
Alan looked at the article. “Ah. Dr. Ferguson has struck again.”

Charlie snorted. “Doctor my ass. David has a better grounding in classic mathematical principle. No offense.”

“None taken.”

“That idiot should be stripped of his letters and flogged naked in the street.”

Alan let out a long sigh. “Charlie, you were thirteen. Can you let it go?”

“I have never cheated in my life and that moron who whored his way into his doctorate has put a permanent smudge on my reputation as a scientist. So, No. I will let it go when I have shown the world that that fuckwit is only good for teaching middle school math in Fresno.”

David winced. That was tantamount to condemning someone to the third circle of hell.

Alan patted Charlie’s arm. “At least you have a long term goal.”

David stuck around for a few more hours until an orthopedic surgeon arrived along with Charlie’s lunch.

David gave Charlie’s hand a squeeze and promised to come back in the morning. After that David drove to the office. He sat in his car for a long time staring at nothing, thinking about Charlie, thinking about how bad he wanted to hold Charlie. The temptation had been so strong, to undo those straps, gather Charlie up, run away with him some place safe for just the two of them.

David took a deep, ragged breath pushing down feelings that hadn’t existed since he left Tel Aviv. Charlie hadn’t shown any interest in him. That one desperate kiss had been just that, a mindless act of desperation. It hadn’t meant anything.

David jumped at a tap on his window. He rolled down the window and Don leaned in. “Thought I gave you the day off.”

“And what was I supposed to do with it?”

Don shrugged a little. He looked exhausted and old as if one night had put a decade on him. David wondered how he looked. “I’m going to see Charlie.”

“I dropped by this morning.”

“How is he?”

“Frothing at the mouth over some guy named Ferguson.”

Don barked with laughter. “The arch nemesis. He accused Charlie of cheating years ago since no thirteen year old could possibly be that good and Charlie has never forgiven him.”

“And never will.”

“Oh.” Don reached into his jacket and pulled out an envelope with David’s name on it. “Dad found it on Charlie’s bed last night.”

David stared at the envelope. His name was written in big block letters like a child might and the hand that had written it had been shaking. He tore the envelope in half and handed it back to Don. “If Charlie wants to say something to me he can say it to my face.”
Don dropped his head. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know. Everything, nothing. I just feel like I should be apologizing.” Don shook his head. “No. Thank you. That’s what I need to say. Thank you.”

“I got lucky. Right place, right time.”

“I don’t know what I would have done if...” He leaned on the car rubbing at his face. “I don’t know how many really bad nights I’ve spent staring at my gun. Even took a taste of gun oil a few times but my finger never got near that trigger, not really. How could Charlie have just... done it?”

It was on the list of questions David had been asking himself as well. He thanked God Charlie had gone for a knife rather than Don’s spare gun that was kept at the house. Or David’s spare gun which was at the house as well. “How many perfectly steady agents have you known that have just eaten their guns one day?”

“A few, yeah, but Charlie’s not an agent.”

David snorted. “Sell me another one, Don. He’s got everything but the badge. He’s got, what, over a hundred cases now? Best conviction rate in the business. He shoots 290 and gets out of bed at 3 AM to poke at dead bodies with the rest of us.”

“Okay, I get it.”

“And,” David continued. “I’ll lay you dollars to doughnuts it’s the part of his life he likes the best.”

“And how sad a statement is that?” Don went around the other side of David’s car and got in. He didn’t look at David and David got the feeling he just wanted to sit down. “You know when Charlie was little he used to follow me around everywhere. First steps he took he was trying to follow me. I loved it. Thought it was great. Like having my own little fan club. Then one day he did my math homework for me. Then he finished my math book. Then he was in classes with me, then classes above me. And suddenly I didn’t want him any more.” David felt his chest clench as Don’s voice cracked. “He was weird and wrong and annoying and asked too many questions I couldn’t answer and was always getting me into fights and...” Don sucked in a deep breath. “Oh god I fucked up.”

“We all fucked up, Don.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Serious, Don. I should have seen it coming I mean, your mother passes away Charlie locks himself in the garage and does math. You nearly get shot, Charlie locks himself in the garage and does math. You get stabbed, Charlie locks himself in the War Room and does a lot of math. Amita walks out and he gets up in the morning and takes a shower and puts on a clean suit and goes to work like nothing happened. I was staring right at it. I should have called the men in the white coats myself.”

Don snorted. “Our Mom sent Charlie to a shrink when he was like ten or something ‘cause she was worried about the pressure getting to him. Charlie ate the guy alive.”

“Well now he’s going to get help whether he likes it or not.”

“Yeah.” Don looked at his watch. “I should go see Charlie. God knows what I’m going to say to him.”
“Start with Hi. Go from there.”

“Thanks. Oh. I haven’t told the girls. Haven’t told anyone really. I mean I don’t want to air Charlie’s dirty laundry while he’s still strapped down…”

“He’ll probably appreciate that.”

Don got out of the car. “Go home, David. Get some extra sleep. You look like you could use it.”

“Look in the mirror, Don. Take your own advice.”

“Soon as I can find the time.”

~

David stared at the chess board. It was only half assembled. The pieces of his failed campaign still sat at the edge waiting to be replaced for another game. David heard the door open and looked up. He wasn’t sure how long he’d been staring at the board. Most of the afternoon judging by the ache in his back.

Alan came in and David really looked. Alan looked old. Far older than when they first met and now he seemed bent under the weight of the last couple of days. He sat down hard on the other side of the chess board but didn’t say anything. He just stared at the board as well.

“How’s Charlie?” David finally asked when the ticking of the clock on the wall had somehow become oppressively loud.

“The surgeon came by. They’re going to take him into surgery first thing in the morning. 7 AM. He did a lot of nerve damage, messed up the tendon a little, the artery of course. They’re going to fix as much as they can but he probably won’t get full use of his hand back. It’ll always be a little weak they said.”

“I’ll try to come and see him before he goes in.”

Alan nodded then took a deep breath and slapped his hands down on his thighs. “Have you eaten?”

“Not really.”

“Right, food it is then.” Without any other comment or even asking if David was hungry Alan puttered off to the kitchen. David took a deep breath himself and followed.

~

David snuck quietly past the nurses into Charlie’s little corner of the hospital. They would wake him up soon for pre-op stuff. He couldn’t tell if Charlie was asleep or just had his eyes closed. He sat down in the chair by the bed. It squeaked a little and Charlie’s eyes opened.

“Hey,” David whispered. “Need your back scratched?” Charlie smiled and nodded pushing himself up on his elbows. David reached under and scratched. Charlie’s head rolled back and he moaned just a little. David clenched his teeth together. The eroticism in that tiny sound went into David’s ears, bypassed his brain and headed south. He scratched a little harder and Charlie made a sound between a sigh and a whimper. Anyone else David would have accused of teasing but he was sure Charlie had no idea what he was doing, how unconsciously sexy he was even strapped to a hospital bed. Finally Charlie sighed and David stopped.
“Thank you,” Charlie whispered lowering himself back down.

“No problem. How are you doing?”

Charlie shrugged. “Hospital shrink agreed that I should be spending a little time in the funny farm.”

“Think of it as a vacation.”

“A potentially permanent one.”

“I seriously doubt that. You are perfectly sane. You just had a... laps in judgment there.”

Charlie turned his head away. “The guy two beds over, he died in the night. 3AM his heart stopped and didn’t start. His wife was with him, holding his hand. I could hear her crying over the sound of the doctors working. He went to get milk. Ended up getting a double barrel shotgun in the gut. And people wonder why I’m an atheist. God makes no logical sense but I wouldn’t want to believe in a god that has a hand in this world.”

David put a hand on Charlie’s head. His hair was feeling a little greasy and it was getting snarled, especially in the back. He tried to smooth it down a little.

“I’m sorry, Charlie.”

Charlie looked back at him. “For what?”

David shrugged. He wasn’t really sure. He was sure he had lots to apologize for. “Everything I did wrong.”

A deep frown cut into Charlie’s face. “I’m the one who stuck a knife in my wrist?”

“Yeah, but... I knew you weren’t in a good place. I should have... I don’t know. It shouldn’t have come to that.”

“You’re not my keeper, David.”

David jolted a little. Charlie was right of course but that thought hadn’t crossed David’s mind once. For days now, ever since that late night confession of teenage love David had been wanting to do nothing more than be Charlie’s keeper. He wanted to keep him safe, sane, hold him and not let him go until the world became a better, more accepting place.

David brushed a bit of hair from Charlie’s forehead. “Maybe I’m interested in the job.”

Charlie snorted. “You don’t get to be Director of the FBI babysitting gay, suicidal, mathematicians.”

“I don’t know. You make my arrest rate look pretty good and from what I hear the current director is pretty impressed with your stuff.”

“I hate to say it but the current director failed college algebra.”

“How do you know that?”

Charlie grinned. “I’m a tenured professor. I have access to permanent academic records.”

David was shocked at the plain fear that hit him at the words ‘permanent academic record’. “That English teacher was out to get me,” he said quickly.
“I haven’t looked up yours, though the next time you’re on stake out with Colby ask him about that modern dance elective.”

“Modern dance?”

“He got a B+.”

David was still contemplating the thought of his partner jumping around in tights when the nurses came in and shooed him out. He gave Charlie’s hand a squeeze as he left and promised to come back in the evening.

~

David glanced at the clock on his computer. It was nearly 9:30 and he was still catching up on a day’s worth of missed paperwork after he and Don had ‘food poisoning’. He wondered how long the surgery was going to take. Alan was waiting at the hospital. Colby had volunteered to wait with Alan and Don had vanished early saying he had somewhere to be leaving David in charge.

David turned around to the tap on his shoulder. Don stood there looking ragged like he’d been crying. David’s heart leapt into his throat and Don must have read his face.

“No word on Charlie, yet,” he said quickly. “It’s pretty fiddly work, nerves and stuff. They said it’ll take a few hours. Here,” Don pushed a scrap of paper into David’s hand. “Don’t be late.”

~

David settled into the couch and looked at Dr. Bradford. Bradford looked right back. “Well, go ahead.”

David was confused. “Um, go ahead with what?”

“Whatever you need to say.”

“I’m not sure what’s going on here. Don just gave me a piece of paper with a time and an office number on it.”

“So you’re fine?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Don’t need to talk to anyone?”

“I’m fine,” David repeated.

“So you found one of your friends nearly dead on the bathroom floor the other day ‘cause he opened his wrist, ended up covered in his blood while just barely saving his life but you’re fine?”

David was on his feet and on his way to the door in a split second. “I don’t need to be here.”

“If you go back to the office Eppes is just going to send you right back down so you might as well sit here in silence for the next 57 minutes and save yourself the trip.” David’s hand hovered over the door knob. He felt it tremble. “Why don’t you do me a favor as well and sit down and talk to me.”

“How’s that doing you a favor?”

“Honestly, I’ve met Charlie a few times, I like the guy, the fact that he did what he did is bugging
the hell out of me and I barely know him. I'm trying to understand what happened and as far as I've heard you probably know more than anyone about what went down.”

David just shrugged a bit. “I needed to grab a shower, change my clothes, opened the bathroom door and there was Charlie and a lot of blood.”

Bradford shook his head and motioned David back towards the couch. “Nah. Suicides are a process. Things build up and up until something tips the whole pile over. We only know in retrospect that we saw it happening.”

“Why don’t you go down to the hospital and ask Charlie this?”

“I’m asking you.”

David sat back down. It didn’t feel right talking about Charlie’s problems. “You’re not going to spread this around?”

“Not allowed and I wouldn’t. Now, what was the first problem you saw?”

David thought about Charlie’s first problem and felt the blood go to his cheeks. “That I saw? This is embarrassing.”

“I’m sure I’ve heard worse.”

“Oh I doubt it. Charlie... after he proposed to Amita he... uh... ended up with a little case of... Mr. Floopy, you know.” David couldn’t help the slightly juvenile miming.

Bradford to his credit only raised an eyebrow. “Well, that happens to everyone.”

“Yeah, except his didn’t go away. We’re talking six months.”


“Yeah.”

“And he actually told you about this?”

“Yes.”

“Can I ask what the situation was? I mean was he drunk?”

“No,” David snapped. “It was like 4 AM. I’d gotten off a stakeout. I mean I was sleep walking. I got back to the house, the light was on in Charlie’s room. I just peeked in for a second ‘cause I thought I heard something and he was... well...” David made a couple of hand gestures feeling even more juvenile about it.

“Gottcha.”

“I mean I was going to leave,” David said quickly, “Just... he was crying and it wasn’t working...” David felt his chest squeeze as he fell into the memories of that night. “And I was going to leave but... He was bleeding. He rubbed until he bled. I couldn’t let him do that, I mean he was hurting himself.”

“You interrupted?”

“He was bleeding,” David said again. It was his only justification for walking into that room outside
of his own desire for Charlie.

“What did he do when you interrupted?”

“Cried. I’ve never... I mean Charlie is tough. I know Don makes him out to be just his baby brother but I’ve been in a fire fight with the guy. We put life and death pressure on him every case and he holds up well as any.”

“You’ve got a lot of respect for him.”

“Yeah, yeah, we all do.”

“So seeing him like that?”

David sighed. He knew he’d been had. “Seeing him like that.” David cursed himself. Even as Charlie had been weeping he had wanted him. He could still remember how warm Charlie’s body had been in his arms, in that bed and how cold that same body had been on that bathroom floor, the blood pouring out.

“He told me what was wrong. I just wanted to help,” David lied to himself.

“Of course you did.”

“We were talking. I asked...” David dropped his face to his hands. “I should have just left. He’d be... Oh god.” David squeezed his eyes shut. The guilt was rising up in waves, nearly choking him.

“What did you ask?” Bradford gently prompted.

“I asked who his first crush was. Just... I made him admit to it.”

“Admit to what?”

“A man. An older boy in Don’s class. Jesse Presman. And once I had the answer, he had the answer and his body started reacting and...” David did his best to choke down the acid that rolled up from his stomach. “He’s just a child. Oh God, I shouldn’t be allowed near him.”

“Last I checked Charlie Eppes is an adult.”

David shook his head. “No, he’s... He’s only twelve. The last time he let himself have a real desire, a normal fantasy he was twelve. Don told him he was a freak and he believed it, he tried to fix himself. He... One fantasy of Jesse holding him, touching his face, not even sex, so what the fuck do I do?” David felt his voice crack.

“What did you do?”

“I touched his face,” David whispered. “I touched his body, his... And once he’d let go I pushed him away. He kissed me and I pushed him away. Told him we couldn’t. Like I was taking some kind of fucking moral high ground. Sexually he’s twelve and I touched him ’cause I’ve been wanting to touch him for years then I fucking run away and left him to his own over sized brain that some how justified death as an option preferable to facing his own actual wants and he’s a fucking atheist. He wasn’t trying to send himself to heaven or hell or some other life.” David wiped at his eyes that were suddenly blurry. “He was trying to completely end it and if I’d just walked away...”

“Do you really believe Charlie’s life would have continued on perfectly happy if you had walked away?”
“I...” David stumbled under the weight of mounting guilt. “I honestly believe that if I hadn’t asked him who his first crush was he wouldn’t have tried to kill himself.”

Bradford let out a long slow breath. “Okay. Well, that’s going to be a lot of guilt to hull around. What are you going to do about it?”

“Aren’t you supposed to tell me?”

“Nope.”

David rubbed at his face. He suddenly felt exhausted. “I shouldn’t be near him.”

“Why not?”

“I might try to...” David didn’t want to say it.

“Touch him?”

“He’s a child.”

“He’s an adult and yes he’s probably a bit behind the curve right now but once he gets his head back on straight, no pun intended, he’s going to realize that he’s an adult with adult desires just like you.”

David curled in on himself. Oh yes he had adult desires and he wanted to show them to Charlie in the worst kind of way.

“I was happy,” David whispered. “How sick is that? He’s a friend and he’s sobbing in my arms and a part of me was actually happy ‘cause he once had a crush on a guy 20 years ago.”

Bradford didn’t answer. He just looked at David for a long time until David felt himself start to squirm a bit. “How long have you been attracted to Charlie?” he finally asked.

David shrugged a bit. “I don’t know. About five minutes after I met him?”

“Before the other night did you ever approach him? Ask him out? Make a pass?”

“No,” David answered quickly.

“Why not?”

“Lots of reasons.”

“Such as?”

“All the cute ones are straight and taken? Bad career move to hit on your boss’ little brother. Worse career move to hit on your boss’ little brother when you’re male. Just wasn’t really ready for a long time.”

Bradford frowned. “What does that mean? Not ready?”

David sighed. That was more territory he didn’t really want to get into. “Um... Couple weeks before I started in L.A my... boyfriend, I guess, was struck by a car. Killed. By the time I was up for dating again Charlie was sort of starting things with Amita and Claudia and I were getting along pretty well so... Always put the career before romance anyway.”

“And how’s that working out?”
“Well up until the other night just fine, thank you.”

Bradford leaned forward and looked at David. David started feeling like he was an interesting specimen or something. “What do you want, David?”

“What do you mean?”

“Long term goals. Career?”

“Well, I hear the Director’s office has a pretty good view.”

“That’s a pretty serious goal.”

“Don’t think I can do it?”

Bradford just shrugged a little. “Probably, if you want. I’ve never gotten the impression that you’re a politics guy and historically it’s usually the ones who play the game that get that office.” David knew Bradford was right. You don’t get the big job by being the best field agent out there. If anything that’s how you get left in the field. “How about family? Marriage? Kids?”

“Haven’t really thought about it,” David lied.

“Bullshit. Everyone thinks about it.”

“They’re not high on my list of priorities. I mean if the right person comes around…”

“And if the right person’s male? Might make it a little harder to get that big office with a view.”

“You know you’re the second person today to say something like that to me.” David hadn’t really thought about it. He hadn’t had a man in his bed since leaving Tel Aviv and few dates of any kind since. “I don’t know. The world is changing. Twenty years ago half the ADs were Mormon and all of them were men. We’ve got a couple of women now, a little ethnic diversity happening, and frankly I’ve seen those pictures of Hover at Mardi Gras. I don’t know who he thought he was fooling.”

Bradford laughed. “Think the Bureau should embrace tradition?”

“Why not?” David rubbed at his face. His eyes were burning and for once he hoped it was just allergies. “Honestly right now all I can think about is the fact that Charlie’s in surgery and in a few days they’re going to lock him in some inpatient facility where…”

“Where you can’t take care of him?”

David curled in on himself again. “I feel like I did after Colby confessed to treason. Like there are a million things I should have seen but didn’t and a million things I should have said but didn’t and if I could violate every law of physics and go back in time I wouldn’t let Charlie out of my sight. Not for a moment.”

“You know you’re not the first person today to express those sentiments.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“David, there are no time machines. So what are you going to do ‘cause you can’t change what’s happened?”

“I don’t know.”
“Okay. What do you want to be doing? Right now this very second.”

“I want to be with Charlie.”

“Just be with him?”

“I want to be holding him.”

“Why?”

“Because he fits in my arms just right and if I’m holding him then nothing can hurt him.”

“Including himself?”

David dropped his head. “Including himself,” he whispered.

~

David slid into the plastic chair by Charlie’s bed. The post op nurse said he could have ten minutes tops. Don and Alan had already had their visits. Charlie’s arm was even more thickly bandaged than before but someone missed the memo and the straps that had held him down were gone.

“Hey,” David whispered softly just in case Charlie was asleep. Charlie’s eyes came open slowly. They were glazed and unfocused.

“Hey.”

“How are you?”

A blissful smile crawled across Charlie’s face. “Good drugs. Feel dumb. It’s nice.”

“Well don’t get too used to them.”

Charlie frowned and pouted a little. “Scratch my back?” His voice was small and child like. David couldn’t resist.

“Sure, let me at it.”

Charlie rolled away from David and David reached under the sheet. Charlie started moaning almost instantly as David worked his way down Charlie’s back and back up again. He bit his own tongue until he thought it might bleed, the pain working to counteract the unbelievably sexy sounds Charlie was making.

Finally David couldn’t take it any more and stopped. Charlie rolled back onto his back and David had to quickly advert his eyes. Charlie was pitching a tent in the hospital sheet, the drug fuelled, blissed out smile back on his face. “Thank you,” Charlie mumbled.

“Any time,” David replied focusing his eyes on Charlie’s hair line.

“It’s nice when you touch me. You’re warm and...” Charlie fell asleep mid sentence.

David let out a long breath. A small part of his mind began formulating an escape plan. It involved sneaking both him and Charlie out of the hospital and being south of the border before Don could put out an APB. He knew it was stupid but he was in the mood for romantically stupid so he quickly looked around then put a tiny kiss on Charlie’s forehead. “I’ll come see you tomorrow.”
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

David and Charlie talk and Colby puts in an appearance.

“Dude!” David jerked his head around to where Colby was behind the wheel. “You have not heard a thing I said, have you?”

“Sorry. What?” David rubbed his face. He hadn’t slept much again, and when he had slept his dreams had been filled with blood.

Colby sighed. “How’s Charlie doing?”

“I don’t know. Haven’t seen him today. He was happily whacked out on post-op pain killers last night.” Colby made a tight u-turn. “What are you doing?”

“We’re taking lunch a bit early and you can pop in and see Charlie.” David thought about arguing but his plans for lunch had been to see Charlie anyway. “Do you think he’d mind if I popped in too?”

“Uh... I’m not sure, he’s kind of had... ups and downs lately.”

“Wow, really?”

David reached across the charger and flicked Colby’s ear as punishment for the sarcasm. Colby swerved a little. “Not while I’m driving.”

“Tell you what, let me go in and see how he’s doing first.”

The duty nurse in post-op scowled at David and Colby as they flashed their badges but let them through. Colby lurked around the corner while David went in. Charlie was sitting up, the one arm still thickly bandaged and the IV drip going into the other. His eyes were half closed and a math journal was spread across his lap.

David tapped the wall lightly. Charlie looked up and smiled. “Hey.”

“Hey there. How are you feeling?”

“Still a little groggy but they’ve cut back the pain killers already.”

“Suck. Hey, are you up for company?” Charlie gestured to a chair. “I mean other than me?”

Charlie’s face quickly darkened and looked scared. “Like who?”

“Colby’s lurking in the hall. He’d like to say hi.”

Charlie let out a breath and looked immediately brighter. David wondered who he was scared of
“Yeah, sure.” Colby must have been listening in ‘cause he poked his head around the corner. Charlie smiled. “Hey Colby.”

“Hey man, how are you doing?”

Charlie shrugged. “Oh, you know, still here.” Colby picked up Charlie’s chart and after giving it a quick once over reached inside his jacket and pulled out a tube of Oreos he’d gotten from the vending machine and tossed them onto Charlie’s bed.

“Though you might appreciate those.”

Charlie quickly snagged the package. “Thank you. For this I’ll do your taxes.”

“I’m holding you to that.”

Charlie picked at the package for half a second with one hand then attacked it with his teeth.

David reached for the Oreos. “Here, let me.”

Charlie waved him off. “I’ve got to get used to doing things one handed.” Charlie managed to tear into the wrapper and quickly shoved an Oreo into his mouth. His eyes instantly rolled back in his head and a smile spread across his face. The smile was followed by a somewhat inappropriate amount of moaning. David was more worried about Charlie’s arm however. He hadn’t seen it move since the surgery.

“How’s your arm?” David asked once Charlie had passed the initial Oreo bliss.

“Hurts.” He twitched a couple of fingers. “They ended up putting in all kinds of grafts and weird stuff which is why I’m still in post-op and not upstairs with all the other crazies.”

“You gonna be able to use it?”

Charlie shrugged. “They said there’ll be diminished strength and fine motor coordination but if I do my physical therapy right I should be able to still type, tie my shoes, stuff like that.” Charlie twitched his fingers again. “Basically it’s a good thing I’m a mathematician and not a concert violinist.” Charlie nibbled on another cookie before his eyes went wide. “Incoming.” He shoved the rest of the cookie in his mouth and the packet under the blankets.

David turned around. Through the glass walls he could see a middle aged woman heading towards the room. She had a pleasant smile that didn’t seem to reach her eyes.

She entered the room and Charlie squared his shoulders. “Good afternoon Mr. Eppes, how are we this morning?”

A tight smile pulled across Charlie’s face. “Doctor Eppes and I am fine, thank you.”

The woman looked at David and Colby still smiling but with disapproval in her eyes. “And are these your friends?”

Charlie nodded to David and Colby. “This is Special Agent David Sinclair of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Special Agent Colby Granger also of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.”

David flashed his ID subtly showing off his gun as he did it. He did not like the vibes he was getting off of the woman.

“Oh my, has Mr. Eppes done something wrong?”
“*Doctor* Eppes is one of our top consultants especially in the areas of violent and serial crime.”

“He’s pretty good with terror cells as well,” Colby added.

“And I am sorry Ma’am but we were in the middle of a discussion with Dr. Eppes. If we could have five more minutes with him? Privately?”

“Of course. But just five. Mr. Eppes needs his rest.”

“Of course.”

The woman left and Charlie sagged back into his bed then reached under his blankets.

“Who was that?” Colby asked.

“Hospital shrink. I know I tried to kill myself and all but seriously if anyone is going to talk me out of trying again it’s not going to be that woman.” Charlie shoved a couple more cookies into his mouth.

David grabbed Charlie’s chin and yanked his head around to look at him. “You are *never* trying that again you hear me, you don’t get to look at anything sharp, you don’t get to pick at a zit. I don’t care if you’re an atheist, you kill yourself and I will hunt down whatever tiny spark of you there might be left in the vast cosmos and I will then proceed to kick your ass so hard it’ll make a believer out of you. Got it?” Charlie’s eyes were wide and David could feel his heart racing in his chest at the very thought of Charlie even thinking about hurting himself again.

Charlie nodded as much as he could with his head still in David’s grip.

David let out a long sigh, resisted the urge to lean forward and lick the chocolate crumbs off Charlie’s lips, then let him go.

Charlie swallowed but didn’t look away. His eyes were locked with David’s and David was not about to break that.

Colby coughed a little. “Hey, we’ve got to get back to the office.”

David finally looked away. “Yeah, okay.”

“Thanks for coming by Colby and for the cookies.”

“No problem. And don’t take too long getting your head back together. Team’s not the team without you.”

Charlie smiled. “That’s nice to hear.”

~

David was aware of Colby turning to look at him every few seconds. “Do you mind watching the road?”

Colby grinned. “Oh you’ve got it bad.”

“What?”

“Charlie and David sitting in a tree.”

“Oh shut up.”
“Tell me you weren’t trying damn hard to not kiss him goodbye there.”

“He’s a friend. He’s a friend going through a rough time and I am trying to be a supportive friend in return. If it was you I’d drop by to see how you were doing.”

“If it was me I would have eaten my gun and it would be a moot point.”

David dropped his face into his hands. “Don’t even say that. There were two guns in the house. My spare and one of Don’s.”

“Shit. I guess he hasn’t been hanging around us quite long enough to have thought about it.” Colby pulled up to a red light. A thought flicked across David’s mind and took the opportunity to reach across the Charger and punch his partner in the arm. Hard.

“Oww.” Colby rubbed at the spot. “What the hell was that for?”

“For going through my porn.”

“Hey, spy. I didn’t want to. Believe me I didn’t want to. And it’s not like it was just you. I had to look at Don’s porn to. How do you take orders from a guy once you’ve seen his Playboys, really?”

“I’m sure Don’s wasn’t that bad.”

The light turned green. “Well that’s the thing. Don’s porn was normal. Like text book, generic, normal. It was too normal. I’m mean everyone’s got something they’re really into but not Don apparently so I figure either Don has the most generic sex life in history or he’s into something so weird he’s scared to bring it into his own apartment. And considering the number of girlfriends he’s been through my money’s on the weird.”

“Colby, I love you man, but the last thing I want to do right now, or ever, is speculate on Don’s sex life.”

~

David slipped into Charlie’s room and behind the curtain half pulled around his bed. Once Charlie was released he was seriously considering writing a memo to the hospital’s security team.

A little light was still on by Charlie’s bed and he was leafing through some trashy looking tabloid. David pulled up a chair. Charlie put aside the magazine.

“You came back.” A smile was just touching Charlie’s lips.

“Yes. I’m sorry about earlier. You scared me.”

Charlie stared at the ceiling. “I know. I’m sorry. I guess... I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore.”

David took Charlie’s good hand. It was so wonderfully warm. “You’re going to get through this Charlie.”

“People keep saying that. No one’s told me how yet. Even that damn shrink. It’s all you’ll get through, you’ll get better, this isn’t the end.” Charlie turned to David. “How?”

“I don’t know. I think you just do. I think time just passes and you start to feel better.”

Charlie switched his gaze back to the ceiling but didn’t try to take his hand from David’s. “You
know, I was kind of looking forward to getting married. I was really warming up to the idea of not dying alone in the old mathematicians’ home. And kids. I was kind of liking the idea of kids.”

“You can still do all those things if you want.”

“David, 5.4 million of my fellow Californians don’t think I should be allowed to marry to say nothing of having kids.”

“Yeah, well, they’re idiots and you can still have children if you want. There are lots of options and they don’t get a say in that.”

Charlie closed his eyes and his breath came out ragged.

David squeezed Charlie’s hand. “Charlie, what happened?”

“You were there.”

“No I wasn’t. If I’d been there we wouldn’t be here. What really happened? You went to work and..?”

Charlie didn’t say anything for a long time. David just waited. “Liam Goodwin came to office hours,” Charlie finally said quietly.

“Who’s Liam Goodwin?”

“Student.”

“You’ve got a lot of students.”

“Yeah, but Liam’s... special. I met him a few years back when he was a freshman. I got stuck doing an orientation tour. All CalSci students qualify as geniuses but something about Liam just... sparked. I’ve been keeping an eye on him. He’s so bright, did his undergrad in three years instead of four, moved straight to his masters, always pushing himself but not beating up on himself like a lot of the other student. I’ve been thinking about bringing him in on cases actually.”

That piqued David’s attention. “Really?”

“He’s observant, good at making connections, thinking up new ways of analyzing data, filling in blanks in the data.”

“What happened when he came to office hours?”

“I noticed him.” Charlie’s voice cracked.

“Sounds like you noticed him a long time ago.”

“He was wearing this blue shirt and it brought out his eyes and I noticed him and the thing is you’re right I must have noticed him years ago. He’s a very attractive young man. I help all my students but I always had just a little extra time for him, pushed him just that little more, felt that little bit happier when he’d knock on my door. And I must have noticed him, I couldn’t have not but I finally noticed myself noticing him and he was standing there in front of me and I couldn’t deny it and I couldn’t ignore it and by the time I got home... I just couldn’t live with it. Final straw.”

David decided to screw propriety or what any nosy nurse might think. He got up and sat on the edge of the bed and carefully pulled Charlie against him. Charlie snuggled in tight.
“The thing is,” Charlie continued. “I don’t remember it feeling like me. I sat on my bed for the longest time and I could smell Amita’s body lotion and it was like it was someone else who wrote those notes, like I was watching someone else. I got out the pocket knife Don gave me and I never used so I knew it was still sharp and I went into the bathroom and just stared at myself for the longest time and felt nothing.” Charlie looked up at David. “The knife didn’t hurt going in. I saw the blood come out. I was so detached from the whole thing I didn’t even feel that. The only thing I felt was when I fell I banged my elbow. How funny is that? Couldn’t feel a knife in my arm but could feel my funnybone get hit.” David ran his fingers through Charlie’s hair as much as he could. It really did need a wash and a brush. “Maybe I do need to a trip to the funny farm.”

“Think of it like a vacation. Use the time to catch up on your theoretical work, or that coherent cosmos thing of Larry’s.”

“What do you know about Larry’s theory?”

“I pay attention you know. I’m up with what all the hip mathematicians are working on.”

David felt Charlie’s little chuckle roll through his body. “You do pay attention, don’t you?”

“I try as best I can.” Charlie nodded then pressed his head into David’s fingers like a cat demanding a head rub. “When are you getting transferred?”

“Day after tomorrow if my arm looks good.”

David rubbed Charlie’s head a little harder and Charlie seemed to melt. “I did a bit of digging into that place you’re going, St. Clare’s.”

“Let me guess, it was built on an ancient Indian burial ground?”

It was David’s turn to chuckle. “No. Actually it has a pretty good reputation. No major incidents. It’s one of the places LAPD sends their guys so they’ve got experience working with law enforcement types.”

Charlie groaned and buried his face into David’s chest. “Is that what I am now? A law enforcement type?”

“You gonna try and tell me you’re not?”

Charlie didn’t answer. “This feels really nice, David,” he finally said.

“Yeah, it does.”

Charlie shook a little. “We shouldn’t be doing this.”

“Why not?” Charlie went quiet again and David stroked his back. “You don’t have a good answer do you?” Charlie shrugged a little. “That’s because there’s nothing wrong with this and you know it.”

“I...” Charlie stumbled. “They’re putting me in an insane asylum, David. That’s not part of the plan. Every moment off my life has had a plan, right since I could add and now it’s all gone and they’re locking me away...”

David’s escape plan roared back to the front of his mind at the fear in Charlie’s voice. “Just for a little while. Just until you can look in that mirror and understand that the person looking back is someone worth keeping around, no alterations required, and I’ll visit you every day. I’m not going to let you
Charlie shook a little more and pulled himself even tighter against David’s body. David held tight and didn’t let go until Charlie had stopped shaking and fallen asleep.

~

David stood at the door to the bathroom taking deep breaths. ‘It’s just a bathroom, just a clean bathroom.’

He pushed open the door and flipped on the lights. For a second the light flared in his eyes and he saw the room bathed in red. He blinked until the blue towels and white tiles reappeared. The room still smelled mildly of bleach. David did his business as quick as he could and ran for it.

He was definitely going to have to get that apartment hunt back on.

~

David stepped into Charlie’s room just as Dr. Patal was stepping out. They only exchanged quick nods as David had heard the doctor just get paged.

Charlie was sitting up in bed looking somewhat amused. Alan was sitting by the bed in one of the thin plastic chares. “Hey, Charlie. See you had a visitor?”

“Yeah, Dr. Patel wanted to make sure I wasn’t wasting some of his better work.”

David grabbed the room’s other chair. “Well it’s nice of him to check on you.”

“Turns out he read my book.”

“Is that why you look so amused?”

“His younger brother gave it to him in hopes that it would help him meet a girl so he’d stop sleeping on his brother’s couch between shifts and mooching meals.”

David couldn’t help laughing. “Sounds familiar. Maybe it’s an older brother thing. Did he like the book?”

Charlie shrugged. “He thinks it’s mildly full of shit but honestly on a lot of levels I think it’s mildly full of shit. I mean who the hell am I to give anyone advice I how to live their lives? Really?”

David didn’t want to make too detailed a comment since he hadn’t actually read *The Attraction Equation* himself, even though a copy had sat in the break room for months. “Well when your publisher asks for a second edition you’ll have far greater personal insight to draw from.”

“I’ll be surprised if my publisher doesn’t try pulling the book once they hear about this.”

“Well then they don’t need to hear about it.”

“It’ll be kind of hard to hide the ruddy great gash in my arm forever.”

“I’m sure you’ll manage something.”

Charlie just shrugged a bit. “How goes the apartment hunt?”

“Do you have any idea how many really crappy apartments there are in LA?”
“Mathematically speaking? A lot?”

“You know you don’t have to move out, David?” Alan offered from the other side of Charlie’s bed. “We’ve got plenty of room. The place is practically the LA FBI annex anyway.”

‘Oh, Alan I don’t think you’d be offering that if you knew how often I’ve thought about indecently touching your youngest son.’

“Thank you Alan, but I think I need to be looking for a place a little closer to the office.”

“Be careful David, marrying yourself to the job might seem like a good idea now but ten years down the road you might find things you’re missing.”

‘Like a warm soft mathematician in my bed?’

“I’ll be sure to keep that in mind.”

~

David stood outside St. Clare’s Psychiatric Treatment Facility with Don and Alan. Officially an ambulance had to transfer Charlie but everyone agreed to let his family walk him in. Alan had spent the night fussing over packing Charlie a bag, debating the things Charlie might want verses the things that he’d be allowed to keep. In the end the bag got mostly filled with a lot of blank note pads and newer math journals.

Charlie got out of the back of the ambulance his face oddly neutral. David surveyed the situation. The only one who was armed was Don and Don wasn’t going to shoot at his own brother. The car was maybe a 500 foot sprint. David was pretty sure he could out run Don but not while dragging Charlie.

Charlie took the bag from his father, walked up the front stairs and into the lobby of St. Clare’s with David, Don and Alan right behind.

On the other side of the large plain lobby was a pair of double doors.

Charlie looked at the double doors with the bars across them. He looked at the two large orderlies in white and the efficient looking nurse with a clip board. Charlie started to back away. “No. No, no. I can’t. They won’t let me go.” The orderlies started to move forward. “I’ll be good. I won’t do anything stupid again. I promise.”

Don put his hand on Charlie’s shoulder. “Charlie, you’ve got to.”

Charlie squirmed away from Don. The orderlies started moving with more purpose.

“Charlie, please.” Alan looked on the verge of tears.

David grabbed Charlie’s good arm and quickly dragged him over to a wooden bench, against one wall. He waved the orderlies off for a second. “Charlie.”

“Don’t make me go in there David.”

“Charlie, listen to me.”

“I’ll never get out. My brain isn’t normal, they won’t let me go.”

David took Charlie’s head in both hands, forcing his attention. “Mexico, Charlie.”
Charlie blinked. “What?”

“Listen to me. Mexico. That’s mine and Colby’s distress word. Mexico. Now I am going to come and see you every day. Every single day. That’s a promise. If someone is maliciously hurting you, if you ever get honestly scared for your life all you got to do is say Mexico and I will get you out of here, even if it means bringing a SWAT team through those doors. I’m not going to let them keep you.” Charlie swallowed hard. “Mexico, okay. Can you say it?”

“Mexico,” Charlie whispered.

“Mexico. Just got drop it in a sentence. Whatever it takes.”

“Mexico,” Charlie said again.

“That’s right. And I’ll tell Don that’s our distress word now.” Charlie nodded a little. “Hey, I let you cover my back in a fire fight and you didn’t puke on your shoes. You, Charlie Eppes, in your soul, are a bad ass and you can face down anything and survive anything and do what needs to be done.”

Charlie took a deep breath. “Mexico,” he whispered one more time.

David pulled Charlie into a hug. Charlie hugged him back for a long time then ever so slowly let go.

Charlie’s face looked calm and controlled but David could still see terror in eyes that normally dance with genius. Charlie walked back to Don and Alan. He gave each of them a hug and exchanged a few words that David couldn’t hear, then handed his bag to one of the orderlies like he was a bell hop and made his way through the double doors with his head held high.

“What did you say to him?” Don asked, staring at the bared doors that had just swallowed his baby brother.

“Gave him a distress word. Gave him Mexico. Told him I would visit and if he got scared for his life he just had to say Mexico and I’d get him out.”

Don looked at David. “You can’t just take someone out of an institution.”

David looked back. “Want to bet money on that?”

~

David couldn’t sleep. It was staring to become a habit. He gave up and decided to wander the house. He didn’t get far before realizing a light was coming from Charlie’s room.

His heart leapt for just a beat as his imagination stirred up scenarios of Charlie’s daring escape.

He pushed door the open. Alan sat on the bed his arms wrapped around a battered, brown teddy bear. His eyes were distant and old.

David sat down next to him.

“He’s named Fibonacci,” Alan said obviously referring to the bear. “That’s when it really hit home that Charlie was different. What four year old names their teddy bear Fibonacci?” Alan patted the bear on the head. “The thing is I can look back, I can see now. I always just thought Charlie was more interested in the math and that’s why we had to throw girls at him, I didn’t think...” David didn’t know what to say as Alan stuttered. “And it’s not like I would have cared or been disappointed. I just wanted to see him happy.”
“I know.”

“God, I don’t know how many times we almost lost him growing up. And now this.”

“How did you almost lose him?” David asked. He knew about Charlie’s fall down the steps but Alan implied there was more than one incident.

“When he was about four we were visiting family friends and we told him and Donnie to go play. He managed to get himself locked in a closet full of junk. He panicked and I don’t know what happened but by the time Donnie found him he’d managed to get some cord wrapped around his neck. He was barely breathing. We had to keep all the windows in the house open for weeks. He’s still claustrophobic. When he was eight he ran away from Donnie’s birthday party. We were camping up in the hills and he walked off. He was miles away, middle of the night, just walking down the road when we finally found him. He told me he was walking home ‘cause Donnie didn’t want him there.” Alan’s voice suddenly cracked and he wiped at his eyes. “Then when he was ten some boys at school pushed him down the stairs. Punctured his lung on his own ribs. Almost punctured his heart.”

“He told me about that.”

“Did he tell you about the tumor?”

“No,” David replied quickly.

“When they did x-rays to check his ribs the radiologist noticed a shadow. It was right about where the ribs went in but even after they healed the shadow was still there. They cut out a mass the size of a golf ball. It wasn’t malignant or anything, more of a cyst. The doctor said it had probably been there for years but I had still been smoking when the boys were little and...” Alan’s voice cracked again. David rubbed circles on Alan’s back. “I wish Margaret was here. She was so strong and she understood Charlie. I tried. I always tried but... He was three the first time he beat me at chess. I didn’t stand a chance by the time he was five.”

“He loves you, you know that, right?”

“But he doesn’t trust me,” Alan replied. “If he trusted me he could have come to me before...” Alan squeezed Fibonacci tight. “David, I am so afraid I’m going to outlive my boys.”

“No Alan, no. Not if I have anything to say about it. No.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Charlie and David both start adapting to Charlie being inside.

David had checked on St. Clare’s visiting hours even before Charlie checked in. Noon until three, they were pretty liberal. With the exception of certain patients they had a policy of trying to keep patients connected to the outside world so as to avoid them becoming dependent on the hospital. At least that’s what the public relations person he talked to said.

David checked his gun with security and was buzzed onto the main floor. The room was large. There was a ping-pong table and scattered couches and chairs. A nurse’s station surrounded by reinforced glass was along one wall. The opposite wall was lined with tall, reinforced windows with a padded day seat under each one.

David scanned the room. Large orderlies stood by the door while patients sat or talked or stared blankly at a caged in TV that had a telenovela showing on mute. There were a few other people David guessed were visitors.

David looked to one of the orderlies. “Excuse me, I’m looking for Doctor Charles Eppes? He checked in yesterday. Curly hair?”

“Oh yeah. New guy.” The orderly pointed the furthest corner of the room. Charlie was sitting under a window, his knees pulled to his chest. David quickly sized up the orderlies and wondered if he could get Charlie past them or if he’d have to call in SWAT.

“Thanks.”

“Hey, New Guy’s a doctor?” the orderly asked.

“New Guy’s one of the smartest people on earth. Top 100 easy.”

“Good to know.”

David made his way over to Charlie ignoring the looks from the other patients. He sat down by Charlie’s feet. Charlie was staring out the window. “Charlie?”

Charlie’s head whipped around and a smile instantly bloomed across his face. “You came.”

“I said I would. Every day. How are you?”

Charlie’s face fell. “I’m in an insane asylum.”

David’s heart squeezed tight. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“I met my shrink. I don’t like him. He’s an idiot.”

“Compared to you most people are idiots.”
“Yes but this guy treats me like I’m an idiot. Everything that comes out of his mouth is just patronizing as fuck. There’s a Nazi in my group therapy group.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, seriously. He’s got a swastika carved into his chest and everything that comes out of his mouth is more offensive than the last thing he said. And my roommate is anorexic with extreme OCD. The only upside to that is he cleans my half of the room. Other than that he’s just annoying. And that guy over there...” Charlie pointed to a middle aged man rocking in the corner. “I’m already in trouble because that guy only ever speaks prime numbers. Hasn’t said a normal word in twenty years however when I started saying prime numbers back to him I got told off because we’re only supposed to speak normal English to him to encourage him to properly communicate. Who are they to say what proper communication is?”

“And other than that Mrs. Lincoln, how’d you like the play?”

Charlie actually chuckled. “I’m sorry. You didn’t come hear to listen to me bitch.”

“Sure I did. I want to know you’re okay. I want to know you’re safe. I want to know that you’re in an environment where you’re getting the type of help you need to get back on your feet.”

Charlie leaned forward and pressed his head to David’s chest. “David. I’m locked in a mental institution.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

~

David stared at the empty warehouse. Next to him Colby blew on his coffee. Someone appeared at the corner of the block. David sat up a little. The man walked past the warehouse and kept on going. David sank back into the car seat.

“You went to see Charlie today?” Colby asked once the man was out of sight.

“Yeah.”

“How’s he doing?”

“He’s locked in a mental hospital. How do you think he’s doing?”

“Knowing Charlie, he’s probably already given his Numbers are Everything speech at least three times.”

“Probably. He’s frustrated already. Wants his old life back but his old life is what got him there.”

Colby slurped at his coffee. “You know I’m surprised he made it this long. I mean remember that woman we had to interview the other day, the voiceover artist?”

“Oh god, I wish I didn’t.”

“Right, sure, dumb as a stump, absolutely painful to talk to. You’ve got to think that for Charlie everyone is that dumb comparatively. I mean he’s even got an edge on Larry and Amita and they’re his best friends. If I had to go through life where 99.9% of the people I talked to were like that woman I’d consider checking out. I mean it’s got to be fucking lonely for him at the end of the day. Right?”
David checked his gun and was buzzed through the doors. The orderlies pointed to the same window seat without being asked. David could almost believe that Charlie hadn’t moved in a day or he had somehow slipped through a wormhole and was doing the same day again.

Charlie saw him coming this time and smiled. “Hey.”

“Hey.” David sat by Charlie’s feet again. “How’s it going?”

“In group therapy they wanted me to talk about my feelings.”

David laughed. Charlie scowled at him. “I’m sorry but I think you’re going to have to talk about your feelings a lot. In fact I think that’s sort of the point.”

“I ended up talking about some of my consulting work so now the really paranoid, paranoid schizophrenic thinks I’m a government spy sent here just specifically to spy on him. I told him the government already knows everything it needs to about him and I lost a point for the day.”

“A point?”

Charlie pointed to a big white board with names on it and lots of hash marks. Charlie’s name was fresh at the bottom of the list. “You start with five points and can lose them for, I don’t know, screwing with the schizophrenics and you gain points for, I don’t know, opening up and doing as you’re told. Ten points and you get a star.”

“Okay?”

“Rumor has it that if you get ten stars they let you out automatically but no one I’ve asked actually knows of someone who’s gotten ten stars. It’s like telling a student that they’re getting an F for the day. You don’t actually ever factor it into their final marks but it scares the crap out of them. And the food’s kinda gross. Especially the pudding. And I’m not sure who I’m going to kick in the nuts first, my shrink or the Nazi.”

David let out a long sigh. “Charlie, please, try to play nice with the other kids.”

Charlie snorted. “Yes, mother.”

David wondered if there were stages of psychiatric treatment, like stages of grief, if this was the combative phase. “Am I allowed to bring you food? I can bring you something from the cafe tomorrow?”

“I don’t think you’re allowed to bring in anything that requires eating utensils but they’d probably look the other way if you smuggled me in one of those lemon tarts from Jean’s Cafe.”

“Lemon tart it is.” Charlie’s face softened then slipped into sad. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

“Aside from the obvious?”

“Yeah. What thought just floated across your mind?”

“Was just thinking about my mom. She made an amazing lemon meringue pie. On really special occasions she’d make it from scratch right down to the crust. She once told me that when I got married she’d make a great big one for me instead of a wedding cake.” David took Charlie’s hand. “Funny thing is, even if she was alive and I was... not here it would never have happened because
Amita hates lemon meringue and at the end we would have ended up with some frilly white cake out of one of the wedding magazines.” Charlie let out a long sigh.

“How’s your arm?” David asked sort of wanting to change the topic away from Charlie’s most likely, no longer, impending wedding.

“Hurts,” Charlie replied flatly. He wiggled his fingers a little and almost managed to make a fist. “They changed the bandages this morning and I’ve got physical therapy at three so we’ll see how that goes.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. Colby says hi. Hopes you’re doing okay.”

“Tell him hi for me. Any interesting cases come up?”

“No. Just really garden variety crime. Trace phone records, stake out suspects. You know.”

“Yeah, actually I do. When Don joined the FBI I so didn’t get it. Seemed so unlike him and what was the appeal anyway? That first case we worked he wouldn’t let me look at the pictures, it was all, ‘just stick with the math Charlie.’”

“Bet you looked at the pictures anyway?”

“Only later when that first map had struck out. I had nightmares for a week. Somewhere along the line I stopped having nightmares, somewhere I stopped getting sick at crime scenes, somewhere I stopped getting scared at the sound of gunfire.”

“Somewhere you became a bad ass like the rest of us and that’s why I want to see you up and running PDQ, ‘cause you’re part of the team and I don’t like going through the day knowing an important part of the team is missing. Okay?”

A bit of color touched Charlie’s cheeks. “Okay.”

David smuggled in the small lemon tart in a brown paper bag under his jacket. Charlie was in what could now be considered his usual spot.

David sat down and slipped the bag out of his jacket and into Charlie’s hand. Charlie opened the bag and took a deep breath. “Oh David I could kiss you for this.”

“I’ll hold you to that. How have you been?”

Charlie shrugged. “My shrinks an idiot, my room mate’s annoying, and I’ve been getting grief in group from the Nazi.”

“So, same old, same old?”

“Pretty much.” Charlie nibbled around the edge of the lemon tart. “What did you mean when you said you’re not doing this again?”

“What?”

“When you came into the bathroom I wasn’t completely out yet. I could still hear, I could feel you touch me. You said ‘I’m not doing this again.’” David was surprised by the pain. It was old but it felt fresh. It must have shown on his face because Charlie frowned suddenly. “I’m sorry. If you don’t want to talk about it...”
“No, it’s okay. Just... I lost someone I really cared about to a stupid traffic accident. He was too young and... I just didn’t want to lose you too.”

Charlie nodded. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“It was a while ago. Just before I came to LA in fact. About a week before.”

“I’m sorry. That must have been hard.”

David hated to admit to himself just how hard it was because it meant admitting just how much he had really cared about his ‘casual’ relationship. “The timing could have been better.”

“I didn’t want to hurt anyone you know? Just...” Charlie shrugged and licked at the filling of his pastry a bit.

“I know.”

“Was he your boyfriend?” Charlie asked suddenly. David found himself stuck on that word. “I’m sorry. If you don’t want to talk about it...”

“It’s okay.” David found he did want to talk about it a little. “He was my boyfriend, sort of. No one knew about us. We didn’t go on dates or hold hands. We kept telling each other that it was just a casual thing but we never ended up with anyone else.”

“What was his name?”

“Isaiah.” David took a breath. “Isaiah Elian Yadin.”

Charlie raised an eyebrow. “I’ll take a guess at Jewish?”

David chuckled a little. “Yeah. Youngest of six. Five older brothers all rabbis or something.”

Charlie gave a little whistle. “Ouch. What did he do?”

“He was our computer guru in the Tel Aviv office. He was a little like Matt Li, job wise. Seriously, you didn’t try to do anything more complicated than check your email without his supervision. He was a bit of a party animal too. My first week there I watched him drink the entire bomb squad under the table and walk a straight line out the door. It was incredible. And he loved banana chocolate chip muffins. It was a grand obsession, the search for the perfect muffin. He’d walk five blocks in the opposite direction of work every morning to go to this place that had better muffins than the one right next to his apartment.”

Charlie grinned. “He sounds like a fun guy.”

“Yeah.” David felt a little ache settle into his chest. The only person he’d ever talked to about Isaiah was his mother. No one else knew, even then. Isaiah had been three days in the ground before David had even found out.

“I’m sorry you lost him.”

David closed his eyes. That was the first time he’d heard those words. Isaiah hadn’t been willing to risk word of their relationship or his preferences getting back to his family and David hadn’t been willing to risk ‘bisexual’ getting unofficially attached to his file practically his first week on the job. And as a result his lover of eight amazing months had gasped his last breath in the middle of a sun baked road, surrounded by strangers and no one had thought to call him in from the field.
“You know you’re only the third person I’ve ever told about Isaiah.” Charlie put aside his tart and took David’s hand. “You look sort of like him. Not identical but first time I burst into the War Room and saw you standing there it had only been a few weeks and I nearly had a heart attack. For a half second I’d thought that he’d somehow faked his death, moved to LA, established himself as a mathematician, and grown his hair four inches, all in two weeks.”

Charlie gave David’s hand a little squeeze. “A year after my mother died I went sprinting across Safeway because I swore I saw her turning the corner into the produce section. Scared some poor lady half to death.”

“I remember when my Dad passed away our school janitor looked a little like him from behind. I spent all of sophomore year half convinced my Dad was just around the corner, down the hall.” Charlie didn’t say anything, just gave David’s hand a little squeeze. “Has Don come by to see you?”

“No. I’m sure he’s busy,” Charlie said quickly. “Dad came by after you left yesterday. He said Don would come by this weekend. You know how it is.”

“Yeah, sure.”

~

David pulled the blinds closed.

“Seriously, David, what did I do this time?”

David turned to Don. “It’s what you haven’t done. You haven’t been to see Charlie once.”

Don’s face ran through several emotions. David caught flashes of anger, guilt and shame before settling into defensive. “I’ve been...”

“Too busy on easy as shit cases to go see your own little brother who’s locked in a mental institution at least partially because he’s spent his life desperate for your love and approval.”

Don’s face got cold. “Who the hell are you to be telling me...”

“I’m the person who’s been checking on Charlie every damn day and making sure he remembers he still has a life out here. Come on Don, if he can survive practically locked in his own garage for five months how easy do you think it’s going to be for him to grab a note pad, embrace the math, and never leave that place?”

Don’s face slipped back into guilty. “How’s he doing?”

“Why don’t you go ask him yourself?” David got a hard look and he knew he had crossed the line about a mile back. “His shrink’s an idiot, his roommate’s annoying, and there’s a Nazi in his group therapy group that he’s planning on kicking in the nuts.”

Don smirked a little. “I’m stuck in meetings 8 to 6 tomorrow. Can you tell him I’ll see him on Friday?”

“Sure. He’ll be sitting under the far window in the main room. Try to smuggle him in a pastry or something. He’s not big on the food.”

~

David surrendered his weapon and was buzzed onto the floor. He looked to Charlie’s window as he
was now calling it and found it empty. He quickly scanned the large room and also found it devoid of Charlie.

David tapped on the window of the Nurses Station. A plain, motherly looking woman in her 40s slid the little window open. “Yes?”

“Hi. I’m looking for Doctor Eppes? Charlie?”

“I’m sorry. Charlie isn’t here right now.”

“Well, since I’m pretty sure he didn’t pop out to get a bite to eat can I know where he is and when he’ll be back?”

“I’m sorry, patient information is...”

David lost patience and whipped out his badge and ID pressing it to the glass. “Special Agent David Sinclair, FBI. Where the hell is Charlie?” The nurse backed away from the window and the door next to it opened. A pale, reedy looking man stepped out. He held out his hand.

“Hello, I’m Dr. Edel. Dr. Eppes is under my care.”

David took one look at the man and didn’t like him but shook his hand anyway. “David Sinclair. Where’s Charlie?”

“Dr. Eppes had an unfortunate violent outburst during group therapy and has been removed to the safe room.”

David’s frown deepened. “By any chance did he kick a Nazi in the nuts?”

“I was not there so I couldn’t go into the specifics of the political affiliations of his victim.”

“Right. I’ll ask him myself if you don’t mind.”

Dr. Edel put on a soft smile like he was talking with a slow child. “I’m sorry but the purpose of the safe room is to allow a patient alone time to calm down and reflect on their behavior.”

“I’m sure it is. I’ll be talking to Charlie now.”

“I understand you are Charlie’s friend however...”

“Yes,” David nearly hissed. “I am his friend. I am also the person whose job it is to keep an eye on a valuable national asset and if Doctor Eppes is sedated somewhere babbling satellite kill orders to himself I need to know that. Now am I going to talk with Doctor Eppes or am I going to be getting the United States Attorneys Office on the phone to get orders to have him removed from here via SWAT team if necessary? Oh and now that I know your name and know that you are in regular contact with Charlie I will be conducting a full background check on you.”

Dr. Edel scowled the scowl of the guilty. David mentally put money on tax evasion while at the same time hoping the doctor would buy what David was selling. “If you’ll follow me.”

David followed Dr. Edel through the main room and down a hall. At the end of the hall was a heavy door with a reinforced glass window.

David looked through the window. ‘Wow. Padded rooms actually exist.’ Was his first thought.

Charlie was laying flat on his back his ankles crossed and his good hand tucked behind his head.
David tapped on the glass and slid open a little slot in the door. Charlie jumped up.

“Didn’t I tell you to play nice with the other kids?”

Charlie grinned a grin that was a little manic to David’s eyes. “Sorry, I took Don’s advice.”

“What advice was that?”

“Shake their hands and kick ‘em in the nuts.”

“The Nazi?”

“I got a standing ovation from my therapy group.”

David let out a long sigh. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Really? Don’t need a little vacation? Maybe down south?” David prayed Charlie would get what he meant and a part of him prayed that Charlie would say the word.

Charlie took a deep breath. “I’m okay. Really. No need to head south of the border, yet.”

“Okay. Don said he’ll come see you tomorrow.”

“He doesn’t need to do that. I know he’s busy.”

“He’s your brother, and he’s not that busy. Besides I’m sure he’ll want to hear about your triumph over evil.”

Charlie chuckled and took another deep breath, then another, then a third. Charlie’s eyes closed and his head dropped. His breath started coming faster. David remembered what Alan had said. Charlie was claustrophobic, he just wasn’t sure how strong a fear it was. It couldn’t be too bad if Charlie was able to fly across country on a regular basis but David doubted the room was big enough for Charlie’s peace of mind.

“Hey, Charlie, look at me.” Charlie’s eyes opened. “Come on, look at me. Take regular breaths, okay? Not too deep. Don’t hyperventilate.” Charlie’s breathing started to ease up a bit. “That’s right, nice and easy.” David craned his head around so he could look up into the cell. It had a double height ceiling like the rest of the building. That must have been why Charlie was laying down, it looked bigger from that angle. “You holding up?” Charlie nodded. “When are they cutting you loose?”

“After visiting hours.”

David winced internally. That was still two hours away. “Why don’t you lay back down. Try to catch a nap.” Charlie lay back down tucking his arm back under his head. “You’re going to be okay, Charlie. Just keep breathing, nice and easy. Try to think about math.”

Charlie chuckled. “Thank you, David.”

“You’re going to be okay, Charlie. Just keep breathing. Try to rest.”

Charlie nodded and closed his eyes.

David watched Charlie just breath for several minutes until he was sure Charlie was as calm as he
was going to get.

He turned away to face Dr. Edel. “Put this in his file, Top page, big letters. Charlie is claustrophobic and he’s never going to calm down locked in that room. Frankly the fact that he hasn’t has a screaming fit already shows a shit load of control on his part.”

“That may be but his violent outburst still represents a lack of impulse control and understanding of appropriate behaviour in social situations.”

David fully understood why Charlie didn’t like this guy. “You don’t get it do you? Charlie is terrified. Every moment of his life since he was three years old has been mapped out, practically preordained, right up until now. For the first time in his life he’s not where he’s supposed to be and he’s no longer going where he’s supposed to go and it’s scaring him. But he can’t grab the future and kick it in the nuts.”

“You fancy yourself an armchair psychiatrist Agent Sinclair?”

“I know as much psychiatry as I need to break someone in the interrogation room.” Dr. Edel’s look got nervous and David decided to push in for a kill. “Doctor. Let me lay things out for you. I understand that to you Charlie is one more head case with a messed up arm but for the last six years Doctor Eppes has been putting his 200 plus IQ points to the task of keeping this city safe from killers, rapists, and terrorists. He has literally saved this city from things that never make the six o’clock news. And he has fought long and hard for the respect of the men and women who are out their risking their lives every day to keep people like you safe. And he’s won that respect. Now I know Charlie needs help, that point is not being argued but if I get even a whiff of a suspicion that he is not receiving adequate care or proper respect then I will have him removed.”

“I do not believe you have the power to make medical decisions for him, Agent Sinclair.”

“I don’t need a piece of paper signed when I have the local SWAT commander, who’s a big fan of Charlie’s, on speed dial and you better believe I’d follow that move up with half the prosecutors in this city raining legal damnation down on your head, personally, ‘cause you see not only does Charlie have one of the best solve rates in the business he also has one of the best conviction rates in town and prosecutors really like to win and they don’t like having their magic ace where they can’t get at it.”

David took more than a little pleasure at Dr. Edel’s frozen face that had dropped at least three shades of pale.

“I see,” the doctor said carefully.

“Good. Now I’ll be visiting Charlie tomorrow. I’ll be bringing his brother, who’s also a ranking FBI agent. And I am sure Charlie will be perfectly calm and ready to receive visitors by then.”

Dr. Edel forced a tight smile. “I’m sure he will.”

~

David dragged Don into the conference room. “Oh what did I do now?” Don whined.

“When did you advise Charlie to shake someone’s hand then kick them in the nuts?”

“Third grade. He was having trouble with bullies. Why?”

“Charlie took your advice and in doing so discovered the padded rooms actually exist.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Don pays a visit and Charlie tries to figure out what he wants.

David signed in and handed over his gun. He had yet to mention to anyone his spare gun at his ankle and the hospital security wasn’t that tight. Don followed him through the door. He felt Don freeze up behind him and take everything in. David had already gotten used to it. “Shit,” he heard Don softly mutter.

Charlie was seated under his window staring out of it, knees tucked to his chin. David led the way but let Don approach Charlie first. “Hey, Buddy,” Don said carefully sitting down by Charlie’s feet. Charlie gave a little smile. David realized it wasn’t the smile he normally got. “How you doing?”

Charlie shrugged. “I’m okay.”

“ Heard you picked a fight.”

“Wasn’t much of a fight. Bastard went down crying like a little girl.” Charlie tried to suppress a grin. Don didn’t bother. “And the orderlies slipped me a jumbo chocolate cookie this morning so I don’t think anyone’s too broken up about it.”

“Still.”

“I know. Try to play nice with others.”

“Oh, on cookies.” Don reached into his sports jacket and pulled out a zip locked bag with a few cookies in it. David hadn’t seen hamantashen cookies since he left Tel Aviv. Charlie seemed just as surprised to see them and pulled open the bag. “Robin made them.”

“Seriously!?"

“Yep.”

“Robin?”

“Yep.”

“Made hamantashen cookies?”

“Well, we had kind of a tense discussion a few weeks back about me going to temple. It’s her idea of an olive branch.”

“Robin can bake?”

“Well…” Charlie took a cookie and nibbled at it. “I know, they’re not grandma’s.”

“They’re not… bad.”
“In this case I think it’s definitely the thought that counts.”

Charlie nodded but kept nibbling at the cookie then he held out the bag to David. David couldn’t resist. “Todah rabah.” Don looked at David and raised an eyebrow. “Eight months in Tel Aviv. I still remember my manners.”

“B’vakasha.” Don replied.

Charlie looked between the two of them. “Well this conversation just went over my head.”

“Now you know how we feel, Chuck.”


“Eight months in Tel Aviv. I still remember my manners.”

“B’vakasha.” Don replied.

“Now you know how we feel, Chuck.”

David nodded but kept nibbling at the cookie then he held out the bag to David. David couldn’t resist.

“Todah rabah.” Don looked at David and raised an eyebrow. “Eight months in Tel Aviv. I still remember my manners.”

“B’vakasha.” Don replied.

Charlie looked between the two of them. “Well this conversation just went over my head.”

“Now you know how we feel, Chuck.”

Don watched Charlie eat his cookie. David wondered what was going through Don’s head. He’d put on his poker face almost as soon as they got in the building. “How’s your arm doing?” Don asked.

Charlie wiggled his fingers a bit. “Still tender. They’ll probably take out the stitches on Monday. It actually looks really gross right now, it’s all scabbed over. Wanna see?” Charlie sounded like he was ten at the prospect of showing off a big scab.

Don waved his hands. “No, thank you. I just ate. I’ll take your word for it.” Charlie shrugged but looked a little disappointed and went back to his cookie. “So how are the doctors here?”

Charlie shrugged again. “My shrink’s an idiot. But he canceled our appointment today so that’s a good thing.”

“Um... Don’t you need to like... talk to him to get out of here?”

“Probably, but it’s painful to dumb everything down to a level where he can understand it. I mean I can handle dumbing it down for you and the team because it’s often a matter of life and death that you understand me and I know you all are at least trying to comprehend what I’m saying, or at the very least you have the good grace to smile and nod but that idiot is just... an idiot.” Charlie let out a frustrated huff.

David remembered what Colby had said about everyone being so stupid compared to Charlie. “You know if we could follow we’d be right there with you?”

“I know, I know. Not your fault. Not my fault. I’m just a mutant. Somewhere some bit of my DNA slipped, there was a duplication error and I ended up short, hairy, gay and good at math. I should consider myself lucky I’ve got the right number of fingers and toes.” Charlie’s look was so dejected and David wanted to pull him into a hug so badly it hurt but Don was sitting right there. Instead Don reached out and ruffled Charlie’s hair a little.

“Come on, Buddy. It could be worse?”

“Don, look at where I am. How does it get worse?”

“Well...” Don obviously didn’t have answer. “You’re not in jail?” Charlie snorted. “Hey, it gets better from here right? I mean this is rock bottom? Got to go up from here?” Charlie just looked at Don. “I know. I’m not helping.” Don pulled Charlie into the hug David wanted. “How about this. Right now this very second, no one expects anything from you. Not a thing.” Charlie pulled back and looked at Don, his mouth slightly open. “When’s the last time you had that luxury of no one, anywhere on earth, asking a single thing of you?”
“Careful Don. When jellyfish get scooped out of the deep ocean they have a habit of exploding because they’ve never lived without crushing pressure before.”

“You’re not going to explode. You’re tougher than a jellyfish, buddy. You’re just taking a little break and using the time to get better.”

David was barely through the front door of the house when Alan looked at him over the top of his paper. “Charlie got in a fight?”

David sighed. “It wasn’t a fight. He kicked a Nazi in the nuts.”

Alan snorted. “Well at least it got Donnie to go see his brother. I hear you’ve been to see Charlie every day.”

David was still stripping off his weapons. “I promised I would.”

“Yes, you did.”

David turned to Alan. There was a slightly odd tone in Alan’s voice that he couldn’t place and he caught a slightly quizzical look on Alan’s face before he ducked back behind his paper.

David looked around the apartment. He had popped in on Charlie quickly but Don and Alan were already there and David hadn’t wanted to butt into the family time too much. Even if both Don and Alan had looked grossly uncomfortable.

The real estate lady opened the curtains that hid a small balcony so David could see the view. It wasn’t much of a view. Mostly it was just of the next building but it looked down on the building’s lap pool.

“Now if you’re interested we will require a security deposit plus first and last months rent. We will also be running a credit check and require proof of income.”

David idly flashed his badge. “I’m FBI. I’m on Uncle Sam’s dime.”

“And I take it you’re interested?”

David looked around possibly the only unoccupied apartment in LA that didn’t completely suck. “Yeah, I think I’m interested.”

David sat by Charlie who was staring out his window. David wasn’t quite sure what he was looking at. The view was of a wall, half a tree and a parking space. “How’s it going?” Charlie didn’t answer. Just shrugged. “I think I found a new apartment.”

“That’s good.” Charlie still hadn’t turned to look at him and his voice was distant.

“Hey, what’s up? What’s wrong?” Charlie shrugged a little again. David laid his hand on Charlie’s foot. “Come on. You’re worrying me and I’m going to start making things up.” Charlie was quiet. David waited. It was Sunday and he had plenty of time to kill before Charlie felt like talking.

“We had group time this morning,” Charlie finally said.
“Nazi still giving you shit?”

“No. He’s just pretending I don’t exist these days. No, somehow we just all got on the topic of sex which is not exactly my favorite thing or topic.”

“I’m sorry.”

“My pathetic excuse for a sex life is no one’s fault but mine, and arguably Don’s. One of the guys was just talking about his wife and how much he missed sex with her and everyone started talking about these great times and memorable partners and I’m there thinking I’m coming off a six month case of ED could we please talk about something else. Plus I had absolutely nothing to contribute to the discussion. I just sat there feeling like crap.” David slid around so he could give Charlie a hug.

Charlie leaned into his chest. “I mean I know intellectually that sex is supposed to be this amazing, mind blowing thing but I’m always just glad if I can get through it.” Charlie looked up at David. “You know what happened after the first time I had sex?”

“What?”

“I threw up.”

“It was that bad?”

“I was stuck tutoring this high school airhead as a way of having contact with people my own age. We were halfway through geometric proofs when I felt her hand on my leg. She was a cheerleader so I knew I was supposed to want her and the guys had been giving me grief about being a virgin but...”

“You didn’t want to.”

“I laid back, closed my eyes, thought of irregular primes then went home and heaved my guts out. Then sat in the shower for three hours.”

David held Charlie tight. “I’m so sorry.” It sounded like the type of stories he’d heard from rape victims except Charlie had done it to himself.

“I don’t think it would have been so bad except she was so dumb. I mean if she tried to have sex with something a hundred IQ points dumber than her it would be bestiality. I have sex with someone a hundred points below me and it just means I’m slumming it. At least with Susan and Amita they were brilliant. I could get interested in their brains then work from there.”

A cold nasty knot of reality settled into David’s stomach. What was he thinking, believing he stood even the tiniest chance with Charlie. Charlie was a genius, what kind of relationship would it be if Charlie had to dumb down every conversation to David’s level. Sooner or later he’d want to talk about his day and have real feedback beyond David smiling and nodding as things whizzed over his head. “I’m sure once you’re back on your feet and ready to get your life going again there will be a line of handsome, young, super geniuses ready to throw themselves at the feet of the great Dr. Eppes.”

“Oh I seriously doubt that.”

“Why?”

“Geniuses don’t necessarily like each other that much, for one. Especially super geniuses. Too much like looking in a mirror. Plus there’s so much competition for grants, and funding and papers and university seats. I mean half the reason Susan left me was because she was brilliant but not quite at
my level so every time I tried to say something nice about her work she thought I was being patronizing and if I critiqued her work then I was showing off and if I ignored her work I was a bad boyfriend. And we weren’t even in the same field. And these days my math is getting less and less respect so I probably won’t even be able to find someone willing to ride my coat tails.”

“So what does that leave for you, Charlie?”

“I don’t know. I guess I should figure out what I want first, shouldn’t I?”

“That’s a good start.”

Charlie sagged a bit against David’s body. “I had everything I was supposed to want and I blew it.”

“Forget what you’re supposed to want. What do you really want?”

“Right now?” Charlie fell silent again. “Someone who’ll hold me at night,” he finally said. “Amita, Susan they would never hold me. Even on nights when it felt like everything was falling apart. A Y chromosome means I’m supposed to be the strong one but I’m really not.”

David squeezed Charlie tight. ‘Just say the word, I’ll hold you as long as you want.’
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Charlie gets a new doctor, people start asking questions and the Men in Black put in an appearance.

David found himself stopped before hitting the security door. “Agent Sinclair?”

The man standing in front of David was large and jolly looking, like a Hispanic Santa.

“Yes?”

The man held out his hand. “I’m Dr. Flores. I’m Dr. Eppes’ new psychologist. I thought I should introduce myself.”

Dr. Flores’ handshake was firm but not aggressive. “Pleasure to meet you. What happened to Dr. Edel?”

“Dr. Edel felt there was too much... aggression surrounding Dr. Eppes and then muttered something about needing to find an accountant.”

David laughed. “So you got passed the buck.”

“So it would seem, but I’m sure we'll have no problems.”

David looked the doctor over. “I guess that depends. Is Charlie going to be getting the type of respect he deserves?”

Dr. Flores seemed to be sizing David up as well. “I have a fair number of contacts in the law enforcement community around here. Last night I made some calls and ever so casually dropped Dr. Eppes name and each time I did I spent the next hour listening to some fairly outlandish tales of the guy who catches killers with math. It was sort of like hearing the story of the brave little tailor. Seven in one blow.”

“Fifty seven,” David said.

“Excuse me?”

“Fifty seven. Last time Charlie got stressed, after his brother got stabbed, he started analyzing every unsolved murder in LA. Ran them through the same kind of algorithms SETI uses to listen to deep space static. We all thought he’d lost it a little but instead he found a stealth predator that had been functioning for decades. When we caught the guy he had souvenirs from every kill. Took us ages to go through them. In the end we closed 45 unsolved cases and there were another twelve that had been attributed to other people. Fifty seven murders solved and a dozen innocent men set free. In one blow.”

Dr. Flores nodded a little. “Well then. We better get Dr. Eppes up and running and back on the job. Can’t have those kinds of skills moping around this place.”
“That’s good to hear. Oh, I don’t know if Dr. Edel mentioned this but Charlie’s claustrophobic. And while I’m sure he’s going to behave himself for the rest of his stay that little padded time out room of yours is not likely to ever help him calm down.”

“I’ll put that on the top page of his file. Now you better head on in. I’m sure Dr. Eppes is eager to see you.”

David gave a little nod and was quickly buzzed through the doors. Charlie was under his window but seemed fairly relaxed. “Hey. How’s it going?”

Charlie smiled. “Hey David, guess what?”

“What?”

“I’ve got a new shrink.”

“Chased off the old one?”

“I guess.”

“How’s the new guy?”

Charlie shrugged. “He seems okay. He doesn’t treat me like an idiot at any rate.”

“Well that’s good. How’s the arm?”

Charlie held out his arm and pushed up the sleeve. It was the first good look David had gotten of Charlie’s arm since he found him on that bathroom floor. His stomach turned a little. It was scabbed over, a little inflamed, and frankly a little gross but the stitches had been removed.

He put his hand into Charlie’s left hand. “How much strength have you got?”

Charlie managed to close his fingers around David’s but that was about it. “It’s not much.”

“It’s a start. It’ll get better.”

Charlie sighed. “I guess it’ll just be a standing reminder.”

David squeezed Charlie’s hand. “At least the stitches are out.”

“Yeah, now if someone can just figure out how to stitch up my brain we’ll be on to something.”

“I thought that’s what your cognitive emergence stuff was, how does the brain think?”

Charlie shrugged and pulled his sleeve back down. “I guess. I haven’t really thought about that lately. Haven’t really thought about any math lately. How weird is that? All past patterns of behavior say that I should be writing on the walls right now. Instead I just sit here. Look out this window.”

David looked out the window himself. A pidgin scratched in the gravel of an empty parking spot. “Maybe you’ve finally hit something that doesn’t get solved with math.”

Charlie giggled a bit his eyes going distant. Then he giggled a bit more. The giggles continued and David could see the edges of full blown hysteria coming down.

“How much strength have you got?”

Charlie giggles continued. He put his hands to Charlie’s face. “Charlie. Take a deep breath and calm down.” Charlie took a deep breath and the giggling began to abate.
That right. Just breathe.”

Charlie pressed his hands to his eyes. “I’m don’t even know what I’m doing here, David. I don’t know how this place is supposed to help me.”

David rubbed Charlie’s head a little. “Why don’t you give the new guy a few days and see how it goes.”

“And if it doesn’t go anywhere?”

“Everything goes somewhere. That’s what being alive is. Going somewhere.”

David heaved another box of files into the War Room. Their number one suspect in a nasty blackmail ring was trying to bury them under useless financial records. Nikki heaved a box of her own.

“Explain to me again why we can’t call, Charlie?” Nikki asked.

“He’s not available,” Don said quickly, not even looking up from his own box of files.

“Five minutes. Five minutes of his time to help us narrow this down.”

“He’s not available,” Don repeated with more force. “We were perfectly capable of solving cases before him and we can do without him.”

“How about Amita?”

“She’s on a break.”

“Larry?”

“In Boston. Now drop it Betancourt unless you want to be going through all these boxes solo.”

Nikki dropped it but obviously the topic was not gone. Rumors were running around the office already. Most of them were that Charlie was in DC working on some secret government project but David had also heard one rumor that said Charlie had a break down which was uncomfortably close to the truth.

A couple of hours later David found himself in the War Room with just Colby. “So how’s Charlie holding up?”

David looked up from his notes. “Good days, bad days. He’s mainly jumping between depressed and angry. I think his new shrink making progress but he has to dig through a lot of shit.”

“How about Amir?”

“Serious?”

Colby shrugged “I miss the guy. And I think I need regular doses of geek in my life these days. There was a NOVA special on string theory last night and I actually watched it.”

David laughed. He’d worked out long ago that geek was contagious and had simply accepted it and in fact had watched that special himself and had even asked Charlie to elaborate on a couple of points over their lunch visit. “He was on a bit of an upswing today so he might be up for a visit
tomorrow. You can come in with me at lunch.”

“Great.”

~

David approached Charlie’s window. For the first time since Charlie’s admittance his knees weren’t drawn to his chest and he looked more relaxed than he had in a while. If anything he looked vaguely amused. He waved to David and Colby.

“Hey man, how’s it going?” Colby asked as he tossed Charlie his daily lemon tart.

Charlie caught it with his good hand. “It’s... It’s okay today. Actually I’m glad you’re here Colby, I could use some advice.”

Colby pulled up a chair and David grabbed a seat under the window with Charlie. “Shoot. What have you got?”

“What I’ve got is a massively paranoid, paranoid schizophrenic in my therapy group, Eric. And this guy is officially loony, part of the foil hat brigade. Elvis was a CIA operative and shot JFK from the grassy knoll, vaccinations are used to implant mind control microchips into our bodies.”

Colby chuckled. “I get the picture.”

“Well in group today he started talking about his secret government satellite program designed to do... stuff. Problem.” Charlie leaned forward and lowered his voice. “He was completely right. He perfectly described the first government project I ever worked. I was eighteen and I helped program those satellites to do... well exactly what he described them doing.”

Colby blinked a few times then cracked up. Charlie followed. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. And it’s all still classified. I mean the technology is out of date and they’ve already scrubbed half the satellites but legally I need to report this poor bastard because there has to be a leak somewhere. The odds of him making up this program, down to the code names and really actuate detail are... Well...”

“So what advice do you want?”

“Well you were mister secret agent, so do I do it? I mean this guy is nuts and if he finds out this one thing is right he’s going to believe that all his delusions are right and he’s never going to get better but legally I’m required to report anyone without clearance knowing anything about that project.”

Colby and David looked at each other then at Charlie. “I think you’ve got to do it,” Colby said. “I mean yeah he might be nuts but if there’s a leak then there’s a good chance he’s not the only one who knows and that’s not the only thing that’s been leaked.”

“And,” David added. “If it gets out that there’s a leak and you knew about it and didn’t do anything... You really want to fight for your clearance again?”

Charlie let out a long sigh. “Yeah. You’re both right. I guess I just needed to hear it. Okay. David, pen and paper.” David quickly handed over his note pad and a pen. Charlie began scribbling. “Okay. I need you to call this number and say these exact words. You’ll hear a click like someone’s hung up but there won’t be a dial tone. Recite this exact alphanumeric sequence then hang up.” Charlie handed the note pad back to David.
“Do I destroy the note after the call?”

“Yes. Burn it if at all possible,” Charlie answered seriously. “Tomorrow morning you’re going to get woken up by a couple of people dressed like the men in black. Jones and Jones, no relation. One is a tall, thin brunet woman, the other is a short redheaded guy. They look like Mulder and Scully in drag. Explain the situation and then bring them here during visiting hours.”

David looked down at the note in his hand. “Um... you do know that’ll mean the government is going to know you’re here.”

Charlie took a deep breath. “I’m sure the government already knows I’m here and if they don’t, well, Jones and Jones are practically old friends at this point. I’m sure they’ll cover for me as long as I level with them.”

“We could tell them you’re here as part of an undercover operation,” Colby offered.

Charlie shrugged. “Don’t bother. Dr. Flores thinks I need to work on being more honest. Mainly with myself but also with people around me.”

David tucked his notepad into his pocket. “I’ll take care of this.”

“Thank you.”

“So, other than a potently massive government leak, how are things going?” Colby asked.

Charlie leaned back against the reinforced window. “Honestly, I don’t know. There’s all these things I’m supposed to be doing to help me get ready to face the world again but I’m not sure if I want to bother. I mean the whole reason I got here was because I decided the world was quite possibly overrated.”

Colby patted Charlie’s knee. “Well you might think the world is overrated but portions of the world are rather found of you.”

“Thank you, Colby. Oh,” Charlie took a big breath. “I’m supposed to practice saying this out loud. I’m gay.”

Colby nodded. “Yeah, I kinda figured.”

Charlie looked sharply at David. “I didn’t say anything.”

“It’s the hair,” Colby provided.

Charlie rolled his eyes. “Great. My hair has been waving the rainbow flag while the rest of me has been in denial.”

“You’ve got great hair Charlie, don’t worry about it.”

~

David was still in his shorts when there was a knock on his door. He opened it to a tall brunet woman and a short redheaded man. “Jones and Jones I presume. Come on in. I’ll make some tea.”

~

Charlie was back to holding his knees as David led Jones and Jones over.
Charlie forced a little smile as they approached. “Dr. Eppes,” the female Jones greeted.

“Hey, guys. You got my message.”

“Yes, though we’re a little curious as to why you are here?”

David had refused to tell them that.

Charlie pulled up his sleeve. Some of the scabs were starting to fall off but that just seemed to make it worse. “I tried to kill myself ‘cause I’m gay and my fiancée left me,” Charlie said bluntly.

“Dr. Ramanujan is single?” the male Jones quickly asked only to be just as quickly kicked in the leg by his partner.

“You’d never get past her parents. I needed a doctorate and my own home to make up for the sin of not being Indian.”

“I think that discussion can wait for later,” the female Jones said quite firmly.

“Yes,” Charlie sighed. “I guess we have matters of national security to attend to. Could you give us a few minutes, David?”

“Sure thing.” David found a chair out of earshot but still reasonably close. He watched as Charlie explained the situation and notes were taken. The Jones seemed both professional and reasonably sympathetic the female Jones giving him pat on the knee at one point. Then the Jones’ went to the duty station. Discussions were had with first the nurse then a doctor David didn’t recognize then poor paranoid Eric was brought out from somewhere. Eric took one look at the Jones and threw his arms in the air. “I was right!” He screamed a look of pure joy on his face. Charlie on the other hand sunk his face into his hands as Eric was led out looking like Christmas had come early.

David sat down next to Charlie. “You had to do it.”

“I know,” Charlie mumbled from his hands.

“Did you see how happy he was?”

“Yes,” Charlie mumbled.

“I bet no one is going to try to fuck with you for a while.” Charlie giggled a little. “Are they going to put down that you’re here?”

“They’re going to put that I was here doing research for my cognitive emergence work. Since no one knows what that is they’re not going to ask questions.”

“Well that’s nice of them.”

“I pulled their back sides out of a jam a few years back. They owe me.”

“You know it’ll probably get around at some point.”

“Yes, it probably will but I don’t want it circulating via interdepartmental memo. I think I’d rather have water cooler rumors when the time comes. If it comes.”

“What do you mean if?”

Charlie shrugged. “I have open invitations from basically every university on the planet. Not to
mention the private sector. I can work anywhere I want, go anywhere I want. I can get out of here, hop on the first international flight I can get a ticket for.”

“Running away isn’t a solution. You know that.”

Charlie wrapped his arms back around his knees. “What am I going to do the next time I have to face King and the SWAT guys? Or LAPD wants me for something. I’m already a diminutive, mutant, uber-nerd. Throw gay and head case on top of that and...”

“And they’re going to have just as much respect for you as they always have.”

“You’re being sweet again, David.”

David pinched his lips and took Charlie’s hands. He could still not believe that Charlie seemed to know so little about himself and how the world saw him. “Look it. You have fought for what you believe in. As hard as anyone as ever preached for a god you’ve preached logic and reason and you’ve won a lot of converts not just ’cause the math works but because you have fought and you have never backed down. You have stuck by your guns and you have made people look past any initial impression to see something far greater. You haven’t taken any oaths Charlie. You’ve never raised a hand and sworn to uphold or fight for anything, it isn’t your job. You don’t have to break your back making our lives easier but you do. You’ve been threatened, you’ve been in the line of fire, you’ve returned fire, you’ve seen absolute horrors and you keep coming back for more and people are always going to respect that.” Charlie bit his lip and David watched the tears well up. “Any time anyone from the office has to go to Quantico we spend half the visit bragging about our mathematician who can do cooler shit than anything they’ve got. And when you lost your clearance, how quick did LAPD jump to try to pick you cheap?” Charlie forced a hair of a smile. “Charlie, the only person you’ve got to worry about still respecting you is you.”

“Thank you, David.”

“And if anyone gives you shit I’ll kick their ass for you.”

“Does that include Don?”

“Oh, he’s at the top of the list.”
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

David brings Charlie a present.

Chapter Notes

For the record I know next to nothing about comic books. The ones listed are taken from trolling Wikipedia at weird hours of the night and a few pointers from swingandswirl.

David had missed the chime over the door of his favorite comic shop. Between the flood, Charlie, and apartment hunting he’d been short on extra time and money. He’d found the shop after he’d been in LA about a year. It wasn’t a shop for kids. It had an aura more resembling that of an antique book store heightened by the half hidden store front and the elderly proprietor named Rupert that wore tweed and fingerless gloves.

At the jingle of the chimes Rupert looked up over his reading glasses. “Agent Sinclair. It’s been too long.”

“Hey Rupert. I’ve been meaning to come around but things got a little crazy.”

“They always do, don’t they? Still I believe in loyalty to my customers which is why I have slipped the last copy of The Absolute Sandman, Volume 4, hardbound under the counter for you.”

David cringed. Rupert was the worst kind of enabler. He was thankful the old man pushed comics instead of drugs. “Actually I need your help. I’ve got a friend who’s going through a rough patch and I want to put together a bit of a cheer up collection for him.”

David handed over a list of about 40 comics. Most of them he had in his own collection but they were mint or near mint. Rupert looked over the list. “Must be a very good friend.”

“Life saver.”


“Do you have them? I don’t need them in top condition. Just readable.”

“I have about 90%. I can call around for the rest. I should have them in a few days.”

“That would be great.”

“On one condition.” David sighed. With Rupert there was always a condition. “I slid something else under the counter for you. For your other collection.”
David felt a small sweat break out on the back of his neck. Rupert reached under the wooden counter and retrieved a half sized yellowed comic in a plastic sleeve. Rupert then handed David a pair of cotton archivist gloves.

He slipped on the gloves and slid the comic from the sleeve. The date on it was January 1952. The paper was cheap and yellowed and the cover was in black and white but other than that it was in good condition. The title was *Cowboy Jack’s Adventures on the Open Range*.

David carefully opened it. Twenty pages, hand printed and stapled, Cowboy Jack had a lot of adventures with his fellow cowboys, quite graphically depicted. He swallowed hard knowing just how rare what he held in his hands was. While the whole thing was completely unsigned David was pretty sure he recognized the style of the art, something in the curve of the lines used in the shading. He could probably get Charlie to use some equation to tell him for sure.

David licked his lips which had gone dry. He knew a piece like the one he was holding did not come cheap.

Rupert had steepled his fingers under his chin. “Now you know I only offer select pieces to collectors who I know will appreciate them.”

“Yes, you also can’t sell something like this to just any collector. What are we talking about?”

Rupert wrote a number on a scrap of paper and pushed it across the counter. David looked at it and engaged poker face. “Knock off 15% and let me spread it over three paychecks.”

“10% and two paychecks. You got a promotion.”

“10% and three paychecks. My apartment flooded, the dry cleaning alone killed me.”

“Done. And I will put together this collection for you... friend.”

“Thank you Rupert.”

“Come back in three days. I’ll have it all by then.”

~

David held the package carefully as he was buzzed in. He’d checked with the hospital and Dr. Flores to make sure it would be all right to give it to Charlie. Dr. Flores had actually quite approved. Apparently in his mind Charlie was not so much suffering from extended sexual repression as he was suffering from lack of a proper childhood.

David sat under Charlie’s window. Charlie didn’t look at him right away.

“Hey,” David said quietly.

“Hey,” Charlie mumbled still staring at the parking spot which had a late model blue sedan parked in it.

“I brought you a present. I even got it cleared first.”

Charlie finally looked over. David handed him the package. Rupert had wrapped it in brown paper and string.

Charlie picked at the knots in the string first with one hand then the other until David reached over with both and undid them. Then Charlie slipped off the brown paper.
“Comic books?”

“A careful selection of characters and story lines I thought might cheer you up. Or at least get you thinking.”

Charlie looked leafed through the top one. “My mother never let me have comic books. Waste of time.”

“Comics are society’s modern interpretation of classic myths. They are the group subconscious of western world.”

Charlie grinned. “I’m sure my mother would debate you on that.”

“I’m sure she would. That’s sort of what mothers do.” David took the comics from Charlie’s hands and set them aside. “So how are you doing?”

Charlie shrugged a little. “I’m still here. My room mate’s still annoying but I figured out how to get away with not eating this really nasty tapioca pudding they have on Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

“How?”

“Just spoon it onto the plates of the anorexics when the orderlies aren’t looking. They’re required to clear their plates so it’s not like it gets wasted and they’re not going to get believed if they say it’s mine and they’re all really skinny so I can take ‘em in a fight, even with one bad arm.”

“Charlie.”

“I know, play nice with others but it’s not like they don’t need the extra calories and I’ve always hated tapioca.”

David pulled Charlie into a hug. He knew he wasn’t half as frustrated with the situation as Charlie was but it still sucked. Every day he prayed that he’d come in to find Charlie with his bags packed signing himself out. Instead it seemed like Charlie was sinking deeper into his own fears most days. He hoped maybe the comics would perk him up a bit.

David took a deep breath. There was one other thing he’d been wanting to talk with Charlie about.

“Charlie, can I tell you something?”

“Sure.” Charlie didn’t sound like he cared.

“Um... I know you wrote me a note. Don found it, gave it to me.” David felt Charlie tense in his arms. “I want you to know I didn’t read it. I tore it up, gave it back. I was sort of mad at you at the time and I figured that if there was something you really wanted to tell me you could just say it to my face.”

Charlie didn’t say anything for a long time. “Oh,” He finally whispered. “Okay. I... I don’t really remember what I wrote. I’m sure it was just over emotional gibberish. Probably for the best.”

David didn’t believe any of that and suddenly wondered if just perhaps Don had kept those torn pieces.

~

David checked his watch. It was 2:30. The sun was baking the tactical van and it was that much hotter in his TAC gear. He only half listened as the hostage takers reiterated their demands and the
negotiators tried to bargain for more time. David was almost sure the whole thing was going to end in a blood bath but he was also pretty sure it was going to take longer than half an hour.

He flipped open his phone and hopped out of the van. He’d put St. Clare’s on speed dial just for this moment and after a few minutes was being put through to the Nurses Station.

“Hello, Nurses Station.”

“Hi. This is Agent David Sinclair. I was wondering if I could speak to Dr. Eppes?”

“I’m sorry but patients aren’t allowed private phone calls.”

David knew he was a lot less scary on the other end of the phone than in person. “Okay then. I need you pass on a message for me word for word and I need a word for word response.” After the thing with the Jones’s a lot of the staff seemed to get the idea that Charlie was some sort of burnt out spy that still had a head full of secret information and David was his handler. As a result they played a little nicer with him and Charlie.

“I think I can manage that.” There was a rustle of paper. “Go ahead.”

“Tell him. Hostage situation in progress. Sorry. Conducting a 10-45.” David was pretty sure Charlie would have the 10 codes memorized by now and know he was being check on.

David could hear a pencil scrape along paper. “Okay. Just a second. I’ll go speak with him.”

David waited in the shade of van. He really hated hostage situations if for no other reason than the waiting around.

“Hello?” The nurse came back.

“Hi.”

“Hi. Doctor Eppes says 10-45A, no need for a vacation.”

David smiled to himself. 10-45A; condition good. “Great. Tell him I’ll come by tomorrow if we can get this wrapped up. That doesn’t have to be word for word.”

“I’ll pass it along Agent Sinclair. He’ll be glad to hear that. I think he was getting worried.”

David sighed. “Yeah, hopefully I won’t have to miss him again.”

~

David looked around for Charlie. He wasn’t under his window. He tapped on the window of the Nurses Station. David recognized the duty nurse. A pleasant woman with a plain motherly face in her 40’s who had the slightly unfortunate last name of Chapel making her Nurse Chapel which David always tried not to giggle at.

“Hello Agent Sinclair. Charlie’s physical therapist had to rearrange her schedule today but he should be out in a few minutes.”

“Okay. No problem.”

“Is that Agent Sinclair?” a male voice from the back of the Nurses Room called out.

“Yes.”
“Could you send him in?”

David peered over Nurse Chapel to see Dr. Flores waving him in. The door buzzed and David let himself into the glass walled room.

“Agent Sinclair.” Dr. Flores held out his hand. “I was wondering if you have a moment?”

“Sure. I guess.”

Dr. Flores motioned him to a desk chair and they both sat down. “I was curious as to your impressions on Charlie’s progress.”

“Well, you’re his doctor.”

“True but you have known him far longer than I have and with the exception of yesterday when you were involved in a hostage situation you have visited him every day of his stay here.”

“I promised I would.”

Dr. Flores looked thoughtful. “Why?”

David was confused. “Why what?”

“Most of the patients here have friends and family on the outside. Some they are very close to but you are the only one who visits every single day.”

David quickly realized that he was the one being analyzed. “You know I’ve got my own shrink to analyze and second guess my motivations, Doctor.”

Dr. Flores smiled a little. “I’m just trying to understand your relationship with Charlie.”

David shrugged. “He’s a friend, he’s a colleague, and he’s part of my team.”

Dr. Flores was quiet for a several moments and just looked at David. “You know he’s becoming quite attached to you?” David just shrugged. “And you don’t have any problems with that?”

“If it keeps him going he can get as attached as he likes.” David tried not to thing about just what positions he’d like to attach himself to Charlie in.

“For as long as he likes?” David tried to shrug again in an indifferent manner. “At some point he will need to learn to function on his own again.”

David chuckled a little. “That’s exactly why I come every day.” Dr. Flores looked puzzled. “Has he told you about the five months he spent in his own garage?”

“It was mentioned in passing.”

“It was about a year before we met when his mother was dying. They were close and he couldn’t cope so he basically locked himself in his own garage for five months and tried to solve something called P vs. NP which as no answer. The only reason he ever left as I heard it was because Don physically dragged him out. Shortly after we met a bust went bad, Don got grazed and Charlie tried the same stunt. P vs. NP. After Don got stabbed it was the War Room and every unsolved homicide in LA County but it was still the garage and P vs. NP at the end of the day. This place?” David gestured around. “This is even better. He’s not doing math right now and really it’s the first time he hasn’t done math since he was three and that should be worrying you but if he gets bored with looking out that window and picks up a note pad and starts on P vs. NP... He gets a soft bed, three
meals a day and as long as he tells you he’s still feeling suicidal no one is going to make him leave and he will die here an old man trying to solve a problem without an answer. I come here every day to remind him that the outside world still wants him and needs him and because I promised I would and I keep my promises and if clinging to me is what’s keeping him from losing himself in this place, fine.” Before Dr. Flores could answer David felt a tap on his shoulder.

“Charlie’s back from the physical therapist,” Nurse Chapel said pleasantly.

“Thank you.” David gave the doctor a nod. “Excuse me.”

David let himself out of the Nurses Station and out onto the floor where Charlie was waiting.

“Sorry I’m late. I got my schedule moved around for the day.”

“No problem.”

“What were you doing in there?” Charlie gestured over his shoulder to the Nurses Station as he headed towards his window.

“Oh, your doctor just had some questions about your consulting work.”

“Oh.” Charlie found his seat and reached into his pocket retrieving a squishy blue ball. He carefully placed it into his left hand and squeezed it a little. “I’m supposed to do this as much as possible to get some strength back.”

“That’s good. How are you doing, Charlie?”

Charlie shrugged and tried to squeeze down on the ball. “I don’t know. Everybody asks me that but I don’t know. I guess I exist. That’s how I am. My molecules are here in this moment of time and space and just...” Charlie petered off. David decided to change the subject.

“Sorry about yesterday. Hostage situation with I think some of the most indecisive hostage takers in history.”

Charlie smiled a little. “How’d it go?”

“Couple of shots fired but we got all the hostages out. Actually we could have used you. Actually we could have used you and Ian as a double act. We ended up breaching ‘cause no one was quite good enough to take the one shot we had but I’m sure you could have worked out the timing and Ian could have made the shot.” Charlie put his face in his hand. “What?”


“What about him?”

Charlie took a deep breath. “Ian is one of the very few people in my life who never backed down in the face of my math. He gave me equal footing but only after a hell of a pissing match.”

“Okay?”

“What’s he going to say when he finds out about this?” Charlie held up his left arm with his wrist out. “Poor little professor couldn’t handle the pressure. Just a sissy nerd like he always thought.”

David wasn’t really sure what to say. How Ian Edgerton might react to the news of Charlie’s suicide attempt never crossed his mind. He did know that Edgerton had bucket loads of respect for Charlie. Probably far more than Charlie realized. “Charlie, when Ian’s life was on the line the first person he
demanded to talk to was you. He might get a little pissed at you but I don’t think he’s going to lose any respect for your skills. I mean he might not have backed down from you but you never backed down from him either and that puts you in one hell of a minority.”

Charlie just groaned a little. “The more I think about everything and everyone that’s waiting for me to get out of this place the more terrified I get just at the thought of all the conversation I don’t want to have.”

David reached out and rubbed Charlie’s head a little. “You can’t stay here forever Charlie and when you do leave no one is going to make you fly solo right off. I’m going to be there if nothing else.”

Charlie didn’t say anything, just pressed his head into David’s hand.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Charlie has a bad day and takes it out on Don.

Don trotted up next to David as he crossed the parking lot. “Hey, are you heading to see Charlie?”

“That was the plan.”

“Mind if I head in with you?”

“Sure.” David was a little surprised. Don mainly seemed to visit Charlie with Alan to provide a buffer.

“How’s he been? I haven’t seen him in a few days.”

David got in his car. “Hard to say. I think he’s hit a slightly numb phase. He’s still not doing any math.”

“I know. It’s been freaking me out a bit. Dad too.”

“I keep trying to tell his shrink that Charlie should be writing on the walls. I don’t think he realizes just how wrong Charlie without math is.”

“Maybe there’s brain damage,” Don said suddenly. “I mean did he stop breathing at any point? Maybe we should get an MRI done or something. I mean major brain damage for Charlie would just look human normal to anyone who doesn’t know him.”

David tried to remember the details of those horrific blood covered couple of hours. “No,” he finally said. “He was breathing or intubated the whole time, his heart never stopped. I got there pretty much the moment he hit the floor. He even remembers some of the things I said before he lost consciousness. I mean he might have banged his head a little but that would have cleared up by now. Right?” David looked sideways across the car at Don who just shrugged. “We’d need something to compare an MRI against anyway. Before and after.”

“Chuck had a stint of bad migraines just after our Mom got diagnosed. He panicked and thought it might be a brain tumor and coned his doctor into giving him an MRI. Knowing him he probably still has all the images.”

“It wasn’t a brain tumor I take it?”

“Nah. He worked out it was the florescent lights in his office. One was half burnt out and flickering at a slightly different rhythm than the rest but he worked this out aftersubjecting himself to nearly every medical test known to man. Still... If he doesn’t do any math soon...”

“Yeah...”

The rest of the ride was more or less in silence. They signed themselves in both being old hands at
the procedure by now but Don still hesitated a moment at the door.

Charlie was still sitting by his window, knees to his chest but even from the other side of the large room David could see that something wasn’t quite right. Charlie seemed to be vibrating. He was tapping one foot and as David approached he could see that every muscle was clenched tight.

David grabbed a chair and Don sat down by Charlie’s feet. “Hey, Buddy.” Charlie only gave Don a quick sharp look then looked away. “How are you holding up?” Charlie didn’t answer.

“Charlie?” David prompted carefully.

“I have no desire to speak with anyone today,” Charlie said primly without looking at either of them.

Don let out a long sigh. “I know you don’t like it here, buddy but I’m sure you’re not going to be here much longer. They’re going to get you fixed up and out the door in no time.”

Charlie’s head whipped sharply towards Don and a cold sneer crawled across his face. A knot of absolute dread settled into David stomach.

“Fixed up and out the door,” Charlie repeated carefully.

David stood slowly as Charlie’s right hand clenched into a fist but he didn’t move fast enough to prevent a solid right hook from impacting against Don’s nose. Don’s head whipped around and bumped against the reinforced glass window.

“This is all your fucking fault!” Charlie screamed as he lunged towards Don with both fists. Don raised his hands to defend himself. Luckily Charlie’s left arm was still weak but he managed to get in a couple of good hits with his right. David wrapped his arms around Charlie’s waist and started to drag him off Don.

The orderlies were there by the time he managed to pull Charlie away with Nurse Chapel right behind.

Charlie almost instantly stopped fighting and put his arms in the air in surrender. “I know, I know, fucking sedate me and get me out of here,” he shouted.

Charlie was handed two pills that he dry swallowed and allowed himself to be led away. Only when Charlie was gone did David turn to Don. Don had his head tilted back and was holding a hanky to his nose. A younger nurse had also arrived with a first aid kit.

“Fuck,” Don hissed as the nurse dabbed at a small cut near his temple. “It’s a good thing no one ever taught Chuck how to throw a proper punch.”

David wasn’t sure what to say. He wanted to go to Charlie but that wouldn’t be allowed and Charlie was probably half unconscious in the padded room by now. Don looked liked he’d taken a few good hits but he’d spent so much time wanting to knock Don on his ass himself that he really couldn’t drag up a lot of sympathy.

As soon as Don’s nose stopped bleeding he was offered an instant ice pack for his face andpolitely asked to leave. David went with him but took a second to apologize to the staff for the commotion. He was on a first name basis with most of them and on good terms and wanted to keep it that way.

By the time he got out to the car Don was checking his face in one of the side mirrors. “You’ll be fine, Don. You’ve taken worse.”
“Yeah, I know. Shit, I’ve taken worse from Charlie. But I guess he’s getting better at expressing his emotions.”

David just snorted and unlocked the car.

“David?”

“Yes?”

“Is this all my fault?”

David didn’t pause to think. “Arguably, yes.”

~

Back at the office Liz asked the question first. “Shit, Boss. What the hell happened?”

“Guy thought I was looking at his wife,” Don answered smoothly.

“Were you?” Liz quipped back without missing a beat.

Don just gave her a dirty look and both the girls snickered and went back to work seemingly unconcerned at the state of their boss’s face which had swelled nicely on the ride back to the office despite the ice pack. David was willing to bet a heck of a goose egg was coming up under Don’s slightly shaggy hair as well.

A half hour later Colby cornered him in the break room. “Spill, what happened to Don’s face?”

“Charlie got pissed.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes. It’s a damn good thing Charlie doesn’t know how to throw a punch properly or Don would be in a whole world of hurt.”

~

David flopped down into Bradford’s couch. He could feel his sinuses blocking up again and could already feel a headache coming on.

“So how are you doing?” Bradford started. Someone had decided that as long as he was seeing Charlie every day he would also be seeing Bradford every week.

David shrugged. “I’m still here, fighting the fight.”

“Yeah, you are. How’s Charlie?”

“Scared, angry.”

“And how’s that big ball of guilt you’re carrying around doing?”

David thought for a moment. “Oddly enough it got a little smaller when Charlie informed Don that it was all his fault right after giving him a bloody nose.”

Bradford chuckled a little “I’m sure it was good for Charlie on some level.”

“It earned him a trip to the time out room but he made a deal with his shrink that he’d be sedated
before getting chucked in there.” Bradford gave him a questioning look. “Charlie’s claustrophobic. When it feels like the walls are closing in it apparently doesn’t help if they’re padded.”

“I can believe that.”

“And if you want a bit of irony he’s claustrophobic ‘cause he got accidentally locked in a closet as a kid and couldn’t get out.”

Bradford just gave a slightly amused snort. “How are you doing, David. Really?”

“I don’t know. I want Charlie out of that place. It’s all I can think about. He’s not doing math. How healthy can he be, how good can the treatment be if he’s not doing math?”

“I don’t know.”

David sunk his hands into his face. “His shrink thinks he’s getting too attached to me. I...” David stumbled. “I want Charlie attached to me. I mean I know he’s going to have to learn to function on his own at some point but everyday I get to give him a hug I mark it down as a good day. And I know I am just setting myself up for one hell of an ugly fall. He’s going to tell me that I’m such a good friend and then go off with some guy that has a Milton Prize and I’m just going to end up sitting in my bath crying into a bottle of cheap vodka.”

“Well... at least you’re self aware. What’s a Milton Prize?”

“It’s some fancy math award. Charlie and Amita both have one. ‘Course Charlie got his at like 15 or something.”


David looked up. “Yes.”

“I’m not sure what I can tell you. You’re talking about matters of the heart. I mostly deal with stuff from the neck up.”

“Thanks.”

“Speaking man to man however; don’t sell yourself short and don’t give up yet. I got the lets be friends speech from my wife three times and didn’t get my shot until after both of us were divorced from other people. I think what you need to think about right now is can you keep being Charlie’s friend even when that’s all he wants ‘cause he’s going to need that rock solid friendship for some time to come, I can guarantee it.”

David ran Bradford’s words through his head. He felt like he was standing on a train tracks and he could hear the train in the distance. He couldn’t see it yet but he knew it was there and when it got to him it was going to hurt. “Yeah. I can go the distance if that’s what Charlie needs.”

~

David sat on the hard bench of the locker room, his towel wrapped around his waist. In the distance he could hear a shower running. He was waiting for someone. He couldn’t quite remember who.

The door opened and Charlie dragged in, dressed in full SWAT kit, riffle slung over his shoulder. He looked exhausted. He didn’t look at David, just put his riffle on the rack then started stripping off his gear dumping into his locker right in front of David. The inside of the locker door was a chalkboard and it was covered in math.
David watched until Charlie had stripped himself naked and slammed his locker shut. Then he turned to David.

“Slicha,” David whispered.

Charlie shook his head and put his hand to David’s lips. He could smell chalk but taste gun oil. Then Charlie sat, wrapping his legs around David’s waist. David groaned at the feel of Charlie’s body against his. He tried to raise his arms, he wanted to hold Charlie, to run his fingers through the mess of curls but he couldn’t move. His body was frozen and all he could do was watch and feel as Charlie rubbed himself along David’s length over and over, harder and harder until...

David opened his eyes. He blinked a few time then carefully lifted his sheet and peered under it. In the early morning light he could just make out cum, still clinging to his stomach and sickly on his sheets.

‘You have got to be fucking, shitting me.’

~

David knew there was something wrong the moment he pushed through the double doors onto the floor. Everyone looked at him for a second then looked away, even the orderlies. Charlie was sitting under his window, staring out of it. Nothing seemed at all unusual.

That was until David got close enough to see Charlie’s face. Tears were slowly rolling from his eyes. He wasn’t shaking or breathing hard and except for the tears his face looked completely neutral.

David sat down next to him. “Charlie?” Charlie didn’t even blink. “Charlie?” He reached out and tried to touch Charlie’s shoulder but he jerked away from David’s hand.

David tried not to jerk himself. Charlie’s little twitch felt like a kick in the chest.

David saw Dr. Flores on the other side of the floor. “I’ll be right back.”

He quickly went to the doctor. “What’s going on?”

“We don’t know. According to his roommate he started crying in the middle of the night and he hasn’t stopped all day. Hasn’t said a word either. And has been rather adverse to people trying to touch him but there is no sign of any kind of injury or fight.”

“But...” David looked back over his shoulder to Charlie.

“We’ve been waiting for you to show up to see how he reacts.”

“And you have no idea what’s wrong?”

Dr. Flores sighed. “I’m rather hoping that this is the breakthrough we’ve been hoping for. That this is a lot of pain finally coming out in a reasonably healthy way.”

“You hope?”

The doctor just gave a bit of a shrug. “Go sit with him Agent Sinclair. Even if he doesn’t respond he’ll want to know you’re still there for him.”

David headed back and sat down next to Charlie again. “Charlie. I’m sorry for whatever is hurting. Just tell me what I need to do to help you feel better and I’ll do it.”
Charlie didn’t respond in any way, just continued to stare out the window with tear filled eyes.

The next day David prayed before stepping onto the main floor of St. Clare’s. He prayed that Charlie had stopped crying. He hadn’t been able to think about anything else but Charlie’s face for the last day. Colby hadn’t asked. Don desked him since he was obviously distracted by something. He hadn’t argued. He sat down by Charlie’s feet and his heart sank at the tear stains still on Charlie’s cheeks.

“Charlie?” David tried. “Charlie?”

Charlie blinked once then slowly turned his head towards David. David felt like he might drown under the wave of relief that struck him.

“David,” Charlie’s voice was small and raspy.

“‘Yes?’

“Are you interested in me?”

David processed the question for a second not sure if he heard correctly.

“‘Am I interested in you?’

“Is there anything about me that you might possibly find desirable?” Charlie voice was still small and there was hesitation in each word. Still, David smiled.

“Yes Charlie. There are plenty of things about you that I find very desirable and yes I am interested in you but that doesn’t matter. I don’t need you to have any interest in me. You are still my friend and my team mate and I am going to be here for you no matter what.”

Charlie nodded a few times then turned to look back out the window. And that seemed to be the extent of the conversation for the day.

The day after that the tears had stopped but David could still feel the pain coming from Charlie in waves.

“Charlie, you do know that if you want out of here you just have to say the word?”

Charlie nodded then reached out and clasped David’s hand. David didn’t say anything, just held on tight.

The next day Charlie turned to look at him as he sat down.

“Hey, there. How are you doing?”

Charlie shrugged a little. “I read some of the comics you gave me.”

“And?”

“I like the ones with the mutants.”

“I thought you might.”

Charlie hunched his shoulders up a bit and rested his chin on his knees. “I’d rather have wings though. If I had a choice of mutations, math or wings, I think I’d take the wings.”
David thought of a winged Charlie. “You’d look like an angel.” Charlie snorted. “You would. Go look at all the old art. Angels always have curls.” A smile touched at Charlie’s face for the first time in days.

“What about you?” Charlie asked. “If you could join the ranks of us mutants? What would you want?”

David had spent more than a small amount of his childhood contemplating super powers. “Wings would be cool I’ve got to say but if not wings... teleporting. It would make the commute so much easier and I’d get to sleep in.”

“Teleporting would be cool,” Charlie agreed with a nod. “I wouldn’t want to be telepathic. I mean the inside of my head is scary enough I don’t really want to know what’s going on in other people’s heads.”

“Would make interrogations easier.”

“But would it be admissible in court? I mean if you pulled something out of someone’s head what’s to say you’re not making it up. It would be hearsay evidence.”

David laughed. “You’ve been hanging around lawyers too much.”

“I was raised by a lawyer. You wouldn’t believe what it took to get an allowance raise or a bedtime extension. By the time I had to defend my first dissertation it was a walk in the park comparatively.”

“I’m sure you would have done fine, second hand law school or not.”
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Charlie has a really bad day.

David flopped around in his bed trying to get comfortable. It was just a little too warm out, the air conditioning just wasn’t quite good enough, and the sheets felt scratchy and David knew he needed to sleep, he was craving sleep but it just wasn’t coming.

His bedside clock told him it was past midnight.

He knew one thing that would help him relax. The old stand by sleep aid but for some reason he’d been avoiding it pretty much since Charlie went into the hospital. Probably because Charlie has become his stand by fantasy for late insomniac nights. And he had been a safe fantasy. Completely unobtainable and there for existing in the same realm as movie stars.

Of course now there was an ever so slim chance that Charlie was obtainable and his completely fabricated fantasies were now stained by reality. He now knew how Charlie felt in his arms. He knew what Charlie’s moans sounded like and knew the sharp smell of his cum and the taste of his lips.

David gave up and kicked off his shorts and took himself in hand. He tried to drag up a fantasy, one that had nothing to do with Charlie. He flipped through his mental rolodex of pretty girls and pretty boys. His mind landed on Zoe Saldana in her little red Starfleet mini dress. He’d spent Saturday afternoons as a kid watching Star Trek reruns and quietly lusting over Lt. Uhura’s legs so had approved of the new casting with old style costumes.

David took a breath, squeezed his eyes shut and tried to picture a little Starfleet striptease. She had her boots half off when suddenly her hair whet short and curly and her chest disappeared. David opened his eyes before his brain could go to a much weirder place.

He shook his head and went for try two. This time he went for Gina Torres. Curls but solidly and beautifully female. In David’s mind she flashed him a smirk full of danger and promise. And that was as far as David’s mind would let him go. She didn’t get much past the smile before she began to shrink and her hair shorten.

David growled and kicked the bed then he took a few breaths, pushed down as much guilt as he could manage and dragged up an old fantasy of Charlie. He felt his cock instantly swell in his hand.

Late at night in Charlie’s old office. Charlie is babbling on about some math he can’t understand. David locks the door then silences Charlie with a kiss. They kiss against the chalkboard for a long time before tumbling onto Charlie’s couch. They make out some more, stripping bits of clothing from each other until Charlie straddles his hips and slides down onto David’s length.

David stroked himself faster at the thought of Charlie riding him, his face open, covered in bliss. He squeezed tighter at the thought of Charlie bearing down on his cock while coming across their bodies.
David gave a grunt and came across his own hand at the thought of Charlie collapsing across his body, warm, solid and with a smile on his face.

~

David yawned even as Colby took a corner a little tighter than was strictly necessary.

“You okay over there?” Colby asked.

“Yeah, just didn’t sleep enough. It’s the weather.”

“It’s only going to get worse.”

“At least it never gets really humid. That was always the worst part of New York summers. The humidity.”

“You haven’t encountered a truly crappy summer until you’ve faced down an Afghani sand storm. Those suck.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

David checked his watch. It was getting close to one.

Colby pulled up to a red light. “Hey, do you think Charlie would mind an extra visitor today? I haven’t seen the guy in a bit.”

Normally David just said sure but there was something still fragile about Charlie after the last few days and it was causing every possessive and defensive part of his soul to well up. “Um... Actually I’m not really sure.”

Colby gave David a quick look before putting his eyes back on the road. “What’s up? He okay?”

“I don’t know. I think he might have found the bottom of bottom a few days ago. He’s been kind of out of it.”

David watched Colby scowl and turn the Charger south. “How about if I just pop in for a second and if he’s not in a social mood I’ll leave?”

~

David knew something was wrong as soon as he signed in. Instead of buzzing him and Colby onto the floor the girl at the desk made a quick hushed phone call. A minute later Dr. Flores emerged looking grim. David’s heart stopped his head filling with a million nightmare scenarios of Charlie trying to kill himself again.


“Dr. Eppes didn’t do anything however there was an incident early this morning.”

“Define incident?” Colby growled out.

Dr. Flores looked at Colby. “This is Special Agent Colby Granger. He’s a friend of Charlie’s,” David said by way of quick introduction.

“I own the guy my life. Twice. So please, define incident.”
Dr. Flores took a deep breath. “From what I’ve been able to understand Dr. Eppes woke early this morning with distressed dreams shortly before the morning shift change. The orderly assigned to Dr. Eppes’ ward felt that he needed to be restrained then moved to the safe room when he refused to go back to bed.”

“What!”

“I would like to point out that the orderly in question is new to this organization, on new employee probation and violated several hospital procedures and policies. He has already been dismissed. Unfortunately by the time the morning shift arrived Dr. Eppes was suffering from a rather intense panic attack triggered by his claustrophobia.”

“No fucking shit.” David moved towards the double doors but Dr. Flores stepped quickly into his path. “Get out of my way and open these doors.”

“Yes, absolutely, but please I need to discuss some serious matters with you first.”

“Make it quick.” David was seeing red and could hear his heart pounding in his ears.

Dr. Flores took another deep breath. “Dr. Eppes is a voluntary admittance. Right now he has had enough treatment, has shown enough progress, is a good enough actor, and has a good enough lawyer that he can check himself out if he wants. We would have a hard time obtaining even a 5150.”

“You want him to stay.” Colby’s voice was flat but hard.

“This is a private organization, the upper management just want him not to sue. I think he has made a breakthrough. I think he has hit a point where he can start healing. It is my true and honest opinion that he is not ready to leave. I do not think he’s a danger to himself anymore so we can’t force him to stay but I do not think he’s ready for the outside world. Not yet. If he wants to leave I can understand but I would feel more comfortable knowing he is going to another inpatient facility and if he insists on leaving I still want to see him five days a week. He is not ready and this unfortunate event...”

“You want me to talk him into staying.”

“Agent Sinclair, he trusts you more than anyone else on earth right now. More than his brother or father. More than any other friend. You are quite literally his anchor right now and he needs you to do what’s best for him.”

“If he wants to leave I won’t make him stay. I promised him that. That was the only way I got him through the front doors to begin with.”

Dr. Flores nodded. “Of course. I’ll take you to see him now. We’ve been letting him sit outside most of the day and given him a mild sedative.”

Dr. Flores swiped a security key and pushed the doors open. David felt Colby’s hand on his shoulder and he took as much strength from it as he could having no idea just what kind of state he would find Charlie in.

They were led quickly through the main floor, down a hall, outside and down some steps where there was some grass, a picnic table and a basketball court. Charlie was sitting on the table, clutching his knees, eyes darting around. Nurse Chapel was leaning against the basketball hoop watching him.

“How is he?” Dr. Flores asked.
Nurse Chapel shrugged. “He’s managed to fight off the alprazolam pretty well.”

“Well, that’s not so surprise,” Colby said. Everyone looked at him. “What? We’ve all seen him do advanced, deep set, pattern theory, Einstein level stuff with a six pack in him.”

David had to agree. “He’s got a point.”

“And I still haven’t gotten close enough to check his arm for damage,” the nurse added.

“Why don’t you go talk to him now, David. And here.” David was handed a little paper cup with a pill in the bottom. “See if you can get him to take that. He’s probably more exhausted than anything else right now.”

David braced himself and carefully approached Charlie. Charlie saw him coming and followed with his eyes but there was no expression on his face. He crawled onto the table and settled in about a foot away from Charlie. He put the paper cup off to the side.

“It’s okay, Charlie. I’m here.” Charlie grabbed the cup and swallowed the contents without even looking then crawled into David’s lap. David could feel him shaking and held on tight. “It’s okay. It’s okay. That idiot’s been fired already. You’re safe. It’s all okay.”

David continued in that vein for several minutes, stroking Charlie’s head and back. Charlie began to calm down, probably as the pill started to take effect and David could feel his left arm begin to go first.

“Charlie, can I check your arm? I just want to make sure you’re okay? Please.”

It was nearly a minute before Charlie let go and held out his left arm, his face still buried in David’s shoulder. David carefully pushed up the sleeve. The skin looked a little raw and a bit bruised around the wrist but nothing too bad. He put his hand into Charlie’s. “Can you squeeze my hand?” Charlie slowly made a fist. It was weak but he was trying. “Okay.” David took his hand from Charlie’s and Charlie wrapped his left arm back around David’s waist.

“I hear you had a bad dream? Want to tell me about it?” Charlie shook his head. “Okay.”

David kept stroking Charlie’s head and started making a list of things that needed to be done if Charlie wanted to leave. He certainly shouldn’t be unsupervised yet. He’d hate it but maybe a home nurse would be for the best for a little while. He could probably use a support group of some kind. There had to be plenty in LA. He probably shouldn’t be heading back to work yet but that would be between Charlie and Dr. Finch. David wondered just what CalSci had been told.

Charlie’s arm flopped down to the table and David realized that Charlie’s breathing had become quite settled. In fact Charlie was fast asleep in his arms. David closed his eyes and let his own body relax for a minute. He knew it would only add to the guilt he was still carrying but he let himself soak in the pleasure of Charlie’s body resting against his.

When he opened his eyes he saw Colby carefully approaching. ‘Need help?’ Colby mouthed silently.

David realized he had no way of getting Charlie up without waking him up and he didn’t want to do that. David nodded. Colby braced Charlie’s back and head and with much slow and careful shifting David got off the bench still holding Charlie in his arms. Charlie felt lighter than David remembered and he added nutritionist and/or personal trainer onto the list of people that might need to be found for Charlie.
Dr. Flores led them upstairs and back inside while David carefully whispered to Charlie to stay asleep. It seemed to work as he laid Charlie in a bed that looked like it was made with military precision. David chalked that up, along with the immaculate cleanliness of the rest of the room, to the OCD roommate.

Once Charlie was tucked in David quickly wrote a note promising to come back and left it on the little nightstand before slipping out. Colby and Dr. Flores were in the hallway talking quietly.

“What was that pill?” David asked.

“Diazepam,” Dr. Flores replied. “It’s a little old school but it works. We’ll wake him up for dinner.”

“If he wants to leave I’m not going to be the one to make him stay,” David repeated. He was still angry over the whole situation.

“I understand.”

“I’ll get Don and Alan to come by tomorrow to talk to him. I don’t know if it’ll help but they should know what happened.”

“I completely agree.”

David didn’t have anything else to say. At least nothing else that was polite or constructive. Instead he just gave a nod and showed himself out of the hospital, starting to feel more than a little claustrophobic himself. He didn’t even bother to note if Colby was following.

When he got to the Charger he leaned against it and pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes.

“I didn’t know Charlie was claustrophobic.”

David didn’t move his hands from his eyes. “He doesn’t like showing weakness. He figures he needs FBI brass balls to get respect out of us.”

Colby snorted. “Think I should tell him I fainted the last time I went in for a flu shot?”

“How about that you collect dolls?”

“They are historically accurate military figurines, comic book guy. They are not dolls.”

~

David leaned over Don’s shoulder as he sat at his desk. “I need to talk to you and Alan after work. It’s important.”

~

They met in a little diner with half way decent food and deep booths. Since Alan had rejoined the nine to five crowd he was spending less time in the kitchen.

“So what’s going on?” Don asked as soon as he sat down.

David quickly and carefully explained what had happened at the hospital. The unhappy look on Don’s face was only matched by the one on Alan’s. “...And be so kind as to not shoot the messenger. I told Dr. Flores that I wasn’t going to be the one to force Charlie to stay if he didn’t want to but I told him that I’d try to bring you two around tomorrow to talk to Charlie.”
The matching looks of anger turned into matching guilt. Don’s excuse had been the bruises on his face that were just finishing fading from green to yellow. Alan didn’t have an excuse except for a sudden inability to communicate with his own son. He tried more than Don did but David knew it was still hard on him.

“If Charlie wants to leave I don’t think there’s much anyone can do to stop him. I mean if his lawyer can get him off of a treason charge he can get him out of a 5150. Maybe between the three of us we can talk him into staying but...”

“Maybe he shouldn’t be staying,” Alan cut in. “I mean Charlie’s brain has never exactly qualified as normal.”

“He tried to kill himself, Dad. Even for abnormal that's not right.”

“And why did he try to do that?”

“Hey! I will accept a certain amount of responsibility but I wasn’t the one so desperate for grandkids that I was going to frog march him down the aisle.”

“Now hold on just...”

“Enough!” David snapped. “Charlie made his choices. They weren’t good choices but they were still choices. And believe me there is more than enough blame and guilt to go around on this but right now he’s had a nasty scare and needs a little help making the right decision. Got it?”

Both Don and Alan got quiet and guilty looking again. David rummaged through his pockets desperate to find even an aspirin as his head began to throb.

~

David and Don checked their weapons at the door. David had made sure to pick up a lemon tart from Charlie’s favorite bakery and tucked it into his jacket. They were buzzed through but Charlie wasn’t at his window. David tapped on the window of the Nurses Station.

Nurse Chapel smiled at him. “Hello, Agent Sinclair. Charlie’s been given extra outside time today so he’s still in the yard.”

“How’s he doing?”

“Calmer, but I don’t think he slept well.”

“I’m not surprised. Can we see him?”

“Sure. I’ll take you down myself. Dr. Flores is with someone else right now but I’m sure he’s going to want to talk before everyone leaves.”

“I’m sure he is.”

Chapel led the three of them back outside. Heading down the steps David could see Charlie perched on the bench again but even from a distance he could tell Charlie was more relaxed.

Charlie saw the three of them approach and David could see him tense up a bit. Still David let Don go first. Don perched on the bench next to Charlie but didn’t get too close. Charlie only looked at him sideways. “Hey, buddy.”

“Hey.” Charlie did not sound like he was in a conversational mood.
“I hear you had a bit of a rough day yesterday?”

Charlie shrugged. “No one tried to shoot at me. I guess it could have been worse.”

“Shit, we have made you into an agent haven’t we?” Charlie snorted but David could see him trying to hold back a smile. He turned and looked at his brother then carefully reached up and tried to touch Don’s face. Don winced away a little. “You’ve got a good swing on you, buddy. Remind me to take you down to the gym one of these days. I’ll teach you how to throw a proper punch so you don’t hurt your hand.”

Charlie dropped his hand then folded it into this lap. Then slowly, very slowly, he leaned sideways until he was leaning against Don’s shoulder. “What am I doing here?” Charlie whispered.

“You’re healing,” Don replied quickly. “Remember what Dr. Patel said? You’ve been hurt and you need to take time to heal and let people help you feel better.”

Alan sat down on the other side of Charlie. “Whatever you need Charlie. I know you’re mad at Don right now and I know we’ve never communicated as well as we should but you are my son and I love you and...” Alan put his hand on Charlie’s knee. “What would make you happy, Charlie?”

Charlie raised his eyes and looked at David. “I don’t know.” David reached into his coat, pulled out a small brown bag and held out the pastry. Charlie took it with a touch of a grin. “Well that’s a good start.”

Charlie nibbled the crust around the edges before going for the filling. “Anything interesting cases come up?” Charlie asked as he started licking at the lemon filling. Don quickly looked up at David. He knew what Don was thinking. Saying yes might motivate Charlie to push forward with his therapy but it could just as easily motivate him to just check himself out.

“Nah. I think all the interesting bad guys heard you weren’t doing so well so are laying low for a bit. I mean what’s the point of going on some vastly complicated crime spree unless you have the great Charlie Eppes to challenge?”

“So I should stay in here and keep the city safe?”

“I didn’t say we didn’t have cases, just no interesting cases. The particularly stupid criminals are having a field day.”

Charlie smiled a little and the conversation fell silent as he finished eating his tart.

“So,” Don finally broke the silence. “I guess this is one of the big decisions Dr. Patel talked about. Do you want to leave?”

Charlie looked up again and into David’s eyes. ‘Oh please say yes.’ David begged silently. He wasn’t sure how much longer he could handle having Charlie in St. Clare’s. Charlie’s eyes were sad and frightened.

“I don’t want to be here.” Charlie’s voice had a small crack. “But I don’t think I can survive outside. Not yet. I’m... I’m still terrified of everything out there. And I don’t know what I’m supposed to do, and...”

Don put his arm around Charlie’s shoulder and pulled him close. “I’m sorry, buddy. I am so sorry, for everything. But you’re going to be okay, I promise. Just give yourself a little time. You’ll be okay.”
“They make me eat tapioca here.” Charlie’s voice was dejected.

“You hate tapioca.” Alan pointed out.

“I know.” Charlie swallowed a few times. “Dad, Don?”

“Yes?”

“I’m gay.”

Alan gave Charlie's shoulder a squeeze. “We know Charlie, we got your note. It’s okay.”

Charlie nodded. “I think I was really in love with Jesse.”

“Buddy, you were twelve.”

“He was nice to me. You didn’t even fall into that category.”

Don flinched back with guilt. “Yeah, I’m sorry about that.”

“Don?”

“Yes?”

Charlie took a deep breath. “I killed Mr. Winks.”

Don straightened up fast. “What!”

“It was an accident,” Charlie said quickly. “I thought you were going to kill me so I left the cage door open so it would look like he just ran away.”

“Charlie!” Alan exclaimed.

“It was an accident,” Charlie repeated.

“He was the class gerbil. I thought my classmates were going to kill me. Mom drove all over town looking for a gerbil that looked just like him.”

Charlie put his face in his hands. “I was five. I was doing an experiment. I didn’t know gerbil fur was that flammable.”

“You lit a gerbil on fire?” David exclaimed. It was a pretty horrific image.

“It was an accident,” Charlie moaned. “I buried him in the back yard under the lemon tree but I couldn’t dig very deep and I think Mrs. Richard’s cat, Mr. Fluffluf, yeah I think Mr. Fluffluf dug him up.”

“Oh my god.”

“You’re lucky you didn’t burn the house down, Charlie,” Alan scolded even going so far as to shake a finger.

“I know, I know. I’m sorry.”

“Why are you telling me this now?” Don asked.

“Dr. Flores thinks I need to work on being more honest.”
“I can’t believe you killed Mr. Winks.”

“I’m sorry,” Charlie repeated.

Don folded his arms and scowled in a way that came perilously close to a pout. David tried not to laugh especially considering the way Alan was looking at both his boys like someone was going to go to be sent to bed without dessert.

“Is this a bad time?”

David turned around to find Dr. Flores just behind him. “No I think this is as good a time as any.”

Dr. Flores approached the Eppes. “Is everything alright here?”

Charlie looked up. “Dr. Flores, this is Don and my Dad.” There were quick handshakes. “And I’m a killer.”

“He killed Mr. Winks.”

“He was a small child,” Dr. Flores said gently having obviously heard the tragic tale already.

“There’s no statute of limitations on murder.”

“It was an accident. It was gross negligence at worst.” Charlie argued.

“Emphasis on the gross.”

“That’s enough boys,” Alan finally cut in. “It was an accident and Charlie is very sorry.”

Don and Charlie looked at each other out of the corner of their eyes. The argument was obviously not over but merely shelved for a later date, probably after a few beers.

Dr. Flores slid his hands casually into his pockets like he was just taking a stroll. “So Dr. Eppes, have you made a decision about staying or not?”

Charlie took a big breath. “I really hate the tapioca here but I have decided to embrace cowardice for a bit. As much as this place really kinda sucks I am petrified of everyone and everything outside of it.”

The slightly guilty look slipped back onto Don and Alan’s faces. Dr. Flores just nodded. “Well that is what we’ll work on next then. I have no desire to keep you here for an extended stay. The world out there might scare you right now but I have the feeling it also could really use you in it.”
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

David and Colby talk and Larry returns.

David felt his back begin to cramp and he wasn’t sure how much longer he could handle sitting in the back of the van crammed in with Colby and a bunch of listening equipment.

“So, how’s Charlie doing?” Colby asked after their target finished ordering a pizza and hung up.

David shrugged. “A little manic, but I think that means he’s starting to pull up and out. Hey, did you know any guys that got kicked out of the Army under Don’t Ask Don’t Tell?”

Colby cringed. “A couple. My unit was pretty cool, we didn’t really give a shit but one winter we got snowed in on a base for a few weeks with a base commander who had a real bug about it. Couple of my guys got caught out. Not much I could do. Why?”

“Charlie was telling me about this British mathematician who worked for the military. Really famous, cracked all kinds of German codes during World War Two then they found out he was gay and they took away his security clearance, tried him in a court of law, then chemically castrated him. He lasted a few years then killed himself.”

“Suck.”

“Yeah. I tried to tell him things were better but he started talking about Don’t Ask Don’t Tell and Prop 8 and all this other stuff and it’s not like I can hold myself up as some sort of great example and... I don’t know. Guess it just sort of got me down.”

“Well, what can you do about it?”

David shifted himself around so he could look at Colby. “Okay, that’s exactly what I’m talking about. Like my mom, she has this pair of ratty old shoes that she’s never thrown out and I once asked her why she didn’t just get rid of them and she told me she wanted to be buried in them because she marched next to Martin Luther King in them.”

“Cool.”

“Yeah, very. And my Dad, scars all down his left side sort of like burns but care of a union busting fire hose as close range.”

“Ouch.”

“And have you ever read Alan’s FBI file?”

“Yeah, but don’t tell Don.”

“Okay, so you know he was investigated for going into South Central and trying to register African American voters. That had to have taken balls on all kinds of levels. I owe them. I owe my mom, and my Dad. I owe guys like Alan. Do I owe it to the generation coming up behind me to try to do
something? Or does my... silence about myself make me a culpable partner to all the injustices going on?"

Colby shook his head. “Man, okay, I’m a Wonderbread farm boy from small town Idaho. I am so not the guy to be asking this.”

“Well you’re the guy I’m stuck in a surveillance van with.”

“Look, you volunteer down at the youth center. You do the big brother thing. You strap on a badge and a gun every day and put your life on the line to try to save people from the scum of the earth and get paid crap and no one says thanks. If you think it’ll help to be out and proud while you’re doing all that, go for it. I’ve got your back. If you want to go down to the protests and carry a sign I’ll bail you out when the cops scoop you up. I mean I know we’ve got slightly different politics and that’s why we don’t talk about politics but I signed up for this gig ‘cause I believe in freedom and justice for all and all that good shit so...” Colby gave a little shrug.

“Thanks man.”

“Though, really, word of advice, once you’re out be sure to tell Don and Alan before trying to make a move on Charlie ‘cause I can picture them in rockers on the front porch with shot guns way too easy.”

~

David took a deep cleansing breath as the elevator dinged and opened on the sixth floor. Any trip to the eleventh floor, even just to file standard paperwork, felt like a trip to no man’s land.

David’s mood quickly sank again as he heard raised voices.

“...Someone in this building knows where Charles is and I will not leave until...”

“Larry!” Liz shouted. “We don’t know. Okay?”

Larry was in the middle of the bullpen facing down Liz and Nikki. Everyone was watching and he looked about ready to take a hostage.

“Shit,” David muttered to himself. Just when Don and Colby were out chasing up something.

“Of course you don’t know.” Larry’s sarcasm was thick. “One of the greatest minds of the 21st century vanishes off the face of the planet and the FBI has no idea.”

“Larry,” David cut in. “Why don’t you calm down and we’ll wait for Don to come back.”

“And what are the odds that he’ll give me the same run around as Alan or Amita?” Larry’s hands were balled into little fists and for a half second David could almost see what Megan might have seen in the guy.

“Why don’t we just go some place quite and talk.”

“I will not budge from this spot until...”

David grabbed Larry around the waist, flipped him over his shoulder and made a beeline for the War Room not putting him down until he’d kicked the door closed with some force.

“Lawrence, I will tell you where Charlie is as long as you calm down and are quiet about it. There are reasons no one here knows where he is, okay?”
Larry took several long breaths. David could see the fear in his eyes. “I know I have been prone to vanishing myself but I am a wanderer. Charles is a fixed point within time and space.”

“I know.” David looked around. “Look, we need to go someplace private.”

“Where do you suggest?”

David grabbed Larry’s arm and ushered him from the War Room in double time and didn’t slow down or acknowledge anyone until he had both himself and Larry in his car with the doors locked.

“Are you going to check for bugs?” Larry asked the sarcasm dripping.

David pressed his forehead to the steering wheel for a second just trying to collect his thoughts.

“There is no gentle way of saying this,” David started.

“Then say it plainly.”

“You called me artless once, Larry. I’m afraid I’m this is going to be worse.”

“I will brace myself then.”

David took a deep breath. “Charlie is in the hospital.”

“Hospital? If he is ill why the secrecy? I would think...”

“He’s not ill. He’s in St. Clare’s Psychiatric Treatment Facility. He’s in a mental hospital.”

Larry blinked rapidly. “I don’t understand.”

“He tried to kill himself, Larry.”

“No.” Larry’s reply was instant. “No. I am sure it was some mistake. He gets distracted, I’m sure he just had some sort of accident, he...”

“Larry, I’m the one who found him. He wrote a note and he opened his wrist right up to his elbow. If I’d walked in thirty seconds later he wouldn’t have made it.”

David watched as Larry processed. It was hard to witness the flickers of shock, confusion, and pain across the gentle face.

“Why?” Was the word Larry finally breathed.

“That’s not for me to tell you. I shouldn’t even be telling you this.”

“I want to see him,” Larry stated firmly.

“Larry...”

“He is my best friend, he is...” Larry’s voice faltered. “He is the closest thing to a son I will ever know, David. Please?”

David checked his watch. It was nearly one anyway. “Okay, but you’ve got to understand he might not want to see you. He might not want to see anyone today. Shit, one day Don and I went to see him and he decided it was a good day to give Don a fat lip, black eye, and a bloody nose. Right out of the blue.”
“Considering their relationship I’m sure that had been building up for a long time.”

“Yes, well, still.” David turned on his car. “Just brace yourself and we’ll hope he’s having a good day.”

They drove to St. Clare’s in silence, Larry staring blankly out the window. David could only guess at what Larry must be feeling. He’d gone off to Boston to have some work peer reviewed and returned home to find his best and quite possibly only friend MIA.

David walked Larry slowly up the front stairs of the imposing grey building. At the sign-in desk David handed over his gun. The first few times the girl behind the desk had held it like she was afraid it would go off if she looked at it too hard but between him, Don and Colby she now just tossed it in a cubby without much care at all.

The doors buzzed and David pushed them open, Larry following meekly behind.

“Oh my lord,” Larry whispered.

“Come on.” David headed straight to Charlie’s window. Charlie was staring out it still, but he seemed reasonably calm. “Charlie?”

“Yes?” Charlie didn’t turn around.

“Charlie, I brought someone who really wanted to see you.”

Charlie’s head whipped around as Larry peaked from behind David. “Hello Charles.”

David braced himself as Charlie’s eyes closed and he drew a deep breath. “Hello, Larry.” Charlie’s voice was flat and emotionless. “You’re back from Boston I see.”

“Yes.”

“I guess you heard.”

“Not until a few minutes ago, no.” Larry’s voice was soft. It wavered. “Is it true? You tried..?”

Charlie pushed up his sleeve and held out his arm. Larry sat down next to Charlie and pulled him into a hug. Charlie ended up running long soothing strokes along Larry’s back while Larry shook and clung to Charlie tighter and tighter. Finally Charlie coughed a little.

“Okay, Larry. Need to breathe here.”

Larry let go but David could see the reluctance. The two looked at each other for a long time silently communicating with just the slightest shift of faces. It was the kind of conversation that could only happen when two people have known each other for years upon years. David felt a small stab of jealousy though he knew it was completely unfounded and pointless. He knew he almost had that level of connection with Colby some days. Finally without a word Charlie reached out and put his hand on Larry’s head. Larry closed his eyes and nodded a couple of times.

Charlie removed his hand and Larry took a deep breath and opened his eyes. “Why?”

Charlie took a deep breath of his own. “I’m gay.”

“Yes, I know Charles, that doesn’t answer my question,” Larry said quickly.

Charlie looked sharply at David. “I didn’t tell him anything.”
Charlie looked back to Larry. “Who told you I was gay, Larry?”

Larry blinked a few times. “Well I have always known you were at the very least bisexual, when I saw Amita without her ring I assumed you’d finally shifted all the way over.”

“What the hell are you talking about? I’ve never been with a man in my life.”

Larry gave Charlie an incredibly patronizing look. “Charles, you dated the captain of the Princeton Men’s Varsity Lacrosse team for six months and it was common knowledge at the time.”

“No.” Charlie dragged out the word. “I tutored John Blake for six months but I don’t recall any dates in there.”

Larry folded his arms. “Charles, how many times did he take you out to dinner?”

“He had late practices; it was usually dinner by the time we could meet up.”

“And how many movies did he take you to?”

“He was a science fiction fan and the other guys on the team weren’t.”

“And how many parties did he take you to?”

“He was just trying to be nice, I had no social life.”

“And the antique pen set he purchased for you for no particular reason and I believe you still use on occasion.”

“He... I...” Charlie’s jaw dropped open then he smacked his hand to his face. “I was dating the captain of the lacrosse team and no one told me it was happening.” Charlie banged his head against his fist a few more times until David reached out and stopped it.

“I’m sorry you were unaware of Mr. Blake’s intentions but it was blatantly clear to everyone else including your mother who had a very stern talk with him about the fact that you were 15 and jail bait and she was a lawyer.”

“Damn it, Larry! Why the hell didn’t anyone tell me? If someone had clued me in I might not be here right now. I did this,” Charlie held up his arm again. “Because I’d spent twenty years telling myself I shouldn’t, wouldn’t, couldn’t like men. Fuck.”

Larry leaned back a little. “I’m sorry, Charles. I didn’t know. At the time your mother and I were more concerned about a 21 year old man developing an unhealthy attachment to a 15 year old boy.”

“You could have at least let him feel me up a little first. I might not have slept with Cindy Stevens if he had and that is something I still have nightmares about.”

Larry didn’t say anything, just sat there with his arms folded. Charlie mimicked the gesture. David looked between the two wondering which one would give in first.

Finally Charlie dropped his head. “Fuck,” he whispered. “So... How was Boston?”

“Not as enlightening as I would have hoped and I found the mathematical assistance somewhat below the level I am accustomed to.”

Charlie smiled a little. “Anything you want me to look at?”
Larry reached into the back pocket of his jeans, pulled out a small stack of folded papers, and handed them to Charlie.

Charlie looked at them, tilted his head a little then blindly held out his hand. David quickly put a pen into it and slowly, for the first time in weeks, Charlie began to scratch out a little bit of math.

David didn’t see the attack coming. Nikki tackled him from the left and Liz from the right and within two seconds he was stumbling into the interrogation room and forced down into a chair. The door was shut and the blinds were drawn.

“Where is Charlie?” Liz hissed.

“What makes you think..?”

Nikki slammed her hand on the table. David jumped. “Do not fuck with us Sinclair. You know about Charlie and you’re going to tell us.”

“Am I?” Liz smacked the back of his head. “Ow, hey. One of you is supposed to be the good cop you know?”

“Larry was throwing a full blown tantrum. You got him calmed down in a minute then vanish for two hours.” Liz leaned in close. “Where is Charlie?”

“I don’t know.”

Liz smacked him on the back of the head again. “Ow.”

Nikki grabbed him by the ear in a move David did not recall from any of his FBI training. “Charlie is our friend and we are sick and tired of the run around. Where is he?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“David!”

“I can’t!” David twisted his head free and stood up. “Don’t you think I want to? What I did today was a fuckload of a risk and it could have blown up in my face. I can’t tell you where he is. I can’t even give you a hint. I would love to take both of you to see him right now. Fuck, I would give my right nut if I could bring Charlie back here right now to see you but I can’t!” David took a deep breath to try to slow the racing of his heart. The girls took a step back. “I can’t,” he said again.

“Any idea when we’ll get him back?”

David shook his head. “No. I don’t know. Soon I hope. Soon.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

The Math is back

David could feel a different vibe before the doors even buzzed open, like the whole building was vibrating. Of course as Charlie and Larry had once explained to him technically everything was vibrating. At least if all the string theory people were right.

David didn’t look for Charlie at his window. He didn’t have to. On the far side of the main room Charlie was holding court. He was standing in front of three battered old chalkboards that were covered in math and diagrams. Strange little mobiles and models were hanging from them constructed from what looked like random bits of medical and office supplies. And Charlie was lecturing. David couldn’t hear what he was saying but nearly all the patients were gathered around, along with much of the staff and the other visitors, and he had their attention. It looked a bit like one of his math for non mathematicians lectures.

Of course what truly got David’s attention was Charlie’s smile as he spoke and gestured to various models and bits of math.

David turned quickly as Dr. Flores tapped his shoulder. “So Agent Sinclair, I think we’ve made some sort of breakthrough.”

David pointed to Charlie. “That is the best looking thing I’ve seen in weeks. That is Charlie as we know and love him. That is what he was meant to do.”

“Teach math.”

“Absolutely. It doesn’t matter how many bad guys he catches unless he feels like he taught us some math in the process the case wasn’t a success. What’s he lecturing on?”

Dr. Flores just shrugged. “I have no idea. Something about the state of the entire universe.”

“Ah, Larry’s coherent cosmos theory. You know if Fleinhardt is actually right on this one then he’s a slam dunk for a Nobel Prize.”

“Dr. Eppes said something to that effect. Now what’s he doing?”

David looked back to Charlie. He had cleared a space in front of the boards and dragged up from his audience a thin blond girl with stringy hair and bandages on both wrists. He put her in the center of the space then poked her in the side until she smiled and held her hands up to either side of her face. Then he pulled up a young man and quickly had him circling the girl while waving his arms around. Charlie followed him around the circle with one hand on the man’s shoulder. Then he waved and spoke to one of the large orderlies who quickly rushed past the two. Charlie briefly grabbed onto the orderly and let go of the young man but stayed close. After that the arm waving stopped and there was much spinning around.

“Oh!” Something clicked in David’s head. “A theory on the creation of the moon. A rogue planet
slipped by earth when it was still in liquid form sucking off a big blob that became the moon and stabilized Earth’s orbit.”

Dr. Flores gave David the kind of look he was used to seeing people give Charlie. “You got that from that?”

“I’ve had six years to get used to translating Charlie and I don’t even have a math degree to help.” The Sun and the Earth sat back down, the Earth looking a little dizzy, and Charlie moved on to doing something with a roll of gauze and some rubber bands.

“It’s kind of like watching performance art.”

“Give him a trough and enough corn starch and he’ll walk on water for you.” David gave Dr. Flores a slap on the back and went to join Charlie's audience. It probably wouldn’t go down in history as one of his best lectures. It jumped from topic to topic and often went well over the heads of his audience but Charlie’s analytical mind had clicked back into gear and was scrambling to catch up. That much was obvious.

Charlie was still going strong when David’s watch told him it was time to get back to the office. He had actually needed to ask Charlie something before coming in so he waited until Charlie paused to breathe then waved him over. Charlie quickly excused himself from his unwitting students.

“Hey,” David kept his voice low. “Feeling better?”

“Everything terrifies me, but the math’s back.”

“That’s great. Hey, do you still have copies of your work for the Genno Lab case, Clarence Weaver?”

“Um... I should. Why?”

“Weaver’s up for appeal.”

“That loony? Shit. When?”

“We don’t have a date yet. Soonish.”

“Lovely. Um...Yeah. I keep all my case work in my office once it’s closed. It’s in the locked filing cabinet opposite the windows. You’ll need my keys.”

“Where are they?”

Charlie’s eyebrows pulled together and a deep frown came across his face. “I have no idea. Home I guess. Probably in the bowl by the door.”

“Okay, don’t worry about it, I’ll find them I just didn’t want to go randomly rummaging through your stuff.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ll let you get back to your class.”

Charlie grinned. “It does feel kind of nice.”

“Yeah, I know.”
David knocked on the Craftsmen door. He still had the spare key and knew he really should give it back. Alan opened the door. “David. Hey, come on in. You’re just in time, I was just about to order pizza.”

“Oh, I’m fine, Mr. Eppes, really. I’m just looking for Charlie’s keys.”

“I though we agreed on Alan and what do you need Charlie’s keys for?”

“One of his old cases is up for appeal next couple of weeks and we need to make sure every I was dotted and T crossed. He told me his finished work was in his filing cabinet in his office but that I need his keys to get in. Well I could probably pick the lock but, you know.”

“Sure. They’re in the bowl.” David looked into the bowl by the door and pulled out a set of keys with a bright orange Princeton key chain and a bright red one from CalSci. “Are you sure you won’t stay for dinner? Give an old man someone to beat at chess?”

Alan’s tone was light but there was a little twitch in his eyes. David hadn’t really thought about Alan’s living situation once he moved out. But Alan would have been used to having Charlie and Amita and often Larry around not to mention Don’s regular presence. He had to admit there was something about the house that now felt a little colder than usual despite the warm evening. “Sure. I haven’t exercised my completely masochistic streak in a couple of weeks.”

Alan smiled. “Great. You like pepperoni on your pizza, right?”

“That’s the only thing that belongs on a pizza. None of this weird Californian smoked salmon and artichoke heart stuff.”

“Pepperoni it is.”

David pulled out the chess board while Alan ordered.

David was still deciding on an opening move when Alan sat down across from him. “So how was Charlie today? I wanted to see him but every time I tried to step out of the office someone dragged me back.”

David lifted his knight for an opening move. “Actually when I got there he was lecturing to all the other patients on Larry’s coherent cosmos theory. They even found chalkboards for him somewhere.”

“Really!” Alan hastily moved a pawn. “He was actually doing math?”

“He was. I think... I think he’s snapping out of it. Weeks of watching him just stare out that window and today he was behaving like nothing had happened. There was math all over the boards. He had them all enthralled, even the staff. And he was smiling and bouncing around. I mean I know this could just be some kind of weird manic up swing but for a moment today... it felt like the world was right.”

David thought learning the FBI filing system had been difficult and counter intuitive. It wasn’t even nine yet but after a half hour of being nose deep in Charlie’s personal system he vowed never to complain about the Bureau system again. That, at least, was alphabetical.
There was a knock on Charlie’s door, then it opened. A young man leaned in. “Hi. Is Doctor Eppes here?” His voice was eager.

“Sorry.” David flashed his badge. “Just getting a few files.”

“Damn.” The young man stepped the rest of the way into the office, closing the door behind him. David looked him over. He looked like he was a couple of inches taller than David though probably fifty pounds lighter. He was in jeans and a t-shirt with some molecule on it. But most noticeable were a pair of grey blue eyes made that much more noticeable since they we’re looking at him from an African American face. “Um… I’m Liam Goodwin, I’m one of Doctor Eppes' students.”

‘Oh of course you are.’ David thought then held out his hand. “Agent David Sinclair.”

“Hi... Um... look... Is Doctor Eppes okay?”

“Why wouldn’t he be?” David replied quickly. He wasn’t sure what the CalSci rumor mill did or didn’t know.

Liam looked around like he was expecting someone to be lurking in the shadow. “When a teacher up and vanishes they’re usually sick or hurt or something, and we know about it. Someone gets a card, we all sign it. But no one’s come around with a card for Dr. Eppes. People are saying he’s off on some secret government thing but I don’t think so.”

“Why not, sounds reasonable?” David remembered what Charlie had said about Liam, observant, good at making connections.

“Well you’re here for one, and you’ve got Dr. Eppes’ keys.” Liam pointed to the lock on the filing cabinet. “So it means you’re in contact with him so he’s in the city, not DC or something. And he’s not just moping at his house ’cause his doctoral students tried to dig him up there with no luck. And I’d say maybe he’s at a safe house doing secret work or something but that doesn’t feel right ’cause Dr. Ramanujan’s engagement ring vanished from her finger a few weeks ago and believe me she showed that thing to the entire damn school and she won’t say where Dr. Eppes is and honestly I don’t think she knows. And the last time we talked. I don’t know... He was acting a little weird.”

David looked the kid over. He was making some leaps in logic but was still putting things together very quickly. “Define weird?”

“His voice was really tight, you know, like he was trying not to cry or something and he just kind of looked at me for a while, then he said he like my shirt and honestly there’s been a running bet that you could walk into Dr. Eppes’ class naked and he wouldn’t notice and I don’t know, just something felt really wrong.”

“Where do you think he is?” David asked.

“Well I’d like to think that he’s south of the border, passed out on a beach with a couple of senoritas and the biggest bottle of tequila in Baja and he’s going to swan back up here in a week with a sunburn and a smile.”

David smiled. “I like that idea.”

“Yeah, I don’t think it’s right though. I think something happened. I think something happened to Dr. Eppes and it’s all being kept secret from everyone but the FBI.”

David nodded slowly. “Was there something particular you wanted to speak to Dr. Eppes about?”
Liam reached into his backpack and pulled out a notebook. “I had this idea for data encryption. I mean it’s pretty out there and it’s probably completely wrong and I’m just an idiot but I wanted it run it by Dr. Eppes.”

“Can’t you show it to other professors?”

“It’s pretty cut-throat around here. When you’re wrong most of the professors let you know just how unbelievably wrong you are and if you’re right you’re still usually wrong about something. With Dr. Eppes if you’re wrong he tries to figure out how to make you right and if you’re right he puts a foot on your back side to get you onto the next thing. Plus he’s already got the top spot, he doesn’t need to be an asshole.”

David grinned. “Would you believe me if I told you that fairly recently Dr. Eppes kicked a guy in the nuts?”

“Did the guy have it coming?”

“Yep.”

“Cool.”

David took the notebook. “If I see him, I’ll ask him to take a look at this.”

“Thanks. And tell him, I hope he’s doing okay with whatever it is. We need him around here.”

“I will.”

~

Charlie was sitting under his window but with a notebook propped up on his knees and a pen twirling between his fingers.

David peered at the notebook. There was math but it looked a little odd. A little too simple perhaps for Charlie’s usual work. “Hey there.”

Charlie looked up. His smile was bright and relaxed and David felt a knot in his chest begin to loosen for the first time in weeks as he sat down.

“Did you find the files you need?”

“Yes. It took me two hours to start to wrap my head around your filing system but yes I found the relevant files.”

Charlie pinched his lips. “It’s not that complicated a system. They’re just arranged by type of original crime, primary math used, then date.”

“Most people just use dates, or lacking that the alphabet.”

“Spelling’s never been my strong suit.”

“Tell me about it.” Charlie snorted and looked back down at his notebook. “Oh. I ran into one of your students.”

“Really?”

“I ran into Liam Goodwin.”
Charlie went still. “Oh.”

“He hopes you’re doing well.” Charlie looked back up quickly. “He doesn’t know anything. Most of CalSci thinks you got grabbed by the Men in Black for a secret mission but you were right. The kid’s smart. He’s worried something happened to you and hopes that whatever it is that happened you’re doing better and he hopes you come back soon.”

Charlie nodded slowly. “We should see about getting him clearance.” His voice was flat. “He’s still young but I’m sure he could be trained into a solid investigator.”

David pulled the notebook Liam had passed him out from under his jacket. “He asked me to give you this. He said it was an idea on a new type of data encryption. He said it was pretty out there and probably wrong and that’s why he didn’t want to show it to any of the other professors.”

Charlie took the notebook and flipped it open. David watched as Charlie ran his finger across the page. A frown crept across his face as he flipped a page then another. For several minutes he just read over the first few pages again and again. “What in the world are you doing Mr. Goodwin?”

Charlie stood up his nose still in the notebook, a frown of deep concentration across his face. David watched as he started to pace, slowly turning each page and then often backtracking several pages. Then Charlie’s eyes went wide and his jaw dropped. “Holy. Fucking. Shit.”

David stood up. “What?”

“Holy fucking, shit.” Charlie repeated.

“What? What is it?”

Charlie began to pace quickly enough that David could see the orderlies start to take note.

“This could be wrong,” he said quickly but didn’t sound like he entirely believed it.

“Charlie. What is it?”

“Possibly an entirely new way of encrypting data. This is brilliant. This is fucking brilliant.” Charlie was leafing through the rest of the notebook and not really paying any attention to where he was moving. “He’s got to do his doctorate on this. No question there. Writing the raw code to test it might be tricky but we’ll get Amita on that. I mean she is the best.” Charlie was waving one hand through the air like he was having to push through a cloud of equations and walking rapidly towards the door. “We’ll need a completely secure testing environment. CalSci won’t be good enough.”

“Charlie.”

“And we’ll...” Charlie bumped chest first into the very large hand of one of the very large orderlies. David put his hand on Charlie’s shoulder. “Charlie.”

Charlie looked around, blinking rapidly, confusion flickering across his face as if he just realized where he was. David’s heart broke as Charlie’s face, so vibrant just a moment before, fell and became still. He closed the notebook and handed it back to David.

“I need you to speak to Mr. Goodwin for me.” Charlie’s voice was controlled and professional.

“Of course.”

“If he is right he may have come across an entirely new way of encrypting data. It still needs several
more years of work but I need to make sure that he has shown this to no one. That he has told nobody.”

“You want in on it first.”

Charlie’s look became deathly serious. “This is an H-bomb for the digital age. The first country or organization to get a hold of this will become very scary indeed and I’m including our own country on that list. A way of transmitting information that no one else can possibly look at?”

“I get it.”

“Remember that guy, Ethan Burdick, mathematician, got his daughter kidnapped five, six years ago.”

“He’s the one who thought he’d solved that math problem and the kidnappers wanted the answer.”

“Yes. A solution to Riemann could destroy all encryption on the internet. What’s in that book could be just as damaging in its own way. I need you to speak to Mr. Goodwin. I want him to keep working on it but he can tell no one, not a soul. This exists just between the three of us. I need you to put the fear of God, Uncle Sam and the North Koreans into him.”

David looked down at the notebook in his hands and idly wondered what would happen if he just made it disappear. “No problem. I’ll talk to him.”

“And…” Charlie took a deep breath. “If he needs to talk to me you can bring him here.”

“Okay. But I think he’d rather you could come and talk to him. He said something about the other professors being assholes.”

The tiniest fraction of smile touched Charlie’s lips. “Thank you for taking care of this, David.”

“Hey. No problem.”

~

David waited in Charlie’s office. The more he had thought about what Charlie had said the more he realized that what was in the little notebook really was a digital nuke. He actually asked Colby to put his spy hat back on and sweep Charlie’s office for bugs as well as check the surrounding area. The sweep didn’t turn up any bugs but it did turn up a surprising number of chocolate bar wrappers shoved in between the cushions of the couch. Someone had a nasty Twix habit they were trying to hide.

There was a knock on the office door and Liam Goodwin popped his head in. “Agent Sinclair?”

“Hello Mr. Goodwin, come on in. Lock the door behind you.”

Liam looked instantly nervous but still came into the office and locked the door with a click. “So... I guess you talked with Dr. Eppes.” Liam was obviously one for cutting to the chase.

“I did and I showed him your work. He was seriously impressed. I need to ask you, and I need the complete truth, have you showed this to anyone else?” David waved Liam’s notebook.

“No.”

“Have you talked to anyone about it? Even mentioned it in passing? Maybe you were bragging online? Does anyone know about this?”
Liam shook his head. “No. I’m not stupid and I’m not a masochist. Make a claim like a new type of encryption without being able to back it up. I’d be laughed off campus and that kind of shit just follows you forever.”

“So no one?”

“No one. I swear.”

David let out a long breath. “Good. That’ll make this easier.”

Liam took a step back. “Shit! You’re gonna whack me. Or... or... take executive action! That’s what they call it, right? Executive action? Oh God.” Liam squeezed his eyes shut.

David laughed. “Relax. I’m not going to hurt you. I’m not the one you’ve got to be scared of.”

“Really? Who do I have to be scared of?”

“Everyone else.” David handed Liam his notebook. “Charlie wants you to keep working on that but you may have found a whole new way of encrypting data. Everyone is going to want it. Governments, corporations, cartels, terror groups. Everyone.”

Liam looked down at the little notebook in his hands. “It’s just some math.”

“Sit down.” David gestured to the now candy wrapper free couch. Liam sat down and David grabbed Charlie’s chair. “Okay, about six years ago we got called in on this case. Little girl, Emily, gets grabbed from her own birthday party. Sadly this isn’t as uncommon as people like to think so there are procedures and we followed them and then the father decides he doesn’t want the FBI’s help. Now the father is a mathematician, one of you guys. And he is convinced he has solved one of the Millennium prize problems. Riemann’s-hypothesis. You know it, right?”

“Yeah, I know Riemann’s.”

“Okay, he is so sure he solved it that he even told a journal to expect his paper any day. The kidnappers find out about this and they kidnap his daughter so they can get the solution as the ransom.”

“So they can collect the prize?”

“So they can hack into the Federal Reserve.” Liam’s eyes got wide as things started to click. “A little girl almost lost her life ’cause of just some math and it wasn’t even correct math.”

Liam’s eyes darted between the notebook and the trash can. “Maybe I should just...”

“No. Charlie wants you working on that. If something is out there to be discovered someone is going to discover it. Who do you want discovering it? You? Or maybe someone with fewer qualms and morals.”

“It was just an idea I had one night when I couldn’t sleep. I just scribbled it down then got a little obsessive for a few weeks but, I don’t know. Maybe Dr. Eppes should just finish it off.” Liam tried to hand the notebook back but David didn’t take it.

“Nope. That’s yours. Your idea, for now, your responsibility.”

“Can I talk to with Dr. Eppes at least?”

David struggled not to cringe. “I can take you to see him but honestly I’d much rather he’d come to
see you. It would... It would better for him if he did that. If he could do that.”

“I see.”

“Can you give him a week? If he’s not up for the trip in a week I’ll take you to see him.”

“Something happened to him, did it? Something no one is telling us.”

David wasn’t sure what to tell the kid. That his favorite teacher had a suicidal breakdown after their last conversation. “You know Charlie’s got a lot of respect for your talent. He’s been talking about getting you clearance so you can help out on cases.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“No it doesn’t. Charlie will be back at some point. Right now he wants you working on that idea of yours, quietly, to prepare for your doctorate.”

“I’m not even sure if I’m doing a doctorate yet.”

David grinned. “You’re doing a doctorate and the great Doctor Charles Eppes will be advising you so don’t sweat it.”

Liam looked back down at his notebook then slipped it into his backpack. “With great power comes great responsibility?”

“That’s what the man said. Hey, there’s a possibility it won’t actually hold up under experimentation. You know, like the cat in the box thing. Everyone knows it’s not actually alive and dead at the same time no matter how much math you throw at it.”

Liam nodded. “You hang out with Dr. Eppes a lot, don’t you?”

“And I once got drunk with Dr. Fleinhardt.”

“Wow. Okay.” Liam took a deep breath and stood up. “Okay. Tell Dr. Eppes he’s got a week and then I’m gonna to come looking for him.”

“I’ll be sure to pass it along and if anything comes up or you have any worries you have my number.”

“Worries? I’m going to be paranoid as all crap now. I’m going to go back to my dorm room and sweep it for bugs.”

“If no one knows then no one is watching you.”

“Yeah, yeah. How do I know someone isn’t watching you?”

“I got a buddy who’s an ex-secret agent keeping an eye out and he already swept the office for bugs.”

“Find any?”

“Nope, just lots of Twix wrappers.”

“Those are Dr. Ramanujan’s. She gets them out of the vending machine and always says she’s getting them for Dr. Eppes but Dr. Eppes is AWOL and she’s still getting them.”
“And that is why Charlie wants you working on cases.”
David needs to talk to some people and Charlie has some news.

David checked his watch as he pushed through the doors. He was running late. It was already a quarter to three. Fortunately David noticed that Charlie had company. Alan was sitting with him and looked a little more relaxed than usual though certainly not comfortable.

“Hey guys, sorry I’m late.”

“Hello David, I was just about to head out myself. I have a product launch strategy meeting. Whatever the hell that is. Lord I miss just building buildings.”

Charlie squeezed his father’s hand. “Thanks for the visit.”

Alan reached out and ran a hand over his son’s head, smoothing down the wild, snarled curls. “I’ll try to come by tomorrow.”

“Thanks.”

Alan gave Charlie a quick kiss on the head then made his way from the room. David watched Charlie visibly relax. “It’s still hard, isn’t it?”

Charlie rubbed his hands over his face. His beard was getting as wild as his curls. “I know he loves me, and I know I hurt him, and I know he wants answers but we had a hard enough time understanding each other when things were normal. Did you know that he blamed me for Don getting stabbed?”

“I’m sure he didn’t.”

“I’m sure he did. While Don was on a respirator he told me it was the result of my inability to properly prioritize my life.”

“He was just scared and lashing out.”

“I know. Still doesn’t change the fact that some part of him thought it.”

David sat down and leaned back against the window, the heavy glass still warm from the sun. A little something clicked in his head. “You sit here because it’s warm, don’t you?”

Charlie smiled and closed his eyes the sun on his face. “I worked it out my first morning here. This window gets the most sunlight throughout the day. I hate being cold and they keep this place just a little too chilly for my taste.”

“And here I thought you liked the view.”

“What view? It’s a parking spot and half a tree?”

David let the warmth seep through his coat for a minute. “I talked to Liam. He hasn’t told anyone
and he’ll keep it quiet.”

“Good.”

“He wants to talk to you but it doesn’t have to be right away.”

“I see.” Charlie took a large breath. “I talked to Dr. Flores about leaving.”

David sat up quickly. “And?”

“And he said a desire to leave was a good sign and I am making progress.”

“Oh.” The bright flair of hope that had erupted in David’s chest quickly vanished.

Charlie took David’s hand. “I’m scared, David.”

“You’ve said that.”

“You have to go in just a minute.”

“I know.”

“Can I get a hug first?”

David quickly pulled Charlie into his arms. “Always.”

~

“I think Charlie’s getting out soon.”

Bradford nodded. “That’s good.”

“I mean, he’s actually trying to get out. He wants out instead of just sitting in there.”

“Good, that’s good.”

“Should I come out?” The words just burst from David’s lips and he was more than a little surprised at them. “I mean I’m not gay. I like women. I just like guys too, sometimes, the right ones. And I mean it’s not like it’s 1950 anymore.”

Bradford keep is face surprisingly neutral. “I can’t answer that for you but I will ask you a question, why haven’t you come out before this?”

David knew the answer to that even if he didn’t like it. He was career minded and there wasn’t that much ethnic diversity in the FBI’s upper management. He didn’t want an extra strike against him in the minds of the old guard that was still hanging around which all really boiled down to the fact that he was a bit of a coward.

“Well my mother knows, which means my sisters know, which means my aunties know, which means probably the entire South Bronx knows.”

“But does your partner know? Your team? Your boss?”

“No.” David confessed. “Well Colby knows but I didn’t tell him. He snooped through my porn during his spy days.”

“I see. And the rest of your team?”
David shook his head. “No.”

“How do you think they’d react?”

“I don’t know.”

“Sure you do.”

“Liz I don’t think would care. Nikki would give me a bit of shit then probably try to set me up with her ex. Charlie knows but that was kind of a life and death situation. Don...” David honestly didn’t know. “Don, I don’t know. Don’s the one who scares me.”

“You think Don Eppes has problems with gay people?”

“No,” David answered quickly. “No. I think Don isn’t an idiot, and I’ve been pretty hard on him about Charlie, and I think Don’ll put two and two together really quick and Colby put this image in my head of Don in a rocking chair on a porch with a loaded shotgun and I’ve got the bad feeling that if he gets one whiff that I’m actually interested in Charlie I’m likely to find my nuts very literally in a vice.” David did not find comfort in Bradford’s laughter. “It’s not funny.”

“It kinda is.”

“This is my life and more importantly my career we’re talking about.”

“Ah, there we have it. Your career.” David ground his teeth. “At the risk of sounding a little like our favorite math professor I think what you really want to do is calculate the emotional and social impact of coming out against the potential damage to your career.”

David sighed. No answers were coming. Just viciously clashing desires.

“Okay David, lets look at this from another angle. Let’s say Charlie gets out of the hospital, finishes breaking up with Amita, catches up on a month of emails and student conferences, then comes to you and says ‘hey David how’d you like get some dinner with me then go back to your place for coffee? What do you say?’”

David’s brain broke the sound barrier as it rushed into the gutter. “What time does he want me to pick him up?”

“Oh, and he wants to mention to Don and his father that he’s going out with you?” David swallowed hard. “You want him, you’re attracted to him, if the universe does smile and give you a chance with the person you want are you, after everything he’s already been through, going to make him climb back into the closet to be with you?”

David shut his eyes as his heart pounded in his ears as the image of Charlie on that bathroom floor rushed back in and filled every corner of his mind. “No.”

“Well then I think you’ve got your answer.”

~

David clicked the lid of his iced tea bottle then clicked it some more.

“Dude, seriously cut it out or I’m going to make you walk back to the office,” Colby snapped.

“Sorry.” David drank the last of the iced tea in the bottle then tossed it in the back of the cruddy sedan the motor pool had supplied them with.
“What’s up, man?”

“What’s up, man?”

“Nothing.”

“Come on, you’ve been fidgeting for the last six hours. You don’t fidget. You’re like the Zen god of stakeouts.”

David stared out the window at a tree and an empty parking spot. He thought about Charlie. “I need to tell you something, seriously.”

“Sure, anything.”

“I’m bisexual.”

“Yeah, I know, we’ve had this conversation.”

“No we have not had this conversation. You broke into my place and rummaged through my stuff. That’s not a conversation it’s a felony.”

Colby waved a hand. “There was no theft and it was during the day. It was a misdemeanor.”

“Breaking and entering with the intent to acquire information for use in blackmail or to solicit treason. Felony. And that’s not the point the point is I never actually told you and now I have so, yeah.”

“Feel better?”

“No really, no.” David turned back around so he could watch the office park that hopefully their suspect would appear at. David felt Colby’s hand on his shoulder.

“Charlie will be glad to have someone on his team he can talk to.”

“If he wants to talk.”

“Knowing Charlie he’s going to have questions at some point. He might as well get the answers off you instead of all the weirdos on the internet.”

~

David was beginning to think that Colby was prophetic. Charlie had been fidgeting and kept blushing as they tried to have a normal conversation about the antics of one of the other patients. Finally Charlie just fell quiet.

“Is everything okay?” David asked.

Charlie chewed at his lip a little. “Can I ask you something?”

“You can ask me anything you like.”

Charlie twisted his fingers together into tight knots. “What’s...” Charlie faltered and began to turn bright red. “What’s it like?”

“Like?”

“With another man? What’s it like?”
David felt his pulse kick up a little as he grabbed his libido with both hands and ordered it to keep calm. “It’s nice.”

“Nice?” That was obviously not the answer Charlie was looking for.

“It’s... It really depends on the person.” Charlie slumped in on himself. “Really, best sex I ever had was with another man and hands down worst sex I ever had was with another man. I mean some things are a little easier. You’re working with the same equipment so there’s a little less guess work involved but at the end of the day what’s important is that you have a connection with the other person and that you have care and respect for each other.”

Charlie nodded his face hovering the thin line between grim and despondent. “I see.”

“Charlie, when you’re doing it right with the right person it feels amazing. I don’t have words to describe moments when you’re not sure where your body ends and your partner’s begins or when the pleasure becomes so intense it shorts out everything else in your brain or looking into your lovers eyes as they come with such power it sends your right over the edge after them.”

“T always figured sex has to be really good for someone somewhere or people wouldn’t keep making such a fuss about it.”

David cupped Charlie’s face into his hand and Charlie leaned into it. “Charlie, I promise you when you are truly ready and with a person you really want it is going to blow your mind.”

~

David checked the time and tried to steady his hands. It would be nine in New York and it was Thursday so there was nothing on TV his mother particularly liked. He’d gotten an email from her, the overtone of which was to pick up the phone and call her. He was usually better about that but he knew they would end up talking about Charlie and he just hadn’t been ready. She had way of picking up the most subtle nuances in a person’s voice. She always knew when someone was lying or trying to hide something and with him and his sisters all she needed to hear was the word hello to know if something was wrong.

The phone rang. “Hello.”

“Hi Mom, it’s David. How are you doing?”

“I’m just fine dear, now tell me what’s wrong and why you haven’t called.”

David sat down on his couch and clutched a pillow to his chest with his free arm. “It’s my friend, Charlie.”

“The math professor? What happened?”

David swallowed hard and willed his voice not to crack. “He tried to kill himself.”

“Oh my dear Lord. When?”

“About...” David had to think. “It’s been a bit over a month now.”

“Now why would he go and do something as foolish as that? I thought you said he was a genius.”

“He is. He... God I don’t know why he did it. Really. The reason he’s giving people is that he finally admitted to himself that he’s gay and couldn’t cope.”
David held the pillow a little tighter as there was a moment of silence that came back over the line from New York. “I see. And I know why you haven’t called.”

“Mom…” David’s voice finally cracked. “I found him, Mom. I’m the one who found him. There was blood everywhere and he was barely breathing and I still have the shoes I was wearing and haven’t cleaned them yet, there’s blood soaked into them and... And he looks so damn much like Isaiah mom. Same hair and skin and nose and really it’s just the eyes, just their eyes look different, they even sort of smile the same sometimes and…” David choked on the knot in his throat.

“Oh baby. I’m so sorry.”

“It hurts mom. It just hurts and I thought I’d given this all up, put it all away.”

“You can’t put away who you are baby. And you know that.”

“But every time it hurts.”

“If you had known what would happen to Isaiah would you have avoided him? Never spent all that wonderful time with him?”

David sighed a little. His mother was always a great one for metaphysical discussions. “No.”

“And that young man of yours at Cornell, Richard? Would you have spent so much time trying to sneak into his study group if you had known how that was going to end?”

“I would have probably tried harder,” David admitted.

“Now I have had to listen to you positively moon over that math professor of yours…”

“Mom.”

“And I swear you are worse than your sisters most days.”

“Mom.”

“And now you say he’s decided he’s gay?”

“That was the general gist of the note he left.”

“And where is he now?”

“He’s still in the hospital but with any luck he’ll be out in the next week or so.”

“Good. Be sure to put in a fresh roll of toilet paper and tidy a bit before you bring him back to your place.”

“Mom!”

“David, honey, I have listened to you talk about this Charlie almost non stop for six years now. Make your move or shut up about him and I want to see both of you here for Christmas. I know you’re relief supervisor now, whatever that is, but I want all my children under my roof this Christmas so figure it out.”

“Mom I…”

“And you can stop making excuses. I’ve given up on the thought of either of your sisters bringing
home a doctor, that just leaves you. Now he sounds like a very nice young man from everything you’ve told me over the years and years and seeing as how you’re out there in California you’re going to want to make your move before he can end up on the open market.”

David felt his cheeks burn. “Mom, please.”

“Mom, please what? I know you like to tell yourself you’re married to that job of yours but a badge and a gun never kept anyone warm on a cold night. And what will be the point of cases solved and promotions and big offices if you’ve got no one to go home to at night to share it with?”

“I could get a cat?”

“You’re allergic to them, sweetie. Now at the risk of sounding like your father, grow a pair and go get what you want while it’s still there to be got.”

David let the smile crawl across his face since there was no one there to see. Only his mother could get away with telling him to grow a pair these days. “Yes ma’am.”

“And call your sisters. They both want to talk to you about stuff.” David didn’t even try to suppress the groan. “Don’t groan at me young man, I’ve got to listen to them all the time you can take your turn.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“I love you dear. Be safe.”

“Always. Love you too.”

~

David was heading up the front steps of St. Clare’s when he ran into Colby coming down them. David gave a wave. “Hey man. Watcha doing here?”

“Just thought I’d drop in on Charlie. See how he’s holding up.”

“On your day off?”

“Like I’ve got a life.”

“Well, that’s true. How’s he doing?”

“ Weird.”

David quickly got nervous. “Define weird?”

“He’s acting like nothing’s going on. I mean Don and Alan are also in there, but he was dropping tells all over the place.”

“What kind of tells?”

“You know how he rubs his middle finger when he’s bluffing like mad in poker, you know he’s either got a royal flush or nothing?”

“Yeah?”

“Well he was doing that the whole time I was in there.”
“Maybe he’s getting out?”

“He didn’t say anything. Anyway I’ve got to take my truck in to get smog checked. You try to figure it out.”

“Sure. I’ll see you on Monday.”

As David signed himself in he wondered what it could be that Charlie was trying to desperately keep quiet about. From a distance Charlie seemed pretty relaxed sitting in the afternoon sun chatting with Don and Alan. He waved from across the room and David joined the Eppes.

“Hey everyone, how’s it going?”

“Oh fine,” Alan replied.

“We were just discussing Charlie’s illustrious baseball career,” Don added.

David looked to Charlie with surprise. “You played baseball?”

“One season of little league when I was seven.”

“What position?”

“Relief pitcher,” Charlie stated flatly.

Now David was really surprised. “Seriously?”

“Chuck didn’t have a half bad arm on him. Slowest pitches in the league but he could throw a natural 12-6 curve ball.”

“Funny thing is I can’t throw one now for love or money. Completely overthink it.”

“I’m sure you could work it out again.”

Charlie shrugged. “Mainly I was just there to throw junk balls at the nine and ten year olds. My pitches were so slow they’d just swing and screw themselves into the plate a half hour before the ball got close.”

Don gave Charlie a little nudge. “Hey, those junk balls won you a few games.”

“And my batting lost us more than a few games.”

“Your batting would have been fine, you just needed to stop thinking.” Both David and Charlie laughed.

“Sure Don, because not thinking is what I am so very, very good at. I creature of pure instinct that’s me.”

“You’re getting better. You at least know when to duck and run these days.”

“True.”

Don looked at his watch. “And speaking of ducking and running, I’ve got to meet Robin. She wants to Talk.”

“Ouch. Good luck.”
Don gave Charlie’s hair a little ruffle. “I’ll see you later, Buddy.”

David watched as Charlie rubbed at the middle finger of his right hand. “Yeah, you too.”

“So why’d you only play one season?” David asked once Don had left.

“Somebody thought it was too dangerous,” Charlie stated while giving his father the hard eye.

“That was your mother’s call. I wanted you to keep playing. I thought it was good for you even if your batting did need work.”

Charlie pinched his lips still glaring at his father.

“What happened?” David asked.

“I got a little bump on the head our last game.”

“It was more than a little bump Charlie. It was a serious concussion.”

“It was a bump. I was on the mound and the batter had managed to time out my Eephus pitch so instead of screwing himself into the plate he knocked it right back at me. I took my eye off the ball for a moment because I thought the guy on third was going to try to steal home and I got knocked on the side of the head.”

David winced. “Ouch.”

“I was out for like two minutes.”

“Or twenty,” Alan added.

“And it was decided that my brain was not to be risked in oh so dangerous activities like little league.”

“Like I said it was your mother’s decision.”

Charlie just waved dismissively in his father’s direction.

“Hey, sign ups for the Bureau team are going up in a couple of weeks. They could probably use someone to run stats again.”

Charlie rubbed at this finger. “If I’m out I’ll talk with whoever is coaching this year.”

“After last year they should be glad for all the help they can get,” Alan said tersely. Don hadn’t been able to play the previous season and Charlie had a falling out with the coach and in the end the Bureau came in bottom of the table including embarrassing losses to the county sheriffs and the local EPA team.

Alan’s watch beeped.

“Got somewhere to be?” Charlie asked.

“Actually, if you don’t mind I promised Larry I’d help him start looking for someplace to live, other than his office, our garage and the occasional city park.”

“Sure thing.” Charlie’s face got suddenly sad. “Actually, I guess Amita’s moved all her stuff out by now.”
Pain danced across Alan’s face. “Charlie...”

“It’s okay. Tell Larry if he wants the solarium it’s available. I mean we could probably both use the company and let’s face it, it doesn’t matter where Larry lives as long as I’m helping out with the math for his theory he’s practically going to be living there anyway.”

Alan smiled. “I’ll mention it to him and I’ll say hi for you.”

“Thanks.”

Alan gave Charlie a hug then gave David a quick pat on the shoulder and headed out. David watched as Charlie almost instantly relaxed. “So what’s up, what’s going on?”

Charlie chewed on his lip for a moment. “I’m getting out.”

David could not have stopped the smile that rushed across his face if his life depended on it. “That’s great.” He pulled Charlie into a hug. “That’s incredible. When?”

“Sunday. After visiting hours.”

“I’m so proud of you.” Charlie pulled away his face dark. “What’s wrong?”

“I haven’t told anyone. I didn’t tell Don or my Dad. I...” Charlie took a deep breath. “I’m... Could I go home with you tomorrow afternoon?”

David wanted to shout yes for a hundred different reasons. “Sure, I guess, if that’s what you want.”

“I’m just... I’m not ready David. I’m not going to survive just leaping back in. If I could just crash on your couch or something for the night so I can reacclimate a little. I’ll go home Monday morning I just can’t go straight from here to there.”

David pulled Charlie close again and resisted the urge to tell him that he could stay as long as he liked. “It’s not a problem. I’ll pick you up and we can order Chinese and watch a movie.”

Charlie’s eyes closed. “You have no idea how good that sounds.” David ran his hand up and down Charlie’s back a few times. “David?”

“Yes?”

“I’m scared.”

“You’ve said that.”

“No.” Charlie’s voice was small and fearful in a way David hadn’t heard in weeks. “I’m scared David. That’s why I did it. That’s what I tried to explain in the note I wrote you. I am fucking terrified.” David held Charlie away from him a little so he could get a good look at Charlie’s face. “David I’ve never been scared. Not really. I was never scared of monsters under the bed because I didn’t believe in them. Thunder and lightening, I understood the science. I’ve had little fears, bullies, gym teachers, frat boys but nothing I couldn’t think my way out of. Even the claustrophobia, I can force my rational brain to override the irrational if I really, really need to. Even when my mother was dying I wasn’t afraid. Angry, but not afraid. The closest thing I’ve ever felt to this kind of fear was when Don was stabbed but I had a case then, I had numbers, data I could follow, the same when Amita was taken but... There’s always been numbers, some odds, some data, some math, something.” Charlie ran out of breath his face contorted into a mask of terror. “That day, it was like there was just static in my head. There were no more numbers,” he whispered.
David finally began to understand. Charlie hadn’t just had a crisis of identity he’d had a crisis of faith. One of the first things he’d learned from Charlie after Even isn’t the same as Random and Don’t Play Lotto was Numbers are Everything. For Charlie to not have numbers was a high priest declaring that there is no god.

He cupped Charlie’s face in his hands since he could think of nothing to say.

“I feel like I’m in the woods David. I’ve been on a bright, wide, sunny path my whole life and all of a sudden it’s dark and I’m lost and I still can’t find a path and I am still so scared and they’re going to send me back out into the world and I know I need to be there, and there are things I need to do but I am terrified.” Charlie’s voice was high and cracked.

David pulled Charlie back in close again. “I’m here, Charlie. Okay? I know you feel lost but I’m right here next to you and I’m not going anywhere and the thing is, yeah the sun does go down but the sun also comes back up and just ‘cause there’s not a path doesn’t mean you’re lost, just means you’ve found some place new. And I’m here, okay, and the numbers are coming back already, you know that.”

Charlie was squeezing as tight as he could. “I’m afraid to go home, David,” Charlie whispered. “I’m afraid of everyone out there. I’m afraid of Don, I’m afraid of my father, I’m scared shitless of seeing Amita again. I’m terrified of going back to work, facing my students, the other staff.” David could feel Charlie’s heart racing like it was trying to leap out of his chest. “What am I going to tell people? What do I say?”

David stroked his hand along Charlie’s back hoping he would calm down before working himself into a full blown panic attack. “You don’t have to say anything, you don’t have to tell people anything. If you want someone to know something then that’s fine but if you don’t then it’s none of their business. You’re still Doctor Charles Eppes. I know you’re having problems with that, but that name of yours still means a lot and that’s not going to change.” Charlie didn’t say anything, just held on tighter. “Charlie, are you scared of me?” Charlie looked up at David. “You said you’re afraid of everyone, are you scared of me?”

“No.” Charlie’s voice was barely a whisper.

“Well then that’s a start.” Charlie buried his face back into David’s chest. “How about Colby?” Charlie didn’t say anything or move for a long time then shook his head. “Okay. That’s two people and we’ve both got your back.” Charlie’s pulse didn’t seem to be thumping quite as hard and his breath was slowing a bit. David kept up the slow steady strokes.

“I asked Dr. Flores for a prescription of Xanax or Valium or something,” Charlie mumbled his face still against David’s chest.

“Did he give you one?”

“No. He said I also shouldn’t drink for a while.”

David stroked Charlie’s head. “Poor baby.” Charlie said something David couldn’t make out but was willing to bet it was rude. “I know it doesn’t feel like it now but you will be okay. It’s going to take time. It’s going to be hard but you’re an Eppes and if there is one thing I’ve learned over the last six years it’s that no matter what the world throws at you lot you are all damn near indestructible.”
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

David picks up Charlie

David looked around his apartment. All his laundry was picked up, the rug had been vacuumed, there was fresh toilet paper in the bathroom, lemon sorbet in the freezer, all case files were neatly hidden away, and even though it didn’t really need to be done and David told himself he would in no way, shape, or form make a pass at Charlie, there were clean sheets on his neatly made bed.

David checked his watch. It was quarter to three. He grabbed his keys and ran.

~

David signed his name to the St. Clare’s visitors’ log, hopefully for the last time.

“Here to see Charlie? The girl behind the desk asked.

“Here to pick up Charlie. He’s getting out.”

The girl smiled. “That’s always good to hear from people. Go on in.”

David pushed through the doors and his eyes sought out Charlie but didn’t find him. He tapped on the window of the Nurses Station. The weekend nurse pushed the window open.

“Good afternoon Agent Sinclair. I think Charlie’s packing but Dr. Flores wanted to talk to you.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“Come on in.” The door to the Nurses Station clicked open and David let himself in and grabbed a seat. A couple of minutes later Dr. Flores joined him.

“David.”

“Dr. Flores.”

They shook hands. “So today’s the big day?”

“Finally.”

“Charlie informed me that he hasn’t yet told his family?”

David wasn’t quite sure what to say. He didn’t want to say anything that could result in a last second repeal of Charlie’s release orders. “He just wants an afternoon to chill before heading home, facing the music.”

“And do you have plans for the afternoon?”

David could smell an interrogation a mile off. “Watch a movie. Order Chinese take out. If he’s in a good mood I might disregard your advice and let him have a beer.”
Dr. Flores smiled a little. “You are aware that he is attracted to you?”

David had hoped but that was his first real conformation. Internally he crowed while keeping his face neutral. “I got that impression.”

“He may attempt to act on that attraction.”

“I’ll brace myself.”

Dr. Flores just nodded a little squinting at David. “Normally I have this talk with a family member but you are the one who is here so here goes. Charlie is not better. Not by a long shot but he has done as much healing as he can here. If he stays here too much longer he will simply stagnate.”

“Time for him to face the world.”

“Exactly and I will warn you right now and I have warned him it is not going to be easy. There will be bad days. There will be back sliding. There will be fear, anger, frustration. All the things that brought him here to begin with will still be waiting. There will be times when he will cling desperately looking for someone else to fight the fight for him and there will be times when he will push everyone else away, even you, while trying to reassert his independence. There are going to be moments that are just weird. He’s building a new identity, discovering a new sense of self and there might be some false starts there. You and everyone else are going to have to brace for all this.”

“I’ll spread the word.”

“And I still want to see him at least three times a week for the next few weeks and I will readmit him if I feel he is becoming a risk to himself again. I’d rather see him alive and cranky in here than dead out there.”

David felt his stomach tighten at the thought of Charlie trying anything again. He reminded himself that Charlie had promised. “You don’t think he’d try again.”

“You’ve known him for six years, did you ever believe he’d try in the first place?”

“No.”

“I’d like to believe that Dr. Eppes has passed the initial crisis point but a path that has been walked once can be walked again.”

“I’ll keep an eye on him.”

“I know you will.” Dr. Flores gave David one more long look then slapped his thighs. “Well, let’s go get Dr. Eppes.” David let Dr. Flores lead the way. They found Charlie shoving the last of his laundry into his bag. “Everything packed Dr. Eppes?”

“Yes. And if it’s not I don’t care, get me out of here.” David was a little surprised. Charlie had seemed quite reluctant to leave just the day before. Maybe the threat of another week of tapioca was enough motivation.

Dr. Flores handed Charlie a clipboard. “Just sign on the dotted line and promise to come see me on Wednesday.”

Charlie scribbled his name and handed the paperwork back.

David picked up Charlie’s bag. “Ready?”
“Yes. No! Wait!” Charlie went over to an obsessively neatly ordered shelf full of books and pushed a random half dozen of the books just a little farther in than the rest. Then he took the pillow off a neatly made bed and flipped it over. Then he pulled out one hair from his head and let it fall to the floor.

Dr. Flores just shook his head. “You are a cruel man Dr. Eppes.”

Charlie grinned an evil grin. “I just don’t want him to miss me.”

“There is a very slim chance of that.”

Charlie led the way out of his room grabbing his name tag off the door as he went. They were halfway across the main floor when the young woman with the bandaged wrists who had been the sun in Charlie’s little dance of the plants came running up. “Charlie?” She looked on the verge of panic.

“Hey, Sunny.”

“You’re leaving?”

“I made parole.” The young woman, and up close she looked more like a child, threw her arms around Charlie’s neck. “Hey there. It’s okay. It’s okay.” He rubbed her back a little before peeling her arms off him. She looked close to tears. Charlie poked her in the side. “Come on, Sunny, no crying. What does the sun do?”

“The sun shines,” the girl whispered.

“Are you gonna shine?” Charlie asked poking her in the side some more. Slowly, with what appeared to be great effort the girl smiled. “That’s right, Sunny shines.” Charlie rubbed her head. “Go on, tell everyone bye for me and no not shining.” The girl blushed a little and went off to join a group of other patients.

“You know Dr. Eppes I was tempted to extend your visit with us just for the amount of good you’ve done Minerva in the last week.”

“I haven’t done anything.”

“She’s been a guest here on and off for five years. You are the first person to ever get her to smile.”

“I just gave her a name other than Minerva and didn’t treat her like an idiot.”

“Well, she is going to miss you.”

“I’ll write.”

Charlie moved towards the main doors with greater speed. He paused briefly by the large orderlies that were guarding the door. He held out his hand. “Jim, Frank, it’s been nice knowing you and I hope I never see you two again.”

The orderlies smiled and each shook Charlie’s hand. “The feeling is mutual, Professor.”

With that the doors buzzed open. Charlie rushed through them. David could feel his own heart pounding with excitement. Charlie was nearly at a run as he went past the check in desk, down the hall, through the main doors, across the lobby and out the front. He stopped at the bottom of the steps and closed his eyes just pulling in deep breaths. David watched from the top step with Dr. Flores by
his side. Charlie turned to face the afternoon sun, smiling.

“I’m not sure what the procedure is on your end.” Dr. Flores kept his voice low. “But I told Charlie he is cleared to return to consulting work whenever he wishes. He has a lot of his self worth and self esteem tied up in his solve rate right now and he’ll need something positive to hold on to while everything else shakes out.”

“I’ll keep that in mind but right now I just want to get him home.”

“Well then that exactly is what you should do.”

Charlie opened his eyes as David got to the bottom step.

“Ready to get out of here?” David asked.

Charlie just smiled. “What do you think?”

“Come on.”

David loaded Charlie’s stuff into his car then struggled to actually drive the speed limit all the way home.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

David finally gets to take Charlie home.

David opened the door to his new apartment with a grand flourish. It was large and open plan and a little weird due to some renovations by the previous owner but it was the best thing in his price range. Charlie stepped in and looked around. David closed the door and put down Charlie’s bag. He heard the lock click then suddenly Charlie was in his arms, clinging to his body, trying to get access to his mouth. David let Charlie kiss him for a few seconds before pulling away.

“Charlie?”

“Don’t say no. Oh god David, do not say no.”

“No, I...”

Charlie latched on to his throat managing to find a particularly sensitive bunch of nerves. David lost his train of thought.

“I’ve been dreaming again,” Charlie breathed against his neck. “Every night for weeks.”

“Jesse?” David asked trying to hold his thoughts together.


David’s head was swimming. He felt Charlie’s hands reach under his shirt. They felt scalding hot. He pushed Charlie away desperately hanging onto the loose threads of his ragged self control. “Wait.”

“Please,” Charlie begged.

“I’m not taking your virginity up against my wall.”

“I’m not a virgin.” Charlie quickly responded trying to dive back in.

“Yes, Charlie. You are.”

Charlie froze then his body jerked like he’d just walked into a wall. David took Charlie’s face in his hands and placed a soft, nearly platonic kiss on his head. Charlie made a sound close to a sob, his chest heaving, and he leaned forward pressing his forehead to David’s chest.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Charlie. I never want to hurt you. Your first time should be slow and gentle and when you’re relaxed and ready. And I am more than willing to be the one if you’ll have me but not standing here like this.” Charlie didn’t say anything. Just breathed against David’s chest. David searched his head for the next step. He meant what he said. He never wanted to hurt Charlie.
and no matter what Charlie’s libido was telling him twenty minutes out of the mental hospital was not the right time to hop into bed. “How about a bath?”

Charlie looked up. “A bath?”

“When’s the last time you got to take a long, hot, bath?”

“It’s been a while.”

“How about if I show you my new bath tub? It’s kinda nifty. We can wash the hospital off of you.”

Charlie quickly smelled his arm. “Oh God. I do smell like the hospital.”

“And maybe a shave.”

“The homeless loony look isn’t working for you?”

David rubbed his hand over Charlie’s chin, “I’ve seen you looking better.”

“Okay. Lead the way.”

David took Charlie’s hand, and led him through the bedroom to the bathroom.

Charlie stared at the tub. “It’s... interesting.”

“I think the last owner did a lot of very personal renovations.” The tub was large and half sunken with steps that could double as benches. It was easily large enough for three and the shower head could be brought down right to tub level. David kissed the back of Charlie’s neck while he was still staring at the tub. Charlie wobbled on his feet a little. “So how does a bath sound?”

“Nice.”

David quickly got the water running then turned to Charlie. Charlie suddenly looked a little nervous. “Charlie, if anything is ever too much, or you want to stop, you know you just have to say so. Okay? As much as my libido is calling me really dirty names right now I’m all for you going slow.”

Charlie nodded but his shoulders were hunching up a bit. David remembered what Charlie had said when he tried to tell him he was sexy. ‘If I pull the other one do I get a prize?’

David wondered just how body shy Charlie was. He pulled Charlie close. “Hey there sexy, have I mentioned lately that I think you’re gorgeous?” Charlie snorted. David kissed him. “Seriously, I’d love to see you naked right now to see how accurate all my fantasies have been.”

Charlie blinked. “You’ve had fantasies about me?”

“A few.”

“Really? Why?”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“Um... I’m short, I’m hairy, I’ve got a nose that makes every plastic surgeon in this town see dollar signs...”

“You have the most kissable lips I know. You’ve got beautiful big eyes I hope I get to drown in soon. You’ve got curls I’m always craving to touch and your body fits into my arms just perfect.”
Charlie looked down as his face flushed bright, rich red. “And I think the fact that you don’t know just how sexy you are is a crime against nature and anyone who can’t see it is blind.” David tilted Charlie’s head up and kissed him again. “Come on gorgeous, let me see you.”

Charlie flushed even harder but his hands went to the edge of his t-shirt and slowly peeled it off. Once it was gone he tried to wrap his arms around his body. David got his hands under Charlie’s arms and pulled them away. Then he leaned over and kissed Charlie neck, then his chest. He placed a kiss on the scars next to Charlie’s heart then a kiss on a small, hard nipple. Charlie gasped.

David straightened up. Charlie’s whole torso had flushed red now but he noticed Charlie had slung his left arm behind his back out of sight.

David quickly turned off the tub before it overflowed then went back to Charlie. He took Charlie’s left arm in his hands. He’d seen the scar a dozen times now. Pink and fresh it ran from almost the heel of Charlie’s hand to his elbow. It hadn’t been quite that long to begin with but the surgeons had lengthen it a bit to repair the damage. David took a second to acknowledge the small pain in his chest at the memories of how it got there, then he put a small kiss on the inside of Charlie’s wrist right over the scar. Then he put another kiss on Charlie’s lips. “Gorgeous,” David whispered. “Come on.” He pulled off his shirt, kicked off his shoes, then quickly slipped out of his jeans hoping Charlie would follow suit.

When David looked up Charlie was still in his shorts, his back turned. He did look over his shoulder and David let him get a full look. He watched Charlie’s face carefully as he looked up and down and lingered for a second in the middle. David knew he was slightly on the larger size. Not abnormally huge or anything, just proportional for the rest of his build. He’d still had partners, male and female however, who had taken a look and said ‘no way.’

Charlie’s eyes got a little wider and his whole body flushed this time. David took that as a good sign. He stepped close and pressed himself along Charlie’s back. “Everything okay?” Charlie nodded. “Come on. Before the water gets cold.” Charlie nodded again and swallowed hard before quickly pushing off his own shorts.

David quickly peeked over Charlie’s shoulder. He was half hard and David had to admit that he was actually a little on the small side, not that size had ever mattered to him but it probably wasn’t helping Charlie’s physical shyness any. Seven months of virtually no use probably wasn’t helping in that area either.

He kissed the side of Charlie’s neck again then in one quick move he scooped Charlie up and plopped him in the tub. He squeaked, sputtered, then giggled. David settled in behind him sliding his legs to either side of Charlie. “There. Isn’t this nice?”

Charlie stretched his legs and let himself float a little. “Actually. Yeah.”

David wrapped his arms around Charlie and let himself luxuriate in the hot water and the wonderful feeling of Charlie’s body against his. He tried to lock every second into his memory just in case it never happened again and began to run his hands up and down Charlie’s body. Charlie’s eyes were closed and he sighed and hummed softly as David let his hands rove in long strokes.

“This is so nice, David,” Charlie sighed. “I’m feeling cleaner already.”

“Good.”

“I don’t suppose you have any shampoo? I have a feeling my hair smells like hospital soap.”
David didn’t want to tell him it did. Instead he pointed to a small sliding door in the tiled wall. Charlie slid it open and grabbed up a bottle of extra conditioning shampoo for curly hair. It was Charlie’s usual brand and David had picked it up as soon as he knew Charlie would be coming over. Charlie weighed the fresh bottle in his hands. “Didn’t know we used the same shampoo?”

“Though after everything you’d want something familiar.”

“Thank you.”

David took the bottle out of Charlie’s hand and set it aside then grabbed the shower head that he’d left within reach. “Here, lean forward a bit and I’ll wash your hair.”

Charlie twisted his body around and gave David a supremely confused look. “You’ll what?”

“When’s the last time you had someone wash your hair?”

“You mean since my mother stopped doing it for me when I was six?”

David shook his head. “Turn around. This’ll feel good, I promise.”

Charlie eyed him a bit suspiciously but turned back around. David was more than a little amazed that Charlie hadn’t had his hair washed by some lover. Even if all his previous partners were women, two of those were long term relationships and Charlie had hair that was just screaming to be touched.

David quickly soaked down Charlie’s hair then grabbed the shampoo. He cast a quick eye over the ingredients and decided that as long as he didn’t have direct daily exposure to it he should be okay. There were reasons every product in his bathroom had hypoallergenic on the label.

He squeezed out a big blob and rubbed it into Charlie’s hair massaging his scalp as he went. Charlie sagged a little and began moaning ever so softly. “Told you it would feel good.” Charlie didn’t comment, just continued making erotic noises.

Once the shampoo was worked in well David grabbed the hard toothed comb he’d bought with the shampoo. Then he started at the bottom and started carefully combing the snarls out of every curl. Charlie sighed in soft pleasure. “You’ve done this before.” It wasn’t a question.

“A few times.” Isaiah had loved having his hair washed and combed and played with and pulled.

Charlie just hummed softly and David let his mind drift quietly as he slowly picked out over a month of snarls. Charlie had obviously not been able to take the time to properly deal with them in the hospital.

Charlie seemed half asleep by the time David could run the comb through every curl and have it spring back smooth, dark and glossy. “Close your eyes,” he ordered before grabbing the shower head and giving Charlie a rinse.

“So when the whole FBI thing doesn’t work out you’re opening that salon, right?”

David snorted. “This is just for people I really like.”

Charlie turned around brushing the wet hair from his face. “So you really like me?”

David placed a quick kiss on his lips. “Yeah, I do.” He ran his fingers over Charlie’s particularly scruffy scruff. “Want to borrow a razor?”

“Only if it’s electric.”
“Don’t like regular ones?”

Charlie shrugged. “Never used one.”

“Really? Never?”

“Never.”

“No one taught you how to shave?”

“I was at Princeton with my mom. And Larry was going through this kind of early proto-grunge phase at the time. Really scary. I just bought an electric razor and read the instructions on the box.”

That statement felt horribly wrong to David. One of the last things his father had done before dying was teach him how to shave. “Okay, how about if I give you a shave and next time you can try it yourself?” Charlie looked particularly suspicious. “I have steady hands and a lot of practice.”

Charlie took a deep breath that must have gone down to his toes. “Okay.”

David hopped out of the tub to grab all his shaving stuff and put a fresh blade on the razor. Charlie was looking a little nervous by the time he got back in. David quickly wetted down a cloth and wrapped it around Charlie’s face. Charlie’s beard, oddly enough, didn’t seem to be as thick as the hair on the rest of him. Even so it was a bit long and David grabbed the small scissors first and got back into the tub.

They shifted around until Charlie was straddling his legs. He trimmed down Charlie’s beard quickly and without comment trying to ignore how close their bodies were. Charlie kept his eyes closed and his head still and David caught the stray hairs in the cloth. He quickly rinsed Charlie’s face.

“You’re looking better already. Ready for the next bit?”

Charlie looked into David’s eyes. “Yeah, sure. I trust you.”

David had to steady himself after those last three words. Charlie trusted him to put a blade to his face. Charlie trusted him to wash his hair, to take him home. Charlie trusted him enough to crawl into his arms while distraught. David tried to think of what he had done to earn that trust. Nothing immediately sprang to mind but the words still hit him like a blow to the chest.

He grabbed the shaving gel (dye free, scent free, hypoallergenic) and spread it liberally across Charlie’s face and down his neck. Then he took up the small razor. Charlie closed his eyes. “When you do this yourself remember to use plenty of gel, rinse the blade often and go with the grain. That’s how you keep your skin smooth. If you’ve got curly hair and you shave against the grain the hairs will curl in under the skin instead of growing back out. Got it?” Charlie nodded. “Okay.”

David began keeping each stroke tiny and tapping the blade clean in a cup after every other one. It was a slow process but he felt no need to rush. Charlie was taking slow, steady breaths that seemed almost meditative. David felt himself start to fall into a meditative rhythm himself. He could feel the bath water beginning to cool a bit by the time he got the last of the stubble under Charlie’s chin. He gave Charlie’s face another quick rinse.

“There we go.”

Charlie opened his eyes and rubbed his hands over his face. “Well, how do I look?”

David ran his fingers across Charlie’s baby smooth cheeks. “Gorgeous. How do you feel?”
“Cleaner. Definitely getting cleaner.”

“Want me to wash your back?” Charlie grinned and started to turn around. “Nah, stay where you are. I can wash your back from the front. Just hand me the shower gel.” Charlie grabbed the shower gel and looked at the bottle, then he looked at the shaving gel still sitting on the edge of the tub and then looked at every other personal cleaning product David had in the little cupboard right down to the natural sponge. Then he looked at David. “I have sensitive skin.”

Charlie shrugged and handed over the shower gel.

David rubbed a liberal amount of the gel between his hands before reaching around Charlie. Starting with his back seemed somehow safer but only just. Charlie’s eyes almost immediately closed. His body moved with each touch pressing himself into David’s hands. When the first content sigh fell from Charlie’s lips David locked his jaw tight trying to keep control but there was nothing he could do about his erection which was poking above the water.

He moved his hands around to Charlie’s front. As he ran his hands just lightly over Charlie’s nipples Charlie gasped and his head rolled back. David’s control cracked. His hands went into Charlie’s freshly washed hair and pulled him in for a kiss.

Charlie caught up instantly parting his lips, giving David the access he’d denied himself earlier. Charlie sent his own tongue out to wrap around David’s. David felt his heart racing like he was in a fire fight. He squeezed his own eyes shut and ignored the fact that it was becoming hard to breathe. He wanted to push farther, get closer, climb right in under Charlie’s skin, get inside his head, his soul and stay there.

Charlie jerked back.

‘Shit.’ David thought. This would be the moment when the panic would set in, when Charlie would fully realize that he was making out in a bathtub with another dude and completely freak out. David braced himself.

Charlie looked down between them then back up at David. “David?”

“Yes.” David tried to keep his voice neutral.

“Could you...” Charlie licked his lips and swallowed hard. “Would you touch me? Please?”

David restrained himself from throwing his arms in the air in relief. Instead he put his hands on Charlie’s chest which was heaving. He could feel Charlie’s heart racing. Still soapy he easily slid his hands down Charlie’s side to his hips and pulled Charlie back in close. Only then did he slide one hand between them and slide the other around to cup Charlie’s backside.

Their moans came almost in unison and Charlie instantly tried to buck into David’s hand. “Easy, easy.”


“I know. Here. Lean your forehead on my shoulder and let me take care of you.”

Charlie leaned forward. David figured Charlie probably had zero stamina at present for all manner of reasons but he’d try to give Charlie as much pleasure as he could before hand. He was also sure that his original theory was right, Charlie was tactile and sensual and starved for touch even if he didn’t know it.
David wrapped his right hand tight around the base of Charlie’s cock. Charlie groaned and trembled. David kept his hand there like a cock ring, not stroking just applying a steady pressure. Then he slid his left hand across Charlie’s gorgeous, round ass and gave it a little squeeze. Charlie gave an odd squeak but David felt the cock in his right hand twitch and try to expand.

“You know you can tell me to stop?” Charlie nodded, not raising his head. “Want me to stop?” Charlie shook his head adamantly. “Okay.” David rubbed at Charlie’s ass a bit. “You have a great ass. You know that?” he whispered into Charlie’s ear. Charlie was still, then just sort of shrugged a little. “It’s true. You’ve got a pair of jeans. I’ve only seen you wear them a few times. They look like they’ve been washed a million times and they just hang off your hips and hug this gorgeous back side of yours like they’re part of your skin. It’s like you’re just wrapped in sex. Every time I’ve seen them I’ve wanted to throw you over my shoulder and just carry you off somewhere, have my wicked way with you.”

David was thankful his shower gel was in a pump bottle and he quickly had his right hand lubed up. It wasn’t ideal but his waterproof lube was in the other room and he was not about to break the mood to go get it. With one hand still kneading Charlie’s ass David gave Charlie’s cock a couple of good, firm strokes.

Charlie cried out and despite David’s grip came into the bath water. David kept working his fist slowly milking Charlie as he trembled through the aftershocks of the orgasm. When he pulled his hand away Charlie gave a tiny moan.

“Shit,” Charlie whispered, his head still pressed the David’s shoulder.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m sure I used to have better stamina than that.”

“It’s okay. You’re just a little out of practice. We’ll have you going for hours and hours soon enough.”

Charlie sat up. “I’ve never wanted to go for hours and hours.”

“Well maybe we can work on that to.”

For some reason Charlie blushed at that and lowered his head. When he looked back up his face still looked embarrassed. “Could..?” Charlie’s eyes flickered down for a second. David looked down at himself and remembered that he was still erect.

“Go ahead,” David said and pushed himself onto one of the higher steps so Charlie could have better access.

Charlie got a serious look on his face. David recognized it. It was the same look he got when an equation just wasn’t quite there yet. Charlie reached his hands out slowly. He wrapped his left around the middle. David could feel that it was still weak but still made a small noise of encouragement. Then Charlie reached out with his right and very carefully and with great concentration rolled back David’s foreskin. David’s parents had been hippy radicals in their own special ways and hadn’t had him circumcised. David hummed a little in pleasure as Charlie played with his foreskin and the head of his cock rolling it about, a look of curiosity on his face.

“Go easy on that,” David said gently. “There’s a lot of nerves in that little bit of skin.”

“Sorry,” Charlie said quickly and pulled his hand away.
“It’s okay. You’re doing fine. Just figured you’re probably in unknown territory here.”

Charlie shrugged a little. “It’s not something I really thought about until, well, sort of just now.”

David leaned in pressed a kiss to Charlie’s lips. “You’re doing fine.”

Charlie nodded and went back to his explorations. David didn’t really have any other word for what Charlie was doing. It wasn’t exactly a hand job, even if it did feel pretty good. Charlie was rubbing and squeezing and twisting and David let himself respond fully to everything Charlie did so Charlie would know for future reference.

Finally though David felt himself creeping up on an internal wall. “Charlie, gorgeous.”

“Yes?”

“My stamina is giving out and I need to cum, and soon.”

Charlie’s hands froze. “Oh... Um...”

David smiled. “If you want, just handle it like you handle yourself. Same equipment at the end of the day.”

Charlie suddenly turned bright, bright red. “I... um...”

“What?”

“I don’t really... I mean not since I was a kid... uh...”

“You don’t masturbate?” David didn’t believe it. He’d watch Charlie masturbate, or at least try to.

Charlie dipped his head turning and even darker red. “Maybe once or twice a year,” Charlie mumbled. “Just quick in the shower. I try to just think about prime numbers.”

“Prime numbers?”

“Instead of other... stuff,” Charlie whispered.

‘Instead of men.’

David carefully tilted Charlie’s head up. “I plan to be cumming in a few minutes and you better believe I’m going to be thinking about you.” Charlie sucked in a sharp little breath. “I’m going to be thinking about how unbelievably lucky I am to have the sexiest man I know sitting on my lap with his hands on my cock and I am going to be doing my damndest to file every second of all this into my memory because I never want to forget you and me and this moment.”

Charlie’s eyes went glassy with tears and he started to move his hands again. David dropped his own hands down to offer a little guidance. He guided Charlie’s left hand down to the root of his cock pulling the skin taunt then helped him find a steady rhythm with his right. And once Charlie was going, a look of deep concentration on his face David leaned back a little and relaxed and let himself revel in the fact that he was not having a dream but that Charlie Eppes was sitting in his bathtub stroking him to completion.

It didn’t take long. David felt his balls tighten and the pressure grow until he could hold back no longer. He grabbed the edge of the tub and with a shout snapped his hips up into Charlie’s hands.

He held on tight as his own body shuttered and the cum poured for him for what seemed to be the
longest time. He looked down. Cum was covering his cock and belly and Charlie’s fingers.

“Wow.” Was Charlie’s breathless comment on the situation.

David tried to chuckle but was still catching his own breath.

Charlie lifted his hand to his face and peered at his own fingers. He rubbed David’s cum between his fingers, pulled them apart then tentatively licked at it with just the tip of his tongue.

David groaned. “Fuck, Charlie. You have no idea just how sexy that is, do you?”

“What is?”

“Licking my cum off your fingers.”

Charlie looked at his fingers again then took another tiny lick. “You’re trying to kill me aren’t you?” Charlie just blushed. “Come on. Let’s rinse off, the water’s getting cold.” Charlie’s stomach took that moment to grumble. “And how about an early dinner?”

“That sounds great.”

They quickly drained the water and rinsed off. David used the opportunity to have a little fun with the shower head making Charlie squeak as the water was sprayed against his bottom.

After, David wrapped Charlie in a bath robe that was several sizes too large and they shoved all his laundry into the wash to try to wash away the smell of the industrial hospital soap. After that they ordered Chinese and put the Magnificent Seven into David’s new DVD player.

“So I take it your insurance finally paid out?” Charlie asked gesturing with chopsticks to David’s new flat screen TV.

“I came very close to threatening them with federal investigation. They didn’t want to pay out ‘cause my contents insurance didn’t cover fire or fire related damage and my fire insurance wouldn’t cover ‘cause there was no fire. I had to explain to the contents people over and over that there wasn’t actually any fire.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“Not really.”

Charlie popped a bit of lemon chicken into his mouth. “Oh god, I never thought that cheap Chinese delivery could taste this good. And look.” Charlie waved his chopsticks. “Pointy objects. Two of them.”

David grinned. “Do you want the last egg roll?”

Charlie dove for it. “God yes.” He shoved half of it in his mouth.

“Careful. If you choke to death in my apartment, wearing my bathrobe while everyone still thinks you’re in St. Clare’s I’m going to have a lot of explaining to do to both your Dad and your brother.”

Charlie tried to say something around the egg roll but it was instantly lost. He chewed a few times and swallowed. “I’ll be fine. And you can just tell people I escaped and was hiding out here and you just found me.”

David knew Charlie didn’t realize what he had just said, what he had just implied. David tried to
keep his face neutral instead of yelling at Charlie that he had no desire to ‘find’ him ever again in any state other than alive and well. “Just chew your food.”

Charlie chewed contently on the other half of the egg roll as the movie rolled on. As it neared the end David got up to fish the lemon sorbet from the freezer.

“Oh god, David, if I believed in mind reading I’d swear you were doing it.”

David handed Charlie the sorbet and a spoon. “I just thought to myself ‘if I were Charlie and had been forced to eat tapioca what would I really, really want?’” Charlie took a bite of the sorbet and seemed to melt. His eyes rolled back and his face slipped into a good approximation of raw lust.

“Better than tapioca?”

Charlie leaned over and pressed his lemon flavored lips to David’s just for a moment. “Thank you.”

After that Charlie just curled against him as they watched the rest of the movie then flipped over to the first sports game they found. David didn’t consider himself much of a hockey fan but found himself enjoying listening to Charlie talk about point spreads as well as some amusing tales of Don’s junior hockey days.

Finally David clicked off the tv, both the game and sorbet finished. He looked at Charlie who was curled against his body like he was custom built for it and had been doing it for years. He ran his fingers through Charlie’s hair.

“Thank you, David.”

“For what?”

“For a perfect afternoon. A perfect evening.”

“I do my best.”

“No.” Charlie’s voice was suddenly thick. “I feel like I’m in a bubble, or a dream, and I know I’m going to wake up and outside there’s going to be fear and pain and a hundred other miserable things but right here, like this, with you. I feel like there’s nothing wrong with me and I don’t want that to end.”

“There is nothing wrong with you.”

“David, I tried to kill myself and I’m terrified of 99% of the people I know including my own family. I’ve got problems.”

David pressed his lips to Charlie’s. “Not here you don’t.”

Charlie closed his eyes. His lips moved softly and silently. Anyone else and David thought they might be praying. Charlie opened his eyes. “David, before I have to face everyone tomorrow, can we...can you...show me things?”

David looked into Charlie’s eyes. They held equal measures of fear and desire and he got the idea Charlie wasn’t asking to see his comic book collection. “What would Dr. Flores say?”

“I really don’t give a shit.”

“Charlie.”

Charlie closed his eyes again. “I’m supposed to be honest with myself. That’s what he keeps telling
me. And I’m trying to be which means for the first time in my life I’m letting myself want... want what I want.” Charlie opened his eyes and pressed his lips gently to David’s again. “Please,” he whispered against David’s lips. David kissed him back. As they kissed softly David did his best to compose a sexual lesson plan in his head. Charlie was more than just a virgin, he had denied himself even the simple pleasure of his own hand and forced his mind into unnatural patterns of behavior and thought.

‘Just start at the beginning.’ The little voice in David’s head stated. He broke off the kiss. Charlie’s eyes were blown wide.

“Can I take you to the bedroom?” David asked. Charlie nodded vigorously. “We’re not having sex. You’re still a bit behind the learning curve for that.”

“I am willing to be tutored.”

“I’m sure you are.” David got up and moved the both of them to the bedroom. He could feel Charlie vibrating as he sat the two of them down on the bed. This time David started the kiss. He held back not wanting to be too forceful but still rubbed his hands gently and carefully across Charlie’s body. Slowly and with great caution Charlie began to follow suit. Pretty soon they were properly making out like they were teenagers.

David worked hard to keep control. Charlie was proving a vocal lover. Even being touched through the thick bathrobe was drawing groans and moans from Charlie’s lips and into David’s. With any other lover that bathrobe would be long gone by now, possibly in shreds. David knew he’d possibly gone a bit too fast in the bath and it would be hard to pull back but he would try.

Finally it was Charlie that pulled back for a bit of air.

“Are you alright?”

Charlie nodded. “Just need to catch my breath.”

“Take your time. No need to rush.”

“I don’t know. I’m not used to being behind the rest of the class.”

“Well you’re not going to catch up by skipping steps.”

“I still think I might be up for an accelerated program.”

David brushed back a bit of Charlie’s hair. “We’ll see.”

Charlie leaned in and resumed the making out process, his movements a little bolder now, his hands slipping under David’s t-shirt and over his chest.

David pulled his t-shirt over his head and flung it somewhere across the room. Charlie stared at his body. “Like what you see?”

“Oh god yes.” Charlie reached out his hands and lay them flat against David’s chest. “I’ve been thinking a lot about my past lately. Trying to find patterns of behavior. I found an interesting one.”

“What is it?”

“Strong men.” Charlie swallowed hard. “Large, strong, men. My whole life I’ve always tried to be around them, impress them, gain their approval, even when they really had nothing to do with me.”
Charlie began slowly stroking David’s chest, tracing the lines of muscles. “Even when I was little I would beg Don to let me go to his baseball and hockey practices, I’d watch the boys run and drill. Then in high school there was Jesse but I also always tried to endear myself to the rest of the team. John Blake during my undergrad. I might have been oblivious to his intentions but I so wanted him to like me. During my doctorate there was Eric Donovan who was campus security, patrolled my little wing of academia at night, looked like Colby on steroids. I was always trying to show him my work. He was polite about it but he could have cared less. After that was fluid dynamics and yachtyes, strong and tan from all that time on the ocean.” Charlie leaned forward pressing his cheek to David’s skin. “Then there was the FBI. First time Don let me go out with you guys for drinks after a case I was so happy. Told myself I was just happy to be spending time with Don after everything but there was also you. I still remember. The four of us sat at the bar. Don was on one side of me, you were on the other and Terri was at the end.”

“I think I remember that. You tried to use shot glasses to explain binary arithmetic.” Charlie nodded, his face still pressed to David’s chest. “I still don’t entirely get it.”

David felt Charlie smile. “I’ll explain it again sometime when we’re both sober.”

David stroked his fingers through Charlie’s hair. “Just so you know you don’t have to worry about impressing me. You managed that a long time ago.” Charlie didn’t say anything but David felt him try to snuggle in a little closer. “Why don’t we lay down? I want to show you something.”

Charlie, ever trusting, pulled back and David moved them both around until he was spooned behind Charlie, Charlie’s robe hanging open.

“Now, this really should be lesson one.” David laced his fingers into Charlie’s right hand then guided Charlie’s hand down between his own legs. Charlie’s whole body jerked at the first touch. Then it began to tremble as he helped Charlie wrap his own hand around his cock. “Just like that.” David helped him rub just a little. “Twenty seven million six hundred forty four thousand four hundred thirty seven,” Charlie answered quickly his voice high and tight.

David sighed. “I’m sure that’s a very interesting prime number but I think you can allow yourself better now.”

Charlie continued to tremble, his whole body clenching tight.

“Shhh. It’s okay.” David kept Charlie’s hand going at a slow, easy pace. “Take a deep breath. Close your eyes. I want you... I want you to picture a room. It’s large and warm and comfortable and safe. Completely safe. Got that room in your head?” Charlie gave a tiny nod. “And in the middle of the room is a bed. A great big, soft bed. Okay?” Charlie nodded just starting to relax a little. “Now there are people in the room. There are men in the room.” David felt Charlie’s cock jump. “Just the kind you know you like.” David dropped his words right into Charlie’s ear. “Big and strong and handsome. And they are there for you Charlie. They are all there for you. They are there to worship every inch of your body. To give you pleasure any way you want. Fulfill every desire you have. Even the ones you don’t know you have yet.” Charlie’s hand was starting to move a little faster on its own accord. “And there is no one else. No one calling or interrupting or judging or demanding anything of you. Just you and them, completely safe, for as long as you want. As long as you need. Giving you pleasure over and over. Touching you. Kissing you. Holding you. Caressing your body until you can feel nothing pleasure and think of nothing but the moment.”

David carefully drew his hand away as Charlie let loose. Still short on stamina in only took a minute of fast, hard strokes before Charlie arched back into David’s arms cumming with a cry.
David carefully stroked Charlie’s head as he trembled through the aftershocks and tried to ignore the fact that his own cock was attempting to rip a hole in his sweats. When Charlie finally managed to catch his breath he gave a high manic giggle. “I think...” He licked his lips. “I think I can maybe appreciate why that is a popular activity.”

David grabbed a packet of tissue and helped Charlie clean up but not before Charlie tasted his own cum. “It tastes different from yours.” Was his comment.

“Diet affects flavor.”

“Oh.” Charlie nodded looking thoughtful and David suddenly worried about possible dietary experiments Charlie was contemplating.

Charlie rolled over so they were facing each other and began running his fingers lightly over David’s torso again. He stopped at David’s side and ran his fingers around an odd round scar about the size of his palm.

“What’s this?” he asked, tracing it around and around.

David was trying hard not to giggle as Charlie had managed to inadvertently find a slightly ticklish spot. “Eczema scar. My dry cleaner changed chemicals a few years back without warning. About a third of my skin flaked off. It was pretty gross. That’s the last of it.”

“That’s why everything in your bathroom is hypoallergenic?”

“Everything in my life in hypoallergenic. Most chemicals make my skin fall off or break out and just about every grass, pollen and mold on the planet is out to kill me or at least block up my head. I keep my head shaved so I don’t have to worry about shampoo.”

“Really?”

“Well that and my hair line started receding when I was twenty.”

Charlie ran a hand over his own curls. “I think Don and I have avoided our Dad’s hair line but it’s hard to say.”

“Well they say it goes down the mother’s side.”

Charlie just shrugged and went back to tracing his fingers around David’s chest. David mimicked the action. He let his fingers trace over the odd cross shaped scar a little to the right of Charlie’s heart. It was nearly completely faded and mostly hidden under chest hair.

“Is this where they took out the tumor?”

Charlie’s hand stilled. “Don told you about that?”

“Your Dad did.”

“They didn’t even tell me what they were doing. It’s not like I was an idiot. I would have been able to understand. I was in the hospital already with broken ribs and a collapsed lung. They just knocked me out and I woke up with a hole in my chest and a disgusting lump floating in a jar.”

“I’m sure they felt it was necessary.”

“They wanted to do a round a chemo just to be safe but my Mom said no. She wanted them to do a bunch of tests first so they checked me into the children’s cancer ward and then took biopsies of
every little bit of me. Every lymph, muscle... bone. I think I would have preferred the chemo by the
time they were done and the whole time I’m in the middle of a line of beds with a bunch of kids who
were all dying and I was fine.” Charlie stared into nothing for a moment. “God that summer sucked.”

“Sounds like it.”

Charlie nodded as he stared at a little spot that was over David’s shoulder and probably twenty five
years in the past. “Didn’t end there either. Mom and Dad got paranoid and every six months or so I’d
have to go through a whole fresh round of tests. When I was twelve they dropped me off for another
round and I remember I had this stack of letters from universities all wanting me to apply and
offering me different scholarships and I was sitting there reading these and next to me were these two
boys and... and they were talking about their funerals. They were talking about how they wanted
their funerals to be and I had enough. I pulled out the lure they put in for the blood draws, packed my
bag and told the kids that if anyone was looking for me I was taking the bus home.”

“What did the kids say?”

“They wished me luck.”

“What did your parents say?”

“Not much. I...” Charlie rolled onto his back and wrapped his arms around himself. He giggled a
little. “I told my parents the only way I was ever going back into a hospital was wrapped up in a
straitjacket.” Charlie started giggling again then kept going. David laid his hand across Charlie’s
forehead. A little voice inside his head that sounded suspiciously like Colby mused that it was a
miracle Charlie hadn’t cracked up sooner and it was probably only that special brand of Eppes
stubbornness and will that kept him going.

When the giggles calmed down Charlie turned his head towards David. “Tomorrow’s going to be
hard, isn’t it?”

David wanted to lie but knew Charlie wouldn’t appreciate it. “Yeah, it probably will be. But the day
after that will probably be easier so focus on that one. And I’ve still got your back.”

Charlie smirked. “You had more than my back a few minutes ago.”

“That I did.” David flung his leg over and was quickly straddling Charlie’s naked hips. He still had
his sweat bottoms on so didn’t think he was pushing too far. He ran his hands across Charlie’s chest
and stomach. Charlie’s eyes closed and his head tipped back. He tried to raise his hips but David
kept them in place. “Tell me about your dreams, Charlie.”

“What?”

“You said you had dreams about me. I want to hear about them.”

Charlie flushed. David realized making Charlie turn shades of red was kind of fun. “They were all
different,” Charlie mumbled.

David kept stroking Charlie’s chest. “So tell me about the last one you remember.”

“I...” Charlie stumbled. “I was in the tactical van. I don’t know why. It was night and it was hot. I
was sweating through all my clothes. And you came in and were in all your gear.” Charlie’s breath
hitched a little. “I think I asked where Don was but he was back at the office. You started taking off
all your gear ‘cause it was too hot. Then you told me to lie on the floor since it was cooler and you
keeled down over my hips. Just like this.” Charlie closed his eyes again.
“And then?” David didn’t really want to admit how much the though of hot sweaty sex with Charlie in the tactical van was turning him on but his body was confessing for him.

“And then I woke up to the sound of my roommate rearranging his bookshelf and the guy down the hall screaming.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It doesn’t matter. My dreams never go much farther than that. I guess my subconscious just doesn’t have much to work with. It’s like the old dreams with Jesse. I’d always wake up just before he’d kissed me.”

“Why don’t we give your subconscious a little more to work with.” David leaned over and kissed Charlie. Charlie’s lips, which still tasted like lemon sorbet, moved under his. David also felt Charlie’s hands at the waist of his pants easing them down.

David hopped up, shimmied out of his sweats and straddled Charlie again. “Is that what you were trying for?”

Charlie was swallowing hard and licking his lips. “Yeah.” His voice came out in a tiny squeak.

David chuckled. “Now, how would you have liked that dream to have ended?”

“Sex?” Charlie’s voice was hopeful.

“Not yet. You’re not there yet and I think you know that.”

Charlie licked his lips a few more times. “I want...”

“Yes?”

Charlie’s eyes were blown out and David could feel Charlie’s cock swelling against his ass. His stamina might be nothing but his recharge rate was good.

“I want to... Iwanttowatchyoutouchyourself.” Charlie blurted out turning bright, bright red.

David didn’t make him repeat it, only took himself in hand and give himself a couple of slow strokes. “This what you want to see?”

Charlie nodded, his eyes glued to David’s hand. David usually didn’t consider himself much of an exhibitionist but the idea of jacking off while kneeling over Charlie was something out of a particularly pornographic dream. David kept stroking himself making a good show of it. Every few strokes Charlie would try to raise his hips a little, grinding his cock against David’s ass.

“Let your subconscious absorb this. A big strong man stroking himself over your body, Charlie Eppes. Stroking himself ’cause you are sexy, and oh so very desirable.”

‘And so fucking innocent.’

“What...” Charlie stumbled again. “You... You said you had fantasies about me. What were they?”

“You really want to know?”

Charlie nodded.

David closed his eyes and kept stroking himself. “I’ve got one where we’re in your old office. And
you’re talking about something. And I lock the door but you don’t notice until I kiss you. I kiss you and I pick you up and pin you right to one of your chalkboards.” David heard Charlie gasp and felt his cock twitch. “I get my hands into your hair and up under you clothes and you taste like coffee and lemon tarts. And you’re moaning and begging for me and I get your jeans down, the soft ones that hug your ass, and once they’re down I slide right into you and you’re open and ready for me ‘cause we do this all the time.”

David could feel Charlie’s hips jerking almost in time to the stroking of his hand along his cock. He opened his eyes and looked down at Charlie. Charlie’s head was thrown back and his eyes squeezed shut. His hands were gripping the sheets as he thrust against David.

“And once I’m in you,” David continued. “I slow down. I take my time, taking both of us right to the edge over and over until I can’t take it any more and you’re begging me and I finally start working in you fast and hard until I cum right up in you and you cum across our bodies we both smell like sex and sweat and cum and chalk.”

Charlie’s eyes came open for just a second before squeezing shut again and with a small yell and a groan and a couple of hard grinding thrusts David felt the hot stickiness of fresh cum across his ass. It had been a while but the feel and the smell and the memories were more than enough to send David racing towards the edge himself. He pressed under his balls with his left hand and stroked with his right and let loose a bellow as he squeezed cum across Charlie’s body all the way to his chest. If David could have come a second time at the sight of the white strings across Charlie’s body he would have. As it was he saved the image for future fantasy material before collapsing, aiming a little to his left so as to hit the bed and not squish Charlie.

Charlie looked down at himself. “David?”

“Yes?” David groaned still catching his own breath.

“I think I’m going to need another shower.”

David hulled himself and Charlie back into the shower for a quick rinse off and a lot more kissing and touching and slow explorations. He knew Charlie was terrified about what he had to face in the morning but David knew he was almost as terrified because there was absolutely nothing to stop Charlie from doing something stupid and destructive again and David wanted nothing more than to keep Charlie safe in his arms, possibly for the rest of his life in needs be. And even if Charlie got through the day and did move on with his life David knew in the long run that despite what Charlie believed there would be brilliant young handsome academics lined up around the block and as someone who never even got to calculus and took accounting instead David knew he didn’t stand a chance.

David turned out the light and wrapped his arms around Charlie and tried not to think about how much it would hurt when Charlie gave him the lets be friends speech.

Charlie snuggled tight against his chest. “Thank you, David,” he muttered.

“Any time. Get some sleep.” Charlie nodded and quickly dozed off. David on the other hand stared into the darkness for several hours just listening to Charlie breathe.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Time to get back to work.

David opened his eyes. Some time in the night they had rolled around so he was once again spooned against Charlie’s back. David looked at the clock. It was still a good twenty minutes before his alarm went off and he wondered what had woken him. Then he heard a tiny sniff.

“Charlie?” he whispered.

“Yes?” Charlie whispered back.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“I feel really, really good. I woke up a bit ago and your arms were around me and it feels so good.” Charlie’s voice cracked a little.

“So what’s wrong? What are you thinking about?”

“All the mornings I didn’t wake up like this. All the mornings I woke up with the smell of apricot body rub or jasmine perfume or just alone. Thousands of mornings where I got out of bed because I had no reason to stay in it. Over six thousand mornings since I was 18 that I could have woken up with someone strong holding me but hated and feared myself too much to let it happen.”

David pressed a kiss to the top of Charlie’s head since it was what he could reach and took a deep breath finding that clean Charlie smell. His heart ached for those six thousand mornings of Charlie’s but at the same time he knew he couldn’t let Charlie dwell on them or they were never getting through the day.

“I’m sorry, Charlie but you’ve got to think about the six thousand ahead of you. Until Larry builds you that time machine there’s no going back. You’ve got to look ahead. You are attractive and desirable and I guarantee that once you let yourself take a good look around you are going to find that there are plenty of options and there is going to be someone willing to hold you every morning from now until you’re an old man.”

Charlie didn’t say anything for a long time. David hoped he was thinking. “Even if I could go back and talk to myself the resulting paradox would be impressive.”

David kissed Charlie’s head again “Yes it would. Did you sleep okay?”

“Yeah. It’s amazing what no screaming neighbors can do for your ability to sleep through the night.” Charlie rolled over and pushed himself up the bed so he and David were nose to nose. “What time do we have to be awake?”
“About another twenty minutes. I told Don I had to run a personal errand this morning so I can take you home before going in.”

Charlie took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “No.”

“Charlie...”

“The office.” Charlie opened his eyes again. “Can we go to the office first? I’ll get a cab home after that but I want to see everyone first. I’ve been thinking about stuff and... and I need to talk to the office first.” Charlie chuckled. “Is it weird that I feel okay about the idea of telling a bunch of FBI agents that I’m gay but not so okay about coming out to a bunch of liberal academics?”

“A little, but no one at the FBI is after your office or your parking spot.”

“That is true.”

David kissed Charlie’s lips. “You are going to be fine. Today’s going to be a little hard but most likely no one will shoot at you.”

Charlie cracked up. “Well that does put things into perspective. As long as no one shoots at me it’s not that hard a day.”

“That’s always been my philosophy.” David rubbed his thumb across Charlie’s cheek and found a good amount of stubble already. “Come on. Let’s get up and we can take a shower and you can practice shaving.”

Charlie groaned a bit but rolled out of bed. The shower was fun with some silly use of the shower head and mutual hand jobs. The shave was interesting. David handed Charlie the razor once he was lathered up. Charlie stared at it for a long time before David put his hand on Charlie shoulder and just said ‘I trust you.’ After that Charlie brought the blade carefully to his face and slowly made the first stroke.

David took a deep breath just as the elevator door opened. His heart was pounding. He wasn’t sure why he was nervous. Charlie was the one who was stepping back out into the world with an emphasis on the out. Charlie took a deep breath as well and stepped out onto the sixth floor. “Here we go,” he said softly.

The first person they ran into was Colby who was going through the filing cabinet. He pulled Charlie into a bear hug right in the middle of the office. People were already beginning to stare. “Hey, man.” Colby kept his voice low. “When did you get out?”

“Just this morning.”

“How are you feeling? You doing okay?” Colby gave Charlie a bit of a mini pat down as if to assure himself that Charlie was all there.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m good.”

“You’re not going to scare us like that again?”

Charlie shook his head. “Not if I can avoid it.”

“Good.”
“Where’s Don?”

“With the girls and Matt in the War Room.”

“Cool, thanks.”

Charlie headed to the War Room. David followed with Colby right behind. He tried to ignore the sideways looks Colby was giving him. Charlie stopped at the door to the War Room and just watched. Don was hunched over a computer with Matt who was trying to recreate some old algorithm Charlie and Amita had tossed together years before while Nikki and Liz went through hundreds of suspect files the old fashion way.

Liz looked up first. “Charlie!” Three more heads snapped up. Charlie smiled and stepped into the room accepting tight hugs from the girls then one from his brother.

Don closed his eyes for a second squeezing Charlie tight. “What the hell are you doing here?” Don asked quietly.

“Got out this morning. Got David to pick me up.”

“Where the hell have you been, Charlie?” Liz asked first.

Charlie looked around and stared running his hand through his hair. David could see him begin to sweat a little. “Well... Actually if everyone’s got a moment I’d... um... I’d like to talk to all of you about a couple of things, where I’ve been, run a new idea by you.” Charlie looked to Don who just shrugged and gestured Charlie to the front of the room, a place he was more than comfortable with.

Charlie leaned against the table then after a moment of thought pushed himself up so he sat there, legs swinging, like a child. He wrapped his arms around himself and looked up at the team.

“Okay, first thing first. I figure Don has been engaging in a campaign of lies and obfuscation for the last five weeks but recently honestly has become a pretty important thing for me so... Where oh where has Charlie Eppes been?”

“Charlie.” Don’s voice was full of warming.

“It’s my life, Don.” Charlie took a deep breath, then another, then swallowed hard. “I have spent the last month in St. Clare’s Psychiatric Treatment Facility and I’ve been there ‘cause I did this.” Charlie pushed up his left sleeve. Nikki, Liz and Matt all hissed. Don and Colby winced. David felt his stomach tighten.

“Shit, Charlie, what the hell did you go and do that for?” Leave it to Nikki to ask the direct question.

Charlie tipped his head back a little laughter bubbling out. “Oh, Nikki, that is a very complicated question with a very, very complicated answer and... And I don’t know if I’ll ever... yeah, it’s just complicated.” Charlie pushed his sleeve back down hiding the scar. “But under the category of complicated topics, and open honesty and because I’m sure someone must have money ridding on this,” Charlie took a deep breath. “Yes I am gay and if I’d just accepted that fact twenty years ago... well...” There was silence in the War Room. “Well go ahead settle up.”

Liz and Nikki both pulled out their wallets and handed twenties over to Matt who was trying hard not to grin. “Told you,” he said while collecting almost a hundred bucks.

Liz pointed to Charlie shaking her finger. “I don’t believe it. I’ve seen you look down my cleavage.”
“It’s a height thing Liz, your cleavage is right there, it’s kinda hard not to look down it.” Liz just scowled while Matt was still trying not to grin. David was trying to figure out how Matt knew while Don and Colby were trying hard not to look at Liz’s cleavage now that it had been mentioned.

Charlie clapped his hands together in a very treacherly manner. “Okay, good, that’s out of the way.” He continued on quickly “Um... So as I’m sure you can guess I’ve had a lot of time to do a lot of thinking lately and I’ve had a bit of an idea and I want to run it by all of you first ‘cause it’ll directly affect all of you. I guess I really should be talking to Don first but, hey, you’re all here anyway.”

“What the idea?” David prompted.

“Right, yes,” Charlie scratched the back of his head in a manner more reminiscent of Larry. “So, the thing is most mathematicians aren’t scared of dying without procreating, ‘cause god knows most of us can’t handle a relationship long enough for that, but what we are scared of is dying without teaching everything we know. Now, I’m a teacher, every year I teach students about fluid dynamics, and advanced number theory, and set theory and multidimensional geometry, all things I know a lot about. What I don’t teach and what I have never taught are all the things I’ve learned here. I mean every case, over a hundred now, I learn something new, I discover a new way of using old principles or come up with entirely new concepts and an amazing amount of them are in the landfill ‘cause I scribbled them on the back of pizza boxes that got tossed as soon as the case closed. I mean I’ve written a couple of papers but I haven’t had the chance to teach.”

“You want to teach FBI math?” Nikki asked.

“Sort of.” Charlie hopped off the table. “The thing is I don’t think I can teach what I learn here in a classroom. I mean how many times have you been out in the field with something major going down and thought 'they never mentioned this at Quantico?'”

Everyone chuckled.

“So I was thinking of putting out a call for a couple, maybe three eager young mathematicians who are interested in learning how to do something more... dynamic with their doctorates.”

“Apprentices,” Matt said.

“More or less. I mean it would be run through CalSci, assuming I still have a job there, but they’d be running around here geeking up this place even more so I figured I’d better run the idea past all of you first.”

The team looked at each other. David could practically read their minds at the thought of even more math geeks running around the place, then they all looked at the stacks of folders that could be sorted through so much more quickly if they had a few more math geeks running around the place.

“How many are we talking about?” Don asked.

“Two, three tops. I don’t think I could handle more than that. I mean in the long run I’d like to be able to send them off with all of you as you take promotions, move on to other teams, other offices. Spread the good word of math.”

“So we’d each get our own mathematician?” Colby asked.

Charlie shrugged. “I don’t see why not.”

“Can I get a cute one?” Nikki asked.
Charlie laughed. “That might be a tall order but we’ll see who applies. I mean honestly what I do here with all of you doesn’t get a lot of respect in the mathematics community but I think it is important that it gets passed on.”

Everyone looked at each other then at Don who obviously had the final say. “It’s a good idea, Chuck. Some of the ADs might laugh but the Director likes your work. Go see if you still have a job then we’ll talk.”

“Thank you. You won’t regret it.”

“Last time you uttered those words to me I ended up with poison oak.”

“Yeah, but it took a week for the Jameson brothers to get the blue dye off their skin.”

Don’s eyes got distant and a smile split his face. “That is true.” David decided he’d definitely have to get that story off of Charlie some time soon. “Okay, we’ll talk later.”

“Great.” Charlie looked around. “Um... Do you need help here?” He gestured to the files.

“Yes,” Matt said quickly.

“No,” Don said just as quickly. “Get yourself settled back in first, we’ll be fine.”

Charlie ignored his brother and wandered over to Matt’s computer. David couldn’t believe how good it felt to see Charlie standing in the War Room looking over a case. It meant the world was back to normal, or at least far closer to it.

Charlie wiggled the mouse, clicked it a few times then typed for about a minute, mainly using his right hand, then hit enter.

Matt put his face in his hand. “I’ve been trying to do that for a week, Charlie.”

“Sign up for my classes and I’ll show you how.”

Matt groaned. “Like I have the time.”

Charlie shrugged.

“So are you heading straight to CalSci?” Don asked.

“No. I should probably stop by the house first, get my keys, find my lap top, find my phone.” Charlie put his hand over his eyes. “Oh god I’m going to have 900 messages aren’t I?”

Don grinned. “Well what do you expect after slacking off for a month?” Charlie just gave Don a dirty look but there was something wonderfully normal in it, at least in David’s mind. “You need a lift home?”

“I’ll get a cab.”

David suddenly found himself on the receiving end of a slightly sharp look from Don. Don handed him a file. “Nah, I need David to re-question a witness out that way. He can give you a lift. I just need to talk to him for a second.” David was dragged to the side while Charlie chatted with Matt about his program. “David,” Don’s voice was low but hard. “I have sources of my own and I know for a fact Charlie got out yesterday afternoon.”

David hopped the sudden stab of panic didn’t show on his face. “He just wanted a bit of time to
reacclimatize. We ordered Chinese and watched a movie.”

David knew the look Don was giving him and it was the same one he gave lawyers and suspects that came in of their own free will. “Did Dr. Flores tell you anything before they let Charlie out?”

“He said there would be good days, bad days and weird days. Charlie has to see him three days a week to start with and he will readmit him if he thinks there is too much back sliding. Charlie’s also cleared to work cases. Apparently most of his self esteem is tied up in this place right now.”

Don snorted. “God help him then. How close an eye should we be keeping on him?”

David shrugged. “In the hospital he promised me he wouldn’t try anything again. That was five weeks ago.”

Don just sighed and ran a hand through his own hair. “Okay. Take him home then go talk to Mrs. Smith. Her finances aren’t what they should be.”

David nodded and ran for it before Don got too nosy, waving Charlie to follow.

Charlie spent the drive to Pasadena looking out the window and sort of randomly humming to himself.

When they pulled up in front of the house Charlie pushed himself back into the seat. “Dad’s car is here. He should be at work, what’s his car doing here?”

“Maybe he forgot something.”

Charlie shook his head and gripped the dashboard as if bracing for impact. “Can’t do it, David. I thought I’d have more time, I’m not ready.”

David reached across the truck and took Charlie’s hand. “Charlie. It’s just your father.”

Charlie was starting to hyperventilate and David was wondering if maybe he should be on some sort of medication. “I can’t face him.”

“Why not?”

“Why not?” Charlie snapped. “He’s so disappointed in me. He could barely look at me when he visited. I’ll just give him nothing but more and more disappointment.”

“He loves you, Charlie. When you step through that door you are going to get nothing but love from him.”

“Now, yes!” Charlie snapped. “He’ll walk on egg shells for a few weeks, maybe even a couple of months if I’m lucky then he’ll slip and it’ll be some little comment about not having grandchildren or commitment issues.”

“You don’t have commitment issues.”

“No, No I don’t. I was so ready to commit I managed to get myself committed.” Charlie giggled.

David sighed, leaned across the truck and kissed Charlie and kept kissing him until he started to relax, then he pulled away. “Worry about all that later. Right now you just need to think about today and a little about tomorrow, that’s it. Now let’s get going so I can get some work done today.”

Charlie dropped his head, grabbed his bag and climbed out of the truck. David got out to having a
funny feeling that if he didn’t walk Charlie to the door he might never get through it. Charlie pulled out the keys that David never bothered to return to the bowl and let himself in.

“Donnie, that you?” Alan’s voice called from the kitchen.

“Hi Dad,” Charlie called out.

There was a rushing of feet and Alan ran from the kitchen and scooped Charlie up tight. “Charlie, Charlie.” David saw the tears just start to squeeze from Alan’s eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here? You should be at work.”

Alan let Charlie go but didn’t back away. “I’m telecommuting today. What are you doing here?”

“Made parole.”

“They’ve let you out?”

“I’ve got to check in with the warden three times a week and behave myself but I’m out. Got David to pick me up.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? I would have come to get you?”

Charlie shifted uncomfortably and David tried not to. “I didn’t want you to get disappointed if it was called off at the last minute.”

Alan pulled Charlie close again and just held him there. “I’ve missed you.”

“I missed you to,” Charlie said softly.

David put his hand on Charlie’s shoulder. “I’ve got to get going.” Alan let Charlie go. “I’ll try to come see you for lunch.”

Charlie snagged David’s hand. “Thank you, David.”

David gave Charlie's hand a little squeeze. “Don’t worry about it. You’ll be fine.”

~

David had a long talk with Mrs. Smith and came to the same conclusion Don did, there was something fishy about her finances. He also had a long talk with Mrs. Smith’s teenage son who seemed to have far more dirt on his parents than any kid really should. He called Don and recommended that they figure out some way of getting the kid in for questioning out from under the eyes of his parents. About that time he got a text from Charlie saying he was heading to CalSci and he hoped his files were where he left them.

David drove back to the office, and spent a few hours filling out paperwork. He tried not to hear the whispers around him but juicy gossip travels fast. This gossip was so good David would be surprised if it wasn’t in DC by morning. David idly wondered if it really counted as gossip if it was true. Dr. Eppes, the genius, Agent Eppes’ little brother had tried to kill himself. He wasn’t on a secret mission he was in the funny farm and oh he was gay too.

David wondered how long it would take before the plain truth of the matter warped into more interesting lies about Charlie’s love life or something.

He checked his watch. It was nearly one and he was more than ready for lunch. Especially if he got
to execute his plan to actually take Charlie out to lunch somewhere, even if it was just the on campus cafe. Not that it was a date or anything, it was just a friend taking another friend out to lunch. A good friend that just a few hours earlier he’d stroked off in the shower.

David felt his cock twitch at the memory and he told himself to behave. Charlie wasn’t just going back to work, he was probably going to see Amita and that wasn’t likely to be easy or go well.

~

David was just reaching for the handle of Charlie’s door when it burst open and Amita rushed out pushing past David without a word. With only a quick look over his shoulder at the retreating Amita David rushed into the office. Charlie was sitting on his couch, his knees tucked under his chin, the same way he used to sit by his window in St. Clare’s

David sat next to him. “Charlie?”

“No one told her.” Charlie’s voice cracked. “She though... She just though I’d run away for a bit. That I was up the coast or maybe south of the border. No one told her what I’d done.”

David pulled Charlie into a quick, strong hug. “I’m sorry.”

“She blames herself. I told her not to.” Charlie took a deep breath and uncurled himself. “She hasn’t told her parents yet. They still think the wedding’s on. They’re making these plans and...”

“Is the wedding still on?” David asked. He was 99% sure of the answer but he needed to hear it said.

“No.” Charlie’s voice was quiet and flat. “I still love her, I still care for her, she’d make a wonderful wife, but... It wouldn’t be fair to her. A husband who can’t...” Charlie petered off.

“It wouldn’t be fair to you either,” David said gently. He was trying hard to bring up the appropriate sympathy. Amita was still a friend but Charlie had spent the night in his bed not hers and David knew he wanted to repeat that as often as possible.

“I love her, David,” Charlie whispered, pressing his fists to his eyes. “When she was taken, when I thought she was dead I felt like my world was ending. How else can you define love?” David took a slow breath and tried to ignore the fact that it felt like he’d just been kicked in the chest. “And I don’t want to hurt her but that’s what I’ve done.”

“Charlie, how many people do you consider close to you? I mean people who really have an important place in your life?”

Charlie dropped his hands. “A few?”

“Let’s say your father, Don, Larry, and Amita?”

Charlie gave a little half shrug. “Sure.”

“So, four people, total.”

“And your point is?”

“If there’s one thing I learned early on it’s that you, Charlie Eppes, are a passionate person. Anything that is important to you you grab on with both hands and don’t let go. Math, teaching, working cases. It’s the same with the people in your life. If Larry had been grabbed in front of you, or Don or your father you can’t convince me you would have taken it any better than when Amita was taken. When
you care about someone you throw yourself into that. Nothing wrong with that. Nothing to be ashamed of but just because they are important to you to the point of love doesn’t mean you have to be romantically in love with them or sexually attracted to them.” Charlie stared up at David with eyes that were still flat and despondent. “Look, after five years of annoying the crap out of me I know that if anything happened to Colby I’d be devastated. I’d absolutely fall apart. That doesn’t mean he is ever getting within five feet of my bed. He snores and he’s registered Republican.”
Charlie cracked up and David ran a hand across his face. “It’s going to take time, for both of you. You’re going to have to redefine your relationship, you’re probably going to spend a little time apart but I’m sure in the long run she’s going to keep being a part of your life.”

Charlie let out a long sigh. “I just wish I could be normal. It would be easier.”

“Easy is over rated.”

Charlie snorted and leaned into David. Then Charlie’s door was flung open. David leapt to his feet with Charlie right behind.

“Charlie!” Millie Finch squealed.

“Dr. Finch.” Charlie took a step forward and was pulled into Millie’s grasp.

“It’s so good to see you back.”

“Thank you,” Charlie gasped out as Millie squeezed him that much tighter.

Then Millie took a half step back, put her hands firmly on Charlie’s shoulders and started to shake him. “Doctor Eppes don’t you ever do something that stupid again. I have lost too many geniuses to their own neuroses and I will be damned if you are going to be one of them. Do you understand me?”

Charlie took a half step back out of Millie’s reach. “Yes ma’am.” Charlie put his hand to his head for a second. “Who told you?”

“Your father. I had to sign off on your medical leave.”

Charlie nodded. “Yes, of course.”

“Now, what have your doctors said? When can you start teaching again?”

“Uh...” Charlie looked around his office as if the answer was lurking in a corner. “Dr. Flores didn’t really put a firm time table on anything. I’m sort of still in one day at a time mode. And there’s a standing threat to readmit me if I back slide too much.”

Millie folded her arms. “Well that’s not going to happen, now is it?”

Charlie shook his head. “No ma’am.”

David tried hard not to laugh. There was possibly something to be said for psychological health through slightly intimidating women.

“How about if you take this week to catch up on messages and have some office hours and we can see about easing you back into your lectures next week and if that goes well we’ll see about your other responsibilities after that.”

Millie pulled him into another hug. “Don’t you scare us like that again, Charlie. The world would be a much darker place without you in it.”

“Thank you.”

“Now, I am already late for a budget meeting. I will see you around?”

“Yeah, I’ll be here.”

“Good.” Millie gave Charlie another quick hug and was gone.

Charlie took a deep breath. “Well, I guess I still have a job.”

“Sounds like it. Why don’t we celebrate? How about if I actually take you out for lunch? I’ve still got a few minutes.”

Charlie grabbed his jacket. “Out to lunch sounds great.”

~

Lunch with Charlie was slightly odd. Not a lot of talking got done because every two minutes one of his students showed up to welcome him back and ask him a question. David had a feeling Charlie would have a line out the door come his first official office hours.

Charlie did walk him back to his car and after a quick look around brushed his lips across David’s. David grabbed onto the car and began reciting the rules for evidence retrieval to himself. Something about that tiny illicit kiss had sent a jolt through him bringing up a teenaged desire to tumble Charlie into the back of his car and start making out.

Instead Don called ordering him back to the office. David was in the office all of two minutes before he was ordered back out with Nikki to dig up a possible witness on the other side of town.

They were sitting in traffic, baking in the sun when David hit on what was bugging him. It was quite. Nikki was quiet. Nikki was never quite. He turned to look at her. “Okay Betancourt, what’s up?”

Nikki’s head snapped around. “What’s up? What’s up! Did you get a look at Charlie’s arm this morning? He tried to kill himself!”

“I know.”

“You know? This is Charlie we’re talking about. You know the genius, the one that can do shit none of the rest of us can do and we can’t replace and what the fuck was he thinking?”

“I don’t know.”

Nikki folded her arms. “You don’t know. No. No. You knew. You fucking knew about this. This is what you weren’t telling us. One of our team almost dies and you and Don didn’t think that maybe we should hear about it. And why the hell do you get to know and...”

“Cause I found him!” David snapped. “I’m the one who found him laying in his own blood. I’m the one who had to call Don and Alan and tell them that Charlie opened his own wrist. That’s why I know, because I’ve got a pair of shoes I can’t wear again because they’re caked in his blood.”

David gripped the wheel and wished he’d just let Nikki stay silent. Still, he should have expected it. He’d had five weeks to get use to the fact of Charlie’s actions. For everyone else it would just be a
bolt out of the blue. Nikki was quite for a few minutes.

“How close was it?” she finally asked softly.

“Close.”

“Shit,” she whispered. “You... you know you guys could have told us. We would have been there for him.”

David sighed. “It wasn’t really my choice. Amita didn’t even get told. And really there’s not much you could have done. There were a lot of bad days in there where he was pretty unmanageable. I mean he tried to redecorate Don’s face out of the blue one visit and I still don’t know what set that one off.”

“Was that a few weeks backs when Don came back from lunch with his face all messed up?”

“Yep.”

Nikki tried to hold back a chuckle. “I’m sure whatever it was Don probably had it coming.”

“Probably but it still got Charlie a trip to the padded room.”

Nikki fell silent again for a bit. “He hit bottom didn’t he?”

“Hit bottom and started digging.”

“Damn. You know when I was still on the force I knew a couple guys that tried to eat their weapons. One managed it but guess I figured Charlie would be immune to all that shit. The job, you know?”

“Why would he be?”

“You got a point. Read somewhere that stupid people are happier than smart people. I guess that leaves Charlie pretty screwed. Still wish there was something I could have done for the guy. I mean he’s saved our asses enough times.”

“Just be accepting. That’s what the doctor told us before he even woke up, that he’d need everyone’s acceptance more than anything.”

“I can do that. I should probably talk to Amita too.”

David took a quick look at Nikki. “Why Amita?”

“I’ve had two boyfriends change teams on me. And believe me it doesn’t matter how much she loves him she’s going to need someone to bitch to or she’s likely to rebound on the first guy who looks at her tits.”

“Why do I hear the voice of experience here?”

“I’m just saying it can be a little ego bruising.”

David smirked a little. “Two of them?”

“Not talking about it with you.”

“Yeah, I bet.”
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Charlie can't sleep and David's in trouble.

David squinted at the clock as he stumbled to his door. It was after midnight and it had been a long day chasing down reluctant witnesses. He peeked through the spy hole in the door then opened it.

“Charlie?”
Charlie’s face looked drawn. “Five.”

“What?”

“You were wrong. Five.”

“What?” David’s brain was refusing to catch up.

Charlie pushed himself into the hall and began pacing in a tight circle. “I can’t sleep. It all feels wrong. It all smells wrong. It all smells like apricots and vanilla and I tried sleeping in the middle of the bed but there’s a ridge instead of a dip and then I tried the garage but there was this math on the board and it’s a month old and I don’t even remember what is was for...”

David reached out and pulled Charlie close. “Shhhh. It’s okay. Calm down.”

“I want to sleep.”

“I know. Just calm down. Tomorrow you can run all your sheets and blankets through the wash and flip your mattress. And I’m sure you’ll be able to work out what the math was for.” Charlie trembled a little. “Come on. You’re tired. Let’s get you to bed.” Charlie just nodded and let himself be led into the bedroom. Silently he stripped down to his shorts and crawled into David’s arms. David gave him a squeeze and in under a minute Charlie was asleep. David gave himself a second to enjoy the smell of Charlie and quickly fell asleep as well.

David awoke to the ringing of his phone. He fumbled for it and didn’t look at the caller ID before answering. “Hello,” he mumbled.

“David, have you seen or heard from Charlie?” Don’s voice was tinged with panic. David sat up.

“What?”

“His car’s gone but his phone is still here and he’s not picking up at his office. My Dad’s panicking and...”

David reached out and shook Charlie awake. “He’s right here, Don.”

“What?” Don all but shrieked down the phone.

“He’s fine. He couldn’t sleep, he came over early.”
“What?” Don yelled a second time.

David thrust the phone into Charlie’s hand and flopped back down before realizing what he’d just done. Or what he hadn’t done. He hadn’t made the pretense of walking into another room to give the phone to Charlie. He only hoped that maybe Don would be too panicked to pick up on that little detail.

“Hello?” Charlie mumbled into the phone. “I’m here at David’s. I’m fine. No. No. I’m... Look I forgot it... I’m sorry.” Charlie rolled out of the bed and began pulling on clothes with one hand his face turning sour. “I said I’m sorry... Well tell him to stop... Look... Okay, look, I’m coming home right now and you...” David could hear Don’s raised voice but couldn’t make out the words. “I’m not a child Don and I’m certainly not your child.. Well that point is fucking debatable! Look, I’m on my way home right now and yelling at me is only going to slow me down... I’ll try not to hit traffic. Bye.”

Charlie snapped the phone shut with a snarl. “I am not thirteen and it’s my own damn house,” he growled at the silent phone.

David retrieved it before it got flung across the room or something. “Charlie, you can’t really blame them.” Charlie rolled his eyes. David reached out and snatched his arm as he reached down to tie his shoe laces. “Charlie.”

“I’m an adult, David.”

“Yeah, you’re an adult who made a very stupid decision just over a month ago.”

Charlie yanked his arm away and went back to the now somewhat difficult process of tying his shoe laces. “I’m fine, they should be too,” he said through clenched teeth.

“Bullshit. You think you’re scared? I’m fucking terrified. Every time you’re not within arms reach of me I’m scared shitless that your brain is going to fall back into some sort of self destructive feedback loop and there will be nothing I can do to keep you from trying to end it again and if I’m terrified your brother and your father are living in a whole special nightmare.”

Charlie stood back up. “I’m not going to try to kill myself again.”

“Good. But you’re going to have to convince everyone else of that and it’s going to be a long while before they can trust you again and leaving messages about where you’re going and remembering your phone and putting up with people hovering is going to part of that process and you’re just going to have to deal with it.”

Charlie’s jaw clenched and his lips pinched together and there was a hard flash in his eyes. “I’ve got to get going,” he said tightly, grabbed his jacket and walked out.

David sat down hard as he heard his door close with a little more force than was necessary. ‘Brilliant.’ The little voice in his head said. ‘You get him into bed and you’re fighting less than 48 hours later. Personal best. And your boss is going to shove a shotgun where the sun don’t shine and pull the trigger.’ David suddenly got very tempted to call in sick.

~

David braced himself as Don closed the blinds in the conference room. He sent up a prayer that his death would be quick and reasonably painless. Don folded his arms.

“Is there something you’d like to tell me David?”
“When I was eight I ran numbers for our local bookie.”

Don smiled. David felt a deep chill creep up his spine. He’d seen that smile. He never wanted to be on the receiving end of it.

“Okay, David, we can do it this way.”

“I’ve done nothing wrong, Don.”

“Of course not. And when I called this morning you managed to get from your bed to your couch really, really quickly and silently. Or maybe you have one of those inflatable mattresses for guests on the floor. Or maybe, just maybe, my little brother, who seems for some reason to have absolute trust in you, less than 48 hours out of the mental hospital, was in your bed.”

David took a deep breath and remembered one of the odd bits of advice his father had given him; sometimes the only way to get out of the shit is to swim through it. “Yes Don, he was in my bed. Asleep. He came over because he couldn’t get to sleep in his own bed.” Don did not look even slightly appeased.

“But he can get to sleep in yours?”

“He likes to be held. Hold him tight and he nods right off. Something his girlfriends never did for him. That’s all that was going on, sleeping.”

“He was in your bed, David.” Don’s words were crisp and precise.

“Yes,” David hissed back. “He was in my bed. Twenty three years ago he declared war on his own libido and two weeks ago he signed a peace treaty, so guess what, he’s going to end up in someone’s bed.”

“So why not yours?” Don piled on the sarcasm extra thick.

“I’m trying to protect him from himself right now. I’m telling him no. And you better believe that’s not exactly easy. There is a hell of a lot of shit that he’s not emotionally, psychologically, or physically ready for that all his newly freed up hormones are trying to talk him into and I’m telling him no. Last night all we did was sleep.”

Don raised an eyebrow. “And the night before that?”

David closed his eyes and lowered his head. “I told him no.” David replied carefully. “He might as well be a virgin and as much as I might want to be some days I’m not that kind of guy. I like Charlie. He’s a good friend. He’s a good team mate. I care for him and I will never hurt him and I will not let myself take advantage of him and I won’t let anyone else take advantage of him if I can manage it.” David knew he was still trying to convince himself as much as Don. He knew he was already walking a thin line with both the Eppes brothers.

Don looked up. Don had his arms folded across his chest and looked like he was trying to x-ray David’s brain through force of will. “Since when do you have any interest in Charlie anyway?”

“Since about five minutes after I met him. But all the cute ones are straight and taken.” Don let a little surprise creep into his expression. “Look it, considering the expression on Charlie’s face when he left my place this morning and the force with which my door was slammed shut I think whatever chance I may have had just crashed and burned. So you don’t need to worry about Charlie coming over to my place anymore.”
“What was the expression on his face?”

“Pissed off.”

“Charlie’s got several variations on pissed off. Which one was it?”

David rolled his eyes. “I don’t know. Pinched lips, tight jaw.”

“Kinda squinty eyes?”

“Yeah.”

“And why was he giving you this look?”

“‘Cause I pointed out to him that he’d tried to kill himself and it was going to be a long time before anyone trusted him on his own again and he’d just have to live with it.”

Don nodded. “Okay. For future reference what you got was Charlie’s ‘I want to argue with you but I can’t because you’re right and I know it’ face. Also known as his ‘losing at Scrabble’ face.”

“Good to know.”

Don squinted at David. “Hurt him and I’ll kill you and no you don’t get to bring up my fuckups in this mess. And know that I am going to be keeping a very close eye on you.”

David sighed. “Don, I’m going to be keeping a very close eye on myself.”

~

David leaned against the elevator doors. Normally he took the stairs up to his apartment but it had been a mess of a day and he just wanted to put some food in his mouth and go to bed. Don had spent most of the day breathing down his neck and when he wasn’t doing that he was sending David off to the four corners of the city to get stuff done. He hadn’t gotten a chance to drop by CalSci and he hadn’t gotten so much as a text message from Charlie so wasn’t feeling too confident about his welcome.

The doors dinged open and David let himself fall through already digging for his keys. When he looked up he realized that someone was sitting in the hall next to his door.

“Charlie?”

“Hey.” Charlie looked a little rumpled and had an unopened six pack with him.

“What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for you.” Charlie held up the beer but didn’t stand. “I come bearing an offering of peace?”

David took the beer but Charlie still remained seated. “You were right. You were completely right this morning. Of course.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’ve had better days. Got home, Dad threw a fit at me. Got to work. Amita cried at me and wanted to know why no one told her. Like I know. Broke the coffee pot in the staff lounge ‘cause I forgot just how weak my arm is. Got home again and got the tenth degree from Don.” Charlie looked up. “Any way we could possibly go inside, drink a couple of those beers and maybe watch something really mindless on television?” David didn’t answer right away. “Don’t worry, I left a message for
Don and my father. They know where I am.”

“Sure.” David unlocked the door trying to work through the joy of Charlie’s forgiveness and the terror of Don knowing where Charlie was. A though hit David. “Wait a second, how’d you get in the building? You need a security code to get in.”

“I’m a genius.” David looked hard at Charlie. “What? I could be a criminal mastermind if I wanted. I could commit every crime I’ve ever helped solve without the clues that gave the original perpetrator away. I could rob banks, steal identities, commit fraud, destroy half the city, kill.” The shock of that idea must have shown on David’s face. For some reason the idea that Charlie was learning from every crime never really occurred to him. Charlie grinned. “Aren’t you glad I’m on your side?”

“Very. Have you eaten?”

“Yeah.”

“Mind if I nuke something?”

“Go ahead.”

David handed Charlie a beer. “Go find something on TV. I think MythBusters is on.”

Charlie cringed. “The science on that is so bad.”

“Yeah, but the explosions are cool.”

Charlie just shook his head at David and wandered over to the TV. David steadied himself against the kitchen counter. Just ‘cause Charlie had forgiven him for being right didn’t mean he had a real chance. He grabbed a random cardboard box from his freezer and threw it in his microwave. Charlie found something on TV and as soon as the microwave beeped David grabbed his dinner and a beer and joined Charlie on the couch. Charlie had found Doctor Who on BBCAmerica and was already pointing out problems in the physics.

“It was designed as a kids show you know?”

“That’s no reason to completely ignore the laws of physics. Basic Newtonian physics at that. Not even the complicated stuff.”

“I’m sure you could write a letter to the writers.”

Charlie sipped at his beer. “Susan loved Doctor Who. Before all this new stuff she had a stack of the old episodes on tape. She was always recording them off PBS.” Charlie took another pull of his beer and looked thoughtful and slightly disturbed. “She had a real thing for Tom Baker, you know the one with the frizzy curls and the scarf.”

“How much of a thing?”

“She tried to get me to wear one of those funny scarves to bed.”

David tried really hard not to laugh and failed miserably which earned him a dirty look from Charlie. “I’m sorry,” David gasped.

“I’d like to point out this was not terribly long before we broke up. I tried really hard to think about her every time we had sex and it turns out she was thinking about some pasty guy with bad hair, worse fashion sense, and a scarf fetish. If anyone should have been thinking about one of the doctors
it was me!” David lost it again. “It’s not funny.”

“It kinda is.”

Charlie looked away and took another sip of his beer but David could see a smile just pulling at his lips.

By the time the Doctor saved the day Charlie had drunk his beer and David noted that he didn’t ask or go for another one. He also looked a little sleepy.

David turned off the TV. “Are you going to go home tonight?” David tried to keep his tone neutral. Charlie didn’t answer. He just stared at a spot of nothing on the coffee table. “You don’t have to. You should just probably wait a bit if you were planning on driving.”

Charlie sighed but didn’t look up. “My house feels haunted. I’m scared of it. Feels like there’s something lurking in the shadows. I sit down or close my eyes and it feels like something is staring at the back of my neck. Or there’s something right in the corner of my eye. I can’t think, I can’t sleep. It’s absurd. Here I am in my 30’s and for the first time ever I think there might be monsters under my bed.”

“You need to clean.” Charlie looked up. “Okay tonight you need to sleep but tomorrow you need to clean. Trust me. Open all the doors and windows. Wash every bit of fabric, scrub every dish in the cupboards, dust every corner, scower the bathroom and the kitchen, wash down your chalk boards, just clean everything out. And be sure to do it all on your own. No help.”

“Clean?”

“Trust me. When my father died my mother started to lose it for a while, insisted the lights always be on, always kept the TV or the radio on, jumped at everything. Finally my grandmother came over, stuck a scrub brush in her hand and made my mother clean every inch of our place, top to bottom, air everything out. Took a couple of days but after that... She started to pull up after that.”

“No one died, David.”

David reached out and let himself touch Charlie for the first time that night. He smoothed out a stray curl. “You did.” Charlie’s mouth fell open a little. “Your heart might not have stopped but a large part of who you were bled out on that bathroom floor. I’ll bet you anything you’re jumping at your own ghost.”

Charlie dropped his eyes then after a long time nodded. “I’ll have to be careful. Dad might try to have me committed again if he sees me with a mop.”

David chuckled. “I’m sure Dr. Flores would understand if you explained it to him. You’re seeing him tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well we should get you to bed so you’re well rested. Do you need a shower?”

Charlie looked up, there was a little glint in his eyes. “Could I get some company with it?”

David felt his id cheer. “Sure.”

~
Charlie was leaning against the wall of David’s tub/shower as he let David wash his hair again. It didn’t really need it but as David pulled the comb through Charlie’s wet curls Charlie seemed to melt against the tiled wall while at the same time thrusting his ass out. David watched the suds rolls down Charlie’s spine and between his cheeks.

Charlie wiggled his hips a little. David set aside the comb and pressed himself against Charlie’s back. “You are a tease. Did you know that Doctor Eppes?”

David felt Charlie tremble. “No.”

“Well you are. You are so sensual. I scratch your back and you moan like you’re getting your brains screwed out. I comb your hair and you wiggle your ass in a way that is so very inviting.”

“I like it when you comb my hair.”

“You should still be careful. You have no idea how desirable you are, Charlie and you don’t want to accidentally advertise to people you’re not ready to have those kinds of encounters with.”

Charlie slowly turned around and looked up at David. “I’m short, I’m hairy, and I’m a couple of bad days away from being declared mentally incompetent.”

“You are gorgeous and sexy and the moment you realize that about yourself you’ll be able to take your pick of partners.”

And that day is going to hurt like hell.

Charlie leaned his head against David’s chest. “What if I’ve made my choice?”

David licked his lips. He knew he heart was pounding. Something primal was screaming in his head, telling him to scoop up Charlie, take him to bed, claim him, mark him, take him over and over until the world knew Charlie was his. He laid a hand gently at the small of Charlie’s back. “Plenty of fish in the sea. No need to take home the first one you pull up.” Charlie didn’t reply, just hummed a little and began running his fingers up and down David’s spine which was doing approximately nothing to help David’s self control. “Why don’t we get rinsed off and get to bed?” Charlie hummed again but David also felt him smile.

By the time they crawled between the sheets David had found a little more self control, at least until the moment the light went out and Charlie’s clever little hands started exploring. Almost as if he were blind Charlie began running his fingers over David’s body starting at the top of his head and running down past his knees. David lay still and let Charlie discover whatever it was he might be looking for.

He wasn’t sure how long he lay there before Charlie started back up and wrapped his hands around David’s achingly hard cock. He let himself arch up into Charlie’s touch. Charlie’s genius mind embraced all previous lessons. He let himself go as Charlie’s quick cleaver hands worked him over. He balled his own hands into the sheets and called Charlie’s name as Charlie stroked him faster and harder. He squeezed his eyes tight as the pressure built and the sensations ricocheted between his balls and his brain and finally Charlie started improvising and gave a little pull and twist and that was enough. David thrust up into Charlie’s hands with a shout as he came squeezing cum across himself with considerable force.

He gasped for breath. “Damn Charlie, you’re getting good at that.”

“I’ve been told I learn things quickly.”

“I have no doubt.” David blindly fumbled for the tissues he always kept on his night stand as a result
of constantly threatening allergies. After a quick clean up he flipped Charlie onto his back. “My turn,” he said and ducked under the blankets.

“What are you..? Oh!”

It only took David a couple of seconds to find Charlie’s cock and suck him down. David knew it had been a while since he’d given a blow job but it was one of those skills you just don’t really forget.

“Oh God!” Charlie cried out. David was pretty sure Charlie wasn’t going to last long so he bobbed his head a little and tickled his fingers below Charlie’s balls. Charlie thrust hard. David used his knuckle to find just that right clump of nerves. Charlie screamed and came. David swallowed as Charlie didn’t taste that bad and it was really just easier. He gave Charlie’s softening cock a lick and climbed up from under the blankets.

David couldn’t make out Charlie’s face in the dark but could hear him panting. “Wow,” Charlie breathed after a long time. “I’ve had that done before but it never felt that good. What was that thing you did with your knuckle?”

David gave Charlie a quick kiss. “I’ll explain later. Right now we both need to sleep.”

“Okay.” Charlie still sounded a little breathless. David pulled him close and within minutes they were both asleep.

~

David was reading through the overnight reports when Don leaned down right next to his ear.

“Sleeping?”

David kept his eyes locked on his computer monitor. “Sleeping.”

~

David sat on Bradford’s couch. “So David, how are you doing?”

“Good.”

“Good?”

“Good.”

“And how’s Charlie?”

“Getting better.”

“Good.”

“Yeah, it’s good.”

There was silence in the office. David was not going to be the first to say anything. He had a small bet with himself that Don had already thrown a screaming fit at Bradford about him and Charlie and he was going to make Bradford be the one to bring it up.

“So. How’s the other stuff we’ve talked about going?”

“Fine.”
“Just fine?”

“Fine is fine.”

There was more silence. “So. How long was it between signing Charlie out and getting him into bed?”

“Couple of hours. We took a bath first, ate dinner, watched a movie.” Bradford raised an eyebrow at him. “For the record I was as much of a gentleman as I could manage. Charlie is the one who asked me to pick him up then tried to pull my clothes off in my own hallway. He wanted sex right then and there in that hall. I said no, which is a word I don’t think he’s used to hearing and we have not had intercourse and we will not until he’s further along in his overall healing process. Despite what Don may think I am trying to be as supportive a friend as possible and really trying hard not to take advantage of him.”

“Let me guess, Charlie isn’t making that easy?”

David dropped his hands to his face for a second as the worry and frustration welled up again. “He has no idea he’s attractive. Seriously. Every time I tell him he’s sexy he looks at me like I’m the one that’s crazy. I’m afraid of him back sliding, hurting himself again but I’m also scared shitless of him wandering into the wrong bar and getting eaten alive. He likes physically strong men and he just does not get how dangerous a situation he could get himself into trying to work out all these fresh cravings.”

Bradford just nodded a little. “Sounds like a bit of a tight rope you’re on. How’s that ball of guilt taking all this?”

David’s stomach clenched. “It’s being slowly replaced with a ball of dread.”

“Dread of what?”

“Dread that Charlie will figure out he is sexy and will notice the geniuses that are going to line up at his door once word gets around he’s on the market. I’ve gotten to fall asleep holding him three times now and when he decides that I’m just a friend and he can do better in a life partner it is going to hurt. I can already physically feel it. Sort of a dull ache in my chest and another in my teeth.”

“David, serious question; are you in love with Charlie?”

David felt a jolt run through him like he’d stuck his finger in a socket. Yes of course he loved Charlie but his mind skitted away from the concept of being in love. Something he had never done, or at least never admitted to himself. David opened his mouth. Only a small breathy sound came out. No words.

“You seem pretty damn scared of Charlie hurting you. And from everything we’ve talked about it sounds like that fear is coming from experience. So, let me try this. Who did you love who hurt you?”

David didn’t answer, he couldn’t. Old pain lodged in his throat making it nearly impossible to breath.

“Who hurt you, David?” Bradford asked again.

“All of them,” David finally choked out.

“All of who?”
“All of the men. Every relationship I’ve ever had with a man. They all just ended...” David squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. “I told myself I wouldn’t any more. No more men. Not after Isaiah was killed. I moved to LA of all places and told myself no more men. Not even quick hook ups. I mean Charlie was here and attractive but he was straight and I was still grieving so that wasn’t really a problem and...”

“So like Charlie you decided to turn off a part of who you are.”

“I didn’t turn it off,” David objected.

“No more men? Not even quick hook ups?”

“That’s... I never denied that I like men.”

“Really? So if I ask agent Warner or Betancourt they’d tell me you’re bisexual.”

“That’s different.”

“Is it?”

“It’s... politics. If they’d asked I would have told them.”

“But you would have asked them to keep it quiet. Don’t want rumors getting around after all?” David clenched his jaw. “Don’t grind your teeth.”

“You sound like my mother.”

“I sound like everyone’s mother.”

David stopped grinding his teeth but he did cross his arms and slouch. Bradford let him sit like that in silence for a while. “I was just getting really tired of having my guts kicked out every few years.”

“Okay, except for the last three nights you’ve fallen asleep holding Charlie.”

“Charlie’s different.”

“Is he?”

“Yeah.”

“Worth the risk of having your guts kicked out, enraging your boss, and possibly damaging your career ascent?”

“He’s unique.”

“Everyone’s unique. That doesn’t answer my question.”

David wrapped his arms around himself a little tighter and didn’t answer.

~

David stopped in the craftsman’s driveway. It was well past sundown and every light was on. The front door was open as well as every window. He knew it was a risk coming to see Charlie at home. Don would certainly not approve, and David didn’t know what Alan might know. Still, David wanted to know how Charlie’s therapy appointment had gone.
He knocked on the door to the house before stepping in. Alan looked up from a paper.

“David.” He smiled and David relaxed. “Come on in.”

“Hey Alan, how’s it going?”

“Interesting. I came home from work to find the front door open and Charlie on his hands and knees ‘scrubbing out the ghosts’?”

David shrugged. “It worked for my mother.”

Alan set aside his paper. “I’m not complaining. I’ve been trying to get Charlie to pick up a scrub brush for years.”

“How’d his appointment go?”

“Appointment?”

“With Dr. Flores.”

Alan frowned. “I don’t know. Charlie didn’t say anything to me about having an appointment.”

David rubbed his hand over his eyes and hoped that Charlie actually went and just didn’t mention it to his father. “Charlie is supposed to see Dr. Flores every Monday, Wednesday and Friday for at least a couple of weeks while he gets readjusted to life.” David looked around. “Where is he? I’ll go talk to him.”

“Kitchen.”

David let himself into the kitchen. Charlie was on his hands and knees with a scrub brush and a bucket of soapy water. Every cupboard was opened and stacks of freshly cleaned dishes were drying on the counter. Charlie looked up. “Hey.”

“Hey. You’re cleaning.”

“Yeah. I was just going to clean my room when I realized just how much of my house smelled like apricot soap and vanilla conditioner and perfume and make-up and I know for a fact the organic, GE free, whole grain muffin mix in the pantry isn’t mine and...”

“Did you see Dr. Flores today?”


“Just checking, your Dad wasn’t sure.”

Charlie frowned for just a second. “I don’t think I mentioned it to him. We haven’t talked a lot but yes I saw Dr. Flores. He knows a lot of cops and if I don’t show I’m getting grabbed off the streets and slapped with a 5150 so...”

“It’s for your own good.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” Charlie dipped his brush back in the bucket and went back to scrubbing the floor.

“So how’d your appointment go?”
“It was an appointment. I bitched. He offered professional advice.”

“Anything I should know about?”

Charlie didn’t look up from his scrubbing. “He doesn’t think I should have sex any time soon either.”

“And what do you think?”

Charlie rolled back onto his knees. “I get it intellectually. I really do. I still have jumbled feelings for Amita and I’ve yet to manage a night under my own roof and I’m building a new identity for myself, yadda, yadda, yadda but that doesn’t change the fact that I want you to screw my brains out on this floor just so I can take that step. I don’t like being held back. I’m not good at it.”

A very graphic image of Charlie, soap suds and the counter top popped into David’s head. “Charlie do you even know what you’re asking for?”

“Excuse me?”

“You said you want me to screw your brains out. I’d love to but do you really have an idea of what you’re asking for?”

Charlie shrugged a little. “Tab A Slot B?”

David dropped his head. “Charlie do both of our libidos a favor and embrace your academic side. Do a little research. Actually do a lot of research. Work out exactly want it is you want so you know what it is you’re actually asking for and so you don’t get any nasty surprises. Okay?”

“Sure, soon as I finish cleaning.”

The kitchen door swung open. “David, have you eaten?” Alan asked.

“I had a muffin around five?”

Alan shook his head. “How the lot of you stay in shape with the way you eat I’ll never know. Anyway I’m ordering Chinese, what would you like?”

David had more or less learned better than to argue with Alan over being fed. “Something with vegetables would probably do me good.”

“Vegetables it is.” Alan left again, David turned back to Charlie.

“I’m going to try to sleep in my own bed tonight.”

David felt a little bit of him die in disappointment. “Good. That’s good.”

Charlie kept his eyes planted on a spot on his kitchen floor. “If... If I can’t sleep, can I come over to your place?”

David felt a flash of hope and knew it was this bouncing back and forth that was going to kill him in the end. “Sure. Anytime.”

The kitchen door opened again. “David, could I interest you in a game of chess while we wait for dinner?”

“Sure thing Alan. I’ll be out in a sec.” Alan vanished again and David crouched down. He let his fingers just touch the back of Charlie’s head. “You’re going to get through this, you know?”
“Yeah.” Charlie’s voice was flat and dull. “I know.”

~

David flopped over in his bed. His clock read three. Three nights. That was all it had taken to get hooked on Charlie asleep in his arms. And now Charlie was on the other side of town presumably asleep in his own bed. David took the pillow that smelled lightly of Charlie’s shampoo and held it to his chest and tried to sleep.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Charlie does some research. David's still in a bit of trouble.

David stumbled to his door. It was 5 AM on a Monday morning after a bitch of a weekend and it was far too early to be dealing with anyone.

He looked through the peephole into Charlie’s face. Charlie hadn’t been over in days and between a heavy case and Charlie still playing catch up at work they hadn’t seen much of each other. David still texted him a couple of times a day just to touch base. But 5 AM was really too early.

David opened his door.

“Hi David, can I give you a blow job?”

David was pretty sure that he could not have heard that right but just in case he dragged Charlie into his apartment and shut the door. “Say that again?”

“I’ve been researching,” Charlie said quickly then grabbed David’s arm and started dragging to towards the bedroom. “Did you know how much porn there is on the internet? I mean I always heard there was a lot of porn online but shit there’s a lot of it.”

David’s brain was still having a hard time catching up. He tried to get a good look at Charlie. He had thick circles under his eyes like he hadn’t slept in a couple of days but there was something wild and manic in the speed of his speech. “You’ve been looking at net porn all night, haven’t you?”

Charlie reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded up piece of yellow legal paper. He unfolded it and thrust it at David. “I’ve been researching. I made a list. Well three lists really.”

David took the paper even as Charlie pulled down his pajama bottoms and gave him a little push so he plopped down on his bed. Charlie had indeed made three lists. They were headed Yes, Maybe, and No and between the three of them they appeared to include every sexual activity David had ever heard of and more than a few he hadn’t. Charlie’s insistence that more data is always better floated into his head. The Yes list was topped with Oral and Penetrative sex. After that was a lot of ass play including plugs, vibrators, and dildos. The No list was filled with things involving bodily fluids other than spit and semen. It was also filled with just about anything having to do with bondage. David could understand that. Charlie probably already had more than his fill of being strapped to a bed for one lifetime. The Maybe list was the interesting one. Somewhat surprisingly it was topped with spanking. David had fooled around with a little light S and M with previous partners and the idea of Charlie over his knee was an intriguing one. On the maybe list was also fisting and erotic shaving.

David looked down. He’d been so engrossed in the lists that he’d manage to not really notice that Charlie was trying to give him a blow job. It was not the best one. Charlie kept shifting his head around and nearly gagging himself.

“Okay, okay, Charlie, wait, stop.” Charlie looked up. “You don’t have to do this.”
“I want to. I really want to try to do this.” Charlie’s look was frightfully determined.

“Fine, but choking yourself isn’t sexy.”

“But there was this video...”

“Camera trick,” David said, quickly deciding that he wasn’t going to tell Charlie that he’d actually been deep throated once but that particular girl was verging on being a professional. If Charlie thought it was possible they’d be there all day. “Here. Just wrap your hands around most of it. Keep the skin taut but not overly tight. Then just try to get a comfortable amount into your mouth and get a bit of a rhythm going. And watch the teeth.”

David watched carefully as Charlie followed instructions and soon his cock was wrapped in Charlie’s warm hands and his crown was in the wet heat of Charlie’s mouth. It took a minute but Charlie found a rhythm. David laced his fingers into Charlie’s hair and tried to keep his eyes open. Charlie’s head bobbing up and down on his cock was going into the ever increasing Charlie Sex file David was compiling for future lonely nights.

After a while David found he did have to close his eyes. It wasn’t the best blow job ever but it was getting the job done and the fact that it was coming from Charlie was giving it that extra edge. Charlie started moving his hands in time with his sucking and David felt his balls tighten and things shift up into another gear.

“Okay, Charlie,” David gasped. “Charlie I’m going to cum and you might want to stop.” Charlie shook his head while continuing to suck. “Charlie, I’m serious. I’m not going to be able to hold back in a second.” In response Charlie sucked harder and stroked faster. A little detached part of David’s brain just sighed and decided that a mouth full of cum would be a good lesson in listening to your partner’s advice. Charlie tilted his head forward and managed to get that little bit more into his mouth. David clamped his hands down onto Charlie’s head and thrust twice into Charlie’s mouth. Charlie gagged but it was too late. David felt his balls squeeze tight and his cock explode down Charlie’s throat. Charlie backed off quickly but didn’t let go, squeezing as David’s cock pumped out several days worth of built up semen.

David watched as Charlie choked, gasped, and swallowed a good amount while the rest ran down his face or across his fingers. David yanked Charlie up and kissed him, licking his own cum from Charlie’s face.


“For a novice. Top of the class.” Charlie smiled. David looked down and noticed that Charlie was pressing tight against his trousers. “Why don’t you get undressed and I’ll return the favor?” Charlie’s smile got bigger and he was naked in under a minute. David flung him to the bed and quickly sucked him down. Charlie didn’t last long and David easily swallowed down what Charlie shot out.

By the time David crawled back up to lay next to Charlie Charlie’s eyes were glazed in post coital bliss and general exhaustion. “What time do you have to be anywhere?”

“I have a class at three and Dr. Flores at five.”

“Okay, why don’t you close your eyes and go to sleep for a bit?”

“Sure.” Charlie closed his eyes and was snoring within seconds.

David mentally cursed. He should have asked Charlie if he left a note for Alan.
David picked up his phone and quickly composed a text.

**Charlie had manic episode this morning. Sleeping it off at my place. David.**

He hit send making sure it went to Don and Alan then reached over Charlie and set his alarm clock for noon.

~

Don cornered him in the break room. “Manic episode?”

David shrugged. He was getting good at this. “Charlie showed up at five babbling a mile a minute about something. Didn’t look like he’d slept all night and almost as soon as I got him sitting down he fell asleep. I set an alarm for noon so he won’t miss his first class.”

“He just showed up at five?”

“Flores said there’d be weird moments. I figure this was just one of them.”

“But what qualifies as weird for Charlie?”

*Showing up at five in the morning offering blow jobs?*

“You know what Don, I have no idea.”

~

It was Monday evening when David stepped out of his elevator to find Charlie crouched in front of his door.

“What are you doing, Charlie?”

Charlie had bits of bent wire and the answer was pretty obvious. “Trying to pick your lock.”

“Okay. Why?”

“Just to see if I can.” There was a click and David’s door came open. “Tada!” David folded his arms. He was actually impressed but he wasn’t about to tell Charlie that. “What? I wasn’t actually going to go in. And you really should get a better lock on this door. You know you should find a building with better security in general. I mean you put people in jail. That makes you a target.”

David let himself into his own apartment while Charlie pulled out the bits of wire. “Where did you learn how to pick locks?”

“St. Clare’s. Klepto called Bob. I taught him how to count cards. As soon as he gets out he’s going to Vegas. Probably going to get his thumbs broken.”

David dropped his gun and keys on the counter. “So, what can I do for you?”

“What? Oh. I wanted to come by and say sorry about his morning. I mean if I was going to do something like that I should have probably picked a better hour.”

“Were you really up all last night looking at net porn?”

Charlie stared at the ceiling. “It was more like two nights. And it wasn’t all porn. A lot of it was more information based sites. And you did say research.”
“Yes I did. Do you have a better idea of what you want now?”

Charlie was still looking at the ceiling but he began to turn a little red. “Yeah. I... um... Well I definitely have a list of strong possibilities for future activities.”

David started rummaging through his fridge for something for dinner. He really needed to go shopping. “And how was class?” David asked turning the conversation away from those lists of Charlie’s for a bit. He’d been stuck all day with images in his head of Charlie and some of the more interesting things listed.

“Class was fine. They were a little behind but I’ve lectured since I was thirteen. I think I’ll be three days dead before I lose my ability to handle a classroom.”

David sniffed at some lunch meat and decided it hadn’t gone off yet. “And Dr. Flores?”

“It was fine. He wants to talk to you.”

“I have my own shrink,” David mumbled his head half way in the vegetable crisper.

“You do? Since when?” Charlie's voice was suddenly concerned.

‘Shit.’

“Just for a month or so. Seeing the same guy as Don.”

“What for? I mean you're...” Charlie fell silent. David pulled his head out of the fridge. Charlie’s look was grim. “I’m sorry.”

“Charlie...”

“It was me, wasn’t it? Why they’re making you see someone?” David wanted to deny it but neither lies nor the truth seemed willing to come from his lips. “I’m sorry. I’ll go. You... I’ll just go.” Charlie started moving towards the door. David quickly found his feet if not his voice and moved to get himself in front of Charlie.

“Charlie, wait.”

“I’m sorry I hurt you David. I wasn’t thinking.”

“That’s the understatement of the century.” Charlie opened his mouth but David quickly put his hands to Charlie’s face. “Charlie, I almost lost a good friend, someone I care a lot about. And the reason I almost lost them brought up a lot of things from my own past that I’d been trying to forget or ignore. And in a lot of ways I blame myself for what happened to my friend.”

Charlie’s face shifted to confused. “Why would you blame yourself, David? What did you do?”

“I...” The guilt that had been subsiding over the last few weeks suddenly swelled back up. “I asked about your first crush. I asked about Jesse. I made you admit to something you’d been trying to hide for twenty years. If I’d just walked away you wouldn’t have done what you did and...”

“Oh, David.” Charlie leaned in pressing his forehead to David’s chest then wrapped his arms tight around David’s body. “No. No. No. No. No. David, you saved my life that night. If you hadn’t walked in I... I was going to poison myself like Turing. Before Amita got back.”

“What?” David pushed back a little so he could see Charlie.
“I hit bottom about a half hour before you came into my bedroom. What I was doing was a last desperate gasp. I didn’t really care anymore. When you touched me, when you grabbed my hand, and touched my face it felt so good. I felt so alive in just that moment, for the first time in months. I... bounced. I didn’t bounce quite high enough but you sitting on my bed, your hands on my body, the memory of Jesse. It was a breath of life, of joy. Not a big enough breath and when Amita left I came down pretty hard but... If you’d walked away you would have found me dead the next day. I owe you my life twice over David and whatever my life is going to become, whatever expressions or theorems I develop, cases I solve, they’re all yours in the end. You were right. Again. Charlie Eppes, as he was, bled out on that floor. I don’t know who this new person is yet with Charlie Eppes’ name but he’s here because of you.” David wiped at his eyes. “And I’m really sorry all my issues drove you to therapy.”

David pulled Charlie back into a hug. “It’s okay. I probably needed it anyway.”

The minutes ticked by as they stood in David’s hall simply clinging to each other feeling their hearts beat and lungs breathe. David now had the horrific image in his head of Charlie with wide dead eyes lying in his bed. But even as that thought settled in he forced himself to acknowledge that Charlie was alive. Alive and warm and in his arms and smelling ever so faintly of chalk and coffee. David thought that maybe he could stay like that forever until his stomach made a loud objection to that plan.

Charlie chuckled. “Have you been to that Thai place across the street?”

“A few times. It’s okay.”

“How about if I take you out to dinner to make up for interrupting your sleep and breaking and entering?”

David pressed a quick kiss to Charlie’s lips. “That sounds great.”

~

David saw Don approaching with that disapproving look on his face. He decided he wasn’t up for it. He and Charlie had gone out for Thai and talked about nothing in particular then they had gone back to David’s place and taken a long bath together. Charlie had talked softly about the months leading up to the night David had walked in on him. He had cried a little and David held him tight. When they made it to bed David left the light on so they could explore. Charlie found the small birthmark on David’s hip that looked shockingly like New Hampshire. David in turn found a collection of faded scars scattered around Charlie’s thighs and genitals. The result of his DIY reprogramming attempts. David had carefully kissed each one, then kissed Charlie, then turned out the light and held Charlie tight while he slept.

Don got close and began to open his mouth. David cut in. “No.”

“What?”

“Whatever it is you’re going to say, just, no. Charlie is an adult, he’s redefining his life, he’s making his own decisions, I’m not going to hurt him or let him hurt himself so whatever problem you’ve got it’s your problem not his and not mine.”

In any other situation David might have found the slightly affronted look on Don’s face funny but in that moment he just took it as victory and before Don had a chance to regroup David left.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Charlie and David explore some more and there's fallout from the canceled wedding.

Chapter Notes

I know a lot of people around here don't particularly like Amita. I don't like Amita much. If I'd been writing the show she would have probably gotten tragically killed at the end of season 2, but that aside she's not the bad guy in this one. If anything she's a victim as well. She's getting a bit of a whump in this part and I'd like people's opinions on it.

David knocked on Charlie’s office door. He found his life was once again part of the Eppes free form dance via Charlie’s random arrivals at his apartment. Depending on the hour it usually resulted in a night of heavy petting, cuddling and Charlie’s continuing attempts to improve his oral sex skills. On days when Charlie hadn’t spent the night David would swing by his office, usually with lunch. It wasn’t the most regular of relationships. It probably couldn’t even really be called a relationship, more like friends with third base benefits but David was trying to enjoy it as much as he could. Plus Don had backed off a little.

“Come in,” a voice called from the other side of Charlie’s door.

David stepped in to find Charlie’s new office looking a little more like his old one. It was filled with boards and for some reason a lot of string strung everywhere like a giant drugged up spider had spun a web and wandered off. In the middle of the web was Liam Goodwin holding a ball of string over his head, and several bits of string in his teeth while Charlie wrote something on a board.

“Hey Charlie, Mr. Goodwin.”

Liam nodded but didn’t drop the string between his teeth.

“Should I even ask?”

“A thought exercise pertaining to Mr. Goodwin’s idea.”

“Funny, I was thinking string theory.”

Liam made a noise that might have been a sarcastic laugh.

“Are you anywhere near the end of a thought so you can stop for lunch?”

Liam spit out the string and put down the ball. “Yes, yes he is and I really need to go study for Audio Topography, I’ll talk to you later Dr. Eppes.”

Charlie laughed and actually put down the chalk. Liam grabbed his bag, ducked through the string
and was out the door.

David ducked through the string himself and found a spot on the couch not covered in papers. “So, how’s the big idea coming?”

“Slowly, but it is progressing.”

David unpacked a couple of sandwiches and coffee for Charlie. “How’s working with Liam going?”

“Good,” Charlie answered quickly. “He’s a bright young man. We could use more like him.”

“No problems?”

Charlie sipped at his coffee with a half shrug. “He told me he was glad I was back and hoped that I was over whatever happened and was feeling better.”

“What did you say?”

“That I was getting there.”

“How’s everything else going?”

Charlie made a bit of a face. “Little hung over actually.”

“You know you’re not supposed to be drinking.”

“I know, I know but Dad wanted to have a heart to heart finally and a few drinks made it a lot easier.”

David sat up a little. Charlie had been tiptoeing around his father since he got out of St. Clare’s and vice versa. “And how’d that go?”

Charlie made another face. “He slept with Uncle Rory.”

David half choked on a bit of sandwich. “He what? Who?”

“This guy who was friends with my Mom and Dad when I was a kid. Uncle Rory. I think he was part of the great movement or whatever. Moved back east when I was six or seven. Anyway, apparently somewhere during the summer of ’66 with a little herbal help my Dad slept with Uncle Rory and last night he felt the need to tell me this. I know it was his way of being supportive or something but my memory of Uncle Rory is a guy who looked kind of like a blonde version of Magnum P.I. and now I’ve got this mental image of the two of them suck in my head which might possibly put me off sex for a very long time.”

David understood. It was bad enough thinking about your parents having sex but it was worse thinking about them with other people. When it had struck that his mother and her long time boyfriend Franklin were almost certainly having sex he’d gone out and gotten quite drunk.

“Can you calculate how much alcohol it’ll take to erase that image?” David had to admit he found the idea of Alan having sex a little disturbing himself.

“More than my liver can handle.” Was Charlie’s answer.

David just shook his head and they quietly ate for a few minutes. That was one of the things he was learning about Charlie. While Charlie was a champion talker and could ramble on for hours about whatever was in his head he also had an appreciation for silence and didn’t need to fill it up with
There was a quick tap on the door and David looked up from his lunch as Don let himself in. “Hey Chuck, files you wanted.” Don held up a stack.

“When did I want files?” Charlie asked ducking under the string and taking them from Don.

“About three months ago. Something about historical patterns of damage to federal property? Or something like that.”

Charlie closed his eyes for a half a second. “Yeah, that. Um...” He looked around then just plopped the folders down on top of a stack of student papers.

Don gave a little nod to David. “How’s it going?”

“Fine. I’ll get the report on the Harper questioning to you once I’m back at the office.”

“Sure. There’s not a huge rush on that one.”

“You staying for lunch, Don?” Charlie asked.

“Nah, I’m going to swing by the house. Dad wants me to eat the meatloaf.”

“You know you’re going to have to learn to cook for yourself one of these days?”

“You’re one to talk, buddy. I’ll see you.”

David watched as a slightly evil look crossed Charlie’s face. Don reached the office door. “Hey Don, Dad slept with Uncle Rory.”

Don whipped around. “What!”

“Summer of ‘66 Dad and Uncle Rory got stoned and did the horizontal tango. Who do you think was on top? Probably not Dad.”

Don’s jaw dropped, his eyes bugged out and he looked slightly green. David tried really hard not to laugh. “How do you know this?”

“Dad told me.”

“And why the hell are you telling me?!”

Charlie grinned. “Because misery loves company. You are my brother and if I have to be stuck with that mental image for the rest of my life so do you.”

Don let out a small but horrified yell and left the office at record speed.

“He’s never going to forgive you for that, Charlie.”

Charlie sat down and kicked his feet up on his coffee table. “This is me so not caring.”

~

David found he was having a hard time caring about his upcoming water bill when he had a wet and soapy Charlie in his arms. Charlie’s back was against the shower wall and their tongues were fighting for dominance. It had been a heck of a day. A routine early morning questioning at a
suspect's home had turned into a full tactical situation. David had gotten out unscathed which was more than could be said for the suspect. It still left him with the residue of a pre-lunch adrenaline rush and Charlie moaning into his mouth.

He grabbed a handful of Charlie’s ass nearly lifting him off his feet. Charlie squeaked but didn’t break off the kiss. He kneaded Charlie’s ass then pulled away from the kiss. “Ever had anyone play with your ass, Charlie?” David knew his voice was almost a growl. He couldn’t help it. Charlie shook his head, his eyes already blown wide. “Never even touched yourself back there?” Charlie shook his head again. “Good.”

David let a soapy finger slide between Charlie’s cheeks and stroke Charlie’s hole. Charlie gasped and thrust his hips against David’s leg. “Easy there.” David kept running his finger in tight little circles round and round as Charlie’s moans became louder and more needy. Then very, very slowly David pushed his finger in. Charlie was beyond tight and scalding hot and David could feel his cock just screaming to go there.

Charlie took a breath and held it but he didn’t try to squirm away. Instead he put his head against David’s shoulder and pushed back onto David’s finger trying to take in more than there was to take. David chuckled as he started slowly working his finger in and out of Charlie. “You like that?” Charlie nodded with a high pitched whine. “You like having my finger in your ass?” Charlie nodded some more and pushed back harder. David twisted his hand around a little until Charlie yelped and nearly jumped out of his skin. David gently stroked the spot he’d found until Charlie was trembling in his arms. “Can you imagine what it’ll feel like when my cock is hitting that spot over and over?” Charlie was full on humping David’s thigh. “More,” he croaked out pushing back against David’s hand.

“No,” Charlie whined. “This is all you get for now.” David kept his voice low. “You’re taking it slow, remember? One finger tonight. Maybe two next time.” Charlie shook his head and pushed back harder. David remembered something that had been on Charlie’s Maybe list. He slid his free hand up Charlie’s back and into his hair. Once he had a good handful he slowly but firmly pulled. Charlie’s eyes rolled back and his legs went out from under him and David had to act quickly to control their mutual descent to the floor of the thankfully large tub.

He still found himself on top of Charlie, the hot water pelting down on his back. He gave Charlie’s hair another pull. Charlie moaned and David felt a spurt of cum hit his thighs. Charlie’s stamina was improving a bit and hair pulling was almost certainly moved from the Maybe column to the Yes.

David pushed himself up and back from Charlie and grabbed his own cock. Charlie still looked blissed out and was panting hard. His lips were swollen from kissing and there was cum still clinging to his softening cock. It was more than enough visual for David and he stroked himself until his own cum splashed heavy against Charlie’s skin.

Charlie scraped some from his body and brought it to his lips licking it delicately and deliberately from his fingers. David had to give Charlie credit, he learned quickly just what got David’s blood flowing. But if there was going to be a round two David wanted a bed instead of the shower floor.

~

David always felt like a jock walking down the halls of CalSci. He knew he wasn’t an idiot but also compared to the kids scurrying past him he might as well have been the guy who gave out wedgies in gym class. Walking down the hall with Colby and Don was a whole different dynamic. Like some sort of primal nerd instinct the hall in front of them cleared out and they were given a wide berth. The little primal jock in David’s head smiled.
As they got near Charlie’s office however an uneasy feeling hit David and with a few more steps he could make out raised voices. He shrugged just a little so his gun was that little bit easier to get to. He saw Don and Colby make similar motions as they went onto alert. They paused by Charlie’s door. A man was yelling and underneath a woman was yelling back. David was pretty sure it was Amita but he couldn’t make out any of the words. Then a third voice rose up and David was sure it was Charlie.

“Weapons?” Colby asked. There was no question about going away and coming back later. They were going through that door.

Don shook his head. “No, but be on guard. This could just be a math fight.”

“Doesn’t sound snarky enough for a math fight.” The other two voices had fallen away and now it was mainly Charlie and he sounded like he was on a rampage.

Don gave a silent count to three then pushed open the door.

Once the door was open the words became clear. There were four people standing around Charlie’s desk. David’s eyes went first to Charlie once it was clear there wasn’t an immediate physical threat. Charlie looked furious beyond anything David had ever encountered or ever wanted to again. He was standing in front of Amita who was crying and she did not cry pretty. Her eyes and nose were swollen and her face blotchy. The other two people were late middle aged and David was going to take a flying guess that they were Amita’s parents.

“She was kidnapped!” Charlie screamed at the top of his lungs. “She was held at gun point for three days and you couldn’t be bothered to get your asses on a plane but she tells you she’s not getting married and you’re on the first flight out! What the hell kind of people are you!?”

David was a little surprised. He knew the wedding was off and had been for a while and hadn’t really thought about what Amita might have told her parents. Amita’s father leaned into Charlie’s face but Charlie wasn’t backing down. “How dare you speak to us that way!” he snarled. “What you have done to our daughter...”

“I love her!” Charlie shouted back. David jerked as that kick to the guts he’d been waiting for hit with full force. “I will always love her. She is my best friend. She will always be a part of my life. Hell, we might still have children but she is the one who walked out on me and it’s the god damn 21st century and she has every right to do that!” David tried to breathe. His body didn’t want to. It didn’t want to do anything but curl up in a ball of self pity.

Amita’s father snapped something David didn’t understand but Amita flinched. Then her eyes quickly darted to towards Don. It was the first acknowledgment that any of the group even realized they were in the office.

“Daddy, please.”

David’s stomach twisted from the misery in Amita’s voice. Her father snapped something else then reached past Charlie and tried to grab Amita’s arm. That’s when David moved along with Don and Colby. Charlie wedged himself between Amita and her father shouldering him aside but it only put him off balance for a half a second. He moved forward again with a raised hand, this time towards Charlie.

Don got there first grabbing the raised hand. At the same moment David grabbed Charlie because he looked just mad enough to go after Amita’s father. Colby just positioned himself as a human wall between the two groups.
“Take your hands off me!” Amita’s father shouted as her mother took a step away looking more frightened than anything else.

“Yeah, I don’t think so.”

Charlie struggled against David’s grip. “Hey, chill. Come on.”

Colby kept his arms spread between them until both parties had stopped struggling. David let Charlie go first then Don let Amita’s father go. There was silence in the room.

Amita slowly stepped around David and Charlie and stood in front of her parents. David noted that Don didn’t back off. If Amita’s father twitched Don would be on him.

Amita tried to wipe the tears from her face but they seemed to just keep coming. “Daddy.” Her voice broke. “I’m sorry. I know I wasn’t the son you wanted. I tried. I did everything you wanted. I wanted to make you proud of me. I just couldn’t do this.” Amita’s voice broke again.

Amita’s father opened his mouth. Don grabbed his wrist again. “Before you say or do anything Mr. Ramanujan keep in mind you are addressing a valuable federal asset, a member of my team, and an American citizen and I will not hesitate to throw your ass in jail for assault if you lay so much as a finger on her.” Don let his wrist go.

There was silence again. “Daddy?”

Mr. Ramanujan’s face went cold before he turned and stormed from the room. As he did David caught a whiff of something high proof.

Amita held out a hand to her mother. She opened her mouth as if to say something but then snapped it shut and trotted after her husband.

Amita wrapped her arms around herself and began to sob. In less than a second both Don and Charlie had their arms around her.

“Did you smell that?” David whispered to Colby.

“Yeah, I’m on it.”

“Bring back a Twix bar.” Colby gave David a weird look. “Serious.”

Colby nodded and quickly headed out of the office as Don and Charlie were getting Amita settled onto the couch.

David wasn’t sure what to do. He still felt like he’d been kicked in the guts and seeing Amita’s arms wrapped around Charlie hurt but it also seemed a selfish shadow of pain compared to the wracking sobs coming from Amita’s slim body.

Don rubbed his hand up and down her back while Charlie stroked her head. “It’s okay,” Don said softly. “Just let it out. It’ll be okay.”

Amita cried for several more minutes before trying to scrub at her eyes and sniffing loudly. David pulled his ever present pack of hypoallergenic tissues from his pocket and handed them over.

“Thank you,” she whispered before blowing her nose impressively loud. Don rubbed her back a bit more. Suddenly she turned around and pushed him. “Why didn’t you tell me what happened to Charlie!”
Don put his arms in the air. “I didn’t know you hadn’t been told. I swear. I thought my Dad told you. I thought you’d be the first one he called. I thought you were just avoiding us and I was trying to give you space, I swear. If I’d known you didn’t know I would have told you. Honest.”

Amita scowled at Don then wrapped her arms around herself. “It’s all my fault,” she suddenly sobbed.

Charlie rubbed at her back. “No, no, I told you it’s no ones fault but mine and sort of Don’s but I gave him a black eye and hacked some baby pictures into his personnel file last week, so it’s okay.”

“You what?” Don snapped.

“Don’t worry, I picked the cute ones of you with peace signs painted on your cheeks.”

Don growled, Amita giggled through the tears and David made a metal note to look at Don’s file as soon as possible before Don got the pictures removed.

“I just wanted them to be proud of me.” Amita’s face was still sunken and miserable.

Don took her chin and turned her face towards him. “Hey, you are brilliant. You are hot. You’ve got two Ph.Ds. That’s more than Chuck’s got. You fight crime with the best team in town. If they aren’t proud of you then they are idiots who don’t deserve you crying over them.”

“I’m not married,” Amita choked out.

“So what? It’s the 21st century. I’m not married and Robin turned me down when I asked. Chuck can’t get married by law now. David and Colby? They’re married to the job and are going to end up in the old agents’ home together.”

David would have replied to that if he wasn’t still processing the new knowledge of Don’s failed proposal.

“And,” Don continued. “I’m pretty sure the only way you’re ever getting Warner or Betancourt into a white Vera Wang is if it came with matching thigh holsters. You are still young and beautiful and brilliant, you can still get another doctorate, you can still have a family. Hell you can still have Chuck’s kids though why you’d want to risk that nose breading through...” Charlie reached around Amita and whacked his brother on the side of the head which earned a laugh from Amita who wiped at her eyes.

“Thank you, Don.”

“And if you want a distraction to take your mind off it all I’ve got case files stacking up?”

Before Amita could answer Colby came back into the office his face serious.

“Amita?”

“Yes.”

Colby crouched down in front of Amita and took her hands. “Amita, I need to ask you something.” Colby took a deep breath. “Does... Is your father prone to drinking at all?”

Amita frantically shook her head. “No. No. He stopped. He stopped a long time ago. He promised he stopped. That’s why they went back to India so he’d... stop.” Amita’s face crumpled again.

Colby let out a sigh. “He pulled his rental car out of the lot going the wrong way right in front of a
city cop. The cop pulled him over and he blew .13.” Amita pulled her hands away from Colby. “He got a little belligerent and he’s been arrested.”

David had a feeling that wasn’t the whole story but it was certainly being edited for Amita’s sake.

Amita closed her eyes went still. “What about my mother?” she asked softly.

“She said something about jet lag and getting him a lawyer in the morning.”

“I’ll call my lawyer.” Charlie offered and David felt that kicked in the guts feeling come back. This was a man who he’d been on the verge of brawling with minutes earlier but he was Amita’s father so he would do what needed to be done.

Amita shook her head. “No. Don’t bother. The consulate will get him out. They always do.

Someone is always cleaning up after him, it shouldn’t be you.”

“Well, he’s being taken down to the Central Pasadena Police station on Garfield.”

Amita shrugged. “He’s made it very clear where I stand in his life. He can sit there.”

Colby took Amita’s hands again. “Okay, look, I loved my father, I respected the hell out of him, he was a soldier and he taught me everything I know about duty and honor and loyalty but he was an alcoholic with a capital A. And the thing is he never tried to stop. He knew he drank. He knew he drank too much and he didn’t care. He just kept on drinking until he screwed up and someone died and even that wasn’t enough. He put his fishing gear and a twelve pack into his truck and he drove up into the mountains and right off a cliff and to this day I don’t know if it was an accident or on purpose. Now right now you have every right to be fucking furious at your father. And you have every right to stay that way for a good long time but at the end of everything, when you’ve got to weigh things up, remember that he at least tried. My father didn’t. Okay?”

Amita tried to nod but her face was twisting with more misery. “He wanted a son,” she squeaked out.

Colby shrugged. “That’s just a standard guy thing, goes up there with the fast car and super model house wife.”

Amita shook her head. “No. The doctors told my Mom she shouldn’t have me. That it might kill her. But they also told my parents that they were going to have a boy. If they were only going to have one child it was supposed to be a boy.” Amita’s voice cracked again. “I did everything they wanted.”

David felt his heart break a little. Don looked furious and Charlie looked close to tears himself but this time it was Colby who pulled Amita in close and held her while she cried some more.

When Amita calmed down Colby reached into his pocket and pulled out the candy David had told him to get. “Twix?”

Amita snatched it and quickly ripped open the package shoving one of the candy sticks into her mouth. “I’m sorry everyone,” she mumbled around the sugar.

Don rubbed her shoulder a bit. “Hey, don’t worry about it. We all have days.”

“What did you guys need anyway?” Amita asked looking around.

“Charlie called us down here to look at something.”
Charlie jumped up. “Oh that’s right, the thing… Um…The thing, the thing.” Charlie looked at the papers on his desk then grabbed one and held it up in triumph. “Ah! The thing!”

~

David was pacing around his apartment as the sun was going down. He was trying not to be mad. He was trying not to be hurt or to let his imagination run away from him. He was trying to tell himself that he knew what he was getting into with Charlie and it’s not like Charlie had any feelings for him beyond hormonally driven attraction and he should be thankful he was getting that.

He was about to change into sweats and go for a very long, hard run when there was a knock at his door. He knew it was either Colby or Charlie. Most likely Charlie.

He opened the door. Charlie brushed past barely looking at him. “Shit.” Charlie started. “Of all the times those two could have shown up. You think I could have pleaded insanity if I had just broken that idiot’s nose? I mean really.” Charlie looked up at David. “What?”

“Nothing? How’s Amita?”

“She’ll be fine. She’s tougher than she looks. I think a night in the drunk tank will be good for her father though. I mean what scares me is must have driven from the airport to CalSci in that condition. How the hell did he even manage to get a rental in that state? Oh well. One more question to ponder I guess.” Charlie lifted onto his toes to try to give David a kiss. David turned his head away letting the kiss land low on his jaw. Charlie stepped back. “Okay. What have I done?”

“Nothing.”

“Yeah right. I’ve had two long term relationships, I know when I’ve fucked up so how have I fucked up this one?”

David tried to squeeze down the ball of anger and hurt that was just sitting in his chest but it didn’t want to budge. Instead it crept up his throat and started to fall from his lips. “Well you’re implying this is a relationship when I don’t think there’s even a name for whatever this is but certainly not relationship. And it’ll be pretty hard to have a relationship when you’re busy having babies with Amita. But that’s okay, I don’t want to get between you and the woman you still love.” David kicked himself even as the words were coming from his mouth. Charlie’s face twisted up with confusion and David knew he just sounded catty but couldn’t seem to shut himself up.

“I’ve known Amita almost a decade. Longer than I’ve known you by the way and we’re not exactly strangers. No, I am not particularly attracted to her body but I’m not going to stop caring for her or stop loving her over night and may I add you were the one that first pointed this out.”

“And where do I fit in. Your experiment? Your learning tool? A not quite fuck buddy? When I’m holding you are you even thinking of me or am I just some stand in for Jesse Pressman, long lost love?”

David knew he’d crossed a line as Charlie’s face went hard. “Of course I am thinking about you, David.” Charlie’s words were cold and sharp.

“How am I supposed to know that?”

“Well I just told you. This isn’t exactly easy for me, you know?”

“Well it’s not exactly easy for me either. I’ve got your brother breathing down my neck, you come and go as you please expecting I don’t even know what. Someone to get you up to speed or
“Well I’m sorry if I can’t give blow jobs while swinging from the chandeliers like your other men.”

“There are no other men!” David yelled and Charlie stepped back. “I haven’t had a man in my bed since Isaiah was killed. Not one. I haven’t have a date with a man, I haven’t flirted with one. Nothing. And then suddenly you’re there in front of me wanting me to show you things. This. Is. Hard. And if I’m just some sort of learning tool for you I want to know now so I can be braced for it when you wander off with someone better.”

Charlie’s mouth came open and then the anger settled onto his face. “Do you honestly think I’d put myself, in this mental wreck of a condition, into the hands of someone I felt nothing for?”

The part of David’s brain that was actually listening cheered. Charlie felt something for him. Unfortunately the fear was still speaking. “I don’t know. Between you and me I don’t know anything. I don’t know how I’m supposed to act around you. I don’t know if I’m supposed to tell anyone. I don’t know what this is.”

A strange calm seemed to come over Charlie’s face. “Well neither do I. If you figure it out call me.” And with that Charlie walked out.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

David has a question for Charlie and a talk with Don.

David looked at his watch. It was 5AM and he hadn’t slept. He’d tried. He’d taken a shower, gotten into bed and then just stared at the ceiling as the minutes ticked by. He knocked on Charlie’s door. There was silence in the house so he knocked again. The knock seemed to echo through the neighborhood.

A light went on inside and the door opened. Charlie was wrapped in his bathrobe and his hair was going in a dozen different directions.

“Go out with me,” David said.

“What?”

David stepped into the house. “Go out with me.”

“It’s 5AM?”

“I know. Go out with me,” David repeated a third time.

“Out?”

“Out. On a date.”

Charlie scrubbed at his eyes. “A date?”

“Yeah, dinner, a movie, maybe making out in the car after. A date.”

David heard footsteps coming down the stairs. “What’s going on?” Alan asked also wrapped in a bathrobe.

“David is asking me out on a date,” Charlie supplied.

“It’s 5AM.”

“Yes, we’ve been over that bit. If Charlie can show up at my door at 5AM asking random questions so can I.”

Charlie scratched his head and seemed to be waking up a bit. “When would this hypothetical date be taking place?”

David shrugged. “Let’s say Friday. I’ll pick you up at seven.”

Charlie nodded a few times. “Okay, Friday, at seven, we will be… dating.”

Internally David let out a giant sigh of relief and felt a dozen muscles unknot. “Good. Friday at
seven.”

“Do you want to tell Don or shall I?”

Those dozen muscles knotted back up. “I’ll tell him. Maybe I’ll get lucky and he’ll be in a good mood and won’t kill me on sight.”

“He won’t kill you on sight. There would be too much paperwork explaining what happened.” Charlie looked him over. “Have you slept?”

“No,” David answered honestly.

“And you’re going to go to work?”

“I was going to try to catch a nap in the locker room.”

Charlie gestured towards the stairs. “You can try here?”

David wanted to but before coming over he’d had a long talk with himself. “No thank you. I’ll be fine.” He did allow himself to lean over and give Charlie a quick peck on the cheek. “I’ll see you on Friday.”

Charlie nodded. “Okay. Friday.”

He let himself out but before he even got off the porch he heard the door open again. “David?”

David braced himself. He had really been hoping that the early hour would let him get away with not facing Alan. “Yeah, Alan?”

Alan’s arms were folded and he was squinting at David. It was a look eerily similar to one of Don’s “You just asked Charlie out on a date?”

“Yes, yes I did.”

“I’m not an idiot you know.”

“Never thought you were.”

“I was under the impression that you and Charlie were already... more intimately acquainted.”

David felt the blood rush to his cheeks and was thankful for the cool early morning air and the dim light. “Well... um... we haven’t...” David found himself sort of randomly waving his hands.

“Gone all the way?”

David dropped his head and prayed for the ground to just rip open and swallow him up. When that didn’t happen he took a deep breath. “I’m very fond of Charlie.”

“I already worked out that bit.”

“I just want to do right by him. I don’t want him to think that I’m using him.”

“You don’t want anyone else thinking that either.” David didn’t really have a good answer. “I would think you’d be more concerned with Charlie using you?”

The pain from the day before hadn’t fully subsided and flared back up for a half second. “That is a
risk but...” David just shrugged. He was an FBI agent. He could catch a bullet at any moment and that would be that and if there was a final couple of seconds before whatever came next David didn’t want them filled with the regrets of the risks not taken.

Alan rubbed at his eyes then gestured through the still open door. “Come on back in and crash on the couch. That’s not a request. I have to be up in a couple of hours for work myself. I’ll poke you awake then.”

Alan was using another Don look. The one that said he was not up for any arguments. “Thank you,” David said.

“Don’t mention it.”

David got Don into the conference room but didn’t pull the blinds mainly so if Don hit him there might be witnesses. Don folded his arms. “Okay David, what do you want?”

David rubbed his palms on his slacks. He didn’t sweat like this before a tactical op but those were arguably less dangerous.

“Um... I need you to know something.” David faltered and Don motioned him to go ahead. “I’ve asked Charlie out. On a date. A proper date. Dinner, movie.”

“Yeah, I know what a date is. Okay, you’ve asked Charlie out. Why?”

David’s brain pulled up short. He’d prepared answers to every possible question except that one.

“What?”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

Don rolled his eyes. “Why are you asking Charlie out on dates?”

David’s head was suddenly hurting a little. “He’s single, I’m single. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Well last I checked the only letters after your name are FBI.”

“So?”

“So Chuck is the very high maintenance, socially inept, king of the nerds who can’t even manage his own laundry and other than the fact that he doesn’t have a mortgage about the only thing he’s got to offer anyone is a pair of academic coat tails which you don’t exactly need.”

It was David’s turn to fold his arms. “We are talking about your brother Charlie here, right? You’ve only got the one?”

“Short, curly, got a thing for numbers?”

“Yeah. That’s him.” David tried to think because it still felt like he and Don were talking about two different things. David decided to try something. “Don, your brother is gorgeous.” Don snorted. “Fuck. It’s your damn fault, I should have known.”

Don straitened up a bit. “What’s my fault this time?”
“Your brother, Charlie Eppes, is gorgeous. He is sexy, he is sensual, he is tactile in all the best ways, he’s fun to be around and someone has been telling him his whole life that he’s nothing but a short nerd to the point where he has a hard time looking at himself in the mirror. Some how I just fucking knew it was you.”

“I don’t know what you’re smoking David but I’m tempted to have you tested. He’s short, hairy, he got the Eppes nose and you need two semesters of calculus for him to be able to tell you a joke. He’s my brother and I love him but...”

David slapped his hand to his own face mainly so he wouldn’t slap it to Don’s. Then he opened the conference room door. “Warner, Betancourt a moment of your time.” Liz and Nikki came into the conference room and David shut the door again. “I need to ask you both an honest question and I swear this isn’t a set up of any kind and nothing you say will be held against you.”

The girls looked at each other for a moment. “Okay?” Liz replied carefully.

“Do either of you think Charlie is attractive?”


Don smirked and shook his head. “Not Shirley temple curls cute, like actually sexy.”

Liz and Nikki looked at each other again in some sort of psychic female communication. “Yeah.”

“Hell yeah.”

“Really?” Don asked.

“Sure,” Liz replied. “I mean if Amita hadn’t been around I was thinking about hitting that for a rebound off you.”

Don’s jaw dropped.

“He does have a pretty sweet ass on him,” Nikki added. “Especially in that one pair of jeans.”

“Oh god yes, The Jeans.”

“What jeans?” Don asked. David knew exactly which jeans but he wasn’t going to say that.

Liz rolled her eyes. “The Jeans. This one pair of jeans he wears like once a year that makes every woman in building hyperventilate. The ladies in security have got security camera stills of him in those things. They shouldn’t be legal.”

David bit his lip a little. Don’s face was slowly contorting into confusion and horror. “Anything else?” Don’s voice was tentative at best.

“Sure,” Nikki said. “He’s got the whole package. Ass.”

“Hair.”

“Nice eyes.”

“Lips.”

“Good hands.”
“Yeah,” Liz agreed. “Really good hands.”

“Amita told me he gives killer foot rubs.”

“Plus you got to think 200 IQ points thinking about sex. That’s got to make for some interesting times.”

‘Interesting is one word for it,’ David thought.

Nikki sighed a little. “It’s always the gay ones.”

“What about me?” Don asked carefully. David tried not to cringe.

The girls looked Don up and down. “You do alright with what you’ve got,” Liz finally said.

David heard tinkling sound of a fragile male ego being shattered. Don closed his eyes and pointed at the door. “Thank you. Out. Both of you.”

The girls giggled and left.

Don sighed. “I’m not sure if I should call my shrink or my girlfriend.”

“You and Robin are still dating?”

“Don’t change the subject, David.”

“I mean if you proposed and she said no I would think...”

“She said my proposal wasn’t romantic and so I didn’t really mean it so it didn’t count or something and I don’t want to talk about it,” Don snapped out.

David took his turn at being confused. Don had a reputation for being an old school romantic. “What, the diamond on the ring wasn’t big enough or something?”

“I don’t want to talk about it... And I didn’t get her a ring.”

“Did you at least get on one knee?”

Don rolled his eyes. “No.”

“And where did you propose?”

Don sheepishly tipped his head. “Over there.”

“And she said no?”

“David!”

David put his hands up. “Sorry.”

Don folded his arms again and looked David up and down. “You really want to go out with Charlie?”

“I really do.”

“And what exactly are you hoping on getting out if it?”
David shrugged. “A few good months.”

“A few good months and then what? You move on, let Charlie hit the singles bars?”

David sighed. “Look Don, this is how it’s going to work. Charlie and I are going to go out and for a few months and it’s going to be good. It’s going to be really, really nice and then he’s going to come home one day and be talking a mile a minute about some amazing breakthrough he’s just had and I’m going to smile and nod and somewhere in there he’s going to realize that I’m just smiling and nodding and he’ll smile back and change the subject to something I can understand and it might keep on being nice for a few more months but that will always be in the back of his head until some new professor in the physics department catches his eye, young, handsome, genius and Charlie won’t want to hurt me so it’ll take him a little while to work up to the thank you David, it’s been great, we’ll always be friends talk but it’ll happen and I’ll smile and nod and pretend like it doesn’t hurt until I walk in on him and Mr. Physics kissing in his office or something and then I’ll transfer to the first place that’ll take me, probably Detroit with my luck and I’ll just pray there’s some giant emergency on the day of the commitment ceremony so I can get away with not going and just send a nice card and a toaster before spending a week getting blind stinking drunk in my bath tub.”

David stood in the silence for long minutes as Don just stared at him. “So if it’s going to end with a toaster and alcohol poisoning why are you asking him out to begin with?”

“Because Charlie is amazing and fun to be around and fun to talk to and sexy as anything and I really want those few good months to be worth the pain of the rest.”

Don tilted his head and very slowly an odd little smirk crept onto his face. “David, I might not understand what you see in Charlie but I don’t think you know him quite as well as you think you do.” Then Don slapped him on the arm. “Good luck.” Then he walked out.

David hadn’t planned on seeing Charlie much before their date but on Thursday afternoon he still found himself with an arm load of files playing delivery boy down to CalSci.

Charlie’s office was much cleaner and smelled of wood polish and window cleaner. It was apparently Amita’s doing as a final act of girlfriendness. Word on the street was that her father had been sprung by his government but was still going to have to go before a judge on a couple of charges the least of which was driving while intoxicated.

David was helping Charlie sort through some case files when there was a tentative knock on Charlie’s door and a student poked his head in. “Dr. Eppes?”

Charlie waved his student in since he was technically having office hours. “Yes, Jake. What can I do for you?”

The student, Jake, looked at David a little nervously. David backed away from the desk a half step but kept his eyes open.

“Actually, I was hoping there was something I could do for you.”

“Such as?”

Jake shifted from side to side. “Well, there’s been all these rumors going around campus since you got back.”

Charlie stiffened a little. “Yes?”
“And, I’m sure most of them aren’t true but here.” Jake shoved a tightly folded piece of paper at Charlie. “Just in case.” Then he quickly left.

Charlie looked at David then carefully unfolded the paper. “Well. I guess that rumor has made the rounds.”

David looked over Charlie’s shoulder. The paper had one of those fractal pattern triangles but it was colored in pink and upside down. It advertised the CalSci Alliance. Friday at 12:15, Room 208 Physics Building. A safe supportive environment for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender students and staff. All are Welcome.

David pointed to the small print at the bottom of the page. “There will be cookies and punch.” Charlie smoothed out the paper on his desk. “Are you going to go?”

Charlie shrugged. “I’ve never been good in groups.”

That wasn’t news to David but he also privately thought that it was probably something Charlie could really use. “You should think about it. You can meet new people. And there will be cookies and punch.”

“Cookies and punch. Well how can you say no to that?”

~

David squinted at Doctor Bradford. “Am I just coming here now so you can get hot gossip?”

“I’m not allowed to gossip. Doctor/Patient confidentiality.”

“That’s doesn’t really answer my question.”

“Why don’t you tell me?”

“Yeah, that doesn’t answer my question either.”

Bradford chuckled a little. “Okay, how are you and Charlie doing?”

“It’s... A little confusing. We’ve already had two good fights and we haven’t even been on our first date yet.”

“Not bad. Are you going to have a first date?”

David checked his watch. “I pick him up in a little over six hours.”

“And how’s that guilt doing?”

“It’s... It’s not. Charlie told me something. I’m not going to repeat it. It’s between him, me and his shrink but... lets just say I didn’t have the full story. I still might not have the full story but I feel somewhat better about my part in it.”

“Okay, that’s good.”

“Yeah, it’s good.”

Bradford leaned back in his big swivel chair. “So... What are you going to wear tonight?”

“What?”
“It’s your first date. This is important. These are the kind of moments your life can completely turn on so what are you going to wear?” David froze. He hadn’t actually put any real thought into what he was going to wear. “Let me guess, lose the gun and the tie and throw on a clean shirt?”

David kind of shrugged. “It’s not like he hasn’t seen me look worse, or in less for that matter.”

“You want him to think you’re taking this seriously that means putting a little effort into it. My wife saw me puking in a gutter five years before our first date doesn’t mean she would have appreciated it if I’d shown up in that state.”

David mentally rummaged through his wardrobe. “I’ve got a silk shirt I never wear much?”

“What color?”

“Kinda maroonish?”

“Anything else?”

David shrugged. “Nothing that doesn’t make me look like Fed or have FBI stitched on it somewhere. Actually I got that shirt for an undercover op.”

“Undercover as what?”

“Casting agent.”

Bradford laughed.

“What? I think I discovered some real talent that day. Also a meth ring.”

“Okay, shirt is covered. What are you going to talk about?”

A fresh splash of panic hit David. “See, this is why I don’t date. I’m just going to talk about work and he’s going to talk about math and work and...”

“Calm down, you haven’t tanked your date yet. Talk about your family. You know Charlie’s family but I bet he doesn’t know a lot about yours.”

“Does giving me dating advice count as proper use of government time?”

“Happy agents are efficient, productive agents.”

“Right.”

“David, you want real advice?”

“Sure.”

“Be yourself and have a good time and you’ll do just fine.”

~

David knocked on the door and smoothed down his shirt. He’d thought about bringing flowers or something but that just seemed a bit over the top.

The door opened quickly and Charlie slid out and shut the door behind him. “Everything okay?”

Charlie looked over his shoulder. “Yeah, I just thought you might want to skip the small talk.”
“Ah.” David was pretty sure Don and Alan were on the other side of the door and quite possibly Larry as well. “So... Dinner? I was thinking La Bocca?”

“I love Italian. Sounds great.”

~

David watched as Charlie played with his bread stick. He was glad he’d dug out his nice shirt since Charlie had apparently done the same pulling out a dark green button down shirt from somewhere. Finally Charlie sighed. “I’m sorry David, I’m bad on dates. I can never think of anything to talk about that isn’t math related.”

“That’s okay, I’ve been sitting here trying to think about anything that isn’t case related.” Charlie just chuckled a little but started breaking his breadstick into bits. A thought miraculously popped into David’s head. “Hey, did you go to that thing today, CalSci Alliance?”

Charlie continued to dismantle his bread stick. “Yeah, actually I did.”

“Were there cookies?”

Charlie smiled a little. “As advertised.”

“How was it?”

Charlie’s gaze shifted from his bread stick to the ceiling. “Odd.”

“Odd?”

Charlie finally dropped what was left of the bread stick and looked at David. “I was the oldest person there by at least a decade and there is definitely a generation gap. I mean there was this one kid who was talking about how he had to come out to his parents when he was 16 so he could take his boyfriend to junior prom. Sixteen. When I was thirteen I was still able to get my hands on psychology text books that listed homosexuality as something that could be treated with electroshock therapy, hormone treatments, and Valium. Another student made an off hand comment about how she’d gotten a cold from her girlfriend and I was there thinking about 1986 when there was no treatment for AIDS, no real safe sex campaign and it was almost assumed that if you were gay you had it and...” Charlie rubbed his hands over his face. “I mean they’re all really nice kids but... They’re kids. I told them about the one kid at school who everyone thought was gay, he was the only one who got beaten up more than I did. They all looked at me like I was from Mars.”

“If you think about it it’s a good thing. Shows that at least some part of society is accepting and moving on.”

“I know. Still feels like I’m the odd man out. My neuroses are holdovers from the mid 80’s. These kids are post Will and Grace.”

“Going to go back?”

Charlie shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe I should find a support group more my age.”

“Maybe. Or maybe the kids can help you be young, hip, and confident.”

Charlie laughed. “David, this is the CalSci Alliance. We might be gay but we’re still nerds.”

“Fair enough.”
“The cookies were good though. Some chem student made them. If being a scientist doesn’t work out he could make a fortune in the pastry business.”

The rest of the meal went surprisingly easy. Their waiter took their orders and Charlie did most of the talking discussing baking and chemistry. Charlie claimed that while he wasn’t much of a cook most days he could bake with the best of them.

There was a bit of a moment when David insisted on paying for the meal since he’d been the one to ask Charlie out. They compromised and agreed that Charlie could at least pay for the movie tickets.

The movie was an action flick and Charlie only mumbled a little about blatant disregard concerning basic physics.

Soon enough David found himself parking in front of Charlie’s house. Charlie stared at it but didn’t move. David broke the silence. “I had a nice time tonight.”

Charlie smiled. “So did I, but I think we missed something.”

David quickly reran the night through his head. “What?”

“This.” Charlie leaned across the car and pressed his lips to David’s. David wasted no time getting one hand into Charlie’s hair and the other around Charlie’s waist pulling him as close as the car could allow. It had been days since he’d properly kissed Charlie and that first touch of Charlie’s lips was more than enough of a reminder of what he’d been missing.

Charlie’s mouth opened and their tongues rolled around each other tasting of popcorn and cherry slushies. All that was needed was a little Lionel Richie on the radio and David could have been back in high school. He fumbled under his seat and managed to shove it back as far as it would go.

Charlie took the hint and crawled across the car until he was straddling David’s hips.

It was David’s turn to moan as Charlie slowly rolled their hips together even as they kissed in near desperation. Suddenly there was a tap at the window. David jumped causing Charlie to bump his head on the ceiling. David looked out his window into Don’s glowering face. Charlie glared back and flipped his brother off. Don squinted. Charlie squinted back and added the middle finger of his other hand to the discussion.

Don gave a quick sharp look to David then turned and stomped back up the driveway to the house.

David groaned. “Oh, Don’s going to give me shit tomorrow.”

“No he won’t.” Charlie sounded quite confident.

“And how do you know that?”

“I know that because I still know what really happened at Mathew Malina’s bar mitzvah which is a secret Don would much rather I take to my grave and unless he wants Dad and Robin to know what happened followed up by a Bureau wide email with the story he’s going to back off the person I’m dating.” David carefully studied Charlie’s face in the yellow street lamp light. It was completely serious without a hint of humor.

“Charlie, I... Don’t mess up your relationship with Don for me.”

Charlie barked with laughter. “Don didn’t speak to me for fifteen years. It took our mother slowly dying to get us back in the same city. We didn’t come close to bonding until I became useful and learned not to puke at crime scenes. Our relationship is so twisted up it might as well be an M.C. Escher sketch. We’re... brothers. We’ve been through worse and weirder. He’s just cranky ‘cause
he’s a control freak but it’s my life and he doesn’t get a say.”

David gently pressed his lips to Charlie’s. “I just don’t want to make your life more difficult than it already is.”

Charlie smiled, his eyes crinkling up around the corners a little. “David, you are the least difficult part of my life right now. If I didn’t have you right now... Well I don’t want to even think about it.”

David opened his mouth but Charlie put a finger over it. “I never got to make out in cars as a teenager so less talking, more kissing.”

“I knew there was a reason they call you a genius.”

~

Colby was looking at him sideways. “What?”

“Who is she?” Colby asked.

“What?”

“Or he.”

David felt his heart rate kick up a bit. He and Charlie hadn’t talked about who they would tell or when. “Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Bullshit. You’re getting some. That’s your I’m getting some face.”

David schooled his features. “No it’s not.”

“I think I know all your faces by now, man.”

“I found a new comic shop over the weekend.”

“Nope.” Colby shook his head. “That’s not your ‘I spent too much money on a comic book’ face. It’s not even your ‘I found good cheesecake’ face. That is defiantly your ‘I spent the weekend in bed’ face.”

Colby was mostly right of course. Now that they were ‘dating’ he and Charlie had been able to spend a large part of the weekend just fooling around or curled up on the couch together. It had been unbelievably nice. “I’m not even going to ask why you’ve spent that much time looking at my face.”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“Well there was nothing to say on the last subject.”

“Okay, but I know you’ve got somebody and I’m going to find out who it is.”
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

David tells some secrets.

David was poking at his food. He knew he shouldn’t. He knew he should be enjoying getting out before 8 on a Wednesday night and enjoying a nice dinner out with Charlie but he hadn’t be able to stop thinking for the last few days. Not since Colby started trying to work out the identity of his mystery lover.

“What’s wrong?” Charlie asked.

“What?” David looked up from his food.

“That’s a nice bit of steak on your plate and you seem determined to poke it to death, so what’s wrong?”

David sighed. “I’m having a bit of a stupid fight with myself.”

“Anything I can help with?”

David took a sip of his water. He really wanted a beer but was on call for the next 48 hours. “Have you told anyone about us, going out I mean?”

Charlie dropped his eyes. “No. I mean I know I should. Nothing to be ashamed about but...”

David sighed himself. “Yeah, but...”

“I mean mainly I don’t want to hurt Amita. We just finished splitting up the joint savings and canceling all the wedding stuff, I don’t want her to feel like after four years I’m just...” Charlie pushed his rice pilaf around his plate.

“Colby is sure I’m seeing someone. Being a bit of a pain in the ass about it. Thing is...”

“I’m out, you’re not?”

David cringed. It was blunt but true. He stared down at his steak. He desperately wanted to look at Charlie but his eyes simply refused to lift and meet Charlie’s gaze. “When Isaiah was killed,” David started slowly. “I was out in the countryside with an evidence retrieval team. Bad cell phone reception. I left on a Wednesday, he was killed Thursday morning. Run down in the street. He was buried on Friday. I got back Sunday night and thought it was odd that I couldn’t get through to him but I figured he just had his head in some new video game and I’d give him shit about it in the morning. I got into the office Monday morning and I went to his work station and all his little toys and gizmos were gone and I asked where Isaiah was and I remember the whole office just going quiet.” David stared at the napkin that was crumpling in his hand. “Thing is no one knew about us. No one. Not even my partner and we wanted it that way. He didn’t want his family to know and I didn’t want the Bureau to know and... I went back to my desk and my transfer notice was sitting there.” David finally dragged his eyes up to Charlie’s. “We were together eight months and I don’t
even know where he’s buried.”

Charlie reached across the table and took David’s hand. It was his left and his grip was weak but still he squeezed and David squeezed back.

“If you want to tell people it’s okay. Give me a heads up and I’ll manage Amita and Larry and if you’re not ready that’s fine too. I’ll have your back whatever your decision.”

“Isn’t that supposed to be my line?”

“You’ve had my back pretty sold for over two months now, I can get yours. That’s what part of being involved with someone is about, right? Knowing someone’s got your back?”

~

It was early and Don was the only one in. David knew it would fill up quick with people wanting to get an early start on their Friday so they could start their weekend going that much sooner, but for now the air was still enough that the steam from Don’s coffee rose slowly in the pink morning light.

David straightened his tie. He’d never gotten the hang of causal Fridays. Don could throw on jeans and a t-shirt and people could still tell that he was the one in charge. When David tried that trick people triple checked his ID.

“Morning, Don.”

Don looked up from his morning reports. “Morning.”

“Hey, have you got a second?”

Don rubbed at his eyes. “Sure.

“I just thought you should know, I’m going to tell the team. About me and Charlie I mean.” David braced himself for Don’s hard look. It didn’t come.

“Does Charlie know you’re doing this?”

“Yes. We had a long talk about it. He’s going to tell Larry and Amita so they don’t feel out of the loop again.”

Don looked to be thinking a bit then just nodded. “Okay. Tell me if anyone gives you a hard time.”

David couldn’t prevent the snort that came out. Don had been giving him nothing but a hard time, for weeks now.

“Yeah, well, my boss has been giving me shit.”

“That’s because you’re sleeping with my brother. If Chuck was a girl and you were sleeping with her I’d be giving you just as much shit. Possibly more.”

An odd image of Charlie in a red and white polka dot dress popped into David’s head. He did his best to scrub it out quickly. “Not entirely sure how to take that, but okay.”

“Don look hardened. “I’m serious David, you’re a good agent. Almost certainly a better one than me. You figured out how to walk that line I keep tripping on. I know what’s policy and what’s reality are two different things around here and I’d hate to see you get a rough time or your career stall out ‘cause you’re with Charlie. I’ve still got a bit of pull and a bit of clout and if nothing else I can yell really loud so if anyone gives you two shit I want to know about it.”
David tried to shake off the shock that slammed into him. He assumed he could write Don off as a real ally the second Charlie climbed into his bed. He certainly didn’t see himself as a better agent than Don. Don was the one he’d been looking up to for years, the unflappable, unkillable, super agent. “Um... Sure. Thanks.”

“When are you going to tell the team?”

“I figure end of the day is best. Give everyone the weekend to process.”

“Okay then.” Don looked David up and down. “How are things going between you and Charlie?”

“Good,” David answered quickly. “Nice.”

“That, tall, dark, handsome, gay physicist show up yet?”

David’s stomach twisted hard around his cereal and orange juice. “Not yet, no.”

Don gave that funny little smirk again. “David, I’m going to let you in on a little secret. Larry is considered a stud of the physics world. I don’t think you’ve got a lot to worry about.”

~

David felt the seconds tick by slow and heavy. They were Friday seconds but somehow worse than usual; each second dragging and even the space between the seconds seemed stretched to the breaking point. In counter point to the slow seconds David’s heart was running faster and harder than it should and in the silence of the War Room he was surprised the others couldn’t hear it over the soft rustle of file sheets and the click of keyboards.

Finally Don broke the silence with a groan and a stretch. “Okay, that’s it. My brain just went on strike for the next twelve hours.”

Nikki rolled her head around and a collection of pops echoed through the room seconded by the cracking of Matt’s knuckles. “I’m sorry, Don,” Matt said. “I can’t make heads or tails out of this guy’s file system. It’s all hand built and over my head.”

“Okay, I know you tried. Why don’t you sing sweetly to Amita on Monday, see if she can get into it.”

“No problem.”

“Everyone else. Go home.”

The whole team began quickly scraping files back together for refiling. This was what didn’t go into the FBI recruitment pamphlet; the amount of time spent sitting on your ass reading old files. Still, David thought he was on the verge of a heart attack. There was actual pain radiating from his chest and his head was pounding in time with his heart. He knew it was now or never. Don caught his eye, gave a little nod then slipped from the room. David closed his eyes for a second. An image of Isaiah’s empty desk filled his head. David opened his eyes and stood.

“Hey, um... If everyone’s got a second?”

David felt four sets of eyes move to him and begin to burrow in. Time slowed and stretched. David was pretty sure he could hear himself blink and wondered if he just might pass out before saying what he needed to say. He knew the job was half done. Charlie held up his end telling Amita and Larry that afternoon, at least according to his text message. Now it was David turn.
“Um... Just, before you hear it any other way, I want you all to know I’m seeing someone.” David faltered. His team waited. “I’m seeing Charlie... Eppes. Me and Charlie are... um... dating.”

David’s heart dropped as three of the four faces staring at him went dark then Matt threw his arms in the air. “Yes! I called it. Pay up, especially you Granger you cheap bastard.”

Liz, Nikki and Colby all groaned and went for their wallets. Colby turned to David. “You couldn’t have told me. I’m your partner and you couldn’t have told me, instead you let this guy take me for a hundred bucks.”

Matt was collecting his winnings with a grin that stretched across his face. “Thank you ladies and gentleman and David. I am now that much closer to my new video card.”

Nikki shook her finger at Matt. “I want to know how the hell you knew?”

“So do I.” David added.

Matt just held out his hands twisting his face into a less than believable mask of innocence. “Best gaydar in town. What can I say?”

Liz, Nikki and Colby, all down a hundred bucks, turned to David. “You are so buying the drinks tonight, Sinclair,” Nikki stated firmly.

“Sure,” David replied without much real thought. “So... Um... Are we all cool?”

“Once we’ve forgiven you for the hundred bucks, sure.” The other two nodded.

“And how many beers is that going to take?”

“Let’s just say you are definitely buying tonight.”

David stood in the middle of the War Room as Nikki, Liz and Colby went to grab their jackets. His heart was pounding but he didn’t feel any real hostility as they walked passed him, though he was sure he was going to have a long talk with each of them at some point. Then Matt stopped at his shoulder. “Just so you know,” his voice was low. “I’ve had an eye on Charlie since he first time Don dragged him in here so I’m sort of hating your guts a little right now.”

Before David could process that shock Matt slipped out and Nikki was yelling at him to hurry up ‘cause they were wasting beer drinking time.

~

David tried three times before getting his key into his own lock and stumbling into his apartment. Lights were on and music was playing. He flopped down onto his couch and tried to get his eyes to focus on Charlie. “Did you pick my lock?” He slurred.

“Yes. You drunk texted me and I wanted to make sure you got home in one piece. You really should just give me a key.” David tried to nod but his head felt heavy. “How’d everyone take the news?”

David thought and thought some more then he remembered to breathe and had to start thinking from scratch. “Matt hates me ‘cause he wants you for himself.”

David giggled at the expression on Charlie’s face thought he wasn’t completely sure why it was funny. “Well I guess I’m not setting him up with Amita then.”

David felt a rush of sad overtake the giggles. “He knows computer stuff. You like people who know
“Knowing computer stuff is not on my list of prerequisites for a partner. And Matt isn’t my type and you are so drunk I’m probably going to have to tell you that again in the morning.”

David nodded at least as far as being drunk part went.

“Okay, you need to probably go to the bathroom then go to bed and you are going to be hurting in the morning.”

To David those both sounded like good ideas but he decided he had a better one. He reached out and pulled Charlie close, tucking their bodies together, then David fell asleep.

~

David knew Colby was looking at him as they drove through downtown. Colby had been looking at him all morning. He kept his eyes on the road but could feel Colby’s sharp green eyes digging into him. He still felt a little off from his rather spectacular binge the previous Friday but that didn’t stop Monday morning from happening as usual.

“What?” David finally broke the silence.

“Nothin’”

“This ain’t the Army. I’m allowed to tell.”

“Never said you weren’t.”

“Then what?”

“Just, rebound relationships don’t work out a lot of the time. I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

David tried to ignore how much that felt like a gut shot. “What do you know about relationships, rebound or otherwise?”

“I’m just saying you’re both my friends. I’d hate to see you get hurt. I mean Charlie can’t be that experienced. I don’t like the thought that he might just be using you to find his feet.”

David took his eyes of the road for a split second to look at Colby. “Charlie’s worth the risk.”

“Sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

“Okay then, good luck to both of you.”
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

The team catches a nasty case and Charlie goes AWOL from date night.

David flicked on the TV just as the game started. He wanted a beer to go with the game but he was on call for the next 48 hours. Actually what he really wanted was a beer and Charlie to go with the game. It had only take a few weeks of properly ‘dating’ for David to get quite used to Charlie’s presence. Even when they weren’t really doing anything it just felt a little better to have Charlie around most days. He’d even taken to taking paperwork to the Craftsman and so he could sit in the garage and work while Charlie bounced between his boards.

There was suddenly an insistent knocking at the door. David jumped. Charlie was spending the night in some sort of meeting with Amita and Larry and Colby usually called before coming up.

David peeked through the spy hole then opened the door to a scowling Charlie.

“Is this a bad time?” Charlie’s teeth were clenched and David began to panic wondering exactly what it was he’d done. He couldn’t think of anything.

“No. Come on in. Game’s on.” Charlie stomped passed. “What’s wrong?”

“Just...” Charlie waved his hands. “It’s just been one of those fucking days.”

“Weren’t you supposed to be meeting with Amita and Larry?”

Charlie snorted and threw his arms in the air. “Yes, I was, except two of the more reasonable people in my life have somehow been magically replaced with a pair of emotional, intractable, irrational...” Charlie let out a frustrated growl. “Then I got home, my own home, and Dad lays into me about something, I don’t even fucking know what. Something about the wedding venue which I canceled weeks ago and Don’s got a bug up his ass about some analysis like I’m a fucking computer you can poke and it’ll give you data.” Charlie was at full voice. David just tried to nod sympathetically.

Charlie took a deep breath. “I just had to get the fuck out of there. I’ve been driving randomly for the last hour I don’t even remember consciously getting here.”

David switched from sympathetic to worried in a heart beat. If Charlie was losing bits of time even to anger it was not a good thing. “So no one knows you’re here?”

David instantly knew that was the wrong thing to say as Charlie’s face hardened. “No, don’t you start in on me too.”

“Charlie...”

“No.” Charlie turned and headed back to the door. “I can not deal with this from you too, I will find a hotel for the night.”

David made a move to grab Charlie when his phone rang. David grabbed it in a Pavlovian reaction and Charlie walked out the door. “What?” David snapped into the phone.
“David, it’s Don we’ve got a triple homicide that ended with a toddler getting grabbed about fifteen minutes ago. I need everyone. Is Charlie’s with you?”

“Hold on.”

David rushed out his door, down the hall and grabbed Charlie just before he stepped into the elevator. He thrust the phone into Charlie’s hand.

“Hello?” Charlie’s face morphed from pissed off to serious and focused. “Okay.” He pulled a notepad out of his pocket and started scribbling. “Okay, I’ll come in with David and see if I can’t put together some sort of search pattern optimization in the car.”

David rushed back to the apartment and suited up while Don fed Charlie data, all previous arguments pushed aside.

~

David rubbed at his eyes as the office TV droned out another bulletin asking for any information on Maggie Green. Three years old, missing, mother, father, and step brother all executed around the family dining table. It had been 48 hours since she’d gone missing and David could count the hours of sleep he’d had on one hand.

Don hadn’t been kidding when he said everyone. Just a few feet away Larry was fast asleep, his head pillowed on a stack of files and through the glass walls David could see Charlie and Amita hunched over a computer and David knew in the other room Dr. Otto Bahnoff was going over the life work of the dead father, a weapons designer, looking for anything that might put up a red flag. So far, however, the trail was going cold and everyone was short on time, sleep and temper.

David reached over and shook Larry awake. He jolted up. “Sorry Larry but you were drooling on the files.”

“Quite alright.” Larry rubbed at his own eyes. “How long was I out?”

“Almost half an hour.”

“I had an odd dream.”

“Helpful odd or just odd odd?”

Larry just blinked a few times. “I think I should go talk to Charles.” Larry got up and wandered into the other room. David looked down at a pile of statements and hoped he wouldn’t fall asleep himself.

~

David watched the coffee slide into his cup. He didn’t drink coffee normally. He didn’t particularly like the taste and he’d known too many hardcore caffeine addicts to really want to go down that road but at this point he was too exhausted to care. They had one more day. One more day before the case was taken out of their hands and given to another team for long term investigation. One more day before Maggie Green was just another small face in a data base and her family were just crime statistics.

In the corner of the break room Charlie and Nikki were talking quietly. David didn’t even try to listen in on the conversation, just took a little note when Nikki patted Charlie on the arm. David wanted to do that. He wanted to do more than that. He wanted to wrap his arms around Charlie and sleep for about twenty years.

“For a given value of okay.” Charlie took a sip of his coffee and grimaced. “I feel like I’m missing something. Actually I know I’m missing something. It’s right in front of me I just can’t get a hold of it.”

“You’re exhausted.”

“So is everyone else.” Charlie pounded the counter. “Damn it!” he hissed. “There has got to be something.”

Otto picked that moment to put his head around the corner. “Hey, um, Doctor Eppes?”

“Yes Otto?”

“I think, um, well, there’s some really weird data here I think you should look at.” Otto then vanished as quickly as he had appeared.

Charlie looked at David. “Weird data. How can I resist?”

“I don’t know!” Charlie shouted. Everyone in the War Room including David jumped.

“Well pick one!” Don shouted back.

“No! Target A is a 39% chance, target B is a 39% chance and C is 21%. Those are the odds. Those are the facts. I am not going to randomly guess with a child’s life on the line.”

“You’ve made guesses before.”

“I’ve been wrong before.”

“Well don’t be wrong this time.”

Charlie pulled at his hair. Neither Charlie nor Don seemed to be aware of the people around them. They were brothers and they were goading each other like brothers.

“Charlie,” Colby said gently. “Just give us your best. Which one feels right?”

“Which one feels right? Feels right?” Charlie’s voice went high and squeaky. “Last time I put serious stock into feelings I ended up thirty seconds away from being dead!” The entire room cringed.

“Charlie,” David held up his hands hoping Charlie would keep calm. “You know these numbers better than anyone, you’ve stared at them the longest. You got us this far, it’s just one more little step.”

“I am not a profiler, I don’t know.”

“Sure you do.”

“B,” Charlie blurted out. “No! A. The margin of error was smaller on A.”

“A or B, Buddy?”

Charlie turned back to the map on the wall and the pictures of possible criminal hideouts. “These
guys are amateurish criminals aren’t they? They’re trying to be big bad guys but they’re not very good at it.”

“If three dead can be considered not very good.”

Charlie pointed to the location in South Beach. “C. It looks like a criminal hideout.”

“Are you sure?”

Charlie took a deep breath. “No Don.” His voice was calm. “I’m not sure. If you don’t like my opinion feel free to form your own.”

Don nodded. “C it is.”

David’s first partner taught him to savor the real victories since they were few and far between. David let himself really enjoy the sound of the cuffs clicking down, binding murderous hands. Over the killers’ shoulder he watched as Don scooped up little Maggie Green from her cage and carried her out into the sunlight and the waiting arms of the paramedics.

David walked his killer out into the light and into the waiting arms of a uniformed officer. Charlie was leaning against the side of the tactical van. “Hey there.”

“Hey.”

“Good guess.”

Charlie shook his head. “A or B. The math said A or B.”

“Yeah, but your guts said C.”

Charlie just sighed. “I know.”

“Maybe your unconscious mind analyzed the data a little differently, saw something that didn’t make it into your hard equation.”

Charlie shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m too tired to think about it right now. I’m going to go home and pass out for twelve hours.”

“Sounds good.”

Charlie started to turn away then stopped. “Hey, want to grab dinner and a movie Friday night? Assuming another case from hell doesn’t jump up and bite us in the next 48 hours.”

“That sounds great. Friday night.”

Charlie smiled and David hated the fact that he couldn’t just lean forward and touch his lips to Charlie’s. “I’ll see you then.”

David had just stepped out of the shower when his phone started ringing. “Hello?”

“David, it’s Don. Is Charlie with you?”
David was surprised at how quickly his system could shift into Charlie Worry these days. “No. We’re supposed to be seeing a movie in a couple of hours. What’s up?”

“When did you last talk to him?”

“We texted this morning about nine. What’s going on?” There was silence on the line. “Don!” David snapped.

“Charlie was supposed to meet with Larry and Amita this afternoon then have some late office hours. He didn’t show for any of it. His car’s not at CalSci. He’s not picking up his phone, it’s going straight to voice mail. Last anyone’s seen or heard from him was around two.”

David felt his heart stop in his chest. “I’m coming over.”

~

David tried Charlie’s phone for the twentieth time since Don’s call and listened to it go straight to voice mail again. “Charlie. Please. Wherever you are, whatever is going on, please, call me, call someone. Text. Smoke signals. Something.”

David hung up. Alan was frozen in place at the dining room table. Don was only marginally beating out Larry for pacing. Amita was trying to look calm but she seemed to be vibrating at the same rate that David’s heart was pounding.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Amita suddenly said though she didn’t sound like she entirely believed it herself. “Charlie forgot to charge his phone and is probably in the middle of a problem working at a cafe or something with his iPod turned up.”

“Well I don’t particularly feel like risking it.” Don growled. David was about to try Charlie’s phone again when Don’s rang. “Hello... Yes...” Don’s face went tight and hard and David’s stomach flipped over “We’re coming out there.” Don flipped his phone shut. “Charlie’s Prius is in the main lot for Eaton Canyon Park. There’s no sign of him.”

Larry grabbed Don’s arm. “Charles and I used to hike that area all the time. We both know those trails well.”

“Great,” Don shook off Larry and grabbed his coat. “You’re leading the search party.”

~

Technically Charlie wasn’t missing long enough to call in an official search, yet by the time they all pulled into the parking lot it was swarming. Colby had a selection of USGS maps of the area spread over the hood of his truck. A few minutes later Liz and Nikki both arrived suited up for hiking which just made David feel out of place and under prepared, still in his date clothes. Not that he was particularly good in the outdoors to begin with. Tim King and some local park service rounded out the search party.

“Hey!” Don barked getting everyone’s attention. “We’re splitting up, going in pairs. We are working on the scenario that Charlie is injured, possibly unconscious somewhere. His phone is either off or broken and we don’t know if he has any gear with him. Charlie likes to walk, considers it his sport, so don’t make any assumptions about where or how far he might go. He can wander off in his head and put a lot of distance on his feet. He also knows this area well so he would not be unwilling to take side trails, even dear tracks. Every pair is getting a GPS unit, and keep in radio contact. We don’t need anyone else getting lost out here.”
Colby grabbed Larry even as Don nodded to David and tossed him a flashlight. “You’re with me.” They all hit the main trail, Charlie’s most likely route but quickly branched off onto side trails.

“Charlie!” David yelled. “Charlie!” He stopped for a second and listened hoping to hear a human sound over the summer crickets and the thumping of his own heart.

He and Don hiked on shouting and shining their lights under every bush and down rocky hillsides.

“Charlie!” David wondered where Ian Edgerton was. If he was possibly anywhere near the LA area. “Charlie!”

David wasn’t sure how long they’d been searching, long enough for his throat to get raw, when Don’s radio crackled. “Granger to everyone, we’ve got him. He’s banged up but alive and awake.” Before David could even properly process relief his body spasmed and his head spun. He grabbed at a tree as his stomach rejected a glob of acid and what was left of his lunch.

Don put a hand on his shoulder. “You okay?”

“Peachy.”

“Colby sent through his location. We need to double back to the main trail.”

David nodded and spat into the tall grass a few more times. “Okay. Let’s go.”

David followed, a step behind Don as they moved as quickly as possibly over the rocky terrain. When they hit the main trail they met up with Nikki and Amita. No one said anything just moved as fast as the dark would allow.

In the end finding Charlie’s location wasn’t difficult. King, Colby and the Park Rangers were already slowly winching Charlie up a steep hillside on a snap together back board. David shined his light down. The hill wasn’t vertical but there’s no way an injured person could climb up it. It was covered in tall grass with thick live oak clumped at the bottom. A person could lay there for days or even months and never be seen.

“How did you find him?” David asked Colby, Charlie was still half way down the hill.

“He was banging rocks together. Some complicated pattern. Larry heard an echo and was like a bloodhound.” David felt a bit of vertigo his again. This time it was Colby’s hand on his shoulder. “Hey, he’s got a sprung knee, probably some cracked ribs but he’s fine. Rangers already radioed for an ambulance, it’s going to meet us in the lot. He’s going to be fine.”

David just nodded not trusting his voice. Instead he lent his flashlight to the effort. It was slow going since the hillside was mainly rock held together with clumps of grass that kept coming loose but with one final heave Charlie was pulled up to the main trail and laid flat. Everyone got out of Don and David’s way.

Charlie grabbed David’s hand. It was cold despite the warm night and David wasn’t sure if it was his hand shaking or Charlie’s. “I didn’t try to kill myself.” Charlie’s voice was nothing but a hoarse whisper and his face was twisted in fear. “I swear. I just tripped. I don’t want to go back to St. Clare’s. I just tripped. I promised.”

Don ran a hand gently over Charlie’s head. “It’s okay, buddy.”

“I just tripped. I swear.”
“I know. It’s okay. You tripped. Now let’s get you to a doctor, get that knee wrapped up, and check your head for bumps.”

“David.” Charlie seemed to be trying to shout but it was nothing but a whisper and the tiniest of squeaks.

“It’s okay. No St. Clare’s. You tripped. If you say you tripped you tripped. You promised.”

Charlie closed his eyes and let go of David’s hand. David grabbed the edge of Charlie’s back board along with Don, Colby, King and the Rangers and like an odd little parade they made their way slowly through the dark down to the lot where the ambulance was waiting.

~

The waiting room wasn’t nearly as bad as the last time David decided as he waited for the doctor to come out with word on Charlie’s condition. Alan didn’t look too thrilled but he was the only one who hadn’t seen Charlie with his own eyes yet. Despite Charlie’s state of alive and reasonably well the waiting room was still full of people who seemed perfectly content to spend their Friday night there.

A nearly elderly doctor came in and looked at the crowd. “Eppes?”

“Yes,” everyone answered in more or less unison.

“Right,” The doctor looked at his clip board. “Okay... Mr. Eppes...”

“Doctor Eppes,” David corrected knowing people calling him Mister Eppes was one of the few things that made Charlie really grind his teeth.

The doctor looked at David for a second. “Doctor Eppes is more or less fine. He has some lightly cracked ribs but they’re not broken. No internal injuries. His knee is twisted up pretty well but nothing ice, cortisone and a little time won’t cure. A very minor concussion but nothing we’re particularly worried about. Some scrapes and bruises. He’s completely blown out his voice. That should come back in a few days after a bit of rest and plenty of hot tea and he’s a little dehydrated. We’ll keep him over night just to be on the safe side but all told he could be in far worse shape considering. It looks like he managed to tuck and roll pretty well.”

“But he’ll be okay?” Alan asked his voice still holding that edge of panic.

“He’ll be fine. Our biggest worry is the couple of ticks we pulled off him but we’ve sent those down to the lab for analysis and we’ll give him a course of antibiotics if needs be.”

David sat down hard in a free chair and the whole room seemed to let out a collective sigh.

“Now,” the doctor continued. “He’s also refusing any pain medication until he gets to talk to the lot of you as a group and being damn stubborn about it so the lot of you get in there, let him say his piece then I’m throwing all of you out for the night.”

Everyone nodded as the doctor opened the waiting room door and pointed the way.

Charlie’s room was like every other hospital room, painted in the same blue and off white with that heavy disinfectant smell. Charlie was propped up a little with his leg elevated and while David had seen him look worse he didn’t look good. His hands were bandaged up, but there was dirt caked under his nails and streaking his face, and there were bits of grass well woven into his curls.
“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“It’s...” Don began but Charlie violently shook his head. Don fell silent as Charlie squeezed his eyes shut and pulled in several breaths.

“No. I. Am. Sorry.” Charlie opened his eyes, tears slid freely down his face cleaning streaks in the dirt. “I am so sorry.” Charlie’s voice was barely a squeak but each word was slow and deliberate as if carefully selected from every possible word in the English language. He looked to everyone in the room. “I hurt all of you. I betrayed all of you. I lied to all of you and I am sorry.” Nobody moved. Nobody said a word. Charlie took another breath wincing slightly. “I have done so much damage to this family, this team and I don’t know if I can ever fix it or if you can ever forgive me or if you even should but I am so very sorry.”

Shuffling footsteps outside the door seemed to echo impossibly loud.

Charlie turned his head to Don and Alan. “Dad, Don. I love you both so much and I never wanted to hurt you.” Alan took his son’s hand but said nothing. Charlie turned his head. “Larry,” Charlie’s voice cracked the smallest bit. “You spent all those years teaching me logic and reason and grace and I just gave you anger and selfishness in return.” Larry was also silent but reached out and just touched Charlie’s bed. “Amita,” Charlie continued. “I never wanted to hurt you. I wanted to be everything you wanted me to be. I did.” Amita nodded and wiped her eyes. Charlie looked to the foot of his bed. “David, Colby, Liz, Nikki. You let me in. You made me part of the team, you had my back and trusted me to have yours and I lied about who I was until it ate me up and I damaged the team with those lies.”

Colby patted Charlie’s uninjured leg. “You don’t have a monopoly on that one you know?”

Charlie gave a half chuckle and promptly winced. “I’m sorry. To all of you. I am so very sorry. And I need you all to know that.”

Everyone nodded but still the room was mostly silent. David wanted to speak, wanted to say a million things, wanted to hold Charlie and tell him all was forgiven but nobody moved.

Finally Alan ran his fingers across Charlie’s bandaged hand. “What happened out there?” he asked softly.

“I was walking. I lost track of time and was rushing to get back. I know that trail, I’ve walked it a hundred times but I stepped on a rock. I felt my ankle roll, then my knee twisted. I tried to grab onto the tree but the branches snapped and I went down the hill. The one time I don’t go out with someone.”

Don carefully teased some grass from Charlie’s hair. “I thought walking was your sport?”

Charlie half shrugged. “I’m out of practice.”

“Maybe you need a new sport.”

“I like walking. You should come with me some time.”

“Yeah, maybe I should.”

“Oh, here.” Colby reached into a pocket and pulled out the shattered remains of Charlie’s phone. “It was just a few feet from you.” Charlie took the pieces. “The SIM card is still in and none of the individual bits are broken so you can probably still salvage the information on it.” It was hard to read Charlie’s face as he stared at his phone.
“It’s okay, buddy. You’ve been trying to justify buying yourself one of those new Android phones anyway, right?”

Charlie just let out a long sigh and set the bits on the little bedside table. The door to the room opened and the doctor came in. “All right Dr. Eppes you’ve had plenty of time to say whatever you needed to say so I’m throwing these people out. They can come back in the morning.”

Alan immediately pulled Charlie into a gentle hug then Don did the same before heading out. Everyone else took a moment to at least squeeze Charlie’s hand or give him a pat on the shoulder. David lingered until last. Charlie snatched his hand. “I’m sorry,” he whispered again.

“I know. It’s okay.”

“We missed the movie.”

“There will be others, I’m sure.”

“Stay? For a bit at least. They’ll let one person stay.”

David pulled up a plastic chair and sat down taking Charlie’s hand again. It might not have been dinner and a movie or making out in the car but Charlie’s hand was warm and alive and there and that was the most important bit.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Charlie starts to recuperated from his fall and Nikki gets flowers.

David opened his eyes. A nurse had woken Charlie and was shining lights in his eyes and taking his blood pressure. David checked his watch. It was after midnight. The nurse said nothing, just made some notes in Charlie’s chart and gave a quick glance to David before heading out. David felt Charlie’s hands find his and despite the hard plastic of the chair or the kink in his back David closed his eyes and fell back asleep.

~

The kink in David’s back was profound as was his sleep deprivation when Don and Alan showed up at seven. Charlie was quickly discharged with a bag of drugs, a pair of crutches and orders to keep off his leg. The crutches proved pointless before they were even out of the hospital since Charlie didn’t have enough strength in his left arm to support himself. The crutches were traded out for an old man’s cane and Charlie worked out a sort of hop limp rhythm after taking a few laps around his room.

It was exhausting just to watch. David and Charlie flopped onto the couch almost as soon as they got through the door of Charlie’s place. Charlie curled against his side. It felt so natural it took a moment for David to realize that they were basically cuddling in front of Don and Alan. He looked to Don expecting a far harder expression than the one he got. He pulled Charlie a little closer and Don’s look actually softened.

Charlie let out a jaw cracking yawn. “Did you two get any sleep last night?” Alan asked.

“Not really,” Charlie replied. “Nurses kept waking me up every couple of hours.”

“You should try to get a few more hours.”

Charlie sniffed at himself. “No, I need a shower first.”

David picked a bit of grass from the back of Charlie’s hair. “And a shampoo.”

“That might be tricky.”

Don snorted a bit. “I’ll let you two work that out but I need to get home myself. Charlie?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t wander off.”

“I won’t. Promise.”

Don nodded and left. David rubbed at Charlie’s face a bit to find out just how thick the layer of dirt was. “Come on. Let’s get you up stairs and we’ll work something out.”
Eventually they decided on what was basically a thorough sponge bath. The hospital had rebandaged all of Charlie’s cuts and scrapes with plastic bandages before he left but what wasn’t bandaged was one large bruise and his knee was still thickly wrapped. They stripped down and David helped Charlie into the tub.

He started with Charlie’s face trying to wash away the streaks of dirt and tears. Charlie just breathed, his eyes half shut and his face quiet. David went for the arms next and worked his way down Charlie’s body.

Getting Charlie’s hair washed would have been comical if it weren’t for the way Charlie passively followed every order David gave as if his own will was washing down the drain with the dirt. He even let David carefully tease through his hair looking for any missed ticks.

When David decided Charlie was as clean as he was going to get under the circumstances it was a matter of making sure the bandages were still dry and rewrapping his knee.

“You’re look like you’ve been in one hell of a fight.” Charlie just shrugged a little looking down at his bandage covered limbs “How’s your head feeling?”

“Still a bit sore.”

“Did they miss anything?”

Charlie shook it. “No,” he whispered. “I tucked and rolled. Only bit of self defence class I was good at; falling down.”

David still placed his hands on Charlie’s head and felt for any lumps or bumps that might have been overlooked. “Okay. Let’s get us to bed.” Charlie accepted his bath robe and gingerly put his arms into it. David made do with a couple of towels and a prayer that Alan was still down stairs then ushered them quickly down the hall to Charlie’s room.

David stared at Charlie’s room and particularly his bed when he got there. It was not the room he remembered. The room he remembered had been cluttered and had the feeling of a teenager’s room that had just never been fully moved out of. The sheets on the bed had been plain white and the blankets looked like they had been picked out by Margaret Eppes many years before.

“You redecorated.” The bed was on the other side of the room so it now had a view of the window instead of the door. The bed still wasn’t made but the sheets were a dark blue flannel, the old blankets were gone and replaced with a summer weight duvet, also deep blue, and there were about half as many pillows as David remembered.

And that was just the bed. The layers of posters and papers had been stripped from the walls. Some were now framed and others just gone and there was a sense of at least attempted organization and the feeling that perhaps an adult lived in the room.

Charlie looked around. “Yeah, I figured while I was madly cleaning and changing everything else I might as well move the furniture around.”

“I like it.”

Charlie just climbed into bed and David followed sliding between the soft sheets and carefully pulling Charlie close.

~
David had rarely been so thankful for a truly quiet weekend. He’d spent most of it with Charlie and Charlie had spent most of it hobbling around his house and trying to hum random bits of songs to himself but his voice was still mostly gone and was only starting to come back to normal by Monday morning.

He could only guess at the thoughts that must have run around Charlie’s mind as he lay at the bottom of a valley banging rocks together, but Charlie spent the weekend quiet and passive and yet when he smiled at little things they seemed honest smiles not edged with shame, anger or fear. It was like stress of the previous months had been drained out of him and he was waiting to be filled with something new. David hoped like hell that whatever it was that filed him it would be a good.

David looked up from his desk as he heard the elevator open. He’d managed to get in a bit early. Not early enough to beat Don but before Colby and the girls. Liz and Nikki had shown up gossiping about a supposed affair between Tim King and someone up on eleven. David knew he and Charlie were still the big office gossip topic of choice but it was nice to know some other people were getting talked about as well.

Colby stepped out of the elevator with a cup of coffee one hand, half hidden behind a couple dozen yellow roses in a cut glass vase tucked against his body.

Colby dropped the roses on Nikki’s desk. “And be so kind as to tell reception that I’m not your delivery boy.”

Nikki peered from around the roses. “Who are these from?”

“Don’t ask me. I couldn’t afford to give a girl that many on my best day.”

Liz reached over and snagged the little card from the flowers before Nikki could. Nikki grabbed for it but Liz passed to Colby who passed it to David who quickly passed it off to Don.

Don flicked the card open. “Nikki, Thanks for the advice. Charlie?” David was quickly paying a lot more attention.

“Recommended a new conditioner?” Colby asked.

Nikki snatched the card away with a dirty look for Colby and her boss. “We were just talking about bad cases last week. You know, what you do when they’re done, shit like that.”

“And what did you recommend?” Don asked but David had a funny feeling he sort of already knew.

Nikki looked embarrassed. “I told him when it gets bad I go screaming.”

“Screaming?”

“Sure, screaming. You know. Take a long walk, find some place where no one’s going to hear then scream your head off for a while. Kick a tree. Throw some rocks then suck it up and get back to work. Cheaper than therapy.”

David shared a quick look with Don. They’d never actually asked Charlie why he went out on that trail in the middle of the afternoon without telling anyone and if he’d blown out his voice yelling his head off somewhere it might have made yelling for help a little more difficult.

“Screaming?” Don nodded a little and sipped his own coffee. “I’ll keep that one in mind.”
David tapped on Charlie’s office door before letting himself in. Charlie was behind his desk hunched over student papers. “Hey there, need a break?”

Charlie glanced at his watch. “God yes,” he crooked while slowly arching over to stretch his back. He winced before he got very far.

“Nikki got her flowers.”

Charlie smiled. “Oh good.”

“Screaming?”

Charlie’s smile faded. “It was a bit more than that.”

“How much more?”

“Started with screaming. When I couldn’t scream any more I cried and when I cried myself out I started beating the earth with my hands until I started screaming again. Kept doing that until I realized how late it was and it was an hour hike back to the parking lot and there were probably rattlesnakes in the grass poised to eat me.” David perched on the edge of Charlie’s desk and ran his hand over Charlie’s hair. “And then I fell down a hill.”

“Well the first bit sounds cathartic.”

“That’s what Dr. Flores said. He also said I can cut back to one visit a week as long as I behave and you and Don promise to call him if it looks like I’m taking a bad turn.”

“I think we can manage that.” Charlie’s smile was back, soft and sweet. David knew Charlie wasn’t better yet, that he was still feeling his way out in the world and the physical and mental scars would never be completely erased but he still let Charlie’s smile warm him. He leaned forward and brushed his lips against Charlie’s. Charlie’s hum of approval was scratchy but still sounded content.

He backed off before things could heat up too much. “Can I take you to lunch before I’ve got to get back to work?”

Charlie put a quick peck back on David’s lips. “Absolutely.”
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Charlie and David fool around some more and David and Amita finally talk.

David ran his hands in long strokes down Charlie’s body as he lay naked across David’s lap. The last of the bandages were gone, the worst bruises were faded to just yellow and he could take a full deep breath. His lovely round ass was in the air, his skin still hot and a little damp from the long decadent shower where David had worked two soapy fingers into him until he came with a whimper against David’s thigh.

He was half hard again already his cock trapped between David’s thighs and his body seemed to roll into every touch.

David picked up a tube of lube. “Are you sure you’re ready for this?”

“Please,” Charlie whined. “I can take two just fine now.”

David couldn’t argue with that. A little soap or lube and Charlie could take two of his fingers and be begging for more even as he came.

“You know the rules.”

“If it hurts I’ll say ow, ow, ow stop.”

David gave Charlie a little tap on his back side for being a smartaleck. Charlie gasped, wriggled all over, and he felt Charlie’s cock jump. He made a note to explore that at a later date but for now he was carefully lubing up his fingers. He thanked whatever gods of gay sex there might be in the greater pantheon for the fact that standard KY was one of the very few things in the universe that didn’t make him break out.

He slipped a finger between Charlie’s cheeks and ran it around his already loosened hole. Charlie moaned, spread his legs and melted across David’s lap. It was almost absurd how responsive Charlie was arching his body into even the most feather light of touches. David settled his other hand into Charlie’s hair alternating between rubbing his head and pulling ever so lightly at the curls that were beginning to get quite long.

David kept running that one finger around and around Charlie’s hole until Charlie was whimpering and the muscle began to twitch. David slid that one finger in effortlessly and Charlie sighed.

“More,” he whispered. “Please.”

David let that one finger set a steady pace. Charlie knew by now that begging did not get him more. He did slip his hand from Charlie’s hair and slid it under his body to tease at a small hard nipple.

Charlie gasped and pressed his face into the pillows with a growl. David chuckled. Charlie had nearly passed out the first time he’d had his nipples properly played with and they just seemed to develop a greater sensitivity each time. David lightly pinched at the tight nipple and Charlie tried to
clench down around David's single finger then loosened. David slipped in a second.

“Oh, yes.” Charlie began panting as David twisted and stretched his fingers loosening the muscles. His own cock was almost painfully full and he had to remind himself that as tempting as Charlie’s ass was he would not be taking it that night. There wasn’t any sort of official time line, though he wouldn’t be surprised if Charlie had one. They had not even discussed it much, there would simply be some time in the future when they would both ready, in every sense.

Charlie’s body was beginning to roll and David could feel his cock twitching. David brushed his prostate and he whimpered and moaned. He gave it a good rub and Charlie’s head snapped back. “Oh,” he gasped. “Prime recursions. Oh god.” Then he collapsed forward again.

David tried not to laugh. It seemed that when Charlie’s verbal skills were right on the edge of shorting out they default to math. David actually wanted to know what was going through Charlie’s mind while his body swam in pleasure but he had a feeling Charlie wouldn’t have words for it and if he did they wouldn’t be words David could understand.

David slid out his two fingers and put a dollop more lube into his hand. “Ready?” Charlie just nodded but it was vigorous. “Okay.” David pressed in just the tip of one finger then the second then stretched the two and slid in the tip of the third. He put his free hand to the small of Charlie’s back then slowly pushed in. The sound Charlie made was closer to a growl. It was low and rumbled through his body.

David stopped his fingers about half way. Charlie clenched tight then his whole body loosened. David slid his fingers the rest of the way in and twisted his hand a little. Charlie’s body twitched and he suddenly felt Charlie’s cum hot and wet between his thighs. That was something else they were still working on. Charlie could cum three or four times on a good night but a look could set him off. Still David twisted his three fingers and slowly worked them in and out while Charlie sighed and gasped and whimpered and occasionally said random words that David might try to look up later.

When Charlie was reduced to a boneless human puddle across David’s lap he pulled out his fingers and cleaned his hands on a waiting towel.

“Anything hurt?” Charlie wiggled his head. “Can you move?” There was another wiggle. “You got cum between my legs and it’s starting to get cold and sticky.”

That got Charlie moving, slowly. He closed his legs, arched his back like a cat then slowly wiggled himself around ninety degrees. Once there he began slowly lapping his own cum from between David’s thighs. David slid both hands gently into Charlie’s hair.

That was one more thing, possibly odder than the random sex math babble, that David couldn’t quite get over; Charlie’s seeming willingness to lick cum off just about anything. Now David wasn’t averse to swallowing but he couldn’t in any honesty claim it was his favorite flavor. Charlie seemed rather impervious to the flavor however and was attacking David’s spread thighs with long strokes of his tongue.

Once that was done he just shifted a few inches north and wrapped his mouth around the head of David’s cock. David closed his eyes and leaned back against his headboard. “Oh god Charlie I swear I will never get tired of you sucking my cock.”

Charlie just sucked a little harder in response and began to play his hands over David’s cock and balls. David tried to hold his hips steady. Charlie was getting quite good and David often found himself coming back down to earth to find Charlie licking his lips a little self satisfied grin on his face.
David breathed in slowly and out slowly even as his heart began to race. Charlie tipped his head and flicked his tongue around David’s head. David’s hips jerked. He’d been on the edge most of the night. Then he felt one of Charlie’s hands slide down and tickle under his balls then press into just the right spot.

David’s eyes snapped open as lightening hit his brain and cock simultaneously. His hands clamped down on Charlie’s head and with a yell the neighbors must have heard he erupted down Charlie’s throat and a second squeeze got him across the face.

David felt his whole body go limp.

“Well.” Charlie looked horribly pleased with himself. “I guess I’ll have to remember that spot won’t I?”

David just closed his eyes and let himself drift.

~

_David tried to will himself awake. It was hot. There were sounds in the distance. Gunfire and he could taste the dust. ‘David!’_

David’s eyes snapped open. The sun was coming through the window and he could hear Charlie’s soft breathing. He took a breath and for some reason thought he caught a whiff of banana.

He threw back the blankets and rolled Charlie away from him. As much as he loved Charlie’s snuggling it was getting into the unpleasantly hot part of the year and Charlie put out considerable body heat. He shook his head a bit. He could have sworn he heard someone shout out his name.

Charlie hummed a little and his eyes fluttered open. “You okay?” Charlie mumbled.

“Yeah, weird dream is all. I’m going to take a run. Go back to sleep.” Charlie reached out and stroked his side a little even as his eyes fell shut again.

~

David paid little attention as he wandered down the CalSci hallways with some folders tucked under an arm. He still felt off and had all day like he was forgetting something important but the more he tried to work out what might have been in that dream the more it slipped from his grasp.

He knocked on the door of Charlie’s office, well Charlie’s old office, aka Amita’s new office. David had only been in it a few times. Amita kept it far neater than Charlie ever had but Charlie’s chalkboards and toys were gone. In their place was computer after computer. Though Amita had inherited the furniture including the couch that had featured in more than a few of David’s fantasies.

There was no answer so David tapped at the door again. A little thread of nerves crawled up his back. He hadn’t actually spent any time alone with Amita since he and Charlie came out and he was aware that on some level he was almost the other woman.

There was still no answer. David tried the door handle. It turned easily and he carefully opened the door and steeped inside.

Amita was sitting hunched over on the couch staring at her phone in her hands. She was completely still, only the small rise and fall of her shoulders telling David that she was alive.

“Amita?”
Amita didn’t answer. David shut the door behind him and flicked the lock. Something was not right.

“Amita?” he tried again and still received no response.

He approached slowly examining her face which was slack, she didn’t even appear to be blinking. David’s mind began running through possibly medical problems as he got within arms reach as well as wondering if perhaps Amita was one of those people who could sleep with their eyes open. With the kind of care he learned from the Tel Aviv bomb squad he reached out and brushed her shoulder.

“Amita?”

Amita jumped dropping her phone. David jumped back. “David!”

“Hey there.”

Amita scooped up her phone. “You scared me.”

“I’m sorry. I knocked a couple of times and said your name. You didn’t hear me.”

Amita rubbed at her eyes. “Sorry... I must have.” She shook her head. “Was there something you needed?”

David held out the files. “From Don.”

“Oh, right.” She took the files and stared at them as if she wasn’t sure what they were for. Then she got up put them on her desk, stared at them for another few seconds then picked them up again and put them on another table on the other side of the room. While she was there she poked a couple of buttons on a keyboard then paced back towards David.

None of it looked right to him. She seemed like she was sleepwalking if anything. He touched her shoulder again as she walked past. She jumped again as if she’d forgotten he was even there.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m fine,” Amita said and her mouth twitched in an attempt to smile. “Really.”

If David had to guess anything he’d say shock. He was not going to make the same set of mistakes twice. “Bullshit.” Amita just blinked. David would have expected anger but instead there was nothing.

“I’m...” Her voice faded out.

“Amita, talk to me. What happened? What’s happening?”

“Mom’s... My mom’s leaving my Dad. Left. She already left him. She...”

*Good for her.* Was David’s first thought.

“It’s my fault.” Amita’s voice cracked.

“That is the biggest load of shit I have ever heard. You are responsible for your actions and your actions alone.”

Amita began to cry and for not the first time David was glad he had sisters. Unlike most men he knew when he really needed to he could handle women crying. He gently put one arm around her shoulder and steered her back to the couch. Once seated he pulled out his pack of tissues and rubbed small circles on her back and didn’t try to rush things.
It took a little while but Amita settled down and reached for the tissues. “I’m sorry David.” She sniffed a bit. “You must think I’m such a cry baby.”

“Never. I’ve always thought you’ve got a streak of bad ass in you. You’re just having a rough patch.”

Amita giggled and sniffed at the same time. It was an impressively unattractive sound. “A rough patch.” She blew her nose. “Yeah, I guess that’s a good term for it.” She went back to staring at her hands. David didn’t push. After several quiet minutes punctuated only by the occasional beep or whorl from a computer Amita looked back up at him, then looked him over. “So... you and Charlie.”

David had a bad feeling about the conversation he was about it have and if he was honest had been halfway avoiding Amita just so he wouldn’t have to have it but she was obviously trying to shift the discussion away from her parents. “Yeah.”

Amita bit her lower lip and looked back down at her hands. “You know I knew. Somewhere in my gut I always knew.”

David wasn’t sure what to say. “I’m sorry.”

Amita gave a tiny half shrug. “When I was still an undergrad I read a paper he wrote on the future of encryption in a post Riemann’s scenario, and there was a picture of him in the back of the journal and I cut it out and put it over my desk and told myself that was the man I was going to marry.” A small sob burst out but Amita quickly wiped it away. “I threw myself at him and when he wouldn’t even look at my cleavage I threw myself at Larry and Alan and Don and I chased away any other woman and I told myself that as long as I was everywhere Charlie was looking he’d have to see me.”

“He did see you.” David took a deep breath and hated himself for the words he was about to say. “He still loves you.” Amita pressed her hands to her eyes. “When you were taken we chased the original vehicle. We didn’t know there’d been a trade off. It was filled with explosives and when we cornered it and it blew and I swear Charlie tried to throw himself into the fire to get to you. We had to tackle him to the tarmac.”

“He would have done the same thing for Larry or Don.” Amita choked out.

“That’s not a bad thing. You’re family to him. You rank up there with his brother and his oldest friend. I’m... just the guy he’s dating.”

Amita looked up at him an odd little frown pulling her eyebrows together. Then she shook her head. “I should have known better when I realized he spent more time fussing with his hair in the morning than I did.”

“Oh I don’t know, I heard Liz make the same complaint about Don. Might just be an Eppes thing.”

That earned David a small chuckle before Amita took a deep breath and focused her eyes on her hands. “You know it was always good, with Charlie I mean, he always made sure it was good. It was a bit like he was going down a check list most days but I always thought that was just Charlie, Mr. Analytical. I didn’t mind, I was always satisfied. Then it all went wrong. That night I left it was the first time we’d been together in so many months and it was so good, better than it had ever been, the check list was gone and Charlie felt so alive and then he closed his eyes and his face opened in a way I’d never seen and... And I knew he wasn’t thinking about me, and I knew he never would again. And it hurt so much.” Amita’s voice squeaked and her whole body clenched up squeezed out two tiny tears.
David didn’t respond. He couldn’t. He could think of nothing to say that wouldn’t come out horribly wrong.

Amita took a few breaths and wiped her eyes before she looked to David. “Was it you?”

“I...” David was shocked. Shocked that Amita would tell him that, possibly more shocked that she’d ask. “I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

She nodded a little. “Okay,” she said quietly. “Good.” She wiped her eyes a few more times then straightened up slapping her thighs. She turned to David. “Don’t let him order raw onions. He loves them, he’ll put them on anything but they aggravate his ulcer. He was given a prescription for Nexium like three years ago but he always forgets to take it or get it refilled and just drinks lots of Pepto until his tongue turns funny colors.”

“Okay.” David, despite everything, didn’t know Charlie had an ulcer. The fact that Amita did sort of hurt but David had to remind himself that she was nearly Charlie’s wife and had been lining herself up for the job for a log time. There were probably volumes of data on Charlie that she had and he didn’t.

“He’s also lactose intolerant but he won’t admit it and it won’t stop him from putting down a carton of Ben and Jerry’s.”

“No dairy. Right.”

“The smell of cloves gives him migraines for some reason. No idea why, it’s psychosomatic or something. And no music on car trips. He’d rather sit in stony silence for five hours while driving.”

“Considering the way he drives that might not be a bad thing.”

“Oh and good luck ever getting the keys to the Prius off him. I swear to god I’ve heard him talking to that thing.”

“All guys talk to their cars, it’s a guy thing.”

“He talks in his sleep but you probably know that.”

That surprised David. “No. I’ve never heard him say a thing.”

Amita looked startled. “Well really it’s only when he’s been seriously drinking.”

“He’s not supposed to drink these days.”

“Oh. Well when he does you’ll find out. He sits straight up in bed, eyes wide open and has long conversations with people who aren’t there. It’s really disturbing. I’ve heard him talk to his mom, his Dad, Larry. I’ve even heard a couple of conversations I don’t think I have the clearance to know about.”

“So I should just wake him up?”

Amita shook her head violently. “No. No. Don’t wake him up when he’s sleep talking like that. It makes him throw up. Instantly. Something Alan and Don were good enough to not tell me about until after I found myself washing vomit out of my nightgown at two in the morning.”

David nodded slowly. “Right. No raw onions and don’t wake the sleep talker.”

“Best you can do is just tell him he’s talking in his sleep a few times and if you’re lucky he’ll lie back
down and shut up.”

“Maybe I should write it all down. Might find some major breakthrough.”

“I tried that. I ended up with his grandmother’s recipe for chicken soup in base seven.”

“I just won’t let him drink.”

“Probably for the best.” Amita looked around her office. “Okay, what else?”

David was still having a hard time believing Amita was telling him all this. It had to hurt. “You don’t have to do this, really.”

“Someone should use this information,” she replied tersely. “Now, every year usually around late August he tries to give up coffee cold turkey. This means he spends a weekend in bed with a headache then falls off the wagon by Tuesday morning.”

“I’ll brace myself.”

“Oh and if he and Alan start arguing about the house save yourself the headache and just walk away, you do not want to be in the middle of that for any reason.”

“Stay neutral on the house. Anything else I should know?”

Amita didn’t say anything right away, instead she just looked at David like she was staring into his head. “He’s really bad about expressing what he wants if he thinks it’ll cause a fight with someone he cares about. When we were planning the wedding he kept just agreeing with my choices on almost everything. After awhile I started picking stuff I knew he’d hate just to see if he’d argue with me. He never did. Then one day I had to get a program off his laptop and I found a folder just filled with pictures of wedding stuff that he never showed me. I wouldn’t have minded 90% of it but he never said a word.”

“What kind of stuff was it?”

Amita smiled a little and shook her head. “I’ll let you work that out for yourself. There’s got to be some mystery, right?”

“Sure.”

She looked up to the clock on her wall. “It’s getting late.”

“Yeah.”

“I owe you tissue.”

“It’s okay. I buy it in bulk.” Amita nodded a little. “Are you going to be okay? Do you want me to call anyone, get anyone for you before I go?”

Amita took a very deep breath. “No. I’m... I’ll be okay. It’s not like this hasn’t been a long time coming. If they’d stayed in California it would have probably happened years ago but divorce is hard in India.”

“What are you going to do?”

Amita laughed. “Oh that’s a fucking open ended question. Right now I’ll look over those files for Don. After that, I don’t know. I’ll think of something. They tell me I’m smart, right?”
“Pretty damn brilliant from where I’m standing.”

“And yet... Should have gone to Harvard.”

“The weather is crap in Boston. And the field office is full of stuffy suits trying to get to DC. You’re better off here.”

“You sure of that?”

“Yeah, actually I am.”
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

No matter what's happening on the home front sometimes it's the job that knocks you around.

David wondered if it was possible to be too tired to breathe. It had been a long 48 hours and any hour spent in TAC gear felt like two. The locker room had cleared out. David had yet to get up the energy to take off his gear. The only thing that was keeping him from curling up on the floor and falling asleep there was the dull throb in his shoulder that did not want to go away.

Something touched his face. David jumped. He had been on the verge of falling asleep.

“David?” Charlie was crouched down in front of him. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” David was aware that his voice was slightly slurred.

“Sure you are. Don’t move.”

“No problem.”

Charlie’s hands went first to the straps on his holsters. David watched through the blur of exhaustion as Charlie carefully removed and properly secured each weapon. Then Charlie went to remove his vest. David tried to lift his arm and suddenly he was awake as a white hot bolt of pain took the short trip from his shoulder to his brain and back again. He had a funny feeling he might have screamed as well ‘cause Charlie jumped back.

“Shit. How hard did you hit your shoulder?”

“It’s fine,” David said automatically even though the throbbing had kicked up a notch.

“Yeah right.”

Charlie reached out and tried to move David’s arm again. David took pride in the fact that he didn’t scream this time but his whole body twitched.

“David, you need a doctor to look at that.”

“It’ll be fine.”

“You can’t move it.”

“I just need some rest.”

“You just need a doctor and possibly an MRI on that.”

“I’m too tired for a doctor.” Charlie pinched his lips. “Please, Charlie. I just need some sleep.”

“Okay, but you’re doing what I say first. Now brace yourself.”
David braced and Charlie reached for the straps of his vest again. He unclipped as many as he could without jarring David’s right shoulder, then unwove the straps from the clips themselves for the rest. By the time Charlie was done David’s vest was more or less dismantled but he’d gotten it off without passing out from the pain.

“How are you holding up?” Charlie asked.

“Still here.”

“Good. You’re coming home with me. We’ll find you something for the pain then put you to bed.” At the word bed David felt his eyes begin to close. Charlie patted his cheek. “Not here. Come on.”

David slowly, and with great effort, hauled himself to his feet and followed Charlie out to the parking lot and into his car. Getting his seatbelt on was another trick and a half but once that was done he closed his eyes and despite the pain was out.

He woke to Charlie saying his name and found himself in Pasadena. Charlie reached over and undid his seatbelt. “Come on, let’s get you inside.”

David just followed again really too tired to make any comment but every step sent a little jolt of extra pain through his shoulder.

“How’s the shoulder?”

“Hurts.” David answered.

“Go sit at the dining room table.” David did as told. Charlie vanished upstairs then quickly came back down and rushed into the kitchen. He reemerged with a roast beef sandwich wrapped in plastic, a glass of water and a small white pill.

“The pill is for your shoulder but you need to put some food on your stomach while you take it.”

David’s stomach suddenly grumbled adding one more unpleasant sensation to the pain and exhaustion. He grabbed the sandwich and took a couple of large bites before swallowing the pill and chugging the water. Charlie vanished again and came back with a couple of large elastic bandages and a pair of safety scissors.

“David, do you think you can take that t-shirt off?”

David tried to lift his right arm and instantly regretted it. “No.”

“Are you particularly attached to it?”

David looked down at the faded black t-shirt. It had a couple of small holes, a bleach stain and the stitching was coming out around the hem. “Nope.”

“Right then, hold still for a second.”

David braced himself against the table as Charlie made two cuts then slid the rest of the shirt painlessly off his left arm. Then he picked up one of the bandages. “Now this is going to hurt a bit but it’ll hurt a lot less once I’m done.”

David just nodded and raised his right arm as much as he could which wasn’t much. Charlie was right however and he soon found his shoulder expertly bandaged and in a lot less pain. That could have also been the drugs kicking in as suddenly everything started feeling a little disconnected.
That was about the time Don walked in. “Shit, David. What did you do?”

“He hit it harder than he admitted. I think it’s compressed but it’s swollen to all hell now.” Charlie answered for him.

“I’m fine,” David said but his lips felt a little funny.

“Sure you are. That’s why you’ve got a Charlie special wrapped around you.” David looked down at the bandages but didn’t manage to completely form the question in his head. “You could pitch seven innings with one of those on if you need to, believe me.”

“I also gave him one of Dad’s arthritis pills.”

“You did what! Those things can knock out a yak.”

“You took one when you twisted up your knee last year.”

“Yeah and slept for twenty hours.”

“That’s why I’m making sure he’s eaten and bandaged up first.”

David was suddenly aware of Don being at eye level with him. It was interesting. Don’s eyes were a lighter shade of brown than Charlie’s. He wondered if Charlie would get the same little lines in the corners, they were kind of cute. David giggled.

“Hey there, David.”

“Hey, Don.”

“Look, you need to stand up, get upstairs and get to bed ‘cause you’re about to take a little trip to sleepy land and it’s going to be a long one.” David watched Don’s lips move as he talked. They were kind of thin. He lifted a finger to try to poke them. Don leaned back. “Okay, you’re stoned. Let’s get you up.”

David found Don and Charlie both helping him get to his feet. It was an odd experience since there seemed to be a delay between every step and the thought attached to that step. Somehow though the steps got him up stairs and to Charlie’s room and Charlie’s blue bed where he lay down and then the world went black.

~

David opened his eyes. His head ached and his shoulder was throbbing a little and his bladder was demanding attention. Without much thought he stumbled from the bed to the bathroom, emptied himself then stumbled back to the bedroom. Only then did he notice a large glass of green liquid on the bedside table with a note in Charlie’s hand that said ‘drink me.’

He took a sip of the liquid and found it to be Gatorade. His body approved and he chugged the rest before falling back asleep.

David woke up again. His head hurt a bit. His shoulder hurt quite a bit but everything felt a little clearer. The clock said six and there was some light coming from under the drawn curtains but he wasn’t sure if it was six in the morning or the evening.

He gingerly sat up and pushed aside the duvet. That’s when he realized he was just wearing his shorts and an elastic bandage. He also realized he smelled.
That was about the same moment the door opened and Alan stepped in a blue gel pack in hand. “Oh, hello, you’re awake.”

David rubbed his face. “Yeah, sort of.”

“Well I was just coming in to wake you up for dinner.”

“Dinner?” David decided it must be six in the evening. “How long have I been out?”

“Oh, a little over twenty hours. How are you feeling?”

“My head hurts.” David thought about the question a little more. “And my shoulder hurts, what did Charlie dose me with?”

“One of my arthritis pills.”

“You take those?”

Alan chuckled a bit. “You get used to them. Honestly they just take the edge off these days, I need to talk to my doctor again.” Alan leaned in. “And truth be told since Don confiscated my stash they’re the most fun I get to have anymore.”

David chuckled and instantly regretted it as his shoulder throbbed. He couldn’t stop the wince.

“Oh, here.” Alan grabbed an odd little pillow from the bed and pulled from it a floppy gel pack and replaced it with the fresh one. Then he settled it on David’s shoulder.

David looked at the pack then back to Alan. “You’ve been icing my shoulder in my sleep?”

“Charlie didn’t want you to wake up with extra pain. He can be quite the mother hen when the mood suits him.”

“Wonder where he got that from?”

Alan just smiled a little. “He’s got an evening seminar, won’t be back until after nine so it’s the two of us again. You’re probably starved.”

David did feel his stomach starting to make noises but the smell coming off his skin was bothering him more. “A bit, but I could really use a shower first.”

“Well you know where it is. Charlie went by your place and got some of your stuff so you’ve got clothes. I don’t think you could get away with borrowing his.”

“Not without making an interesting fashion statement or two.”

“I’ll help you get that bandage off first.” David couldn’t see much of his shoulder but what he could see was some rather complicated looking weaving which felt like it was keeping his arm attached to his body. Alan carefully unclipped a safety pin. The bandages instantly began to loosen and his shoulder instantly hurt more. “When Charlie couldn’t play baseball anymore he still wanted to have something to do with the games. He kept all the stats of course but he did that in his head with one hand tied behind his back even then. Donnie’s coach let Charlie be in charge of first aid, which in those days meant holding the box of band-aids, but Charlie took it seriously and insisted on taking anatomy over the summer. We’d get home from late evenings to find the baby sitters wrapped up like mummies with Charlie calculating their range of motion verses support.”

“For some reason I can picture that.”
Alan put aside the first bandage and started on the second. “Well it probably saved Donnie’s scholarship. Senior year just about the time the college scouts were sniffing around Donnie took a bad wave, got dumped, twisted up just about everything. For a couple of months before every game and practice Charlie wrapped up his shoulders and knees and ankles and he went out on the field like nothing was wrong. By the time the team made the finals they were all the walking wounded and Charlie was wrapping up half of them. We actually thought he might give up math for orthopedics for a while there.”

David couldn’t imagine it. What kind of hell that must have been for Charlie. After everything Don told him and everything he was trying to do to himself to stand in a locker room and tend to the same boys he was learning to hate himself for desiring. David wondered if he’d tended to Jesse, star batter, if he’d found some way to legitimately touch the object of his first little lusts.

David tried to move his arm a little as Alan finished rolling up the second bandage. His shoulder was a deep purple and easily twice the size it should be. “You know it’s hard to believe things like that. I mean I’ve heard all about how Don and Charlie went years without talking and were never close and never got along then you tell me about stuff like that and it just doesn’t quite sync up.”

Alan sighed and sat down next to David. “The thing about Charlie and Donnie is at the end of the day they’re brothers. They might throw fits and tantrums at each other but they’d also die for each other. I hate to say it but they’d probably kill for each other. Donnie sacrificed a lot for Charlie’s education, the whole family did, really but I don’t think Donnie realizes how hard Charlie fought for what little time they had together. If Charlie’s tutors had their way they would have whisked him off to a private school at age five and we would have never seen him again. Charlie threw screaming tantrums to go to Donnie’s games or on fishing trips. He would purposely fail tests if he wasn’t allowed on school trips with his brother. He blackmailed a vice principal when Donnie got in trouble for fighting. I’m still not sure if he knows about that.”

“How do you know about it?”

“Charlie told me once they’d graduated. He walked in on the vice principal and one of the math teachers.”

“Oops.”

“Actually I think that bit of information kept Donnie out of a lot of trouble in high school.”

“Good thing Charlie’s the nosy type.”

“Yeah.” Alan seemed lost in thought for a moment before looking over David’s shoulder. “You really hit that didn’t you?”

“I really did.”

“Well take a shower; I’ll go finish up dinner. It’s just some pasta and salad but there’s plenty of it, and I’ll let Charlie wrap you back up when he gets home.”

“Thanks.”

Alan left and David made his way to the bathroom. It still took him a second to step through the door but he found his toothbrush and razor sitting on the sink and his shower gel was waiting next to Charlie’s soap. His jeans and a button up shirt were also waiting.

The first thing he did though was open up the medicine cabinet, bypass Alan’s arthritis medication and fish out a couple of extra strength Tylenol.
After that David tried to luxuriate in the shower as much as he could with one arm held stiffly to his side. As much as he hated to admit it he’s was going to have to see a doctor and probably be stuck on a desk.

Brushing his teeth was interesting since it was one of two things he did right handed, the right hand he couldn’t actually lift more than four inches. He decided to forgo the shave and just got dressed as best as he could. He had a bit more sympathy for Charlie as every move of his fingers sent pain to his shoulder and pretty effectively killed a lot of his dexterity.

After that it was a matter of following his nose down to the dining room where spaghetti with a thick meat sauce, garlic bread and a big salad was waiting. David’s stomach demanded attention. And with only a couple of words to Alan he dug in.

He was somewhere in the middle of his second bowl he stopped to breathe. “This is really nice, Alan. Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

“I really need to do my own cooking more often.”

“You and the rest of the FBI from what I gather.”

“Unfortunately crime fighting isn’t nine to five. Doesn’t lend it self well to cooking or a lot of other things.”

“Dating?”

“That’s one.”

“Family?”

David froze up a little. He’d talked with Alan since he and Charlie had started dating but they hadn’t Talked. “Family can be difficult,” David replied carefully.

“You interested in children, David?”

“Is this The Talk, Alan?”

“Should it be?”

David took one more bite of spaghetti and carefully wiped his mouth. He turned to face Alan a little better. “I don’t have anything particularly against children.”

“But they’re not a motivating factor in your life.”

“I have two nieces and a nephew. I’ve never had a problem being Cool Uncle David.”

Alan nodded a bit. “I see.”

David found himself completely stuck on what to say. Personally he thought Charlie would work out how to have kids of his own some day but that would probably not be with him. “Alan, I am sure Charlie is going to give you grandchildren one of these days. I know one of the big things that bothered him about Amita leaving was the fact that he was starting to look forward to the idea of children but don’t tell him I told you that.”

“But if you don’t want children..?”
David rubbed his face. “Alan, I’m not a genius. I got where I am by studying my ass off, but none of it came easy, still doesn’t. I really care for Charlie and I’m really enjoying what we’ve got and I want to do right by him but one of these days he’s going to clue into the fact that I’m just a field agent and we are a dime a dozen and whatever wildly remarkable person is out there waiting for him it ain’t me.”

Alan frowned and tilted his head. “I think you need to talk to Charlie.”

“I talk to him every day.”

“No. You need to talk to him.”

“About?”

“Charlie’s a genius.”

“I know that.”

“No,” Alan said again. “Everybody knows he’s a genius but it’s very easy to forget he’s a genius.”

David was confused and beginning to wonder if maybe the drugs hadn’t fully worn off yet. “I’m not following.”

Alan pinched his lips. David recognized the expression. It was the exact same look Charlie got when he was having a hard time dumbing down something particularly complicated. “When Charlie was born he screamed. Now all babies cry but he screamed and he didn’t stop for hours. He wouldn’t feed, he wouldn’t lay still, he spent the first hours of his life screaming himself sick. They had to wrap him up tight, stuff his ears, and cover his eyes just to get him to quiet down because he was born with that little brain of his over processing every tiny piece of input, we just didn’t know it at the time. I read the note he left you.” Alan quickly waved a hand to silence David. “I know I shouldn’t have but I needed information myself that night. I know the one moment in his life when he had no numbers was when he tried to end it. When Charlie chooses something, even something as simple as a carton of milk, he has consciously or unconsciously, analyzed that decision in more ways than you or I could possibly hope to understand. So when he takes the time to actually think about something important, like who he wants in his life or who he is willing to trust, he has put what to us would be a lifetime worth of thought into it. If he’s pursuing a relationship with you it’s not on a whim, or a folly, or because you’re convenient and it’s not something he’ll put aside for a maybe. Math is about absolutes and Charlie is all about math.”

Alan’s words slowly sunk in as David began to wonder just how much thought Charlie had put into that kiss in his hall? How much genius brain power had gone into the idea of asking him to take him home from St. Clare’s? He’d been working on the idea that Charlie was going to get his jollies, they’d have some fun then Charlie would move onto someone more suited for him long term but this is a guy who could think dozens of moves ahead in chess and had written a book on using logic in relationships and Charlie was a man who could make logic sing songs and dance dances for him.

David could only guess at the look on his face as Alan reached over and patted his hand. “Don’t sell yourself short David. It’s true that Charlie doesn’t suffer fools or trust easily but if you were a fool Donnie would have kicked you to the curb years ago and Charlie trusts you far more than he trust me or anyone else right now.”

David still couldn’t think of what to say as his hopes and fears kicked down that six month wall and for the first time allowed themselves to look into a future that involved Charlie by his side.
“Are you going to finish that?” David looked down at his spaghetti. He suddenly wasn’t hungry. He shook his head. “Okay.”

Alan gathered up the plates and took them to the kitchen. David decided that he would have to talk to Charlie. They obviously weren’t quite on the same page and David got the feeling he was the only one who hadn’t realized that. Without thinking he went to pick up his water with his right hand and hissed as the muscles protested. He penciled in the talk for sometime after his arm felt better.

~

David had made his way to the couch by the time Charlie got home. Charlie flopped onto the couch beside him dumping his bag on the floor. “Hi. How’s your shoulder?”

“It hurts but please don’t drug me again.”

“Okay.”

David looked over Charlie who looked reasonably exhausted himself. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, just tired. Long day. Oh.” Charlie dug into his bag and pulled out a scrap of paper. “Nine AM you have an appointment with Dr. Morrow. The guy cut his teeth on Don’s pitching arm so he’s pretty good by now and he’ll take FBI insurance.”

David bristled a little. “You made a doctor’s appointment for me?”

“Well you need to see one and you were out.”

“And why was I out?”

“You were awake for almost 48 hours solid. You would have slept with or without the pill. I wanted to make sure you wouldn’t wake up screaming if you rolled over onto your shoulder.”

“I’m just...” Off David wanted to say. “I’m fine Charlie, okay? I don’t need...”

Charlie poked David’s shoulder with one little finger. David winced. “Yeah, you’re fine.”

David felt the anger start to build up along with a headache. “I’m....”

“David, please,” Charlie cut in. “I spent the day tracking every bullet that got fired off yesterday and just so you know you came two centimeters away from being very dead and I don’t handle it well when I people I care for come that close to dying.”

“Yeah, sucks when that happens.” David kicked himself as the words came out of his mouth and Charlie’s face went hard.

“Yeah, yes it does so just let me fuss over you for a bit until I calm down.”

“Sorry.” David quickly apologized “I know you’re just trying to help. What did your analysis turn up?”

Charlie shrugged. “Don’t know yet. I’ve still got to let the computer process a lot of the data but from where I’m standing it looks like good shoots all around but forensics still needs to come back on a couple of the more damaged bullets.” Charlie let out a jaw cracking yawn.

“Okay, I got twenty hours of sleep, how much did you get?”
“Less than twenty. I’ll be fine. Nothing I haven’t done before.”

“Have you eaten?”

“I think I had some muffins at some point.”

“Your Dad left you some spaghetti.”

Charlie carefully leaned over and around and gave David a quick kiss. “Let me rewrap your arm. Then I’ll eat.”

~

David spun around. He tried to read the street signs but the dust obscured them. He spun around again. He was sure he was late for something but he was lost and the streets all looked the same.

He crossed the road and pushed on for another block. He thought he could hear the sea in the distance. It would be a point of reference but no matter how far he walked the sea never came closer and the streets looked the same.

Finally at another cross road he saw a figure on the other side of the street. “Charlie?”

The figure moved away. David chased after until he came to a building. A door was hanging open. He pushed inside and found his apartment. Tiny, just one room it wasn’t much bigger than his Quantico dorm, the bed shoved against one wall. He could see a lump moving under the blankets.

David smiled and pulled the blankets back. Charlie lay there with wide dead eyes his arm open, blood soaking into the white sheets.

David felt a tap on his shoulder. He whipped around and looked directly into another pair of brown eyes.

David’s eyes whipped open and he jerked up, then promptly wished he hadn’t as his shoulder throbbed. He yelped and Charlie stirred beside him.

He could feel his heart thumping in his chest as the edges of the dream began to fade. He carefully reached out and brushed aside some hair from Charlie’s face. His face scrunched up for a moment like a cranky child’s then slipped back into a deeper sleep.

David checked the clock. His alarm would be going off in just fifteen minutes anyway so he carefully slid from the bed to grab first dibs on the shower.
Chapter Summary

Charlie and David go shopping.

David always hated getting injured, especially his right arm or a hand. He was left handed but always forgot just how much he still did with his right until he couldn’t. The doctor had popped out his shoulder out then popped it back in correctly. David was quite proud of the fact that he hadn’t screamed at the time but he’d been stuck in his sling and on his desk for a week now and was getting damn tired of it.

He still hadn’t worked out the trick for holding his cup and turning on the boiling water with one hand. At least without scalding himself.

“Here, let me.” Nikki took David’s cup and quickly fixed him some tea.

“Thanks.”

“So how’s it going?” Nikki asked as she fixed herself a cup of coffee.

“It’s going. Should be cleared by Monday, Wednesday at the latest.”

“Good. How’s everything else going?”

“You want gossip.”

Nikki tried to look innocent and failed miserably. “Hey, can you blame me? You kind of blindsided all of us going from Mr. Married to the Job to hooking up with the cutest guy in the office.”

“Don’t let Don hear you say that. His ego is still a little bruised.”

“He’ll live. How is it going?”

David sipped at his tea. “It’s good.”

“Really?”

“What are you looking for? Charlie and me, we’re pretty good. I mean I’ve known the guy for six years, any major personality clashes we’ve already had.”

Nikki leaned against the counter. “I remember being distinctly underwhelmed the first time I met Charlie. I though he’d be taller or something.”

David almost snorted his tea. “What in the world would give you that idea?”

“I don’t know. I mean he’d just screwed up his clearance when I got in and all you and Granger would talk about was this guy Charlie who could wave some magic wand and solve all our cases and having Amita was good but not as good as having Charlie. The talk up you guys gave him I just thought he’d be taller.”
“I’ll tell him you said that. He’ll be amused.”

“Speaking of, how’s Charlie doing?” Nikki quickly looked around. “I mean with... stuff.”

“He’s... he’s okay. He’s doing better. Routine helps. Classes, cases.”

“Dates?”

David smiled a little. “Dates.”

“I keep wanting to ask him but he’s not always the easiest guy to have a casual conversation with the at the best of times.”

“Give it a few years. You’ll get the hang of it.”

“A need to speak advanced applied mathematics was not in the Bureau recruitment papers. I went back and checked.”

“Tell me about it. Charlie and I started here on the same case and I spent the whole case thinking Don was out of his mind for bringing his brother in and trying to wrap my head around this whole Hot Zone concept. I mean we couldn’t speak math but Charlie didn’t exactly know how to speak FBI either.”

“Sounds like a short, sharp learning curve.”

“Oh yeah.”

“Speaking of learning curves is he making any progress on his apprentice idea?”

“You just want your own math nerd.”

Nikki gave a firm nod. “Yes I do. How’s it coming?”

“Slowly. He’s talking people around. Budgets and programs are already set for this coming school year but he’s got a definitely, maybe from Millie for the year after.”

“That’s something I guess.”

Don stuck his head into the break room. “Warner, need you and Colby to run and check something.”

Nikki chugged the last of her coffee. “On it.”

Don looked at David’s arm. “When are you out of that sling?”

“Next week.”

“Good.” Was Don’s quick reply before disappearing again.

~

David took long slow breaths and fought the conflicting waves of embarrassment and arousal. Embarrassment because he was standing in a sex toy shop with Charlie and arousal because he was standing in a sex toy shop with Charlie. Admittedly it was one of the less seedy ones. Clean, well lit, with lots of educational reading material and a knowledgeable and helpful girl behind the counter. There was still the fact that he was an FBI agent and it was a sex toy shop.
Charlie seemed surprisingly unembarrassed as they perused the shelves of plugs, dildos and vibrators. David looked at the price tag on one vibrator and decided that for $299.90 it should also rub your feet and do the dishes. Charlie picked up a plug and ran his fingers across it. David swallowed hard.

The shopping trip was Charlie’s idea, undoubtedly spawned by his regular ‘research’ time on the internet which was more than David was willing to bet he’d admit to. He could take three of David’s fingers now and thrashed about as he came but there was something still holding both of them back. They hadn’t talked about it. It wasn’t that Charlie wasn’t doing better. He was going through most days like nothing was wrong and nothing ever had been wrong. But his temper was still shorter than it had been, even with his students, and there were days when David would find Charlie sitting by his office window staring out of it is mind somewhere far away.

He was also less willing to commit to the outcomes of his own math. Before he would say jump and the whole team would jump but during the last several cases he would simply give Don the odds pushing the final decisions into his brother’s hands. He was also less willing to come out to crime scenes. It was closer to the way he worked cases six years ago as apposed to six months ago. David had a funny feeling that full out sex wouldn’t be happening until Charlie was back on his investigative game.

Charlie picked up another plug. This one was deep red, with three lumps, the third being larger than David’s three fingers together. He pictured it tucked into Charlie, stretching him as they had dinner somewhere or at a movie. Charlie looked over. David tried to keep his face neutral but failed. Charlie smirked a little a dropped the plug into the shopping basket.

After that was the job of picking out a dildo. Again, something larger than David’s fingers but smaller than his cock. Whatever they picked it would go deeper than David’s fingers ever had. Charlie picked up a semirealistic looking one with a large base. David pictured himself working it into Charlie with slow deep strokes. A shiver of arousal went through him.

Charlie eventually passed up all the realistic dildos when he found a display of anal stimulators. Made of acrylics, silicone and steel they looked like strange objects of art made by a sculptor with a dirty mind. Finally Charlie picked up something made of shiny black acrylic that was phallicish but also looked like it could have been produced by an algorithm. It was a good ten inches long with a slight curve to it and waves increasing the diameter. David approved and heard a small sound come from the back of his throat. Charlie slipped it into the basket without even looking at David.

The final stop in their little tour around the shop was the one where David would be doing the choosing. David looked over the display of cock rings. Some of them were downright frightening but David had experience with them and Charlie still had a bit of a stamina problem. Richard, the college sort of boyfriend, had possessed a full on fetish for them and had acquired a large collection. David knew exactly what he was looking for. A simple adjustable ring that would also go around and between Charlie’s balls. He found what he wanted towards the back of the display as it was simpler and cheaper than many of the fancy ones.

He grabbed it and Charlie paid for it and the other objects in cash while making polite conversation with the girl who tossed in several pamphlets on toy maintenance and a few free condom and lube samples.

They were almost out the door when David’s phone rang. He checked the caller ID. “Don it’s my day off,” he said by way of greeting.

“It’s been canceled. Charlie’s too. Is he with you?”
“Yes.” Charlie was in fact not looking amused. David took a little solace in the fact that Charlie’s annoyance was almost certainly going to be directed towards his brother.

“Good. A representative’s been killed and the cops found the guy’s kid standing over him with a smoking gun swearing he didn’t do it.”

“What do we need Charlie for?”

“The kid goes to CalSci. He’s studying math.” David looked at Charlie. He knew how Charlie felt about his students, all of his students.

“Guess what Don, you get to tell him that.” He held out the phone. Charlie took it.

“Hello?” Charlie went quiet then blinked twice. “Like Fuck! We’re coming in.”
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

David and Charlie relax.


“Tell me about it,” David mumbled.

“We have the rest of the night off, right?”

“And tomorrow.”

“Good. Is it just me or has it been a fucking long week?”

“Yeah.” Family homicides were always tricky but throw national politics on top and you’ve got a nightmare situation of never ending secrets combined with a media circus.

“David?”

“Yes?”

“I never, ever, ever want to investigate one of my students again.”

David blindly reached over until he found Charlie’s hand and squeezed it. “You cleared the kid.”

“I know. I’ve just spent the last week looking at my math wondering if I was somehow unconsciously influencing my results because I wanted him to be innocent.”

David pushed himself up so he could look at Charlie a bit better. “When have you ever let your emotions truly influence your math?” Charlie gave him a dry look. “I didn’t say judgment I said math.” To David’s surprise Charlie’s face went a little guilty. “Really?”

“You know Colby’s trust metric?”

“You said it didn’t say anything we didn’t already know in our hearts.”

“And none of you ever actually asked to look closely at it.”

David blinked in shock at what Charlie was implying. “What did it say?”

“The math came out completely inconclusive. I may as well have asked Amita’s Magic 8 Ball. But I figured we didn’t have time to waste debating. If he wasn’t a spy I didn’t want him dying out there and if he was I still wanted him back here so...” Charlie shrugged.

“You lied.”

“I gave a very vague answer that let everyone justify what they really wanted to do.”
“You lied,” David repeated still in no small amount of shock.

“I lied. I let my emotions trump my math. At the time it seemed justifiable. Now I worry about doing it again. I mean I don’t have religion for a moral compass, I have science and the first commandment is don’t lie about your results.”

“You did it to save Colby’s life.”

“So ends justify means?”

David decided he was just a little too tired for this kind of debate. Especially after putting up with professional politicians for a week. He swooped in and gave Charlie a quick peck on the lips. “Yes you went a little over the line you’ve drawn for yourself but the fact that you’re bothered about it and worried about doing it again means you’re less likely to go back there. Okay?”

Charlie just let out a long sigh and sat up. “I need a shower.”

“Well you know the way.”

Charlie wandered towards the bathroom. A few minutes later David heard the shower running and he began to doze off.

He opened his eyes later to an extremely pleasant sight. Charlie was standing by the bed still a little damp a towel slung low around his waist. He was also holding a plain plastic shopping bag in one hand. “Look what I found in the bathroom.” He tossed it lightly on the bed.

David peeked in and felt a warm little rolling wave of lust slide up his spine. It was the bag from the sex toy shop. He remembered stashing it in the bathroom before grabbing a couple of hours of sleep a week earlier. He looked up at Charlie who had a sultry smile. It was a smile he’d perfected reasonably quickly once he had a reason to use it. And it always got David’s blood flowing.

“Maybe I should take a quick shower myself.”

Charlie sat on the bed. “Don’t. I like the way you smell at the end of the day.”

“Like sweat and gun oil?”

“Yeah. I remember thinking, once I got past you being the guy sent to spy on my brother by the SAIC, that you smelled really good. You couldn’t have been here more than a few weeks. I had one of those moments thinking about prime numbers in the shower the same day I first got a good smell of you.” Charlie undid his towel and crawled across the bed towards David. “Had another one after that sniper case. You tackled me to the ground and your smell was all over me.”

David lay back as Charlie tucked his face into the curve of his neck and breathed deep. He trembled at such a primal act. He’d always loved Charlie’s sent, chalk, coffee, soap and something just him but he never really thought that Charlie might be enjoying something in return. “At least let me get my suit off. I’m feeling over dressed.”

Charlie backed off and David got naked as quickly as he could without destroying his suit. Charlie was lightly teasing at himself as he watched David undress. He was quietly amazed at Charlie’s progress. Not that long ago he’d been barely able to think about touching himself. Now he was nearly exhibitionistic about it under the right circumstances. David jumped back on the bed and pinned Charlie under him. Charlie wriggled his hips against David’s.

“What number were you thinking about?” David asked.
“When?”

“When you were standing in your shower, washing off my smell and burning off the adrenaline of being shot at for the first time. What number?”

“Twenty seven million six hundred forty four thousand four hundred thirty seven.”

David wasn’t entirely sure but that sounded like the number Charlie gave him the first night he was out of the hospital. David had a feeling that just might equal him in Charlie’s head. With anyone else he might be insulted to have a number associated with him but for Charlie numbers were everything and prime numbers were special.

David kissed him and kept kissing teasing little sighs and moans out of Charlie’s mouth. When Charlie’s body began to go nicely limp he backed off and fished around inside the bag. He pulled out the cock ring. Charlie sucked in a sharp little breath. “Want to try it?”

Charlie nodded and spread his legs. David slipped Charlie’s balls through two of the leather loops then tightened the third around the base of his cock. Charlie grabbed the sheets while his hips lifted into David’s hands. “Oh god.”

“Not too tight?”

Charlie shook his head, his eyes squeezed shut. David smiled and knew exactly what he was doing next. Without giving Charlie any warning he sucked Charlie’s cock in with a long slurp. Charlie half sat up and cried out before flopping back down. David kept going. Usually Charlie didn’t last more than a couple of minutes into a blowjob but this time David just felt Charlie slowly expand between his lips getting larger and harder than ever before.

Charlie’s head began to thrash and the words that were falling from his lips were a combination of curses, prayers and words David would have to look up later. When Charlie began making a noise somewhere between a whine and a scream David backed off to look at his handy work. Charlie’s cock was glossy and nearly purple with the skin stretched tight. And while David couldn’t be completely sure he’d put it at least a half inch longer and thicker than usual. His balls were also drawn up tight and fighting the leather straps.

Charlie himself was gasping for air as tremors rippled across his body. He looked debauched and desperate and so sexy. David gave his own balls a quick tug not wanting to go off too soon himself.

“Don’t move,” David said grabbing the dildo from the bag and running to the bathroom. He gave the toy a quick wash down and grabbed an extra tube of lube and a towel before running back.

Charlie hadn’t moved an inch but his breathing had calmed a little. “Roll over on your front. We’re going to try your new toy.” Charlie smiled sort of dreamily and rolled over with an inelegant flop. “Did you wash well during your shower?”

Charlie nodded and David realized that he might have already rendered Charlie non verbal for the duration. Or at least non coherently verbal.

David knelt between Charlie’s legs and gave his own balls just a bit of a twist. Charlie’s ass was round and smooth and just there and waiting.

‘Not yet.’ He told himself sternly then laid his hands on the small of Charlie’s back. He rubbed gently relaxing the muscles. Charlie buried his face in a pillow with a groan. David slid his hands down kneading at Charlie’s ass casing Charlie to start to grind himself into the sheets.
Then David flipped open the lube. He slicked up his fingers first and Charlie raised his ass searching for them. David knew he could do it right then and there. Stretch Charlie and take him and he knew Charlie wouldn’t say no. He also knew Charlie would never forgive him and he’d never forgive himself.

He slid one finger between Charlie’s cheeks and in. Charlie must have worked himself well in the shower, there was no resistance, instead he just sighed and wriggled. David went for two fingers. That was a little tighter and Charlie made a mewing noise that David knew meant that Charlie wanted more. Truthfully most of Charlie’s noises were some form of demand for more. The phrase Pushy Bottom came to mind.

David took his time though and just let his two fingers slide in and out. As Charlie’s muscles clenched David imagined what they were going to feel like around his cock. He rubbed at Charlie’s back a bit more with his free hand and as soon as Charlie relaxed he slipped in a third finger. This time Charlie growled and started babbling into his pillow. David pulled out his fingers added some more lube and really went back in. Charlie pushed back.

“Easy.” David stoked Charlie’s back. “We have to do this slow, remember? As sexy as you are trying to fuck yourself on my fingers we have to go slow.”

Charlie said something into the pillow that David didn’t catch. Instead he twisted his fingers running them along Charlie’s prostate. Charlie yelped, jumped then settled back down. David pulled out his fingers and picked up Charlie’s new toy. The tip was the size of a marble but it widened quickly. He got a good grip on one end and spread lube across the rest.

Charlie looked up and over his shoulder. “Are you ready for this?” Charlie nodded and lifted his ass in the air. “If it hurts...”

“I know.” Charlie’s voice was already low and rough.

David used just the tip to tease at Charlie’s entrance before slipping it in just an inch. Charlie pushed back seeking more but David pulled it out and put a hand on the small of Charlie’s back. Once Charlie go the hint and settled back down David slid the dildo in again. He worked just the first inch then the second. When he had three inches in he twisted the dildo so the curve found Charlie’s prostate. Charlie moaned low and ground himself into the sheets.

Then David went farther. It was amazing watching Charlie stretch around the slick black acrylic then tighten up around the thinner parts. He almost wished he could take a picture of the dildo half in Charlie’s ass the other half protruding lewdly. His back was flushed and glossy with a thin sweat and his legs were spread in blatant invitation.

David let the dildo just sit for a while and let Charlie’s body adjust before slowly pushing in the thickest part. Charlie let out a wail and pushed back. David watched in fascination as Charlie’s muscles clenched and relaxed in waves right across his body. When they’d all relaxed David began pulling the dildo back out.

After that it was a matter of just finding a slow, easy rhythm. For ten minutes David kept a firm grip and slowly fucked Charlie’s ass. And for ten minutes Charlie moaned, grunted, whimpered, cried, begged and finally began screaming as he tried to work himself off against the sheets.

David pushed the dildo in as far as he felt safe then reached between Charlie’s legs and released the cock ring. Charlie screamed loud and long then went limp.

David eased out the dildo and quickly wiped Charlie clean. His reddened hole stayed open and
inviting. He carefully rolled Charlie over.

“Charlie? Charlie?” Charlie was breathing steadily but he was out cold. David used the moment to clean up the considerable amount of cum clinging to Charlie’s stomach before pulling him into his arms. Charlie’s eyes fluttered open. “Hey there, you went away for a bit.”

Charlie opened his mouth but only a small mewing noise came out. Charlie frowned.

“It’s okay. Give everything a few minutes to reboot. Wiggle your fingers and toes.”

Charlie did as he was told before taking a deep breath. “Wow.” His voice was scratchy

“How do you feel? Any pain?”

Charlie shook his head. “Little sore. It’s okay.”

“Enjoy that?”

Charlie smiled and a thought bloomed in David’s mind. The thought was that Charlie, blissed out on sex, was one of the more beautiful things he’d ever seen. His eyes were alive but soft without that razor edge of lightning hot genius that seemed to define him most days. His cheeks were still flushed and his hair was a mess of curls. It was an angelic look. A debauched angel but an angel nonetheless. David felt his heart squeeze in his chest.

Charlie blinked slowly and David swore he could see bits of Charlie’s brain turning back on behind his eyes. Finally Charlie’s brows came together a little and he looked down their bodies. David was still half hard but was able to wait. Charlie reached down and slowly drew one finger along David’s length.

“How about if we take a bath and we can fool around there?”

Charlie smiled again. “You really should let me pay half your water bill or something.”

“Is that a yes?”

“If my legs still work and I can actually make it to the bathroom that’s a yes.”

David flicked the back of Colby’s ear. Colby jumped and sloshed a bit of coffee over his fingers.

“Dude, what was that for?”

“You owe Charlie a beer.”

Colby sucked the coffee off his fingers then took a sip. “Okay? What for?”

“Remember when we pulled you off that freighter we told you about some math Charlie did, a trust metric?”

“Sure, some weird math that said I probably wasn’t a spy and that’s why you guys came and got me.”

“Yeah, well, Charlie lied about his results. They were completely inconclusive; he just didn’t want you out there.”
“Well, I definitely owe him a beer then.”

David knew Colby wasn’t getting it. “Colby think about this Charlie Eppes went and lied about math results to save your ass.”

David saw the little twitch of realization behind Colby’s eyes. “Oh. Definitely owe Charlie a beer. Maybe a six pack.”

“Yeah. Just thought you should know. I mean Don hit that boat without a warrant...”

“But Charlie lied about math. Yeah, I get it. Next time we’re down at Gonzales’s I’ll definitely buy him a round.”
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Charlie and The Jeans.

David was on a mission. It wasn’t urgent but it was vital. His mission was to pry Charlie out of his garage and get him down to the office. Charlie was still insisting on running extra checks and reworking all of his equations to the point where it was getting tricky to get an answer out of him some days.

Not that David particularly minded being sent on his mission. Their schedules had both become full and clashing and they hadn’t seen each other in a few days. David knocked on the door then let himself in. The house was quiet. He made his way to the garage then knocked again and let himself in.

Charlie was at a board, his headphones on, and the washing machine was churning away. David swallowed hard. Charlie was in The Jeans. They were close to white, nearly threadbare and they hugged his ass like a second skin. Charlie was moving a little in time to whatever music he was listening to. David reminded himself to breathe. That was about all he could do. He was already hard and if any more blood went south he just might pass out.

David ripped his eyes north from Charlie’s ass but that didn’t help much. He didn’t recognize the shirt Charlie was wearing. It was a deep dark blue, much like his new sheets. It was tight around his wrists but puffed a little at his shoulders and from where David was standing it looked like it just might be silk.

Charlie turned around and jumped a little as he noticed David standing there. He took off his headphones. “Hey, how long have you been there?”

David scrambled franticly around his brain trying to remember how to speak. “Just a moment. You didn’t hear me knock. New shirt?”

Charlie looked down at himself. “Sort of. I got it ages ago, after Susan left I think and I never wore it. The tag was still on but I didn’t have anything else clean so old/new shirt and laundry day jeans. I couldn’t even find clean underwear.”

David’s brain crashed and burned. Without any real thought he took three long steps, lifted Charlie into the air, and pressed him against his chalkboard. Charlie gave a little squeak.

“Dr. Eppes,” David growled low into Charlie’s ear. “Are you telling me that you are wearing painted on jeans and no underwear?”

“What happens if I say yes?”

“Then I might have to rip those jeans off you.”

Charlie lifted his legs and wrapped them around David’s waist grinding their erections together.

David attacked Charlie’s mouth demanding entrance and Charlie gave it. He found himself snarling
as he bit at Charlie’s lips and pulled at his hair and only gave a small thought as to the structural integrity of the chalkboard as they rutted against each other.

David felt Charlie’s nails scraping against his skin as their shirts were pulled up and flies were fumbled with.

David nearly screamed with relief as pants and shorts were pushed down and his cock sprung free. Charlie dropped his legs and dropped to his knees even as he pushed his jeans down around his thighs freeing himself and confirming the lack of underwear.

David didn’t have a chance to comment as the head of his cock found its way into Charlie’s mouth. He leaned forward bracing himself against the chalkboard as Charlie multitasked, stroking David with his left hand and himself with his right.

David got one hand deep into Charlie’s hair and began thrusting even as Charlie came, his cum mixing with the years of chalk dust ground into the garage floor. David didn’t hold back, his balls were already tight and that special burn had settled into his lower spine. With a few quick thrusts and a shout he poured himself down Charlie’s throat. Charlie coughed and swallowed but didn’t pull back and David kept going until it felt like he’d just drained out every higher thought or function through his dick.

He stumbled backwards falling onto the couch even as Charlie collapsed under his chalkboard. He prayed no one would wander in to find them sitting there their dicks hanging out.

Charlie spoke first. “Wow. Okay. We’ve never done that before.”

“Done what exactly?” David asked in between gulping breaths.

“Performed a proper sexual act under my roof. Not that I’m complaining mind you.”

David had to think but Charlie was right. When they slept together it was almost always at his place and when it was at Charlie’s there usually wasn’t anything more than some light making out. “You’re right.” David fished out some tissue and cleaned himself up a bit before tossing the rest of the pack to Charlie who wiped up his hands, face and floor.”

“Oh, by the way, Don wants your results at the office more or less now, no more tests or rewrites.”

Charlie giggled as he tucked himself back in. “I was sort of wondering why you were here. I mean I wouldn’t have minded if you just showed up to make out against my chalkboards but I didn’t think it was the only reason.”

David started putting himself back together. “Believe me Charlie if I could ravish you against your chalkboards daily I would.”

“Ravish me? You make me sound like one of the girls in the novels my mother would never admit to reading.”

“I will swear on a stack of bibles that you are definitely not a girl.”

~

David found himself carrying Charlie’s laptop and briefcase by the time they got to the office after being out logicicked as they lightheartedly debated about chivalry and gender roles. David was not even completely sure he lost the debate but he still found himself carrying Charlie’s stuff and walking a few paces behind. It did give him a chance to watch people watch Charlie.
He hadn’t been able to talk Charlie into changing his jeans, Charlie insisting everything else was dirty and it was either the jeans or nothing. Nothing might have caused less of a stir. As they walked down the hall David saw heads turn. Mostly female heads but there was the occasional flick of the male eye and they couldn’t even get a truly good look at Charlie’s ass under his sport coat.

When they got to the war room he watched Nikki and Liz leer quite openly then Nikki gave him a wink.

“Chuck, tell me you’re done banging on your chalkboards and have results.”

David tried his best to keep his face still at that comment.

Charlie stripped off his sport coat. “I would prefer to run my results through a few more tests however since you are insisting…”

“Oh hell.” Don muttered and started brushing at Charlie’s shoulders. “Did you lean on a board or something you’re absolutely covered in chalk.” Don’s hand started brushing down Charlie’s back. “How did you even get chalk..?” Don’s hand froze as it approached Charlie's backside. His mouth froze as well. He squinted up at David. David tried to will down the heat in his cheeks. Charlie was silent. Don removed his hand from low on Charlie’s back. “Have you got our killer?”

“I have some interesting results.”

Very little was said as Charlie presented his narrowed down suspect list though David was aware of everyone’s eyes occasionally flicking in his direction. Don pushed Charlie to knock off a couple of more names that had lower odds then assigned a bit of the list to everyone.

As the team split up Don motioned David off to the side. “I told you to pick him up, not have a quickie,” Don growled.

David tried to think of a good defence.

‘You have no proof.’

‘It’s none of your business.’

‘It’s not like you’ve never done it.’

Then David hit on the one that would send Don running.

“Come on Don. He looked me in the eye and told me he wasn’t wearing underwear. I’m only human.”

The horrified look on Don’s face was priceless. His eyes flicked over to were Charlie was packing up his laptop and he went a little green. His opened his mouth a little but no sound came out. He closed it again and still looking horrified wandered off. David knew he would probably pay for that with a 40 hour stakeout or something but decided the look on Don’s face was well and truly worth it.

~

David tapped on the door to Matt’s little room before letting himself in. Matt was banging at his keyboard like he was trying to drive his fingers through it.

“Hey? Any luck on getting into that system yet?” David asked carefully.

“I assure you Agent Sinclair I will inform you at the earliest possible opportunity.”
David leaned back a little. Matt’s voice had a sneer in it that felt almost dangerous. “Okay, what’s going on?”

Matt stopped typing and spun around in his chair. “Against his chalkboards? In those jeans against his chalkboards? Do you have any idea how many men in this office have been lined up for years desperate for a crack at Charlie? How many hours of fantasies have gone into his ass in those jeans? Then you Mr. Straight Arrow G-Man swoop in before the rest of us even get a chance then parade through here like you god damn own him and just who the hell do you think you are?” Matt stood up and David realized that their nerdy little computer tech wasn’t actually that much shorter than him, just as broad across the shoulders and sporting some serious muscle definition through the FBI polo.

David tried to pull his thoughts together feeling completely broadsided by the verbal attack. “I wasn’t aware anyone else was interested in Charlie.”

“You weren’t aware? Weren’t aware? Fuck. You really are just a straight guy who likes cock aren’t you? Look around; there are six of us just on this floor. Not to mention Jeffrey down in autopsy, Roberts in trace, Mendez in SWAT. All of them want a try at Charlie. I knew who Charlie was years before Don dragged him in here. His 2002 paper on data security post Riemann was seminal. A paper I’d be very surprised to see you get through two paragraphs of.”

David jerked as surly as if he’d been slapped. “I’d watch your tone there.”

Matt flicked off a salute. “Sir, yes sir. Just remember you won’t be able to pull rank on Charlie when he picks up his Fields Medal and half the mathematicians and every university on the planet come courting.” Matt sat back down.

David left, quickly.

~

David ran his finger slowly over the same paragraph for the fifth time breaking down every word. It was gibberish. He knew he should be able to understand it. When Charlie had developed the math it contained for the New American Front case he understood the concepts just fine, but here in black and white academic vernacular it made no sense.

He flipped back to the front of the article. Charlie smiled from a small black and white photo, except it wasn’t Charlie it was Doctor Charles Eppes Ph. D Applied Mathematics, California Institute of Science.

David heard his door open and slid the journal between a couple of files on his coffee table. He’d finally given Charlie a key having gotten tired of his lock constantly being picked.

“Mission accomplished. We have takeout,” Charlie called out.

“That’s great,” David called back.

Charlie pressed a kiss to his lips before starting to unload the takeout Thai on the coffee table. Before David could make a grab for them Charlie shoved over the files himself and the copy of the International Journal of Mathematics slipped out. Charlie picked it up a confused look on his face. David couldn’t stop the odd guilt twisting around inside. It wasn’t like it was porn or something. It was a math journal.

Charlie looked at him. “What do you have this for?”

“I... I just wanted to see the math that you were using for the New American Front case.”
Charlie still looked confused. “You’ve seen the math for that case. It’s in the file.”

“Yeah but I didn’t see the paper you wrote to go with it.”

“If you wanted more information on it you could have just asked, I would have explained it.”

“You’ve been busy. Didn’t want to bug you with an old case.”

Charlie’s brows pulled together. He flipped to the article and skimmed over it then looked back up at David. “David, you can’t understand this?”

“Yes! Thank you!” David snapped. “I am well aware of the fact that I can’t understand more than two words of your work unless you dumb it down for me like I was slow child.”

“I’ll stop talking about my work if you want?”

“No!” David stood up. “You should talk about your work, you do amazing work and you should be able to come home to someone who can do more than smile and nod.”

Charlie rubbed at his face for a second. “David, help me out here. You’re upset and I have no clue what I did or what’s going on.”

“You didn’t do anything. It’s not...” David took a deep breath. “I can’t understand your work Charlie. I want to. I really wish I could. I wish you could just go on about all your theories and problems and breakthroughs and I wish I could understand them and give you feedback and be helpful because that’s what you’re supposed to do when you’re involved with someone but I can’t. And you... I want you to be happy Charlie. How long are you going to be happy with someone who can’t speak the same language and is miserable at chess?”

Charlie closed his eyes, David could feel his heart attempting to beat its way through his chest. Charlie stood. “David, have you ever heard of a guy called John Nash?”

“Sure. Beautiful Mind.”

“Yeah, I’m smarter than he is. Ever heard of a guy called Stephen Hawking?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“I’m not as smart as he is. That is the very slim, intellectual stratus I exist in. There are maybe forty mathematicians globally that work on the same level I do. I know most of them. I like almost none of them and they don’t like me or each other. I don’t particularly like Nash either and Hawking is married and I don’t fancy myself a home wrecker.” Charlie put his hand over David’s heart. “David, you are a perfectly intelligent individual. If you were an idiot Don would have dumped you on someone else years ago.”

“But...”

“You want to understand the math?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Call up Don and tell him you’re resigning. I’ll pull some strings, get you enrolled in CalSci for the fall. You’ll need a few remedial courses, calculus and what not but I’m sure you can pick up your bachelors in the standard four years, another three or four for your masters and you’ll probably start catching up around the second year of your doctorate.” David blinked and felt stupid for
differently. “David, I wasn’t just born knowing how to do this stuff. Yes I’ve got a leg up on it but I have also studied my ass off since I was three years old to get where I am. I wouldn’t survive three days of Quantico and you know it.” David sighed and sat back down. Charlie sat down next to him. “If I need someone to bounce shit off of that’s what I have Larry for.”

“And Amita.”

Charlie shook his head. “No. She might be a computer goddess but she’s not actually all that good with just raw theoretical math. Truthfully Larry isn’t particularly good at it either but he’s got a better grip on how my brain works so he knows where to poke it.”

“So who do you talk to about the really pure math stuff?”

Charlie shrugged. “I don’t. I just try to get it down on paper. I have a couple of hundred filled notebooks and pictures of chalkboards. Most of it is half built, strange late night ideas. When I die my fellow mathematicians will descend and start going over those notebooks trying to find anything interesting. That’s how it works.”

“That’s kind of morbid.”

“It’s the academic circle of life. Now what the hell brought this all on?”

“Matt Li wants you.”

“And what does that have to do with anything?”

“He... He wants you and he can actually read your papers...”

Charlie giggled. “No he can’t.”

“He’s read at least one. He knew who you were.”

“I’ve written a couple of articles for computer journals but believe me his math isn’t that much up on yours.”

“Really?”

“He’s got his masters in computer science but it was mostly focused on networking and security. He dropped out of his doctorate before joining the FBI. No idea why, you’d have to ask him.”

“He’s not exactly speaking with me at present. He really wants you Charlie.”

“I’m not interested in him. I’m interested in you.”

“Jeffrey in autopsy is also interested in you, also Roberts in trace, and Mendez in SWAT.”

The look on Charlie’s face was surprisingly horrified. He shivered. “Well, I know which departments I’m avoiding.”

“Come on. They’re all nice enough guys though I don’t know why I’m arguing on their behalf.”

“I just... I don’t really like the thought of people, I don’t know, thinking of me that way.”

“You don’t like the idea that there are people out there that find you sexy? Which by the way you are.”
“Honestly the idea of, you know just meeting someone and going out with them makes me a little nauseous. I mean meeting some guy in a bar, or at work, seeing a few movies together then giving him access to my body?” Charlie shivered again and made a face like he was eating tapioca. “I’ve never understood how Don can do what he does with women. I know I’m probably the biggest prude of the 21st century but...”

“Even Mendez in SWAT? He’s your type?”

“Are you trying to set me up with someone else?”

“No! I just want to make sure that... I want to make sure you’re not with me because you don’t think there are other options.”

Charlie took a deep breath and pressed his hand over David’s heart. “The night I got out of St. Clare’s you laid down behind me. You wrapped your arms around me and you showed me how to touch myself. You whispered in my ear and you told me to think of a room full of men. I didn’t. I couldn’t. There was only one man in that room and it was you.”

David felt his ego swell even as a weight came off his chest. He wasn’t going to let himself believe that he and Charlie were destined forever and ever. That was too big a fall to set himself up for but at least Charlie wouldn’t be hooking up with some random or not so random guy from the office.

He pulled Charlie in for kiss. “Thank you.”

Charlie smiled. “You know I’m supposed to be the neurotic insecure one?”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind.”
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

David has nightmares and Charlie's math is called into question.

David couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t move and he couldn’t breathe. In the darkness he could make out a shape. It was kneeling on his chest, radiating heat, somehow pinning his body. He could feel Charlie shifting in his sleep beside him even as the thing on his chest tried to squeeze the life from him. David tried to will himself to move. Just one finger. He told himself. If he could move just one finger. The thing on his chest chuckled darkly. David scrambled through his mind. He knew that laugh.

David’s eyes flew open. He sucked in a breath and sat up throwing Charlie’s blankets off. Predawn light was just creeping under the curtains.

Charlie rolled over. “What’s wrong?” he muttered, not even opening his eyes.

“Nothing, go back to sleep.”

Charlie opened his eyes and pushed himself up a little. “Bad dream?”

“It was nothing.”

“David, that’s the third this week.”

David reached out and stroked Charlie’s head a little feeling calmer for that simple act. “I’m okay.”

“Don’t try to kid a kidder, David.”

“I’m okay. Really. I’m going to take a run.”

Charlie grabbed his hand. “I’m here.”

“I know. Now go back to sleep.”

Charlie frowned but wiggled himself back under the blankets. David changed into sweats and tiptoed out the door. They still spent most nights together at David’s place but Charlie had cleared out a drawer, that smelled suspiciously like lavender, and made a little room in his closet for a spare suit or two.

The morning air was cool and Charlie’s neighborhood was peaceful. A garbage truck rumbled down a side street and a few people were walking their dogs or taking runs of their own. David kicked up the pace a little sucking air into his lungs and trying to think of just that. Trying to think of that and not the dark little giggle that was echoing around his head.

David took a left into a small park. It was just some grass, benches and a few swings but it was empty and he let himself go his feet driving into the asphalt path as quickly as he could manage. He looped around and around the park a dozen times until all he could hear was his heart thumping and
the slap of his feet on the ground. When the tight burn started to creep up his lungs to his throat he slowed and started to ease his way back towards the Craftsmen, the sharp edge of the nightmare beginning to fade.

David got back to the house just as Don was getting out of his car. “Hey David, I don’t suppose you being out for a jog means Charlie’s awake and caffeinated?”

“At this hour? He’s not a morning person.”

“Yeah, tell me something I don’t know about him.” David opened his mouth. “Don’t!” Don said quickly. “That was a figure of speech. I don’t want to know what you probably know about him. I really don’t.”

“What do you need Charlie for anyway?”

Don held up a bunch of papers. “I actually need to pull in a favor for Robin. Defense attorney is bringing in his own mathematician who has done up a bunch of math contradicting some Charlie did.”

“Oh, Charlie’s not going to like that.”

“Tell me about it. Robin needs him to meet with a judge in about two hours.”

David looked at his watch. “He’s had six hours but you get to be the one to wake him up.”

David ran to the shower while Don tapped on his brother’s door. A minute later he heard Charlie’s voice even through a closed door and the sound of the water.

A minute after that the bathroom door was flung open. David stepped aside while Charlie took 30 seconds to rinse the previous night’s sex off his body before jumping back out of the shower and running back down the hall his electric razor in hand.

David finished rinsing himself off and headed back to the bedroom. He snagged Charlie’s arm as he was about to run out the door. “David, I don’t have time...”

“Yes you do, hold still, you’re going to court.”

David stripped off Charlie’s jacket, shirt and tie. He’d had a little time to nose around Charlie’s wardrobe and had found a few things that Charlie didn’t wear that often but should. He pulled out a nice sport coat, a shirt that was actually on a hanger, then grabbed one of his own ties and quickly redressed Charlie.

He noticed Don watching from the door way as he tucked in Charlie’s shirt. “Keep it tucked in.”

“Yes mother.”

“It’ll make you look taller. It’s like those optical illusions where they ask you which line is longer but really they’re the same length. Keep your shirt tucked in, it’ll make your legs look longer and you’ll seem taller overall.”

“I’ll try to remember that.”

David gave him a peck on the lips then pushed him out the door.
David was still responding to overnight emails when Don got back into the office. “How’d it go?”

Don grinned. “According to Robin the other guy didn't know it was Charlie's math he was going up against and Charlie actually made this other guy cry.” David cracked up. “According to Charlie he’s a second rate statistician and Charlie shredded him in chambers. And, according to Robin, once this poor bastard was in tears Charlie decided to channel our mother or something and spent ten minutes poking so many holes in the defense’s argument they left chambers willing to take a plea.”

“Oh man, I wish I could have seen that. Where’s Charlie now?”

“ Took him home, sent him back to bed, I figure he earned it. I’m going to have to watch him though, I think Robin wants to poach him full time for her team.”

“It would put him in the line of fire less often.”

Don got that little pinched look on his face that seemed to make his lips disappear. “I saw him first.”

“I thought the NSA saw him first?”

“He was doing my baseball stats way before that. I saw him first.”

David didn’t try to hold back the laughter. “Sure thing Don. You just keep telling yourself that.”

~

David stared at the desk. It was empty. It had a phone and a computer monitor but it was empty. The Rubix cube was gone. The picture of six brothers gathered together was gone. The plastic dinosaurs were gone. He ran his fingers across the desk. It felt dusty. He felt a hand on his shoulder. He spun around. Isaiah stared at him blood running from his nose and ears. Then he reached out.

David sat up straight at his desk, the office bustling around him. “Hey man, you okay?” Colby asked from his desk. “Not coming down with anything?”

David rubbed at his face. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just didn’t sleep well last night. How long was I out?”

“Just a couple of minutes. Look, why don’t you go down to the car, grab a power nap. I’ll cover for you.”

David could feel himself fading but dreaded the thought of sleep. He rubbed at his face. “Nah, I’ll be fine. Really.”

~

David fumbled with his keys. He knew he had to figure out how to sleep, or better yet how to sleep without dreaming. A night or two on short sleep he could handle but he was working on three weeks and was starting to feel it.

He pushed open his door to soft music and a lovely smell coming from his kitchen. He could hear Charlie humming along to Sinatra.

“Hello?” Charlie called out from the kitchen.

David stripped off his jacket, tie and guns. “Hey.” His table was set complete with wineglasses and candles. He tracked down Charlie in the kitchen and kissed the back of his neck. “What’s the occasion?”
Charlie looked up from where he was stirring some sort of red sauce. He grinned. “I made an idiot cry today, I put a bad guy in jail, and generally I’m just feeling good.”

David returned the infections grin then gave Charlie a peck on the lips. “That’s great. And what are you cooking? I thought you couldn’t cook.”

“I’ve got a half dozen recipes up my sleeve. Are you on call tonight?”

“Nope.”

“Good.” Charlie gave him another kiss. “Open up the wine in the fridge.”

David did as told popping the cork on a nice looking Napa Valley white while Charlie fished some baked chicken breasts out of the oven.

Despite the low level grogginess David found himself relaxing. Charlie served up a variation on chicken parmigiana with a spinach and tomato salad, that went just perfectly with the wine. David had a third glass while Charlie dished up cranberry lemon sorbet. Charlie finished nursing his first glass of wine and didn’t pour a second but David was used to that. Charlie had been trying to cut back on his more passively destructive habits, including drinking.

“How are you doing?” Charlie suddenly asked.

David smiled. “I’m just fine,” he said even as a small voice in his head was calling him a liar.

“Good.” Charlie came around the table, sat himself in David’s lap and began to kiss him. David closed his eyes and wrapped his arms around Charlie their tongues lazily chasing around each other. Charlie broke off the kiss and started tracing random patterns with his tongue along David’s neck. David secretly believed he was actually doing math but didn’t care as his toes curled and shivers of lust started running through his body.

He slipped an arm under Charlie’s legs and stood. Charlie held on tight and they were quickly in the bedroom. David started opening the buttons on Charlie’s shirt. “I forgot to mention this morning you looked sexy when you left.”

“Maybe I should let you dress me more often.”

“At least for your court dates.”

After that the clothes came off quickly. There was a fire and urgency to Charlie’s moves as he tumbled them onto the bed. His kisses were wet and open as they trailed across David’s body.

David wasn’t sure if it was the alcohol or exhaustion but he found himself racing to keep up. He looked down to where Charlie was bobbing on his cock, cheeks hollowed out and moans interwoven with wet slurs that filled the room. David felt his balls pulling up and squeezed his eyes tight that dark little giggle suddenly dancing through his head.

Charlie stopped sucking and lunged for the bedside table. He found the lube and began slicking his own fingers and David’s cock while pressing his lips once again to David’s.

“I’m ready,” he breathed into the kiss.

David felt every muscle including his heart and lungs freeze in blind panic. A dark laugh was in his ears and horrible things he never actually witnessed flashed under his eyelids.

Charlie pressed a clean finger to David’s lips then shook his head. David sat silently while Charlie fetched a washcloth and cleaned them both up. His heart rate didn’t calm any. Even when Charlie sat calmly on the bed facing him it felt like his body was about to rattle apart from the force of his pulse. “I’m...” David tried again.

“Don’t apologize,” Charlie said, quickly cutting him off. “I’ve been up to my eyeballs in psychoanalysis for a while now so talk, but don’t apologize.”

“I’ve been having nightmares,” David whispered in confession.

“I know. Every night?”

“For a few weeks.”

“About what?”

‘About who.’ David’s mind supplied. ‘You know.’

“Tel Aviv.” David answered.

Charlie nodded. “Isaiah,” he said, his mouth in a grim line.

David started hearing that name from Charlie’s lips. “How..?”

“You mumble in your sleep a bit. And the job wouldn’t put you off sex.”

“That’s right. You’re a genius.”

“I’m sorry,” Charlie said quickly. “I shouldn’t have pushed.”

“No. It’s... It’s been six years. I don’t know why this is happening. Why now?”

Charlie tipped his head a little and David recognized his puzzle solving face. He couldn’t say he particularly liked it directed at him but he was at a loss and more than anything, tired.

“You never talk about him,” Charlie finally said. “I’ve rummaged through most of your stuff and I don’t even think I’ve seen a picture.”

David stood almost without thinking. He pulled a large box from his closet. It was filled with old files and early training manuals. In the box was also another box he hadn’t touched in years except to see how wet it had gotten in the flood.

He took it back to the bed and opened it. On top was a carefully folded t-shirt announcing Kirk and Spock’s 2000 Presidential campaign. Under that was a collection of comics, a couple of paperbacks and a few other odds and ends of Isaiah’s that had been left in his apartment.

Slipped in between the pages of a copy of Catch-22 was a Polaroid picture.

David picked up the Polaroid. The colors of the photo were starting to fade even though it had been sitting in a sealed box for years. ‘David and Isaiah’ was written beneath it. It was the only picture he had of the two of them together, taken at some bar celebrating someone’s birthday. David couldn’t remember who but the whole office had been invited.

David passed the photo to Charlie like it was a holy relic.
“Jesus David, you said I looked sort of like him, not that we could pass as twins in anything but full direct lighting.”

“I know. I... You’re different. You are completely different people but I avoided you my first month in the office for a reason. Every time I saw you it was all I could do not to cry.”

“And now?”

David knew what Charlie was really asking. “When I’m with you I’m only with you Charlie, I swear. What we have is so different it’s...”

Charlie handed the photo back. “Tell me about him.”

“What?”

“Tell me about him. Tell me about Isaiah Elian Yadin.” David looked at the photo. Isaiah was flushed with life and kosher beer, his eyes were shining. David looked back up at Charlie. He didn’t even know where to begin. Charlie seemed to read his mind. “How did you meet him?”

“First day at the office, just off training probation, still piss green, he was part of the tour. My new boss just said ‘this is Isaiah. He handles anything with a circuit board,’ and we shook hands and there was... a spark.” David closed his eyes for a second remembering that first jolt, the twinkle in Isaiah’s eyes and a knowing smirk on his lips. “48 hours later we were ripping each other’s clothes off in the men’s room. I didn’t even know his last name yet.” David looked to Charlie but Charlie was managing a true poker face for perhaps the first time in his life. “That’s the way it was with us,” David continued. “We didn’t talk like we should have, or just spend time together, we...”

Charlie shook his head and lifted a hand. “Woulda, shoulda, coulda. Just tell me about him.”

David swallowed around an ache that had formed in his throat. “He was... a nerd. His comic book collection was three times mine. His apartment had so many book and computers stacked up together you couldn’t move. He had every Dungeons and Dragons book ever published. His EverQuest and Never Winter Night scores were legendary. He could also party. He could out drink the office, dance until dawn, get a half hour of sleep and still look better than the rest of us on Monday morning.”

David looked down into the box and ran his finger around the edge of the coffee cup with a chip in it. “He had a temper. In retrospect he probably had some flavor of mood disorder. Little things would set him off. Usually people being stupid online. He’d throw absolute screaming tantrums, then crash dawn and withdraw, then demand sex or else and that would be at one in the afternoon and he’d be fine by dinner. He loved his job though. He held it together for work, no matter what, and when he was on an upswing he was so alive.”

“What about his family?” Charlie asked gently.

“No. He talked about them some but I never met them. He swore they’d disown him if they ever found out. I didn’t argue. He could have worked anywhere on earth. He had the brains and the credentials. I know the only reason he was still in Tel Aviv was for his family but he was finding that harder and harder. If... If he hadn’t been killed I would have asked him to come with me here and I’m sure he would have said yes and...” David looked to Charlie and pictured the two of them side by side. “Oh god you two would have hated each other.”

Charlie's poker face broke and he raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“He would have driven you bonkers and vise versa. He wasn’t big on thinking through a lot of his decisions and took a very... spontaneous approach to life that was closer to reckless. But he was
smart so he usually got away with it. You two would have been like twins each insisting the other one is the evil one.”

Charlie reached out and touched David’s hand. “Did you love him?”

Yes. David thought as his whole body clenched up.

“David?”

David finally forced a tiny nod. “Yes.”

“Did you ever tell him that?”

“No.”

Charlie carefully took the picture from David’s fingers and placed it back in the box. Then he knelt at David’s side and pressed his lips to David’s temple. He wrapped his arms around David and stayed like that for a long time. “David,” he finally breathed. “I knew Susan almost six years before I said yes to lunch with her. I knew Amita through her Masters, her Doctorate and a year into her professorship before we managed a date and that date crashed and burned. I’ve known you through my entire Violent Crimes career. That’s six very intense years now. I don’t let people truly close to me quickly or easily and I don’t let them go quickly or easily either. So take your time, work through what you need to work through. I’m here if you need me as a friend and if you still want me as more I’m not going anywhere in a hurry but try not to take forever.”

David took a breath and tried to focus on Charlie’s lips against his skin and not the ache in his chest.

Charlie backed away and quickly dressed then leaned forward again and pressed his lips to David’s forehead this time. “I’m going to go back to my place.”

“Okay,” David whispered.

Charlie touched his cheek and left. When David heard his door close he curled into a ball and spent the rest of the night that way.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

David has some decisions to make.

David stared at his hands. He knew Bradford was staring at him. He could feel it. He had begged Don for an indefinite amount of time off. Don had said yes quickly and without question. It made him wonder what Charlie might have told his brother. Then he made a phone call to Bradford. When he got to the office he laid out everything.

“Take me through the time line again, in detail,” Bradford asked.

David took a breath.

“We got a report Wednesday morning that something had gone down out in the countryside. No one was sure if it had to do with terrorists or was just a domestic that went horribly wrong. Local authorities requested FBI assistance in evidence retrieval and general backup. I got tapped to go out with a few other guys.”

“Did you say anything to Isaiah before you left?”

“No. I caught his eye. My orders had been shouted across the office so he knew where I was going.”

“Then what happened?”

“To me? I drove way out into the middle of nowhere until we found ten dead bodies and a lot of confusion. I helped set up a mobile command center to start processing some of the evidence. I was out there for a few days and I started driving back very late Sunday night. I tried calling when I got back but his phone went straight to voice mail. It was a little odd but I was so tired I just left a message.”

“What was the message?”

“I told him I was back in town and that I’d see him in the morning.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No.”

“And what happened to Isaiah?”

“Thursday morning he was crossing the street and a driver that wasn’t paying attention ran him down. He died on the scene and he was buried on Friday.”

“Of course. Was he on his way to work, or to see someone?”

“No. There was this cafe he liked. He went every morning even though it was a bit out of the way. They made these muffins he liked, banana muffins, and this imported coffee. He went every
morning. They’d have his order just waiting for him.”

“And what happened when you got to work on Monday morning?”

“I looked for him first. You could see his workstation from the elevator. He wasn’t there. I remember the office felt quiet but I just thought everyone was still hung over from the weekend. He wasn’t at his desk and his desk was empty. It was weird so I went over and asked where he was. Things got quiet.”

“Who told you?”

“Julia. She sat next to him. She started crying.”

“And she was not aware of your relationship.”

“No. No one was. He told no one. I only told my mother.”

“And once you were told what did you do?”

“Went back to my desk. Sat down. There was a letter on my keyboard. It said I was getting transferred to L.A. My partner read it over my shoulder, told me congratulations.”

“Did you stay at work?”

“No. Told my boss I was coming down with something. Went back to my apartment. Drank everything I had, passed out, then woke up, got sick and started packing.”

“And now you’re having nightmares.”

“Yeah.”

“And there have been no men between Isaiah and Charlie?” David shook his head. “And very few women.” David shrugged a little. “You know David this is almost too easy, I was sort of hoping you’d bring me something tricky.” David’s head snapped up. Bradford leaned forward. “You haven’t said goodbye, David.

“No. I grieved. I went through all those damn stages. I vividly remember bargaining. I tried making some weird deals with God.”

“I didn’t say grieve. I’m sure you did that. You didn’t say goodbye. You didn’t go to his funeral or memorial or wake, you never even went to his grave. That is the real final stage. Saying goodbye. That’s what funerals and graves are for. The dead don’t really care. They are a time and place for people to say the final words that need to be said and to say goodbye and you didn’t. You put your heart on hold for six years and now you are trying to move forward with a new person but you can’t. You are still tethered to Isaiah and the closer you get to consummating your relationship with Charlie the tighter and nastier that tether is going to feel. You need to say goodbye.”

“How? I mean what the hell do I do? Hop on a plane to Tel Aviv?”

Bradford shrugged. “If that’s what it takes. I can’t give you advice there.”

“I grieved,” David repeated.

“David, you loved him. You loved him and you left without saying goodbye.”

“He left me!” The shout burst from David as he nearly leapt to his feet. Bradford didn’t even blink as
David became aware of what just happened. He sat back down carefully.

“You left Tel Aviv denying and lying about your own sexuality, never admitting to even your closest friends that you once loved another man. That’s worse that what Charlie did to himself. You are disrespecting Isaiah's memory and you know it.”

“He didn’t want anyone to know.”

“He’s dead, he doesn’t care that much, what you’ve got to worry about is your own guilt, shame and memories of him chewing up the inside of your head, not to mention your relationship with Charlie.”

David put his face in his hands trying to will himself not to cry in frustration.

“You need to say goodbye, David. You and Isaiah have got to make peace and you’ve got to figure out how to do that on your own.”

~

David sipped his beer. He wasn’t drunk, he wished he was. He stared at his phone thinking about who to call. He wanted to call his mother, he wanted to call Colby. He wanted to call Charlie and tell him to come over. He pushed his phone aside and slipped the lid off the box that was sitting on his table.

He took out the t-shirt first and brought it to his nose looking for any lingering scent. There was nothing. He set the t-shirt aside and carefully removed the coffee cup. There was still a stain around the inside. David had never washed it. He remembered when it had been flung across the room leaving a dent in the drywall and only chipped as it hit the floor.

The comics were next. They weren’t in pristine condition or particularly valuable ones. They were just ones Isaiah had brought over and forgotten. David wondered what had happened to Isaiah’s collection. It was worth comfortably five figures and full of rare European comics. He had a horrible image of Isaiah’s mother simply throwing it out or something.

David plucked out the copy of Catch-22. It was a Hebrew translation and Isaiah had loaned it to him with orders that he learn the language. It was Isaiah’s favorite book for reasons he refused to explain until after David read it. Isaiah had read his copy so many times it didn’t close properly. It was filled with dogeared pages and large passages underlined or highlighted with Isaiah’s chicken scratch annotations in the margins.

David flipped open the book to a random page. There were three lines highlighted in yellow and in the margin were the words ‘this is us’.

David drank the rest of his beer, then another, then a third then went to bed.

~

David woke up with a start, his heart pounding in his chest. It went along with the pounding on his door. His head swam and in his mouth was the memory of the taste of blood and bananas. It was fading as fast as the dream.

He stumbled to the door and flung it open. Don stood there. “Shit, David, I’ve been banging for over a minute, I was about to call in the cavalry. You look like hell.”

“Thank you, did you want something?”
“Mainly to come in and make sure my second in command isn’t having a breakdown. Losing Megan to her issues was enough of a pain I’m not up for doing it again.”

David waved Don in. “What did Charlie tell you?”

“That if you asked for time off I should give it to you. Am I losing you?”

“No,” David mumbled as he stumbled into his kitchen. He pulled a beer out of the fridge.

Don gave him a pointed look. “It’s seven in the morning.”

David looked at the beer. “It’s happy hour somewhere.”

Don took the beer firmly from his hand. “This isn’t you, what the hell is going on? Is this about that hypothetical gay physicist?”

David snorted then winced. “No.”

“Then what?”

“I’m being haunted.”

“Figuratively or literally?”

David did love the way Don rolled with the punches. He sat down at his table and handed the Polaroid to Don. Don glanced at it quickly then did a double take. “Who is that?”

“Isaiah Elian Yadin. He was my boyfriend for eight months in Tel Aviv.”

“Well, you’ve got a type.”

David took the picture back. “He was run over four days before I got my transfer notice. I was out of town on a job, no one knew about us so no one told me and he was buried before I got back, I don’t even know where.”

Don took the other chair at the table. “I’m sorry.”

“I’ve been having nightmares about him almost since Charlie and I got together but they’ve been every night now for the last three weeks, I can’t even catch a nap without having one, I’m terrified of closing my eyes and the closer Charlie and I get to actually doing it the worse the nightmares get so yeah I’m feeling haunted.”

Don’s brows came right together. “Wait, you and Charlie haven’t done... it yet?”

David felt too wrenched to bother lying. “We’re kind of stalled out at third base and at this rate it’s never going to happen because I’m going to lose my mind first.”

“You’ve talked to someone, right?”

“Yeah, had a long talk with Bradford yesterday.”

“What did he say?”

David looked at the picture. “That I need to say goodbye, need to say all the things I didn’t say, make peace.”
“Well I’ve been there. It’s not easy but it feels better when you’re done.”

“I’m sure it does but I’ve been trying and nothing I do here seems like enough or the right thing and right now I’m starting to believe that I need to drag my ass back to Tel Aviv and I really don’t want to. That city kicked my ass once, I don’t want to give it so much as another day to try to do it again.” Don didn’t say anything but he did reach over and pick up the paperback still sitting on the table from the night before. “Isaiah loaned it to me. He wanted me to learn Hebrew by reading it.”

“By reading Catch-22?”

David shrugged a little. “He was odd at times. He didn’t like explaining things to people who couldn’t keep up with him. I was supposed to give it back to him but I never got the chance.”

Don thumbed through the book a bit and tilted it sideways to read some of the notes. He chuckled a little at one before putting it back down. “David, take the day off. Tomorrow I want you back in the office. You can sit at your desk and drool on your keyboard all day but you don’t get to hang around here drinking beer at seven in the morning. I want you somewhere where people can keep an eye on you while you figure out what you’re doing next. And if that involves going to Tel Aviv I’ll give you the time off for that. Also give Charlie a text and tell him you’re still alive. He’s worrying on a level that’s starting to remind me of our grandmother. And those are all orders from your superior.”

“Yes, Don.”

“Text Colby too. Only reason he’s not kicking your door in is ‘cause I gave him a direct order but I don’t know how long that’s going to stick.” David just nodded, he still felt sick and everything was starting to hurt, like he’d been fighting in his sleep. “I’d tell you to get some sleep but...”

“Yeah, I’ll try.”

David drank his tea barely noticing that it was a bit too hot. Nikki was making coffee and looking at him sideways. He’d been on his desk three days now and was averaging only a couple of hours of good sleep a night. He was on the verge of calling Dr. Flores and asking if he had some good knock out drugs and a spare room.

Nikki nudged him. “Hey, I was talking to you, or at least at you.”

“Sorry?” David mumbled.

“You okay?”

“Just having a minor breakdown. Nothing to worry about.”

“Yeah right. You’re not going to do anything stupid are you? ‘Cause our resident genius used up this year’s allocation of stupid already and took a loan out of next year’s as well.”

David smiled a little. Leave it to Nikki to be that blunt. “I might do something a little stupid but it’s something that I think needs to be done. I just really don’t want to do it.”

“Ah, hell, David, you just described the human condition. If we were smart we would have stayed in the trees but some dumb monkey probably dropped something and had to climb down to go get it.”

“Stupid but necessary.”
“Yep.”

David took another swallow of his tea. ‘Stupid, stupid, stupid.’

~

David knocked on Charlie’s door. He’d decided to put this off until the last minute. He’d swing by home after this then straight to the airport. Charlie opened the door.

“David.”

“Hi. Can I come in?”

“Of course.” David looked Charlie over. He looked tired. They hadn’t spoken much since that night except for the occasion text as proof of life.

“I... um, I don’t have long but I wanted you to know I’m taking a little trip.”

“Where?”

David shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. I shouldn’t be long. No more than a week. I think it’ll help.”

Charlie raised an eyebrow. “You checking in somewhere?”

“Only a mid range hotel.”

“Ohkay.”

“I just wanted you to know I’m not just going for me. I’m trying to get myself back together for us. You’ve been fighting so hard and I feel like I’m dropping the ball here.”

Charlie took David’s hand. It was warm, soft and dry. “Do what you need to do for you.”

David pulled Charlie into a hug their bodies molding against each other. He took a deep breath of Charlie’s sent as Charlie snuggled into his chest.

“Do you have to go now?”

“Yeah, I have a flight to catch.”

“Can I get a kiss before you go?”

David tilted Charlie’s face up to his. “Always.”
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

When David left Tel Aviv he swore he'd never give it another chance.

David bent over backward as far as he could and listed to his spine pop. Sixteen hours on a plane, flying economy, was not the most pleasant thing he’d ever done. The people around him in the customs line looked more or less how he felt as they all shuffled forward like zombies.

He finally reached the front of the line and presented his passport, which hadn’t been used since leaving Tel Aviv to begin with. He also pushed his paperwork and credentials across the small desk. The bored looking customs agent examined everything carefully then eyed him up.

“Reason for your visit?”

“Visiting the grave of an old friend. I couldn’t make it in time for the funeral.”

The agent nodded, stamped his passport and pushed everything back across the desk. “Welcome to Tel Aviv.”

David shuffled forward dragging his suitcase and finally was herded out into the international arrivals area.

He scanned the crowd until he caught sight of a familiar face. Jonathan Brite, his first partner, and the man who got him out of Tel Aviv alive. Jonathan pulled him into a hard backslapping hug.

“God damn it Sinclair, look at you. Welcome back. How was the flight? Got all your stuff?”

“Got my stuff and the flight was long.”

“No shit, come on.” Jonathan waved him towards the exit and the parking lot. They made small talk about the flight until they were in Jonathan’s grey sedan with the air conditioner turned up. Jonathan twisted around in the seat to look at him. “Look at you Sinclair, back in Tel Aviv. What the hell are you doing here?”

David tried to dodge the question. “What are you doing still here? I thought you swore you were getting out, DC or something?”

Jonathan shrugged. “What can I say, the town grew on me. The question is what the hell are you doing back here, Sinclair?”

“I left town quick, didn’t get to wrap up a few things.”

“You left town quick six years ago. That’s a long time leave whatever it is hanging.”

David just shrugged a bit.

Jonathan pulled a folder off the back seat and handed it to David. “Those few things have anything
to do with this?"

David took the folder. He’d asked Jonathan to do some local research for him. He flipped open the folder and looked right into Isaiah’s smiling official photo. “Well I was out of town that weekend, missed the funeral.” David tried to sound casual. Jonathan was one of the better agents he ever worked with and had always been quick on the uptake.

“He was a good techie but I didn’t know you’d ever even talked to the guy. Frankly it took me a minute to remember who you were talking about.”

David desperately tried to school his features and hide the stab of pain in his chest but Jonathan was a grand master of reading faces. “Well,” David stumbled and quickly closed the folder not knowing what to say.

“Oh you are kidding me,” Jonathan said slowly. David hung his head. “No way. You and the techie?”

David closed his eyes. “His name was Isaiah,” he said softly.

“Holy shit.” Jonathan dragged out the words. “For how long? I mean how long did I not notice that?”

“Eight months.”

“You were only here eight months.”

“I know.”

“Wow.” Jonathan didn’t say anything else, just let the sound of the aircon fill the car. “Wow,” he finally said again. “I’m going to have to turn in my badge. I mean everyone knew the techie was a little light in the loafers but how the hell did I miss the two of you for eight months?” David just shrugged a little suddenly feeling like a green probie again. Jonathan gave him a little shove. “And why the hell didn’t you tell me?”

David looked up. “Oh come on.”

“Yeah, I get it. Still. It’s been what six years and now you’ve got a desire to find out where they planted him?”

David rubbed at his head feeling the post flight headache crashing down. “It’s complicated.”

“You’re not dying are you?” Jonathan asked suddenly. “This isn’t a bucket list thing?”

“No, as far as I’m aware I’m no more terminal than the next guy.”

“So..?”

“It’s just...”

“Complicated?”

“Yeah.”

Jonathan raised his hands. “Okay, I’ll stop being Mr. Nosey since I’m obviously crap at it anyway.” He finally put the car into reverse and pulled out of its space. “By the way you’re staying with me.”
David was hit with a memory of Jonathan’s terrifying bachelor apartment. “Um... You know you really don’t have to do that.”

Jonathan laughed. “Don’t worry, I have a house now with a proper guest room and everything. You can find out why I’m still here.”

The rest of the drive was quiet. David stared out the window trying to reorient himself. There was a lot of new construction that he didn’t recognize. In six years it was like parts of it were a whole new city. Jonathan drove out into an area where the homes looked new. He pulled into a driveway next to a tidy yard. “Home sweet home.”

Before they got to the front door it opened. A trim black haired woman stood in the doorway. She was perhaps more handsome than classically beautiful but Jonathan’s face lit up. “David, may I present Mrs. Brite my lovely wife Yafit. Yafit, my old partner David Sinclair.”

David tried not to let his jaw drop open. The Jonathan Brite he knew had been determined to die a bachelor. David shook hands. “A pleasure,” he said automatically then turned to Jonathan. “You got married!?”

Jonathan grinned, “I did better than that.” There was the sound of small running feet and a little black haired blur leapt into Jonathan’s arms. The blur was about four and wearing butterfly wings. “Maya, sweetie this is my old partner David. David this is the smartest thing I ever did, her name is Maya.”

David shook the tiny hand that was held out to him before the girl wiggled out of her Daddy’s arms and ran off. “So.” David was still processing the shock. “Not leaving Tel Aviv any time soon are you?”

Jonathan laughed. “Nope, the place has got me. Come on, I’ll show you to your room. Dinner should be ready soon.”

David unpacked in a small room done in tasteful blues. He couldn’t believe that Jonathan was completely settled down but it wasn’t like he had kept in contact. He knew when he locked away the memory of Isaiah he’d shut away the entire city along with him.

A small dark head peeked around the door to the guest room. “It’s dinner time.”

David smiled. “I’ll be there in a second.”

“You have to wash your hands first.”

What David really wanted was a shower after that flight but hand washing would have to do. “Well why don’t you show me where the bathroom is so I can do that?”

David’s hand was grabbed and he was dragged down the hall to a bathroom where he was carefully schooled in the proper way to wash his hands then dragged back down the hall to where dinner was waiting on the table and a Goldstar Lager was already open and waiting by his seat.

David took a sip. “Wow, that brings back memories.”

“Don’t have those out in LA, do they?”

“Nope, been living off Corona and Heineken.”

Jonathan raised his own beer. “Well, welcome back.”
Jonathan managed to keep the conversation off the reason for David’s trip though David could tell he wanted a better answer than ‘complicated’. He regaled Yafit, a business analyst, with some particularly embarrassing stories of some green boneheaded messes David had gotten himself into during their eight months as partners. David had managed to half forget some of the stupider stunts and made a note to himself to apologize to Colby for riding him quite as hard as he did their first year. Finally, over dessert, as Maya was explaining that she wanted to be a bug doctor, David let out a yawn.

“I'm sorry,” he said quickly.

“Don’t worry about it. What time is it in LA?”

David checked his watch. “About ten thirty in the morning.”

“Did you sleep on the flight?”

“No really. Do you mind if I grab an early night?”

“No at all,” Yafit answered. “It’s time for someone else to get ready for bed too.”

Maya crossed her arms and shook her head. “Not tired.”

Jonathan stood and lifted the little girl right from her chair. “I think you are. I think it’s time for all good little bugs to crawl into their cocoons and go to sleep.” Jonathan headed off carrying his daughter down the hall, her butterfly wings fluttering behind her.

David helped Yafit gather the desert dishes. “Last time I saw Jonathan he was living in a two room bachelor pad you couldn’t find the floor of and most nights he slept on this terrible yellow sofa he had.”

Yafit laughed. “I made him burn that sofa as proof of his love for me.”

“Thank god. That thing was a biohazard. Every time I sat on it I was worried that I was going to catch something.”

“He took me back to his place on our third date. My thought was ‘I am falling in love with this man but that couch must go.’”

“You or it.”

“And I won.”

“Lucky for Jonathan you did.”

~

*David pushed through the crowd. The press of bodies was stifling hot. They were all moving somewhere but David couldn’t tell where. There was just heat and a flat yellow light. He tried to call out but his throat was locked, no sound could escape. He kept pushing against a sea of people. He knew he had to find someone, he knew he had to do it quick. He could feel his heart pound like he was in a race. From somewhere a whiff of sweet putrid rot hit his nose. His stomach clenched and he pressed on harder but the crowd started pressing back. He fell. A crush of humans moved over him. He tried to scream and stand. Just out of arms reach he could see another body topped with short black curls being trampled into bloody nothing. David tried to scream.*
David’s eyes snapped opened. He’d gotten used to waking up in a sweat his heart racing. He wasn’t used to someone shaking his foot. He fumbled for the bedside light and flipped it on.

Maya stood at the foot of the bed in a long nightshirt covered in butterflies and was clutching was looked like a fat, green, stuffed caterpillar. She was also shaking David’s foot. “You had a bad dream,” she stated plainly.

David rubbed at his eyes feeling keenly embarrassed. He’d made hotel reservations mainly so he wouldn’t risk subjecting Jonathan to this. “I’m sorry. Did I wake you up?”

Maya shook her head. “Mommy has bad dreams sometimes to. Daddy shakes her foot ‘cause she can hit hard.”

“Well you can stop shaking my foot now, I’m awake. And I don’t hit very hard.”

Maya let go of David’s foot with a nod and wandered off. A couple minutes later he heard the toilet flush and the soft shuffle of small feet. He flicked off the light and tried to get back to sleep.

David found himself waking up three more times. Twice more in the dark then the third time light was coming between the curtains and his foot was being shaken again.

“You have a lot of bad dreams,” Maya said.

“Yeah, I do.”

Maya pinched her lips and give him an intense dark stare that made him feel like a particularly confusing bug. “Breakfast,” she said then left again.

David managed to make small talk through breakfast and get himself together. He knew what his plan for the day was. He needed to do the thing he should have done six years ago. It was the thing he should have done that Monday when he begged off sick.

Yafit dropped him off near Isaiah’s old apartment. David let his feet take him down what was once a familiar path. Three blocks down, one block up and over. David let his feet take him across the intersection where he knew Isaiah had taken his final breaths. He kept going one more block then stopped.

To his surprise a small cafe was still sitting on the corner. He had been more than half sure it would have been closed or changed ownership but the same mismatched wooden chairs were still sitting on the sidewalk and the walls were still painted to resemble a tropical rain forest.

David inspected the pastries sitting under glass. “The banana chocolate chip muffin, please. To go,” he told the girl behind the counter. There was one left. She put it into a small paper bag and David paid.

From there he went to a corner and flagged down a cab.

The cemetery was one of the larger ones and the man there spoke English. He led David to the appropriate grave then left.

David stared at the grave and the grey lump of stone at its head. He couldn’t read most of what was written on it but Isaiah’s name was also written in English. David took a deep breath, then another. It was hard, his chest tightening and his throat felt like it just might close up. This was it. The thing he’d come half way around the planet for. The thing he had to do to hopefully get his life back. He swallowed hard.
“Well, you got me here,” he choked up. “All the way back to god damn Tel Aviv. And... I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t come here sooner. I’m sorry I wasn’t there on the day. I’m sorry I didn’t feel safe enough to at least tell my own partner about us so maybe I would have found out sooner than that damn Monday morning. I’m sorry I didn’t say goodbye to you properly that day. I’m sorry the sex wasn’t better the night before I left. I mean it was okay but it wasn’t our best. I’m sorry I didn’t go to your family and demand your comic collection. I’m sorry I don’t know what happened to it. I’m sorry I wasn’t standing by your side in that moment. And more than anything I’m sorry I never told you I love you.” David heard his voice crack.

He scrubbed at his eyes and looked around making sure the cemetery was completely empty. “There, I said it. I loved you Isaiah. You were insane and a pain in my ass most days but god I loved you and I’m sorry I was such a fucking coward about it. I don’t know what’s over there but you have every right to be angry at me for that. Here’s me, big bad FBI agent, facing down armed gunman but I couldn’t tell you that for eight months you made me happy and I fell for you so damn fast and hard. I should have told you. I should have told you every damn day. You shouldn’t have died and we should have gone to LA together and gotten married on vacation in Canada. My mother would have loved you. My sisters too. You could have gone to temple with my boss and hung out with the CalSci gang and...”

David took some deep breaths, he could feel his pulse racing. “I’ve got a friend now, Larry. And he told me one night about the big parallel universe theory and how there are an infinite number of them, one for every decision ever made. So as much as this hurts standing here I’m telling myself there are a million other universes where you walked a little faster that day or a little slower or stopped to talk to someone or just laid in bed an extra minute and in all those universes that car missed you and in those universes where you are alive there’s got to be at least a few where we’re together and happy and I hope that David and that Isaiah fucking appreciate what they have.”

David let silence descend in the cemetery once again. Somewhere a bird chirped not knowing or caring about the affairs of men. David ran his hand over his head a few times.

“I don’t know if you’re watching my life. You’re certainly haunting it these days. I can’t close my eyes without you being there anymore. I’ve met someone, his name’s Charlie. Well really I met him six years ago, just after I got to LA, just after you were killed. He had some issues though and I was grieving so hard for you and I couldn’t tell a soul. Anyway a few months ago, well, we’re together now, or at least we’re trying to be. He’s a really good guy. He’s makes me happy. I don’t know if we’ve got a real future but I really want to enjoy what we’ve got going now. It’s hard. I’m trying not to make the same mistakes with him that I made with you, but it feels like I left some big chunk of myself here some days and I need it back. Not all of it but what’s happening now, what’s happening to me... I just want to be able to sleep through the night and make love to Charlie but I miss you. And I am sorry. For everything I am sorry.” David took the muffin out from the little bag and placed it at the base of the headstone. “It’s from your favorite place. It’s still there. Got it just for you. I love you. I always will. Goodbye.”

~

David sat on a low stone bench by the cemetery’s entrance. He watched people come and go. After an hour an entire funeral came through. He watched as women dressed in black sobbed while trailing confused children who looked uncomfortable in their mourning clothes.

The funeral was a long one and it was well over another hour before David saw the same people start to trickle back out. Some were crying more, others less.

It was sometime after the last of those mourners went on their way that David made a phone call.
It took about half an hour before Jonathan pulled up and David got in. “Are you sure this is okay?”

David asked.

“I’m sort of the boss these days. I can give myself a bit of time here and there.”

“Okay.”

Jonathan found a place that was dark, open and already serving alcohol. They got a booth in the corner and David started drinking. It took three drinks for David to get past ‘complicated’ and start laying out the story of the whole sorry mess.

Six or seven drinks in his vision started going blurry but he wasn’t sure if that was from the alcohol or if he was crying. Somewhere after the ninth or tenth drink David found himself in an alley with Jonathan’s arm around his shoulders as he became violently ill. He’s pretty sure he didn’t pass out but things were a little fuzzy after that.

David woke up to his head pounding and the room spinning. Jonathan sat on the edge of the bed and held a glass of blessedly cold water to his lips. David took a few sips trying to wash out the taste of dead things. “What happened?” David mumbled, his lips feeling thick.

“You got blind stinking drunk, rambled, cried, puked in an alley then I took you home and you passed out.”

David winced as fragments of memories floated back. “What time is it?”

“After eleven. There’s some leftover dinner in the fridge if you want some.”

David’s stomach lurched at the thought of food. He shook his head which didn’t feel fully attached.

“I thought so.”

“I’m sorry, Jonathan,” David mumbled.

“Don’t be, you’re doing exactly what you’re supposed to do when you lose someone, you’re just a little late.”

David tried to shake his head again. “Shouldn’t have dumped this all on you.”

“Hey, that’s what partners are for, even old partners. Here.” Jonathan handed him a couple of white pills. “Take these, use the can, then try to get back to sleep. I know this sounds asinine but you’ll feel better in the morning.”

David opened his eyes to find himself being stared at. His foot wasn’t being shaken so he figured he wasn’t having nightmare, that realization alone was a shock to his system which was already feeling a little fragile. “Hello?” he said wincing at the rawness of his throat.

Maya tilted her head. She had ladybugs all over her pajamas. “Are you sick?” she asked suddenly.

“Why?”

“Daddy only makes biscuits for breakfast when I’m sick but I’m not sick and Mommy’s not sick and Daddy’s not sick so you must be sick.”

David slowly sat up. The absolute worst of the hangover had happened overnight but he was still
feeling raw in every sense. “I’ve felt better.”

The little girl nodded seriously then patted his leg and left.

David stumbled to the bathroom and managed to get himself cleaned up and at least looking halfway human before a tray of biscuits came out of the oven.

Jonathan put a plate in front of him that had large fluffy biscuits and poached eggs. “Now this’ll cure what ails you. Mama Brite’s biscuits and eggs. You’d be able to swim back to New York with that in you.”

“I think I’ll fly.” David found the biscuits were quite good and after a couple of cups of coffee the raw edges started feeling a little better. David let himself get roped into a bit of babysitting which seemed to consist of a couple of hours of sitting in the backyard watching Maya catch various kinds of bugs, a couple hours of Fraggle Rock on DVD, then making sandwiches.

He didn’t know if it was planned but after a few hours of looking at the world through the eyes of a clever four year old what had felt like a gaping wound in his chest for weeks now felt like it just might be starting to heal.

~

David had planned for a week in Tel Aviv. He spent the next few days going around to places he and Isaiah had liked together, shops, parks, little cafes. In each one he forced himself to close his eyes, take a breath and remember the good moments he had. Nights were still a little rough but the dreams were not as harsh or graphic and they would slip more quickly from his mind. That didn’t mean he didn’t wake up to his foot being shaken a few times but Maya would just look at him then wander off.

There was one more thing however that he was putting off and each day he told himself it would be that day.

It was David’s last full day in town and already getting late. He knew it was now or never. He double checked the address scribbled on a slip of paper, straightened his tie, clutched Isaiah’s copy of Catch-22 and knocked on the door in front of him. A man in his early 40’s with dark angular features opened the door. “Yes?”

“Hello, my name is David Sinclair, I’m looking for Liat Yadin?”

The man squinted a little. “May I tell her why?”

“I was a friend of her son, Isaiah. I have something of his that I never had a chance to return.”

The man looked him over for a moment then opened the door to let David in. David was led silently down a dark hall to an airy sitting room. There were three men there, all around forty by the looks of them and a small proud looking woman who was at least over sixty. David tried to remember the picture that always sat on Isaiah’s desk as he was sure this had to be at least four of his five brothers. In each of their faces he could pick out something of Isaiah’s face, eyes or cheeks or noses.

The brother who had let him in whispered to their mother. She stood and offered David her hand. “You are a friend of my son’s?”

“Yes, a long time ago, we worked together. My name is David Sinclair.”

She had a good strong grip to her hand then motioned him to sit on the tastefully upholstered sofa.
David perched on the edge to nervous to make himself comfortable. Each of Isaiah’s brothers was giving him some flavor of the eye.

“My son passed away some time ago,” Liat stated plainly.

“Yes, I’m sorry. I was sent on assignment out into the countryside the day before his accident. I didn’t find out what happened until I returned on Monday. I was reassigned back to the states the same day.”

Liat just nodded.

David swallowed hard trying to keep every emotion in check. He put down the copy of Catch-22 and pushed it across the coffee table. He noticed one of the brothers shift a little. “Isaiah loaned this to me. He wanted me to learn to read it. Said it was his favorite. I didn’t get a chance to give it back and it ended up getting packed when I moved. I didn’t want to just drop it in the mail but it’s taken me a few years to get back here.”

Liat picked up the book with her age speckled hands. “He loaned this to you?”

“Yes.”

“And you were a friend?”

“Yes.” David’s heart was thumping so loud and hard in his chest he was sure they could hear it. “We... we both collected comic books.” One of the brothers made a small dismissive noise. “He was a good guy, a lot of fun to be around, smart, always on the ball at work. He... He’s still missed.”

Liat nodded. “Thank you,” she said. The room went silent. David waited a moment but that was apparently it. He stood, gave a bit of a nod, and showed himself out.

He was barely a block away when he became aware of the sound of feet hurrying behind him. He turned to find the youngest looking of the brothers approaching and holding the book. David stopped, the name Ethan popping into his head. The one brother Isaiah had ever really spoken about.

Ethan stopped a few feet away. “Mr. Sinclair.”

“Yes?”

“I know who you are.” Ethan’s voice was serious but David didn’t think he was a threat. “I’m a friend of Isaiah’s. I...”

“No. My mother, my brothers they are good at never seeing things that will disturb them. I knew my brother. I know who you are.” David swallowed hard and silently apologized to Isaiah for where he thought this conversation was going. “I loved my brother,” Ethan continued “but he was... flaming, on his best days.” David lowered his head. He didn’t know what to say. It was the truth but he would not be the one to confirm it. “He tried his best to keep quiet, appear normal, for the sake of our mother but I knew him and when he spoke of you I knew who you were, who you must be to him.”

David’s head shot up. “He talked about me?”


“Yes.”

“That was more discussion than other agents got. When my brother was killed I was afraid you
would come, tell people who you were, cause a scene. And when you did not come I was angry at you that you had not come to pay your respects to the man you were with.”

“I didn’t know. I was out in the country side. No one told me until Monday.”

“Yes. You said.” Ethan took a deep breath. “I knew my brother. He was unwell at times. As a child he was often angry and morose, took to having fits and tantrums. Our father would say that he was too smart for his soul. That never quite made sense but we knew what he meant. In the months before he died Isaiah was happier than I could ever recall him, more at peace, for what that may be worth to you.”

David blinked trying to fight back tears and work his way around the lump in his chest. “Thank you.”

Ethan held out the copy of Catch-22 “My family would not appreciate it.” David carefully took the thick battered paperback into his hands. “And I have my own copy.”

“I still don’t know how to read it.”

Ethan gave a half shrug. “Then learn.” And with no other comment he turned and walked away leaving David on the sidewalk blinking into the falling sun.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

David comes home.

David stretched his back as he stood in the customs line. Jonathan had taken him out his last night in Tel Aviv with some of his team. Surprisingly there were a couple he knew that had, for their reasons of their own, settled into the office there. They had swapped stories of crazy days when they were all that little bit younger and they all wanted conformation that the LA office had a mad idiot savant genius they kept locked in the basement. David had confirmed that the genius’ name was Charlie and they didn’t keep him locked in the basement it was in fact the garage.

It had been a fun night but it meant David crawled onto his international flight with a hangover. The fact that he didn’t sleep on flights meant by the time they touched down in LAX he had a splitting headache, blocked sinuses, and he could feel the start of a rash, most likely from Jonathan’s laundry detergent.

Customs was reasonably easy, his badge getting him through the worst of it. He trudged out into the arrivals area and turned towards the taxi stands when he was suddenly looking at a familiar face.

“Charlie?”

Charlie smiled. “Hey. Welcome home.”

David looked around. “What are you doing here?”

Charlie shrugged. “Thought I’d give you a lift.”

“I mean how did you know I’d be here?”

Charlie smiled sweetly. “I have my sources. Did you honestly think you could sneak off to the Middle East and not have me find out?”

“Don told you.”

“No he didn’t and I didn’t ask him. Now come on.” Charlie took David’s shoulder bag. “You look dead on your feet. Let me take you home.”

David was dead and too damn tired to wonder about Charlie’s sources that were good enough to know exactly what flight he’d be on.

The hum of the Prius starting up was strangely comforting even if Charlie’s driving wasn’t. The traffic ground to a halt outside the airport. Charlie chuckled. “Welcome back to L.A.”

“Yeah.”

Charlie reached across the car and took his hand. David gave it a squeeze, letting himself enjoy the simple touch after so long.
“How have you been?” Charlie asked.

“Sort of all over the place.”

“How have you been?”

Charlie shrugged a little. “I’ve been okay. Cases, classes, research, therapy, the usual.”

“Usual can be good.”

“Yeah it can. Amita and I have decided to have a party.”

David looked to Charlie as that had come completely out of the blue. “Um... Okay... Why?”

“Well the venue for the wedding reception demanded a non refundable deposit. So did the caterers. We canceled everything else except for those two things. We had a long talk a couple of days ago and decided we might as well use them. Swap out the champagne for beer, samosas for pizza, and just invite everyone we know. A party for the sake of having a party.”

“That sounds like fun.”

“Well after then last several months we figured a party wouldn’t hurt anyone. We could all stand to cut loose for a night. Maybe get a karaoke machine or something.”

“Karaoke?”

“If you get Don drunk enough he will sing.”

“Can he sing well?”

Charlie grinned. “Nope.” Whatever was holding up the traffic cleared and they started moving again. “Finally. Let’s get you home.”

David looked around his apartment. There were empty beer bottles, dishes that were growing things, unwashed laundry and scattered bits of paper.”

“Oh my god. Who is the person who belongs to this mess?”

Charlie laughed.

“It’s not funny.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just that’s almost exactly what Larry said when he saw his office for the first time after leaving the monastery. Of course he didn’t have this many empties.”

“I need to clean.”

“No.” Charlie grabbed his sleeve and dragged him to the bedroom. “You need to sleep. Good long sleep. Then you can clean.”

David found his bedroom in a sorry state as well but the bed looked inviting and he barely noticed Charlie peeling off his shirt, and pulling off his shoes and socks. Then Charlie pushed him onto the
bed, tossed the blankets over him and turned out the light.

~

David watched as Isaiah peeled the wrapper from his muffin. The dappled light coming through the cafe windows almost made the painted trees seem real. He sipped his coffee. There was a strange scratching sound coming from somewhere but he ignored it.

Isaiah took a couple of bites of his muffin and sipped his coffee. David had an odd feeling like he was late for something but his coffee wasn’t in a to go cup and Isaiah seemed relaxed.

“It’s really not fair, you know?” Isaiah said after a few more bites of his muffin.

“I know,” David replied but he wasn’t sure why.

“I love this cafe. Best coffee. Best muffins. And no one from the office ever comes here.”

David reached across the table and took Isaiah’s hand. It felt strangely cold. The scratching sound got louder. David could feel his heart starting to race but he wasn’t sure about that either.

“It’s really not fair, David. I can’t stay here much longer, I just can’t.”

“I know.”

Isaiah leaned across the table and kissed him. David could taste bananas and chocolate and coffee. He looked around. Isaiah never kissed him in public but the cafe was empty. “It’s not fair.”

“I love you,” David said his heart trying to pound through his chest. He never said that. He never admitted that. Something was wrong.

“I know. That’s why you buy me muffins.”

“Something’s wrong.”

“Yes it is. I’m way cuter than he is,” Isaiah stated.

“Who?”

Isaiah pointed. David looked over his shoulder. The other wall of the cafe no longer had jungle trees. Instead it was one large chalkboard and Charlie was scratching away at it. Charlie stopped and turned to him. He tilted his head and his face became sad.

“I’m sorry David. It’s basic Newtonian physics. It’s not even the complicated stuff. You can’t just rewrite it.”

David looked back to Isaiah. He was leaning back in his chair, his eyes closed, and his hands wrapped around his cup of coffee. He was smiling softly but was so very still.

David opened his eyes. There was a dull ache in his chest but it no longer felt like a knife, just a bone deep, heavy bruise.

~

David knew Colby was looking at him from the passenger’s seat of the Charger. “Okay. Say whatever it is you want.”
“I was just wondering partner of mine if you were going to tell your partner what the hell has been going on the last few weeks. I mean you acting weird is weird, Don ordering me to keep my distance is weird, you up and god damn vanishing is weird so I think that’s my quota of weird used up for the month.”

David sighed. He’d decided to take a play from Charlie’s book and try to be more honest. It wasn’t easy. “Yeah. Not now. It’s a long story and I’m sober.”

“Okay. So I’ll buy you a beer tomorrow night.”

“I’ll probably cry so I’d appreciate it if you’d respect me in the morning.”

“I’ll do my best, man.”

“Thanks.”

~

David looked up to a tap on the conference room door. He’d moved himself in there so he could spread out the heaps of paperwork he had to catch up on. It was Charlie and he was holding a couple of bags. “I’ve brought you dinner.”

David looked at his watch, it was after eight. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I wanted to.”

David cleared a space as Charlie unpacked a couple of burritos. They ate in mostly silence but it was warm and comfortable.

Charlie was wiping some salsa from his fingers when David took a deep breath. It felt like he was doing this for the first time all over again. “Hey, um... assuming we don’t get slammed with a big case would you like to go out for dinner Friday night?”

Charlie smiled. “Yeah, I’d like that a lot.”

“Pick you up at seven?”

Charlie leaned over and gave David a small kiss at the corner of his mouth. “Seven on the dot.”

~

David sat up in bed. He knew he’d had a dream but it was hazy, the details faded as quickly as he grasped for them. His stumbled to the bathroom to swallow down a couple of Tylenol. Colby had made good and bought him a beer plus a few extra and in return David had spilled his tale of woe.

Colby had been silent for a long time then told him about a girl in Afghanistan with beautiful green eyes who was dragged naked into the street and beaten to death because her brother collaborated with the Americans. David looked at Colby and saw the dark things that were usually kept well hidden behind stupid jokes and a dumb farm boy mask. David had bought the next several rounds and they switched to harder stuff even though they both had work.

David stumbled into his living room. Colby was sprawled across the couch snoring like a two-stroke engine with a bad cylinder. He put the bottle of pills and a glass of water on the coffee table next to Colby’s phone then pulled the blanket from the back of the couch down over him before stumbling back to bed.
David knocked on Charlie’s door at the stroke of seven. Charlie opened it already smiling. He quickly slipped out the door much like on their first date. He gave David a quick peck on the lips. “How does Italian sound?”

“How does Italian sound?”
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

A case rides into town and Ian is right on its tail.

David reached over Charlie’s body and grabbed his phone before it vibrated off the nightstand. They had taken to sleeping together again. And mostly just sleeping. There was a little making out and light petting but David still felt the need to slow things down a bit and Charlie was showing great patience. He could only assume that Dr. Flores was getting an earful every week.

“Sinclair,” David mumbled into his phone.

“Morning, David.” Don’s voice was oddly perky. “I need you to suit up. We’ve got a body, corner of Avon St. and Duane St. Reports are it’s ugly.”

“Need Charlie?” Charlie had half opened his eyes and was watching.

“Don’t know yet. I’m still en route.”

“Okay.” David’s alarm went off. He slapped it hard. “I’ll be there.” David hung up.

“Body?” Charlie mumbled.

“Yeah.”

“Need me?”

“Don’t know yet. Get a little more sleep.”

Charlie hummed a little and closed his eyes. David pressed a small kiss to his forehead before getting up and getting his day started.

~

The scene was reasonably easy to find. David parked and ducked under the tape. An LAPD uniform pointed him towards a bunch of trees off a bend in the road. He spotted Don first.

“Hey Don, what’s with all the uniforms?”

“A little question of jurisdiction. LAPD thinks it’s theirs.”

“And why is it ours?”

“Because I say it is,” came a familiar voice to David’s right. He turned to watch Ian Edgerton slink out of the thick brush.

“Edgerton.” David hadn’t seen Ian since his little prison escapade that had resulted in Colby becoming a hostage. At the time he had wanted Ian to be innocent of the murder charge more than he really believed Ian was innocent. Of course he’d had the same feelings about Colby during the spy
fiasco.

“How’s it going Sinclair?”

“Not bad. Could have used a little more sleep. What brings you here?”

“Serial killer. Kills three times in a city then moves on.”

“That’s a little atypical.”

“Tell me about it. I’ve been putting the whole thing together myself for months. Couldn’t even get the guys in Investigative Support to believe me at first. I think I got close to him in Vegas but I’m pretty sure he skips town right after dumping his third body. I BSed a bit of my own pursuit math and took a guess he was going to hit LA next. Been laying low then picked this up on the scanner.”

“And you’re sure it’s your guy?” Don asked.

“Oh yeah, he’s easy to spot when you know what you’re looking for. I’ll show you.”

Ian waved them a little further into the trees. The forensic techs backed away and David got a good look at the body. He instantly felt sick. He wasn’t sure what look went over his face but Don’s hand gripped his shoulder and steadied him.

Ian crouched down next to the body. “Jogger’s dog found him,” he provided. In front of David was a large white plastic tarp. The tarp was covered in blood. Lying in the blood was a young man, probably in his 20’s, stripped naked with his right wrist cut open. “He lures his victims out to semi secluded areas and injects them with a combo of heroin and heparin. The heparin’s the real killer. Anticoagulant. Once the heroin’s doing its thing he strips them naked, lays them out nice and pretty on the tarp then opens a wrist, always the right one. They bleed out pretty quick.”

David tipped his head back so he was staring into the canopy and not at the body.

“His victims are sex workers or club kids,” Ian continued. “So the first bunch got written off as weird suicides. M.E. friend of mine in Houston started putting the first bits together.”

“How many has he got so far?” Don asked. David was impressed by how steady Don’s voice sounded but then Don never actually saw the mess Charlie made in his own blood.

“Five cities that I know of. Fifteen victims. This is sixteen. But I’m pretty sure I’m missing a victim zero.”

“Well I don’t want this guy in my city so let’s find him and quick.”

“Knew I could count on you Eppes.”

“Hello?” a voice called out from the road.

David whipped around. “What the fuck is Charlie doing here?” he hissed.

“I called him,” Ian replied.

“Cover the body.” Don ordered one of the M.E. assistants.

“We can’t. There’s too much blood.”

David moved quickly trying to intercept Charlie. “Charlie, turn around.”
Charlie kept moving. “Ian called said…” Charlie saw the body and froze.

“Professor,” Ian waved. “I’ve got a weird one for your voodoo.”

In the dim light under the thick trees David could still see Charlie’s face go ashen.

“Get him out of here,” Don snapped.

David grabbed Charlie by the shoulders and started to drag him away from the scene. Charlie kept looking over his shoulder at the body until they reached the road, then his knees hit the cement and he heaved into the gutter. There wasn’t much but stomach acid but his body convulsed in David’s arms.

Some of the uniforms were looking. He hoped none of them recognized Charlie. Charlie did have a reputation in LA law enforcement and throwing up at a crime scene was a rookie maneuver that Charlie was long past.

Once the worst of the heaving stopped he dragged Charlie to the Charger. He moved like a puppet with cut strings and let David manhandle him into the passengers seat. They took the quick drive to a quiet corner of Elysian Park where David parked then turned to Charlie. Charlie was still pale and shaking. He pulled Charlie across the cab and into his arms.

“There was so much blood,” he whispered.

“You shouldn’t have seen that. Edgerton shouldn’t have called you. He should have gone through channels.”

“There was... When I... Was there that much blood?”

“No,” David answered honestly. “You still had a bit left in you.”

Charlie squeezed his eyes shut and buried his face into David’s chest. “I watched it run down my arm. It ran across the floor. It must have been everywhere.”

David stroked Charlie’s head while trying to scrub away his own memories. “I cleaned it up. Me and Colby while you were still in the ER. Your Dad never saw it. Don never saw. We cleaned it all up.”

Charlie nodded then started fishing in his pocket. He pulled out his phone and pressed it into David’s hand. “Could you please call Dr. Flores for me?” he whispered.

David’s heart broke. After everything, after everything they had both fought through god damn Ian Edgerton had to go and make a phone call Charlie wouldn’t have refused. He hoped Don was ripping the sniper a new one.

David found Dr. Flores’ cell number on speed dial. “Charlie?” The man answered.

“No, it’s David Sinclair.”

“What’s happened?” Was Dr. Flores’ immediate response.

“It’s complicated. Can you talk to Charlie?”

“Of course, when?”

“How close are you to St. Clare’s?”
“About forty minutes.”

David checked his watch. “We’ll see you in forty then.”

The drive to St. Clare’s was silent with Charlie curling into as much of a ball as the seatbelt would allow. They hit a little traffic so it was 45 minutes before they parked in St. Clare’s lot. David wanted to throw up himself. He unstrapped Charlie and slowly they climbed the front steps together.

Dr. Flores was waiting in the lobby. “Oh my, you both look terrible.” He pressed his hand to Charlie’s forehead then took his pulse. “Are you in shock Dr. Eppes?” Charlie shrugged a little. “Well why don’t we go to my office and have a little chat and you can put your feet up.”

Charlie gave a little nod.

“I’ll wait here for you,” David said. Charlie gave David’s hand a squeeze then followed Dr. Flores through the main doors.”

David rang Don. “David, where the hell are you and where’s Charlie?”

“We’re at St. Clare’s.”

“Shit,” Don hissed across the phone.

“Charlie’s request. He’s in talking with Dr. Flores.”

“Shit,” Don hissed again. “God damn it, I do not need this. We’re going to need him on this one.”

“Well he’s in shock right now so you can tell Edgerton to shove it,” David snapped, the fear starting to seep through. “What have you told him by the way?”

“I told him we were being a little more selective about which cases Charlie works and that he has to go through proper channels concerning him from here on out. Everyone is giving him a cold shoulder and he’s mainly very confused.”

“Good.”

Don was silent on the other end for a long time. “We’re going to need him.”

“Don, I’m standing in the lobby at St. Clare’s. For all I know Charlie’s checking himself back in.”

“He better not.”

“Well I can’t exactly kick in the door, throw him over my shoulder and walk out if he doesn’t want to go.”

Don muttered something under his breath that David couldn’t make out. “Look, stay there and keep me posted.”

“Will do.”

David tried to get comfortable on the lobby benches. They were more like church pews and he soon found himself up and pacing. An hour ticked by. Don called again. “He’s still in there.”

“Shit.” Was Don’s reply then he hung up.

David paced for another hour before the large double doors swung open. Charlie emerged with Dr.
Flores right behind. Charlie’s face was still a grim mask but it had a little color again.

David didn’t care what Dr. Flores might think. He pulled Charlie into a hug and was perfectly happy for Charlie to melt against his body for a minute. “Are you staying?” David asked.

Charlie shook his head. “No.”

“Good.”

“Agent Sinclair may I speak with you for a moment?”

David reluctantly let Charlie go and Charlie wandered towards the front doors. “What can I do for you?” David asked.

“You can keep an eye on Charlie.”

“I already do that.”

“I know. You did a good job today calling me.”

“It was Charlie’s request.”

“You still did it.”

“Yeah. Don’s going to want Charlie on this case, so is Ian.”

Dr. Flores nodded sagely. “Yes, the great Ian Edgerton of song and legend. Only man with enough spine to directly challenge Charlie’s math.”

“Charlie’s the only person with big enough balls to tell the third best sniper in the country that he doesn’t believe in guns. It’s a mutual admiration thing.”

“Dr. Eppes is going to want to work this case. He likes serial cases and he’s not going to want to appear weak in front of Agent Edgerton. I have given my approval and if he gets through this I think it will be a very good thing for him but he might get a little shaky at times so just keep doing what you’re doing.”

“Keeping an eye on him.”

“And keep me posted. Also get both of yourselves some flavor of breakfast before getting back to work. Most important meal of the day.”

“Right. I’ll talk to you later.” Dr. Flores just gave a nod and David followed Charlie back outside. “So where would you like to go?”

Charlie closed his eyes and turned his face towards the morning sun while taking a couple of deep breaths. “The office,” Charlie answered carefully. “Ian didn’t give me a lot of detail when he called me. Just that it was a serial killer moving from city to city. I need a more detailed briefing before I can start looking for patterns in his movement.”

David pulled Charlie close again for his own peace of mind. “Okay, but we’re getting breakfast first.”

~

Breakfast ended up being drive through McDonalds. It probably wasn’t what Dr. Flores had in mind
but at least it sort of qualified as food, and while David would never admit it under torture he’d always kind of liked Egg McMuffins.

David sent Don a quick text telling him they were heading back to the office. By the time they reached the war room Nikki was trying to quickly sweep crime scene photos into folders. Liz flicked the most recent ones off the big screen. Charlie shook his head. “It’s okay. You can leave them.” Liz nodded but left the screen blank.

Don came in with a bottle of Pepto and a bottle of water. He handed both right to Charlie. “Hey, buddy.”

Charlie gave his brother a little smile and took a swig straight out of the Pepto bottle. “Thanks.”

“Need anything else?”

“Don’t suppose you know where Mom’s old stash of Valium got off to?”

Don laughed. “Sorry buddy, tossed it years ago.”

“Damn.” Charlie took another swig of Pepto before turning to Ian who had been lurking in the corner looking unimpressed. “Agent Edgerton.”

“Doctor Eppes, would you mind telling me what the hell is going on? This whole place is acting like I kicked a puppy and...”

Ian stared at Charlie hard. It was the kind of look that would send most men running. Charlie stared back as if Ian was a student that was being particularly obtuse. Ian broke first. He picked up a folder from the table and handed it to Charlie. “Mickey Jensen. I don’t think he’s victim zero but he’s the earliest I could find.”

Charlie sat down almost primly and began to go carefully through each folder.

From there the day stretched. Don sent them off in different directions trying to identify the victim, find witnesses in the area, and work out where the victim might have been picked up by the killer. Don stayed in the office, officially coordinating, unofficially keeping one eye on Charlie.

It was after six by the time they were all gathered back in the war room trying to put together everything they had scrapped up during the day. It wasn’t much but Charlie was already starting to scribble out little bits of math on the white board.

Ian was rubbing at his eyes. “So Professor, got any voodoo you think might work?”

Charlie scowled a bit, probably at the nickname for his math. “I think what we will have to employ here is deep set theory to aid in data mining. Since our killer keeps moving usual tricks like hot zones would be ineffective. As far as you are aware he does not know he is being tracked so pursuit math will not yield the necessary results. I think you are correct and we do need to find a victim zero.”

“I’ve tried. Come up with nothing.”

“Yes, but you didn’t have access to a supercomputer and lots of databases. By taking the facts of each case I can look for commonalities assigning a value to each.” Charlie pointed to one of the
photos. His sleeve slid up a little. “For example...”

With lightening speed Ian grabbed Charlie’s wrist and yanked it to within inches of his face pushing up the sleeve in the process. “What the hell is that!”

Charlie slapped at Ian’s hands. “Let me go.”

“Let him go, Ian,” Don snapped.

“Edgerton!” David barked.

Ian looked around and realized that most of the room had their hands on their weapons. He let go of Charlie’s wrist. Charlie yanked his sleeve back down.

“What...” Ian actually stuttered. “What the hell is that on your wrist?”

“What the hell does it look like?” Charlie’s voice was crisp and cold. Everyone took a half step back but did not relax.

“It looks like you opened your god damn wrist?”

“Brilliant powers of deduction,” Charlie’s retorted with heavy sarcasm. “Maybe you should be an FBI agent.”

Ian’s jaw dropped, he blinked a few times. A look of honest shock and more than a bit of horror crawled across his face, and while David couldn’t be exactly sure he thought there just might have been a hint of fear in there as well. “What the hell did you do something that stupid for?”

Charlie drew himself up to his full five feet six inches. “I was having a bad day.”

The shock didn’t leave Ian’s face. “Everyone has bad days, it’s just part of the job.” David decided there was definitely fear in Ian's voice.

“This is not my job!” Charlie flat out yelled.

“Bull shit!” Ian yelled back leaning into Charlie's face. “You were going to bail on your unit.”

Charlie rose up onto his toes until he was nearly nose to nose with Ian. “I had a break down. I didn’t really give a fuck. Kind of the definition of suicidal there.”

“You were going to leave your unit down a man.” Ian continued not really listening to Charlie’s excuses and by the sounds of things defaulting into military mode.


Ian quickly looked up and around the room as if looking for some sort of back up but every face was cold. His eyes settled on Charlie's math. “What about the soap bubbles?”

“What?”

Ian pointed towards the big board. “Where am I supposed to get my soap bubbles and deep set theory and math stuff from if you off yourself? There’s only one of you, Professor.”

Charlie gave an epic eye roll. “Oh pardon me if in the middle of the worst day of my life I forgot to think about where the borderline sociopath who pops in and out of my life and occasionally takes my friends hostage will get his math from! How could I have been so fucking inconsiderate!” Charlie’s
hands had balled into fists. Ian was silent, each of Charlie’s jabs visibly hitting.

“I...” Ian stumbled. It was like watching a sports car crash into a brick wall but Ian seemed to rally for one more push. “What about your family? What about your girlfriend?”

“I don’t have a girlfriend I’m gay!” Charlie voice was loud enough that the entire bullpen was now looking.

“Oh,” Ian said quietly. “Uh...”

Charlie sucked a deep breath through his teeth. “Ian, why don’t you go find something to shoot at for a while. I’ll call when you’re needed.”

Ian’s jaw opened and closed a few times. Charlie’s look was as cold as any killer. “Right. Sure.” Then David watched in amazement as Ian Edgerton actually fled. Charlie turned back to the white board and continued his math while muttering harshly under his breath.

Colby slid up next to David. “Dude,” his voice was low. “Is it just me or did Charlie just own Ian Edgerton?”

“It wasn’t just you.” There were looks all around the room and everyone, even Don was trying to pick their jaws off the floor.

~

David wasn’t paying much attention as he pushed open he door to the men’s room so he really wasn’t expecting to find Ian there, leaning up against the paper towel dispenser, sulking. “Wow. The great Ian Edgerton hiding out in the men’s room.”

Ian scowled. “I put my foot into it didn’t I?”

“And managed to walk down your own throat. It was impressive.”

Ian had his arms curled around himself like a cranky child. “He doesn’t really think I’m a borderline sociopath, does he?”

David let out a long sigh. Handling Charlie’s still fragile ego was enough of a job, he didn’t want to deal with Ian’s as well. “Ian, there’s no tactful way of putting this, everyone thinks you’re a borderline sociopath, but you’re our borderline sociopath.”

Ian snorted. “I wasn’t hallucinating in there, I mean he actually..?” Ian did a bit of miming.

“Yeah, he did.”

“Really? You’re sure?”

David had a hard time imagining a stupider question. “Yes. I’m sure. I’m the one who found him. He left a note on the sink and made one cut, wrist to elbow, we’re lucky he didn't blow his brains out.”

“Fuck.” Ian started pacing the few feet between the sinks and the stalls. “What the hell was he thinking? I mean it’s not like Quantico is turning out field ready mathematicians. And where the hell am I supposed to get soap bubbles if he’s dead?”

“Soap bubbles?”

Ian waved a hand. “It’s a math thing. I mean what the hell could he have been thinking? He’s Mr.
Logic and Reason for fuck sake.”

“He had a bad day. The numbers glitched out. He got scared.”

“Everyone’s scared,” Ian snapped. “We’re all scared every moment of every day from the second we’re born. It’s the fear of the light and cold and hunger that makes us scream and cling to our mothers. It’s what keeps us alive.”

David was startled. He never pegged Ian for great philosophy but then again Ian spent a lot of time alone with just his own thoughts. “I guess he thought he couldn’t handle it anymore.”

Ian gave a dismissive wave of his arm.

David looked Ian over. He looked truly distressed. It was a bit of a surprise and not just because Ian had a reputation for being a cold hearted bastard. Charlie had been out of the hospital and just out for months now. David figured the FBI rumor mill would have filtered down even to whichever rock Ian lived under. Charlie must have really crept under his skin but then Charlie was good at that.

“Did anyone see this coming?” Ian asked suddenly.

“No, we should have but...” Ian kicked at one of the stall doors. David jumped a little. “This is really bothering you?”

“Contrary to popular belief Sinclair I’m not a sociopath and Charlie is...” Ian stumbled looking for words.

“He’s Charlie.”

“The world is full of idiots and bastards and there are very few people on this earth that don’t have a streak of either or both in them, except maybe Charlie.”

“Charlie kicked a guy in the nuts and gave Don a black eye.”

Ian flashed a grin. “I’m sure they had it coming.”

“Yeah, a little.”

Ian leaned back against the wall. “And he’s gay?”

David tensed. If Ian had a problem with Charlie being gay and Charlie found out it could set things back considerably. “Have you got a problem with that?” David asked carefully but firmly.

“No.” Ian’s reply was instantaneous. “Honestly first couple of cases I was sure he was hitting on me then suddenly I roll into town and he’s got a girlfriend. Figured I just read him wrong.”

David mentally slapped himself in the forehead. “No Ian, you’re possibly the only person who ever read him right.”

Ian stared at the wholly unremarkable ceiling for a while then looked to David. “So, what do I do?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well you’ve all obviously circled the wagons around the Professor if this morning is any indication, which means you’re all still scared of pushing him in the wrong direction so what’s the game plan? How are we keeping the genius from being stupid?”
“We’re not. We can’t. Charlie has to make his own choices. He spent a month in a facility and still sees his psychiatrist every week. But... he has to function on his own at the end of the day. We’re being supportive and accepting.”

“And keeping him away from crime scenes where the victim had their wrist opened.”

“You can’t blame us on that one.”

“No.”

David eyed Ian up. He still looked rattled far more human than David had ever seen. David never had the kind of hero worship for Ian that Colby did but he still had a healthy respect for the guy. He tried to ignore the little voice that was telling him that Ian was just Charlie’s type and if Ian hadn’t stuck his foot in it he wouldn’t blame Charlie for being interested. He realized that just might be useful. “Actually Ian, if you want to be helpful, you can walk back into the War Room and call his math voodoo.” Ian just raised an eyebrow. “Charlie’s been off his game. Second guessing his own math. Avoiding the crime scenes. He can still do it but...”

“I gotcha. He got dinged, he’s a little gun shy, now he needs a kick in the ass. His friends can’t risk doing it, his family can’t but the borderline sociopath can.”

“He respects you Ian. Not many people challenge him like you do. Your name was at the top of the list of people that he never wanted to find out about what he did. He didn’t want to diminish any in your mind.”

“Like I haven’t seen a hundred perfectly good soldiers get tired of the job and try to eat their weapons.”

“Charlie’s not a soldier, or an agent, or a cop. He’s a math teacher.”

“Could have fooled me.”

“Fooled us all.

“Voodoo?”

“It’ll get his hackles up. Piss him off a little. Get him fighting again.”

Ian nodded a little. “Pissing people off is something I can do.”

Ian left the men’s room. David did what he’d originally came in to do then followed. He peeked into the War Room. Ian was looming over Charlie as Charlie explained something, shuffling through the bloody crime scene photos with ease.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

If it quacks like a chicken.

David didn’t bother knocking on Charlie’s office door. He just let himself in. Charlie was plugged into his iPod playing something loud and surprisingly angry sounding. It went with the overall mood of the office. Charlie was banging away on his boards and had been for over a week now. He was taking the case almost personally. Ian had embarked on a campaign of loving antagonism that was keeping Charlie on his toes as well.

David carefully cleared a space on Charlie’s desk and laid out some pasta he’d gotten to go. Charlie’s stomach had been iffy since the case started and plain pasta seemed to sit the best. Only when everything was ready did David carefully shift himself up against a board and into Charlie’s line of sight. Charlie still jumped.

He pulled out his earbuds. “Hey, how long have you been here?”

“A few minutes. Since when do you listen to metal?”

Charlie paused his ipod. “I went through an angry phase at fifteen. Penfield of all people got me listening to it. It just felt right.”

“Math not going well?” Charlie shrugged. “Well stop and eat for a few minutes.”

Charlie didn’t argue. He knew he’d lose. He just sat and ate his noodles. “I feel like I’m missing something right in front of me. Once he hits a city he doesn’t go more than two weeks between kills and it’s been a week already.”

“You’ll work it out. You’re good that way. You’ve got that same obsessive streak as your brother.”

“Mann family trait. My mother could obsess like a champion. It would probably be called OCD these days.” Charlie took a few more bites of his pasta. “It’s too bad you never got to meet her. I think you would have gotten on really well.”

“Really?”

Charlie shrugged a bit. “Sure. I mean she always said she just wanted me to be happy. I’m happy with you.”

David dipped his head trying not to grin like an idiot. “Fair warning, my mother wants me home for Christmas and she wants me to bring you.”

“Really?”

“And you better believe that’s an order not a request.”

“She wants to meet me?” Charlie sounded genuinely surprised.
“Well, I’ve only been talking about you for six years.”

“And she wants to give me the once over now that I’ve got my claws in her son?”

David laughed. “Hardly. She’s about as non judgmental a person as you can get without becoming a sucker. She just wants to meet you.”

“I’ll pencil Christmas into my calendar.”

David got a couple more bites of his own dinner down before his phone rang. He fished it out of his pocket. “Hello?”

“David are you with Charlie?” Don asked.

“Yeah.”

“We’ve got a second victim we think. LAPD isn’t letting us near the scene yet.”

“You want Charlie there?”

“Not really but I’m going to give him the option.”

“Why don’t you talk to him.”

David handed the phone to Charlie.

“Hello... Fuck. Okay, where? I’m fine Don... I’ll... Give me the address and I’ll come in with David. Okay, see you soon.” Charlie stood and grabbed his jacket. “Let’s go.”

~

Charlie was quiet as they drove across town. He stared out the window and tapped his foot at stoplights. When they got to the scene uniformed officers were standing guard. Behind the yellow tape Ian was talking to a man in a cheap suit with a sallow complexion. His whole form screamed LAPD and he was in a pissing match with Ian.

David approached Don who was watching the two men. “What’s going on?”

“Detective isn’t sure it’s part of our case and doesn’t want us trampling over his scene.”

“Excuse me,” Charlie said quietly and ducked under the tape. He went directly to the detective and pulled him aside, waving Ian off. A couple of minutes later Charlie came back. “Detective Henderson and I are going around the corner to get a large cup of coffee and have a chat. You’ll have twenty minutes to figure out if it’s part of our pattern. Try not to mess up his scene.”

David looked back over to the detective who was hunched under a streetlight. There was a small flash of recognition in David’s mind and he was pretty sure the last time he’d seen that profile it had been hunched over a checker board in St. Clare’s day room.

Charlie went back to Detective Henderson and they quickly disappeared around the corner. Don looked to David. “What the hell was that?”

“Maybe Charlie knows the guy. Let’s get a look at this body.”

The scene and the young man on the white tarp matched their other victims perfectly. This one was underfed with track marks all over his feet. Ian cursed and hit the brick wall of the alley with his fist.
Don pulled on gloves and touched the young man’s chest. “He’s still warm, even for this weather. Our guy can’t be far and this is more public than usual. Someone must have seen something so let’s start canvassing.” Ian slinked off, eyes to the alley dirt, following his own trail.

It was a good half hour before Charlie came back with Detective Henderson who seemed to be more in a mood to share and started talking with Don. David pulled Charlie aside. “Detective Henderson was in St. Clare’s wasn’t he?” Charlie was silent and only looked at David hard. “Right. Definitely our guy and the ME doesn’t think he’s been dead more than a couple of hours. Ian’s off doing his thing. We’re canvassing everyone.”

Charlie nodded. “I’m going to go check the body before they take it away.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m missing something and it’s really starting to bug me.”

~

David was jolted awake by Charlie springing out of bed. He checked the clock. It was two and they had only been asleep for an hour, stumbling to David’s apartment since it was closer. Charlie was pulling on his clothes. “What’s wrong?”

“Victim zero. Why can’t we find our victim zero?”

“Probably because it was mislabeled a suicide.”

Charlie was hopping around on one foot trying to pull on his shoes. “Or maybe it was correctly labeled a suicide.”

“What?”

“There’s more than one way to kill a person, David. I need to get back to the office and redo my calculations and make another run at the databases.”

Charlie started moving towards the door his shoelaces still untied. “Hold on. Let me get dressed and I’ll drive you. You’re running on less sleep than me.”

David suited up and drove even as Charlie scribbled into a notebook. Once in the office he made a cup of coffee, extra large, extra sugar. He left it within easy reach of Charlie then settled into a war room chair and fell back asleep.

David snapped awake again. Charlie was shouting into his phone. “Yes I am aware what time it is, are you aware that people are dying? People who would possibly prefer to live! Yes I’ll hold.”

David checked his watch. It was three. Charlie’s coffee was untouched. David closed his eyes and drifted back to sleep.

David awoke to a hand on his shoulder and Colby standing over him. “Good morning sunshine.”

David rubbed his face. “What time is it?”

“Six. How long have you been here?”

“Since two.”

“When did you leave?”
“One. What are you doing here?”

“Got a call from Charlie. He’s dragging everyone in.”

David looked around the war room. “Where is he?”

“Getting coffee.”

Charlie practically bounced into the war room with a cup in each hand. He gave one to David and the other to Colby. “Have you got our guy?”

“I’ll tell you when everyone’s here.”

Colby sipped at his coffee. “You’ve gone above and beyond on this one Charlie.”

“I just don’t like problems I can’t solve. They bug me. They...” Charlie suddenly froze. He tilted his head then leaned forward and sniffed Colby’s neck.

Colby jumped back. “Hey there!” Charlie followed and got on his toes and sniffed Colby’s hair.

“Okay Charlie, just a sec...”

Charlie waved a hand. Colby shut up. Charlie leaned slowly forward and took another sniff.

“Colby,” Charlie’s voice had cold control. “Why do you smell like apricot body wash and vanilla cream rinse shampoo?”

David’s brain wasn’t quite awake enough to register Charlie’s question as anything but weird. Then Colby’s face went bright red. His jaw opened and shut a few times but no sound came out. “Look,” he finally sputtered out. “You’ve managed to move on with your life, she has got every right to move on with hers. You can’t expect her to sit in her office and pine away for you.”

David’s brain finally woke up. “Amita!?”

“What about Amita?” Don asked as he came through the war room door.

“Nothing!” Colby squeaked his face going an even deeper red. Charlie folded his arms and leveled a look at Colby that would have done Don proud.

Don looked between the two and snickered. “She was going to rebound on someone, buddy.”

Charlie raised a finger at Colby. “Yes this is hypocritical but don’t you dare hurt her. I have 200 IQ points and I learn from everything I see and do and I have spent the last six years seeing some gruesome things and doing a lot of things they never covered at Princeton. And let’s not forget everything I learned during my month in the loony bin. Am I clear?”

Colby went from bright red to dead white. “Very.”

Charlie gave a tight smile.

“Now that we’re done with the threats what have you got for us, Chuck?” Don asked.

“Possibly everything, let’s wait for Ian and the girls.”

Ian showed up after a couple of minutes with a cup of coffee and a muffin. Nikki and Liz sneaked in right behind him. Charlie went to the front of the war room to address his favorite students.

“Ian was correct, the key to this was to find our victim zero. Except we made an incorrect
assumption. Something that quacks like a duck isn’t always a duck.” Charlie put a picture up on the big screen. It was of a young man with dark hair and an open wrist bled out on a white carpet. “This is Robert Sinewell. Age 17. He committed suicide about a year ago. One month to the day before the first killing. He was the son of Doctor John Sinewell M.D. and Doctor Laura Sinewell M.D. of Boston Massachusetts. According to his Facebook page, which is still up, he wanted to be a poet. I woke up some people unpleasantly early on the east coast this morning. According to the detective who handled the case it was an obvious suicide. Robert had problems with his parents. He ran away from home several times. He got into the club scene, began taking drugs, may have even been working as a prostitute. The night of his suicide he had a fight with his parents and they threw him out. He broke back in that night. Gave himself a relatively small dose of heroin then opened his wrist on his parents’ pristine white carpets. His right wrist, he was left handed. Robert also had type 3 Von Willebrand disease which is a bleeding disorder. Not as bad as something like hemophilia but he would have still bled out quickly. Two weeks later Laura Sinewell crashed her car into a tree and for the first time in her life she wasn’t wearing her seat belt. Two weeks after that a male prostitute was found near the Charles River on a white tarp with his right wrist cut open and a week after the third body was found like that Dr. John Sinewell sold his practice for a fraction of what it was worth and dropped off the grid.”

The room was silent.

“Well shit,” Ian finally breathed.

“We were looking for a murder except these murders are meant to invoke suicides.”

“So you went looking for a suicide that fit.”

“And if Dr. Sinewell is blaming himself...” Don muttered.

“In his mind Robert is his first murder.”

“Chuck, that’s fucking brilliant. Let’s get on this guy. Track his credit cards, get his picture out there.” Everyone jumped up and started to move.

Ian slapped Charlie on the back. “Good work, Professor. Why don’t you go home and get some sleep. We’ll take it from here.”

“Call me if you get anything else.”

“Promise.”

~

“Don, Ian.” David waved his boss and Ian over. “I’ve got Sinewell’s credit card statement. A charge just went through for the Blue Room Motel.”


“Really?”

“Have we got enough to pick this guy up?”

David scanned his eye quickly over the credit card statement then over the list of killings. “He’s got charges for every city around the time of every killing.”

Don snapped the paper out of David’s hand. “Works for me. You and Ian go get eyes on him.”
“On it.”

~

David looked through the binoculars at a rundown mess of a motel. He could practically feel the germs from the sheets crawling across the street to get him. He looked back to Ian. “You’re staying here?”

“What?”

“Okay, you know when my apartment flooded Charlie let me crash in his guest room for over a month. Don’s got a spare room too. I’m sure if you asked they’d put you up.”

“A bed is a bed, Sinclair.”

“Yeah, but they probably don’t have livestock.”

Ian just shrugged, then his phone rang. “Edgerton... Yeah... Great.” Ian hung up. “Eppes got a judge to sign off on bringing him in.”

“What?”

Ian quickly checked his weapon then reholstered it. “Nope.”

David followed Ian across the street and up the steps to the second level of the motel. He’d have preferred to wait for backup but nothing was going to stop Ian.

Ian pounded on the door of room 218. A ragged graying man with small gold-rimed glasses opened it. David flashed his badge. Ian smiled. “Doctor Sinewell, you’re under arrest for 17 counts of murder, would you mind coming with us?”

The doctor looked between Ian and David then closed his eyes. “Yes, of course.”

~

David watched through the glass as Don prowled around the doctor. The man hadn’t said anything since his arrest. ‘We found heparin in your room, you’re a doctor, why don’t you tell me exactly what that does.’

“Do you think he’ll confess?” Charlie asked from his place at David’s right.

“He doesn’t need to.” Ian replied from David’s left. “We’ve got witnesses that stick him with the last victim and a credit card trail right across the country.”

“That stuff makes them bleed, doesn’t it? Bleed out like your son did. Poor little Robert. Sinewell flinched. What was it, he didn’t want to be a doctor like mommy and daddy so you threw him out?”

“Professor, I’m curious, what triggered off your early morning brain wave?” Ian asked.

“I had a weird dream,” Charlie answered.

“How weird?”

“I dreamed I was in a farm yard trying to feed vitamins to chickens except they kept quacking at me. I woke up feeling kind of strange then the light bulb just went on.”
“If it quacks like a chicken?”

Charlie giggled.

“I think Eppes has warmed him up enough.” Ian cracked his knuckles. “Let’s see what I can do to this guy.”

Ian left the viewing room and let himself into interrogation.

“Thanks for calling me,” Charlie said. “Figured you’d want to be here for this. Did you get any sleep?”

“A bit. I’m okay. I’ll just sleep well tonight.”

“Assuming nothing comes up.”

“Yeah.”

“Want to come over tonight? Get some pizza, watch TV?”

“Sure. Maybe a little later than usual. Ian’s taking me down to the range.”

David pulled his eyes away from the interrogation and over to Charlie. “Really?”

“He said he’d teach me how to shoot.”

“You already know how to shoot?”

Charlie looked over and waved his left hand. “I can’t pick up a gallon of milk, I sure as hell can’t handle the recoil on a Glock.”

David was instantly ashamed that he, of all people, hadn’t thought of that. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think. I should have...”

Charlie shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. I haven’t exactly brought it up. Ian thinks if I change my stance and my grip and do some exercises I should be able to hit a wall of Cheez Whiz should the need arise.”

“Well he would be the man to figure it out.”

A crack echoed through the little room as Ian slapped the table. David jumped. Ian hissed something into Doctor Sinewell’s ear. A second later Sinewell began to cry. Ian left the interrogation room and popped his head back into the viewing room. He grinned. “One minute, twenty eight seconds. Personal best.” With that quick statement he left.

Charlie shook his head a little. “There goes a man who enjoys his work.”

“Yeah, I noticed that too.”

David had pizza in his mouth when he heard his door open. Charlie came down the hall and flopped down on the couch. David swallowed quickly. “You okay?”

Charlie groaned. “I can’t lift my arms and I’ve got blisters coming up on both hands. I have never
gone through that much ammo before and I never want to go through that much again.”

“Ian put you though your paces.”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“Can you shoot now?”

“My best round was only 273 but I can hit a wall of Cheez Whiz again if necessary. Oh that pizza smells good.”

David took mercy and picked up a slice and held it to Charlie’s lips. Charlie leaned forward just enough to take a bite then sank back down into the couch. “What day is it?” Charlie asked suddenly.

“Tuesday.”

“I mean the date.”

“Twelfth.”

Charlie frowned a little. “Really?”

David checked little date window on his watch. “Yep, it’s the twelfth for another four hours.”

Charlie seemed to go away inside his head for a moment. David was perfectly used to it. Just about anyone in Charlie’s life for more than a few weeks was used to it. It was a look where you could practically see the synapses firing off behind his eyes and the question was always what would be the end result. Sometimes it was groundbreaking math, other times it was an insistence that *Across the Universe* is actually The Beatles greatest song.

Charlie blinked. “Are you off this Friday night?”

“Yes. Friday night and all day Saturday.”

Charlie grinned and slid himself closer to David. “Want to go out Friday? We haven’t been properly out in a while.”

David thought about it. Charlie was right. Between taking it slow again and some heavy cases they’d been staying in far more than going out. “Yeah, out would really be nice.”

Charlie snuggled himself into David’s shoulder. “You know what we did today?”

“What?”

“We caught a bad guy.”

“Yes we did.”

“That feels really good. I mean it always feels good but this one felt really good.”

David snaked a free arm around Charlie’s body, Charlie was right, when Sinewell cracked there had been a flush of real satisfaction. “It did.”

“Doctor Flores says every time I have a pure moment of feeling something, good or bad, that I should take a second to really lock that memory in so I can take it out later when I need some feeling to balance out the math. I’m keeping this one.”
“I think I’ll be keeping this one too.”
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Charlie and David go on a date to celebrate an important day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

David idly wondered just how many meals he’d eaten sitting at his desk. Currently it was just a sandwich but he knew he’d had just about every flavor of take out or frozen meal while hunched over paperwork.

He stretched his back and checked his watch. It wasn’t even one yet. Don settled into his own chair and had apparently decided to embrace his inner starving student and was having instant noodles from a Styrofoam cup. David’s coffee shop turkey sandwich suddenly looked a lot better.

“So,” Don started. “Where are you and Charlie going tonight?”

David shrugged. “Don’t know. Figured we grab dinner then see about a late movie somewhere.”

“That’s it?” Don looked puzzled.

“Yeah, far as I know. Why?”

“You might want to double check your plans with Charlie.”

“Why?”

“Well he called me to double check that you had tonight and tomorrow off and made some very interesting threats concerning what might happen if that changes and according to my father Charlie’s spent the last three days trying on every piece of clothing he owns then vanished and reappeared with shopping bags from a couple of high end men’s stores. Now considering Charlie has been know to let items of clothing deteriorate off his body before going shopping I think he might have bigger plans than dinner and a movie.” David racked his mind trying to figure out what Charlie might have planned. “It’s not your anniversary or something?”

David checked the date but it didn’t ring any bells. It was the 15th. Charlie had gotten out of the hospital on the 22nd and they’d had their first date on the 18th. “I don’t think so. Maybe he’s got some big conference or presentation coming up and he just needs better clothes.”

“He’s a mathematician. If he gets his shoes on the right feet he’s the height of fashion.” David shot Don a hard look. “Sorry,” Don said quickly.

David held the look for a second longer. He was still trying to get Don out of the habit of taking little jabs at Charlie. He knew Don didn’t really mean them but Charlie absorbed and learned from everything and a lifetime of little comments like that had done damage that only David really saw.

“Honestly Don, I don’t know. As far as I’m aware we’re having dinner and seeing a movie.”
David checked himself over before knocking on Charlie’s door. At four he’d gotten a message telling him to come at seven and to wear something nice. David took a shower, put on his nicest shirt and gave his shoes a quick polish.

David knocked. Charlie opened the door. David’s jaw dropped. He was always prone to thinking Charlie looked good but Charlie looked down right hot. He was in a dark green silk shirt that was almost black. His pants looked a size smaller than usual but couldn’t be called tight. And his curls were styled, slick and shining. David tried to swallow.

“Hey, David. Come on in, I just need to run upstairs for a second and grab my coat and we can get going. Mind if I drive tonight?”

David shook his head still trying to process this new Charlie before him. Charlie gave a cheeky grin and rushed up the stairs. It was only when Charlie was out of sight that David realized there were other people in the room. Both Don and Alan were looking at him. Both Don and Alan were looking at him. Alan was giving him a bit of a hairy eyeball. Don looked like he was trying really hard not to laugh. David smiled, not really trusting his voice. Charlie trotted back down the stairs in a well fitted sports coat that made him look like a studio executive instead of a math professor.

“Ready to go?”

David nodded.

“Have fun tonight,” Don said and David could definitely hear the laughter in Don’s voice.

It was only when they were in the car and halfway down the street that David found his voice. “You look really great tonight.”

Charlie flushed a little. “Thank you.”

“So, where are we heading?”

“We have reservations at Culina.”

David tried to work out where he’d heard that name. His brain finally pulled a mental case file concerning a series of hotel robberies. “Isn’t that the restaurant at the Four Seasons?”

Charlie smiled. “Why yes, I do believe it is.”

David tried not to look around like a tourist as he and Charlie were led to their table but most of their meals out were at good but midrange places. This was a step up. David looked over the menu. Everything looked fancy and expensive and he was pretty sure he couldn’t pronounce 90% of what was on it.

“Oh, they have sea urchin.”

David tried not to make a face. “You like sea urchin?”

“My first set theory professor, Professor Yoshida, would sometimes invite her favorite students over for meals. Her husband was a master sushi chef. And I mean Master. He’d make balls of rice with his bare hands and if you counted the grains of rice in each ball they’d all be within five grains of
each other. He could do amazing things with sea urchin.”

“Well I’ll leave you the sea urchin, I think I’ll start with salami myself.”

When the waiter came over David let Charlie order first. Charlie didn’t hold back picking some of the most rarified dishes off the menu and topping it off with a bottle of wine that was over two hundred dollars. David held back a little, mainly just ordering things he recognized. The waiter looked a little disappointed then left.

“Okay Charlie, I give up. What are we doing here? Are we celebrating something? Did something happen? Are you buttering me up before dumping me?”

Charlie snorted. “I’m not dumping you.”

“Just checking.”

“Let’s wait for the wine to get here.”

They didn’t have to wait long. David watched as Charlie went through the whole swishing, sipping, corking ritual. David prided himself on being a New Yorker and a reasonably sophisticated guy but he’d never quite gotten the hang of what you were supposed to do with fancy wines. They either tasted good or they didn’t. Charlie approved of his selection and they were both poured generous glasses.

“Okay. What’s up?”

Charlie’s smiled flickered and he gazed into his wine. “It’s the 15th.”

“I know.”

“It’s been six months, David.”

David’s mind rapidly rewound six months and found itself in a blood covered bathroom. “Shit. I’d forgotten the date.”

“I don’t blame you. Sort of wish I could forget. Six months ago today I woke up strapped to a hospital bed and a strange little doctor asked me if I was willing to accept the fact that I had hit bottom and had no where to go but up or if I just wanted to walk outside and step in front of a bus.”

Charlie looked up at David.

“No bus.”

“No bus.” Charlie lifted his glass. “But it’s been six very short and damn long months and I wanted to celebrate that.”

David raised his glass. “To six very short and damn long months, and the six after that.”

Charlie touched their glasses together and David took a sip of his wine and found it was actually quite good. Maybe not two hundred dollar good but definitely drinkable.

David felt himself begin to relax as the meal arrived. He tried not to cringe as Charlie slurped down his sea urchin declaring it good if not quite as good Chef Yoshida’s. That got the whole conversation turning towards food. It seemed a little wrong debating where to get the best pizza slice while eating lobster with black truffle but David didn’t really care.

It might have been the wine or Charlie’s laughter or just the fact that it was a Friday but David felt a
lightness settle over him as the meal progressed. It felt easier to breathe and laugh and in between courses David did his best to lock in the look of Charlie’s smiling face and flushed cheeks.

There was a bit of a pause in the conversation as they waited for their tiramisu and espresso. David took the opportunity to really look Charlie over. “Have I mentioned that you look great tonight?”

“Oh or twice.”

“I hear you went shopping?”

Charlie rolled his eyes. “I realized that I didn’t own anything that didn’t make me look like a math teacher.”

“I hate to break it to you but you are a math teacher.”

“For a math teacher I spend a lot of time doing things other than teaching math. Besides I wanted to look nice for tonight. Celebrate this newish me with a new look.”

“Well I like it.”

The dessert arrived. It was rich with a heavy mix of coffee, alcohol and thick cream. Charlie licked the cream off his spoon the same way he licked cum off his fingers.

Suddenly the restaurant felt just a little too warm and the wine started doing laps around David’s head. Charlie must have felt the heat as well and undid just the top button of his shirt. That did not help David in the slightest.

“You’re being a tease again, Charlie.”

Charlie smiled and looked up through his lashes. “I know.”

David gripped his spoon until he felt the metal start to bend. “Do you have any other plans for this evening?” David was proud at how calm his voice sounded.

“I might. Eat your dessert and we’ll find out.”

David ate his dessert then calmly finished his coffee. Charlie flagged down the waiter and signed the check.

“I hope you’re not planning for either of us to drive anywhere.”

“Not until sometime tomorrow afternoon. Come on.”

Charlie led them through the sprawling hotel to the luxury suites. He fished out a cardkey for one of the suites and swung open the doors.

The large room was bathed in soft warm light. Iced champagne and two glasses sat waiting. Charlie walked past them and threw open the doors to the balcony letting in the breeze. David went for the champagne instead. He didn’t have it often but it was a bit of a weakness. He popped the cork and poured two glasses then turned to the balcony.

Charlie was leaning over the railing into the night.

“Charlie.” David tried not to raise his voice. Charlie turned around. “Could you not?”

Charlie looked around confused for a second then backed away from the railing. “Sorry.”
“It’s okay.” David handed him the glass.

Charlie took a sip and looked out into the night, twinkling not with stars but city lights. David took the moment to study Charlie’s profile. It was one that always seemed to be changing. With a fresh shave and a smile he looked barely twenty and with a tilt of his head and a serious glance he looked far older than his years.

“That night David, when you came into my room, you told me I needed to work out what I really want. Do you remember?”

“Yes.” David was sure he’d be long dead before he forgot a second of that night.

“When Amita left she told me I need to figure out who I really am.”

“I remember.”

Charlie took another small sip of his champagne. “I think I’ve figured it out. Who I am. What I want.”

“Who are you?”

Charlie took a deep breath. “I am Doctor Charles Edwards Eppes. Brother of Special Agent Don Eppes and son of Margaret and Alan Eppes. And that’s not a bad thing to be.”

David lifted his glass. “No. No it’s not.”

“I figured out what I want as well.” David gestured for Charlie to continue. “I want to be married.”

David felt his heart stop in his chest. “At some point,” Charlie continued. “I want to share my life and grow old with someone I care for. I want children or at least a child. Sooner rather than later as it’s pretty close to later already. And I want the work I do with the FBI and the work the FBI does with me to get the proper respect it deserves from the mathematical community.”

Charlie took a large swallow of his drink then stepped close to David. “And I have no idea how I’m going to get any of that but I figure I can think about those things tomorrow.”

David was close enough now that David could feel his breath. David’s own breath fell into sync even as his heart began to race with hope, fear and arousal. “And there is one other thing I want.”

“Yes?”

“I want you David. All of you. Tonight. If you’ll still have me.”

David tried to think but suddenly there was nothing but a rushing sound between his ears and a tingle running over his body. He put his champagne aside with care and cupped Charlie’s soft cheek. Charlie’s eyes closed. They had looked earnest and afraid. David leaned in and pressed his lips to Charlie’s for just a moment.

“Yes.” The word finally found its way out from the tangle of desire that was filling his head.

Charlie smiled.

The second kiss was soft and tentative but still they wrapped their arms around each other. Charlie parted his lips and David dipped his tongue in. He felt a ripple go through Charlie’s body and a soft sigh escape.

“Should we move this towards a bed?”
Charlie nodded but seemed reluctant to unwind his arms from around David’s body. David realized that six months and three days since their first kiss he was actually in no rush himself. They had all night.

He kissed Charlie again, lacing his fingers into those always soft curls, dancing his tongue gently around Charlie’s mouth. Charlie moaned and sighed into the kiss, his hands trailing along David’s back. A breeze with the heavy scent of summer lilies danced around them.

David pulled away from Charlie and sneezed.

Charlie giggled. “Should we move inside before the pollen attacks?”

“Good idea.” David grabbed their champagne glasses and stepped back inside. Charlie closed the balcony doors then opened the doors leading to the rest of the suite. A king sized bed was carefully turned down and spread with rose petals. David also noticed Charlie’s overnight bag was tucked against one of the nightstands.

“I didn’t order the rose petals,” Charlie said quickly.

“That’s okay. I don’t have problems with roses... or clovers.”

“Roses and clovers. I’ll remember that.”

Charlie started the next kiss, his hands going to the buttons of David’s shirt. David was already aching but the first feel of Charlie’s fingers against his chest were like pinpoints of electrical shock, like he had never been touched before and his body was struggling to understand. He craved more.

His hands went to Charlie’s buttons. The shirt was new and the button holes were tight and he didn’t want to rip the tissue thin silk. He managed three buttons before just pulling the shirt up and over Charlie’s head then shrugging off his own.

He took a step back and looked Charlie over wanting to hold the moment. He took in the way Charlie’s hair curled just above his shoulders. The way his nipples peeked through the thick hair on his chest which trailed down his stomach pointing the way. He took in the small scars on Charlie’s chest that had nearly faded away and the one large one on his arm that would never truly fade.

“Gorgeous,” David whispered.

Charlie blushed. “Funny, that’s just what I was thinking.”

David pulled Charlie in for a hot and heavy kiss tumbling them onto the bed in the process. Charlie started squirming trying to kick off his shoes and undo his pants.

“Here.” He rolled Charlie over onto his back. “Let me.”

Charlie went still as David slid down his body. He carefully unlaced each shoe and pulled off each sock taking a moment to rub at Charlie’s feet. Charlie moaned and began to melt into the bed. Then he went north peeling the pants from Charlie’s legs to find a pair of silk boxers that matched Charlie’s shirt.

“You know I was thinking about wearing those jeans you like but I wasn’t sure if we’d make it through dinner if I did.”

David nuzzled at Charlie’s erection through his shorts. “I would have probably jumped you in the parking lot.”
Charlie’s chuckle was low. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

David slid down Charlie’s shorts and flung them across the room. Charlie’s erection sprang free. It was already as thick and red as he’d ever seen it. David gave it a long lick.

Charlie’s hips bucked and he griped the bed. “Jesus, David! I’d like to last tonight you know.”

“I’m sure you’ll manage. Besides you’ve got the recharge rate of a teenager.” David did back off a little peppering kisses along Charlie’s thighs and stomach.

“David.” Charlie’s voice was getting low and husky. “I think you might be overdressed down there.” David got up to strip off his pants. Charlie pushed himself up to watch. “First time I saw you naked I almost passed out. I wanted you to take me in that bathroom in the worst way. Wanted to touch every inch of your skin. Wanted you to touch me. Didn’t care what my doctor said or what I was supposed to want. You could have done anything to me. I just wanted to feel you.”

David crawled back onto the bed aware of the rose petals sticking to his knees. “Touch all you like. It’s all here for you.”

Charlie took the invitation. He guided David onto his back then straddled his hips. He ran his hands down David’s chest in long broad strokes, lingering over his nipples and sliding their cocks together. David grabbed the sheets and tried to keep his hips still even as Charlie’s length burned along his.

He pulled Charlie forward into a kiss letting Charlie’s tongue probe and explore while he ran his fingers through Charlie’s ever touchable curls. He pulled and Charlie’s hips bucked. A thin sweat broke out across his body. David slid his hands down Charlie’s back and slipped a finger between Charlie’s cheeks expecting to find a dry tight hole. Instead he felt lube and Charlie’s hole twitching open. He broke off the kiss. “Charlie?”

Charlie smiled trying to look innocent through lust heavy eyes. “Hope springs eternal. I cleaned and stretched before you came over. I wanted to be ready.”

David couldn’t control the shiver of lust at the thought of Charlie stretching himself. He ran his finger around Charlie’s hole feeling it twitch. “What did you use?”

Charlie closed his eyes and tried to push back against David’s teasing finger. “A little toy I picked up,” he breathed. “About three fingers thick and as long as you. I worked it in nice and deep while I took my shower. Made sure everything was nice and clean. Then I slipped in that red plug while I got ready. I only pulled it out a minute before you drove up.”

David growled and rolled them both over pinning Charlie to the bed. Reason and control were trying to fight through a raw lust. “You were careful?”

“Very. I want you David. As much as I wanted you in your hallway when I got out of the hospital that’s nothing compared to what I’m feeling now. I am so ready and I want you and I want you to be ready. After everything you are the only person I want to do this with. Please.”

David felt his balls draw up at that simple please. He drove his nails into his palms to keep from coming, untouched across Charlie’s body. “Yes.” Even with that word David backed off trying to slow himself down a little. Charlie went for his overnight bag. A tube of lube was quickly in David’s hand. “Condom?”

Charlie shook his head. “We’re both clean. Please?”

David’s cock jumped in approval. His higher brain was shorting out and agreed. David flipped open
the lube and started covering his fingers. “Roll over. Across my knees.”

Charlie’s smile was impish as he crawled across David’s knees and wiggled himself into place. David got to work. One finger slipped in easy but Charlie had tightened up over dinner. David took his time, careful to stretch but not overly stimulate. Yet with each extra finger Charlie’s moans would rise in volume and he began babbling something abut recursive sets. David rubbed at the small of his back to keep his body relaxed. The beside clock pointed out that a half hour had passed by the time David felt safe working in a fourth finger and giving a twist.

Charlie jumped and his cock was smearing precum across David’s thigh. “God, David. Now. Please.”

David pulled out his fingers and helped Charlie off his lap. He was nearly boneless already. Charlie spread his legs. David kissed him and rubbed at his nipples. “This is still going to hurt,” David warned.

“I know,” Charlie replied.

David knelt between Charlie’s legs, lined himself up and slowly pushed. Nothing happened at first then Charlie’s hole twitched and David felt the head of his cock slide past the first ring of muscles.

Charlie gasped and grabbed the sheets. David grabbed Charlie’s hips and knew there would be finger bruises by morning. Charlie’s breathing was ragged but his erection had yet to flag. David pushed on trying not to cum. He’d never been anywhere so tight. It was painful and at the same time far beyond any hedonistic pleasure he’d ever felt. His cock was being squeezed in ripples as Charlie’s whole body tensed and relaxed in waves.

When he felt his balls start to press against Charlie’s body he stopped and drew breath. “Charlie?” Charlie’s eyes were squeezed tight and his breath was quick. “You okay?” Charlie nodded but David didn’t move. He didn’t particularly want to move. He wanted all of time and space to freeze and hold that moment. “Can you stop hyperventilating?” Charlie didn’t say anything but his breathing did begin to slow and finally his body relaxed. His eyes fluttered open. “Charlie, I’m going to start moving again. You feel amazing.”

Charlie's eyes were wide and glazed. He nodded and David started moving. He knew he couldn’t last long. Not with the way Charlie’s ass was gripping at him, nearly sucking him in. And beneath him Charlie’s body was flush and rolling. He didn’t dare touch Charlie’s cock, not yet. Instead he reached out and touched Charlie’s face. Charlie whimpered and tears squeezed from his eyes. David froze.


David started moving as Charlie rolled his head trapping David’s hand between his cheek and the pillow.

He lifted Charlie’s hips with his free hand. Charlie got the idea and lifted his ankles to David’s shoulders. David leaned in capturing Charlie’s mouth, bending him in half, his taste and scent filling David’s world.

Charlie’s eyes were flung open, his back arched. “David,” was his quiet gasp as the cum poured from him, and across his body in a thick pulsing stream. It was more than David had ever seen and with every new spurt he clamped down around David’s cock.

He held on to Charlie’s thighs, desperate to hold back his own release, just for a moment longer, just
long enough to see every expression of pure release painted across Charlie’s face.

Charlie was still twitching when David could hold back no longer. He thrust hard, twice, into Charlie’s pliant body. It was like pouring himself into an abyss and like Charlie the waves of pleasure and release seemed never to end, shaking and squeezing him until his body was drained and his mind blank.

When his body was accepting orders again he slid from Charlie, who gave a small hiss, then collapsed beside him.

Charlie was taking deep breaths, his body shining with sweat and covered in cum. David took his hand. It was still for a long moment before Charlie gave it a little squeeze. After that they lay there, the silence only ruined by their breathing. Charlie’s eyes closed and David felt himself begin to drift into sleep.

David opened his eyes to find the bed empty and cum drying on his body. Light spilled from under the bathroom door. David waited, listening for any sound but it was silent. He waited a minute longer then got up.

“Charlie?” he called through the bathroom door.

“Yes?”

David’s heart skipped a beat with relief. “You okay?”

There were a few seconds of silence. “Yeah.”

“Can I come in?” There was no answer. David turned the door handle carefully and found it unlocked.

Charlie was standing in front of a sink staring into a wall to wall mirror. He was still naked but had cleaned himself up.

David laid a hand on his shoulder as gently as possible. “Hey, you okay?”

“Yeah.” Charlie replied again but his voice was as flat as his expression.

David tried stamp down the raw panic rising out of his gut. “Whatcha doing?”

“Just looking.”

“Did you think you were going to look different?”

“No. Maybe.”

David slid himself behind Charlie. “It’s not a bad view.”

Charlie shrugged a little. “I was just thinking, this is who I am. Without anything else, at the end of the day, this is who I am.”

David wrapped his arms around Charlie and took a moment to admire the way their bodies seemed to slide into place, contrasting yet locking together like pieces of a puzzle. He kissed the tip of Charlie’s ear. “If this is who we are I don’t mind. Look at us and tell me we don’t look right, that we don’t fit.”

A smile finally touched Charlie’s lips and he leaned back against David’s body. “David, I’m not all
better yet.”

“I know.”

“There are things I want to say right now, they’re sitting just at the tip of my tongue but I’m scared to say them, and I’m not quite sure I even know what they’re supposed to mean anymore.”

David tightened his arms around Charlie. There were words he was terrified to risk saying himself that had been hovering on his lips all night. “It’s okay. It’s not tomorrow yet. It’s still today and you don’t need to think about anything or worry about anything.”

Charlie turned in David’s arms and pressed a kiss to his bare chest, over his heart. Then he rested his cheek against the same spot. His breath was warm and gentle as it slid across David’s skin.

David cupped Charlie’s face in his hands and tilted his head back so he could steal a soft kiss and slip into Charlie’s deep brown eyes, his heart filling with peace as he did.

Charlie’s lips parted and he drew in a slow breath. “Take me back to bed,” he whispered. “Show me all the ways we fit.”

THE END

Chapter End Notes

This fic was never meant to happen. At least not like this. Over a year ago I signed up for choc_fic’s 100 Days of Color. I grabbed David and had about six weeks to write a story. This should not have been a problem. I’ve always liked David and I’ve always liked David and Charlie. One of my earliest pieces of smut was David/Charlie and I’ve had bunnies with the two of them bouncing around for years. None of them had made it to full size however. Oddly enough almost all of them involved Charlie having some sort of mental health crisis and David fighting with Don.

This story was supposed to be maybe 5,000 words of most h/c pwp. I even had plans for some light D/s overtones. Basically in chapter one when Charlie throws himself at David David was supposed to kiss him back. Instead David said no and pushed him away. I was shocked at what I was writing. I thought Charlie would sulk. I had no idea he would try to kill himself until my fingers typed out those words.

Now most of my longer stories are at the very least outlined before I get too far into them. This one wasn’t. I kept on tell myself that the end, or at least the smut, was only a couple thousand words away. Instead it just seemed always out of reach. Charlie never seemed ready then David’s own problems cropped up. The night I typed The End I did a word count then cried for about ten minutes. David and Charlie are not a popular pairing in a quickly diminishing fandom and I couldn’t believe what I had done. I was sure I’d just spent a year writing something that all of three people would read.

I did have help keeping me going along the way. I showed the first few pages to emmademarais early on and she became a real cheerleader as did mikes_grrl who made me rewrite the first chapter moving it from weepy!Charlie to a situation that had some layers. swingandswirl watched this slowly develop as well and her and riverotter1951 had a mammoth nightmare of a beta once this was all done.
As for what is next I should get working on Whitman 5 which was meant to be out now except this quick little throw away fic ate it and my life for a year. I will keep trying to work on that but for my own sanity I also need to work on some original work of my own. Thank you for all being so lovely and understanding and thank you all for the support and thank you for reading.

LG

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