A Woman Waits for Me

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Series: Part 4 of Whitman

A Woman Waits for Me

by ladygray99

Summary

When Don's life slides into the darkness only family will help him find his way out.

Notes

Hello all. Here it is the long awaited fourth part to Whitman ’verse. I'll tell you right now if you haven't read the rest of the Whitman stories this will make very little sense so go to the start and start reading. It's OK. I'll wait. This starts out maybe nine months after Sing My Body Electric. This is going to be a little different as it will cover about two years of time so there will be jumps of months between parts. I also want to apologize. While there is sex in this there isn't a lot, considering the length, and half of it will be het. While Colby and Charlie do feature largely this is mainly a Don story or really a Don and Charlie relationship as brothers’ story. This is also the middle part of a trilogy (yes Whitman 5 is in the works) and while I'll try to tie up a lot of the threads by the end a few will be left hanging. I'm going to say this is cannon up through Trust Metric. Let's say Trust Metric happened sometime in the middle of The Modern Man I Sing. I'll put warnings on each part as we go. I spent almost a year of my life on this monster so feedback is really desperately wanted.

Warning: Discussion of Rape and Suicide
Don felt himself drift in the comfortable buzz brought on by three beers, the easy laughter of his team, and the knowledge of a job well done. His Dad had already climbed off to bed, leaving the ‘kids’ to sit around and talk.

“Hey, Megan?” David asked. “Does having this conversation count as sexual harassment?” The conversation had gone from first bust, to first kiss, to lurid, embarrassing tales of losing one’s virginity.

Megan took a pull of her own beer. “I don’t know, David, are you feeling harassed?”

“Careful.” Colby said. “Don’t forget she’s an undercover shrink. Anything you say is open for analysis.”

Megan tossed a wadded-up napkin at Colby, who batted it away with a laugh.

“So whose turn is it?” Megan asked.

“Charlie hasn’t given us any lurid tales of nerd love.” David pointed out. Charlie was curled up against Colby’s side on the couch and was already a beer ahead of Don and at least two ahead of everyone else.

“Male or female?” Charlie asked brazenly.

“Chicks, please.” David said.

Don put his hands over his ears. “I don’t want to know,” he whined, to the amusement of the team.

“Rachael Wise.” Charlie said softly as if thinking about something else.

Don’s hands dropped from his ears. “What?!”

Charlie smirked.

“Did you say Rachael Wise, as in my high school girlfriend Rachael Wise?”

Charlie shrugged. “Maybe.”

Everyone laughed. Don put his face in his hands.

“Well, you two were broken up, it was after graduation, she came by looking for you, one thing led to another.” Don’s hands had gone back to his ears.
“What she hot?” David asked.

“Co-captain of the cheerleading team.” Charlie said.

“Awesome.” David replied in guy solidarity.

“Just tell me it was in your room.” Don moaned feeling a little disturbed, though some part of his brain was trying to tell him that something more was wrong with Charlie’s story.

Charlie shrugged. “Well, we never really got as far as my room. Your room, on the other hand...” Don groaned.

Megan laughed. “This is the kind of stuff you need to be worried about me analyzing.” Everyone but Don laughed.

“So first guy?” Megan asked.

Charlie gave a melodramatic sigh and fanned himself. “Martin Smith, fellow prodigy, electrical engineering major, tall, blond, Mormon.”

“Mormon!” Colby exclaimed.

“Mormon, he’s got like twenty kids now. Do you know what it takes to get one of them out of their magic underwear?”

Don’s head shot up as a couple of synapses connected in the beer soup of his brain. “Wait a second! Rachael and I broke up right before prom.”

“Yeah.” Charlie said sounding a little annoyed at his story of Martin’s magic underwear getting interrupted.

“And you went to Princeton that September.”

“Yeah?”

“You were thirteen, Charlie!”

Charlie shrugged. “Yeah.”

Don was so in shock he couldn’t even speak for a moment. “It was illegal!” he finally sputtered out “Did you even know what was going on?”

“Well I like to think I caught on pretty quick when she started doing that thing with her tongue.” Charlie answered a slight edge to his voice.

Don blinked at his brother so casually curled up against Colby, beer held lightly between his fingers. Over the last year Charlie had shed the last of the awkward, boyish act and morphed into a confident adult with an easy sexual aura that turned heads. Even like this, he didn’t look small against Colby; rather Colby looked like an exotic pet to lounge against.

“I need another beer.” Don said and got up to wobble to the kitchen.

~
Don was staring at the fridge, not doing anything, when Megan entered the kitchen.

“Hey, Don, you okay? You’ve been here a while.”

“Yep. I’m great. My high school sweetheart’s a pedophile, my brother’s a victim, and it was on my sheets. Life is spiffy.”

Megan rubbed circles on Don’s back. “Hey, don’t beat yourself up. Any problems Charlie may have resulting from that incident I’m sure he’s dealing with in therapy, and even if the statute of limitations weren’t expired, it would be her word against Charlie’s and I really doubt Charlie would want to drag himself and the family through that.”

“I know, it’s just… Fuck!” Don exclaimed and pounded his fist onto the counter.

“I know.” Megan said softly.

“I always thought I was protecting Charlie and I find out everyday just how miserably I failed at it.”

“Don, if you had truly failed with Charlie he wouldn’t be sitting in the other room, confident, successful, with someone who loves him.”

Don nodded his head. “Yeah.” He grabbed a beer from the fridge and headed back to the lounge.

When he got back to the lounge Charlie was explaining something using a beer bottle and an empty take out box as a prop. Judging by how much David and Colby were laughing he had a feeling it wasn’t a math theorem Charlie was trying to explain.

“Hey, guys, what did I miss?” Before Don could be caught up David’s phone beeped. He quickly looked at it and, though it was a little hard to tell, a bit of extra color rose in his cheeks.

“Ah…I’m gonna call it a night.”

The rest of the crew snickered.

“Well, you have fun with the rest of your night.” Colby teased as David tried to keep a straight face.

“Actually I’m going to head out, too.” Megan said. “I’m supposed to meet Larry at the observatory.”

“Say hi for me.” Charlie said.

Megan and David grabbed their coats and said their goodbyes.

“You heading to bed, Chuck?” Don asked.

“Yeah, going to call it a night. You?”

Don shook his head. “Nah. I’m still feeling a little wired. I’m going to watch TV for a bit.”

Charlie frowned for a moment and Don put on a smile.

“Okay. Try to get some sleep tonight.”

“I’ll be fine.”
“Okay.”

“Goodnight, Don.” Colby said.

Don watched as they climbed the stairs and disappeared.

~

Charlie snuggled up against Colby, the warmth of his body relaxing already loose limbs. He gently kissed Colby's chest and looked up for a kiss on the lips. Colby’s face was far away and pensive.

“Hey, what are you thinking?” Charlie asked with a little nudge.

Colby’s forehead creased in thought. “Charlie, what Don said tonight...”

Charlie stiffened. “What about it?”

“Were you...were you really thirteen?”

“Yes.” Charlie said evenly, unsure where the conversation was heading.

“How old was she?”

“Eighteen, nearly nineteen. She was a little older than Don.”

“Charlie?” Colby whispered his name, voice full of second-hand pain. Charlie pulled back a bit so he could look at Colby.

“It didn’t have anything to do with me. She was trying to hurt Don. Three years together and it ended badly just before prom.”

“Did you know?”

“More or less.”

“Then why...?” Colby suddenly looked hard at Charlie. “Did you say no?”

‘Come on Charlie, aren’t you curious?’

“I don’t remember.”

“How can you not remember?”

“It was a long time ago.”

‘Just lay still.’

‘Wait, Rachael...’

‘Shhhhh’

“You must remember.”

“Only bits. It’s a strange memory. Like watching a movie with frames missing.”

‘Don’t you want to be just like your big brother?’
“Did you say stop?”

‘No, Rachael. Stop.’

“It’s unlikely.”

‘You don’t really want me to stop.’

“Charlie?”

Charlie looked the man he loved dead in the eye and lied.

“I don’t remember. She wanted me to tell Don, to piss him off. I never did and I don’t even know why I let her name slip out tonight. It must have been the beer. It had nothing to do with me.”

‘Charlie, Charlie. Always the shadow, always telling your brother the things you see. Are you going to tell him what you just did, little Charlie?’

‘No.’

‘We’ll see.’

Colby wrapped his arms around Charlie and drew him close. Charlie let out a long breath and ordered his body to relax. He closed his eyes and told himself that everything was fine.

~

Charlie cracked open his eyes and looked at the clock. 3 am. The math hour. He could feel the numbers spark across his mind. Sometimes they were unformed and he slid back into sleep. Other times…

‘Of course!’

Charlie slipped out of bed wrapping his bathrobe around him and headed down to the garage.

He paused as he walked past the living room. The TV was still on. Figuring Don had probably fallen asleep on the couch, Charlie tiptoed into the room and reached over to turn off the television. Don had been sitting so still Charlie assumed he must be asleep. He quickly glanced over his shoulder. Don’s eyes were open but not blinking.

“Don?” Charlie said softly.

Don blinked once. “Yes?” Don answered flatly. Charlie looked to his brother’s lap. A gun sat there and Don’s hands were gently curled around it. Charlie felt his heart stop, like liquid nitrogen had been pumped into his veins. He slowly approached Don and knelt down in front of him.

“Don. What are you doing?”

“Thinking.” Don answered flatly, still staring straight ahead.

“With your gun out?” Don flicked his eyes down for a second as if to confirm the gun was still there. He shrugged. “Don, why do you have your gun out?”

Don gave a chuckle. “Cognitive emergence.”

“What?”
“What does it take for a brain to make all these thoughts, that’s what you’re always thinking, what does it take to stop all these thoughts. To just have quiet. There has to be a balance right? Equations have to be balanced. That’s what you’re always saying.” Don slowly lifted the gun and looked at it. “Just a thing, a tool.” Don whispered, voice heavy with exhaustion.

Charlie found his limbs frozen as Don leaned his cheek against the barrel, in a quick move the end of the barrel was pressing into the skin of Don’s temple then just as quickly it was leaving a mark in the soft skin of his lips then under his chin. “What does it take, Charlie? How do you turn it all off? What’s the other half of the equation?” Don’s voice became cracked and raw.

“Don, give me the gun.” Charlie said evenly, despite the almost deafening pounding of his heart. Don gave a chuckle and let go of the gun so it was only dangling from one finger.

Charlie snatched the gun from Don, flicked on the safety, ejected the clip and pulled the slide back to retrieve the bullet from the chamber. Don raised an eyebrow.

“I might not be able to shoot one of these but I sure as hell can unload one.” Charlie quickly dropped all three bits into the pocket of his bathrobe. If he could have dismantled the whole thing he would have. He could feel the fabric strain against the unusual weight.

Charlie carefully took Don’s hands in his. “Do you do this a lot, Don? Think about balancing the equation?”

Don shrugged. “Sometimes, it’s worse in winter.”

“Why?”

“The sheets are cold, the nights are longer, the only thing in my fridge is fossilized mu shu pork and the milk looks more like cheese. I’ve got five bucks in my retirement account and I can feel my elbow start to hurt where I screwed it up pitching when I was twenty…” Don trailed off then suddenly looked at Charlie. “I’m so sorry, Charlie, I’m so sorry for what she did to you, I’ll bust her, I’ll kill her, it never should have happened, you never should have been there, I…”

Charlie shook his head and gently squeezed Don’s hands. “Okay. Don, listen to me. What happened with Rachael was a long time ago and my patterns of response to situations were already firmly established.” Don gave Charlie a questioning look. Charlie took a breath. “I was already broken, it did me no damage, it meant nothing, just a moment in time like any other and it only has the meaning I give it and I give it none and I now have a boyfriend, and a shrink, and a doctor, and a bottle of little pills I take every other day to help me, and what is wrong with me is getting better all the time, okay?”

“You’re taking drugs?”

Charlie nodded slowly. “Yes, Don.”

“You swore you’d never do that.”

“And I also swore I’d never see a shrink. Things change, people change. Do you get what I’m saying?” Don nodded. ‘Good. Also, you have more than five dollars in your retirement fund. I started a fund in your name when you moved back from Albuquerque. I know you took a demotion, I also know you took a pay cut. Most of it’s in money market, some property development but there’s also a good chunk of cash just collecting interest every month.”

“What? How?”
“I’m practically a line item in the federal budget these days. I am rich and you are my brother and I love you very much and you are not going to die cold and alone in the old agents’ home as long as I have anything to say about it. Okay?”

Don nodded again.

“Good. Okay.” Charlie let go of Don’s hands and put them gently on Don’s head. Don closed his eyes and lowered his head under Charlie’s soft touch. “Don, I need you to do something now. I need you to promise me you will not harm yourself.”

“Charlie…”

“No. No debate here. I need you to promise. I need you to swear by god, and mom, and the math you will make no attempt to harm yourself, no attempt to kill yourself, no driving too fast, no putting yourself in the line of fire. Nothing. Promise me this, Don. As my brother.” Charlie knew he was pleading but he also knew Don, knew Don didn’t break promises. “Please.”

Don took a deep breath. “I promise.”

Charlie slipped his hands from Don’s hair to Don’s face and tilted his head up. “Open your eyes. Look at me and promise.”


“Don, if I thought you needed to be bound to all the Rules of the Arrangement, this would be a much longer and weirder conversation.” Don chuckled. “Okay, here’s what you’re going to do.”

“Giving orders, Chuck?”

“Yes. You are going to go upstairs, get undressed, get into bed and go to sleep. In the morning you will get up, take a shower, put on your spare, clean suit, come downstairs, eat breakfast then look me in the eye. Depending on how much dark I see will dictate if you get your gun back.”

“Charlie…” Don began to object.

“No. My turf. These are my rules. When you go to work the first thing you will do is call Bradford and make an appointment for today. You will go down, you will tell him everything and we’ll go from there.

“He’ll take away my field status.”

‘Good!’ Charlie wanted to shout.

“No he won’t. They only do that if you’re a danger to yourself or others and you are neither because you have promised.”

“Okay.”

“Good. Now, repeat back. What are you going to do?”

Don sighed. “Go upstairs, bed, sleep, wake up, shower, clothes, breakfast, look at you, work, Bradford.”

“Good. And if you don’t go I will have Colby drag you down in your own cuffs.”
“I’m his boss.”

“I’m his lover.”

“Okay.”

Charlie stood and pulled Don to his feet with him. He felt the gun bounce against his leg.

Don made his way slowly up the stairs and Charlie followed. Don stopped at the door to his old room, long ago redone into a guest room, all signs of the crime that happened there long since washed away.

Charlie reached out and opened the door, motioning Don through it.

Don moved like a man asleep, striping off his clothes, letting them fall where they may. He climbed into the neatly made bed and shivered. “The sheets are cold.”

Charlie sat gently on the edge of the bed.

“I’ll stay until they warm up. Now sleep.”

Don nodded and closed his eyes. Charlie gently reached out and placed a hand on his brother’s head and left it there until he was sure Don was asleep.

~

Colby cracked his eyes open as Charlie entered the room. The clock said quarter to four.

“That was quick.” Colby mumbled, since he was rather used to Charlie staying awake at his boards until dawn. Charlie didn’t answer, only sat down heavily on the bed that wasn’t really made for two. There was a heavy clunk on the bedside table. Colby sat up quickly.

“Uh…Charlie, where did you get that gun?”

“It’s Don’s,” he answered flatly.

“Why do you have Don’s gun?”

“So he won’t use it.” Colby watched as Charlie began to shake. He quickly shifted so he could wrap his arms around Charlie, just in time. The heaving sobs came in waves like an ocean storm. Colby desperately wanted answers, but all he could do was watch Charlie cough and choke around the tears. He rocked Charlie whispering soft, soothing nothings. When the worst seemed to have passed Charlie looked up at him.

“Why?” he choked out. “I don’t understand. How could he? He pressed it to his lips right there in front of me. How could he?”

Colby didn’t know if he wanted to run to check on Don or shoot the man himself.

“Where’s Don now?”

“Asleep, next door.”

“Are you sure?”

Charlie nodded. “I stayed until he was asleep and he always forgets that the board outside his door
squeaks so I’ll be able to hear if he tries to leave.”

Colby nodded. Charlie must have been in highly sensible mode when he put Don to bed.

“What did he say?”

“He wanted me to balance the equation, to make the thoughts in his head be quiet. He sounded so tired.” Colby winced inside. He knew about the Long Nights where you couldn’t make your own dark thoughts shut up long enough to let you sleep and one of your own bullets seemed like a perfectly reasonable sleeping pill. “Colby, have you ever…I mean..?”

“A few times, mainly in Afghanistan. That high up in the mountains the sun goes down quickly, the nights are dark.”

“But not since. I mean the FBI…” Colby sighed and tried to figure out how to explain that sooner or later every agent, every cop has a bad night where they get a little curious about what gun oil tastes like.

“We all have bad nights, Charlie. That’s why they screen as heavily as the do. Try to weed out the ones who can’t take it before they can’t take it.”

“But Don…”

“Don’s in a different situation from me. I’m a grunt. I rank somewhere between the janitors and the drug dogs. Don…Don’s the boss, and a good boss with a major reputation and a serious track record in the Bureau. If something goes wrong he’s the one who catches the shit and unlike damn near every other boss on the planet his shit doesn’t roll down hill. He doesn’t take it out on us, most of the time we don’t even hear about it and he’s got that same damn obsessive streak you do. It’s got to be done right, and if it’s hard or messy he does it himself. That’s going to wear someone down faster than normal.”

“But it’s Don.” Charlie said as if it should explain everything and in Charlie’s mind it probably did. Don was constant as 2+2.

“Charlie, you of all people should get where Don is. You live on that cliff; you’ve spent most of your life hanging over that abyss trying to get a better look.”

“But I’m broken.” Charlie said as if it were the simplest statement of fact. Colby held Charlie close.

“Oh, love, it’s the 21st century. We’re all broken, you just beat the rush.”

Charlie pulled away from Colby and put his head in his hands. “I made him promise. Made him look me in the eyes and promise.”

“That’s good. Don keeps his word.”

Charlie reached over and took the gun off the nightstand. In the dark it looked grotesque in Charlie’s hands. He flipped it around a few times and before Colby could say a word Charlie leaned over and wrapped his lips around the barrel. Colby’s heart stopped, he couldn’t breathe, his brain tried desperately to wake up from what had to be a nightmare. Charlie pulled his lips away and made a face.

“Yuck. Gun oil.”
Colby snatched the gun from Charlie’s hand.

“Don’t you ever, ever do that again! That was the worst thing I have ever seen!”

“I’m sorry. I just…I had to know.”

“Well now you know and don’t ever do that again!”

“Sorry.”

Colby double checked that the gun was in fact unloaded and took a few deep breaths. “Charlie, why don’t you get some sleep?”

“I can’t. I have to listen, in case…”

“Don’ll keep his word. You sleep. I’ll keep watch.”

Charlie nodded. “Okay.”

‘Oh, Don, you better keep your word.’
Don opened his eyes to sickly yellow gray LA light coming through the window. He turned his head to find Colby sitting in the chair by the bed, very awake and looking a little perturbed.

“We all have bad nights, Don.” He said. Don closed his eyes wishing he could just drift back to sleep.

“He shouldn’t have been there.” Don said. It was as much of an apology as he could muster.

“No. He shouldn’t have.” Colby looked at him for a long moment. “I’m giving you back some advice. Get your own head together or this is just the crazy leading the crazy.”

Don nodded his head. He felt better in the light of day, but that was the problem. In too few hours the sun would go down and it would be just him and the dark thoughts running circles around and around.

“Get up, take a shower, and get dressed. Charlie is trying to make waffles.”

Don made his way downstairs twenty minutes later to the sound of his dad and Charlie having a friendly disagreement over waffle toppings.

“Hey, guys.” Don said, sitting down at the table. “Did you do all this, Charlie?”

There was an impressive breakfast spread that went way beyond his usual coffee and egg whites.

“I was up early,” Charlie said. “Felt like cooking.” Don didn’t ask if Charlie had slept after he went to bed. He grabbed a waffle and some sliced oranges and drenched both with syrup.

“Charlie’s been puttering around down right domestically the last few weeks. If I didn’t know better I’d say he was expecting.” Alan joked.

“Yeah. I meant to tell you, Dad, I signed up for an experiment in the Biology department, I’m due in seven months.”

Don choked on his waffle as his dad glared at Charlie.

“I’m almost not sure if you’re joking.”
Charlie gave an evil smile. “You’ll find out in seven months, won’t you?”

Alan rolled his eyes. “Don’t tease an old man with no hope for grandkids.”

“Hey!” Don objected. “I could still…”

“Get drunk and stupid with the right woman?”

“Right.”

“I pray nightly.”

Don shook his head and went back to his waffles. He knew the joking was for his dad’s benefit. Before the morning was over he’d have to look his brother in the eye. He looked over at Colby instead, just in time to seem him squeeze lemon into his coffee cup.

“What are you drinking?” Don asked, vaguely horrified.

“Nothing.” Colby said quickly.

“Tea.” Charlie provided with great amusement. “Properly made tea. He even heats up the pot first and swishes it around.” Don raised an eyebrow at Colby.

“What? I cross trained with the SAS for a bit. Scary bastards but they’re big on their tea.”

“Did you also pick up a taste for boiled liver and cricket?”

“No. Just tea in the morning. It’s good for you, unlike the two cups of sugar sitting on your plate.”

Don put a big bit of syrup soaked waffle in him mouth. “Mmmmm. Sugar.” He said with relish.

Alan looked at his watch. “Oh. I’ve got to get to a proposed build site. Thank you for breakfast, Charlie. Be safe, you two.” he said to Don and Colby. Charlie and Don each got a quick pat before Alan rushed out the door.

“Well at least he’s keeping busy.” Don said.

The rest of breakfast was quiet and at the end plates were moved to the kitchen with little discussion. Don finally turned and looked at Charlie.

“Can I have my gun back?” Charlie peered at him with the kind of scrutiny usually reserved for math problems. Don tried to smile but wasn’t sure if it reached his eyes. “I’m okay, Chuck.” He tried to say brightly.

“No you’re not.”

Don’s face fell. “No, I’m not, but I promised.”

Charlie nodded. “Okay.”

Colby took Don’s gun out from under his suit jacket and handed it to Charlie who weighed in carefully in his hands for a long moment before handing it to Don. Don gave it a quick once over. Safety on, clip in, one bullet chambered. He slipped it into his shoulder holster, relaxing at the feel of its solid weight and presence there.

“Thank you.”
Charlie nodded. “Okay you two, off to work.” Charlie made little shooing motions. “I’ll be in my office all day if you need me. Be safe. Try to eat some real food for lunch and dad’s making a chicken for dinner.”

At the door, Don got a hug and a kiss on the cheek, Colby got a hug and a kiss on the lips. Don looked at Colby.

“Are you sure he’s not expecting?”

“Better be mine if he is.” Charlie gave both of them a playful shove out the door and closed it behind them.

‘And so begins another day.’ Don thought.

~

Don paced Bradford’s office, he sat down, jumped right back up and started pacing again.

“Don, sit down, I’m not chasing you around this place for the next hour.” Don sat. “So why are you here? You said it was an emergency.”

“Well I don’t know if it’s an emergency, emergency, I mean how would you define emergency on a physiological level which in itself can’t really be quantified…”

“Don.” Bradford cut in.

Don winced. “Shit, I sounded like Charlie there.”

“Yeah, and it’s kinda freaking me out. Now take a deep breath and tell me why you made the call this morning.”

Don took a breath. “I made the call because I promised Charlie I would.”

“Okay. Why did Charlie have you promise him that?”

Don took another deep breath. “Because last night he caught me kissing the barrel of my gun.”

Bradford nodded. “I see. Was this a friendly make out session or were you planning on going all the way?”

Don shook his head. “I don’t know.” He sighed.

“Yes, you do.”

“It was a long night, okay? You were a cop, you know about those.”

“Yes I do. Had a few myself, but they don’t happen for no reason.”

“I’d had a long day, a few beers, I got some…some bad information I couldn’t get out of my head, couldn’t sleep. I don’t even remember taking my gun out. I was just staring into space with it when Charlie found me.”

“What was the bad information?”

Don was on his feet again. “I can’t…it’s not mine…it’s about Charlie, and really it’s his…I guess it’s his problem but he doesn’t see it as a problem or at least says he doesn’t…and he’s an adult
now and is taking care of himself…”

“What was the information, Don?”

Don seemed to hold his breath for a long moment. “Rachael Wise,” he finally said softly.

“Who’s she?”

“My high school sweetheart, Rachael Wise. Three years together. By senior year, she was captain of the cheerleading team, I was the school’s baseball star, Charlie was our curly haired little shadow. We were the all-American high school dream. Had a bad fight, broke up just before prom senior year.”

“Okay. So what about Rachael Wise?”

Don squeezed his eyes shut. He couldn’t believe he was about to say this out loud, the words were sticking in his throat. He felt bile rise and for a second he actually choked on the taste. “She raped Charlie.”

Bradford let out a slow breath.

“And you just found out?”

Don nodded tightly, eyes still squeezed shut. “We…we were sitting around, having beers, telling stupid embarrassing stories about our first times. Came around to Charlie and he said Rachael Wise, after we’d broken up, before he went to Princeton.”

“Did he say rape?”

“No! He told it like any other stupid embarrassing story to wind up his brother. He was thirteen, Doc, and apparently it was on my sheets as well.”

“Did he understand what was happening at the time?”

Don shook his head, still on his feet. “He couldn’t have. Okay, some guys at thirteen are six foot two and shaving twice a day, Charlie was four foot six. He hadn’t grown an inch since he was eight, and he was skinny. Mom would feed him and he’d never put on an ounce. He was brain and bones and a little baby fat left on his cheeks. Rachael was taller than I was, could have chucked him ten feet in the air. There was no way in hell he could have really known what was going on, could have consented in any way, could have fought her off!” Don suddenly realized he was shouting at the top of his voice, arms flailing about. He sat down hard. “All night. Every time I closed my eyes all I could see was Charlie, so small, and Rachael. Oh god. I loved her. A generation earlier we would have gotten married out of high school instead of breaking up. Just the memory of her got me through some long nights before and now…” Don scrubbed at his eyes, refusing to shed tears for something that didn’t happen to him.

“And now that’s all tainted.” Bradford finished.

“You know what Charlie tried to tell me last night? He tried to tell me it didn’t matter, tried to tell me he was already broken and it was nothing. And I just want to kill her. I want to hunt her down for what she did. If Colby…if Colby had any idea of just how small and innocent Charlie was then he’d be down here spitting tacks with me!”

“I see Agent Granger on Wednesday. I’m sure I’ll hear all about it.”
“And I don’t want to drag it all out into the light because…because Charlie’s happy these days. I mean he was happy before but there was always something a little on edge, now…” Don trailed off.

“If he caught you kissing your gun last night I can guarantee he’s not happy right now. He’s probably worried sick.”

“I know. I got a hell of an evil eye from Granger when I woke up this morning.”

“So you did get some sleep?”

“Yeah. A bit.”

“Okay.” Bradford said with a nod. “I’ve got to ask you this. Don, are you a danger to yourself or anyone else?”

“No.” Don said softly.

“How do you know?”

“I promised Charlie.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes. He took my gun away, he made me swear by god, mom and the math that I wouldn’t do anything to hurt or kill myself. I even drove the speed limit on the way here.”

“And that’s enough?”

Don shook his head and rolled it back, contemplating the ceiling. “Last night I got Charlie. I had never really understood before, the thing between him and Colby, the Arrangement and the Rules, why Charlie needs what he needs. Last night I got it. I couldn’t get the pictures out of my head, horrible images of vague guesses and they wouldn’t go away, and if someone had come up and said we can give you silence and clarity and all we have to do is break your wrists I would have held my arms out and let them do it. These thoughts are like a bad dream I can’t wake up from but for Charlie…Colby told me the numbers crush him, they define him and they crush him. He needs them but can’t make them go away. Oh god, I get that now. When he made me promise, made me swear, the moment the words came out of my mouth he said good and started giving me orders, ‘good to bed, go to sleep, call Bradford in the morning’ and I did. It’s like he wrapped a leash around part of my brain and I don’t mind it being there. I couldn’t put my gun to my head if I tried, because I promised, and he said I couldn’t.”

“Are you strong enough to keep that promise, Don?”

“Yes.” Don looked at his hands pensively. “I know why Charlie’s happy now. He can dance right up to the edge and not fall over because Colby’s got him wrapped up tight and can yank him away from that edge with a word. It must be so freeing in its own way and it must have been so hard for both of them to get there.”

“It was.” Bradford said. “Nearly broke them both.”

Don nodded. “I’m the older brother. I’m supposed to be the strong one. If he’s strong enough to keep his promises, break a lifetime of stupid, destructive patterns, then so am I.”
The Smell of Melted Jellybeans and Lavender

Chapter Summary

Chocolate Sundaes and antacids.
Warning: Discussion of Adolescent Rape, and Suicide, and Drug Use

The chicken was being laid on the table when Don let himself into his brother’s house, arms loaded with bags.

“Donnie, you’re just in time.”

“Hey, Don.” Charlie said lightly but cast a probing eye over his brother. “What’s in the bag?”

“All the fixings for chocolate sundaes.” Charlie gave him a questioning look. “And a jar of pickles in case you’re having cravings.”

Charlie threw his arms in the air. “Sorry I mentioned it.”

“Why sundaes?” Colby asked

“Actually, I’m keeping a promise to Charlie.” This time Charlie’s look was more confused than anything else.

“When did you ever promise me chocolate sundaes?”

“10th grade. I needed a B- in math to stay on the team. You stayed up ‘till four in the morning working me through a semester of back homework and lectures. I promised you chocolate sundaes and I keep my promises.” Don knew that Charlie would understand what he was saying without having to be blatant in front of their dad and Colby.

“Oh god, I remember that,” Charlie said. “I could not figure out how you went an entire semester without absorbing anything.”

“I had Miss Windfourth. The only thing I was absorbing was the sight of her cleavage.”

“Oh, I remember her.” Alan said, a slightly far away look on his face. “Very popular on parent/teacher night.” Colby laughed and Don went to put the ice cream in the freezer.

Dinner was light conversation. Don knew that Charlie knew that he had kept his promise so far, and Don knew that Colby probably knew everything. Charlie actually seemed to take it upon himself to carry the weight of the conversation, relaying updates on an interdepartmental feud between a couple of professors. The latest volley in the feud had been the re-hanging of an office door so it opened the other way. Don and Colby each ended up telling a few stories of classic Quantico pranks. Suddenly, mid-conversation, Charlie reached across the table and yanked the wishbone off the chicken carcass. He held it an inch from his face and bent it a few times before jumping up with a smile and sprinting to the garage.

“I wonder what that was?” Don asked.
“An excuse to get out of clearing the table?” Alan offered.

“DoD has him doing something on carbon fibers. Bet that’s it.” Colby said.

“Like we could understand it even if we knew.” Alan said. Both Don and Colby nodded in agreement.

~

Don stood in the garage, a bowl of ice cream in each hand. He cleared his throat softly just so Charlie would know he was there. Charlie raised one finger. He was almost out of board space anyways. The last line of the equation went down in a couple of seconds, Charlie threw his arms in the air in victory and spun around, a smile plastered to his face.

“Eureka?” Don asked.

“Close, very close. I’m saving running naked through the streets for Cognitive Emergence.”

“What about P vs NP?”

“For that I am stripping naked in the middle of Times Square and announcing my personal godhood.”

Don nodded seriously. “Well, I look forward to posting bail.”

“You mock.” Charlie exclaimed waving his finger at Don. “When I achieve mathematical godhood you will be properly smited.”

“I’m sure.” Don handed Charlie one of the sundaes. He’d gone all out. The ice cream was almost impossible to find under the mound of whipped cream, chocolate sauce, sprinkles, nuts and a cherry. Charlie perched on the edge of the air hockey table while Don settled into the couch. Charlie took a bite.

“Mmmmm. I’m going to be awake all night on this.”

“Well consider it my contribution to the Charlie Eppes godhood campaign.” The two brothers ate in silence for several minutes before Don became aware of Charlie looking at him.

“How are you, Don?” Charlie asked. Don knew the question had to be coming but still just shrugged.

“I’m here.”

“Yes, you are.” Charlie said gently.

“I’m sorry about last night. You shouldn’t have been there.”

“Where else should I have been? In bed, sound asleep, no idea my only brother was hurting that bad?”

Don shrugged and pushed the ice cream around in his bowl.

“How are you, Charlie?” he asked, not really trying to change the subject but just feeling the need to get inside his brother’s head for a bit.

“What do you mean?”
“I mean...are you happy, is your life a good one?”

“Yeah.” Charlie answered softly. “It is.”

“You’re...you’re taking medication?”

“Very small doses, every other day. Doesn’t numb me like I was afraid it would. Just keeps the highs from getting too high, the lows from getting too low. Helps me keep control a little better.”

“But you’re happy?” Don asked again.

“Sure. I mean, life isn’t perfect, I still get angry, I still get frustrated, there are things I’d like to change, but I like my job, I like teaching, working with you, I have a house most of the city would kill for, I’m in love and I am loved back.” Charlie gave a shrug and a soft smile looking like he was a teenager again instead of well over thirty.

“What would you change?”

Charlie gestured at his black boards “That, for one.”

“Your equation?”

Charlie shook his head. “It’s military. I can sit here and tell myself that when it filters into the civilian world it’ll revolutionize people’s lives, but the Army’s got it first and I don’t know if it’ll kill more people or save them.” Charlie said with a sigh. “I try to balance my mathematical karma by working your cases. Not usually too much moral dilemma there. We are the good guys, they are the bad guys.”

“Here, here.” Don said raising his spoon in salute.

“Don, I’m sorry if I...if I triggered something. I don’t even know why I said what I did last night, must have been the beer or something. I never planned for you to know.”

Don felt like he’d been hit in the chest. Charlie was the last person who should be apologizing.

“I should be the one apologizing, for really a lot of things. I was already heading to a bad night and I just couldn’t get the...images out of my head, black thoughts, things I wish never happened.”

“Are they still there?” Charlie asked.


“What do you mean?”

“To get the numbers out of your head, the things you do. I just want these thoughts to go away for a few minutes, anything for a few minutes of quiet.” Charlie nodded again. “It works for you?” Don asked quietly. “The pain. It makes things quiet?” Don watched a Charlie closed his eyes for a moment a strange shake running through him. When he opened his eyes Don saw the same Charlie that had quietly given him orders last night.

“Stand up, Don.” Charlie said. Don found himself standing without a single conscious thought. Charlie took three long strides, stopping just at the edge of his personal space. “You want to know if it will work for you, that’s what you’re asking?”

“Yes.”
“Are you sure you want to know this? Know this about me? Know this about yourself?”

“Yes.” Don said.

Charlie moved another step closer his hands clasped behind his back.

“You are my brother and I love you. Do you consent?”

“What?”

“Do you consent?”

Don looked at Charlie for a long moment. What he saw frightened him in so many ways.

“Yes.” He said.

“Good.”

Don yelped and fell back onto the couch as pain exploded in his side. “Holy fuck! Shit! You hit me!”

“Yes.”

“God damn! I think you broke a rib.”

“Do you want me to hit you again?”

“What?!”

“Do you want me to hit you again?” Charlie asked flatly.

“No!” Don snapped.

“The pain response, the adrenaline and endorphins, how does it make you feel?”

“I don’t know.” Don groused, gently poking at his side.

“Does it make you want to hit me back?”

“A little.”

“Does it make you want to run out and get yourself wild, brutal, sex, grab your ankles and not care who does what to you?”

“Not exactly, no!” Don couldn’t keep the horror out of his voice at what his brother was suggesting.

“Has it made your brain quiet, driven out the chatter of thoughts that won’t go away, even for a moment?”

Don closed his eyes. “No,” he said softly.

“Okay. Sorry Don, looks like you’re stuck with beer, therapy, and force of will like the majority of the population.” Don opened his eyes and looked at his brother.

“I think you broke a rib.”
“You consented.”

“I didn’t exactly know what I was getting myself into.”

Charlie closed his eyes. “Don, remember this moment. Mark it. Remember those words came out of your mouth.”

Charlie went back to the air hockey table and the dregs of his ice cream.

Don lay back on the couch and studied the rafters of the garage, while gingerly poking at his ribs. “God, is this what you make Granger do, sucker punch you in the ribs?”

Don heard Charlie’s spoon clang loudly against the bowl.

“Do you really believe Colby could take a swing at me like that?” Charlie asked, the anger and annoyance evident in his voice.

“No.” Don said truthfully.

“We have...rituals I guess you could say, rules, boundaries. It hurts him more that it hurts me.”

“Is that what he says?”

“No. But it does. It took me a very long time to get that. In the past it was always so easy for people to hurt me. I took it so well. I never considered there would be someone who wouldn’t, and it would be the one person I want to do it.” Don squeezed his eyes shut, horrible images of Charlie’s face superimposed across the worst cases of abuse and degradation he had seen. “Every day Colby tried to fix me he broke a little something of himself. It took a long time for me to get that. But we’ve...we’ve found a balance now. Found a way to make it work.”

Don rubbed his face with both hands. “I’m really screwed up right now, Charlie.” He said.

“Welcome to the club, you’re in good company.”

Don rolled his head over to look at his brother. “You know what I want, right now, really want?”

“What?”

“I want to get stoned.” Charlie laughed. “I’m serious. I really want to get stoned. Remember when you were like ten and we found Dad’s stash except it was really old and we couldn’t figure out how to roll a joint between the two of us?”

Charlie laughed. “And we heard someone coming home and had to hide it again really quick.”

“It’s probably still there.”

Don and Charlie looked at each other and jumped up. Fourth set of rafters, second cross beam, behind the little bit of drywall.

“Got it!” Charlie exclaimed, pulling down a rusted cookie tin. Don pried the lid open and began to laugh. He pulled out the worst rolled joint in history, suspicious green dust falling out of it.

“Hey, Chuck, what’s the half life of THC? Maybe we can lick it.” Don said, giggling. Charlie had collapsed into giggles himself. He reached into the box and pulled out a thin piece of card stock that had been left in the bottom in their youthful exuberance. Charlie held it up.
“Don, is this what I think it is?”

Don looked at the card and laughed. “Take a lick and find out.”

Charlie shook his head. “No way.”

“Come on.” Don gave Charlie a little poke in the ribs. “Forty year old acid. Can’t be that bad for you."

“You first.”

“With my luck I’ll get a random test tomorrow.” Don said with a snort.

“Tell them it was in the name of science.”

“Only if you do it to. Hey, might help with P vs NP.”

“You know, Larry was stoned when he started his eleven dimension super gravity theory.”

Don leaned back and shook his head. “No way.”

“He was splayed out on his office floor in the middle of the night, going ‘wow, gravity, it’s soooo super.’” Don knew it wasn’t that funny and knew he couldn’t have inhaled that much of the suspicious green dust but he still couldn’t help the hysterics that came out of him. “He couldn’t reach a pen to write anything down, and didn’t want to move and disrupt the awesome, super force of gravity on his body so he ended up just dictating these weird ramblings to me while I dropped M and M’s into his mouth until he passed out.”

The image was too much for Don and he slid to the floor, holding his sides with laughter, Charlie right behind him. Which was just how Colby and Alan found them a moment later.

Alan took one look at the tin and his hysterically laughing sons and slapped his forehead. “What have you boys gotten into? Give me that.” Alan reached for the tin only to have it snatched away by Charlie.

“No way.” Charlie said.

“Finders keepers.”

“Yeah, this is our stash now, you’re trying to steal it.”

“What are you, The Man?” Don said, which only sent Charlie into fresh peals of laughter.

“Fine.” Alan said. “Put it back when you’re done amusing yourselves and I wouldn’t touch that card too much if I were you.” Don looked at the white card and seriously considered licking it just to shock his dad.

Charlie held it out. “You want the first hit old man?”

“Come on, what are you, a square?”

Alan rolled his eyes and wandered off muttering to himself. Colby just shook his head and followed Alan. For some reason, the departure of the two was also deemed hysterical and Don and Charlie leaned against each other laughing hard enough to cry for several more minutes.

Don couldn’t remember the last time he had laughed like that and certainly couldn’t remember the
last time he’d laughed like that with his brother. After they settled down and wiped their eyes, they boxed up the family felony and slipped it back behind the drywall for some future generation of nosy children to find.

“Hey, Charlie, mind if I spend the night tonight? Don’t really feel up to going back to my apartment.”

“Spend as much time as you want. Really, you may as well just move back in.”

“Are you nuts? I have enough trouble getting dates without admitting I’m living with my dad and brother. Plus, Colby practically lives here as is. It’s gonna start getting a little crowded.”

“There’s always room for you, Don.”

“Thanks, man. Seriously though, why doesn’t Granger just move in? He can’t be spending that much time at his place.”

Charlie got a slightly pained expression. “Well you know, Dad’s still here and what with everything...”

“They’re not getting along?”

“No, they get along fine. It’s not that he doesn’t like Colby. I just think he still kinda has problems with what Colby represents. You know, Fed, Army.”

“A guy.”

“Yeah, well.” Charlie shrugged. “Plus Colby’s neighbors are literally deaf, makes things a little more...freeing.”

Don put a hand over his eyes, trying not to think about what the two could get up to that would require deaf neighbors.

“You know what, forget I asked.”

~

Colby looked at his watch. 10 pm, time for all good little agents and mathematicians to go to bed. Alan had crawled off to bed a while back while Colby was finishing off paperwork. He wandered into the living room where Don and Charlie had been watching a B-grade movie on TV. The movie had ended and Colby was greeted by the cute, if somewhat funny, sight of Don passed out on Charlie’s shoulder mouth hanging open, drooling slightly. Charlie shrugged with his free shoulder looking rather amused. He turned his head and said something to Don which Colby couldn’t hear.

Don sat up with a bit of a start then looked around and rubbed his eyes. He got up and left the room, then quickly returned.

“Here.” He said trying to hand his gun to Charlie.

“Don...” Charlie pulled his hands away.

“I’m not going to do anything stupid, I just...I just don’t want it around tonight. Okay?”

Charlie nodded. “Okay.” He took the gun with what Colby couldn’t help feeling was just a little too much ease and checked the safety before unloading it with again more proficiency than Colby
thought Charlie had.

Don gave Charlie a pat on the arm and a quick smile. “Sleep well.”

“You too.” Don climbed the stairs. When he was out of sight Charlie let out a long sigh and looked to Colby.

“Don’t worry.” Colby said. “He’ll find his way out.”

“I know. I just wish he wasn’t there to begin with.”

~

Charlie let himself sink into the warm soft couch of Dr. Anar’s office. The couch was plum velvet and the room was decorated in rich jewel tones. Switch the dark wood desk for a bed and it was easily a room for the most elite ladies of the evening. Colby had found her, like he had found Dr. Goldman, and like all of Charlie’s doctors and specialists she had been carefully vetted for discretion. Even with that Charlie had been unable to set foot in her office for the first two months. Every time he tried, he panicked, sure the men in white coats were about to pop out of the woodwork, haul him away, shoot him full of drugs and ruin his career. It was four months before he could have a session without Colby sitting there, holding his hand and armed to the teeth.

Charlie wished Colby was here now but that wasn’t an option. It wasn’t an option because he had lied to Colby. He didn’t do that often and it twisted in his stomach but laying there, warm and safe, five beers swimming in his head, he hadn’t been able to bring himself to say what happened. To say he remembered everything.

“He loved her,” Charlie said softly, letting his eyes focus on a mandala on the wall. He started to run the math of the twists and turns of the mandala in his head. He’d found this was the easiest way to get through these things, partition off his brain, let one part run math while another part screamed and wept and bled. He’d mastered that trick very quickly in Leacroft’s warehouse. “She was smart and gorgeous. She was even nice to me.”

“What happened between them?” Dr. Anar asked.

Charlie rubbed his hands along the couch, it was soft, warm, safe. “The birth of Don’s commitment issues happened. I’m not sure on the details, something about Rachael wanting him to go to a different college with her even though it wasn’t offering Don a scholarship, or something like that.” Charlie shook his head. “It got ugly fast. They probably would have been prom king and queen or something like that if they had just held out for a couple more months.”

“And the incident between you and her?”

Charlie took a deep breath, and another.

“I’d forgotten, well I’d blurred it all out.”

“She came to your home?”

Charlie closed his eyes, began to recite pi out in his head as far as he could remember. He knew as soon as he sat down he’d have to go through this, same way he’d been walked through other nightmares.

“She came to the house. I still liked her, she was still nice to me, not many were.”
“And there was no one else?”

Charlie shook his head. “She was just talking, asking me about Princeton, if I was excited. If I was excited about how I was going to be around all those college girls.”

“Were you?”

“I was excited that I might get the chance to study under Dr. Fleinhardt. I’d read some of Larry’s early work on string theory. The math was a little off in places but his writing was the first I’d encountered that put the numbers of the cosmos into poetry. I thought he might understand what was going on inside my head. It was half the reason I wanted to go to Princeton.”

“Well, weren’t you lucky on that count?”

Charlie smiled a bit, remembering the early days of him and Larry, like Jedi master and apprentice.

“Yeah I was.”

“What happened next?”

Charlie swallowed hard and his stomach began to clench. “She wanted to get something of hers from Don’s room.”

“What did you say?”

“I said she probably shouldn’t since Don wasn’t there. She told me I could go up with her to make sure she didn’t steal anything.” Charlie closed his eyes, bringing the memory into even sharper focus. “I’d forgotten, just... it didn’t come back in little pieces, just suddenly it was there.”

“I understand. You went upstairs with her?”

Charlie nodded. “I went upstairs. She went through his closet. I sat... I sat on Don’s bed and watched her.” Charlie’s stomach flipped over again and he could feel the blood pounding against his ears. “She turned around and looked at me watching her.” Charlie wrapped his arms around himself, wishing they were Colby’s.

“What did she do when she saw you watching?” Charlie shook his head. He didn’t want to go further. “Charles, what happened when she turned around?” Dr. Anar prompted gently.

“She...” Charlie stuttered. “She walked over, asked me if I was curious.”

“Were you?”

Charlie shook his head. “She started touching my face, my hair. Asked me if I was curious again. I...” Charlie clamped his teeth shut as his stomach rebelled. Dr. Anar casually pushed the wastebasket his direction. Charlie shook his head. He had made it a point not to eat anything but a roll of antacids that morning, having puked in Dr. Anar’s office enough times in the past to feel kinda bad about it. A little ball of bile rolled halfway up his throat and he quickly swallowed it back down.

“Take your time, Charlie.”

Charlie took deep breaths. Tried to disconnect, tried to find the words. “She pushed me back, got her hands under my clothes. It was summer, she was in a skirt. Polka dots. I estimated 237 polka dots on it. I told her no. I said stop, I actually said stop.” Charlie could feel the tears begin flow.
Somewhere in the back of his mind, he could still hear Don calling him a cry baby. He tried to rub them away. “She wanted me to tell Don. God she wanted me to tell Don. She fucking knew what it would do to him. I can’t believe I did. Only took five beers and twenty years.”

“Charlie, how much sexual understanding did you have at the time?”

Charlie shrugged. “I knew where babies came from. I’d looked at a couple of Don’s Playboys. They didn’t do much. But one of them had an interesting article on Feynman.”

“How about your past experiences, with your tutors?”

Charlie shook his head. “I don’t know. I had some idea that some of that might have had something to do with sex, but really, I’d blocked out most of that and really didn’t have a frame of reference.” Charlie took some more deep breaths. “I can’t believe... she was always nice to me. She was better to me than Don some days. I can’t believe... she did that, she actually did that.”

“Do you think she was aware of the distress she was causing you?”

Charlie curled up on the couch and let his eyes focus on a random spot in the air. “I remember shivering. When she was done I just remember... I just kept shaking like it wasn’t the middle of summer.”

“You were probably in a mild case of clinical shock.”

“Mild clinical shock,” Charlie repeated the words carefully. “Is that a technical term for terrified out of your mind?”

“More or less. What did you do when she left?”

“I tried to clean up. Don hated me being in his room. I took a shower. She had this perfume, it was so sweet. Smelled like melted Jellybeans and lavender. I was still in the shower when Don came home. I sat in the bottom of the tub just terrified that he knew somehow and he was going to come in and pummel me for doing something with his girlfriend.”

“Ex-girlfriend.”

“Close enough.” Charlie closed his eyes and just tried to breathe for a moment. He’d taken a few classes in meditation at Dr. Anar’s suggestion in hopes that there would be other ways of quieting the numbers outside of pain. Charlie found it helped calm his brain a little but not enough to really be an effective option.

“Are you able to discuss the events of the other night?” Dr. Anar asked after Charlie had taken a couple of minutes just to breathe.

“I’m meant to be the broken one. Don’s stepping on my turf.”

“That must have come as quite a shock?”

“It’s funny. All those times I’ve sat on a radio and listened to Don or Megan or one of the guys talk down someone with a gun, that all kicked in. I guess learning is still what I do best. I didn’t grab for the gun or shout or make any quick movements, just talked slowly, calmly, tried to be reassuring.”

“That’s not a bad thing.”
“No. All those years I was falling apart, all the nights after bad cases when Don was telling me I did my best, all those times I was looking up at Don and wondering how he never got rattled, brushed it all off, he was going home sitting alone in the dark and sucking on the end of his gun.”
Charlie quickly scrubbed at his eyes again. “I never knew. I never knew he was hurting that bad, that he felt that alone, that hopeless. And I can’t help felling it’s at least a little my fault.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Well, we can’t have two drama queens in the family. Someone’s got to be stoic.”

Dr. Anar chuckled a little. “Do you think he sees it that way?”

“Actually, yes. Poor crazy Charlie’s got enough problems. No point adding more. No point in telling him I want to blow my brains across the room.”

“Do you really think your brother wants to die?”

Charlie stared at the hand-carved wooden ceiling tiles. “I don’t think he’s actively seeking death but I don’t think he’d care if it found him.”

“So if you hadn’t come downstairs?”

“I think he would have sat there until morning, put his gun away, drunk a pot of coffee to wake up and told everyone everything was fine. At least until the next night, or the night after that.”

“Do you know if Don is currently seeking help?”

“Yeah, I made him promise to go see Dr. Bradford. He’s helped Don with some rough patches. Ex-LAPD. Doesn’t take shit, especially doesn’t take it from Don.”

“Well, that sounds good. Have you and Don spoken since that night?”

“He asked me to hit him,” Charlie said softly.

“Why would he do that?”

“The Dr. Eppes method for getting your brain to shut up. He didn’t want another night of me and Rachael and all the dead swimming around his head. Wanted to know if the pain would work.”

“And did you hit him?”

“Thirty years of noogies and short jokes, I sucker punched him in the ribs.”

Dr. Anar winced “Well, I’m sure that was cathartic for one of you.”

“It didn’t work, thank god. I can only retool the mental image I have of my brother so far. I want to curl up into a ball and cry about it as it is.”

“Have you?”

“Only a little. I can’t... Don needs me and not for the math for once. For once he needs me to be his brother not a computer on legs. I cannot crumble now, for any reason. Don’s carried me through so much, now I have to step up. My turn to be the strong one while Don heals.”

“And how long do you think you can manage that?”
“For as long as Don needs me to.”
The Feel of Wind

Don poured himself a cup of coffee and looked at the calendar. Thursday again. It had been a long week, subjecting himself to more navel gazing and order taking than he was used to.

He’d spent the weekend on his back next to the koi pond just looking at the sky pondering his general place in the universe. He hadn’t slept in his own bed a single night. The one night he tried he’d ended up driving back to the house at two in the morning. He’d let himself into the house and quietly into his brother’s room where he’d put his gun into the drawer of Charlie’s bedside table.

Colby had looked at him from the darkness. He knew he could get into that room without waking Charlie but he knew Colby would be awake as soon as the downstairs door opened. Colby hadn’t said a word, hadn’t moved except to pull Charlie even closer to him.

That had hurt, the thought that his own brother needed to be protected from him. He had actually cried while talking to Bradford about that. Bradford had sighed and explained that Colby was Charlie’s white knight and was going to react to anything that might potentially upset Charlie. Don had then asked Bradford if the Eppes family was the best soap opera in the building. He had said yes without even pausing for breath.

Strangely enough, Don didn’t feel as uncomfortable as he should with a subordinate watching him crack apart. Then again he could do as much damage to Colby’s career as Colby could do to his and Charlie would never forgive either of them if they tried.

All told the oddest part of the week had been the amount of time he’d spent talking with Charlie. Each night after dinner Charlie would retreat to his blackboards and after a couple hours, Don would follow him into the garage and stay for a few hours at least. Sometimes he would find himself on long stream of conscience rants and stop mid-sentence because Charlie was watching and listening to him with such focus he’d suddenly feel like a bug under a microscope, other times he would ask Charlie simple questions and try not to wince, or cry, or rage at the answers honestly given. Sometimes they would just laugh themselves silly over stupid things that had happened twenty years before. When he’d groused about the bruise Charlie had left on his side Charlie had pulled out an x-ray that looked like a set of ribs made by a child with a tub of white play-doh, all lumps and nobs. ‘Doc says if I break any more I’ll start having trouble breathing.’ Don had cried that night after going to bed but took some pride in the fact that he hadn’t thought about checking out.

Don sighed and took a sip of the coffee and made a face. The Bureau had gotten cheap again and had gotten something burnt and vile for the coffee pots. ‘You know you’re a Californian when you have a real opinion as to where your coffee comes from.’ Don thought to himself.

Colby entered the break room, poured himself a cup of coffee and drank it without so much as a wince. Don shook his head.

“One of these day’s we’re going to teach you how to have a proper Californian palette.”

“I’m a country boy, Don, as long as there’s caffeine I don’t care.”

Just then, Don’s cell phone when off. He answered it quickly. “Eppes.” The words of the agent on the other end caused his pulse to speed up and the adrenaline to start pumping. “Okay. Yes. I’ve got it.”
Don clicked his phone closed and stepped out onto the main floor.

“Everybody suit up. We’ve got a bank job in process with hostages. Exact same MO as the Locktell jobs.” There were groans of disbelief and annoyance around the room. “Colby, call Charlie. He was swearing for months the math said two teams, looks like the second one was just laying low. Full briefing in two, we’ve all done this before.”

～

David kept one eye on the road and the other eye on Colby in the passenger seat. He had his cell phone squeezed between his ear and shoulder and was checking over his guns on his lap.

“No…no…Don doesn’t want you there ‘till we’ve secured the area…no…are you planning on joining the SWAT team?...Well, then you can wait until the all clear...Yes, you were right...Yes, even Don admits you were right and we were foolish mortals to question your numbers ... yes... Okay ... I’ll be careful ... promise ... Okay ... bye.” Colby clicked his phone closed.

“Awwww, your honey bunny all worried about you?” David gushed.

“You know you’re the only person allowed to say shit like that.” Colby said, sliding his gun into its holster.

“Yeah, why do you think I do it?” Colby rolled his eyes. “Seriously, it’s kinda cute.”

“Yeah, well, he should be more worried about himself ending up in the line of fire. I mean, you go down, I go down, sucks to be us. Charlie takes one in the head the entire species gets a whole lot dumber and we can’t afford that these days.”

“Well, then, you should be watching your back more ’cause good money says if you go down we’re sticking the entire Eppes clan in the ground.”

Colby’s head whipped around. “What?”

“Seriously, man, you go down, Charlie takes three days to put his affairs in order and eats Don’s gun. Don’s not going to make it five minutes past that, and without his boys Alan’s six months away from a heart attack or a stroke or something.”

“Don’t ever say that again.” Colby said slowly. David looked over quickly to where Colby was giving him a look of pure death.

“You honestly never thought about what Charlie would do if you took a bullet?”

“He calculates the exact odds of me dying everyday. We try not to talk about it.”

David shook his head. “You and Charlie have been wrapped up in each other since the moment you set foot in LA. Really, how much time did you spend listening to his drunken ramblings on prime numbers before you two got together?” Colby winced a bit. “Even Larry checked out of those nights. You go down, he’s not getting over it. Even if he doesn’t eat a bullet, he’ll probably wander into traffic. Everyone knows if you take a bullet we’re picking out four coffins. If you really love him, start worrying about yourself.”

～

Don found the barely controlled chaos of the scene strangely comforting.
‘This is who I am,’ he thought. ‘This is what I do.’

Hostages were escorted from the smoking shell of the bank by emergency personnel.

“I need an eight block radius cordoned off and searched,” he called out to the assorted personnel and agents around. “Witness statements from everyone, let’s see if we can get composites.”

Don saw Charlie duck under a police line and waved him over.

“Was I right?” Charlie asked.

“Yes.”

“Injuries?”

“Some.”

“Fatalities?”

“No.”

“Okay. I’ll need lists of computers accessed, surveillance…”

“We know the drill.”

“Good, I’ll go talk to the bomb squad. See if I can’t calculate a more accurate point of origin.”

“You do that.”

Charlie hurried off to talk to the bomb squad captain. Don wasn’t quite sure whether he should be proud of Charlie, or feel a little guilty. He distinctly recalled a time when Charlie would nearly faint at the sight of blood or violence- now he could walk onto a scene of pure chaos and go right to what needed to be done as sure as any agent. ‘We should just give him a badge and a gun and be done with it.’

David came over. “Don, we got a witness, says she got a good look at the key man.”

“Great, let’s go.”

David led him over to the back of an ambulance, where a young woman with mousy brown hair and gray eyes held an oxygen mask over her face.

“Hello, ma’am I’m Special Agent Don Eppes, FBI. I’m told you got a good look at the primary robber?” The woman nodded and held out a hand.

“Anne Finnegan,” she said, quickly removing the oxygen mask, then putting it back on.

“Anne Finnegan,” she said, quickly removing the oxygen mask, then putting it back on.

Don shook her hand. “If we bring over a sketch artist, do you think you could help him with a composite?”

Anne shook her head and gave a cough. She held out a hand again.

“Pencil, paper.”

Don took out a notepad and pencil. Anne grabbed them and began to draw quickly and furiously. After about two minutes she looked around as if seeking something, then she looked at her arm
where an EMT had dabbed iodine onto a small cut. She rubbed her finger into the still wet iodine then rubbed it on the paper. She handed the pad back to Don. He looked down at the face of a man in his forties, a slight squint in one eye and iodine red brown hair.

“Are you sure of this, ma’am?” Don asked.

Anne nodded. “I paint portraits for a living. I’m good with faces.”

“This is excellent. This will be a big help.” He tore off the page and handed it to David. “Get this around.”

David nodded and headed off. Don turned back to Anne. “Now, I’ve got to ask if you can remember anything more, the faces of anyone else who may have been involved or maybe anyone who seemed to be a victim but appeared perhaps less frightened than they should have been?”

Anne shrugged. “I’m sorry, Agent...?”

“Eppes.”

“Eppes. I can close my eyes and see lots of stuff, it’s just…it’s just all kind of jumbled up right now.”

“Okay. That’s okay. A composite sketch of a suspect usually takes us hours to get, you’ve been a big help already. I’m going to get an officer to take your details and a basic statement.” Don reached into a pocket. “Here’s my card. If you could take a little time when you get home, sketch down what you remember, give me a call and I’ll have an agent come over to look, or you could just send it direct to the building, mark it priority.” Anne gave a nod. “Okay. Great. Thank you.”

Don gave the woman a gentle, reassuring pat on the arm and went off to find Charlie.

~

Charlie’s surprisingly strong hands worked their way down Colby’s back. Each knot was worked with scientific accuracy and focus. Colby groaned. “God, Charlie, is there anything you don’t do well?”

“Well, my golf game still sucks.”

“I told you I could help you with that.”

“Nah, Dad needs something other than Scrabble to beat me in.” Charlie worked his thumb into a knot and Colby jumped. “You can’t tell me one little bank job got you in this state.” Colby rolled over, grabbing Charlie’s waist to keep him from slipping off the bed. Charlie laughed and smiled down at Colby. Colby didn’t smile back.

“Hey. What’s wrong?”

“Charlie, I need a promise from you.”

“You want to add something to the Rules?” Charlie asked seriously.

“No. I just need a promise.”

“What is it?”

“It’s just...If I get killed out there...”
Charlie quickly hopped off the bed. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Colby grabbed Charlie’s wrist. To his complete surprise Charlie twisted out of his grasp, grabbed a bath robe and walked out of the bedroom. Colby blinked down at his empty hand. Charlie had never avoided his touch, for any reason.

Colby jumped up and went looking for Charlie. He found him in the tiny apartment kitchen, apparently trying to make a cup of tea, but just fluffing around more than anything.

“Charlie, please...”

“Please what? Please calculate the likelihood that you’re going to die at any given point out to six digits, ‘cause I can do that. Calculate the rate you’ll decompose in your coffin? Calculate how fast I’ll go completely insane without you?” There were tears in Charlie’s eyes. He tried to wipe them away and turned back to the teapot.

Colby reached out to touch Charlie’s shoulder only to be shrugged away. Colby took a step back as surely as if he’d been slapped. Twice in two minutes Charlie had denied him the most simple of touches, the only two times in almost three years of being able to touch him with complete impunity.

“Charlie, find someone safe. If I should go, find someone safe. It doesn’t have to be someone to love but I would hope you’d find someone to make you happy. Just...just don’t go back to how you were.” Colby left the kitchen and went back to the bedroom. He sat on the edge of the bed and closed his eyes. He half expected to hear his front door open and close. He more than half expected Charlie to leave for the night. The bedroom door opened and the bed sunk down next to him.

“Who?” Charlie asked. “Who should I find? It took me over thirty years to find you.”

“I don’t know.” Colby said. “I just...I just don’t want you to follow me ‘till you’re 113 and when you do I want to know that your life was happy.”

Charlie leaned against Colby “I don’t know, Colby. I can’t think of anyone. I try and all I see are faces full of pity and disgust.”

“I don’t know either. Maybe...I don’t know...Sherwood?” Charlie gave a slight chuckle. “He said that there was once...”

“Martin is a very intelligent man in a position of not inconsiderable authority.”

“Well, yes.” Colby said feeling a little confused. Charlie chuckled again.

“Martin would much rather spend his life on his knees next to me than standing over me.”

“Oh.” Colby said, filing that bit of information away for future perusal.

“He was able to give me what I needed that once because he craves it himself. Something more than that would end badly for both of us.”

“I see.” Colby gently reached out and took Charlie’s hand. This time he was allowed and Charlie gave his hand a little squeeze. “Maybe...I don’t know. I guess our circle of friends is kinda small.”

Charlie nodded. “I promise I’ll hold out as long as I can. And I’ll abide by my half of the Arrangement.” Colby nodded and gave Charlie’s hand a squeeze. The two sat in silence, just thinking thoughts they’d rather not contemplate. Finally Colby turned to Charlie.
“Sherwood? Really?”

Charlie laughed. “You really can’t tell?”

“No.”

“Oh god, he practically has ‘whip me, beat me, make me write bad checks’ written across his forehead.”

Colby shook his head. “No clue.”

Charlie shrugged. “Maybe it takes one to know one.”

Colby scrubbed his eyes. “See, now that undercuts the scary Men in Black thing he does.”

“Oh it shouldn’t. He could still make you vanish in a puff of NSA smoke. Of course that would really piss me off and we’d have words about it.”

Colby leaned back on the bed and scrubbed his eyes some more. “Oh, some days I wonder what the fuck I’m doing in the FBI.”

“I know the feeling.” Charlie said.

“What do you mean? You’ve got a sweet deal at CalSci.”

“Between student papers and ever rotating department heads, believe me, the urge to chuck it all and get out of there is there some days.”

“What would you do?”

“Open a brothel.” Charlie said without any time for thought.

“What?” Colby said with a laugh.

“I’m serious. I know some people out in Nevada. Pick up a little place outside of Vegas. Lots of rooms, a pool. Make it a really classy joint. More of a retreat.”

“What about the math?”

“Nope.” Charlie shook his head. “Screw the math. Only math I’ll be doing is calculating how many mojitos it’ll take to drop my IQ below 100.”

“I see you’ve put some though into this.” Colby said with a serious nod.

“Well, you’ll come with me, of course.”

“Oh, of course.”

“Yep, bring the whole team, in fact. We’ll cater to feds and academics. High security and discretion our main selling point. Run weekend seminars on D and S with practical demonstrations. Larry can do the books, Megan can shrink heads. I’m sure David would be a big hit with the ladies.”

Colby put his hands over his eyes. “Charlie, please. I’ve got to work with these people.”

“We’ll nick some TAC gear and Don’s thigh holsters on the way out. Set him up in an
interrogation room and people will pay 500 an hour to lick his boots.”

“Agh! Bad thoughts, bad thoughts!”

“Martin can be the house pet.” Charlie continued, ignoring Colby’s screams. “Sleep at the foot of
the bed, have his own bowl. He’d like that. Bet I could even talk Edgerton into in-house security.”

“Damn it, Charlie, you have put way too much thought into this.”

“You think you’re the only person to get bored at staff meetings?” Colby gave a groan of general
protest. “Nope, that’s it. I’ve made a decision. We’re chucking it in and getting out of here. We’ll
hand in our letters of resignation tomorrow and let everyone in on the scheme.”

“Dr. Eppes, you are really weird.”

~

Don stood looking around his apartment. He actually found himself feeling fairly good. Not 100%
but better than he’d felt in a week. Something about strapping on Kevlar and going out on a case
blew out a few of the cobwebs that had been cluttering up his brain. He had decided that he would
actually make a concerted effort to sleep in his own bed tonight.

The phone rang but Don didn’t answer. He let the machine pick up.

‘Eppes. Leave a message.’

‘Don, it’s Colby.’ Don reached for the phone. ‘Give me the phone, give me phone,’ Don heard
Charlie say in the background. Don paused. ‘So Charlie and I quit. We’re moving to Nevada and
opening a brothel.’ Don gave a bark of laughter. ‘You’ll get our letters tomorrow.’ ‘Shut up. Give
me the phone.’ There was a sudden high pitched squeal. ‘No tickle, no tickle!’ Charlie squeaked.
‘Charlie said you can come too, but house gets a cut.’

Don picked up the phone.

“Hey, tell Charlie I get 70% and pick of clients.”

“50% and we give you room and board.” Charlie called out.

“60 and a 401(k).”

“Done.” Charlie said with a laugh.

“Good night, you two, I’ll see you in the morning.” Don said.

“Good night Don, See you then.” Colby hung up his end of the phone and Don hung up his with a
smile.

~

“Package for you, Don. Came courier.”

Don carefully opened the package and peered inside. It looked to be a stack of papers at least an
inch thick. He pulled them out. There was a handwritten letter on top with a business card attached
to it.
Dear Agent Eppes,

I couldn’t sleep last night after they let me out of the hospital so I did as you asked and I drew everything I could from the bank from memory. I know a lot of it isn’t what you want but I needed to get it out of my head and I can’t exactly sell or paint most of this. Use what you can, consider the rest of it a gift or something. If you have any questions I’ve attached my business card, come by my studio, I live there anyway.

Anne Finnegan

Don looked at the first drawing. It was in pencil with a little drop of paint to denote eye and hair color. It was of a young man in his 20s with a lip piercing and earbud cords hanging down. Along the edge was written in quick cursive ‘Man behind me in line, listening to Linkin Park. Too much bad cologne.’ The next was of a little old lady with milky eyes. ‘In line ahead of me. Five foot, smelled of cat.’ Don was strangely put to mind of the copy of The Hobbit his mother had given him as a kid with the little pen and ink drawings and descriptions written along the side.

“Hey, guys,” Don waved the team over. “That artist that gave us a sketch of our key man yesterday just sent over a stack more.” Everyone gathered around as Don flipped through the pages.

“I interviewed that guy,” David said, pointing to a pudgy man with wide frightened eyes. “That’s actually a really good likeness.”

“She did these from memory?” Megan asked.

“So she claims.”

“Then she’s very good. Got a lot more faith in that sketch she gave us yesterday.”

Don flipped through a couple more pages. There was a large sketch of the bank. No one had detailed faces but it was easy to denote male and female, young and old.

“We should see how these match against our witnesses and possible suspects.”

Don turned another page and froze. He was looking at himself. He stared intently from the page as if he could see through someone’s skull right into the truth of their minds. She had painted in his eyes, hair and lips with a little watercolor, there was even a blush of color high on his cheeks. Special Agent Don Eppes was written along the side. Don blinked a few times.

“Do I really look like that?” Don asked.

“When you’re on the job you do.” Colby said.

Don shook his head. The next picture was of David, just as well rendered but looking a little off to the side. Don had the feeling that if you lay the two pictures together David would be looking at him.

After that were pictures of the chaos. Smoke from the bank, emergency personnel, a good portrait of the EMT that had bandaged her arm, a panorama drawing of the whole scene had no person more than a couple of inches tall but you could tell the feds, cops, firefighters, and victims.

“Hey, there’s you and Charlie.” Colby said pointing to a couple of figures no more than two inches
tall. The figures had their heads together bent over a clipboard, one obviously in TAC gear while the other had curly hair and a suit in the long clean lines Charlie favored these days.

“Yeah, I think it is.” Don handed over the stack to Megan. “See if there’s anyone here we didn’t interview, they may have been in on it.”

“No problem.” Megan said, taking the stack.

“Oh hey, Granger. Where’s that letter of resignation?”

Colby gave a smile and a shrug. “Forgot it.”

“That’s my retirement plan you’re screwing with.”

“Maybe tomorrow.” Colby said with a smile and headed off.

~

Don felt weird about ringing the buzzer. The letter had said she hadn’t slept. It was six, she might already be in bed. Don took a step back from the building and looked up at the windows to see if lights were on. The building was an old chunk of warehouses that had been subdivided. Buyers got to buy a big empty brick box then renovate them into luxury condos to resell while the city gave breaks to business willing to go in on ground floors in the area.

Don thought he saw a little movement in the windows. He stepped up and rang the buzzer. The speaker crackled to life. ‘Hello?’

“Hello. This is Agent Eppes.”

‘Oh, yes. Come on up.’

The door buzzed and Don entered. There was a staircase and an empty shaft where an elevator should probably go one day. Don climbed the steps and knocked on a door. Anne Finnegan opened the door. Standing up, she was a little shorter than Charlie but seemed to have a similar nervous energy that vibrated from her.

“Hello.” Don said and held out his hand.

“Hi. Anything wrong?”

“No, everything’s fine. I’m sorry if I woke you, I got your package, you said you hadn’t slept?”

Anne just gave a dismissive wave. “When I’m doing a major push I don’t sleep for a couple of days anyway. Come on in.”

Don stepped in and looked around. An elegantly renovated luxury condo it wasn’t. The apartment was basically still a very large brick box. There was a makeshift kitchen, a small bed against a wall, a couple of couches and a table marking off some sort of social space and a little pod that was probably a bathroom. The rest of the place was just filled with paintings on stands or leaning against the walls. Most were covered and all colors of paint covered the floor.

“Sit down.” Anne offered a seat at a cheap yellow Formica kitchen table. “So was anything I sent you any help?”

“Yes, actually that’s why I came by.” Don pulled one of her drawings from his jacket. “This man didn’t show up in any of our witness lists, leads us to believe he may have been part of the crew. I
was wondering if you remember anything else about him?"

Anne looked at the picture and shook her head. “I only remember that guy ‘cause he bumped into me. I dropped my check book and he picked it up.”

“With his bare hands?” Don asked eagerly.

Anne thought and winced. “No. Damn it. He had driving gloves on, I remember thinking what pretentious fuck wears driving gloves any more?”

“The kind of pretentious fuck that’s pulling off a bank job.”

“Apparently. I’m going to be paranoid about men with gloves from here on out.” Anne said with a slight laugh.

“This is LA, if that’s your only paranoia you’re doing pretty good.”

Anne shrugged. “True. Sorry I couldn’t be more help.”

“You’ve been a great help already. If we could get an artist at every crime scene our jobs would be much easier.”

“Well, I hope you get the guys.”

“We’re working on it.” Don looked around, pointing to a half-finished portrait. “Is that your art?”

Anne rolled her eyes. “Calling it art is debatable. That’s how I pay my bills. Chairman of the board of some fascist mega conglomerate. 40 thousand so he can glare down at his underlings even when he’s not there.”

“That’s not bad money.” Don said.

Anne shrugged. “Every one of those lets me take time off to paint what I really want to.”

“Could I see?” Don asked though he wasn’t sure why, there was just something in him that wanted to delay leaving.

Anne looked at him and tilted her head to the side as if trying to look right into his brain. “Sure.”

Anne got up and lead him over to a row of paintings all covered. She pulled the cover off one.

“It’s my new series, almost done, got about another six months on it. It’s called Icarus Flew.” Don looked at a paining of a sun, silhouetted against it a human figure with feathers on the arms.

“I thought Icarus fell?” Don said.

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“I thought Icarus fell?” Don said.

“He did. But what everyone forgets is that before he fell he flew. He spent years prisoner on an island with a monster and whatever other hells his captors could conceive, little more than a child, but it didn’t kill him, it didn’t keep him. He launched himself from there and flew in a way we’ll never know. Felt true freedom but all we remember is that he crashed back down to earth with the rest of us.”

Don smiled. “I like it.”

“And for ten grand it can be yours.”
Don winced. “A little rich for a humble servant of the people.”

Anne laughed and pulled the cover from a few more. Some were still only half completed but the amazing talent was obvious. The next one was of Daedalus huddled in a corner, hiding his son’s face from some horror half-silhouetted on the wall. Then one of Icarus launching himself from a stone window. It was from the back and Daedalus could already be seen in the air ahead of him. Anne pulled down another cover. Don gasped. He felt a pressure in his chest like he’d taken a blow. He squeezed his eyes shut and turned away for a moment giving his head a shake.

“Are you alright?” Anne asked.

“Yes, yes. Fine. It’s very good.”

“Yeah, very good doesn’t get that reaction out of people.”

Don looked at the painting again. Icarus hunched over half built wings, dark curls obscuring his face. His back was covered in thin red lines, as if he’d been whipped, or some monster had raked claws against him. Blood dripped down his arms onto the white feathers.

“No. It was just.” Don rubbed his face. “I...um...my brother has hair a lot like that. A bit ago he got kidnapped, was cut up pretty bad when we found him, especially on his back. Just startled me for a second.”

Anne’s face fell. “Oh, I’m sorry. Is he okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. He’s good. Us Eppes are little but scrappy.” Don forced a bit of a smile. Anne covered the painting. “Do you ever paint his face? I mean you seem to be pretty good with those.”

“No. We’re all Icarus. We all want to fly so his face is ours.”

“Profound.”

Anne smirked. “That and I couldn’t find a model I liked.”

“You have real talent here. I mean I don’t know art from a hole in the ground but it’s better than a lot I’ve seen.”

Anne smiled and blushed a little. “Thanks. My agent wants me to paint kids and puppies. Says they’ll be easier to sell. I keep telling her I can’t paint something just ‘cause I want to or need to. I have to work what’s in my head. This is in my head.” Don gave a hard short laugh. “You find that amusing?”

Don shook his head, “No, no. It’s just my brother’s a mathematician and he does a lot of equations and work for a lot of different people and every so often he’ll just go off. Locks himself in the garage and tries to solve completely unsolvable problems, and the last time I tried calling him on it he told me that he had to work on the math that was in his head and he couldn’t solve something just because he wanted to or needed to. And P vs NP was what was in his head. I thought it was just a Charlie thing.”

Anne laughed. “When I was younger I briefly knew a guy who was really into math. Was all about working what was in his head.”

“Well maybe it’s a math thing.”

“Or an art thing.” The two fell into silence. Don knew this was the point were he needed to look at
his watch and announce that he had to get back to the office.

“Um...Hey. Uh...this is completely against policy, and out of line, and feel free to tell me to screw off but...uh...could I get you a coffee downstairs or something?”

Don felt Anne quietly judge him and form an opinion. “Sure, but the place on the corner is better.”

Don smiled. “Okay.”

“Okay. Let me get my shoes.”
Ian enjoyed the flow of the LA field office. Each office had a flow set by one agent, not necessarily the agent in charge but the pack leader, the Alpha. In LA Don Eppes set the flow, fast but not frantic, motivated and driven but not abused.

“It’s been a while since you’ve been out our way,” Don said, not looking up from his papers.

“Well, you’ve been doing a better job at scaring off the bad guys than the boys back east.”

“Thanks, we try.”

“I would have been out last March but I was dug in deep, time I got out everything seemed cleared up.”

Don got a grim look on his face for a moment. “Well, I’m sure your good thoughts helped.” He flipped through a couple of file sheets, then suddenly seemed to have a thought. “So you haven’t seen Charlie in a while. I mean over a year?”

“Yeah, been about a year and a half, I guess.”

“Oh.” Don said with a slight smirk.

“Why?”

“No reason.” Ian peered at Don with the funny felling that he was being set up for something.

Ian suddenly felt the room shift as surely as if there’d been an earthquake. Someone had entered and the office flow moved in response. Ian looked to the door and blinked. Charlie Eppes strode towards them but it couldn’t be Charlie. Charlie was a man who skittered through life, ducking and weaving, apologizing for being in the way, moving quickly from one safe shadow to another. The man walking towards him didn’t look like he’d skittered in his life. Younger agents stepped quickly out of his path, older agents gave him polite greetings and deference, which he returned. And then there was the suit. Ian was sure a set of threads like that would blow a couple of years’ worth of his clothing allowance. Charlie moved like it was a pair of old jeans and a t-shirt.

“Hey, Don.” Charlie greeted.

“Hey.” Don said, not looking up from the paper.

“Agent Edgerton.” Charlie held out his hand. “It’s been a long time since we’ve been graced with your presence.”

“Too long it seems, Professor Eppes.”

Ian took Charlie’s hand, the grip was stronger than he remembered, more sure.
“Don, I’ll need five to set up?”

“No problem.”

“Ian.” Charlie said with a nod before heading to the war room.

“Where’d he get that suit?” Ian heard himself ask. Though he had about a million questions that was the only one that seemed safe. Don looked up.

“What, that old thing? Downtown, I think.”

Ian tilted his head and watched through the glass as Charlie set up his laptop and cleared a board.

“He looks like an accountant for an Indian crime family.”

~

Ian watched Charlie lecture. ‘Well, the math hasn’t changed any.’

“It’s like this rubber band. It appears to stretch to cover an ever-increasing area but if you turn it sideways you can see it getting thinner and weaker. Sooner or latter if I keep stretching it, it will either break or…” Charlie dropped the band on the table. “Snap back to its original size. These crews seem to be covering larger areas and getting more powerful but really they’re just stretching thinner and thinner. According to my math, within the next week they’re going to have to snap back or risk breaking.”

‘Alpha female,’ was the thought that suddenly popped into Ian’s head. Don was Alpha male, he ordered the hunt, but Charlie was the one in front of the maps, he chose the prey, picked the best place to bring it to ground. His math determined if the pack had something to hunt tonight and they gave him the appropriate focus and attention.

Granger raised a hand. “So what you’re saying is our field variables in the current sets are way too wide and we actually need to be focusing on that initial data set from the first three days?”

“Precisely.” Charlie said.

Ian watched as Agent Granger preened as surely as if Don had given him a punch in the arm and said ‘good job’. And since when does the office grunt know how to use ‘field variable’ in a sentence?

“This,” Charlie brought up a map and a set of grainy surveillance photos “is your crew and the locations of your original crimes. They’ll have to come back here soon, this is where you’re going to find them.”

“Okay.” Don said. “Anything else?”

“That’s it.” Charlie said with a slight nod, giving the pack back to his brother. All eyes swiveled to Don.

“Okay people, looks like time is circular, let’s go back to the beginning and see what we can find.”

Agents filed out of the war room. Granger paused to exchange a few quick words with Charlie before following Don.

Ian stayed watching as Charlie packed up his laptop and papers. He left the equations on the
board, a sign he’d been there, that this room was as much his territory as Don’s.

“Something I can help you with, Agent Edgerton?” Charlie said as he snapped his laptop shut.

“Yes, I seem to have lost something, maybe you can help me find it.”

“It depends on what you lost, I suppose.”

“I’ve lost a sparrow.”

Charlie tilted his head. “A sparrow?”

“Yes, see I used to know this sparrow called Charlie Eppes. He was very good at math, but if I questioned that math he’d puff out his chest and hop up and down on his little twig, and peep at me.” Charlie had raised an eyebrow, his face cool and vaguely amused. “I had a bit of a fondness for that sparrow. It was cute listening to him peep. Now there’s a Charlie Eppes in front of me and he seems to be just as good at the math but I have a feeling that if I question his math he’d listen carefully, put honest thought into how my opinion could factor into his equation, and then remove my balls and keep them in a jar on his desk for the amusement of his students.”

Charlie gave an almost sweet smile. “Don’t be ridiculous, Agent Edgerton, a pair like yours would go into my private collection.”

Ian felt himself almost smile back. “Where did that sparrow fly off to?”

Charlie took a couple of long steps towards Ian, pushing just into his personal space. “Maybe the sparrow was a figment of your imagination?”

Ian shook his head slightly. “I don’t think so.”

Charlie took another half step closer and leaned in a bit. “Well, maybe it was a figment of mine.”

Ian had the sudden realization that Charlie was flirting with him. He tried to take a half step back but had been leaning against a table already.

‘Shit.’

~

Out on the office floor Don looked around for Charlie and sighed when he saw him still in the war room.

“Colby.” Colby looked up from his papers. “Go rescue Ian and tell Charlie I’ve got a question for him.”

Colby looked over to the war room. Edgerton was backed against a table despite Charlie being a good three feet away from him. The body language was obvious. Colby sighed. “He’s just trying to make me crazy.”

“Welcome to the first thirty years of my life.” Don said.

~

Ian looked up as Granger entered the room and walked right up to Charlie. Not around the side, like you would if you were getting a colleague’s attention, but right behind Charlie, stopping only a hairsbreadth away. He put a hand on Charlie’s shoulder. Charlie didn’t look behind him to see who
it was. Instead he leaned back just the smallest amount, closing the last physical gap between himself and Granger. Ian saw Charlie’s face and eyes flicker and shift, for a fraction of a second he thought he saw the sparrow again, but then there was something else. Something in his eyes that said ‘mine’ said ‘I own, I am owned’. Ian had noticed the ring Charlie wore on his right hand, but had chalked it up to a fashion statement. Now he noted an identical band on Granger’s finger.

“Hey, Charlie, Don’s got a question.”

“No problem.” Charlie gave Ian a polite nod and walked out of the room.

Ian found himself suddenly on the receiving end of a hard look from Granger. Ian raised both hands slightly. He wasn’t used to rolling over and showing his throat, but this was something he wasn’t going to get anywhere near the middle of, and best if Granger knew that now. Granger gave a slight nod and followed after Charlie.

Ian let out a breath and tried to figure out what parallel dimension he’d slipped into. He resolved that he would drag Reeves or Sinclair aside when this was done and demand an update on the last 18 months of the LA field office because he had apparently missed a lot.
The Look of a Smile

Chapter Summary

What does it take to make Don smile?

Don checked his watch and grabbed his coat, making a beeline for the door.

“Hey, Don,” David said. “We just got in that fax from the IRS.”

Don winced. “Any chance it can wait ‘till morning?”

“Sure, I guess.”

“Great.” Don started to the door.

“You got a hot date or something?”

“None of your business.” Don hit the security gate before David could reply.

~

Don shivered a bit in the parking lot.

“So, what did I miss?” He whispered to Anne.

“Well the block of ice on wheels is the polar caps, the cage on the ice is our dependency on fossil fuel, naked guy on the ice is us, and it’s all being dragged by a rusted out Beetle ‘cause no one would loan them a Hummer.”

Don nodded. “What does the bird represent?”

“I have no idea. Penguins or something.”

“Okay.”

Anne looked at Don. “Don’t worry, once this bit is over Phill and Joy will strip almost naked and juggle fire for twenty minutes.”

“Cool.”

Anne nudged Don with her elbow. “You know you didn’t have to come?”

“No, no. I’m interested.”

“In really half-rate performance art?”

Don eased his arm around Anne waist. “Well, as long as I have someone of fine quality to explain it to me...”

Anne laughed and Don felt himself smile.
Don was going over papers when David sat on one side of his desk, Colby sat on the other, Megan came down the middle.

“Okay, Don. Who is she?” David asked.

“Excuse me?”

“You’ve been sneaking around for six weeks. We know it’s no one in the office ‘cause you’re not that good.”

“I object.”

“Tell us who she is, Don.” Megan said.

“What makes you think there’s anyone?”

“Alan made rib-eye last night and you missed it.” Colby said. “You have a preternatural talent for sniffing out your father’s rib-eye and you either ignored it or were too distracted to notice.”

“Plus you’ve been smiling. You only smile if you’re getting some, or get an excuse to bounce a perp’s head off something.” David said.

“My social life is no one’s business but mine, now if you’ll excuse me I have some place to be.” Don stood and grabbed his coat. “And if I have a tail tonight I’ll bust the lot of you right back to Quantico.” Don made his way to the door, well aware that he had more or less just challenged his three best agents to find out his secret.

~

Don rang the buzzer. He could hear music coming from an open window.

‘Hello.’ A male voice answered.

“Um...Is Anne there?”

‘Yeah, come on up.’

The door opened and Don climbed the steps with some trepidation. He knocked on the door. A woman in a long purple dress with equally purple hair opened.

“Yes?” She asked, giving Don a suspicious look.

“Um...Is Anne in?”

“Yes.” The woman turned around. “Anne, I think there’s a policeman here to see you?” she called out, then eyed Don with suspicion again. Don tried to look around the woman but she had only opened the door half way. The door opened the rest of the way and Anne stood there, all smiles, and the woman in purple retreated. Don looked into the loft. The little social area had about a dozen people lounging around.

“Yes.” She said brightly.

“Hi, Don.”

“Hi. Sorry. I just got off. I didn’t know you were having a thing, I’ll go.” Don turned around only to have his wrist grabbed.
“It’s not a thing, it’s just one of those spontaneous everyone gets together thing, you know, meet a few friends for lunch and end up with twice as many rooting around your wine collection by seven.”

“Still, I should just...”

Anne gave a tug. “Come on in, I’ve been talking about you anyways.”

Don followed where led and was dragged over to the group. He sized them up almost as quickly as they sized him up. Most of the hair was not a natural color; there were large quantities of piercings, tattoos and slightly glazed expressions. He was sure a strip search would net him at least one felony and several misdemeanors. Don sized himself up, brown suit, white shirt, boring tie, plus badge, shoulder holster, and gun.

‘Oh god, Dad was right, I am The Man.’

“Everyone, this is Don Eppes, who I’ve been seeing.”

“Hi.” Don said with a little wave. The looks he got back could have lowered the ambient temperature of the earth.

A woman in jeans and a bright pink peasant shirt stood and approached Don.

“Orange, with green streaks.” The woman said.

“What?”

“Your aura.” Anne whispered.

“Oh.”

“Darkness, here.” The woman jabbed a finger into Don’s solar plexus causing him to jump back. “And something is missing. I wonder where it is?”

Don shook his head. “I’m always losing stuff in the couch.”

The woman giggled. “Perhaps.” She held out here hand. “Mary.”

“Don.”

“Well I’m going to make pasta.” Anne announced. “Who wants some?” Half the hands went up. “Great.”

“I’ll help.” Don said quickly and followed Anne into the half-built kitchen.

“Don, relax.” Anne said as she pulled out some pots.

“I’m relaxed.”

“Bullshit. Don’t worry. They like you.”

Don looked at the group that was still giving him frosty looks. “How can you tell?”

“Because I like you, and Mary didn’t run screaming the first time she looked at you, and believe me she’s done it before.”
“Good to know.” Don held the large pot as it filled with water. Anne gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“Go take off your jacket and relax.”

“I am relaxed.”

“And get rid of the tie.”

“What’s wrong with the tie?”

“It’s boring.”

“Well, I’m a boring guy.”

Anne laughed. “No you’re not. Go.” Don put the pot on the stove and Anne nudged him out of the kitchen.

Don peeled off his suit jacket and with a little wiggling managed to get his shoulder holster off at the same time so he could hang them both up with no one seeing the gun. The badge went from his belt to the pocket of the jacket as well. Don contemplated his tie for a moment. It was a faded rust red and brown. Don looked over at the group gathered around laughing and smiling. They looked like someone had taken all of Anne’s brightest paints and smeared them around. Don took off the tie and kicked off the shoes for good measure.

He headed back to the kitchen where the woman in purple was helping Anne cut some tomatoes.

“Am I more presentable now?” Don asked.

Anne looked him up and down. “Well, if I can’t get you in Kevlar, that’ll have to do.”

Don grinned. The woman in purple looked at him. “Oh, I get it. He smiles.”

~

Don leaned back on the couch in Bradford’s office and folded his hands behind his head.

“You’re smiling.” Bradford stated with more than a little trepidation in his voice.

“I know. I kinda can’t stop.”

“Really?”

“It’s sorta freaking out my team.”

“It’s sorta freaking me out. Why are you smiling?”

Don let out a long happy sigh. “Because I think I’ve had my shoelaces tied together.”

“Excuse me?”

“You once said one day someone would swoon at my feet and tie my shoelaces together while she’s down there. I think they’ve been tied.”

Bradford nodded. “So it’s a girl?”

“Oh yes.”
“And how long has this been going on?”
Don chuckled. “The smile or the girl?”

“The girl.”
Don shrugged. “About two months.”

“And it’s going well I take it?”

“Yeah. It’s going kinda scary well.”
Bradford nodded. “Okay. Tell me about her.”
Don sat up a bit. “She’s...ah...not my usual type.”

“What?”

“Well my usual type looks good in Kevlar and can outshoot me.”

“I see. And this girl?”

“Anne, pretty sure she’s never touched a gun in her life. She’s...she’s a painter.”

“Like house painter?” Bradford asked.

“No. Um...she’s an artist. She makes her living as an artist, pretty good one in fact.”
Bradford tried to hide his surprise. “Well that is a bit of a divergence from type.”

Don chuckled. “Yeah. She’s got really amazing talent, just genius.” Don rubbed his hand over his face. “And she’s fun, I have so much fun when I’m out with her. Even when it’s weird performance art shit I don’t get, she just makes it fun. Even her friends. I mean they all look at me like I’m a narc and a shake down would probably get me at least two felonies. But...um...” Don giggled a little “Apparently I have an orange and green aura and some darkness in my third charka that I need to work on.”

“Well, who doesn’t?”
Don gave a laugh. “Don’t read anything weird into this, please, but she kinda reminds me of Charlie in a way.” Bradford leveled a gaze at Don that clearly said he was reading all kinds of weird into that statement. “I mean when she’s painting, she lets me watch sometimes, I’ll just work on paperwork and she’ll paint and she’ll get this focus, it’s like watching Charlie at his blackboards, she has to paint what’s in her head, has to finish the thought and interruption can lead to dodging flying tubes of burnt sienna.”

Bradford nodded, getting it. “Like Charlie tossing chalk at people.”

“Yeah, you would have heard about that.”

“At length. So when did this smile start?”

Don’s smile got even bigger. “Two nights ago.”

“What happened two nights ago?”
“A movie. Late night Mel Brooks marathon at a theatre downtown. Um...we were watching Blazing Saddles and she laughed at a joke and just something in the way she laughed, I smiled and she took my hand and...I don’t know. Just can’t get this stupid grin off my face. I keep trying...”

“What part of the movie did she laugh at?” Bradford asked.

“Stampeding Cattle, That’s not much of a crime, through the Vatican?, kinky. She laughed on kinky.”

“It’s a funny bit.”

“Yeah. Can I tell you something, Doc?”

“That’s what I’m here for.”

Don leaned in. “We haven’t had sex. Two months. No sex. And I don’t mind. Closest we’ve gotten has been making out in the car like teenagers.”

“And this is unusual?”

Don shrugged. “I’ve been known to put out on a second date. Or a first. Or sometimes just skip the date.”

“Really?”

Don cringed a bit at the tone in Bradford’s voice, which clearly said he was trying to think up the male word for slut. “Well, most of my exes have been other agents, there’s this sort of ‘tomorrow we may die’ feeling about sex. You know?”

“Oh I know, I’ve heard. At length, from many agents.”

Don laughed. “You know, I’ve spent nights at her place. Slept in the same bed. No sex, just held her and slept so well.” Don closed his eyes for a moment as if he might just drift off from the thought. “Oh, Doc, I do not want to fuck this up.”

“Then don’t.”

“Okay, easier said than done. I’ve always been from the ‘make the best of it until it all falls apart then move on’ school of relationships. Except I don’t want this one to fall apart, I mean really. Two months, no sex, and I can close my eyes and picture us ten, twenty years from now. My god, I can picture kids. Cute little kids with gray eyes and curly hair.” Bradford gave a quick chuckle. “I know. It’s weird. It is so weird, I don’t want to fuck this up and I don’t want the dark things that are still in my head to fuck her up.”

“Can you tell me about the dark things in your head?” Bradford asked seriously.

Don shrugged his smile fading a little. “They’re what they’ve always been, maybe not so loud anymore. Mainly it’s just if I’m alone in my apartment after work or something, lately I’ve just been calling Anne, seeing if she wants to go out. Or going over to Charlie’s place and hanging out with him if he’s around.”

“And that’s been working?”

“Yeah.” Don said softly. “You know Charlie and I never really properly talked until a couple months ago. There’s a million things I never knew about him. Lot of stuff I wish I didn’t know or
didn’t exist to be known but…” Don shook his head. “He has such…strength I didn’t know was there. He was the last person I thought could catch me but…It’s like he’s gone from being my little brother to being my brother. Does that make sense?”

Bradford nodded. “Yeah, it does.” Don gave a little chuckle and raked his finger through his hair. “Has she met your family yet?”

“No.” Don said quickly. “Oh no. Avoidance of my family until…oh I don’t know…the tenth wedding anniversary is part of my plan for not fucking this up.”

“I’ve met your family, Don, they’re not that bad.”

“Well it’s not just them is the thing. Okay, there’s my Dad who’s going to be thinking grandkids. Okay that’s fine, then there’s Charlie, who is weird and intimidating on his best days, where goes Charlie so goes Colby and Larry, and Larry needs a disclaimer attached to him before any meeting, with Larry comes Megan at which point we kinda got to drag David along out of politeness, at which point it goes from meet my family to meet my family and a team of highly trained federal agents and a weird little physicist.”

“Maybe if you just tried one at a time or something?”

Don shook his head. “We’ll see but it’s not anything I’m in any rush to do. I like it being me and her. I like no one knowing.”

Bradford leveled a gaze at Don. “You really think know one knows?”

“Oh I’m sure my team tailed me and has a full background check on Anne by now, but I figure if they haven’t told me then there’s no major felonies or security alerts, and they won’t tell me for any other reason ‘cause I’ll bust them all back to Quantico.”

“I guess that’s fair enough.”

“And if I didn’t catch their tail it’s my own damn fault.”

“True.”

Don spread his arms and let the full smile creep back onto his face. “So that’s the current life and times of Don Eppes.”

“If nothing else Don, you keep this job interesting.”

“Glad I could help.”
“Hey, Charlie, the spaghetti’s good tonight.” Don said.

“Oh, thanks.” Charlie said distractedly from pushing noodles around his plate.

“They’ll be plenty of leftovers for Dad when he gets back.”

“Uh hunh” Charlie muttered.

Don looked at Colby across the table, who shrugged and shook his head. Don looked at Charlie and tried to figure out if this was a deep in math thought mood or deep in other thoughts mood. Don took another bite of spaghetti and tried to read Charlie’s mind. Difficult at the best of times. Charlie put down his fork and sat up a bit straighter. He looked first at Don then and Colby.

“I’d like one or both of you to teach me how to shoot.” he announced. Colby’s fork froze half way to his mouth. Don had to swallow quickly so he didn’t choke.

“You’ve shot a gun Charlie.” Don said quickly.

“I’m not talking about pulling a trigger on a pre set rifle. I mean I feel I should learn how to shoot a handgun, preferably a Glock 19, 22, or 23 since they are the weapons I am statistically most likely to come in contact with.”

“Why, Charlie?” Colby asked.

“Every day I calculate the likelihood of each of you coming home down to six digits. It’s actually a very complicated equation with multiple ever-changing variables depending on the type of case being worked, last qualifying round, type of protection worn, etcetera. The last time I was in the office, I applied the formula to myself, and didn’t like the results.”

“Come on, Charlie, it’s not like you go on busts or anything.” Don said.

“And yet I seem to find myself dodging bullets at least once a year.”

“Just because you can shoot back doesn’t make their aim worse.” Don argued.

“Actually, yes it does. I’m not talking about carrying a weapon on a regular basis, however if I find myself in a situation of last resort...”
“I think it’s a good idea.” Colby cut in seriously. Don shot him a hard look. “You’re around guns, you consult for people with guns and not just us, if something ever goes...completely to shit you should be able to shoot back.”

“Thank you.” Charlie said softly.

Don looked between the two of them. “Okay. Just promise me you won’t tell dad.”

~

Colby handed his Bureau-issue Glock over to Charlie. He didn’t carry it any more, it just sat in its case under his bed, but it was a 23 like Don’s. Last night he and Don had sat at Colby’s small kitchen table and made Charlie go through the basic weapon maintenance procedures, cleaning, disassembly and reassembly. It was interesting and had given Colby an idea of just what kind of an instructor Don must have been at the Academy. Apparently the ability to teach was not limited to Charlie.

Colby was never able to forget just how good Charlie was at math but, with the exception of golf, he’d forgotten just how quick a study Charlie was at other things as well. Don hadn’t even needed to show him how to put the Glock back together once it was disassembled. He just ran the procedure in reverse in his head. It took under two minutes.

Don and he had looked at each other across the table, both trying to hide vaguely horrified expressions. The gun looked painfully wrong in Charlie’s hands and he left a trace of chalk dust on the grip- and yet, Charlie had steadied something inside himself and his hands never shook or faltered once.

Charlie held the gun and pointed it downrange. He had pulled his ever-lengthening curls out of the way with a rubber band and had worn utilitarian black.

“Don’t worry about aim too much this first round. Just take your time with each shot, get used to the recoil.” Don said.

“Spread your feet a little wider.” Colby advised.

“And you want to squeeze with your whole hand, don’t just pull with one finger.”

“Square your shoulders a bit.”

Charlie nodded and shifted a little. “Okay.”

Don and Colby snapped on their hearing guards and Charlie pulled off a shot. His arms sprung back from the recoil and he mouthed a small curse.

“It’s okay.” Don said. “It’s always a little more than you expect.”

Charlie shifted again and squeezed the trigger a second time. This time his arms remained steady.

“Good, good.” Colby said.

Charlie took a deep breath and fired again and again, with each shot his breathing became smoother and body developing a stillness that made Colby shiver. When he fired 13 rounds he carefully set the gun down and looked at Don. Don pressed the button to bring the target forward.

“Not bad.” Don said looking at the target. It wouldn’t have passed a qualifying review, but all but
one shot actually went through the figure.

“It’s not great either.” Charlie said.

“Hey, it’s better than your first golf game.”

“Or your last one.” Colby said, earning himself a quick, dirty look.

Don handed Charlie another clip. “You’re pulling to the left. Loosen up your right a bit to catch a little more of the recoil. Reload and do it again.”

Charlie ejected the spent clip, slipped in the new one with a snap, and did it again.

By the third clip Charlie had found his rhythm, his body was steady and his face serious. Colby looked at Don and Don looked back. For a moment it was like they could read each others’ minds. Colby shivered a bit.

Charlie finished the clip and brought the target forward. Don looked at it.

“Congratulations, buddy. You just passed your first basic qualification in three clips. That might be a record.”

“It’s all vectors, velocities, and trajectories.” Charlie said calmly. “I just did the math.”

Colby watched as this time Don shivered a little.

~

Colby pushed his vegetables around his plate.

“You know, those vegetables aren’t going to eat themselves.” Charlie said.

“You sound like my mother.”

“I sound like my mother.”

Colby sighed. “Charlie, are you planning on going shooting again?”

Charlie shrugged. “I figured once a month, just to make sure I don’t forget anything. Why?”

A frown creased Colby’s face. “Could you...Do you think you’d be able to go alone?”

“I guess, but...what’s up?”

Colby pushed the food around his plate. “I just...I just really don’t like seeing you with a gun in your hand. It really just...”

“You’re the one who agreed that it was a good idea.”

“I know. And I still think it’s a good idea it doesn’t mean I have to like the visual.”

“It’s just a tool, Colby, like my chalk holder.” Charlie said before taking another bite of his dinner.

Colby put down his fork. “No. It’s...I saw something today that...that scared me and I know Don saw it too and...”

“What did you see?”
Colby let out a puff of air. “I saw Special Agent Charles Eppes. It was like I was looking into another dimension and there he was and he scared me.”

Charlie laughed. “Come on. I would be a disgrace of an FBI agent.”

Colby shook his head. “No, you wouldn’t. That’s the thing. You’re so damn smart, Charlie, and so very good at damn near anything you put your hand to, and when you were on the range today you got this focus, a lot like Don, really, and I could see you as clearly as anything, I could see you with a sniper rifle, I could see you in TAC gear, I could see you as a team lead, I could see you kicking in doors, interrogating suspects and it just fucking scared me.”

“Colby, I’m not about to sign up for Quantico. Dad would never forgive me and the pay cut wouldn’t be worth it, and even if I did I would still be me.”

Colby shook his head again. “That’s the thing. If I worked for Special Agent Charles Eppes instead of Special Agent Don Eppes I would have full respect for you, you’d probably be one hell of a team lead and I’d follow your lead into hell and back but...” Colby shrugged. “I fell in love with this sweet, goofy, sexy, poetic math teacher that always smells a little like chalk...I don’t know what I would do with a Charlie that smelled like gun oil and interrogation rooms.”

“Could you really see me interrogating someone?”

“Yes! That’s the point. I have three years of interrogation with the Army and more than a few with the FBI. I could probably teach you everything I know in a couple of hours and if you put as much focus into it as you put into hitting that target today you could have suspects in tears inside a week.”

Charlie let out a long sigh. “Colby, that’s not me.”

“I know and I’m damn glad of it. I mean, I think would have fallen for you it whatever weird parallel dimension the universe throws up but it would be very, very different.”

Charlie nodded. “Okay. It’s okay. For your peace of mind, Special Agent Charles Eppes will be kept well from view.”

“Thank you.” Colby said with a sigh.

“Though that will put a crimp in my plan to nick a couple of thigh holsters for your birthday.”

Colby’s brain froze. “What?”

“Well, deny it all you like, but I’ve seen you ogle Don when he’s in TAC gear.”

“Everyone ogles Don in TAC gear. It’s the only way he gets laid.”

“Yeah. So I was thinking for your birthday I could dig up that pair of black jeans that are a little too small, get a hold of a couple of thigh holsters for the night, maybe even a vest...” Colby swallowed hard. Charlie leaned in close. “I was even going to let you call me, sir.” Something shorted out in Colby’s brain.

He stood up carefully, walked calmly around the table, and yanked Charlie up into a searing kiss. Charlie melted against him, fingers clutching hard enough to bruise. Both collapsed onto the nearest horizontal surface, which happened to be the table top. Charlie’s dinner hit the floor.

Hands quickly yanked down pants and shorts, kicking them off. Fingers clawed and pinched while
mouths sucked and bit. Charlie’s hand went from the butter dish to Colby’s cock. Colby didn’t have to be told twice. Or even once, for that matter. He got both feet back down on the floor and Charlie slid down to the edge of the table and drew his knees to his chest.

With a quick thrust, Colby was in and saw stars as Charlie squeezed down on his cock tight enough to hold him in place. Charlie clawed at the table sucking deep breaths before loosing up enough to let Colby thrust with wild need.

Neither lasted long. Colby wrapped his hand around Charlie’s cock, roughly jerking him off. Charlie clamped down again and his cum splattered across his chest, drawing out a bellowing orgasm from Colby.

Colby doubled over, leaning his head against Charlie’s cum splattered stomach to catch his breath while Charlie’s legs dangled from the table.

Charlie gave a blissed out giggle. “We need more butter.”

Colby chuckled. “First we need a shower.”

“Can we do something kinky in the shower?”

Colby groaned slightly. “Sure, Professor. What did you have in mind?”

Anne hit the reply button on her end of the door buzzer with her brush.

“What?”

‘Anne, it’s Don. Can I come up?’

“I’m painting.”

‘Please?’ She heard Don say softly through the speaker.

She pushed the buzzer on the bottom door. She closed her eyes and listened. Over the sound of the street she could barely hear someone climb the stairs. It was a long time before she heard a knock. She opened the door. Don leaned against the door frame, eyes that always looked so focused and alive seeming dark and far away. There were white bandages across his knuckles.

“Are you okay?” she asked carefully.

Don shook his head. “I’ve had a bad day. Can I just watch you paint?” Anne read the pleading in Don’s eyes.

“Come on in.” Anne moved aside and Don dragged himself into the apartment. She looked at him closely, not just his face, which was her favorite part. His black jeans and t-shirt seemed almost painted on, he could have walked into any club in the city just like that, of course he’d have to remove the three guns first. Anne had usually only ever seen him with the one. Even when they had first met at the bank, the rifle he had slung over his back had really just registered as an abstract object, black on black. A thing, not really a gun. The three he had now seemed larger and menacing, as if they weighed more than they should and were pulling him down.

Don collapsed on the battered couch that allowed a view of her work space. He closed his eyes. Anne carefully ran her fingers across his hair as she went back to her canvas. Don made the
slightest of noises but seemed to be falling asleep. Anne wondered if you should sleep with guns strapped to you, if it was like sleeping with a bra on or contacts in.

Anne looked at the painting she’d been working on, Icarus spinning about in the air with the birds, joy in every line of his body. Anne put it aside and picked up a blank canvas. With a thick pencil she roughed out lines. The couch, the table behind it. Don’s arms and legs splayed out, his head to the side, eyes closed. She could barely make out the soft rise and fall of his chest. She penciled in the shirt, the line of muscles in his arms, tense but weary. When she had that she began to pencil in the guns and the way the straps bound into flesh, Don opened his eyes, almost like he could feel what she’d been drawing.

She put down the pencil and went to him. It was almost disconcerting, the way he was looking at her. Like she was an angel or something, come to take him away. Anne crouched down in front of Don and carefully unclipped each holster and put it gently on the couch next to him. She had expected him to object or at least comment but he just watched her. When the guns were gone she sat on the other side of him and pulled him to her. Don sighed and wrapped his arms around her so carefully, like he was afraid she would break.

“It’s okay, Don. I’m not made of glass.”

Don held her a little tighter. Anne shivered a little as his breath went along her neck. Over three months now, and they hadn’t had sex. Don had never once questioned why, even with his eyes. So many nights he just seemed content to do paperwork on her yellow Formica table while she painted, then pass out fully clothed next to her at two in the morning.

She pressed her lips to Don’s neck, Don’s hands began gently moving along her spine. Anne took a deep breath.

“Come to bed, Don.”

Anne stood and Don followed. She led Don to her narrow bed against one wall. She sat him down on the bed and kissed him. Don melted and his hands began to move. Clothes were peeled off slowly and gently. Anne almost wanted to cry at how Don was looking at her, touching her. Like he had never seen a woman, never touched one.

They lay down face to face, Anne lightly stroking her fingers along Don’s bare thigh.

“It’s okay.” Anne said trying to reassure him though she wasn’t entirely sure about what.

“People keep telling me that.”

Don breached the gap of inches and kissed Anne with a passion that made her toes curl and a whimper escape her throat. Hands began roving again, touching, teasing, wrapping around, dipping in.

Anne pulled away from the kiss, gasping for air. Don Eppes was a man who knew his way around a woman’s body. She had the feeling that women who carried guns for a living didn’t put up with second rate sex. Someone, somewhere, had trained him very well. He twisted his fingers and Anne felt her body arch without thought. Don gave a chuckle. Anne tried to shake the gorgeous warm fog from her brain that Don’s fingers were putting there. She took a deep breath and pulled Don on top of her.

“Are you clean?” She managed to ask through the fog.

“Yes.” Don answered.
“Good.” Anne wrapped her legs around Don’s waist and drew him in. Don rolled his head back and closed his eyes. Anne gritted her teeth a little. It had been just a little too long for this to be completely comfortable. Don seemed to know and took his time, each movement slow and calculated. He opened his eyes and locked with hers. Anne saw that same focus she had seen in the back of that ambulance, the same look that had kept her awake that night until she had it down on paper, looking back at her again.

Anne felt a warmth begin to build. Don’s hands slid back down her body even as he began to pick up speed. Anne closed her eyes and let the feeling of someone else’s hands take her away for once.

~

Don giggled a bit to himself and kissed Anne’s elbow. He had been slowly working his way down Anne’s arm kissing every freckle he could find.

“What are you doing, Agent Eppes?” Anne asked lightly.

“I’m counting your freckles.”

Anne giggled. “Why?”

“Cause they’re there.”

“I see.” Don kissed another freckle. “You should see me in summer. I get burnt and turn into a giant freckle.”

Don kissed the inside of her arm. “How do you get burnt in LA? We have a homemade ozone layer.”

“I can get sunburnt in Alaska in winter.”

Don licked a freckle. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Anne giggled. Don grinned and took another lick. “That tickles.”

“Good to know.” Don said with a wicked grin. He licked and kissed his way down Anne’s inner arm, grinning at each little snicker and giggle Anne made. Anne’s laugh was quickly topping the list of his favorite sounds on earth. Not quite as high as the sound of a bat hitting a ball, but working up to it. Don kissed the inside of her wrist. A strange little message went from his lips to his brain. He stopped and looked at what he was kissing.

“What is it?” Anne asked.

Don sat up and gently took Anne’s thin wrist in his hands. He rubbed his thumb gently over white marks that had nearly faded into her pale skin.

“Anne?”

Anne pulled her wrist away. “They’re not what you think.” She said quickly.

“Well they look like what happens when someone spends too much time fighting badly applied cuffs. Now, we run background checks on witnesses, so I know you don’t have a record so I don’t know what I think.” Anne scooted away a little and tried to hide her wrist under her arms. “Hey, whatever it is, it’s okay.”

Anne ran her fingers through her hair. “I was…I was into some bad shit when I was younger. Got
into some bad places, a bad scene."

"Bad scene, like what, sex wise?"

Anne shrugged. "Kinda bad scene all around but yeah sex was part of it. Spent too much time in a bad place then just kinda snapped out of it one night. Tried getting him to stop but...um...it was ignored."

Don closed his eyes for a moment, he felt his stomach twist and turn, all the dark thoughts that usually featured Charlie suddenly featured Anne as well. "Did you...did you press charges?"

Anne shook her head. "No, I was pretty fucked up in those days, I managed to kick the guy in the nose, knock him out. One of the other people there got me out of the cuffs, took me to the emergency room. I called my granddad, he took me up to his place in the mountains. I spent a year up there just cleaning up, painting landscapes, getting my head together."

Don rubbed his hand over his face. "Oh, god, I'm sorry."

"Don't be, Don. It was a long time ago and it's not your fault. You're not the one who did it."

Don shrugged. "I know, still. I mean depending on how long, there can be historic cases..."

"Don't worry about it."

"Anne."

"Special Agent Eppes, the man is dead." Anne said sternly. "I heard about it when I got back. Billy, who was there full-time, snapped and gutted Frank with one of his own knives down in the dungeon then wrote out his confession in blood on the wall. Got a couple years on a psyche plea."

"Are you sure?" Don asked.

"Got it from a good source. Though I was also told the confession was in iambic pentameter. Not sure how true that bit is."

Don gently took one of Anne's hands and kissed it. "I'm sorry...I'm sorry I couldn't have helped you then."

Anne shook her head slowly. "Don, you wouldn't have liked me then. I was ninety pounds; I had a shaved head, bright pink eyebrows, and a bad attitude. It was a decade ago and I was a tragic fucked up, strung out statistic waiting to happen. You would have looked at me and that's all you would have seen."

Don carefully brushed some hair away from Anne's face. "I don't think I could ever look at you at any point in your life and not see something remarkable."

Anne lowered her head and gave a chuckle. "You are so sweet, Agent Eppes."

"You're pretty sweet yourself, Ms. Finnegan."

Anne rolled her eyes and flopped back down on the bed. "God, don't call me that."

"What, you sound like your mother?"

Anne snorted. "Hell no, Finnegan is just the name of the guy my mom was fucking when I was born. Mind you, not the name of the guy she was fucking when I was conceived, just the guy she
was fucking when I was born. I keep meaning to change it.”

“Why don’t you?”

Anne shrugged. “Well I’ve sold all my paintings under Anne Finnegan and unless you’re getting married it’s a pain in the ass to change your name.”

Don lay back down and looked at the ceiling trying to drive out the dark thoughts that had been stirred up with idol conversation. “What would you change your name to?”

“I don’t know. Maybe something hippyish, Anne Rainbowfeather.”

Don laughed. “I don’t think that’ll sell your paintings.”

“Well Rice is taken. How about Whitmore?”

“Very English.”

“Letherton?”

Don shook his head. “Serial killer, nine girls over two years.”

“Okay, non serial killer names. Napier?”

“Where’s that from?”

“I think it’s a town in New Zealand?”

Don thought about it. “You should go there first. It might be a sucky town.”


“Aside from the fact that you have way too cute a nose,” Don planted a kiss on the nose in question. “You are way too sane and together to be an Eppes. Seriously, being a head case is like a prerequisite.”

“Is it, now?”

“Yep. My mom was an obsessive organizer and she just married into it, Dad is still convinced the CIA had something to do with JFK, Charlie, god, Charlie is just bonkers and he’s got a high-end shrink to prove it.”

“And what about you, are you the stable normal one in the family?”

Don closed his eyes and drew Anne to him. “I’m the workaholic commitmentphobe with trust issues and way too many shootings in my jacket. Literally one week before I met you I sat in my brother’s living room at three in the morning and tried to eat my own gun.”

Don expected Anne to draw away; instead she snuggled into his chest. “I’m glad you didn’t do it.”

Don smiled and ran his fingers along her hair. “You know what? So am I.”
The Howl of the Abyss

Chapter Summary

Don heads back into the darkness but with a reason and a guide.

Chapter Notes

Warning: discussion of BDSM

Don leaned over Colby’s shoulder and spoke low. “Colby, can we talk?”

“Sure, Don.”

“I mean after work, someplace quiet, maybe make a couple of hours.”

Colby’s face fell with worry. “Sure, no problem.”

~

Don looked around the cafe. There was no one he recognized, even though it was frequented by law enforcement types, mainly because the deep booths had unique acoustics that muffled sound and virtually no visibility between them. Plus, the burgers were extra greasy and the waitstaff left you alone. Colby slipped into the other side of the booth.

“What is it, Don?” Colby asked cutting to the chase, looking grave.

Don lowered his head. “I need to ask you some questions, and I need you to explain some stuff, a lot of them are going to be personal questions and you’re going to want to tell me to fuck off but I need to know and I’ll explain why in the end. I won’t repeat anything you say, anywhere, ever, and I’d appreciate the same courtesy.”

Colby nodded “Okay.”

Don took a deep breath. “I need to know, do you ever cuff Charlie, ever tie him up?” Don watched as Colby jerked back in his seat.

“No. It’s one of the rules. No ties, no restraints, ever, any reason. I’ve had to hold him down a few times in early days when he was still prone to jabbing himself with pens, but no.”

“So never restraints?”

“No.”

Don nodded slowly. “Why? Is it his rule, his idea?”

Colby shook his head. “No. It’s mine. He has to be able to stop at any point, say the word, get up
and walk away, decide he’s had enough.”

“Has he ever?”

“No.” Colby said softly “Some days I really want him to, some days I really want him to just decide he doesn’t need me, that he’s had enough, get up and walk out the door, meet some nice girl, get married, and have a dozen kids.”

“I don’t think it’s going to happen.” Don said.

“I know, and if it did I’d probably climb into a bottle for a week, then eat my gun.”

“Well, at least you’re honest with yourself.”

Colby shrugged. “Kinda got to be. The kinda of life Charlie and I have, it doesn’t hold up well to secrets.”

“Okay.” Don rubbed the bridge of his nose. “You know about Anne, right?”

Colby snorted. “Of course I know about Anne, the whole office knows about Anne, and we’re very happy for you. You’re a much happier boss when you’re getting laid.”

Don rolled his eyes. “Hey, for the record I haven’t been.”

“What?” Colby said, honest confusion on his face.

“We’ve been taking it slow.”

Colby blinked a few times. “You’ve been that happy without getting any?”

“Just shut up, okay? The other night, Anne and I finally...well.” Don made some vague hand gestures.

“I got it. Took you long enough.”

“Hey, we were going slow.”

Colby put his hands in the air. “It’s okay, fair enough.”

“Anyways, after, we were doing the whole, you know, look at the other person thing.”

Colby nodded “Right, count the freckles, find the ticklish bits.”

“Right, you’ve been there.”

“Sure.”

Don took a deep breath and let it out slow. “So, I was counting freckles on her arms and I found some scars around her wrists, I mean she’s pretty pale so they don’t really show up but...”

Colby’s face turned grim. “What kind of scars?”

“Handcuffs, badly applied, multiple times from the looks of it.”

Colby let out a long breath himself. “What did she say?”

“She said, she said when she was younger she got into...well.”
“Right.”

“She told me she got in kinda deep, someone went to far, she tried to get them to stop but she had to fight her way out, never went back.”

Colby closed his eyes. “Fuck. Don, that’s...”

“Rape, I know.” Don lowered his head.

“Did she press charges, did she deal with it?”

“She told me that she ran off to the mountains for a year, and that the guy was dead, I did some digging and he is.”

“Good.” Colby said coldly. Don had his head in his hands. “Just so you know, Charlie’s safe word is stop, and no, he hasn’t used it.” Don nodded.

“The thing is...She said she never went back to that place, but that doesn’t mean...” Don pettered off hoping Colby would understand.

“She didn’t go somewhere else.”

“Right.”

“Did you ask?”

“I don’t even know how to broach the subject, and if she wants me to...” Don made some more vague hand gestures. “Colby, I think I might really be in love this time.”

“Well, you have been walking around with the stupid, ‘I’m in love’ look on your face, freaking everybody out.” Don nodded. “Okay. Look, Anne had what I’m sure was a very traumatic experience and there’s a good chance it turned her off to the whole thing. This could be completely unfounded worry on your part.”

“And if it’s not?” Don ran his hand through his hair in frustration. “I don’t think I could. I’m not in a position to judge and the only point of reference I have is you and Charlie and I get the feeling you guys are a little on the fringe of the fringe.”

“None of your exes ever tried to get into your cuffs?” Colby asked.

“Most of my exes are other agents, so no.”

Colby rubbed his forehead and seemed to come to a decision. “Okay. What do you want to know Don?”

Don shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t even know what you know.”

Colby sighed “When I worked out what Charlie...wanted, after I got over the ‘holy fuck, Don’s going to kill me’ panic I did a lot of research, a lot of reading, a lot of time on the net, and went to some parts of this city I never want to go back to, then found out 90% of it didn’t really apply to Charlie anyway ‘cause he always has to do things his own way for his own reasons, but I’ve got it all in my head still so...”

Don just looked at Colby trying to ask questions without having words to do it. Colby sighed and grabbed a salt shaker.
“Okay.” He put the salt at one end of the table. “There’s a spectrum here. On one end there’s the whole ‘oh I’ve been a bad girl spank me’ thing.” Don made a face.

“Do you know how really wrong those words sounded coming out of your mouth?”

“Oh, worse is to come.” Colby slid the salt down to the other end of the table and put it on the edge about to fall off. “On the other end of the spectrum we have Charlie, who says ‘let me look the potential for my own death in the face because the pain and terror are the only things that let me know I’m more than a walking computer.’” Don looked at the salt about to fall off the table. “This is why Charlie is lucky to be alive, this is also why he won’t really stop, it’s how he reminds himself he’s a person.”

Colby knocked the salt off the edge and easily caught it.

“Is Charlie still there?” Don asked.

“No. It’s taken a few years. He’s never going to leave that edge, but he’s not dangling himself over it anymore.” Colby gently put the salt down near the edge of the table again. “If Anne got into something really bad, chances are she was near that edge, either wandered there or was pushed. But if she really got a bad enough fright, chances are she’s not going back.”

“If Charlie’s at that edge, it means you have to be there too.”

Colby nodded. “Yeah. That’s why we have the rules, so I don’t fall over with him.”

“It’s that bad?”

“Terrifying. Like jumping off a cliff to see if you can fly.” Don picked up the salt shaker and turned it around in his hands. He looked up when Colby let out a long sigh. “Don, I’m going to tell you something and please try not to hit me or take this the wrong way.”

“What is it?” Don said suddenly full of trepidation.

“If you ever wanted to quit the FBI you could make a vast fortune ordering people to lick your boots.” Don’s eyebrows hit his hairline. “I’m serious, you could be the most terrifying, most in demand and most expensive dom in the business.” Don felt his eyes bug out. “You are intelligent, you are focused, you are intuitive, you can read people and situations like no one else, and you can give orders in a way that bypasses higher brain function. When you pull out the TAC gear and thigh holsters it’s a wonder half the office doesn’t fall to their knees and start calling you ‘master’.” Don pressed himself back into the booth. He knew he was giving Colby a hairy eyeball but couldn’t seem to help it. Colby leaned forward and lowered his voice to a gentle whisper. “And if you ever did decide to do it, it would break you.” Don blinked a few times. “It’s not you. At least not a part of you you would like. Because you see, when someone falls to their knees in front of you, hands you everything they are for your use, it feels soooo good. It’s like no drug, it’s like no rush, it goes against everything you’ve ever been taught to think or act or believe, and if it’s not something you’re naturally prone to it’ll tear you up inside.”

“Then why do you do it?” Don asked softly.

“Because Charlie asked me to, and I decided at some point I’d rather destroy and rebuild a large part of myself then have him in someone else’s arms.”

“Did it hurt?”

“God, yes, and I see a shrink every week to hold the rebuild together.”
“Charlie knows this, right?” Don asked, more than a little horrified at the type of power Charlie had somehow managed to wield over Colby.

“Yes, and I’ve asked almost as much from him and we’ve forgiven each other for it, and for a lot of other things as well.”

Don rubbed his eyes. “Colby, does Charlie ever talk about...other people he’s been with?”

“Sometimes, there’s a few exes in the woodwork.”

Don shook his head. “I mean other people he’s...consented to?”

“Ah...not often in specifics. I think he’s afraid I’ll go on a bit of a rampage.”

Don nodded. “Okay.” Don picked a case file up of the bench next to him. “I went looking for the guy who hurt Anne. She told me a strange enough secondhand story about what happened to him that I was able to find the case file.” Don opened it up and slid a couple of crime scene photo across to Colby. Colby looked at them and made a face. “Yeah. Apparently one of his full time...slaves, snapped and got him in the chest with his own knives in his own dungeon.”

“Messy.”

“Well he wrote out his confession in blood on the wall.” Don slid across another photo. Colby read the words, then stopped and read them again, moving his lips and bobbing his head slightly.

“Yeah, it’s in iambic pentameter.”

“Got to give props for creativity. I take it Anne got out before this?”

“About three or four months, I think.” Colby looked at the pictures of the room. Close up of cuffs dangling from chains from the ceiling and various unpleasant looking devices, many of them metal, scattered between lush pillows covered in odd stains.

“This was not a good place, on any level.” Colby said darkly.

“I kinda worked that out for myself. Here’s my problem, here’s why I’m talking to you. They found something else written on the wall, in blood about six months old at the time, unknown donor, unrelated to the crime as far as they could tell. Old enough that they couldn’t get a clear DNA sample aside from male and a blood type.”

Don slowly pushed a picture across to Colby. Colby blinked a few times and his mouth fell open. “Oh, god.” he whispered.

“Tell me I’m not seeing what I think I’m seeing.” Don begged.

Colby squeezed his eyes shut. “Only if you tell me first.”

“That’s Charlie’s hand writing, isn’t it? That’s one of his equations.”

“Yes.” Colby whispered.

“Written in blood. Probably his.”

“Yes.” Colby whispered again before steeling something in himself. “When were these pictures taken?” He asked.
Don shrugged. “The case is a decade old. Ten, eleven years ago Charlie was in that room, maybe even with Anne but he was there.”

Colby shook his head. “This isn’t right.”

“No shit!” Don snapped.

“No. You don’t get it, the whole reason Charlie does, did, these things, went to places like this was so he’d stop thinking about math. ‘Make the numbers go away,’ that’s what he asks me. If he was bleeding enough to write this he shouldn’t have been able to add two and two.”

“Well, he was doing something.”

Colby looked at the equation. “Cognitive Emergence.”

“No, he didn’t start Cognitive Emergence until after mom died.”

“No. I recognize this, this is the start of Cognitive Emergence.”

“How would you know?” Don snapped.

“Look it, I’ve had this written across my chest in my own cum. I can recognize it upside down, inside out and backwards, it’s cognitive emergence.”

Don threw up his arms in frustration. “Whatever, that’s not the point. The point is Charlie was in that room and had god only knows what done to him, same as Anne!” Don growled out.

Colby took a few deep breaths. “And what are you going to do, Don?” Colby asked calmly. “The man is dead and if Charlie’s name is not in the report then chances are he got out before whatever happened came to a head.”

“They should never have been there to begin with!” Don snapped trying to keep his voice low.

“No Don, they shouldn’t have! There are a lot of places Charlie should never have been, things he should have never done, people so far beneath him they should never have been allowed to look at him let alone lay hands on him. Guess what, Don, it was a decade ago. And yes, just the thought of Charlie in that place makes me want to find one of Larry’s wormholes and go back there and kill the guy myself, but that’s not an option right now.” Colby took a deep breath. “Really, Don, what are you going to do? I’d like to know because whenever you two get into it, I’m the one dealing with the fallout and would like a heads up.”

“I don’t know.” Don said. “Maybe ask Anne…”

“Ask her what? ‘Hey honey, just curious but while you were going through the most painful, traumatic experience of your life did you happen to see a short guy writing math on the wall?’”

Don grit his teeth together. “That’s Charlie level sarcasm you’re abusing there.”

“I hate to say it, Don, but welcome to my life. There are times where it’ll be okay to push, there will be moments when you’ll need to push, and there will be times when you’ll just be jabbing your finger into wounds that are already healed, doing neither of you any good.”

“Maybe Charlie…” Don shook his head and stared at the ceiling. “I don’t know.”

“You like this girl, Don?” Colby asked.
“Yeah.”

“Think you might even love her?”

Don nodded slowly. “Yeah.”

“Sooner or later, then, she and Charlie are probably going to meet. If they recognize each other it’ll be up to them if they want to admit it.” Don had lowered his head and pressed his forehead to the table. He felt Colby actually lay a gentle hand on the back of his head. “Don, if you love someone enough it’s amazing the black abysses you’ll be willing to jump over for them.” Don raised his head and looked at Colby who managed a slight smile. “I’m going to go to CalSci, wait for Charlie to finish his lecture, maybe kiss him in front of his class, tell him I love him, take him home, have dinner, tell him I love him again, take him to bed, and tell him I love him a few more times and wait for him to fall asleep in my arms and tell him I love him one more time and when he wakes up in the morning and smiles at me I’ll know all those I love yous worked.”

“Is that how you fixed him?”

Colby closed his eyes. “Charlie isn’t fixed, he never will be, none of us will be. Even if you marry Anne, move to the suburbs and have three kids you’ll still have long nights where your gun’ll look way too good, Charlie will always look up at me and beg for the numbers to go away no matter what it takes, I’ll always have screaming nightmares for a week after I smell burning gas or get a needle stuck in me. We’re all broken Don, this world broke us, this life broke us, now it’s just damage control and you know what? Some days it is actually enough.”

～

“So...um...have you got plans for tomorrow?” Don asked, leaning against Anne’s kitchen counter.

“Not really, why?” Anne replied handing over a cup of coffee.

“Well, it’s just, there’s this office thing.”

“You have to work?”

Don shook his head. “No. No, it’s just kinda a picnic for friends, family, you know, watch the federal agent in your life drink beer, get sunburnt, play softball badly.”

“Your family’s going to be there?” Anne asked carefully.

“Um...yeah.”

Anne fidgeted her own coffee cup around in her hands. “You want me to meet them?”

Don took a deep breath. “Yeah.”

“You sure? I mean, I’m not usually meet the family material. I’m usually more the fun thing on the side material.”

Don smiled. “You don’t carry a gun for a living. My dad’ll love you and Charlie’s happy as long as I’m happy and you make me happy.”

Anne blushed a little. “That’s sweet. Still, I mean, it’s only been, what four months?”

“Hey, I mean if you’re not comfortable, no pressure.”
“No I’m just...I’m just surprised.”

Don put down his coffee and took Ann’s face in his hands. “I think I just might love you.” Anne’s eyes went wide. “I am so stupidly happy around you. When you walk into a room for a moment every dark and horrible thing in my life just skitters away. I don’t know how you do it. I don’t care. I want everyone to know that you’re the one who does it in all your sweet, sexy, paint-splattered glory.”

～

Don had given Colby fair warning that he was bringing Anne to the picnic. In a lot of ways, he seriously hoped that Charlie and Anne wouldn’t recognize each other, or at least not acknowledge it if they did. He’d been sitting on that case file for too many weeks now. As much as he wanted answers, he was trying to take Colby’s advice and not stick his finger into wounds already healed.

They were walking across the parking lot when Charlie flagged them down from the sidewalk. Colby had his arm around Charlie’s shoulder. Don was still occasionally amazed at how natural those two looked together.

Don waved back and took a deep breath, stepping onto the sidewalk. They were early and there weren’t a lot of people around yet. “Anne, this is Colby Granger and my brother Charlie. Guys, this is my girlfriend, Anne Finnegan.”

Don watched as Charlie automatically put out his hand then froze. “Annie?” Charlie whispered, a weary look in his eyes.

Anne took a half step back her own aborted handshake frozen in mid air. “Christian?” Anne whispered, like she was looking at a ghost. In a heartbeat the two had joined, Anne wrapping her arms around Charlie and Charlie holding her head to his shoulder like a man would with a frightened child. They both clung to each other like lifelines.

Don and Colby both took a step back, giving them a bit of room. Don looked around to see if anyone was watching.

“Oh my god, oh my god. You’re alive?” Charlie breathed.

Anne nodded. “I’m alive. You’re alive?”

“Yeah.” Charlie said. He drew back for a moment to look at Anne actually running his hands along her face as if to confirm she was really there.

He giggled. “You have hair.” Charlie said with great amusement.

“You have clothes.” Anne said with equal amusement.

Charlie gave a kind of manic nod. “I know. I’m told it’s a good look for me.”

“It is.”

Charlie pulled her back to him. “You’re alive?” Charlie asked again. Anne nodded. He pulled back to look at her again. “And you put on so much weight.”

Don winced. In his experience, that was the fastest way to get a good ass-kicking from a woman.

“And nice ones.” Charlie said. Anne laughed and pulled Charlie in for another hug. “I can’t believe you’re alive. No one saw you…”

Anne shook her head. “I ran away, far away.”

“Good.” Charlie whispered gently stroking Anne’s hair.

Anne pulled back and looked at Charlie. “Are you okay? Are you still..?”

Charlie shook his head. “Sort of, it’s complicated, but I’m… I’m getting better, got a boyfriend and a shrink and everything.” Charlie said with a slight chuckle. “You’re not..?”

Anne shook her head hard. “No, no. That’s… that’s old me.”

Charlie nodded. “Good. Good.”

Don watched as his brother held his girlfriend close to his chest, gently rocking, eyes closed. Don watched as a single tear escaped from those eyes.

“I was so worried.” Charlie whispered. “I couldn’t stay.”

“I know, I know.” Anne said soothingly. “God, Christian, you’re alive.”

Charlie gave a slight chuckle. “Actually, it’s Charlie.”

Anne pulled back and put her hands to her mouth. “Oh my god, you’re Charlie Eppes. You’re Don’s little brother.”

“You’re Don’s girlfriend.” Charlie said in a teasing accusation.

Anne looked over her shoulder and looked at Don. Don raised an eyebrow but wasn’t going to push. He had figured if those two knew each other there might be some strained silences but not this.

Anne turned back to Charlie. “Oh my god, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t… does he..?”

Charlie shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. It used to, but…”

Anne nodded and turned back around. “Don, this is Charlie.” She said.

“Yeah, I know.”

Anne closed her eyes. “This… that place I told you about? Christian… Charlie. He pulled me out of there. Took me down, carried me, a couple of miles to the E.R.”

Don looked at Charlie, who was absentmindedly playing with the ends of Anne’s hair. Charlie looked back at him with a challenge, daring him to judge.

“I guess I owe you one, Chuck?” Don answered to the challenge.

“Don’t worry about it.” Charlie said.

Charlie gave Anne a little push back to Don. Don put a protective arm around her. Colby stepped in and put an arm back around Charlie.
“Is Dad coming?” Don asked, changing the subject.

“Yeah, but he can’t stay too long, so he’s bringing his own car.”

“Ah.”

“He’s also made the fruit thing with the little marshmallows.”

Don smiled, “The one mom used to make for the PTA?”

Charlie smiled brightly. “Yeah.”

“You needed like two bites to be on a sugar buzz all night.”

Charlie nodded. “Yeah!” Charlie peered around Don and waved.

Don looked behind him “Speak of the Devil.” Alan made his way across the parking lot, a large bowl of fruit marshmallow stuff in his hands. “You okay?” Don asked Anne softly. “We can go...?”

Anne smiled and squeezed Don’s hands. “I’m good.”

“Sure?”

“Yeah.”

Alan approached the four of them. “Hey, Dad.” Don said.

“Hello, boys. And who is this?” Alan asked spotting Anne.

“Um...this is Anne Finnegan. My girlfriend. Anne, this is Alan Eppes, my dad.”

Anne held out her hand, “Pleased to meet you.”

Alan shook it “Likewise.” He turned to Don. “Girlfriend? You’ve been keeping secrets, Donnie?”

“I am a man of mystery.”

“Sure.” Don watched as his dad politely scrutinized Anne. “So you work with Donnie?” Alan asked.

Don winced and Anne laughed. “Oh, god no. No, I’m a painter.”

Alan’s eyebrows shot up. “A painter? Like an artist?”

“Yes, I specialize in portraits, but I sort of consider myself a modern pre-Raphaelite.”

“So not a fed?”

“No.”

“Hold this, Don.” Alan thrust the bowl into Don’s hands and pulled Anne into a tight hug. “Welcome to the family.”

Don rolled his eyes even as Anne laughed. “Dad!”

“Don’t lose this one, Donnie.”
Anne laughed more. “Thank you, Mr. Eppes.”

“Please, call me Alan.” Alan let Anne go only to thread his arm into hers and lead her towards the picnic area. Anne let herself be led and shot Don an amused smile. “So how’d you and Donnie meet?” Alan asked.

Don watched as his dad led his girlfriend off. “Did Dad just abscond with my girlfriend?”

Charlie and Colby laughed.

“Not girlfriend.” Colby insisted. “Daughter-in-law material, not to mention potential mother of bouncing baby Eppeses.”

Don rolled his eyes and stomped off to rescue Anne before his dad started planning the wedding.

~

Don had managed to sneak Anne away from his dad before they started naming the kids. Introducing Anne to the team had gone better than expected since they all knew Anne already, at least on paper. Meeting Larry had even gone well, with Anne slapping her forehead and realizing that she’d studied Larry’s dad’s modern minimalist phase in school. Somewhat under the heading of ‘what not to do’, but it had given them a point of reference.

Don sipped a beer and watched as Anne and Charlie stood by a tree and talked. Charlie reached out and playfully ruffled Anne’s hair. Colby sat down next to Don.

“That took balls, Don.”

Don shrugged. “I honestly convinced myself that at worst there’d be some strained silences. Did not expect that.” Don gestured to where Charlie was now gently running his fingers over the scars on Anne’s wrist. Charlie pulled up his own sleeve and showed Anne what Leacroft had done.

“You’re going to have a talk with Charlie?” Colby asked.

“Oh yeah.” Don took a sip of beer. “Consider yourself warned, it’ll probably get ugly.”

“I’ll put his shrink on standby.” Colby took a couple of sips of his own beer. “I like her, Don. She seems good for you.”

“Yeah. I like her too.”

“Good. Don’t let this fuck that up.”

Don nodded. “I’ll try.”
Charlie was doodling, it looked impressive as all hell but Don knew Charlie was just wasting time. It had been long enough that Don could pretty much tell the difference between Charlie actually working and just scribbling out junk.

“Time for a talk, Don?” He asked without even turning around.

“Oh, yes.”

Charlie faced his brother. “And what shall we speak of today?”

“How about this?” Don tossed a case file on the table. Charlie picked it up and started leafing through it. He pulled out the photo of the confession.

“Billy always did have a poetic streak to him.” Charlie said casually. Don’s mind raced, he couldn’t understand how Charlie could be so casual.

“Poetic?”

Charlie pulled the photo of his own equation. “Hunh. I’d forgotten about that.” He said sounding more amused than anything else.

“Charlie!” Don shouted.

“What do you want Don, what do you want to know?” Charlie spread his arms “My life seems to be an open book these days.”

“You were there? I mean...You were in that room?”

“I was in those chains.” Charlie said, calm as anything.

“Damn it! Charlie! How can you just stand there and...”

“And what, Don? Admit that a decade ago my head was really fucked up. That my one real relationship was over, that all my math was crap, and I was more than a little nihilistic?”

Don shook his head as if he could somehow rattle some sense into the situation. “How’d you even end up there?”
“I went looking.” Charlie hissed harshly. “Everyone who was there went looking. We all believed we deserved hell and we all found it.”

“And you just let this guy..?”

“Yes. I was trying to self destruct, Don. You of all people should understand that. I didn’t have the guts to take a knife to my own wrists so I found someone who would get jollies doing it for me.”

Don sat down hard on the couch. “Anne…”

“I don’t know how Anne got there. When she got out I didn’t go back.”

Don looked at Charlie. “But you went other places?”

Charlie shrugged. “I tried to find a better quality of sadistic nut after that, and I was a little more accident prone. It’s amazing how much damage you can do falling off a bike. Hitting a pole, hearing the crack of your own ribs. Plus mom got sick not too long after that. Had to keep my head down.”

Don felt sick. He choked down the waves of nausea that flooded through him. “Anne said you got her out?”

Charlie shook his head. “I don’t know, Don. It was me and it wasn’t me. I haven’t though about that night in years. I almost managed to forget it. I figured Annie was a Jane Doe somewhere. You standing there with her, it’s the only time in my life I almost believed in ghosts.”

“I think she thought the same about you.”

Charlie rubbed his hand over his eyes a few times. “You want to know about that night, Don?”

Don shook his head. “Not really, but…”

“Frank liked to start and end the night with either me or Anne. He liked the way Annie screamed and he liked the way I’d take anything.” Don grit his teeth but said nothing. “I was…recovering in the corner. He’d taken his knives to my back and dislocated two toes… among other things and I was just sitting there thinking about nothing.”

“You let him cut you?”

“What part of self destructive didn’t you get? We were all hoping one day he’d slip and that would be it. Bleed out in a dark hole where no one would ever know how low we’d sunk!” Charlie took a deep breath and composed himself. “Anne was screaming and I was barely hearing it then… I don’t know Don, something in the room snapped. Anne…I looked up and she grabbed the chains, lifted her feet over the height of her head and drove her heel into Frank’s nose. He went down like a rock. It’s amazing it didn’t kill him right there.” Don felt a grim pride and satisfaction in his girlfriend. “Then…Don I swear it wasn’t me in my head. I remember all this like someone else was doing it. I was completely out of my head and yet…I stood up calm as anything, got the keys, got Anne down. I carried her into the hall, found two sheets, wrapped one around her, one around me and walked three miles in bare feet on two dislocated toes with her.”

“Anne said you carried her.”

“Yes. She was 90 pounds if she was an ounce but…I don’t remember her weighing anything at all Don, I don’t remember my toes hurting. They must have, but it’s like I was completely disconnected from my body and someone else was pulling the strings.” Don could see Charlie
begin to crack around the edges. “I walked into emergency, I laid her down, I told the admitting nurse everything I knew and when they asked if I was okay I formally refused medical attention and I walked out.”

“What?” Don asked in honest confusion. “What do you mean you walked out? You don’t just walk out of something like that. They don’t let you.”

“Don, I walked out and I...I blinked and when I opened my eyes from that blink the sun was up, I was sitting in my room in my pajamas, I was clean, my back was bandaged, my toes were wrapped, I was even shaved and to this day I have no clue how I got there. It’s maybe six hours of my life and it’s completely gone. Even if I had managed to get a cab in LA, while naked in a bloody sheet I don’t know how the hell I could have bandaged myself.” Charlie tugged on his own hair in frustration. Don was tempted to tell him to stop but wasn’t sure if hair pulling was in the list of rules. Charlie suddenly crouched down wrapping his arms around his knees.

“What is it, Charlie?”

Charlie’s face collapsed. “It had to have been Mom.” Charlie half sobbed out. Don closed his eyes, doubling over from the sudden twist in his gut. “There’s no one else. She never said a word but...There was no one else it could have been. There’s no one else I would have let...” Charlie scrubbed at his eyes. “She must have looked at me and died inside. I was so fucked up, Don. As bad as I am now, as bad as I was when Colby found me, god my head when I walked out of that place...She must have been so disappointed.” Charlie said softly.

“Mom always said she understood you.” Charlie choked out a sob and sat hard on the floor “Why the hell didn’t you tell someone, Charlie? If you were that fucked up. Larry, me, anyone?”

“You, Don? You would have been the first one to slap me in a straightjacket.”

“Well, you probably needed one.”

Charlie ground his teeth. “We had not spoken in years and I was terrified of you. When Dad said you were coming home I completely panicked, locked myself in my room for three days.”

“What? Why? I’m your brother.”

“No, Don. My brother played baseball and gave me noogies. You...” Charlie sighed. “Do you remember the last time you came home before you took the job in Albuquerque?”

Don shook his head. “No.”

“I do. You were out here hunting someone. We didn’t even know you were in LA. You knocked on the door and thank god Mom and Dad were out for the night. When I opened it you were standing there with two guns strapped to you and blood splattered across your shirt. I panicked and you said ’oh, don’t worry, it’s not mine.’” Don winced suddenly, having a vague memory of a hunt with Billy that took him out west. “You walked into the house, asked where Mom and Dad were, stole a beer out of the fridge, then said you had a plane to catch. You brought guns into our father’s house! Guns and someone else’s blood and you scared the living shit out of me.”

Don blinked not knowing what to say. “Charlie, I’m...I’m sorry.”

“You weren’t my brother, Don, you were some creature of death inhabiting his body. My brother smelled of grass and dust and glove oil. The thing that walked into the house smelled like gun oil and sick sweat and fear and I don’t know what. When Mom and Dad got back I was still shaking. I told them I’d fallen asleep and had a nightmare and I almost thought it was one except I could still
“I smell the gun oil in the air.”

“I’m sorry buddy. I was… I was kinda in a bad head space in those days.”

“Really?” Charlie said sarcastically. “Guess what, Don, so was I and so were a lot of other people.” Charlie ran his hands through his hair a few times and took some long breaths. “If it makes you feel any better, I never had sex with her.”

Don snorted. “Yeah. A little.”

“I mean she really wasn’t my type.”

“Well, yeah, female.”

Charlie rolled his eyes. “I have a perfectly healthy appreciation for the female form thank you very much, when I say Anne wasn’t my type I mean she looked like walking death. You could count every rib and vertebra on her. I don’t know if she was strung out or wasn’t eating or what. Shaved head, pink eyebrows, looked like she walked out of an alien death camp. The only part I recognized on her were her eyes.”

“She called you Christian?” Don asked.

“Christian Emerson, who could die in a ditch or get caught in a raid and not easily be tracked back to Margaret or Alan or Donald Eppes. I may have been crazy but I wasn’t stupid.”

“I think that’s arguable.”

Charlie rolled his eyes and laid out on the floor. “Any other deep, dark, nasty, secrets of my past you want to dig up tonight, Don? I’m seeing my shrink tomorrow so it would be nice to get this all out of the way at once. That woman isn’t cheap.”

Don shrugged. “I don’t know. Uh… Ever done drugs?”

“Pot, morphine, coke. Mainly coke, I don’t like downers.”

“What! When?”

Charlie stretched “Fluid dynamics. The yachting set is shameless. Tell them you can make their boats go faster and the world is yours. God, I miss that some days.” Charlie sighed.

“You did coke?” Don was in shock.

“In case you haven’t noticed Don, I am occasionally a creature of appetite. I want what I want and I’m not used to getting no for an answer.” Charlie sat up. “Don, have you ever eaten beluga caviar from the inner folds of a gorgeous woman then turned around to drink three hundred dollar champagne from the lips of her equally gorgeous lover?”

Don blinked a few times. “Um…no.”

Charlie heaved a great tragic sigh. “What was I thinking ever giving up fluid dynamics? Oh that’s right, the 90’s ended and the money ran out.”

Don snorted. “Well you don’t seem to be hurting now.”

Charlie let out a long sigh. “I’m a war profiteer, Don. Seriously, September 11th 2001, 6 a.m. ‘Dr. Eppes, calculate when this will happen again, who will do it, pick the next target.’ Like I’m a
fucking crystal ball, and you know what? After all these years I’ve gotten pretty damn good at it.”

Don wagged an accusing finger at Charlie. “Yeah, well, wait ‘till I tell them you’re a cokehead.”

Charlie laughed. “Don, you could tell them I shoot up black tar heroin, fuck sheep, and hold Satanic rituals in the basement of the Pentagon and they’ll let me get away with it. Heck, they’d probably raise my clearance. I am perfectly capable of taking Colby to the White House and introducing him to the entire joint chiefs as my boyfriend and they’ll just shake his hand and say nice to meet you. That’s how bad they need my numbers.”

“That I would actually like to see.”

Charlie gave a sad smile. “Yeah, so would I.” Charlie let out a long sigh. “I like Anne, Don. Even when we were very different people just whispering to each other in the dark...She’s good for you. I haven’t seen you this happy since you were playing ball.”

Don nodded. “Yeah, she...she just makes me happy.”

“Oh. Don’t let this fuck that up, Don, it was a long time ago. It was a different life, we were different people, even you. Just because you just found out about something doesn’t mean it happened yesterday.”

“I know.”

“Good.”

“Charlie, if you ever want to self-destruct again, you can tell me now, I can be your brother.”

Charlie gave a thin smile. “I know.”
The Smell of Fresh Cut Grass

Chapter Summary

Golf and male bonding.

Don carefully picked up the tube of cadmium yellow and wondered why so many paints had radioactive names. The tube had sailed by his head in a way that made it very clear that between now and the show opening in four weeks he would only be seeing his girlfriend on her demands and to not expect much more than to be used until inspiration struck again. Don wondered if Granger ever had the same problem.

~

Colby ducked the flying eraser and made a quick retreat from the garage. Even with the door closed every note of Welcome to the Jungle could be heard.

Colby’s phone rang. “Hey, Don,” he answered.

“Colby, you and Charlie got plans for today?” Don asked.

“Charlie’s tossing chalk and listening to Welcome to the Jungle on loop, so no.”

Don gave a chuckle. “I got bended with a tube of cadmium yellow. Want to hit the links?”

“Love to.” Colby said with great relief.

“Hey, ask my dad if he wants to come with.”

“Sure.” Colby popped his head into the kitchen. “Alan, Don and I are hitting the links. Want in?”

“What’s Charlie doing?” Alan asked.

“Tossing chalk and listening to this on loop.”

“I’ll get my clubs.”

“He’s in.” Colby said to Don.

“Great. See you in twenty.”

~

“So Anne’s in uber artist mode?” Colby asked as they made their way across the green.

“More like pre-show panic mode. Finally met her agent, scary woman. I was informed if I could live through Anne doing a show opening I’d be one of the few.”

“That bad?” Alan asked.

Don shrugged. “You know, really no worse than Charlie with his head in a new equation. You
know, stay out of the way, dodge projectiles, leave caffeine in the area every hour and food in the general vicinity every six or so.”

Colby gave a laugh “What are the odds that babysitting Charlie all those years would end up helping your relationship?”

Don snorted. “Tell me about it. What was he working on when you left?”

“I don’t know. He had some eureka moment at 3 am and has been going flat out.”

Alan shook his head. “Sooner or later he’s going to realize he’s not as young as he used to be and sleep is important.”

Colby gave a shrug. “You know, as long as caffeine is legal, I don’t think that’s ever going to really come up.”

Alan teed off. Don followed the ball with his scope.

“Not bad, broke a little left.” Don said. Alan put his club away and Colby stepped up.

“So do you actually get to see all these paintings?” Colby asked.

“Yeah.”

“Any good?” Asked Alan.

Don shrugged. “The all look brilliant to me but what do I know? Anne’s been going over them obsessively with these little tiny brushes, like with one bristle and she’s working on ten at once.”

Colby swung. The ball leapt into an arc that Charlie would have found mathematically brilliant.

“Nice.” Don said. Colby flipped around the club and stuck it in the bag with a flourish.

“Charlie’s got five projects going at once right now.” Colby said. “He’s not happy with a one of them but he’s obsessing on all of them.”

Don shook his head. “You two should get out of town. Seriously, he needs a break.”

“Love to, Don, but you see I’ve got this hard-ass boss who’s a little stingy with the vacation time.”

Don laughed and stepped up to the tee. “I’ll see if I can talk him around. Really, you two should road trip or something. Take him to Idaho.”

“Oh hell no.” Colby actually took a step back “Charlie within 200 miles of my family is just begging for badness. I mean, I’m already the family freak.”

“Come on, Granger. You’re not that weird.” Don said.

“Don, I am, for all intents and purposes, the Charlie of my family.”

Don took his swing. It broke a little left like his Dad’s.

“Now, that I don’t believe.” Alan said.

“I am 4 inches shorter and 60 pounds lighter than my next smallest brother. I’m functionally literate, which puts me head and shoulders, over my cousins. I graduated top third of my high
school class instead of bottom third which makes me the family genius, and instead of marching down to the recruiting station and signing up to be cannon fodder I had the audacity, to go to college first and attempt to become an officer. I am the biggest weirdo the Grangers have seen in a long time and adding Charlie to the mix will only lead to someone losing teeth, probably me.”

“So I take it you’re not planning a trip home anytime soon.” Alan said as they pulled their golf bags across the green.

“Nope. I am perfectly happy to hide out here and be perfectly normal by the standards of Hollyweird.”

“One more freak in the kingdom.” Don said with a smile.

“My family thinks I’m living in Sodom and Gomorrah and I don’t care, I love L.A.” Don laughed. “I’m serious. Forget crime and earthquakes and air you can chew- there’s no snow, no one cares about the price of potatoes, you can get top-rate takeout sushi at three in the morning. Last time I got my annual letter from my family telling me to come home and get married, I read it while Charlie fed me Moroccan takeaway and good merlot and we watched one of those glorious smog-filtered Technicolor sunsets and all I could think was goodbye Idaho.”
Ian took long strides down the gun range. It was time for qualification and even as third best sniper in the country, every month the FBI wanted to know he could still hit a target at 15 yards with a Glock.

Something in the corner of his eyes sent an interesting message up to Ian’s brain. He was used to trusting his eyes almost more than anything else, so he quickly backtracked for a conformation. Dr. Charlie Eppes fired off an entire clip, carefully put his weapon down and drew the target forward. He looked carefully at the target and made some sort of notation in a book before replacing the target and sending it out to the range.

“I though you didn’t believe in guns, Professor?” Ian said.

Charlie jumped a little before looking at Ian. “Agent Edgerton. I don’t. I detest the things.”

“And yet here you are doing what..?” Ian asked.

“I try to keep in practice. Should I end up in a crisis situation with a gun in my hand I’d like to be able to make the best of it.” Charlie gestured to the note book “I’m also doing a comparative analysis of various types of ammo and how they interact with cleaning techniques, different brands of gun oil and weather conditions for greatest accuracy.”

“Weather conditions?”

Charlie shrugged. “I’m finding humidity seems to be causing a slight shift, thought I’m not sure if it has to do with the gun itself or my reaction to the weather.”

Ian snorted a bit. “Dr. Eppes doing personal weapons research, never would have believed it.”

“I have a brother and a partner in the line of fire every day.” Charlie said with a serious edge. “If I can tell them that something works a little better than something else…”

“Understandable.” Ian said, actually appreciating the fact that Charlie was apparently willing to set aside high philosophy for the human end of the equation. “Who taught you how to shoot?” He asked.

“Don and Colby.” Charlie answered.
“Figured. You shoot like army and you’ve already picked up some bad habits.”

“Have I?” Charlie asked.

“Yes.”

“Would you care to correct me then?”

Ian shook his head. “I wouldn’t presume Professor.”

“Presume away.”

Ian nodded. “All right, reload. Turn around.” Charlie did as told and aimed down range. “You’re pulling left. Rotate out your right foot a little. Straighten your left wrist. Drop your right shoulder.” Charlie shifted and turned a little. “Ok give me three shots.” Charlie fired three shots. Ian didn’t bother to look at the target; he looked at the way Charlie’s body handled instead. Charlie held position. Ian reached out and gave Charlie’s right bicep a squeeze then the left. “Interesting.”

“I’d like to see you write on a black board for eight hours a day and not develop some lopsided muscle mass.”

Ian nodded, having never actually considered that. “Well, I’d start doing one-armed pushups on your left side until it evens out. Until then, rotate that right foot a little more and give me three more shots.” Charlie pulled off three more. This time Ian watched Charlie’s hands. They were reasonably steady. Steadier than a lot of young agents he’d trained over the years. Still…

“How much coffee do you drink, Professor?”

“Mathematicians are machines that convert caffeine into equations.” Charlie said bluntly.

“So a lot?”

“Yes.”

“Well I suppose if you’re ever in a real fire fight the adrenaline is going to be doing a lot worse things to your aim than a few cups of coffee. Finish the clip.” Charlie emptied the clip at a steady pace, taking a moment before each shot. Ian brought the target forward. There was a fairly neat grouping, almost center of mass, but moving closer to the dead center.

Charlie made a few more notes in a small book.

“Tracking your progress?”

“Only way to know if I improve.”

“Well, you improved just between the first three and the last three. Reload and see if you can do it again.”

Ian found himself talking Charlie through three more clips. Each one got progressively better but there was still something that was a little off. Ian watched Charlie carefully. Charlie’s body was saying that the shots should be grouped far more tightly than they were.

“Let me see your eyes, Charlie.”

“Why, Ian…” Charlie said with a flirtatious smile and batted his eyelashes. Ian got a small pain in his head. Something about Charlie flirting with him seemed horribly wrong.
“What’s your vision?” He asked.

“20/20.” Charlie replied.

“Okay. Just follow my finger.” Ian said and moved his finger the length, breath and depth of the small space between him and Charlie. “Are you taking anything, Professor?”

Charlie’s face became serious. “Why?”

“Just tell me.”

“I take a small dose of Paroxetine Hydrochloride every 48 hours.”

Ian shook his head. “What does that do?”


“Is it also a muscle relaxant?”

“I think it’s a side effect.” Charlie said with a half shrug.

“And let me guess, you took a dose this morning.”

“Yes.”

Ian nodded. “I can see your eye muscles twitching. They’re not holding focus as well as they should, so you’re not clustering as tight.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Only if you’re planning on quitting the math gig and becoming a sniper.”

Charlie gave a half chuckle. “Not likely.”

“Then I wouldn’t worry.”

Charlie gave a nod. “So do I pass Agent Edgerton’s school of small arms?”

“I think I can be persuaded to pass you.”

Charlie leaned in close. “Really and what would that take?” He said in a sultry voice.

Ian felt his heart rate spike and that funny little pain reemerged in his head again.

“You can fire off one more clip. Half center of mass, half to the head.”

Charlie gave a nod and reloaded. Ian watched as Charlie morphed from flirt to focused as any agent, with a look on his face that put Ian very much in mind of Don. There were six quick shots to center of mass. Charlie adjusted slightly and emptied the rest of the clip.

Ian drew the target forward. There was a nice cluster in both the torso and the head. Ian rolled up the target and handed it over like a diploma. “Congratulations, Professor Eppes.”

“Thank you very much, Professor Edgerton. Could I offer you a cup of coffee as tuition? Or whatever magic non jittery juice snipers drink.”

“I’m not on duty, so coffee will be just fine.”
Ian accepted his cup of coffee from Charlie, who sat down across from him. Charlie’s cup was at least twice as big.

“How many of those have you had today?” Ian asked.

“Just two. I’m trying to cut back.”

“They say caffeine stunts growth.”

Charlie smiled. “Ian, I assure you for reasons entirely my own, I am immune to short jokes.”

Ian decided not to think about what could make a man completely comfortable with only being five foot six.

“So I take it you’re not here on a case?” Charlie asked.

Ian shook his head. “My mother just moved down from Sonoma. She’s got some friends in the area, I’m just making sure she’s settled.”

“Awww. What a good son.”

Ian gave a slight smile. “I have my moments.”

“Don’t we all. Though I should have guessed you were a Northern California boy.”

Ian chuckled. “Born and bred.”

“Spending your childhood traipsing through vineyards while I managed the mean streets of L.A.”

Ian threw back his head and laughed. “You have never had to survive a mean street in your life, Professor.”

“You try starting high school at ten and tell me that’s not an exercise in pure survival.”

Ian snorted. “When I was ten my mother had me in tights working the first Renaissance Faires with her on weekends.”

Charlie laughed “Tights?”

“You will never find the photos.”

Charlie shook his head. “It’s okay. I’ve got a picture of Don, two years old, in diapers, with daisies in his hair, peace signs painted on his cheeks, holding a sign that says Make Love not War.” Ian actually felt himself snicker, which was a rare thing. “Next time he pisses me off it’s going to magically find its way into his personnel file.”

Ian raised his cup of coffee. “Here’s to hippy parents and blackmail photos.”

“Indeed. Dad still gets stoned every couple of months with this guy down the street and honestly thinks we don’t notice when he takes a fourth helping of lasagna.”

Ian nodded. “Sounds like my mother. She still spends her weekends playing mandolin at ren faires and getting up to god only knows what and at her age, too.”
“Sounds like a pair.” Charlie said with a laugh.

“They could start a support group. Old hippies with feds for kids.”

Charlie shook his head. “How are you supposed to rebel against a generation that practically defined youth rebellion?”

“Join the FBI, apparently.” Ian provided.

“Well, whatever works.”

~

Charlie opened the door to Colby’s apartment and wandered into the living room. He put the gun case and final target down on the table.

“Hey, love.” Charlie greeted brightly.

“Hey,” said Colby. “I was about to get worried.”

Charlie looked at his watch. “Wow. Sorry. I ran into Ian at the range and we ended up getting coffee.”

“Edgerton’s in town?”

“Yeah, but he’s just helping his mom move.” Charlie leaned over the back of the couch to give Colby a kiss on the temple. “What’s for dinner?”

“I don’t know. You and Ian have a long talk?”

“Guess we did.”

“Talk about anything in particular?”

Charlie shrugged. “Just stuff.”

“Oh.” Colby shifted on the couch. Charlie felt something shift in the room.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“Nothing,” said Colby quickly.

Charlie frowned and sat down next to Colby. “What’s wrong? Is this about not liking me with guns?”

Colby shook his head. “No. No. That’s fine.”

“Then what?”

“Did you flirt with him?” Colby said suddenly.

“Who?”

“Edgerton.”

“A little but…”
“Did he flirt back?”


“No.” Colby said quickly.

“Hey.” Charlie said and quickly straddled Colby’s lap putting them face to face. “You have nothing to be jealous about.”

“I know, I know.” Colby said quickly.

Charlie took Colby’s face. “Hey, you have nothing to be jealous about. Yes I flirt. It’s the first time in my life I’ve been able to, been safe to. And yeah, I flirt with Ian. But I flirt with Ian because it throws him completely off balance, and we’ve spent enough time trying piss on each other’s professional territory that I get more than a little pleasure watching him get this funny, slightly panicked look on his face. And yeah I flirt with the DEA because they’re shameless and it makes Don’s left eye twitch.” Colby let out a little chuckle. “I’m all yours, Colby. Do you get that? Anything you want from me. You want me to stop flirting, I will, want me to go back to ratty jeans and t-shirts, I will.”

Colby shook his head. “It’s just…You could do so much better than me, Charlie.”

“What? Where the hell did you get that idea?”

“I mean everyone wants you.”

Charlie shook his head slowly. “They really don’t.”

“You’ve got math groupies all over you, you could have damn near any professor on earth, Edgerton’s sex on toast and he’d have you and you’d probably have him. I’m a field agent with no real chance for promotion and a spotty record. You could have the rich, powerful, sexy and brilliant of the world if you wanted them.” Colby said waving his arms around Charlie.

Charlie leaned in pressing his lips to Colby’s forehead. “No I couldn’t. I am damaged goods and even if I wasn’t I wouldn’t want them. First damn time I saw you it was all I could do to keep from jumping you right in the middle of the office and every day, every new thing I learned about you that urge just got worse. I’m just trying to figure out every day why you want me. Especially after everything I did to you. I’m insane, I’m scarred, I’m hairy, I’m getting old, I’m self absorbed, and I give whole new meaning to the words high maintenance, and have you really looked closely at this nose?”

“You’re beautiful, Charlie.” Colby whispered.

“No. I’m not.”

Charlie was suddenly pulled into a kiss. He eagerly opened his mouth to Colby’s, thankful to be claimed by it. He started to melt into Colby’s arms when Colby pushed him gently away.

“Stand up. Get undressed.”

Charlie grinned and started stripping off his clothes. Just the sound of Colby sounding vaguely commanding could get him hard in an instant. It was a bit of a problem in the office really. Colby walked out of the room as Charlie pulled off his shoes. By the time Colby got back Charlie’s cock was ready and he had his hands clamped behind his head to be ready for Colby’s perusal.
Colby came back in with some clothes.

“Catch.” He tossed the bundle to Charlie who barely managed to grab them. “Get dressed but don’t zip up.”

Charlie quickly pulled on the skin tight long sleeved black t-shirt that had a slight iridescence to it. The jeans were a little trickier. They were just a little too small and were damn near skin tight. He managed to pull them up over his ass as Colby watched.

“Good. Bend over and grab the back of the couch.” Charlie grabbed the back of the couch as Colby disappeared behind him. Charlie felt his jeans pulled part way back down and cold lube slicked fingers spread his ass. It wasn’t fingers that entered. Charlie felt one of the hard smooth acrylic plugs they had slip in. It wasn’t a deep one but was wide and didn’t come out without some force. The back of his jeans were quickly pulled back up and Charlie let out a groan as Colby’s large hand wrapped around his cock and began roughly jerking him off.

“Cum quickly, Professor.”

Charlie squeezed his eyes shut and let his hips thrust into a warm hand and a cool damp washcloth. Charlie shuddered and came and, as soon as he was soft, was quickly tucked into his jeans and zipped up.

“Stand up.” Charlie stood and was handed a stick of eyeliner that had been purchased on a whim months before. “Put this on and grab your shoes. We’re going dancing.”

Charlie smiled. “Yes sir.”

~

By ‘we’re going dancing’, Colby had meant that Charlie would gyrate on the floor while he watched from the dark of a booth.

Charlie was doing his best to lose himself in the music and the feel of other bodies dancing against his, as were his orders.

There was a bottle blond dancing in front of him, she had to be underage but she moved like she was made of music. For the last few minutes, a pretty red-headed boy had danced behind him, moving against his ass. Charlie smiled and remembered fluid dynamics. Of course, he’d been younger then with only a few marks that could be easily explained away if they were ever noticed at all.

One song morphed into another. Charlie felt his hand rest on the hip of the blond and the redhead put a hand on his shoulder. The music pounded in a way that made him crave the open ocean in that boat well stocked with champagne and caviar and enough coke to make him believe he was normal for a few minutes. Of course he’d been young, and the brilliance and willingness made up for the lack of beauty then, and the young beautiful people got things like that.

A voice loomed out of the pounding music into his ear. “Come with me, Professor.” Charlie followed.

~

Colby locked the door of the bathroom stall and pinned Charlie against the narrow wall. “Did you see, Professor? Did you see how they were lined up to dance with you, to be with you? The young and beautiful.” Charlie sighed as Colby nuzzled his neck.
“It was dark. They couldn’t see the grays.”

“No, Professor, you’re one of them, you always will be. One of the young and the beautiful, they know that. You looked so sexy moving out there. So sexy knowing they all wanted you.” Charlie shook his head. “So sexy, they all wanted you but they can’t have you, can they?”

“No.” Charlie whispered.

“Say you’re mine.”

“I’m yours.”

“They all want you but you’re mine,” Colby nuzzled at Charlie’s neck. “You are so beautiful and you’re all mine.” Charlie sighed into Colby’s touch. “Turn around.”

Charlie turned around and braced himself against the wall. Colby reached around and gently pulled down the zipper of the jeans. Between the dancing and the plug Charlie had been painfully hard for a while, the jeans holding him in place. Charlie let out a grateful sigh as his erection finally sprung free. Colby pulled down his jeans to just below his ass. Charlie closed his eyes. There was the sound of a second zipper being lowered.

“You know I love the noises you make, Professor, but let’s try for quiet.”

Charlie nodded his head, not trusting his voice.

He felt the plug roughly removed and quickly replaced with Colby’s cock. “So beautiful. So perfect.” Colby whispered in his ear as he thrust in, rolling his hips in just that way that sent shocks of fire threw every inch of Charlie’s nerves.

Charlie began to pant.

“I’m going to leave my cum in you. I’m not putting that plug back. I’m going to zip you up with my cum leaking from you. They won’t be able to see it in the dark but they’ll smell it on you. Smell sex on you. They’ll want you even more but know you’re mine.”

Charlie wasn’t sure if he wanted to cum from the words Colby spoke roughly in his ear or the feel of Colby’s cock working in him in deep short strokes. Colby’s hand reached around, and with just a few short hard strokes Charlie came into Colby’s hand. Colby pulled out and was quickly back in with Charlie’s cum for extra lubrication. A few more strokes and he felt Colby shudder and pull out. A second later he was tucked back in and zipped up.

“Go back out and dance, Professor. I’ll be watching.”

~

Charlie closed his eyes, letting the pounding music flow through him. The blond had gone but the redhead stayed, not touching but moving in front, syncing his wild movements with Charlie’s. A tall, slim Asian boy had also danced up behind him several songs before. Charlie wondered how they must look from the tables scattered in the dark. The redhead had tried to lure him off the floor a few times but Charlie had stayed. His orders were to dance and he would dance as ordered.

A strong but familiar hand snatched his wrist and led him from the floor. The only word that was spoken was beautiful. Colby whispered it over and over in his ear as the stainless steel toilet wall cooled his face and Colby worked in him with deep hard strokes.
Charlie danced for another hour, he thinks, his limbs exhausted, his head spinning with noise and sex and movement. Almost driving out the numbers. So close to that. But no matter how tired, his body obeyed. His body was good at that even if his mind wasn’t.

The third time Colby pulled him from the floor it was into the cool night air and to the car. Charlie sank bonelessly into the passenger seat, taking no notice of the trip. Colby nearly carried him upstairs into the apartment and into the bathroom, then stripped him of his clothes in quick, practiced movements. Charlie stood blinking in front of the bathroom mirror under the sickly florescent lights. Cum, still sticky from sweat, stained his body that was flushed from heat then cold.

Colby stepped up behind Charlie and wrapped his arms around him.

“Charlie, can you see how beautiful you are? Can you understand why I’m so afraid to lose you?”

Charlie raised a hand and touched it to one of the thick scars that ran across his chest, a couple of silver hairs around it. The doctor had told him at the time the slight olive tone of his skin would mean the scarring would be that much worse. “No.” Charlie said.

Colby sighed and gently took Charlie’s hands in his. “You are so very, very beautiful and I’ll tell you that every day ‘till you believe it.”
The Taste of Cheep Champagne

Chapter Summary

Who though art shows could be so exciting?

Don stood outside the gallery bathroom, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“Hon? Sweetie? Are you okay?” he called gently. There was the sound of a toilet flushing and water running. Anne stumbled out.

“I’m fine. I’m down to dry heaves.”

“If you want to go home...”

Anne shook her head. “I have yet to do a show opening where I haven’t heaved my guts out.”

“It’ll be fine, the series is brilliant.”

“Oh what do you know, Don?” She groused.

“I know that anyone who tries to give you a bad review is going to get a surprise audit by the IRS.”

Anne laughed. “I knew there was a good reason to keep you around.”

“Come on. Let’s go meet your adoring fans.”

Don followed Anne out on to the gallery floor. Icarus Flew was hung about the room and bored-looking waiters wandered around with trays of midrange champagne and nibbles. Don looked around and quickly realized that these weren’t his people. He got the impression they weren’t really Anne’s either. The crowd looked to be mostly camp young men with more money than taste and bored-looking middle-aged women with real diamond earrings that probably listed volunteer work as their career.

“Well, here they are, Don.” Anne said softly. “The mindless gray masses that pay the bills.”

“I’ve never been in a crowd like this where I wasn’t about to arrest someone.” Don said softly. Anne chuckled. “Here comes the cavalry.”

The gallery door swung open and a group of people who didn’t quite fit the scene came in. Even though Don had made it very clear that no one was in any way shape or form required to attend the showing, everyone, even David, had agreed to come as back up. Though David had insisted on knowing first if there would be a risk of any nudes of Don. Don had assured him no.

Only Charlie and Megan really looked like they fit in. Charlie looked youngish, hip, and wealthy and Megan had just shimmied into a little black dress and that was all that was needed.

“Hey guys, thanks for coming.” Anne greeted approaching the group.

“You think we’d miss this?” Alan replied giving her a warm hug.
“I would if I could.” Anne said.

“In my experience all truly good painters want to avoid their own openings.” Said Larry. “That being said, my father loved his.”

“Well thank you all for being here as is. Grab some champagne before the art students steal it all.”

The group broke up and wandered around the gallery. Anne and Charlie quickly fell into conversation. That was something Don had consistently found odd over the last couple of months. Anne and Charlie had known each other at probably the lowest points of their lives, moments most people would do anything to forget and try to avoid any reminder of, and yet the two were able to chat pleasantly as if they had gone to college together or something.

Don looked around. Colby was standing in front of a particular painting. His hands were clasped politely behind his back but his shoulders were stiff. Don joined him. In the painting blood dripped down the arms of Icarus onto half built wings.

“I damn near had a heart attack first time I saw that one.” Don said quietly.

“It’s…well done.” Colby said tightly.

“I was supposed to be questioning her about a suspect, asked to see the art instead. When she pulled the cover off this one…”

“Yeah.” Both looked over their shoulder to where Anne and Charlie were now chatting with Larry. “Do you think somewhere in her head..?” Colby left the question hanging.

“I don’t know. Rather not know.”

Colby squinted at the little card next to the painting “$20,000!” he exclaimed quietly.

“Yeah. Well, the way it was explained to me the gallery only expects to sell two or three of them right off, then the rest go into their back catalog and they try to sell off maybe one a year. Then the gallery takes a cut, the agent gets a cut, Anne gets what’s left and ‘cause they’re oils it takes her maybe two years to put together a showing like this.”

“So not rolling in it?”

“Well no worse off than us. Just more of a feast or famine thing.”

There was a little jingle as the gallery door opened again. Four men in cheap suits came in. They weren’t FBI agent cheap or even plainclothes cop cheap, they were criminal cheap and Don could see the bulges they were trying to hide under the cheap jackets.

“Oh, you have got to be kidding me.” Don sighed.

Colby looked over and shook his head. Both of them casually walked towards Megan and David.

“You guys seein’ what I’m seein’?” David asked casually.

“Oh yeah.” Said Colby.

“Who’s packing?” Asked Don.

“I am,” said Colby to no one’s surprise.
“Same here.” said Megan. The three men looked at Megan with the obvious question of ‘where?’ on their minds.

“Stand back to back with me, Don. Look casual.”

Don maneuvered so he could take the gun from the small of Colby’s back without anyone seeing. Colby then dropped his gallery brochure and while he was picking it up slipped the small gun from his ankle and managed to palm it to David.

“So who’s got who?” David asked.

“I’ll take the bruiser.” Said Colby.

“I got the blond.” Said Don.

“I guess that leaves David and I with the brunets.” Megan said with a smile.

The four agents broke up tailing their prey. On his way across the gallery Don paused to whisper into Charlie’s ear. “Take Anne and Dad out front for a smoke. Don’t draw attention.”

Charlie gave a quick nod but said nothing. Don couldn’t help be a little proud that Charlie had finally learned to follow orders. Or perhaps he’d seen the same thing Don had.

Don kept moving, following his target towards the cheese plate.

~

Charlie stepped out into the warm night air. He had slipped his arm around Anne’s elbow to make sure she made it out and a few choice words to his Dad had made sure he followed. He wanted to grab Larry but had seen Megan send him off to the bathroom.

“What are we doing out here, Charlie?” Anne asked.

“Waiting for your show to get robbed.”

“What?” Alan said.

“Four guys walked in in really bad suits, were all packing, and they weren’t feds or cops. One guy it’s maybe a hired hit, four it’s a robbery.”

“We should call the cops.” Anne said.

“There are four very good, highly trained, FBI agents inside and I saw David sending a message so I’m willing to bet the cops are already on their way. Odds are in favor of Don and company.”

“I just hope no one starts shooting.” Alan said.

There was a loud pop and a scream and Charlie hit the cement dragging Anne and his father down with him.

“You had to jinx it, Alan?” Anne gasped out.

~

Don had his knee between the blond guy’s shoulder blades, Colby’s big ass gun pointed at the guys head. David, Megan, and Colby had their guys in similar positions.
“You so picked the wrong opening.” Don said with more than a little amusement. “Anyone bring cuffs?” He asked his fellow agents. Everyone shook their head.

“Sorry, Don.” Said Colby.

“You wore three guns to an art show and didn’t bring cuffs?”

“You didn’t even bring your gun.” Colby said as some sort of defense.

“I don’t want to draw down on a critic.”

A well dressed lady in her 60’s opened her purse and pulled out what appeared to be a set of police standard cuffs. “Will these help?” She asked sweetly.

Don took them, trying not to think to hard about things. “Yes, thank you.” He heard Megan snicker from the other side of the room.

“Um…we have some of those plastic cable ties, we sometime use them to hang heavy pieces?” The gallery manager provided.

“That would be great, thank you.”

By the time the cops arrived, the four suspects were more or less tied up. Don poked his head outside to wave Anne, Charlie and his Dad back in.

“Everything okay?” Alan asked.

“Yeah. One guy got trigger happy, a bit of drywall took the worst of it.”

“The paintings..?” Anne began.

“Are fine. Not a scratch.” Anne let out a long breath.

Charlie shook his head. “Really, Don, we dress you up and we can’t take you anywhere. Just have to arrest someone.”

“Hey, it wasn’t my date that was packing tonight.”

“Just ‘cause you’re paranoid, Don.” Charlie said with a smile.

Inside David was giving a quick rundown to LAPD.

“You sure the feds don’t want this one?” The cop asked.

“Yeah. We’re just here on a social thing.” The cop raised an eyebrow. “Boss’s girlfriend is the artist.”

“I get it. Here under orders?”

“Nah, he’s cool. So’s she. But happy boss’s girlfriend means happy boss means work weeks less than a hundred hours.”

“I hear you,” said the cop. “We’ll book them on attempted robbery, attempted aggravated assault, weapons charges, smelling bad, and we’ll probably be able to link them to some unsolved.”

“Seemed a pretty amateur crew.” David said with a shake of the head. “Pros aren’t that twitchy.”
Anne was taking deep breaths in-between swings of champagne. “Take it easy. You’ll make yourself sick.” Don advised.

Anne shook her head. “Little too much adrenaline for one night, Don.”

Don chuckled. “Ah, that wasn’t even a blip.”

“Don,” Anne said softly just within Don’s hearing range. “As soon as we can get out of here I’m going to need you to drive me home and fuck my brains out for the next 48 hours.”

Don gave a smile. “Well I’m not as young as I used to be but I’ll see what I can manage for my favorite neo-Pre-Raphaelite.”

Don let the warm steam of the coffee curl around his face as he hunched over his cup. His body was still sending highly conflicting signals and it was making his brain twitch. On the one hand 48 hours of raw, kinky, uninhibited, animalistic, acrobatic, non-stop sex was something he could get behind, in theory, in practice every inch of his body was telling him he was no longer twenty-two and a large part of his brain just wanted to curl into a fetal position in a dark room and whimper for a while.

And it’s not like he hadn’t been warned. Anne had warned him, Anne’s best friend Sasha had warned him, Anne’s agent had warned him, not one but two of Anne’s exes had warned him. Oh yes he had been thoroughly warned and given just about every opportunity to back out. The extra adrenaline of gunfire at the show only seemed to have added to the aftermath of months of pre-show stress and panic.

“Holy shit, what happened to you, Don?” David asked entering the break room with Megan and Colby behind.

Don closed his eyes and tried to crawl into his coffee. “Don’t ask.”

“You look shattered, man.”

“I said don’t ask.”

“I think rode hard and put away wet is the definition you’re looking for.” Don gave Megan his look of death. He must have been tired because it didn’t seem to be working. He felt Megan pull down the back of his collar. “What I want to know is how you got a hicky there?” She said looking down his back. Don waved Megan away like a fly.

“I’m wondering more about those bruises.” David said prompting Don to yank down the cuffs of his shirt a little further.

“Now Don, you did have the safe word discussion first, right?” Colby asked.

“You all want a week on your desks?” Don finally snapped. David and Megan put up their hands in surrender and left. Colby hung around. After a minute he sat down across from Don and carefully rolled up his sleeve.

“What are you doing, Granger?” Don asked, too tired to really fight.
“Just checking to see what kind of bruises they are.”

“Granger.”

“Hush.”

“I’m not my brother.”

“Yes, he’s cuter and has almost learned to say when.” Don tried his look of death again. Again it didn’t work. “Come down to the locker room I’ve got some stuff that’ll fix you up.”

“I’m fine.”

“Did she break skin?”

Don blinked a few times. “I’m not sure, it’s kinda one big…”

“Right, locker room or a doctor’s office, your choice?” Don looked at Colby and realized that, boss or not, he wasn’t really being given an option. Don stood up, wincing as every muscle protested. “First word of advice, Don, if you’re going to make a habit out of this, yoga.”

~

Don sat hard on the end of the long bench in the locker room, which was thankfully empty. He really wished he had his cup of coffee back to try to crawl into.

“Come on Don, strip.” Colby said.

“This is sexual harassment.”

“Only if one of us gets off on it and it’s not going to be me.”

Don though for a moment. “I think I should be insulted.”

“Shirt. Off.” Colby ordered.

Don peeled off his shirt wincing at every move and bypassing the argument his jeans as well. The loosest pair he owned.

“Shit, Don.” Colby sighed. “Did at any point you consider the words ‘no’ or ‘stop’?”

“No.”

Colby shook his head. “Maybe it’s genetic.”

“Well, I was warned.”

“You were?” Colby said, not sounding like he believed it.

“Yes, by…five people. Including two of her exes.”

Colby shook his head again, looking Don over. “No cuffs, bands or ligature marks. Shit, that’s all teeth and fingers and rug burn.”

“Oh, you’re one to talk.” Don groused.

“Looks like she broke skin on your back.” Don tried to look over his shoulder but his neck was
unfortunately stiff. “I’ll get them.” Colby took the top off a tube of antibiotic cream and started
dabbing it on Don’s back. Don hissed. “Can you feel where she got you now?”

“Oh yeah.” Don said through clenched teeth.

“Really, Don, voice of experience here. You really need to have conversations before
nights like that.”

“Didn’t know what I was getting into.”

“Well, she should have warned you.”

“She did. Didn’t believe it. Thought I could handle it.” Don said tightly.

Colby finished applying to wound cream without comment before opening up a large jar of green
liquid. The smell of high proof alcohol and something weird hit his nose.

“Granger, what the hell is that stuff?”

“No idea.” He said dipping a cotton ball in it. Don shifted away. “Charlie has some witch doctor
brew the stuff up, no clue what’s in it but it’ll make those bruises heal twice as fast.” Don looked
at Colby and shifted further away. “You can ask David, I gave him some last time he caught a slug
in the vest, swears the bruise was gone in a week and the pain was seriously lessened.”

Don tried for his look of death one more time then gave in. “Fine, whatever.”

Colby started rubbing the stuff in where ever he could find a bruise or a hickie starting from the
neck down. The stuff soaked in quickly and Don had to admit that he was starting to feel better.

“Why do you keep that stuff in your locker?” Don asked. Colby paused and pushed up a sleeve
reviling an impressive collection of finger bruises. “Huh. For some reason I thought things went
the other way around.”

Colby gave a chuckle. “Charlie’s a masochist, not a submissive, not really. One gets him the other
but he can flip around on a dime.”

“Really?” Don said. Not that he’d never seen Charlie act dominate ‘You’re my brother and I love
you. Do you consent?’ He really just couldn’t picture Charlie being the aggressor with Colby. Then
again… Don looked at himself in the mirror.

“We were out dancing a month back…” Colby said.

“You dance?” Don said cutting in.

“No, Charlie dances. He was taking a break and this kid followed him off the dance floor back to
our booth. And I mean kid, no way he was old enough to be in there. Anyways he tries to
proposition Charlie, with me sitting right there and Charlie just shifts around and gives this kid a
look and the kid drops right to his knees right there and it wasn’t that kind of club, Don really.
Charlie looks this kid over like a side of meat, shakes his head, the kid gets up and wanders off and
by the end of the night I looked like you.”

“And the word ‘no’ never crossed your mind?”

Colby gave a bit of a grin. “I’m used to it.”

Don looked himself in the mirror again. He raised his arms so Colby could get to the finger
bruises on his sides. “Why do I feel like I have the words ‘property of Anne Finnegan’ written across my chest?” Don asked.

“‘Cause you do,” Colby said with a chuckle. “In great big letters for anyone who knows how to read them.”

Don gave a snort. “On some odd level I don’t think I mind.”

“Yeah, I know.” Don looked at Colby and kinda got something but was too tired for a full blown revelation. “How long before her next show?” Colby asked.

“Two years. I should be recovered by then.”

“I don’t know.” Colby said with a shake of his head. “You’ll be two years older.”

“Yeah, but so will she.”

Colby gave another chuckle. “At least tell me you got breakfast out of all this.”

Don smiled. “Yep, pancakes. I love pancakes. And she makes them so well.”

Colby gave a full out laugh. “Ask her if she’s willing to give lessons, I’m always burning mine.”
The Taste of Lipstick, Fear and Chicken Wings

Chapter Summary

Alan gets a date.

Don looked at his brother and saw a twitch. “Fold.”

Don looked at David. “I’m out.”

“Same.” said Megan.

“I’m out.” said Colby.

“Ah, come on guys.” Charlie whined. “It’s no fun if you don’t play.”

“You mean it’s no fun if we don’t cough up our hard earned cash against whatever insane hand you’ve got.” David said.

“What makes you think I’ve got an insane hand?”

“We all know your tells by now, buddy.” Don informed him with a smirk.

“I do not have tells.” Charlie claimed in his defense.

“Um...yeah, you do.” Megan said shuffling the cards.

“Hey Charlie, what time did Dad say he’d be back? It’s almost midnight.” Don asked, looking at the clock.

Charlie shrugged. “I don’t know. He said a movie then dinner.”

“Maybe it’s going well.” David pointed out.

“I’d call, but I’m not sure if guy code applies to my own father.” Don said.

“It applies.” Colby and David said in unison.

“I’ll give him another half hour.”

Megan dealt the cards. Don was contemplating how much he was willing to bluff on a crap hand when the front door opened.

“Hey, Dad, that you?” Don called out.

“No it’s the ghost of Franz Kafka.” Alan called back before coming into the dinning room.

“Hey, Dad,” said Charlie, not looking up from his hand.

“Hey Mr. Eppes.” Greeted Megan and David.

“So dad, how’d it go?” Don asked.
“It went well.” Alan said with a nod.

“Midnight is well?” Don prodded.

“Kathryn’s a very interesting women. We had a lot to talk about.”

“Seeing her again?” Charlie asked.

“We’re having lunch on Monday.”

Don gave his dad a little punch in the arm. “Not bad.”

“Um...Alan?” Megan said. “You might want to fix the buttons on your shirt.”

Don lowered his gaze and realized that the buttons on his father’s shirt were off by one. His jaw dropped.

“Dad!”

“What?”

Charlie made some tasking noises. “Putting out on a first date.”

“Taking hints from Don’s playbook?” Colby joked.

“Watch it, Granger.” growled Don.

“Nah, if he was taking tips from Don’s book he wouldn’t have a second date.” Charlie said.

“Good point.” Said Alan

“Hey!”

“Still, I mean really dad, what message are you sending?” Charlie asked.

Alan set his chin proudly. “That I’m too old to be virtuous.” And with that he snagged the last of the chicken wings off the table and walked out.

Megan shook her head. “The Eppes charm strikes again. Why there’s not a dozen mini Eppes running around I’ll never know.”

“Thigh holsters.” said Charlie. “I’m sure they lower sperm count.” Don choked on his beer, sending it up his nose. The rest of the table made faces.

“Thanks, Charlie.” whined David. “Now every time we’re on an operation I’m going to be wondering about Don’s sperm count.”

Don used a napkin to soak up the beer dripping from his nose. “There’s nothing wrong with my sperm count.” he defended.

“You’ve checked lately?” asked Charlie.

“No!”

“I don’t know, Don,” Charlie shook his head “You wore awfully tight jeans in the 80’s. I’ve got pictures.”
“So did everyone else and the human race is still here, and you’re one to talk.”

“Kinda a moot point for me.”

“Hey, Colby might want kids.”

“Well he can carry them, I’m not doing that to my figure,” Don rolled his eyes. The rest of the table laughed as Charlie preened with extra camp.

“Charlie.” Colby said fairly seriously. “You do know Ian’s going to kill you, right?”

Charlie gave a dismissive wave. “It’ll be fine.”

“Wait, what’s Ian got to do with anything?” Don asked.

Colby looked at him. “Do you know who your dad just scored with?”

“Some woman Charlie set him up with?” Don looked at his brother, who was suddenly fascinated with the salt crystals on the pretzels.

“Oh yeah, some woman being the much loved mother of your favorite slightly psychotic sniper and mine.” Every head swiveled to face Charlie.

“You set your dad up with Edgerton’s mother?” Megan asked sounding slightly horrified.

Don put his head in his hands. “Fuck. This one’s all on you, buddy. I mean, I can loan you a vest but he can do a head shot easy as anything, I mean, you’re screwed.”

“He has a mother?” David asked.

Charlie looked annoyed. “No, David, he sprang fully formed from a CIA cloning vat, it was the one next to mine.”

“That I would believe.” said David.

“It’ll be fine, Don,” said Charlie picking up his cards again. “Now who’s got the first bet?”

~

David was huddled with Don, Charlie and Colby going over some offshore money transfer reports when a voice hissed across the office.

“Charles Edwards Eppes!” David looked over his shoulder. Ian Edgerton stood there with insane fire in his eyes.

“Fuck.” Charlie said. David turned around and Charlie was already springing for the stairs at not inconsiderable speed. Ian blew past hot on Charlie’s tail and Don and Colby sprinted to follow.

David looked at Megan. “Who’ve you got your money on?”

“Well Charlie’s got backup.”

“Yeah but this is over someone’s mother.” David pointed out.

“I’ll get my black suit dry cleaned.”

“Hey!” An agent by the windows shouted, waving everyone over.
Everyone rushed to the windows. Ian had caught Charlie and had him by the lapels bent backwards over one of the rails with a not inconsiderable drop below. Charlie seemed to be frantically trying to talk his way out of an early grave.

“Who’s got a scope?” Megan handed a retracting one over. David looked through it in time to see Don and Colby arrive. It took the two of them to pry Ian’s hands off Charlie. Ian was held firm by Granger’s not inconsiderable bulk but David had a sneaky suspicion Ian could probably drop Colby like a brick if he really wanted to.

“Shit, I wish I could read lips.” said David. Charlie looked like he was in lecture mode obviously trying to justify his actions. And Ian appeared to be reciting the Riot Act in return.

Megan tapped David on the shoulder. “Heads up.”

David looked away from the scope. Coming across the walkway, unnoticed by the four men was Alan Eppes, his arm hooked around the arm of an older woman about his height. The woman had a long silver braid tossed over one shoulder. David looked back through the scope. The woman also had a slightly aged but very recognizable face. The woman said something. Ian actually jumped straight out of Colby’s grip.

“Oh!” David said. “That had to have been the full name. Nothing else on earth makes a man jump like that.”

Megan cringed. “I can’t read lips but ten to one Ian’s getting spanked down there.” Ian’s shoulders had hunched, Don and Colby looked equally uncomfortable, while Charlie just seemed to be trying to keep out of Ian’s field of vision.

Once the woman had wound down Alan appeared to make introductions. Don and Colby both politely shook her hand. Charlie bowed gallantly at the waist and put a kiss on her hand.

“Fuck! Did any one know Charlie was working on a death wish?” David asked the room.

“I’ll talk to him about it.” Megan said.

There was some more discussion on the walkway. The three agents and Charlie all shook their heads and made vague gestures towards the building.

“That would be the lunch invite followed by no, no, big case, much work.” Megan translated from body language. There was some more discussion and some uncomfortable looks and nods between the younger men. “And that would be, we should have dinner at the house. Great idea, that would be lovely and everyone thinking ‘dear god I hope there’s a call out.’”

There was another round of handshakes, some hard looks from parents to their respective children, Colby even picking up one from Alan, and a hasty retreat was made by three hard-boiled FBI agents and a fairly tough mathematician.

By the time the elevator door opened letting out Charlie, Colby, Don and Ian, David was back at his desk and the entire office was behaving like nothing had happened.

~

Don had always wondered what kind of family could produce a man like Ian Edgerton. His money had always been on wolves, or maybe ninjas. It turns out the answer was hippies, or rather hippie, singular. Kathryn Edgerton- never-married, semi-retired, chronically impoverished, art teacher from the backwoods of Sonoma. Don had no idea that Sonoma even had backwoods.
He looked carefully at the woman his father was making eyes at. She was obviously younger than
his Dad and still very good looking but Ian was older than Don, which meant she must have had
him young.

Everyone, including Ian, had been trying to avoid this dinner, but after several weeks there was an
unfortunate evening off work that no one could get out of.

Don realized that this night would be worth it if for no other reason than to watch Ian squirm in
abject embarrassment.

“Mom, it was a commune. Everything was made of hemp and we had to ask the chickens’
permission before taking the eggs.”

“Just because they’re chickens is no reason to have bad manners.”

“I still have scars on my ankles from those vicious little things. I was never so glad to move out of
anywhere.”

Don shoved a large spoonful of mashed potatoes in his mouth to try to muffle the giggles.

Colby had put on a completely blank ‘resisting interrogation’ face that made him look a little brain
dead. Charlie had casually wrapped a finger around a chunk of hair and was pulling hard and Colby
was letting him get away with it, since it was in aid of the cause of not laughing at the realization
that Ian Mayweather Edgerton was a complete mama’s boy. Yes, Ian called home every week,
even in the mountains of Afghanistan or the jungles of South America.

Don had squirmed a bit under the look from his father. He didn’t have to be a mind reader to know
what his dad was thinking. ‘He can call from Afghanistan and you couldn’t call from Tennessee?’

“I thought you liked it there?” Kathryn Edgerton continued. “You had some friends.”

“I had Emily Mikeus who like to pull my hair and drop spiders down my shirt.”

“I don’t know, Ian,” Don said. “That sounds like love to me.”

“If that’s your idea of love, Eppes, your track record suddenly makes a lot more sense.”

“Hey, I’m up to seven months with Anne!” Don defended himself.

“He’s close to a personal best,” Charlie added.

“I wouldn’t throw stones, Ian.” Kathryn said. “When was your last date?”

“Mom...” Ian objected.

“I mean, I have long given up the thought of grandchildren.”

Alan snorted. “Tell me about it.”

“...but I’d feel so much better if you’d just find someone nice. I mean, I wouldn’t worry as much.”
Don though he might have a stroke if he didn’t laugh soon. “I mean, what happened to that nice
girl, Mindy?”

Ian sighed. “That was in college, mom, and I was more in love with her car.”

“Nice car?” Colby asked.
"'64 Mustang, mint condition, dark red."

"Nice."

"Very."

"Well what about, oh, what was his name? Darin?"

Ian buried his face in his hand. Don ran his junior year batting stats in his head in a desperate attempt to keep his face neutral at the information that Ian was apparently playing both sides of the field.

"Danny," Ian mumbled out from under his hand. "And he’s a househusband with five kids."

"And not a one of them is yours."

Ian let out a soft groan of pain. "That was decades ago, mom."

"Well, if I have to go back that far, then it’s been too long."

Don’s phone rang. "Eppes." He answered, quickly excusing himself to the kitchen. Don sighed at what the voice on the other end of the phone was telling him. He hung up and went back out to the dining room. At least he’d get the credit for rescuing Ian.

"Oh no," said Alan. "I know that look."

Don shrugged. "Sorry guys, we’ve got another one. Mendez by the looks of it."

"What?" complained Charlie. "He’s not due for another two weeks."

"He’s broken pattern. I need everyone up there, even you, Ian." Ian, Colby and Charlie got up from the table. "Sorry, Dad."

"I know, I know, duty calls."

"Save us some pudding?"

"Sure."

Everyone made polite goodnights and the four men headed out the door. Before they could get in their cars, Ian paused on the front porch.

"Gentlemen. Just in case you’ve forgotten, I can kill anyone, anywhere, at any time."

Don smiled. "I promise you, Ian, that thought will never slip my mind."
Ian watched as Don and Colby fidgeted about the war room. There were a dozen DEA agents in there, along with Megan, David, and a handful of others, including the head of FBI SWAT, and Lt. Walker. Everyone was looking at their watches.

“Where the hell is Charlie?” Don asked.

“His phone’s going straight to messages. I’ve tried three times.” Colby said.

“Well try again. Ten more minutes and I’m sending in search and rescue.”

“I’m sure he’s just stuck in traffic or his phone died.” Megan said calmly but her body language read worried to Ian’s eyes.

“If he used his panic button I’m sure we would have heard by now.” Colby said, sounding more like he was trying to reassure himself.

“He’s got a panic button?” Walker asked.

“NSA makes him carry it.”

“I’m sure he’s just stuck in traffic. I mean, look at the weather.” Megan said, gesturing to the windows. Rain pelted against the windows, coming down at a sharp angle in a freak summer storm.

“Well, traffic or not, he should be answering his phone.” Don groused.

The door to the war room was suddenly yanked open and Charlie stalked in.

“Charlie, what the hell...” Don started.

“Don’t.” Charlie cut off his brother with a snap.

Ian looked Charlie over and quickly decided the man looked terrible. He was soaked to the bone and his suit was covered in dirty streaks and torn in places. He had a scrape high on one cheek, was carrying a stack of muddy papers in his arms and was moving with an obvious limp. Colby was quickly on his feet, trying to fuss with Charlie, but Charlie was just shooing him away.

“We tried calling...” Don started again. Charlie yanked something out of a pocket and threw it at Don. It was the shattered remains of a cell phone.

“My apologies for being late.” Charlie said tightly as a DEA agent handed him a cup of coffee. “I was struck by a vehicle, capping off a very bad day.”
“What!” Colby exclaimed. “We need to take you to a hospital…”

“I need to brief, we are on a time limit!” Charlie snapped, causing Colby to jump back a bit. Ian raised an eyebrow.

‘The little professor’s got a nasty bark when he wants to.’

Charlie slammed down a stack of muddy papers in front of Don. On top was a math journal. The lead story, ‘Challenging the Eppes Theorem by Dr. Frank Fendworth and Dr. Amita Ramanujan,’ was splashed across the cover in big bold letters. Charlie stalked to the front of the war room.

“Hey, Don.” Ian whispered. “Isn’t that…” he pointed to the name on the cover.

“The Ex.” Don said softly.

“Shit.” said Walker, summing things up.

At the front of the room Charlie looked at the empty whiteboard.

“You’ll all have to forgive me, I’m going to be doing this from memory, as my laptop is currently resting in pieces in the wheel rim of a Mercedes.” Ian glanced over at Colby, who looked nothing more like he just wanted to bundle Charlie up and carry him out of there.

Charlie pulled the cap off a pen and began to write. He managed to get one number down on the board before the pen went dry.

“And this is why I like chalk,” Charlie said, barely loud enough for the room to hear. The pen was flung across the room with not inconsiderable force and another one was picked up.

Charlie began to brief. It was one of those cases that was so complicated the math was the only way of sorting everything out. It was a huge mess between rival gangs, an ex-army sniper working as an enforcer, some huge drug shipments and a steadily escalating body count.

Ian watched as the math became more and more complicated and the analogies became more and more obtuse. He looked at the other agents, expecting glazed expressions. To his surprise, they seemed to be keeping up, even the DEA agents, many of whom were copying Charlie’s equations diligently into notepads as if they were in a class.

Suddenly something caught Ian’s eye. He nudged Don and pointed to Charlie’s feet. There was a pool of water at Charlie’s feet where he’d been dripping. The pool was slowly becoming pink.

“Shit.” Don whispered harshly.

Charlie waved an arm to make a point. A couple of drops of blood flew from under his sleeve and splashed on the whiteboard. Charlie didn’t seem to notice but everyone else in the room did.

“We’ve got to get him out of here, Don.” Colby whispered harshly under his breath. Charlie was still lecturing, but at the same time he was beginning to shiver. Ian glanced up. The air-conditioner was blowing down right on Charlie’s sopping wet head and since it was technically still summer it was blowing cold air.

“Charlie!” Don cut in. “I think we’ve got it.”

Charlie shook his head. “No. You can’t mess this up. This has got to be right.” Charlie said.

“We understand, Professor Eppes.” said one of the older DEA agents “We’ll get the guys.”
Charlie shook his head again but this time as if he was trying to clear it. “You don’t understand. All of you. I have been drip feeding all of you the best mathematics education for years now. Most of you could audit my introductory classes with just a little extra prep. You all understand this because I’ve been teaching you to understand it. I cannot explain this to a jury. You have got to get these guys in the act and you’ve got to get them tonight or they’re gone! No lawyer or judge would give me time to explain this and L.A juries are notoriously moronic! You have to get them in the act!” Charlie was panting like he was running a marathon.

Ian didn’t need advanced medical training to recognize shock and first stage hypothermia when it was standing in front of him.

“Charlie!” he said. “We’ve got it. We’ll get them all.”

Charlie nodded. “Okay. Okay. I think...I think I’ll go home.” Charlie turned to head for the door but missed and slammed his thigh into the edge of a table, sending him sprawling with a curse.

Several agents were quickly on their feet, helping Charlie up and pressing him into Colby’s arms. The last of the fight seemed to leave Charlie as he slumped against Colby.

“Don, I’ll take him downstairs and to the ER if we need to.”

Charlie shook his head. “No hospitals,” he slurred out as if drunk. “I hate hospitals.”

Colby half-dragged, half-carried Charlie out of the room. Don obviously wanted to follow.

“I’ll give Granger a hand,” Ian offered and got a quick nod from Don. Ian already knew what his role in that night’s mess was going to be.

“Okay, people,” Don said. “Let’s go over this game plan one more time. See if we can’t make Charlie’s day any better.”

Ian took long strides to catch up with Granger and Charlie. Granger was barely managing to keep Charlie on his feet as they waited for the elevator. Ian noted the looks going their direction from the office. Concern, questions, a little anger. Someone had injured one of their alphas and it wasn’t the first time either. Ian went up to Charlie’s free side and propped him up. He could feel Charlie shivering and hear teeth chatter. Colby sent him a quick look that was both questioning and grateful but nothing was said. They got Charlie into the elevator where he quickly slumped to the floor.

By the time they got to the shower room, Colby just picked up Charlie in his arms. Without comment, Ian helped Colby strip Charlie to his shorts and began assessing the damage. Charlie had a livid bruise coming up on the outside of one thigh and multiple abrasions along the other side of his body, including a deep cut that was sending a trickle of blood down one leg and another that was dripping down his arm. You didn’t have to be a trained accident investigator to tell that Charlie had been hit and sent flying. Ian tried to focus on the fresh injuries instead of the old ones. They were a bit of a shock though. He had been told that Charlie had been injured when he was kidnapped but no one had bothered to mention just how messed up he’d gotten.

“Charlie, why the fuck didn’t you wait for an ambulance?!” Colby finally snapped.

“Had to brief. No one else.” Charlie mumbled as if he was about to doze off.

“Come on, Professor, stay awake.” Ian said.

“Okay. Let’s get you warmed up.” Colby said and picked Charlie back up, depositing him on the
floor of one of the deeper stalls with a flexible shower head. Colby turned the water on warm and pointed it at Charlie’s chest. Charlie yelped and tried to scurry out of the way. He was breathing hard again but Ian could see the color quickly flood back into pasty cheeks. Charlie shook his head a few times as the blood obviously crept back up to his brain as well. Charlie reached out a hand and Colby gave him the shower sprayer. Charlie leaned against the tiled wall of the stall and held the sprayer about an inch from the top of his head. He closed his eyes and sighed.

“Warming up?” Colby asked gently. Charlie gave a slow nod and made a soft sound that could have been a cry or a laugh. Ian did his best not to watch but he wanted to be ready in case the sudden shift in temperature caused Charlie to pass out. The water did unfortunately plaster down Charlie’s boxers and Ian quickly discovered why Charlie was immune to short jokes. Charlie cracked open one eye and looked at Ian.

“See something you like, Agent Edgerton?” Charlie asked lightly. Colby’s head spun around with much the same question in his eyes and a good deal more threat as well.

“I prefer my boys less bloodied. Call me picky.”

Charlie gave a light chuckle and closed his eyes again.

“Now see, these are the kind of things that get the Bureau stuck in sexual harassment law suits.” Don said behind them.

Ian whipped around, more than a little annoyed that he had somehow managed to miss Don’s approach, given the vast echoing room. Charlie gave his brother the finger with a free hand.

“Shit, Charlie, you look like hell,” Don said.

“Kinda feel like it.”

“Don, could you grab some towels and the first aid kit?” Colby asked.

“No problem.” Don was back a minute later with a stack of large towels and an industrial first aid kit. “So who hit you?” Don asked as Colby started to towel Charlie dry.

“The 15 and a half year old daughter of one of CalSci’s biggest private donors. The guy practically funds Larry’s research single-handedly.”

Colby peeled off Charlie’s shorts, wrapped a towel around his waist and draped another across his shoulders.

“Did you call an ambulance?” Don asked.

“No time.”

Don rolled his eyes “You just can’t leave the scene of an accident, Charlie. Even if you’re the victim.”

“The family lawyer is also the family driving instructor. Apparently Daddy doesn’t have a lot of faith in his little angel’s ability to use a turn signal. I settled on the scene for eighty thousand and drove here.”

“You drove?” Colby exclaimed.

“Colby, please,” Charlie begged with a whimper. “I’ve had a bad day.”
“The ex?” Ian asked as Charlie let himself be led to a bench, where he and Colby started poking at Charlie for internal injuries. Charlie rolled his eyes and gritted his teeth.

“The Fendworth-Ramanujan theorem.” Charlie spat out with not inconsiderable venom. “Who’d want to study the Fendworth-Ramanujan theorem? It takes five minutes just to figure out how to spell it! Eppes theorem. It’s short, friendly, to the point and it’s fucking mine. Not that anyone cares about the math. Oh no. Every fucking message board is about how I’m a raving queen and Amita left me when she caught me in one of her dresses and I haven’t published anything in months because I’ve joined a secret sex cult or I’m letting the government experiment on my brain and apparently I’m sleeping with everything male within reach up through and including Don!” Charlie finished with a growl through clenched teeth, tugging at his own hair in raw frustration.

“Don’t pull your hair.” Colby chided gently.

Charlie let go but didn’t let up on the rant. “And I got told all my classes are being rescheduled for next semester, and I got de-prioritized on the supercomputer, and someone in the staff room though it would be cute to switch my coffee out for decaf so I’ve got a headache and I didn’t get any sleep last night because Dad decided to find god. Loudly. Four times.”

“Put your arms up.” said Colby.

Ian watched as Charlie’s arms went into the air, twisted around and clasped together. He swallowed a little. He could almost see invisible chains holding Charlie’s arms that way. Colby began to carefully check over every rib.

“Four times?” Don asked, sounding a little horrified.

Ian gave a snort and got a disturbed look from Don. “Hey, I know my mother. I’m completely immune to that particular trauma by now.

“I’m not!” said Charlie.

“Hey, you’re the one that set him up.” Don pointed out.

“So he’d get out of the house. Out. On loooooong weekends.” Charlie said with a half sob.


“Oh. Right.”

Ian had been watching Colby go over Charlie’s ribs but so far everything had seemed fine. Colby started again and this time Charlie obviously remembered to wince at the right moments.

“Neat trick.” Ian said watching Charlie’s face.

“Don’t encourage him.” Colby said darkly under his breath.

Ian had been working on dabbing iodine on Charlie’s scrapes from the feet up. Ian realized Charlie hadn’t reacted to the sting of that either.

“You’ve cracked two.” Announced Colby with obvious annoyance.

“Hey, not my fault this time.” Charlie said firmly.

‘This time?’ thought Ian with some trepidation. ‘What the hell had the professor been up to?’
“You could have gone to a hospital.”

“I hate hospitals.”

“So do I.”

“I had to brief.”

“We could have moved it there if need be.” Charlie just gave Colby an irritated look as rebuttal. “Arms down.” Colby said.

Charlie’s arms dropped, freed from their invisible chains.

“Hey, Charlie, can you fix the Eppes theorem?” Don asked.

Charlie rolled his eyes. “It doesn’t need to be fixed. There’s nothing wrong with it, it’s just a little loose and sloppy in places. I mean, I was 19 and was trying to use it to get my doctoral adviser into bed.” Don shook his head. “I need maybe two weeks to clean it up but I’ve got ten other things on right now and they’re all going wrong and...”

“You’re off cases.” said Don.

“What?” Charlie and Colby both snapped, eerily in sync.

“Take two weeks off, fix the Eppes theorem. Right now it’s the only thing that carries the family name that’s likely to outlive us.”

“Don...” Charlie started to object.

“I’m serious. When I’m a hundred and two and in the old agents’ home I want some young volunteer to look at my chart and go ‘Eppes? Any connection to the Eppes theorem?’ and I will go ‘yes, that was all my brother’, unless of course it’s a really cute young blonde volunteer, then I might need to take credit myself.”

Charlie laughed, then winced. Ian had managed to work his way up Charlie’s legs while Colby wrapped Charlie’s ribs with surprising efficiency.

“Um, Professor...which pocket was your cell phone in?” Ian asked.

“My right.”

“I think you’ve got a bit stuck in your leg.”

“Well, pull it out.” Charlie said with a sigh.

“It’s in pretty deep.”

Charlie reached into the first aid kit and grabbed out a pair of long tweezers and handed them to Ian.

“Your hands are probably steadier than most doctors. Go for it.”

Ian looked at Colby. Colby gave him a ‘go ahead’ nod. Charlie closed his eyes and seemed to go somewhere else. Ian dove into a dark wound and pulled out a piece of black plastic. Blood oozed out after it. Ian quickly slapped a large chunk of gauze over the wound.
“That’ll probably need stitches.”

Charlie shook his head. “Just wrap it tight. It’ll be fine.”

Ian set about wrapping long strips of gauze around Charlie’s leg while Don cleaned and bandaged the cuts on Charlie’s arms.

“Hey, Charlie?” Don asked gently. “Did you mean what you said about auditing your classes?”

“Yep. You’d probably need a semester of high school level calculus. After that...you’re all really solid on the conceptual level it would just require catching you up on the arithmetic. Why, planning a career change?”

“No, just noticed a lot of the DEA taking notes.” Don said, amusement in his voice.

Charlie smirked. “Don’t be a federal snob, Don. Lt. Garcia gives his agents time off to attend my lectures.”

“Really?” Don said, not sounding like he believed it.

“Yep. Agent Lewis has even entered a part-time degree program. She’s got a real head for stats.”

“Who knew? Math and the DEA.”

“They are seriously embracing some of my work, Don.” Charlie said as if it were a threat.

“That’s not all they want to embrace.” Colby mumbled under his breath.

“Really, if you weren’t my brother I might have jumped ship by now.”

“I’ll consider myself warned.”

Colby helped Charlie pull an oversized t-shirt over his head. Ian looked at Charlie, swimming in an FBI t-shirt that was three sizes too big, and realized where the sparrow he remembered had gone off to. It had become the keeper of Charlie’s pain and black moods.

“I’m serious about you being off cases.” Don said. “I know you, Chuck, if you let this sit it’s just gonna gnaw at you. Amita just threw down, you know? You need to show her you’re still on your game.”

Charlie gave a tired chuckle and pulled his legs gingerly into a pair of Don’s sweat pants. “I’ll fix the theorem if you get these guys tonight.”

“We’ll have them wrapped up with a bow and in holding by morning. And if you ever drive injured again I will shoot you myself.”

Charlie held up two fingers. “Promise. Mathematician’s honor.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll drive him home.” said Colby.

“Thanks.” Don said, and ruffled his brother’s hair before leaving.
The Feel of Hope

Chapter Summary

Don has a secret and needs a favor.

“Don?”
Don looked up from the table. Anne had something clutched in her hand.

“Don, can we talk?”

~

“Charlie, can we talk? I mean, are you at a place where we can really talk?” Charlie turned around from the board.

“Sure, I’m basically doodling.” Charlie finished off an equation, peered at it, then put his chalk down. “What is it, Don?”

Don paced around for a moment, then sat down, jumped back up and ran his hands along his jeans, wiping away sweat.

“I...ah.” Don paced some more. Charlie rolled his eyes and grabbed Don by the arms, forcing him to hold still.

“Don?”

“I need...I need to tell you something and I need you to keep it secret, I mean big secret, not even Colby, I need you to be willing to spill NSA shit before this.”

“Okay.” Charlie said carefully.

“And...and I’m going to need a favor.” Don stuttered out.

“Don, if you’re in trouble...”
Don shook his head. “No, no...I mean, there’s a thing, but...”

“What is it, Don?”

“Anne’s pregnant.” Don said softly, then felt himself yanked to Charlie in a bone-crushing hug.

“Do you need the house?” Charlie asked.

“What?”

“It’s a family house, it should have a family in it, I just bought it ‘cause I’m bad with change, but I can get a condo or something.”

“No, no, Charlie...it’s not...we might not...” Don felt a knot in his throat trying to cut off his air. He
pulled himself away from his brother. “There are problems.”

“What kind of problems?” Charlie asked quickly.

“The doctors say, they say there’s damage, Anne has damage. They’re not sure how long she’ll be able to carry. We just passed 12 weeks but the doctors say...the odds are...they’re telling us don’t bother telling anyone unless we make it past five months and not to bother making any plans unless we get to seven and the odds aren’t good, and...”

Charlie put his hands to Don’s face. “Don, look at me.” Don looked up into his brothers eyes, dark and serious “I want you to understand that this is me saying this. Screw the odds, screw the math, whatever numbers the doctors give you, screw ‘em, what the fuck do they know? Anne is one of the strongest women I know. She is a survivor and you, my stubborn, bullheaded, never-say-die brother, are easily the strongest man I know. Between the two of you that child will have no choice but to be strong, to be a survivor, to hang on for dear life until it’s time. You understand me?” Don bit his lip and nodded. “You want this baby?” Charlie asked.

Don nodded and sucked in a deep breath. “I want this baby so bad. The second I saw that little stick it was like it was like it was already in my arms. I could see it. A little girl, I think, and she had Anne’s eyes and your curls and...” Don wrapped his arms around himself. “Oh god, Charlie, I’m dying at the thought that I might not see her.” Don felt himself pulled into another hug, Charlie rubbing circles around his back.

“It’ll be okay, it’ll be okay.” Charlie held him for a long minute, giving Don time to pull his thoughts back together. “Okay. That’s the secret. What’s the favor?”

“I need...” Don closed his eyes. “God this is hard to ask and say no if you need to...”

“What is it Don?”

“I need money.”

“How much?” Charlie asked without blinking.

“I don’t know. A few thousand. I can pay you back, it’s just this stuff...”

Charlie shook his head. “Don’t worry about it.”

“You’re not going to ask why?” Charlie shrugged. “It’s just...it’s the doctor is recommending specialists and Anne doesn’t have insurance, and the FBI coverage for spouses is crap, and...”

“Wait, wait, wait. Spouse?”

Don winced. “Well, I had to get her on my insurance, and we just went down to the court house and we don’t even have rings or anything.”

“You know Dad’s going to kill you for cheating him out of a big white wedding.”

Don sighed. “I’ll make it up to him.”

“So you’ve got a government policy doc looking after Anne?” Charlie asked.

Don shrugged. “It’s what I could get.”

Charlie shook his head. “No good. I know people who know people, I’ll get her the best specialists in LA.”
“Charlie.” Don said starting to object.

“Hush.” Charlie put his hands to his brother’s face. “You might not realize it, and might not believe it, but you did more than you think looking out for me, keeping me in the here and now, and guiding a lot of the better choices in my life. It’s my turn to look out for you, balancing the equation. I’ve got a doctor who’s experienced with the type of damage Anne probably sustained.”

“Charlie.”

“Hey, I was in the room.” Charlie said darkly. “My doctor can get me access to all the best specialists she might need. You sure you don’t want the house?”

Don nodded. “Yes, Charlie, it’s your house.”

“Okay, but consider it an open offer, wait here.” Charlie rushed out of the room and came back with a checkbook. Don felt himself being scrutinized before Charlie scribbled out a check and handed it to Don. His jaw dropped.

“Charlie, I can’t take this.”

“Yes, you can.”

“I can’t pay this back.”

“It’s a gift.”

“You can’t possibly afford this.”

“Don. I’m on the payroll of damn near every government agency in this country. The same government that pays you dick for risking your life every day pays me absurd amounts for doing their math homework, plus I bring home my CalSci salary, plus my publisher just gave me a major signing bonus for my next book, plus I just got a huge check for getting smacked by a dumb socialite. I’m not paying mortgage or rent or electricity, I drive a Prius, my biggest monthly expenditures are chalk and lube. I can afford it.”

Don shook his head. “The doctors shouldn’t cost this much.”

“It’ll take care of the doctors, and finish the remodel on Anne’s place if you’re not going to take the house. I’ll give you the number of one of Dad’s old contracting friends, he’ll cut you a deal, put in a proper bathroom, finish the kitchen, a couple of real bedrooms.”

Don looked at the check again and carefully counted the zeros. “You’ll have to write a letter to go with this, they’ll think I’m on the take.”

“Whatever you need, Don,” Charlie said slowly, as if talking to a dumb child. “I’m serious, the house, money, a kidney, a couple pints of blood. Don, you’re going to be a father. Whatever I have is yours, whatever I can get is yours.” Don found himself biting his lip again. The last six weeks had been nothing but mind-numbing swings between joy and terror and the person he had wanted to tell most was Charlie and at the same time he’d been terrified that Charlie would just give him more numbers, telling him how pointless it was to hope.

Charlie must have seen him begin to crack because Charlie sat him down on the couch and held him. “I’d say congratulations but...”

“Don’t. Not yet. I can’t afford...”
“I know. I’ll hold on to hope for you until you’re ready.”

~

Don sat next to Anne on the exam table holding her hand. She fidgeted with her clothes as Charlie’s doctor made some notes. Don had thought Charlie was joking when he had introduced them to Dr. Goldman. The man looked like he’d never treated anything more complicated than a cold.

“You okay?” Don asked softly into Anne’s ear. She nodded and gave his hand a quick squeeze.

Dr. Goldman placed the folder on the small table and gave a gentle smile. “Well now, Miss Finnegan, Mr. Eppes I know you came hoping for a second opinion but I’m afraid I can’t change the original recommendation your other doctor provided…” Don’s heart sank. “However, I can’t say it isn’t worth trying if you’re willing to fight the fight. It will be a difficult pregnancy, however, honestly, I don’t see why this shouldn’t be a viable one. You’ve already made it to your second trimester, you are on full bed rest, correct?”

“Yes.” Anne replied with a nod.

“There is extensive damage and after the completion of this pregnancy I would recommend reconstructive surgery, especially if you’re planning to make a second go of it.”

Don and Anne looked at each other. Charlie who had been sitting in the corner snickered at what could only be the combined looks of panic on their faces. “Uh…we haven’t though that far ahead.”

“Still, it never hurts to plan for the future. I can recommend a very good surgeon with experience.” Dr. Goldman picked up a pad. “I’m going to write you a prescription for a couple of things that should help prevent early labor at least up until five months. After that, we’ll see.”

Don took the slip of paper. “Thank you.”

Dr. Goldman took off his glasses and peered at Anne. “I probably shouldn’t be saying this, but in my practice I had to throw out the text book a long time ago. I have seen damage like this before and far worse and it will be difficult but it’s not a reason to give up hope. The fetus is healthy and developing well right on schedule. It’ll just be a matter of giving it as much time as possible.”

Anne bit her lip, tears welling up. Don wrapped an arm around her, determined not to cry himself. He’d found himself doing it a lot lately and was determined to blame it completely on sympathetic hormones.

“I’m going to refer you to an OB/GYN I’ve worked with many times before. My receptionist can help you make any appointment. He’ll take good care of you and I want to be kept posted on your progress.”

Don nodded. “Thank you, Doctor.”

Dr. Goldman smiled. “Well, have a good day you two. And get plenty of rest,” he said before leaving.

Everyone left in the room let out a breath. Don gave Anne a long hug.

“See?” said Charlie. “Quick and painless.”

Don gave a little chuckle. “Where’d you find him, Charlie?”
“No idea. Colby dug him up for me a few years ago.”

Anne nodded. “I like him.”

Charlie laughed “You’ve never had to have his fingers up your ass while getting lectured on cholesterol.”

“No, I got his fingers up somewhere else.”

“Ah, but you avoided the cholesterol lecture.”

Anne smiled. “True.”

Don gave Anne’s back a quick rub, glad to see her smiling. It was his favorite look for her, one that had been sadly lacking the last few weeks.

“Come on, hun, let’s get you home.”

~

“Hey, Colby?” Don said, coming into the break room where Colby was committing crimes against coffee.

“Hey, Don, what can I do for you?”

Don scratched the back of his head and looked over his shoulder. “Um, yeah...so I met Charlie’s doctor yesterday.”

“Okay.” Colby replied carefully.

“I mean it was a thing and...”

Colby put his hands in the air. “None of my business.”

“Yeah, um...I was just wondering, where in the hell did you find that guy?”

Colby laughed. “Law library.”

“Say what?”

“Goldman vs. HUAC. I was doing some research into...stuff and...back in the day someone ratted on him to HUAC for discreetly treating homos, commies, and sexual deviants, when they subpoenaed his records he claimed doctor/patient confidentiality and when it looked like they were going to get them anyway, he torched his own office. State court held up doctor/patient confidentiality and threw out the case but he did time for the arson.”

Don’s eyebrows hit his hairline. “Really?”

“Yep, and when he got out he went right back to discreetly treating very grateful patients. I read all this, went looking for the guy, turned out he was still in LA and when I went poking around some message boards I found he’s still known for treating... well, homos, commies and sexual deviants.”

“Wow.”

Colby chuckled. “He looks like he walked out of central casting, doesn’t he?”
“Yep.”

“Hey, Don whatever’s going on, none of my business but he’s a good guy, been taking good care of Charlie, anything you’re not willing to do or can’t do he’ll work his way around it. Did you know Charlie can’t go under general anesthesia without an NSA officer present?”

“Really?”

“Yeah. He’s got a little card in his wallet with a number to call in case of emergency surgery. Charlie needed some stuff done a few years back, Goldman did it with a major local and let me hold Charlie’s hand the whole time.”

Don knew that little bit of information probably meant a lot more than he was up for processing now. “That’s good to know.”

“He’ll take care of you, Don, but he’s got a thing about cholesterol, do not walk into that office with a cheeseburger on your breath. You will never hear the end of it.”

Don nodded. “I’ll keep that in mind.”
Colby watched as Charlie scribbled frantically on a chalk board. It was one of about a dozen. There were even boards attached to the ceiling of the garage.

“Charlie, you’ve got to come eat.”

“I need to finish this thought. The DoD…”

“I though you we’re working for the NSA?”

“That’s the other boards. This is DoD, NSA is on the ceiling, CDC is all the whiteboards, FBI is up in the solarium, NASA is in the white notebooks, Homeland Security is on the yellow legal pads, super gravity and Cognitive Emergence are at the office.”

Colby raked his hand through his hair a couple of times as Charlie tried to desperately finish whatever thought was in his head. “Charlie, what the hell are you doing?”

“My… patriotic duty.”

“Bull. You’re keeping something from me and if it’s classified just say so, but even you don’t try to juggle six projects like this at once.”

Charlie stopped and let out a long sigh. “It’s… it’s not classified but I can’t tell you.”

“Charlie.”

“It’s not a bad secret… it’s… it’s kinda a good thing… and… and you’ll get told eventually but… I just… there’s going to be a drain on my assets and I needed to pick up a little extra work and this is all stuff they’ve been wanting me to do for ages.”

“Is this about that check you wrote Don last month?” Charlie whipped around from the board. “I balance your check book, remember?”

“Oh. Right… um, yeah it’s about that.” Charlie went back to the equation.

“Look, if Don’s in trouble, I mean he’s been behaving like… well… an asshole for a couple of months now.”

“No, he’s not in trouble. It’s a good thing that’s happening, it’s just…” Charlie leaned his head on
the blackboard. “Look, I just can’t tell you right now… soon…about a month. I promise.”

Colby nodded. “Okay. A month?”

“Yeah.” Colby watched as Charlie wrote out a chunk of math then stopped and looked at the ceiling then at the whiteboard. He started again, then stopped “Shit.” He erased the bottom line and went to begin yet again. Charlie took a few deep breaths. “Colby,” he said weakly.

“Yeah, I can tell. How scrabbled is your head?”

“I just… They’re all bleeding into each other. I just… I just need to be able to focus a little.”

“Go back to my place?”

Charlie shook his head. “I can’t, I’ve got to…” He waved randomly at the boards.

“Come upstairs then.”

“We… Dad’s in the house.”

Colby nodded. “I know. Come upstairs, I’ve got an idea.”

Charlie put down the chalk and followed as Colby headed upstairs. Colby felt a knot twist in his stomach at what he was about to try. Not so much putting Charlie into pain. A couple years of sitting with Charlie in therapy had gotten him mostly over that bit, but now Colby was about to do something to the person he loved that he’d been taught to do on enemies.

“Get undressed, lay on the floor, put your arms over your head.” Colby watched as Charlie quickly stripped. He was only half hard, probably too tired for this to be about sex.

“Do you think you can be quiet?” Colby asked. Charlie grabbed a reasonably clean t-shirt that had gotten shoved under the bed and shoved it in his mouth.

Colby sighed. “Okay, if this is too much I need you to tell me, okay?” Charlie nodded. “Okay.”

Colby took a deep breath. If this worked it could actually save both him and Charlie a lot of problems in the long run. Colby ran his hands down Charlie’s body a few times then placed his thumb at just the right point under Charlie’s arm and pushed.


Colby sighed internally. ‘Well that answers that question.’

Colby found another spot under Charlie’s collar bone and two along his ribs. He never held any spot for longer than a split second. The same amount of time it would take a leather strap to crack across his flesh, but this time no bruises, no welts, no marks.

Colby kept a close eye on Charlie’s face. He could watch Charlie drift away in the moments after the sharp flash of pain. As much as Colby hated to admit it, he’d gotten good at reading this side of Charlie. He had to, for both their sakes. He could tell when Charlie was at that point between regaining focus and when all the numbers were on the verge of being blown out of his head. He knew Charlie in this moment would want complete oblivion from the numbers but the Charlie with six projects downstairs would be a little cranky about it.
Colby pressed one last time under Charlie’s arm and held it for a second. Charlie arched his body like he was being hit with electricity. Colby pulled his hand away and Charlie collapsed his eyes fluttering shut.

“Okay. That’s enough for now.”

Charlie took the t-shirt out of his mouth. His head lulled to the side and he blinked a few times.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” Charlie gave a weak smile. “Wow.” Charlie took Colby’s hand and pressed it to his lips.

“Thank you.”

Colby stroked Charlie’s face. “Do you know what I would give for the inside of your head to function normally?”

“Probably the same amount I would give.”

“And then some.”

Charlie sighed. “I’m sorry.”

Colby shrugged. “You are as god made you.”

Charlie leveled a look at Colby. “What a bastard.”
Alan watched as a scowl darkened Colby’s features. Not many things did that, really, but war reports on the evening news were one of them. Especially when they talked about Afghanistan. Charlie was on the couch next to Colby, scribbling in a notebook, only half listening to the news. Charlie only half listened to anything these days. Alan shook his head. Charlie had been working himself into the ground for reasons he was unwilling or unable to explain and even Colby seemed to be at a loss to explain why.

The news switched to a recorded briefing by some general. ‘Today we announce the commencement of Operation Caissa’ Charlie’s head snapped up. ‘The first wave in this operation has already commenced with a decisive victory over forces in Afghanistan.’ Colby snorted but Charlie’s jaw had dropped open.

“No,” he whispered softly. The general kept talking. “Oh, no, no, no, no, no...” Charlie jumped up and headed to the garage. Colby looked over his shoulder to watch Charlie go, then looked at Alan and shrugged. It wasn’t like Charlie running off the garage at random moments was a new thing. Alan watched the rest of the general’s speech with Colby. Apparently the Pentagon had some new scheme to have a decisive victory against America’s enemies.

Alan shook his head again. It would be funny if they weren’t several years past it being a joke. Alan flipped the TV to mute as Colby got up and headed for the garage himself. Alan remembered the days when he stood on protest lines screaming that the US had been in Vietnam for two whole years and it was two years too many. He had a hard time remembering how long they’d been in Afghanistan, nine years, ten. Too many, that was a fact.

There was a crash from the garage. Alan sprang up.

“Charlie!” he called out, bursting into the garage and into a nightmare. Two of Charlie’s boards had toppled and Colby had Charlie’s arms locked behind him like a prisoner. There was blood, bright red, on Colby’s white t-shirt. Charlie was struggling, tears running down his face. Alan felt the rage well up in him. “Colby! Let him go!” Alan shouted.

“I can’t do that, Alan.” Colby replied in a strangely level tone.

“Let him go! I’m...I’m calling the police!” Colby let Charlie go. Charlie’s arms dropped and he stumbled a few feet away from Colby. Alan could see long scratches on Charlie’s arms that were bleeding. There was blood under Charlie’s nails. Charlie took a few breaths and swayed like he was
standing on the edge of a precipice before he began to savagely claw at his arms, making the scratches longer and deeper.

Colby grabbed Charlie’s wrists and yanked Charlie’s arms across his chest, holding him like a human strait jacket. Charlie began to struggle again.

“Come on, Charlie, calm down. We’re not doing this.” Colby said softly “Whatever it is, this isn’t how we deal with it. You know that.”

Alan took a few tentative steps towards the scene. “Charlie, what’s wrong?” The tears had not begun to abate. Charlie looked up at him. Alan’s heart stopped. The look in Charlie’s eyes was a terrifying mix of grief and madness.

“Hate me.” Charlie choked out.

“What?”

“Hate. Me.” Charlie choked out between sobs. “I have killed now, I’ve killed us all.”

Alan looked at Colby who shook his head obviously just as confused.

“Charlie, you haven’t hurt anyone.” Alan said carefully.

Charlie closed his eyes and began to rock back and forth, still held tight by Colby. “Thousands, millions, Caissa, Caissa. I’ve killed us all.”

“What?”

Charlie twitched and shuttered “Just a game, just a game. A perfect game.” He suddenly became still and opened his eyes again. “Hate me.” He hissed out. “You are a man of peace, always peace.” Charlie made a sound like a cat with a hair ball. “I am a god of war, I am death’s hook-nosed little accountant, why won’t you hate me!?”,

Alan reached out carefully to try to touch Charlie, as if he could somehow put some sanity back into his son’s eyes with just a touch.

Charlie wrenched his way out of Colby’s grip and stumbled away from Colby and Alan. He looked at his hands.

“No!” Alan and Colby shouted together. In one quick move Colby and Charlie pinned to the floor. The shard went skittering across the room, Charlie’s bloody hand leaving prints on the floor. Alan grabbed a napkin left over from some lunch and knelt down pressing it to the cut on Charlie’s hand. This was the scene Don walked into.

“What the fuck!” He shouted. Charlie was sobbing hysterically now.

“I don’t know, Don.” Colby said quickly. “There was something on the news about a new military operation and he completely flipped out.”

“Let him up, Granger.” Don barked.

“Not a good idea, Donnie.” Alan said quickly, his heart still pounding.
“I said let him up. That’s an order!”

Colby rolled off of Charlie and Charlie skittered away across the floor before scrambling to his feet. Alan got up watching Charlie carefully for any sudden movement. The tears began to fade but the wild look in Charlie’s eyes didn’t.

“Okay, Charlie, what the fuck is going on?” Don asked harshly.

“I killed us all.”

“You’re going to have to be more specific than that, buddy.”

“Caissa. They wanted a game, a perfect game, victory guaranteed, all costs, all variables, all units. Just a game, just a game.” Charlie wrapped his arms around himself and began to rock.

“Oh, fuck.” Colby said softly. Alan snapped his head towards Colby who took a few careful steps towards Charlie. “You gave them a war game, Charlie, didn’t you? Caissa, goddess of chess. Doesn’t matter how many pieces you lose as long as you get the king.”

“Just a game.” Charlie whispered.

“But it’s not a game. They’ve implemented it, haven’t they? Operation Caissa.”

“Just a game.” Charlie whispered again.

“Charlie,” Don said carefully. “How many pieces get lost to win this game?”

“Chess, game theory, shooting chains, retaliations, pawn for pawn, locked in combos, us, them, us, them, white goes first, no other moves.” Charlie had begun to claw at his wrists again.

Don took a couple of long steps across the garage and picked Charlie up by arms pinning him to the wall with a solid impact.

“How many, Charlie? What’s the endgame?” Don hissed. The force of the impact seemed to snap Charlie back for a moment.

“We lose two thirds of our civilian population to a coordinated terrorist strike before nuking the Middle East, and half of central Asia into a sheet of glass.” Charlie hissed back, ice dripping from his voice. Don dropped Charlie.

“Oh my god, Charlie, you thought of this?!” Alan couldn’t keep the horror from his voice.

“I told you to hate me.” Charlie replied with a sick chuckle. “Even if they remove nuclear strike as an option it won’t actually diminish their retaliatory moves, we still lose major industrial centers. Of course, they lose everything and that’s why we win.” Charlie chuckled again. “But we don’t really win because we’ll be fatally crippled and bring down the world economy and the resulting war will be something even I can’t calculate.

“You got to stop them, Charlie.” Don said.

“Just a game.” Don picked up Charlie again and slammed him against the wall.

“Donnie!” Alan shouted

“If this is your idea Charlie then you’ve got to stop it.”
“They’ve already started!” Charlie shouted. “We’re all dead!”

“You’re not even going to try?”

“They won’t listen!”

“Well they’ve listened once.” Don growled.

“We’re all dead.” Charlie sobbed out.

“We’re all dead.” Don repeated. “Fine.” He dropped Charlie and pulled his gun from its holster. Alan’s heart froze. Even after all these years he’d never see the gun in his son’s hands. Only worn on his side or tucked under a jacket. Don put the gun to his head. “Come on! If you’re not going to try why the hell should I bother?!” Don shouted. Charlie reached for the gun but Don took a step back.

“Don!”

“Donnie!” Alan shouted.

“If we’re all dead anyway then I’m just beating the rush!” Don lowered the gun and quickly shoved it into Charlie’s hand so the muzzle was against Don’s chest. “Come on! Pull it.” Charlie’s hands were shaking and tears were streaming down his face again. “You know how. And when you’re done here why don’t you go across town and finish off my wife and son!”


“Yeah, remember them? Why don’t you go tell Anne to forget about trying to fight to keep that child alive, tell her to forget about the medications and bed rest and constant mind-numbing worry and fear because we’re all dead already!” Don was shouting at top of his voice.

Charlie’s hands shook violently. Alan could hear the gun rattle. Blood from Charlie’s cut hand dripped from it.

“I don’t know how.” Charlie squeaked out.

“Then figure it out. Time to be an adult. Time to clean up your own mess.”

“I didn’t start this!”

“Well, no one else is going to stop it!”

“They’ll want something else, they’ll want a reason!”

“Then give them one! Since when have you found a problem you couldn’t beat to death with math?!”

Charlie collapsed to the floor and began to cry but the sobs were softer, saner, cleansing. He put the gun on the floor next to him and buried his face in his knees.


“Um...Donnie?” Alan asked carefully.

Don turned to his father and sighed. “Anne’s five months in and could miscarry at any moment.”
Don replied to the unasked question. “We signed marriage papers so I could get her on my insurance policy.”

Alan nodded. “I see.” It was rapidly all becoming too much for one night. Colby knelt down next to Charlie and pressed the napkins against his hand again. He was gently stroking the side of Charlie’s face as the tears began to dry up.

“Maybe...” Charlie said softly. “Maybe...there’s nine days before the next phase, maybe if I take two days, write something up, go out there. Maybe I can knock some sense into... someone. Murphy likes me.”

“Who’s Murphy?” Don asked

“Chief of staff.”

“White House Chief of Staff?” Alan asked.

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” Don said lightly. “Starting tomorrow morning you’ve got nine days to save the world.” Charlie gave a chuckle and a snuffle.

“Don?” Colby said. “Could you take Charlie upstairs to his room? I’ll be up in a bit.”

“Sure thing. Oh, you’ve got the 48 hour flu.”

“Thanks.”

Don gingerly helped Charlie to his feet and ushered him out of the garage like an invalid. Colby watched them go.

When the door was closed Colby fished his cell from his pocket and quickly dialed it. “Dr. Goldman, This is James Hoover… Yes, I’m sorry I had to use this number...look, I need to get Christian in for X-rays first thing in the morning… three ribs, I think… no, ER ain’t an option tonight… yeah, one of those nights… no, I’m fine… we’ll make it ‘till morning but… 8 am? All right, thank you.”

“X-rays? What do you need X-rays for?” Alan asked.

“Charlie’s probably cracked three ribs.”

Alan jumped up. “He should go to the hospital!”

“Alan, taking Charlie to the E.R. ends one of two ways. Either they believe him when he says he caused all his own injuries and he spends the night in five point restraints in the psych ward or they don’t believe him and I spend the night in lock up on domestic abuse charges and right now we can’t afford either.”

Colby dialed another number. “Dr Anar, this is Colby Granger. I need to set up an emergency appointment for Charlie Eppes, ASAP and um… we probably need to discuss adjusting his medication a little, or maybe an emergency supply of something stronger, I’m not sure. Give me a call back on the file number as soon as you get this.”

“Charlie’s on medication?”

“Yes.” Colby snapped and dialed another number. “Sherwood, this is Granger, it’s Charlie, call me
“What are you calling him for?”

“Charlie’s about to climb Everest with a screw loose, he needs a Tensing that knows that mountain better than I do.” Colby took a big breath and dialed another number. “Hey Anne, it’s Colby. No, Don is fine, don’t worry… Look, I just heard… I understand… Charlie’s had a bad night… we’ll live… um… I’m sending Don home in a bit, he’s watching Charlie now… He’s going to be a little fragile when he gets home, can you just… Yeah… thanks… two?... okay, I’ll see if I can get Charlie there, but… okay… You have a good night.”

Colby clicked off the phone and quickly dialed again. “Dr. Bradford, this is Colby Granger. Um, look, some shit’s gone down on the home front and it might be a good idea if you drag in Don tomorrow, we don’t have anything hot but he’s got a thing at two. Maybe grab him in the morning before the caffeine hits his brain and he can clam up. I’m going to be out of the office for a few days but when I get back, yeah, well, that’s all.”

Alan watched as Colby collapsed on the couch and pressed his fists to his eyes. Something in Alan finally snapped.

“What the hell are you doing, Granger? What gives you the right…”

“Alan!” Colby snapped. “Could you please hold it together?”

“Hold it together! My son just aimed a gun and his own head and…”

“And it’s not the first time and god knows it probably won’t be the last and yes, Charlie is on medication and Don’s depressed and please, please, Alan, hold it together.”

“How can you…”

“Alan,” Colby pleaded, the tone bringing Alan up short. “Please, Alan, for the love of anything you might believe in, please hold it together tonight. I can handle Charlie being a fruit loop, I’m used to it by now and I can handle Don melting down ‘cause I’ve seen it before but please Alan you are the one sane Eppes left standing tonight and I need you to hold it together. Please.” Colby begged.

Alan looked at Colby. The man looked exhausted and there were scratches on his arms from where Charlie had clawed at him.

“Does this happen a lot?”

Colby shrugged. “I’ve never seen it quite this bad. I guess it’s like an earthquake; we were way overdue, so it’s a big one. Oh god, I thought we were over this, he was doing so damn well.”

“And Donnie?”

“Well I haven’t smelled gun oil on his breath since he met Anne, but if she loses that baby… Shit, no wonder he’s been cranky.”

Alan sat down hard, just trying to process. He looked at Colby again.

“Why?” he finally asked.

“Why what?”
“Why...why?” Alan said waving his hands around.

Colby shrugged. “It’s what I do.”

“Arrange shrink visits and doctor’s appointments for my sons?”

“Sometimes, yeah.”

“But why?”

Colby sighed “Somebody’s got to.”

“Why you, I mean who asked you?”

“Charlie did.” Colby snapped. “He, for all intents and purposes, walked up to me one night and said I am a genius, I can do great things for the human condition, but I’m also stark raving bonkers and I can’t do this alone anymore and I want you.”

Colby scrubbed at his eyes. “And I said okay, and by the time I realized just what I was getting into I was in love and it was too damn late and Charlie, for whatever weird reason, decided to love me in return, so this is what I do.”

He put his face in his hands and Alan saw the cracks begin to appear. “Alan, I have done bad things, I have killed, I have lied, I have betrayed, I have turned a blind eye to things that in a just world should have me before a war crimes tribunal. I don’t know if I believe in Hell but if it exists I’m probably going there. Charlie is possibly the greatest of us, and loving him, being loved by him, making sure every damn day that he can continue to be great, it’s my salvation, it’s my penance and it’s all I’ve got.”

Alan closed his eyes, determined not to cry over the madness of the last half hour.

“I don’t understand, Colby. I don’t understand where my little boys have gone.”

“They grew up, and the world got dark.”

Alan looked down at his hands, they were shaking and he couldn’t seem to get them to stop.

“Alan, once this is over...Once Don calms down and Charlie saves the world, you can have the biggest, angriest, drunken breakdown you can manage. You can rage against everything you don’t understand and I’ll pick you up afterwards but please, I need to take care of Charlie right now.”

Alan balled his shaking hands into fists and took long breaths. Colby got up and left the garage.

Alan looked around. The place was a mess. Charlie’s boards were toppled, papers were scattered, and bloody hand prints were beginning to dry on the floor. Alan wandered over to Don’s gun on the floor where Charlie left it.

‘Glock 23.’ The thought popped up in Alan’s head. Somewhere over the years he had learned that. ‘13 rounds.’ He wondered how many people his little boy had killed with that gun. ‘Too many.’ Still not nearly as many deaths as his innocent little Charlie could have on his hands already, his beautiful mind of fractals and chess and balanced equations turned towards war.

Alan reached down to pick up the gun.

“Don’t touch it.”
Alan yanked his hand back and spun around. Don was taking quick steps across the garage. He
snatched up his gun from the floor and quickly holstered it, seemingly not noticing the transfer of
his brother’s blood to his hands.

“How’s Charlie?” Alan asked.

“He is now as he ever was and ever will be,” Don replied, voice heavy with sarcasm.

“Don!” Alan snapped.

“Sorry. He’ll be fine.” Don turned to leave.

“Donnie, wait. We need to talk.”

“I need to get home, Dad.”

“I know, I know.” Alan ran his hand through his ever-thinning hair. “I just...Do you love her?”

“Who, Anne?”

“Yes, Anne.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Are you planning to stay married?”

Don threw his arms in the air. “I don’t know, Dad. We just...I’ve had other things to worry about,
okay?”

“Donnie, I think you know.”

Don shook his head. “She makes me happy, Dad, happier than I’ve been in a long time and seeing
as how I just put my own gun to my head you should use that as a point of reference. So, yeah. I’ll
stay with her for as long as she’ll have my raggedy, useless, fucked-up ass.”

Alan gave a serious nod. “Good. Come here.”

“Dad...” Don started to protest.

“Come here.” Alan repeated with as much force as he could muster.

Don took a few steps and stood in front of his father. Alan slipped his wedding ring from his finger
and before Don could react, roughly grabbed his left hand and shoved it on.

“Dad!” Don yanked his hand back.

“Just until you get your own. You’re a married man now, with all the position and responsibility
that goes with it. The world should know that.”

Don looked down at his hand and gave a slow nod. “Okay.”

“Okay. Go home to your wife. We’ll take care of things here.”

Don nodded again and slowly walked away.

Alan looked around the wreckage again. He hoisted one board to a standing position, then another.
The second had a crack running across the corner and a gouge in the middle. Charlie would be
pissed, but it was his own fault.

Looking at the crack, Alan felt drained in a way he hadn’t in years. He headed upstairs, determined to find his bed. He passed Charlie’s room, where the door was open a crack. He peeked in. Charlie sat on the edge of his bed without a shirt. Colby was wrapping a long white bandage around Charlie’s chest. It went with the white bandages on his hands and arms.

Alan shivered. The image was too close to the month Charlie had spent ghosting around the house, wrapped in bandages, trying to pretend everything was alright. Of course, Colby hadn’t been there that month, and for Charlie, that was half the problem.

Alan wandered to his own room, running his hand along the frame of Margaret’s wedding photo on the way.

He lay down on the bed meant for two without even bothering to change, bits of Charlie’s blood on his hands and cuffs. He closed his eyes and prayed for sleep.

~

Alan took Margaret’s hand. Charlie laughed and squealed as Don chased him around the yard with the hose.

“Make it rain, Donnie!” Charlie asked with a clap of his hands.

Don pointed the hose in the air and the water came down on Charlie, face still round with baby fat and eyes bright.

“What happened, Margaret? When did we let Charlie break?”

“He never did. Even inside me he twisted about, kicked and fought. Don was the quiet one.”

“I don’t know if I can keep him without you. I don’t know how to take care of him.”

“I’m sorry, love, but you have to let him play the game.”

Charlie tripped and fell hard.

“Oh, Charlie!” Alan ran and crouched down to pick him up. Charlie stood up, all smiles. “Oh, Charlie, look at your hands.” Charlie held up his hands and giggled

“It doesn’t hurt, Daddy.” Blood ran down Charlie’s hands to his wrists. Blood dripped from skinned knees and pooled at Charlie’s feet. Alan went to grab Charlie’s hands. Charlie was suddenly lifted off his feet. Alan stood. Colby held Charlie on his hip, Charlie’s arms were wrapped around Colby’s neck leaving little bloody hand prints.

“Give him back.”

“He’s too heavy for you.”

Don stepped up to Colby’s side dressed in black. He had a gun. Hundreds of faceless men in suits gathered behind him.

“Don’t you dare, Donnie...” Don handed Charlie the gun, Charlie taking it into his pudgy hands.

“It’s okay Dad. It’s just a game.”
The blood still flowed from Charlie’s hands and dripped off the gun. Colby whispered in Charlie’s ear. “Play the game.” He put Charlie down. Charlie giggled and ran into the mass of faceless suits “No! Charlie, come back.” Alan pushed past Don and Colby and into the sea of suits. He could hear Charlie laugh and giggle somewhere.

Alan pushed into a clearing. Charlie sat on the end of a table. He was dressed like a soldier, his head was shaved. There was a roar and war jets flew overhead. Alan looked at Charlie. The table had filled with men in uniform. Charlie put the gun to his head.

“It’s okay, Dad, it’s just a game. And I’m very good at games.” There was a bang and Alan’s eyes flew open, his body still paralyzed with sleep. He sucked in a deep breath and began to cry.
Debris of Artistic Endeavors

Chapter Summary

Agent Sherwood returns and conversations are had.

The knock on the door was soft, polite, causing Alan to wonder as he opened it. He hadn’t seen the young man on the other side in nearly two years yet Alan recognized him immediately.

“Agent Sherwood.”

“Mr. Eppes. Is Dr. Eppes in?”

“No.” Alan snapped. “If you’re here to give him more work…”

Sherwood raised his hands. “I’m here merely as a friend and fellow citizen who would rather not see LA become a glowing puddle of nuclear fallout.”

Alan gave a tight nod. “Charlie’s at the doctor’s, he should be home soon. You can wait inside.”

“Thank you.” Sherwood said with a slight smile and nod.

Alan led Sherwood to the dinning room were he’d been trying to read the paper. “Can I get you some coffee?”

“That would be lovely. Thank you.” Alan quickly looked over the agent before grabbing a cup out of the kitchen. Sherwood looked immaculate. The suit was perfectly pressed, not a hair was out of place, and he sat with an easy perfect posture that would put a dancer to shame. The overall effect was more than a little intimidating. Of course, that was probably the effect he was going for. Alan was willing to place money the man was younger than Charlie, not much taller, and a little on the skinny side.

Alan poured a cup and took it out to Sherwood, who was looking around the dining room.

“This is a lovely home you have, Mr. Eppes.”

“Thank you. Technically it’s Charlie’s.”

Sherwood gave a slight smile. “Of course.” Sherwood took a sip of the coffee and blinked a few times. “Ah, and this would be Charlie’s ‘never say die’ blend.”

“Well considering the situation…” Alan squinted at Sherwood. “Did you know about..?”

Sherwood shook his head. “I am only responsible for Dr. Eppes’ security and intelligence work. The Pentagon has its own people keeping track of his military work, and his work for other agencies is sporadic enough that they don’t bother having someone assigned to him full-time.”

“You know, when Charlie said he consulted for the government now and again, I didn’t think… Well, I figured most of it was FBI to keep Don happy.”

Sherwood chuckled. “Dr. Eppes’ FBI work more or less counts as his hobby. He does it for fun and
so he can hang out with his big brother, and he gives the FBI a very large family discount on his consulting fee because he knows it comes out of Agent Eppes’ budget.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Oh and may I say congratulations on the nuptials of your son and my deepest hope for his child?”

Alan rocked back. “How did you..? I just found out…”

“When the much-loved brother of a key asset files a marriage license with a woman he’s known less than a year and then said asset writes out the same brother a very large check, we get curious.”

“You’ve been nosing around Don?”

“Just making sure nothing untoward was happening, especially with that amount of money involved.”

“What money?”

“From what I gather Charlie has been covering all of your daughter-in-law’s medical expenses, he has her seeing the best specialists in LA. Apparently he didn’t trust the doctors on the FBI’s medical plan. And seeing as how I have the same medical plan, I don’t entirely blame him.”

“Does Charlie know you know this?”

“Charlie knows it’s my job to keep him loyal, useful and alive. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t try to keep things from me. He somehow managed to keep his relationship with Agent Granger off my radar, though I suppose he had his reasons for that and Dr. Ramanujan was quite an effective smoke screen.”

Alan looked carefully at the agent again. He had been cold and professional in that hospital waiting room but had smiled softly at Charlie and given him the gentlest of kisses before leaving. Well, Alan didn’t have to be a mathematician to put two and two together on that one. And he didn’t have to work for the government to guess that those kinds of things were frowned upon.

“Agent Sherwood, what happened to the man who took Charlie?” Alan asked quietly.

“Nothing a man of your principles would approve of if you thought about it too much.” Sherwood answered coldly.

“I see.”

The front door opened slowly and Colby helped Charlie through.

“Charlie, you have a guest.” Alan said.

Agent Sherwood stood up.

“Hello, Martin. What brings you here?” Charlie asked, his voice heavy with exhaustion.

“I’m here to throw in my support with the great Dr. Eppes.”

Charlie gave a snort “Thanks.”

“How are you feeling, Charlie?” Martin asked more softly.
“I feel…I’ve felt better.” Charlie took a deep breath. “But that’s not really important right now. I’ve got to save the human race from itself, though I’m wondering why I should bother. I mean we’re massively over populated, an 87.3% loss… could be a good thing.”

“Don’t be morbid, Charlie.” Alan scolded.

“Have you talked to the Pentagon yet?” Sherwood asked.

Charlie gave a tight smile. “They’re avoiding my calls like a bitter ex-girlfriend.”

“I wouldn’t know about that.” Charlie gave a tight chuckle. “I’ve made some calls, I can get you into the Oval Office day after tomorrow, but you can’t go in empty handed.”

Charlie sat down hard at the dining table and stole Martin’s coffee. “I know, it’s just… generals get cranky if you take away their wars without a good reason.”

“Charlie, you’ve got to write that policy piece.” Charlie rolled his eyes “You know the one you’ve been not writing for the last five years?”

“I hate policy…” Charlie whined.

“Dr. Eppes, you give the Pentagon very dangerous toys without any instructions on how or when or why or if they should use them. I think the current situation proves that if you are going to continue with this variety of work, you are going to have to voice an opinion on policy. Now I seriously doubt they showed the President all of Caissa. They probably cut and pasted chunks that looked good with crap from their own strategists and slapped your name on it. Now I’ll get you into the Oval but you’re going to have to explain to the President why this is the stupidest idea in history and present something better.”

Charlie threw his arms in the air. “How about if we pull all our troops out of fucking everywhere for a start?”

“Charlie.” Sherwood scolded. “You know that’s not going to happen. They asked for a game and you gave them one, now you have to take away their game and give them something real. You have 36 hours to write the piece then we go to DC.”

Charlie sighed. “You’ll have to spell check it.”

“Every word.”

Charlie put his face in his still bandaged hand. “It’s just numbers.” He said softly.

“Charlie,” Alan said. “It’s never been just numbers and you know that.”

Charlie looked at his father. “I’m sorry, Dad. You raised me to be better than this, more… peaceful than this.”

“I raise you to do the right thing. Write up this, whatever, go to Washington and give the President a piece of your mind. You’ve got plenty to spare.”

Charlie chuckled. “Okay.”

Alan looked at the three men. Charlie and Colby looked equally exhausted, there was something brittle in the way they held themselves, Sherwood looked like every conspiracy theorist’s worst nightmare about ‘men in black’.
‘And they stand between us and oblivion.’

“I have to run some errands and get something for dinner. Will you three boys be all right on your own?”

“Uh, Dad… there’s no one here under thirty.” Charlie pointed out.

“And yet if I don’t cook, you don’t eat.”

Sherwood chuckled. “Don’t worry, Mr. Eppes, I’ll make sure they get their homework done before they watch TV.”

“We’ll be fine, Dad.”

Alan tried to give a smile. “Okay. Good luck.”

~

Anne pushed the button on the phone to open the door downstairs. She’d had a feeling that his moment would be coming. She moved carefully to the kitchen table. At five months she wasn’t at the waddle stage yet, but the doctors kept saying to move as little as possible. There was a knock at the door.

“Come on in. It’s not locked.” Alan Eppes carefully poked his head around the door. “Come on in, Alan,” Anne said.

Alan walked in, gazing around. “You’ve been renovating.”

“Yeah, well, considering the circumstances it was pointed out that it might be time to upgrade the large, drafty brick box.”

“I thought you were renting.”

“Nah, the box is all mine, well it’s mostly the bank’s but…” Anne petered off. “Want to take a seat?”

“Thank you.” Alan said sitting across from her.

“So I hear Don told you?”

“Well, I don’t know if told is the right term. Let it slip while having screaming fits at Charlie…”

Anne nodded. She’d got a briefing of the night from Don. “How is Charlie?”

Alan shrugged. “Trying to save the world apparently.”

Anne winced.

“Yeah, I know the feeling. How are you feeling?”

“Tired, the drugs make my queasy. I… you know, we were going to tell you. We hit five months so… Don just didn’t…”

“He didn’t want to jinx it?”

Anne gave a slight chuckle. “He didn’t want to get your hopes up. He hasn’t wanted to get his own
Alan nodded. “I…uh, actually understand.” Alan looked down at his hand and took a deep breath. “Margaret. My late wife, Don’s mother. She…she miscarried three times before we got Donnie, one quite late term, twice more before Charlie, then twice after.” Anne bit her lower lip determined not to give into hormone ravaged tears. “When Charlie started needing extra attention, it was excuse enough to stop trying. We were hoping for a girl. I… Donnie, the boys, we never told them, there never seemed to be a reason to.”

“I’m sorry.” Anne croaked out. Alan pushed over a box of tissues without comment.

“I… I can’t say I know what you’re going through since I’m short an X chromosome but… no matter what happens… if you need anything at all…”


“It’s okay. It’ll pass.”

Anne shook her head. “Alan, I… I never planned to live to thirty. I didn’t think I’d make twenty-five, I was screwed up, and in some bad shit and… I hurt myself and I let other people hurt me and… and meeting a great guy and getting pregnant was not… it just wasn’t in the cards you know, I should have been a Jane Doe in a gutter somewhere and I patted myself on the back for getting my life together and getting this far and now…” Anne choked, unable to talk through the tears. Alan scooted his chair over and took Anne gently into his arms.

“Hey, it’s okay,” he whispered. Anne tried to fight back the tears.

“I’m so sorry, Alan.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry for. What you’re doing, what you’re trying to do. It’s more hope than this family’s had in a long time.”

Anne nodded and grabbed more tissue to wipe her eyes.

“I just wish we could have done this right, you know move in, get hitched, talk about kids, try for a bit.”

Alan laughed. “Believe me, this is the only way you could have gotten, Donnie. He self sabotages relationships with more skill and panache then anyone I’ve ever met.”

Anne shook her head. “I just never wanted to be… I never wanted to be my mother. Get pregnant and get some guy to marry me.”

Alan gave a nod. “I can appreciate that. Are you and Donnie planning on staying married?”

Anne gave a long sigh, she had somehow known this was coming as well. “I don’t want to trap Don, I feel better with him than I have with… oh, pretty much anyone. I think I may very well love him, which is a very surreal thought. But… I’ve never though of myself as wife and mother material. I mean I used to close my eyes and look at the future and I’d see myself and my paintings and a few too many cats and now… And now Don’s there too, cranky, up to his ass in paperwork but…there. Don deserves the white picket fence, house in the suburbs… I don’t know…”

“Don’t sell yourself short, you make him happy.”
Anne shrugged, feeling tears threatening again. “Alan, I can’t bring anything to a marriage but what you see, and that’s not much.”

“Trust me, all anyone can bring to a marriage is themselves and a willingness to try.”

Anne sighed, feeling so tired. “I’m willing to try if he is.”

Alan nodded. “Good. Donnie…well he was engaged a while back. Some agent in Albuquerque. When he told us, his mother and I, we started putting a little money into savings every month to help with the wedding. Well, Margaret fell ill and Donnie came back to LA and the engagement fell apart, but I guess I just got into the habit of putting a little into that account. There’s… well… between the interest and how long it’s taken Donnie to find anyone, if you decide you want a proper wedding, with dresses and flowers and music and everything, it can be arranged.”

“Does Don get a say in this?”

“Hell no.” Anne laughed. “Donnie’s idea of a wedding is what you already got. Weddings aren’t for the groom anyways. Their job is to show up and say ‘I do.’”

Ann chuckled. “I’ll remember that.”

Alan reached into his pocket and pulled out a thin gold ring. “I have something for you.”

Anne shook her head. “Alan, I can’t.”

“Yes you can. It was Don’s mother’s. Just a loan until you can get your own.”

“I’ll get paint on it.”

Alan smiled and slipped it on her finger. “Margaret was a trained composer. She’d have no problems with the debris of artistic endeavors.” Anne bit her lip hard. “You’re family now and you should be able to show the world that. And you’re married to an Eppes and we are notoriously difficult men. My mother was a saint for putting up with my father’s vices and Margaret had more than her fair share of work turning me into the well-adjusted family man you see before you. Donnie’s got forty years of bad habits you’re going to have to beat out of him, you should at least get some jewelry out of it.”

Anne gave a chuckle and a sniffle. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

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Don looked at the agents under his command. He knew he’d been an asshole lately and they had all gotten in to the habit of keeping out of his way. They were all expecting a group chew-out over something. Don rubbed at his father’s ring.

“Okay, everyone. I’m going to try to keep this short and painless. First, I want to apologize for being a raging asshole for the last few months. It had nothing to do with any of you, as always you’ve been doing excellent work, you’re the best damn crew in the Bureau and I’m always proud of you. Some of you know my girlfriend Anne, well, for the last few months she’s been my wife and she’s been pregnant.” Don didn’t stop for breath, not wanting to have to listen to anyone say congratulations. “Unfortunately there have been complications, chances of a live birth aren’t good and chances of full term are nonexistent. However, it turns out I will be taking a three month leave of absence once she goes into labor, it’s already been arranged with the Bureau.” Don ran out of breath and let the information sink into the office.
There was a long moment of silence. “Any idea when that’s going to be, Don?” David asked.

Don shook his head. “We just hit 20 weeks, it could honestly be today or three months from now. We’re hoping for at least another two more months.” Don sighed. “Two would be good.”

“Who’s going to be in charge while you’re out?” Megan asked.

Don let out a long sigh and looked around the room. He ran his fingers through his hair a few times. “Okay. Guys this is going to be the bit where you hate me. I petitioned to have Megan just step up, I mean I think she’s earned it.”

“Thank you, Don.” Megan said.

“However...”

“Here we go,” said David.

“However the Bureau wants to bring in someone else.”

“Who?” Megan asked.

“Well they were originally going to send us some bureaucrat from D.C...”

“Who’s going to be our babysitter, Don?” David pressed.

“I managed to talk them into someone who will at least know not to take Wilshire during rush hour...”

“Don.” Megan snapped.

Don let out a long sigh. “Edgerton.”

“Ian Edgerton?” Megan asked.

“Yeah.”

David shook his head. “Man, you know we all love Ian but he ain’t command material. He’s got that whole lone wolf thing going.”

“I know, I know, but the Bureau’s getting tired of having to apologize when he rides into town and steps on people’s toes and they want to see if he can stay in one place in a command position.”

“So they’re experimenting on us?” One of the younger agents whined.

“Look, it was either Ian or some jackass from D.C. We’ve already had a long talk. He knows this office, he knows how we roll around here.”

“He knows Charlie,” one of the techs from the back of the room said.

“He knows Charlie. He’s not entirely thrilled with being stuck in one place for three months either, so he’s agreed to keep his head down and try to do as little damage as possible around here. Okay?” There were nods from around the room. “Okay. That’s it. Thank you. Let’s all get back to work.”

Everyone shuffled out of the room except for David and Megan. Megan stood, reached out, and pulled Don into a hug.
“I’m sorry, Don,” she said.

Don sighed. “I’m sorry too. I mean, I wanted to be able to tell everyone from the beginning but...”

Don rubbed a hand over his eyes.

“We get it.” said David. “I take it the family knows.”

“Well, I kind of let it slip last night. Well, Charlie already knew but Dad and Colby had a ‘what the hell?’ moment between them.”

“Hey, Don. How many exes do you have in the Bureau?” David asked.

Don shrugged “Four, five. Define ex.”

“Want to put money on how fast you’re going to get emails from the other side of the country from them?”

Don gave a half chuckle. “I figure 24 hours before my ex-fiancée sends me a very polite and more than a little irate email. Liz should know in 12, she’s up in Seattle. Robin by tomorrow morning. Yeah, I figure 24 hours for the Bureau to know, 48 for it to filter to every other branch of the federal government.”

Megan shook her head. “There will be women crying into their pillows tonight. Don Eppes is off the market.”

“Be strong, Megan. It would never have worked between us anyway.”

Megan gave a sharp laugh. “Nothing personal, Don, but I’m with Colby on how I like my men. Short and geeky.”

Don gave a dramatic sigh. “It’s karma for every nerd I picked on in high school.”

“Possibly, yeah. When’d you get the ring?”

Don look at the thin gold band on his finger. It felt odd but he couldn’t bring himself to take it off. “Um...it’s actually my dad’s. It’s a loaner until I get one of my own.”

“It looks kinda natural there.” David said.

Don nodded. “I know, and believe me, that’s been the scary thought for the day.”
The Logic of War

Chapter Summary

Charlie puts pen to paper and Colby and Martin have a talk.

Alan let himself into the house, nudging the door open with a hip, arms filled with groceries. It was a trick he’d mastered years ago. He idly wondered if he could still do it with a screaming baby in one arm. With any luck, he’d be able to find out. He and Anne had talked until Don came by at two to take her to the doctor’s.

It was after three. The house was quiet of everything but the sound of computer keys and the soft rustle of paper. In the dining room Charlie was typing frantically away on his laptop while Colby sorted through stacks of papers and maps. Sherwood was hunched over a stack of printouts in the living room, looking more like an English teacher marking them with one of Charlie’s red pens.

“Is the world still here?” Alan asked the house at large.

“For the time being.” Charlie answered, not looking up from his computer.

“Good, I’m doing a baked fish for dinner. You know, brain food.”

“Sounds great.” Charlie’s voice still sounded brittle.

Alan shook his head and went into the kitchen to unload the groceries. The store had had a deal on propane tanks. Alan had resisted the urge to buy several. Not for the grill out back, but for the stove at the little one room fishing cabin in the Sierras, remote enough to possibly be out of the path of fallout or war.

He’d walked by the tanks in the end, telling himself that if it ever came to that, Charlie would tell him when it was closer to a good time to run.

Alan finished putting away the groceries, made a sandwich and headed to the living room.

He sat across from Sherwood who, despite removing his jacket and tie, still managed to look immaculate.

“How goes the great work?” Alan asked.

“It’s a first draft.”

“That good?”

“Well Charlie needs to realize that committee is spelled with two e’s and two t’s and two m’s.” Alan gave a snort. “He also needs to realize that inbred congenital idiots is not the best way to describe the Joint Chiefs.”

Alan sighed. “Well, at least he has respect for authority.”
Sherwood finished editing the page in his hand and picked up the next. “Once you get past the ranting what Charlie is writing could effect the most profound change on how we see ourselves as a nation in relation to other nations since Thomas Paine wrote *Common Sense*.”

Alan reached over and picked up a pile of marked papers covered in red spelling corrections. “*The Logic, Theory, and Practice of War and Its Relation to and Effects on the United States of America* by Doctor Charles Edward Eppes.” Alan read.

“It’s brilliant, unfortunately no one is going to read it.”

“Then what’s the point?”

“The half-dozen people who need to read it to get us out of this mess will read it, then it will be stamped classified and dumped into the same dark hole as Hoover’s dresses and the Roswell aliens.”

Alan’s eyebrows shot up. “There are really Roswell aliens?”

Sherwood shrugged. “Who knows?” He shook a piece of paper. “This needs to be published in every American newspaper and magazine, splattered across the internet. If we’re lucky, in a decade someone might leak it.”

“Well, that’s reassuring.” Alan said with a sigh.

“Mr. Eppes, I don’t know if it’s a good or bad thing that you tried to raise your sons to be men of peace.”

“I don’t see how it could be a bad thing.”

Sherwood shrugged. “Agent Eppes was the youngest tactics instructor Quantico ever had. He rewrote the book and every time he hits the field he rewrites it again. He takes losing an agent so badly because he doesn’t lose agents. Granger has said more than once in his cups that he’d give his left nut to have had Don as a CO in Afghanistan.” Alan shivered at the thought. “And Charlie. Well, you taught Charlie how to play chess.”

“Lots of people play chess, Agent Sherwood.”

“Chess was designed to turn young princes into warrior kings, how to think strategically, laterally, cruelly on occasion. Charlie is a crown prince of the Ivory Tower with an ability to learn like few others. The military gave him a stack of data and he just turned it into chess without a second thought.” Sherwood sighed. “If Don and Charlie ever put their heads together they could probably take over the world. And sadly enough, the world would probably be better off for it.”

Alan flipped a few pages into Charlie’s writing. It was a little hard to read between the ranting and bad spelling but Alan got the gist and like everything Charlie did, it was brilliant.

“Charlie,” Alan called out. “Committee has two e’s.”

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Don entered his family’s home carefully, more than a little wary of what he could find. He took the fact that he couldn’t hear hysterical screams or sobs as a good sign.

Colby waved him in from the dining room.
“Hey, Don.”

“Hey.” Charlie didn’t look up from his computer.

Don gave a quick nod to the other man at the table. “Agent Sherwood.”

“Agent Eppes.”

Alan came out from the kitchen. “Donnie. How was Anne’s check up?”

Charlie’s head shot up. “Shit. Sorry Don, I forgot, I...”

“It’s okay.” Don said quickly. “It went fine. In fact, I’ve got something for you.” Don took a couple of pictures out of an envelope and put them next to Charlie’s laptop. He pointed to a black and white blur. “Look. Little feet.” Everyone quickly gathered around. “And little hands, and look at the size of that head. Head that size, I’m not sure if he got your brains or your ego, Chuck.” Charlie gave a tired chuckle and gently touched the photo. Don felt his father’s hand on his shoulder.

“A son?” Alan asked.

“Yep.” Don pointed to another blur. “No question on that front.” Everyone tilted their head to the side a bit and did a little mental upsizing.

“Well he won’t have any worries in gym class.” Charlie said. Everyone chuckled. Charlie picked up the photo and gazed at it for a long moment before handing it to Don.

“Keep it.”

Charlie nodded. “I’m sorry, Don,” he said quietly.

Don gave his brother’s shoulder a squeeze. “Hey, you keep trying, I’ll keep trying. Deal?”


Don looked over Charlie’s shoulder to the laptop screen. “Committee has two e’s.”

Colby finished off his cup of coffee as he paced about the dinning room, not really tasting it. He knew he should be in bed and Charlie should be in bed as well, but that was not going to happen any time soon. Charlie had wandered back off to the garage to try to sort out a few numbers while Martin did a final edit on the first draft of the *Logic of War*.

“Is there any more coffee?” Martin asked.

“I think we emptied the pot.”

Martin finished off the last page and stood, stretching his arms over his head, bending back like a cat.

As much as Colby hated to admit it he could see this man with Charlie. Only a hair taller than Charlie, he had plain brown hair, average brown eyes, and a face that could morph between instantly forgettable and seriously intimidating. Even in situations verging on being national emergencies, Colby had never heard him even attempt to give Charlie a direct order. Everything was phrased as a question or, at most, a polite suggestion. Colby had learned over the years that
that really was the best way to get Charlie to do anything and Martin had, apparently, over years of being Charlie's handler, learned it as well.

The thing that really gave Colby the slight twist of jealousy was the fact that Charlie had simply been able to ask this man for the pain he craved whereas Colby had been more or less conned and coerced into it. Of course, Colby knew he would not have reacted well to a direct request, not having any real understanding of what Charlie would have been asking for, whereas Charlie swore up and down that Martin had ‘sub’ written all over his face. Colby kept looking but didn’t see it.

“Do I have something on my face, Agent Granger?” Martin asked.

“Huh? Oh.” Colby shook his head. “Sorry, just staring into space.”

“And my face happened to be between you and space?”

“I guess.”

“You should get some rest.” Martin advised.

Colby shook his head. “I’ll crash when Charlie does.”

“So devoted.” Martin said coolly. Colby peered at him, not quite liking the tone.

“Something to say, Agent Sherwood?”

“Not at all. Just commenting that Charlie is lucky to have someone so purely devoted. It’s a rare thing,” he answered with a slight smile.

“I suppose it is.”

“And it’s good to have a place, isn’t it, where things fit together neatly?”

Colby squinted at the agent. “I don’t know if Charlie and I have ever fit neatly.”

“Of course you do. It may have taken time for you both to realize it but in your natural forms, in your moments of pure instinct, you two slide right into place beside each other.”

“Is that why you didn’t stay with Charlie? You didn’t slide into place with each other?”

“Oh we slid quite nicely into place, but I fear what we brought out in each other was not something...survivable in the long term if we had let it solidify.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Charlie is fluid, he shifts and evolves, his desires are broad and far reaching, he makes a place for himself anywhere, with anyone, as naturally as we breathe. He needs to be able to do that, it’s part of what makes him remarkable. I only have one place that is truly natural for me and that would have locked Charlie into something he did not want.”

“And what place is natural for you?”

Colby watched as Martin’s face shifted, became soft, young, submissive. He closed his eyes and sank as gracefully to his knees as any dancer, back straight, head bowed, hands clasped behind it. Colby’s breath caught in his throat as something primal swelled in his chest.

“You will never have anything to fear from me.” Martin said softly. “I would never be more than a
sad burden to Dr. Eppes, unable to truly fulfill his desires.” Colby felt his hand begin to reach out against the will of his higher brain. “I am meant, perhaps, to be claimed by a man more like yourself, a man who acknowledges my place.”

Colby felt his pulse spike as his hand hovered over Martin’s head, the desire to grasp a handful of perfectly placed hair, yank that head back, savagely claim the body that was being so willingly offered. Martin opened his eyes. Colby snatched his hand back as if burned. Martin stood. His face morphed back into that of Agent Sherwood, NSA.

“Amazing, isn’t it, how easy it is just to give in to our natural states?”

Colby swallowed hard and took a half step back. “I’m...I’m going to go make more coffee.” he stuttered out.

Sherwood gave a cold smile. “Of course.”

Colby beat a hasty retreat to the kitchen.

~

Alan bounced nervously outside the LAX security gates. Charlie had been putting final touches to his master work until the last minute and everyone was running late. Charlie and Martin were doing one last double-check of everything before they hit security and there was no turning back.

“Now, you sure you got everything you need, buddy?” Don asked.

“Yeah.” Charlie said with a nod.

“Try to get some sleep on the plane.” Colby said, running his hand over Charlie’s tired face.

“I’ll be fine.” Charlie looked at his brother. “Keep me posted?” he asked.

“Anything happens you’ll be the first to know.”

“Good.”

“Hey, Charlie, I’ve got something for you.” Colby said, handing over a small black box.

Charlie looked confused and carefully opened it. “Your purple heart?”

“Remind you what you’re out there for.” Charlie nodded and slipped the box in his pocket.

Colby leaned in and kissed Charlie gently. A woman passing by stopped and made an affronted noise and opened her mouth to begin to say something. Alan prepared himself to shout this woman down. Without breaking off the kiss Colby brushed back his suit jacket, showing off his badge and gun. The woman turned, her nose in the air, and walked off. Colby broke off the kiss and gave Charlie a peck on the forehead.

“Go save the world.”

Charlie turned and looked at the retreating back of the woman. He sighed. “For all good, God-fearing Americans.”

Colby shrugged. Charlie gave him a peck on the cheek and got into the security line.

Once Charlie was in line, Sherwood pulled a thick envelope out of a shoulder bag and handed it to
Alan.

“If you would be kind enough to keep this for posterity, Mr. Eppes?”

Alan weighed it in his hand. “What is it?”

“The first draft of *The Logic of War* by Dr. Charles Eppes, complete with spectacular spelling errors and half mad ravings.”

Alan nodded. “Something for the history books.”

“Perhaps one day, yes.”

Sherwood gave a slight nod to Don and Colby and went to join Charlie in line.

Alan looked to Don and Colby who both seemed lost in their own thoughts. “There they go to save us from ourselves.”

“Yeah,” said Don slowly “but who’s going to save them from them?”
Colby worked diligently over a backlog of paperwork. A day with the ‘flu’ and the paperwork fairies had gone into overtime. Charlie had promised to call when he landed in DC. Colby checked his watch. It would be another hour, easy.

“Hey, Colby,” Don said, flopping down into an empty chair. “How much math have you picked up from Charlie?”

“A little, but mostly on the conceptual level. Why?”

Don handed over a map with dots all over it.

“Random daylight robberies.”

Colby looked at the map. “They’re too even, random isn’t.”

“I know. I need hot zones.”

Colby shook his head and put his hands in the air. “Don’t look at me. That involves calculus in its easiest forms and that I haven’t picked up.”

“Know anyone who has?”

“Larry?”

“Conference.”

“Oh, that’s right.” Colby went through his mental Rolodex of people Charlie associated with and realized that a disturbingly small number of them were actually other mathematicians.


Colby shook his head. “She quit a month ago, during the Macintyre case. Took one look at the crime scene photos and resigned.”

“How many assistants does that make?” Don asked.

“I don’t know. Too many.”
“Nothing personal, man, but there are days I miss Amita. She at least had a strong stomach.”

Colby snapped his fingers. “Ask Matt Li. He and Amita usually worked on about the same level, I know he’s still using some of her software. Maybe he’s got something.”

Don pointed at Colby. “Now that’s an idea.”

Charlie’s shoes echoed on the marble floor as he passed easily through security. He checked his watch. He was twenty minutes early for his Oval meeting but the odds that the President was behind schedule were pretty good. No one got in his way as he made his way to the Oval Office. Not even the staff he recognized tried to stop him or even greet him. Charlie knew he and Martin probably looked like two of the Four Horsemen stalking down the hall. Charlie had to admit he sort of felt like it.

John Murphy stopped him right outside the foyer to the Oval Office.

“Dr. Eppes.” the Chief of Staff greeted. Charlie was in no mood for pleasantries.

“I blame you, Murphy. You should have known. You should have taken one look and known it wasn’t my work.” Murphy gave a little cough and looked away. “You have my number, you could have at least called.”

Murphy gave a snort. “You sound like my ex.”

“I sound like my ex.”

Murphy sighed. “The President is worried about his legacy.”

“Better to be forgotten than remembered for this.”

“I wouldn’t use that argument going in there.”

Charlie tilted his head back grasping at his own hair in raw frustration. “I was trained in the rigors of logical argument and thought when I was four. I have LAPD thinking in terms of game theory now and every time I come out here it’s like going down the rabbit hole. I say things that make 100% perfect sense and no one listens.”

“Welcome to politics, Dr. Eppes.”

Don watched as math crawled slowly across the white board. Very slowly. Matt froze and stared at the ceiling.

“Matt.” Don snapped.

“Don, I haven’t done raw calculus since college. Charlie showed me how to do this once, quickly, five years ago. Cut me a little slack.”

“Its squiggles on a map, it can’t be that hard. I mean, you’re a smart guy.”

Matt put down the whiteboard marker with some force. “Yes, Don, I am a smart guy, and in case you haven’t noticed your brother redefines genius every time he opens his mouth. Most people don’t even try to keep up with him when he’s on a roll.”
“You always managed to keep up with Amita and she kept up with Charlie.”

Don got hit with a ‘you’ve got to be kidding’ look. “Amita never managed to keep up with Charlie, I mean, yeah, she was majorly smart and did his programming because he finds it tedious, but believe me, he was slowing down his pace so she could keep up and ‘cause when he did run ahead she’d get pissed and he was trying to get laid. That’s why no one could believe it when she decided to stay with CalSci, she was signing up to be permanently second fiddle to the guy she was sleeping with. And for as much as Charlie slowed down stuff for her, I couldn’t have developed her image enhancement algorithms on the best of days.”

Don sighed and dropped his head into his hands. “Matt, just do the math.”

Matt looked at the board. “Can’t we call Charlie?”

“He’s in a closed-door meeting with the President of the United States. No, this once, we can’t call Charlie.”

~

Charlie leaned heavily on the President’s desk. He took a moment to calculate the growth rate of the tree from the wood grain beneath his fingers. Behind him, generals and military advisers argued amongst themselves about the validity of Charlie’s calculations, calculations they didn’t even understand. Charlie raised his head and looked at the President.

“Mr. President, if you continue on this course of action, it will be the stupidest decision in the history of the human species.”

The room went quiet.

“Our strategists assured us...” Charlie whipped around to the general that was speaking, “...with a few minor alterations...”

“Tell me, General,” Charlie cut in. “From which university did your strategists pick up their doctorates in applied mathematics?”

“Well, they...” the general stuttered.

“What gives them or you the gall to think you have even a fraction of the intelligence needed to make ‘minor alterations’ to my work? There are twenty people on earth who have the ability to do what I do and half of them are insane and none of the rest work for you. I...”

The President stood. The room got quiet again.

“I have another meeting to attend. I will read what you have written tonight, Dr. Eppes, and take it under advisement. We’ll discuss this again after morning briefing tomorrow.”

“Yes, Mr. President.” Was the reply given by the room as everyone shuffled out.

~

Colby watched as Don paced about the war room, Matt still working diligently through half-remembered equations.

“How’s Anne?” Colby asked as Don paced into his space.

Don sighed. “Do you know where to find cashew nut butter in this town at two in the morning?”
“No...” Colby answered slowly.

“All-night Middle Eastern food specialty store. Right between the brined chickpeas and the pickled eggplant. Aisle 5.”

Colby nodded. “Good to know.”

~

Charlie leaned against the wall outside the Oval Office. He pulled the picture Don had given him out of a pocket. A lieutenant who was in the meeting but hadn’t said anything paused as he walked by.

“What’s that?” he asked.

Charlie held up the little sonogram picture. “My nephew. First new Eppes since me.”

“Congratulations.” The lieutenant said.

Charlie shrugged. “We’ll see. The doctors still aren’t holding out lots of hope but…” Charlie held out the photo. “He looks strong. He… he looks like a fighter already.”

~

Matt drew a line carefully around an eight square block section of the Silverlake district. He slowly raised his arms in victory.

“I think I’ve got it.”

~

Colby felt weird entering the house with Charlie out of town. He knew he shouldn’t, he practically lived there, he had a key, and had personally cleaned out the gutters the previous December when it became very obvious the Charlie would never get around to it. Still…

Alan came out of the kitchen and looked at him.

“Hi, Alan, I just need to grab some paperwork, I’ll be out of your way.”

“Stay, Colby, I was about to have a drink. You should join me.”

Colby froze. The tone of Alan’s voice made it clear that this was an order and not a request.

Colby smiled. “Sure.”

He cringed internally when Alan pulled out a bottle and two glasses. It was tequila, not even really high-end tequila, and the bottle was full. Colby told himself that as long as he stayed to one or two he’d be fine.

Alan sat down at the table, put the other shot glass in front of the seat across from him and the tequila bottle between them.

‘Shit.’ Colby thought and sat down. Alan poured the first piss yellow shot. Something must have shown on Colby’s face.

“Don’t like tequila?” Alan asked.
“I’m more of a bourbon guy.”

“Are you registered to vote in California?”

“Yes.” Colby answered with confusion.

“Fine, then you can drink tequila like the rest of us.” Alan threw back his first shot without so much as a blink. Colby ignored the desire to ask for at least salt and threw back his. It landed in his stomach like a rock and he suddenly wished he’d had more than a tuna sandwich for dinner. Alan poured another shot for each of them.

Alan tipped his back and Colby followed suit. Well, at least he now knew where Charlie got his taste for the vile stuff from. Not to mention the ability for guys as small as Charlie and Don to hold way more liquor than one would guess.

“What’s wrong with Charlie?” Alan suddenly asked.

Colby shook his head. “Neither of us are drunk enough for that question, Alan.”

“Fine.” Alan poured them both another shot. “Keep drinking.”

Colby tipped back his third shot, then his forth. By the fifth the stuff was actually starting to taste okay. He looked across the table at Alan who didn’t even have flushed cheeks yet where as Colby could feel his already going red.

Colby shook his head as Alan poured a sixth shot.

“I shouldn’t,” he said but his lips were feeling funny, like they weren’t quite connected to his mouth. He half wondered if Alan had somehow spiked his drink but Alan was drinking from the same bottle.

Alan threw back his shot and Colby followed, the tuna sandwich already starting to voice an objection to its new company.

Alan poured a seventh but he just sipped at that one, giving Colby permission to do the same.

“What’s wrong with Donnie?” Alan asked.

Colby blinked a few times. His eyelids felt like his lips. He’d been thinking about what to tell Alan about Charlie, classic interrogation technique. Ask a question then pull a 180 on the next one.

“He’s too fucking good at his job.” Colby said without pausing to think. “He should be an AD in Washington or running an entire field office somewhere but he’s too damn good at what he does. The Bureau’s not going to let him out unless he threatens to quit or gets crippled or something.”

Colby sipped at his drink. “He’s like Charlie, he thinks he can change the world through force of will. Like if he catches every bad guy the world won’t make new ones. He burned out years ago and everyone knows it and no one can figure out how he’s even still standing.”

“‘He put his gun to his head in front of me.”

Colby tossed back the rest of his drink and poured himself another. “Yep.” Colby drank another shot, having now officially lost count. “Ghosts, Alan. They whisper in your ear, keep you up at night, don’t let you sleep, make it cold, tell you you’re a worthless shit, a disgrace to the uniform, and it would be so easy to join them, one shot and you can do the haunting instead.” He chuckled darkly. “I’m from five generations of American soldiers, I grew up with the ghosts of all the men
my father killed in combat. I knew my own would be waiting for me. They don’t tell you about ghosts at Quantico. They should. There are agents who go their entire careers, never pull their gun once, Don’s got all the ghosts of the ones he’s killed but those aren’t the worst ones, those guys are assholes, you ignore them. The ghosts of the ones you didn’t save, the victims you weren’t fast enough, or smart enough to save, innocent bystanders, the agents he’s lost, the ghosts blame him, he blames himself. Living ghosts, the ones he’s sent to the row, their lawyers asking over and over, are you sure, are you sure, are you sure until you’re not sure anymore.”

Alan tossed back two shots in quick succession as Colby talked.

“When Don started getting bitchy a few months back everyone though it was the beginning of the end, whatever was holding him up was finally crumbling.” Colby poured another drink for himself and another one for Alan. “If Anne loses that baby it’ll be one ghost too many. He’ll either quit and take some dead-end job somewhere, drink himself into a coma, do something spectacularly stupid in the field, or just eat his gun.”

Alan looked quietly at his drink before sipping at it. Colby did the same but found he missed his lips on the first try.

‘Oh, shit,’ was the very simple thought.

“What’s wrong with Charlie, what broke him?” Alan asked.

Colby was still together enough to shake his head. “Not my secrets to tell, Alan, and there’s no amount of fermented cactus juice that’s going to get it out of me.”

Alan poured a half shot into Colby’s glass, finishing off the bottle. Colby looked at the empty bottle in horror, then looked at his watch. They’d cleaned out a bottle of low-end Jose Cuervo in under 20 minutes and Colby could feel it hit his head like a brick.

“Are you trying to kill me, Alan?” Colby slurred. “Cause if you are my spare Glock is in a case under Charlie’s bed and it’ll be a lot quicker and if you empty out a plastic soda bottle and stick it over the end you can even have a silencer so the neighbors don’t call the cops.”

“Thank you for that bit of information but no, I’m not trying to kill you. Drink your drink.”

Colby took the half shot and swallowed it. Alan got up on bizarrely steady legs, went to the liquor cabinet and pulled out a second bottle.

Colby frowned. “How much tequila have you got in there?” he asked.

“Charlie bought them for a margarita night that got blown off for a case.”

“Oh.”

Alan twisted the cap off a second bottle and poured. A little sloshed onto the table, which Alan quickly mopped up with a sleeve. For some reason Colby found this funny and began to giggle.

“Why’s Charlie on medication?”

“Mood swings.” Colby answered before downing his drink.

“What mood swings?”

Colby tried for his best ‘you’ve got to be kidding’ face. “He stays awake for three days in a row
living off coffee and math then crashes down, binges on lemon meringue, then won’t get out of bed for a week, mood swings.”

“So?” Alan said sharply, “His mother did the same thing. Some weeks it was up at 4 in the morning organizing the PTA and Little League, other weeks the only thing that got her up were the boys begging for breakfast and she’d be in bed by six. It didn’t kill her.”

Colby put his face in his hands. “Oh, that explains so much,” he said softly to himself and desperately prayed that he’d be able to remember that bit of information once he sobered up. Colby sat up straight a little too quickly, the blood rushed out of his head and the tequila rushed in. The room spun and Colby grabbed the table. “They almost killed Charlie ‘cause after three days at the boards he was sneaking out of the house and going to all the wrong kinds of bars and clubs to get picked up by all the wrong kinds of people and getting himself in stupid, dangerous situations then dragging his bloody beaten ass home and sitting in the kitchen eating an entire pie while seriously considering putting one of the kitchen knives through his own wrist and then not getting out of bed for a week so no one could see the worst of whatever injury he’d gotten. That’s why he’s medicated. The drugs take off the sharp tips. He still stays awake for days on end but doesn’t try to sneak out when he’s done and he still binges on pie but he’s not completely suicidal while he’s doing it anymore and unless he agrees to electro shock therapy, which ain’t gonna happen, he’s going to be taking something for the rest of his life.”

Alan looked at Colby and blinked a couple of times. He went to pour himself a drink then aborted the motion in favor of taking a swig right out of the bottle. He slid it across to Colby who did the same thing himself.

“Alan, I know you’d probably do anything to have Amita sitting here rather than me but trust me, if you think I’m bad, you should have seen the guy Charlie was trying to pick up before me. I mean, we’re talking ugly on all levels, Neolithic, and LAPD to boot.”

Alan took the bottle back and took a long drink off it.

“Well, you’re easier to cook for than Amita.” Alan said, voice still annoyingly clear. Colby laughed and laid his head on the table.

“Please don’t tell Charlie I told you anything,” Colby said, the laugh turning into half sobs. “He just wants to be the perfect son for you and knows he can’t. He hates to disappoint you.”

Alan reached across the table and put the bottle in Colby’s hand. “Don was supposed to play pro ball and Charlie was supposed to help me start a planning firm.”

Colby took a long drink. “I was supposed to die.”

“You were?”

“Yep, valiantly in combat and if I didn’t I was supposed to come home and marry my high school sweetheart and have a dozen kids so that maybe one of them would die valiantly in combat.”

“That’s what your father wanted?”

Colby shook his head slowly. “No,” he said softly. “That’s what the rest of the family wanted. I was Dad’s favorite, I’m the only one he took fishing.” Colby took another drink and started to giggle. “The funny thing is I think he would have liked Charlie.” Colby felt hot tears suddenly squeeze from his eyes.

Alan took back the bottle and took several quick sips. “Oh, where did I fuck up?” he asked quietly.
You didn’t.” Colby said laying his head on the table top. “If you’d fucked up they’d both be dead by now. Okay, maybe they’re not all joy and light but they’re alive and trying to save the world. Like super heroes, the brothers Eppes, no case to dangerous, no problem too convoluted. Wow, I actually managed to say that word.”

Alan and Colby both cracked up.

“Explain to me string theory in your state and I’ll be really impressed.”

Colby shook his head. “I’ll do you one better.” He fumbled inside his pocket and pulled out a small notepad and pen. It took a moment for his eyes to focus but once they did he quickly scribbled down a series of symbols and tossed the pad to Alan while taking back the bottle.

“What’s this?”

“The first three parts of Cognitive Emergence.” Colby said and took a long swallow off the bottle.

“Really?”

“I have no idea what it means but I’ve had it written across my body in enough interesting fluids that I can recognize it upside down and backwards.”

“Charlie does math while you’re having sex?” Alan asked, his words finally starting to slur together, sounding more than a little horrified.

“You don’t want to know what’s involved in getting Charlie to stop thinking about math for five minutes and no, just sex, even damn good sex, ain’t enough.” Colby took another drink and really prayed he wouldn’t remember this in the morning.

“Some parents want their kids to be remarkable; I just wanted mine to be normal and happy.”

“They are as god made them.”

Alan blinked. “What a schmuck.”

~

Charlie sat quietly outside the Oval Office. A four star general sat two chairs down. Charlie thought the guys name was Higgens or Huggies or something.

“I read your piece, Dr. Eppes.” The general said suddenly.

“Which one? I publish a lot.”

“The Logic of War.”

Charlie gave a snort. “True logic would simply be to not have war. Did you understand it?”

“I was a little fuzzy on some of the math.”

“Do you play chess, General?”

“Yes.”

“Any good?”
“I have my moments.”

“Well if you can play chess your mind is logical enough to learn math.”

The General nodded. “Is that why you think you can tell seasoned generals how to run a war, you play chess?”

“I think I can tell them how to run a war because math is everything, the movement of every particle in the universe can be predicted as long as you have enough data and the math is good enough and quite frankly no one’s been running this war or any other war for a very long time. We’ve let petty ancient grudges smolder unintended like a fire in a peat bog until it erupts out of control a good distance from where it started. Cassia was a game, General. I gave you boys a game and you treated it like it was real. Now, ask nicely and I’ll give you something real, but what you have now is nothing more than a toy that’s going to burn down the whole neighborhood and I’m taking it back.”

~

Colby pressed his face to the cool metal of his desk.

“What the fuck happened to you Granger?” Don’s voice sounded from somewhere above him. Colby winced and looked up at Don, David and Megan.

“I’m not going into the field today, Don.”

“No shit. You look like crap, what happened?”

“Your father deciding to have a manly heart to heart is what happened.”

“Was tequila involved?” Don asked.

Colby squeezed his eyes shut, his stomach turning over at just the word. “Maybe a bottle or three.” Megan gave a low whistle.

“Is Dad okay?” Don asked, eyes going wide with worry.

“He’s fucking fine.” Colby groaned out. “I woke up to him whistling in the kitchen.”

“Where were you?” David asked.

“Under the table.”

Don gave a bark of laughter that forced Colby to squeeze his hands to his ears.

“Alan Eppes drank you under the table.” David said with a chuckle.

“It’s not funny.” Colby moaned. “The man’s a mutant. We were on the second bottle before his speech even slurred. That’s not normal.”

“What did you talk about?” Don asked still looking a little horrified.

“Your mother.”

“Watch it.” Don said darkly.
“No, really, after the second bottle we talked about your mother.” Colby closed his eyes his head pounding in time to his pulse. “He still misses her. Totally has the hots for Kathryn but really misses her.” Colby said in a whisper hoping the others would take the hint.

“Yeah, well.” Don said flatly. “Why don’t you just stay there and try to do paperwork today.” Colby nodded.

“At least he didn’t threaten to kill me this time.”

“When did he threaten to kill you?” Don asked.

“Oh, the last time we had a heart to heart. If I ever hurt Charlie I will find myself bound and gagged at some abandoned construction site, courtesy of some teamsters who owe him, whereupon my nuts will be severed slowly with a cheese grater until I bleed out, at which point I will be hacked into small pieces, run through a food processor, dried out and fed to the koi.”

Colby cracked open an eye. Don’s jaw was on the floor, along with David and Megan’s.

“Seriously?” Don asked.

“He had the cheese grater in his hand when he said it.”

“Whoa. Remind me never to piss off Alan.” David said.

“It’s a good thing you don’t have sisters, Don.” Colby said closing his eyes again. “They’d be bitter, bitter, forty-year-old virgins by now.”

~

Charlie stood on the other side of the Oval Office from the Joint Chiefs. He knew most of them, a few of them even sort of liked him, at least when they were drunk.

“Gentleman, operation Cassia will cease immediately.” The President said.

Charlie let out a breath and bowed low from the waist. “Thank you, Mr. President.”

“Don’t thank me yet. You seem to fancy yourself quite the strategist these days.”

Charlie shook his head. “I am now and have only ever been a humble mathematician.”

One of the generals actually snorted.

“Oh I doubt you’ve been humble a day in your life, Dr. Eppes,” the President said. “You’ve made a compelling and logical argument. Now you get to back it up in practice. Are you able to stay in DC for a while?”

Charlie shook his head. “I’m sorry Mr. President. I have family obligations that really must take priority the next few months.”

“Priority over a presidential request?”

Charlie pulled out the sonogram picture and handed it over to the President. “My first nephew. First Eppes in a long time. Um...there are complications, we’re not sure if he’ll make it. I’m handling all the specialists for my brother because the FBI really needs to improve its medical coverage for dependents.” The President looked at the picture and turned it around a bit. “They say he’s big for his gestational age. If he can make it another eight weeks... Well, we’re hoping for another eight
weeks."

The President nodded. “Of course.” He handed back the picture. “That doesn’t mean you’re getting to drop *The Logic of War* on us then walk away. The digital age is a marvelous thing. They call it telecommuting.”

Charlie nodded. “Of course, Mr. President.”

“I’ll have Murphy be in touch.”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“Okay, folks, what’s next?”

~

Don’s feet pounded the pavement as he careened around a corner, the suspect only a few feet out of reach. David stepped out from behind a dumpster and clotheslined the guy. Don slowed down and stopped while David snapped cuffs on.

“You’re under arrest… for making me run.” Don said between breaths.

David yanked the guy to his feet. “And smelling bad.”

~

Charlie leaned his forehead against Martin’s shoulder, not really caring that they were in a main corridor of the White House.

“Is the world coming to an end?” Martin asked.

“Maybe, but not through any action or inaction of mine.”

“Good, let’s go home.”

~

Colby had come back from a coffee run to find his Purple Heart sitting on his desk and a B- on the white board next to Matt’s equation with some notes in Charlie’s hand about the proper weighting of variables and a message to come see him at office hours for remedial calculus.

According to Don, Charlie had only come in long enough to grade Matt’s work and mention the world wasn’t coming to an end.

Now Colby stood in the doorway of his bedroom and watched Charlie sleep. He had Colby’s pillow clutched to his chest and his face looked drawn. Charlie’s eyes fluttered open.

“Shhhh. Go back to sleep.”

Charlie closed his eyes but reached out a hand to Colby.

Colby sat on the edge of the bed and took Charlie’s hand.

“We did it.” Charlie said softly.

“So I gathered.” Colby stroked Charlie’s hair. “How are you feeling?” he asked.
“Tired. I didn’t sleep well. I don’t sleep well without you any more.”

“Me too.”

Charlie brought Colby’s hand to his lips. “Take a nap with me.”

Colby smiled. “Okay.”

He striped down quickly and climbed into bed behind Charlie. Charlie rolled over, pressing his face to Colby’s chest. Colby felt his whole body relax in a way it hadn’t in days. His body knew that this was how sleep was meant to be had, with Charlie’s body pressed against his, the soft sound of his breathing and his scent in his nose. Colby’s eyes fluttered shut and he slept.

~

Charlie woke up slowly to the feel of Colby’s fingers sliding up and down his bare hip. Charlie sighed and blinked into Colby’s chest. The touch was so gentle. Charlie squirmed a little feeling himself begin to slowly harden. He’d been on edge since before the Cassia mess. D.C. had been an exercise in pure self-control, fighting back the chatter of dark numbers that always hovered around the edge of his mind. In the past it would have been an easy fix. A pen jabbed hard into the thigh, a slight cut to the palm of his hand, something that would look like a paper cut but hurt like hell, a simple misstep off a curb if he could risk it, but all those were against the rules now, not allowed. Pain only came from the hand of the man who had claimed him before knowing what it would mean.

Charlie twitched again. He didn’t need gentle touches right now. His mind was scrambled and in a fit of despair he had broken hard-fought for rules, had clawed and cut at his flesh, slammed his body into the hockey table to feel his ribs snap, imagining it was the fists of those he would have killed pounding into him, taking their revenge.

“Please.” Charlie heard himself whisper.

The blanket was pushed aside and with quick, economical movements Charlie found himself spread across Colby’s lap, a couple of pillows pushed under his chest so as not to strain the still-cracked ribs.

There was no preamble, no warm up. The first blow landed on the soft flesh just above his knee with the full force of Colby’s strength. The crack echoed around the room and the flash of pain spiked through Charlie’s body, blinding his mind to all other things. Before the flash could fade Colby landed another blow and another.

Charlie made no effort to control the sounds that bubbled from his mouth. Cries and screams, babbled curses and apologies as Colby worked methodically up one leg, across Charlie’s ass and down the other, each blow overlapping the one before. Even as the pain gleefully blinded Charlie to his own mind, his body fell into rhythm, rising up to meet Colby’s methodical blows, then grinding down into Colby’s thigh.

Then the blows stopped. Charlie took a deep breath, squeezing hot tears from his eyes. Before Charlie could even consider thoughts more coherent than ‘breathe’ Colby’s nails scraped along the burning flesh. Charlie screamed even as he felt his hips buck wildly into Colby’s leg.

The crack of flesh hitting flesh resumed, Colby’s hand landing randomly on already tender skin, and with a particularly hard blow to the thigh Charlie felt himself launched from his own mind. All was sensation now, all was pleasure. Each strike sent waves rushing from his too hard cock to his
furthest extremities, the screams becoming pornographic moans and pleas.

Colby stopped and slid himself out from under Charlie. There was the squik of the lube bottle and Charlie scrambled to get on his knees. The bed sank beneath him and he felt Colby get his cock into position.

“Mine,” he heard Colby growl out before thrusting in with no warning. The pain, pleasure was blinding, perfect. With that first thrust Charlie came, burning the numbers from his mind, the world blurring around the edges.

Colby continued, his hips snapping against the hot, raw skin, for long minutes, each thrust sending aftershocks through Charlie’s body until Colby came with a growl, sinking his teeth into Charlie’s shoulder, sending him over the edge for a second time with a desperate scream.

Colby managed to collapse next to Charlie instead of on top of him. Charlie managed to pull the blanket over them as they both shivered through recovery, breath slowing, hearts rates returning to normal. They blinked at each other, knowing words could wait. Colby reached out a hand and took Charlie’s and they both closed their eyes and drifted back into sleep.
The Feel of a Warm Bath

Chapter Summary

In which conversations are had and decisions are made.

“Alan, I have to say you are not on your game today.” Larry said sliding a rook across the board.

“I’m fine.”

“Check. For the third time.”

Alan sighed. “Sorry, Larry, I guess I’ve just been thinking about other things. Or maybe other things have been thinking me.” Alan said with a chuckle.

“Well that’s understandable, what with everything.”

Alan moved his king. “Every time I think I can’t get a bigger shock to the system…”

“How is Anne doing?” Larry asked.

Alan shrugged. “Hard to say, but every day is a good thing.”

“That is true.”

“Have you and Megan thought about…”

Larry moved a pawn putting Alan in mate. He didn’t even state it, Alan just sighed and started resetting the board.

“Children?” Larry asked.

“Yeah.”

Larry shrugged slightly. “Well, we have discussed it in passing but I’m afraid we are in a rather difficult situation.”

Alan took the first move, edging a pawn out onto the board. “Well, you haven’t married her yet.”

“Alan, last I checked, despite this slightly obsessive need you have to see the world married off, it’s not a prerequisite for getting someone pregnant. It’s just that in many ways I am as bad as Charles when it comes to falling into my work and living in my own world and Megan has fought too long and hard for her career to be a full time mother and I would never ask it of her, but it would leave primary care giving in my rather shaky scattered hands and frankly, Alan, I am not a young man.” Larry spun his knight out onto the field.

“You still have a few good years left on you.”

“True, but they’re slipping by quickly. Don’s current situation has brought the discussion up again, though…” Larry gave a sigh. “May I confide in you, Alan?”
“Always.” Alan shifted another pawn.

“I started out in nuclear physics, and I’ve been to space, and I’m afraid I have some concerns on the general state of my transitive DNA.”

“Worried the kid’s going to come out with extra arms?”

“Or no arms at all, yes.”

Alan shook his head. “Larry, I’m sure you and your transitive DNA are fine.”

Larry contemplated the board for a long moment then idly moved a pawn. “May I ask how Charles is handling all this? We haven’t had a lot of time to have a proper discussion lately. I’m afraid he’s rather gone to ground.”

Alan slid his bishop out. “Charlie is…Charlie has stepped up. I’m proud of him. He’s shouldering a lot of financial responsibility that he knows Don just can’t manage right now, he tries to make it to all of Anne’s doctor appointments, he’s over there almost daily. Between him and Don it’s hard to say which one is more nervous. I think he wants to see this baby born as much as Don.”

Larry nodded and snagged one of Alan’s pawns. “I do know he feels some guilt about not being in a situation to personally carry on the Eppes line.”

“Yes, well. There are ways around that these days. I’m sure Colby wouldn’t mind kids. He comes from a big family.” Alan contemplated the board but didn’t make a move.

“Still,” Said Larry pensively. “I’ve always gotten the impression that Charles is scared of the concept of his DNA being out in the world, as if all the things he sees wrong with himself would somehow be forced upon a child.”

Alan’s knight jumped a row of pawns onto the field. “That’s just stupid.”

Larry shrugged slightly. “He gets requests to donate every year and as far as I’m aware he has always politely but steadfastly refused.”

Alan peered across the board at Larry. “He does?”

“Oh yes,” The pawn guarding Larry’s queen slid out. “Between the genius and the big brown eyes there have been a steady stream of women wanting his babies.”

Alan frowned at the board and the thought. “He’s never mentioned it to me.”

“Well, like so many things in his life, I’m afraid it’s one more thing he did not feel comfortable revealing too much of to the world.”

Alan picked up a pawn but didn’t put it down, just twisted it about in his fingers. “Larry did you know about…well, did you know Charlie was gay?”

Larry lowered his head, “Well, not in so many words. He had just barely hit puberty when we met and for the most part seemed more interested in math. When there was word that he was interested in someone it seemed to shake out fairly evenly between male and female, but after a few years he seemed to come down on the female side and frankly, I didn’t put a lot of thought into it, until…well, until I watched Colby snap a two inch thick piece of particle board with his bare hands at the sound of Charles in distress.”
Alan sighed “Well, at least it wasn’t a grand conspiracy to keep me out of the loop.” He put the pawn down within striking distance of Larry’s knight.

“I’m sure Charles just didn’t want to disappoint everyone. I’m sure he just wanted some part of himself to be perceived as normal.” Larry moved his knight.

“I just want him to be happy.”

“But a wife and a home and two kids would be nice as well, from your point of view.”

Alan shrugged and moved a pawn. “I’m getting over it.”

“Agent Granger isn’t a bad man.”

Alan nodded. “I know. He’s a good man, Charlie means the world to him and then some, it’s just as a parent when you try to picture your children’s future…I guess I’m just showing that I’m a product of my age. Always pictured Amita or some similar girl. You know sweet, pretty, understands the math, pregnant, barefoot, in the kitchen.”

Larry gave a bark of a laugh and slid his queen onto the field. “Amita would have cold cocked you if she heard you say that.”

Alan gave a wave. “Oh I know, and I don’t really mean it that way. I guess I just pushed at those two because I’d given up on Don finding anyone for more than three weeks and mainly she seemed able to put up with Charlie. Actually, at the start I kind of pictured her and Donnie.”

Larry stopped for a moment and went deep into thought. “Now, strangely enough, that is a pairing I could see.”

“I know.” Alan slid out a bishop. “But I like Anne. I mean I barely know her, but the fact that she’s willing to risk this… it says a lot.”

Larry shifted his queen. “That it does.”

“I still worry about Charlie, though. He’s changed so much, or maybe stopped being someone he wasn’t. Some days it’s like living with a stranger.” Alan slid out his other bishop. “Did you know he doesn’t like pancakes?” he asked quickly.

“I may have been aware of that.” Larry replied, studying the board.

“His mother used to make them ever week. He always ate them. Turns out he’s never liked pancakes but never said anything because Don liked them and didn’t want his mother to stop making them on his account.”

“And all these years you never knew.” Larry’s other knight shifted to stand by his queen.

“I was up early last week, decided to make pancakes for breakfast and he comes down and just looks at them and sighs and tells me that he’s never liked pancakes.”

“Oh my.”

“And then he said it was okay because he was trying to watch his figure anyways. I’m not sure if he was joking.” Alan said with a shake of his head.

“He has taking to preening a little more the last couple of years.” Larry said as Alan moved his own queen onto the field.
“Not to say I mind him dressing well but once upon a time his only requirement for clothes was that they were vaguely clean, and his only requirement for food was that it existed, everything else was just math.”

“You want to know the odd thing Alan?” Larry asked, claiming one of Alan’s pawns.

“What?”

“The math has gotten better.”

“Has it?”

Larry nodded. “Oh yes. Charles always had this odd habit of padding his math, making it seem easier, softer, like anyone could have done it and he just happened to be the one who came along first. It was like he was scared of the math or scared the math would scare other people and would sort of edge around it in a lot of ways, but lately the math has become…sharp. Anything not needed is gone and it’s blatantly brilliant. Just in the last few years I’ve seen him put out equations that even I can’t begin to understand and he can barely explain but they are there in full glory and he signs his name to them proudly. I supposed hiding aspects of his genius went along with hiding other parts of himself and now he feels less need to do so.”

Alan shrugged and shifted his rook against his king. “I suppose so. Still a little warning would have been nice, a hint, a clue, from anyone.”

“It was a little startling.” Larry said nodding in agreement.

“I was so furious in those days.” Alan half whispered, sounding far away.

“At Charles?”

Alan shook his head. “At everybody. At Don for getting his brother so wrapped up in the FBI, at Charlie for being so ready to drop his own work for Don’s, at Colby pretty much for just existing, at myself, especially at myself. No matter how old your children get some part of you always believes that you’ll be able to protect them… Charlie never wears his old t-shirts anymore because he doesn’t want people to see how badly scarred he is. The thing is, the doctor told me that all the worst ones came from him trying to fight against the ropes. If he had stopped fighting they would have been minimal and healed to almost nothing.”

“Do you really think Charles would be capable of not fighting?” Larry asked.

“No.” Alan said with a sigh. “And I suppose I should take some pride in that, shouldn’t I?”

~

Don slid into the bath behind Anne and wrapped his arms under her breasts and over the steadily increasing baby belly. Anne hummed contently and settled her head back on Don’s shoulder.

“Oh why didn’t we install the tub first?” Don asked as the warm water relaxed his back.

“No idea.” Anne mumbled, sounding half asleep. “Long day?”

“They’re all long days.”

“I know.”

Don sighed. “I’m sorry.”
“For what?”
“I don’t know. Everything.”
“Hey, takes two to tango, remember?”

Don cupped some water into his hand and let it trickle out across Anne’s stomach, her skin amber from the candles lighting the bathroom. “I know, it’s just all kinda...quick.”

“Second thoughts?”

Don shook his head a little. “No. Just, you know, uncontrollable blind panic. You?”
Anne gave a little nod. “About the same.”
Don chuckled a bit. “I was just thinking today, I don’t know your favorite color.”

“Green.”

Don thought about it for a moment. “Green is nice.”

“How about yours?”

“Blue.”

Anne gave a low chuckle. “Probably Dodgers blue.”

“Nothing wrong with that.”

“Never said there was.”

Don closed his eyes and just took a moment to enjoy the feel of the warm water and Anne pressed against him.

“We finished 24 weeks today.” Anne said softly.

“I know.”

“We should...we should probably start planning.”

Don let out a long breath. “I know.”

“I mean...I mean this is really going to happen.”

“I know. I did mention the uncontrollable blind panic, right?”

Anne picked up Don’s hand and put it over her stomach. “He’s asleep now but he was twisting around all day. Felt like he was swimming laps in there.”

Don chuckled. “He’s just getting into shape for spring training.”

Anne shook her head. “You know Don, considering the genetics of you family there is a chance he could come out a nerd.”

“My son, a nerd? Never.” Don proclaimed boldly.

“Well there must be some pretty major nerd genes running around somewhere to get Charlie and
let’s face it your dad’s kinda a geek in his own right.”

“I don’t care if he comes out with two inch thick glasses and a calculator, Little League will happen.”

Anne smiled. “Whatever you say, Daddy.”

Don froze. “Oh god, someone’s going to call me Daddy.”

“Yep, little someone who’s asleep right there.” Anne poked her stomach.

“I got to get out.” Anne tried to lean forward but Don held her. “No, I mean...”

“What is it Don?”

“I’m kinda asking you to be a house wife aren’t I?” Don asked with a hint of horror.

“Yep. I got a glass of water yesterday and I realized I was pregnant, barefoot, in the kitchen. If you had come home at that moment I think I would have thrown the toaster at you.”

Don squeezed his eyes shut. “I’m sorry.”

Anne shrugged. “Don, any other guy, any of my exes, I would have been down at Planned Parenthood five minutes after that stick turned blue and you wouldn’t have heard two words about it or had any say if you had. This is as much my choice as anything.”

Don took a deep breath. “Give me...Give me a couple of years, I know it’s a lot but...the Bureau’s talking about opening a Quantico extension up in the hills and they’re going to authorize a second Violent Crimes unit. Let me...let me get the right people trained up, the right ones in place. I can...I can get out of the field, teach again, or get an oversight position, and...and I can do school runs and PTA meetings and be home in time for dinner and...”

Anne twisted around to look at Don. “Are you serious?”

Don blinked a few times. “Yeah. Yeah, I think I am.”

“You love your job, Don. You’re great at it.”

“Yeah, I love my job which has me sucking on my gun twice a month and in therapy and practically living on my brother’s couch and drinking too much.”

“You don’t drink too much.”

“Yeah, I do. A beer with dinner turns into four passed out on the couch.” Don closed his eyes. “Look, I’m not good husband or father material, never have been, and I’m not going to be able to change overnight but...I’ll try, okay?”

Anne blinked the tears from her eyes and leaned her head against Don’s chest. “Don, that’s more than I ever expected to get from anyone in my life. You’re a good man. I think that alone would be enough.”

“Well, I’ll try for more, I promise.”

~

Colby sank low in the tub and rested his head on Charlie’s chest.
“Long day?” Charlie asked.

“Multiple up in the hills, whole family.”

“Gonna need me on it?”

Colby shook his head. “Drugs. Looks like more of this Columbian verses Jamaican shit. Walker and Garcia are working it. We’re just providing forensics.”

Charlie gave a long sigh. “Every time I think we’re making headway...”

Colby just shrugged as Charlie gently massaged his arms and chest. “Did you talk to Anne today?”

Colby asked.

“Yeah, she said the baby felt really active today, swimming around.”

Colby smiled. “Watch him turn out to be a jock.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it.” Charlie trickled some water down Colby’s chest.

“Colby...do...do you want kids?”

Colby twisted his head around to look up and Charlie then gave a shrug. “I don’t know.”

“Really?”

Colby shrugged again. “I thought I wanted a wife and kids and house in the suburbs and a golden retriever but...I don’t know if I wanted it or if I wanted it ‘cause that was what I was supposed to want.”

“I’m sorry.” Charlie said softly. “I’ve kinda made that difficult haven’t I?”

Colby shook his head. “My life made that difficult. I mean, look at the office. Having a stable relationship with anyone kinda puts me in the minority.”

“Do you want kids?” Charlie asked again.

Colby shrugged again. “I guess it’s a nice thought in the abstract but the reality of that...nah...I’ll be Uncle Colby, that works.”

Colby frowned a little in thought as Charlie ran his fingers through his hair. “Do you want kids, Charlie?”

“No.” Charlie answered without pause.

“Really?”

“I’ve never wanted kids. At least not ones that are genetically mine.”

“Really?” Colby asked, a little disturbed by the statement.

Charlie shrugged. “I’m a mutant, Colby. I’m the result of a genetic fluke that altered the development of my brain. If I’d been born with an extra arm they would have cut it off. My mutation is useful so I’ve been spared the frontal lobotomy, but...there’s so much extra crap in my head that’s come with it. There’d be no guarantee that my genius would pass on and to potentially subject a child to all the other shit that’s wrong with me...”
Colby sighed and took Charlie’s hand and pressed it to his chest. He knew when Charlie got in these dark moods there was nothing to be done for it but ride them out. The medication kept them from crashing into full out suicidal urges but nothing could get Charlie to love himself at these points. And if he’d logicied himself into an idea like no kids ever then it would take more energy than Colby could muster up at the moment to logic him out of it.

“Plus, I’d be a disgrace of a parent.” Charlie added. “I mean I have a hard enough time keeping the koi alive.”

“Charlie, if it really came down to it, I have no doubt that you could rise to the occasion and be a fine parent.”

Charlie shrugged. “I always figured I’d probably have to one day. Figured I’d get roped into marrying some girl, probably Amita, have a kid to keep Dad happy. I guess I though if I could pull off the act for 18 years, try not to screw the kid up too much, get a divorce and die alone in the old mathematicians’ home…”

“You really thought you could fake it that long?”

“I faked it for 30 years, what are 20 more on top of that?” Charlie asked with a sigh. Colby kissed the palm of Charlie’s hand and got a happy hum in response. “This is why I love you so much.” Charlie said. “You’ve never tried to change me.”

Colby twisted around to look at Charlie. “Uh, Charlie...I’ve put vast effort into trying to change you.”

Charlie shook his head. “No, you haven’t. You’ve tried to fix the broken bits but you’ve never tried to turn a blender into a toaster oven. You never tried to make me into something I wasn’t, like everyone else. You gave me encouragement to rein in my bad habits instead of ignoring them or just trying to cut them off. You’ve taken every drop of insanity in stride. You’ve been...patient. I don’t know what I’ll ever be able to give you to equal that.”

“You give me plenty, Charlie.”

“It doesn’t feel like it.”

“You give me you. You give me a place. You give me a reason to get up on mornings when I don’t want to. You hold me when I have nightmares.”

“Doesn’t seem like enough.”

“Charlie, my own mother didn’t hold me when I had nightmares. I was told to toughen up and go back to bed.”

Out in the hall Alan silently mouthed ‘What!? ’ He had been planning for a quick toilet run, one of the joys of being over 50, when he realized the boys were indulging in a late night bath. He had planned to give the lemon tree a quick water instead, then he heard them talking. He knew he shouldn’t be listening in, but Charlie had so many lies of omission these days Alan had gotten into the habit of gathering scraps of information any way he could.

‘Charlie, my own mother didn’t hold me when I had nightmares. I was told to toughen up and go back to bed.’

“You’re kidding.” Charlie’s voice echoed from the crack in the door.
“No.” Colby said flatly. “She knew we’d all end up soldiers. She didn’t want to coddle us.”

“Speaking as someone who was not only coddled but downright spoiled that’s complete bullshit, love.”

“I don’t think she wanted to get too attached to us boys. I think she had a bunch of us so she could afford to lose a few and still get grandkids. You know, an heir, a spare, and a couple that could be expendable.”

Alan buried his face in his hands trying to figure out how Colby could come from a family like that, go through war, and still end up with a delicate enough touch to lead Charlie through the minefield of his own brain.

“Love,” Charlie’s whispered voice trickled into the hall. “You are unique, brilliant, wonderful, and as long as I have anything to say about it you are never, ever expendable.”

Alan sighed and made his way downstairs and out back. He’d been trying for a couple of years now to figure out how Colby and Charlie fit together. Sure Colby was smart, had a good chess game, but not a genius like the women that Charlie had dated. Of course that was the thing, women. Alan had only ever seen how Charlie related to women in terms of romance. With Amita, Charlie had gotten into the habit of making grand romantic gestures to make up for brushing her off for the FBI or Larry or just flat out forgetting that she was there. Where as with Colby he seemed to remember the simple day to day affections and Colby seemed content to let him wander off into math land for as long as was needed, knowing full well that Charlie would come back to him. Alan had to admit that Amita had tried to turn Charlie into her perfect boyfriend where as Colby just let Charlie be Charlie and if Colby’s mother was anything to go by even Charlie’s small affections were probably more than he was used to.

Alan finished watering the lemon tree and looked up at the house, a soft glow coming from the bathroom window. He shook his head. For all the times he looked at his sons and wondered where he’d gone wrong, at least he loved his boys and more importantly they knew it.
The First Whisper of a Plan

Chapter Summary

Charlie has a plan. It's a kinda crack monkey plan.

Chapter Notes


Authors Notes: Okay this chapter might feel a little out of place. Honestly it's been shifted around this story about a dozen times. I'd cut it out all together but it's a set up for something that I will hopefully do in Whitman 5 so it sort of needs to be here. At any rate give it a read and give me your feelings on it.

Martin Sherwood knocked on the garage door after there had been no answer at the front, though he could hear music playing somewhere in the house. He had let himself into the Craftsman having finally talked Charlie into giving him a key for emergency reasons. Not that he couldn’t get into the house very easily without a key. Getting the key had been a big win though, along with talking Charlie into carrying the panic button. He knew Colby wasn’t happy about Martin technically having free access to the house and swept the Craftsman for bugs every week. What he didn’t tell Colby was that every time he was in the area he swept the Craftsman for bugs as well, only he had some seriously high tech gizmos to help him do it. He knew a few too many of Charlie’s secrets and not the type that needed to get written up in anyone’s reports. Of course, Charlie knew a few too many of his as well.

“Come in,” came a tired-sounding call from the garage.

“Hello, Professor.” Martin said. “Didn’t you hear me knocking?”

“Yeah but I figured if it was anyone I actually needed to see they’d just come around the side.” Martin sighed internally and decided he’d try to talk Charlie into a security system next. The man knew how valuable an asset he was and negotiated his fees to match but at the same time he always acted as if he were expendable.

Charlie was standing in front of his blackboards looking tired and worried.

“I came for those results on…”

“They’re on the hockey table.”

Martin went and picked up a folder with all kinds of classification data on the outside. He thumbed through it, though he didn’t understand most of it. Of course, that wasn’t his job. His job was really to make sure Charlie stayed loyal, useful, and alive, pretty much in that order.
Charlie didn’t move from his spot, staring at the boards full of equations.

“What are you working on, Professor?” Marten finally asked.

“You know I could destroy a country?” Charlie said softly. Martin blinked a few times.

“Is this a hypothetical discussion we’re having?”

“I could destroy a country and rebuild it into a peaceful, stable, area. The math says I can.”

“Dr. Eppes are we talking about this country or one of our immediate allies ‘cause if we are…”

“You know I’ve never looked at Colby’s military record. I could, I could even get into the sealed bits.” Martin cringed beneath his Men In Black mask. He had read Colby’s military record, even the sealed bits. There were bits that just weren’t pretty. “It never seemed right. I’ve never looked at Don’s FBI file or even my Dad’s.” Martin restrained himself from telling Charlie that his Dad’s file was actually a pretty interesting read. Certainly a valuable historical document of the era.

“We’re talking about Afghanistan, aren’t we?” Martin asked softly. “Not a war game, a real plan?”

“The math says with an army big enough, real time data input from every satellite we've got, I could do it. I could run through those hills, take prisoners, destroy lines of supply, annihilate insurgence forces, wipe out the poppy crop as a Christmas bonus to my friends at the DEA. It would take me...six, eight months, tops.”

Martin’s eyebrows actually rose the tiniest bit. “Write it up.”

“No,” Charlie said with a shake of his head.

“Charlie, if you’ve got a plan…”

“I almost destroyed the world with my last plan.”

“That wasn’t a plan, that was a game.”

“What did that Congressman say, ‘We fucked up the endgame?’ If we continue as we are we’ll leave in two years and be back in ten. So says the math.”

Martin nodded in agreement. “If you’ve got a better idea…”

Charlie ran his hand over a section of equations. “I’d need to double current US forces, have full NATO backing, plus internal Afghan troops…”

“Things like that can be arranged.”

“I’d have to be giving the orders. In real time. I’d have to be in a room, doing the math as the information came in, bypass the chain of command, be giving orders straight to ground troops. I’d have to be pulling the strings.”

Martin felt himself give a little laugh. “Sounds like Ender’s Game.”

“What?”

“Oh, I forget, you don’t read.”

Charlie pursed his lips. “I read.”
“It’s about a genius kid in the future who’s trained by the government to be a military commander. They set him up in a simulated ‘game’ where he has to defeat an alien race. He manages to annihilate them completely then is told it wasn’t really a game and he was commanding a real fleet as it happened.”

Charlie snorted. “What happened to him?”

“The guilt of genocide sends him into a five day coma then the books get a little weird after that.”

Charlie looked thoughtful for a moment. “Sounds about right.”

“The math says this could be done?” Martin asked just to make sure.

“The war bit is actually easy. Not fucking up the end game, that would be hard.” Charlie pointed to another set of equations. “That’s the end game. It would have to dovetail with the final push. To achieve stability we’d be talking about the largest humanitarian effort in the history of the planet, I’m not just talking about rice and blankets. I mean rebuilding every damn mud hut and outfitting each one with solar panels since they’re out of trees to burn, I mean replanting millions of acres of forest, millions of acres of cropland, drought-resistant food crops, fresh top soil, deep water wells, buildings, schools, roads, hospitals and making sure every little village has all of the above, basically rebuild the entire infrastructure of a country in a way conducive to developing polite western thinking, and fast. Not to mention full debt relief, micro loans, macro loans, probably rig an election or two, and it would have to be done in a year or less while simultaneously guarding the border from external combatants trying to undermine what we’re doing.”

‘Only you, Dr. Eppes.’ Martin thought with a sigh.

“Write it up.”

Charlie snorted and flopped down on the floor, staring at the rafters.

“I’d have to make devil deals with everyone from the CIA to Greenpeace and the only thing I’ve got to bargain with is my brain and the type of money we’re talking about is in numbers even I’m finding kinda big.”

“Write it up,” Martin said again.

“I mean we’re talking huge sums going to a country no one particularly likes full of people no one particularly trusts.”

“Write it up,” Martin said for a third time, hoping that simple bit of instruction would sink in.

“And I can make just as good an argument that we should be funneling all that money into education and healthcare.”

“Yes, that way in a generation we’ll have smart healthy kids that can go and get shot at by their not as smart and healthy kids.”

Charlie shook his head. “This is completely insane. I don’t know what I’m thinking.”

“The math says you could do it.”

“The math says I can stick a cat in a box and it’s alive and dead simultaneously. That whole analogy was developed by Schrödinger to point out the absurdity in the difference between what math says and what the real world allows. According to math I can unscramble an egg. I’ve yet to
manage that, either.”

“Write it up, Dr. Eppes. You have a plan, no one else does.”

Charlie scrubbed at his face. “How did I come to this, Martin?” He asked softly.

“I don’t follow.”

“I remember the first time I saw a dead body at a crime scene. Bank job gone bad. Don got… Don got his arm grazed, I went into a mild case of shock and puked my guts out. I retreated here and tried to solve P vs NP for two days. Now… I was at a scene for LAPD last week. Really messy. A bit of human brain matter fell off the ceiling, landed on my shoulder, my first thought was ‘that’s gonna stain.’ A piece of human brain and I treated it like a bird dropping. I philosophically don’t believe in guns but that doesn’t change the fact that I’ve become a very good shot. The thought of war makes me outraged and yet in my free time I just did up a set of calculations that lists numbers of human lives as ‘statistically acceptable losses’ and what’s more I want…” Charlie shook his head. “I want to be your Ender. It makes my fingers itch. I want to be in a room somewhere pitting my math against a real time battle for real stakes. Me, not some general rewriting my work, me.”

Charlie rubbed his eyes “How the hell did I become this?”

’Because we needed you to and you never fought it.’

“Why don’t you ask your brother how he went from a minor league all-rounder to the youngest tactics instructor Quantico ever had.” Martin answered gently. “Ask Agent Reeves how she went from the upstate country club social register belle to picking apart the brains of serial killers.”

Charlie stood up and picked up an eraser. Martin grabbed his wrist before it could touch a board.

“Charlie, you just told me you’ve got a plan. Okay it’s kinda a crack monkey plan that hinges on the world giving a gay atheistic Jewish mathematician who made his public name with a self help book lots of money and serious military power to destroy and rebuild a predominantly Islamic nation, but Charlie, no one else has got a plan. I mean really. The plan as it stands is to pull out in a year or two and let the whole area sink even deeper into hell and you’re right in a generation or less we’ll be back there trying to root out people who hate us because someone told them they should hate us and the satellite feed doesn’t get them the Simpsons and they don’t know who we are any more than we know who they are.”

Charlie put down the eraser.

“What’s the worst that can happen?” Martin asked.

“I’ll get a lot of people killed and waste a lot of money.”

“No the worst thing that can happen is they’ll tell you no.” Charlie just shrugged. “At least you’ll still have your looks.”

Charlie snorted. “Martin, does the NSA know that underneath that black suit and ten pounds of hair gel you’re just a deranged horny little nerd?”

Martin let a smile crack his face. “No Dr. Eppes that’s just a little secret between you and me.” Martin rubbed his hand along Charlie’s back a few times. “Write it up. All of it. I’ll make sure it lands on the right desk.”

“Yes, where it will quickly move to the right garbage bin.”
“I think they recycle now.” Charlie gave him a withering look “Just write it up, Charlie. Please.”
The Sound of a Breath

Chapter Summary

And then the day comes.

Chapter Notes

Authors Notes: First off I have to give a huge debt of thanks to sabelle67 and boymommytotwo for sharing their personal experiences and the experiences of friends. Without them the next few chapters would not be half the quality they are. So thank you both. That being said I’m sure I left something out or forgot something and I know I ended up fudging some medical stuff but I hope I kept the emotion honest and recognizable.

Don sat up with a start to the sound of Anne calling his name. She was standing at the foot of the bed, tears flowing down her face.

“It’s too soon,” she choked out.

~

Don felt beyond helpless, all the books, all the website had told him he’d feel helpless. This was worse than that, this wasn’t helpless, this was useless. Anne curled into a ball on the hospital bed squeezing his hand until he could feel the bones begin to bend.

It wasn’t the pain Don couldn’t stop; that wasn’t the worst, it was the tears. They hadn’t stopped for a moment. They ran down Anne’s face in waves and ran down his own.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” Anne whispered between sobs.

“It’s okay.” Don tried to say. Be supportive and sympathetic the books advised. “You can do this.”

Anne shook her head. “It’s too soon.”

The doctor came into their small but private room. Anne curled into a tighter ball, squeezing her eyes shut, as if she could somehow keep the child in her through pure force of will.

“Mrs. Eppes,” the doctor began, a middle aged woman with a kindly face.

Anne shook her head. “It’s too soon.”

“Mrs. Eppes, Anne. Can you look at me?” Anne cracked open her eyes. “Yes it is too soon but we knew this was coming. You made it to twenty nine weeks, that’s twenty eight more than any doctor would have predicted. You’ve done very well, you’ve done excellent. You have nothing to be ashamed of, do you understand?”
Anne squeezed her eyes shut again and squeezed Don’s hand but gave a tight nod.

“Good. Your last scan showed he was large for gestational age, which means his lungs should be more developed and that’s a very good thing. Now we’re going to have everything set up ready to go. We have good people standing by. He’ll be warm, he’ll have air and food and a team of very experienced people keeping a very close eye on him. We even have little speakers that can play a recording of your heartbeat for him. Okay?”

Anne nodded again. Don gently stroked her fine hair unable to think of anything else to say or do.

Anne opened her eyes and took a deep breath trying to blink away tears. “Make the call.” She whispered. Don nodded and pressed his lips to her tear stained cheek before stepping out into the hall.

~

Colby picked up his phone. “Hello.” He mumbled into it, peering at the clock that said 3:22 a.m.

“It’s Don. It’s started.”

“Okay. Good luck.” Don hung up on him. It had all been arranged weeks ago like a military operation. Don would only have to make one phone call to set everything in motion. Colby nudged Charlie awake. Charlie mumbled. “Charlie, it’s time.” Charlie’s eyes snapped open and he sprang out of bed grabbing his phone and pulling on clothes. Colby quickly made his way down the hall to the master bedroom. He tapped on the door and let himself in.

Alan squinted at him from the dark. “Is it time?” He asked in a rough whisper.

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

“Downstairs in five.” Colby closed the door as Alan nudged Kathryn awake next to him.

Back in their room Charlie was dressed and on his phone. His job was to call Anne’s best friends, Sasha and Mary. Colby pulled on jeans and a t-shirt, then grabbed his own phone.

~

Megan picked her phone up before it vibrated off the nightstand. “Hello.” She whispered into it.

“Megan, it’s Colby, it’s started.”

“Right. I’ll meet you there.” Megan hung up and nudged Larry awake. “Larry, come on, time to get up.” Larry made a mumble and tried to hide his head under a pillow. “Anne’s in labor.”

Larry sat strait up. “Oh my! What?”

“I don’t know anything. Just it’s started.”

Megan had put a new number on speed dial and quickly thumbed it. The phone on the other end rang twice.

“Edgerton.” A voice rough with sleep answered.

“It’s Reeves. Where are you?”
“Fresno.”

“Time to hit L.A.”

“Shit.” Ian mumbled as Megan began pulling on clothes the phone wedged between her ear and shoulder. “I can be down in about four hours. Can you give me a quick brief, what’s on the board?”

“We’ve got bomb threats hitting the LA Times through the mail every other day, same sender but no bomb yet. Got a nasty Columbian/Jamaican turf war but Walker and Garcia are heading up that one, we’re just providing manpower and forensics. We’re waiting for forensics on two suspicious deaths that may or may not be connected, got a product tampering case but that’s looking like an isolated incident, and a sloppy bank job, we’re just waiting for the guys or the money to pop their heads up.”

“So… busy week?”

Megan laughed. “No, Ian, this is a light week where we catch up on paper work.” Ian groaned. “Welcome to Violent Crimes, boss.”

Ian sighed. “I’ll see you in the morning,” he said, then hung up.

Megan dialed another number and waited for the voice mail to pick up. “This is Special Agent Megan Revees calling to inform you that Special Agent Don Eppes will be starting his leave of absence effective immediately. Agent Ian Edgerton has been informed and is in transit to L.A.”

~

Colby fidgeted in the waiting room with Charlie, Alan and Kathryn. They had tried to get information but all they were told was that labor had begun and the doctors were making final decisions and preparations. Alan began to pace about the room, practically bouncing off the walls, whereas Charlie got up and worked his way into a corner of the room. Colby checked his watch. It was barely four. The door swung open. All heads shot up and there was a slight whoosh of disappointment as Megan and Larry came in. Megan caught the vibe in the room.

“I take it we don’t know anything?” Everyone shook their head. Larry took a seat next to Colby and Megan took up a place in the corner across from Charlie.

Next time the door opened David crept in with a quiet nod.

“Hey.” He said to Colby in barely a whisper.

“Hey, man. You didn’t have to come down. We don’t know anything yet.”

David shrugged. “Biggest thing to happen to the office since you and Charlie hooked up. I’m not getting left out of the loop this time.”

Colby gave a tired chuckle. “Fair enough.”

Just a moment behind David were two women Colby had never met. One had short cropped blond curls and a sweet if slightly disconnected expression, the other had long blue hair which you could argue was either hospital blue or baby blue. Charlie came out of his corner and gave each of them a hug. He lifted a lock of blue hair.

“Sasha, explain to me how you manage to color coordinate your hair to any situation?” Charlie
asked.

“Practice. And lots of Manic Panic.”

Charlie waved his dad over. “Dad, these are Anne’s friends, Mary and Sasha.”

“So, no news?” Sasha asked. Alan shook his head. “Right.”

Colby was sure that Charlie could get some sort of amazing mathematical formula out of watching the way people paced around the small room, avoiding each other yet still managing straight lines that intersected. Colby blinked and for a split second he swore he could see the paths of each person streaking back and forth across the room, the speed they each moved, where the paths intersected. He gave his head a shake and made a note to ask Charlie about it later.

The door opened one more time and a doctor stepped in.

“Eppes?” the doctor inquired.

“Yes,” everyone said in unison, even though there were technically only two Eppes in the room.

“Very good, Mrs. Eppes will be delivering tonight. She is being moved to the delivery room as we speak and it should take place within the next hour.”

“Anything else?” Alan asked.

“That’s all I can tell you for now.”

“Right.”

The doctor left the room and everyone looked at each other.

“Should someone… maybe… be there?” Larry asked carefully.

The room was silent as everyone of course wanted to be there but at the same time dreaded what the final outcome could be.

Suddenly a ring tone pierced the quiet. It was a tinny, telephone rendition of Hail to the Chief.

“Shit!” Charlie exclaimed and flipped his phone open. “Eppes.” He snapped. “No I will not hol…” Charlie rolled his eyes. “What?” Charlie snapped then rolled his eyes again. “Good morning to you too, Mr. President.” Charlie said, heavy on the sarcasm. Every eyebrow in the room except Colby’s shot up. “Look… I can’t… This isn’t…Mr. President!” Charlie suddenly snapped. “It’s four in the morning, my sister-in-law is in labor and unless you need me to stop the apocalypse you can give it to someone else.” Charlie snapped his phone shut.

Alan’s jaw dropped. “Charlie, did you just hang up on the President?”

“Oh, like I’m the first.”

“Charlie!”

Charlie held open his arms. “You once said one day I’d have to make a decision between one of my equations and a kid upstairs sick with the flu. I’ve decided.” Charlie tossed his phone to Alan who barely caught it. “I’ll be with Don.”
“Wait.” Alan said as Charlie grabbed the door knob. “What do I do if the president calls back?”

Charlie shrugged. “Answer it.”

~

The room was dim and warm. From somewhere there was whale song playing. Anne was taking long slow breaths. They had skipped the whole lamaze class thing since the chances of a normal birth were going to be so low anyways. They’d also skipped a lot of the birthing books for the same reason. Don had tried to read a couple of expectant father books but had mainly just found them patronizing. He still remembered how to change a diaper from when Charlie was a baby and was really more concerned about whether or not his son was going to come out with functioning lungs. He’d diligently read What to Expect When You’re Expecting front to back but Anne just treated it more like a reference manual.

Tucked into the corner of the room was a clear plastic box. Don knew his son would go right into it, tubes and monitors were all standing by waiting for something that shouldn’t happen for another two months but was going to happen now.

The door opened and Charlie snuck in, wrapped in blue disposable hospital scrubs.

“Hey,” he said softly.

“Hey,” was all Don could manage. Charlie gave Don a squeeze on the shoulder then went around the bed to take Anne’s other hand. She gave him a ghost of a smile.

“Hey, Christian.”

“Hey, Annie.” Charlie looked around. “Why are we listening to whales?”

Anne shook her head. “I don’t know. I voted for Begger’s Banquet.”

“My kid is not coming out to Sympathy for the Devil.”

“I’ve got Let It Be...Naked out in the car.” Charlie offered.

“Maybe for the next one, Charlie.” Anne said between clenched teeth.

The door opened again and a small army of people walked in in masks and scrubs.

“Okay, Mrs. Eppes. Are you ready?” One of the masked people asked.

“All right, Mrs. Eppes this shouldn’t take more than a push or two.” Someone said.

Anne nodded, got into position, closed her eyes and pushed.

There was a wet sound and the doctor’s hands came away. Don saw what could only be a sick joke of a baby doll in the doctor’s hand, tiny and dark, no movement, no sound. The nurses descended. The cord was quickly cut and the face was wiped and the tiny mouth suctioned. Then there was a noise, it couldn’t be called a cry, maybe a mew from the smallest of kittens, a slight whistle, the sound of a breath passing over small lips.
“We have lung function.”

Anne began to cry and Don felt the tears run down his own face again. The plastic box was rolled over and within a moment the room had the sound of a heart monitor, rapid but steady, strong.

“We’ll take him strait to NICU.” Don nodded and watched as his son was wheeled out of the room. He turned to Anne who let go of his hand for the first time in hours.

“Go.” She said, gesturing to the door.

“I’ll watch her.” said Charlie.

Don nodded and ran after the team.

Charlie stroked Anne’s head gently. “He made a noise, did you hear?”

Anne nodded, then suddenly gripped Charlie’s hand. Charlie looked over just in time to see something horrible hit the bed.

“Holy Shit, what’s that!?” Charlie exclaimed feeling his stomach turn over.

“That’s the afterbirth.” A nurse informed calmly.

Charlie looked at Anne, unable to get the horrified expression off his face.

“If you pass out I’ll kill you.” Anne mumbled exhaustedly, still holding Charlie’s hand. Charlie swallowed hard, firm in the knowledge that he’d never be ill at a crime scene again after that.

“Okay, Mrs. Eppes, we’re going to get you cleaned up then you can rest.”

“I want to see him.” Anne said.

“I know. In a little while. They’re getting him cleaned up and settled in as well.” The nurse said calmly.

Anne let go of Charlie. “Go find Don.”

“Okay.”

“Tell him, Matthew.”

~

Don leaned against the large glass window. There was a whole room of babies on the other side, if they could be called that. Don still remembered Charlie coming home from the hospital. He’d been large and round, a week late, with stubby fingers, and dark hair, and chubby cheeks that never really went away.

There wasn’t a pink chubby cheek in sight here. Life could only be detected by the beeps of heart monitors and the rise and fall of tiny chests connected to a dozen tubes. A part of Don thought it looked like a sick modern art exhibit, especially the way the incubators were brightly decorated with pictures and drawings and the name of each baby.

Here and there a parent sat quietly next to one of the plastic boxes, each with a tiny life inside, the parents wrapped in dim yellow robes. There was a void in the room, right near the window, an empty spot waiting to be filled.
Don jumped as a hand rested on his shoulder.

“Don.” Charlie said softly.

“Anne?”

“Is fine. They’re just getting her cleaned up and settled in.” Don nodded. He looked at his watch, it wasn’t even five yet, it had all happened so fast.

“Where..?” Charlie began looking through the window.

Don shook his head. “They need to weigh him and do...stuff.”

Charlie nodded. “Anne says Matthew.”

“Matthew Eppes.” Don gave a little smile. “Sounds good.”


Don gave an exhausted chuckle that may have come out closer to a sob.

There was movement in the room. A cart with an incubator and all kinds of equipment Don didn’t recognize, but got the feeling he soon would, was wheeled into the void. A piece of tape was stuck to the plastic with the word Eppes written on it in black pen. Don squeezed his eyes shut.

“He’s so small, Charlie.”

“No, Don, open your eyes, look.” Don looked. “See,” Charlie pointed. “He’s trying to kick his legs already. He’s strong. He was just impatient, wanted to get out and see the world. Must get that from you.”

Don nodded and tried to breathe. He watched as the baby, Matthew, tried to shift his legs for another moment before seeming to settle down into sleep.

A youngish man in purple scrubs came towards them.

“Mr. Eppes?”

“Yes.” Said Don.

“I’m Nurse Andrew, I’m here to answer any questions you have right off, then I get to make you fill out paperwork.” the young man said, holding up a clipboard with what looked like a half a ream of paper attached to it.

“How is he?” Don asked quickly before he could even think.

“He’s doing well. Three pounds even, that’s very good for 29 weeks, his heart sounds good, his O2 levels are good, your wife is expressing in the other room and as soon as that’s ready we’ll get in a feeding tube and get him breakfast.”

“Feeding tube?” Don asked with some panic.

“Not as scary as it sounds. Our goal here is for him to be able to put all his energy into growing, that means doing everything for him, keeping him as quiet and relaxed as possible. This is full time pampering until he’s ready to go home. Okay?” Don nodded. “Okay. He’s going to be assigned a
specific nurse so she can learn his habits, likes, dislikes.” Don looked through the window at his tiny son. “Don’t let the size fool you, he’ll start displaying personality and preference very quick.”

“Can I hold him?” Don asked.

The nurse shook his head. “Not right away, we don’t want to over stimulate or jar his system. You may be able to touch him a little.”

Charlie began rubbing soothing circles on Don’s back as he contemplated not getting to hold his son until who knew when.

“You’re going to have Martha assigned to your baby.”

“Matthew.” Don said quickly.

“Excuse me?”

“Matthew, his name.”

“Good name.” Andrew said with a smile. “Martha is a wonderful woman, she’ll be in in about an hour and she’ll take good care of all of you, help you over the rough bits, answer your questions, and she’s been doing this longer than I’ve been alive.”

Don nodded. “Okay. Thank you.”

“Now, hate to do this.” Andrew held up the clip board. Charlie plucked it from his hand along with the pen.

“I’ll handle the paperwork.”

“Well then Mr. Eppes, would you like to meet your son?”

Don nodded and let himself be led away.

~

Charlie was still diligently working his way through a mound of insurance and payment forms when the circus solemnly and quietly arrived.

“Hey, Charlie.” Alan said softly. Charlie stood and motioned everyone towards the window. Don and Anne were in matching yellow robes watching as a nurse slid in a tube up through Matthew’s nose.

“Oh, God.” breathed Alan at the sight. Charlie could hear the shake in his father’s voice.

“Hey, it’s okay.” Charlie rubbed firm circles on his father’s back. “You’re a grandpa now.” Alan nodded.

“Have they picked a name?” David asked.


“Mattie Eppes. Sounds like a ball player to me.” Megan said and there were soft chuckles all around.

“That’s what I thought about Don Eppes.” Alan said.
“Nah, Don Eppes, FBI rolls too easily off the tongue.” Megan argued.

Alan gave a snort. “So that’s where I went wrong.”

Sasha leaned over and whispered into Mary’s ear. “What color?”

“Blue.” Mary answered, never taking her eyes off the infant.

“Dodgers Blue?”

Mary smiled. “Yes.”

“Don’ll be happy about that.”

“He’s strong already.”

“Good.”

David’s watch beeped. He quickly shut it off. “Oh look, time to wake up.”

“At 5?” Megan asked.

“I was going to go for a jog.”

Larry took that moment to let out a jaw-cracking yawn. “Oh, excuse me.” He quickly said.

“It’s okay. I think we’re all feeling it.” Colby said.

“There better not be any call-outs today.” mused David.

“Maybe we can talk the new boss into an early day.”

Don looked up and out the window. He gave a little wave to his team, who waved back.

“So this is life now.” David said, sounding a little philosophical.

“For Don, yeah.” said Colby softly. It was a weird thought and he knew Megan and David shared it. Don, in his own way, was damn near as hyper as Charlie, only willing to sit still through sheer exhaustion, notorious for the amount of twitching he did on stake outs. The thought of him more or less glued to a small box in a windowless room for the next few months was a difficult one to contemplate and yet they all knew he would do it. He’d probably have to be dragged out to eat or sleep or change clothes.

“Oh, here.” Alan said suddenly, handing Charlie back his phone. “I nearly forgot. The President called back.”

“Did you answer it?” Charlie asked with more than a little trepidation.

“Yes. We had a very nice chat and he sends his best and would like you to call him back before his six o’clock with the Chinese premier.”

“Right.” Charlie said, still feeling a little suspicious at the thought of his father talking with the president.

“You have some interesting people on your speed dial you know?”

Charlie’s eyes went wide. “Did you crank call the Pentagon?”
“No,” Alan answered a little too quickly.

“We wouldn’t let him,” said Colby.

Charlie gave his father a bit of an evil eye before dropping his phone back in his pocket.

Nurse Andrew came out of a side door. “Excuse me? Mr. Eppes, Dr. Eppes?”

“Yes,” said Alan and Charlie.

“I’ve been asked to run you through decon procedures and then you can meet the new member of your family.”

“Well, I think that’s our cue to get an early start at the office.” Megan said.

Larry gave Charlie a hug. “Give Don my best and all my hopes for his own wormhole.” Charlie chuckled.

“Wormhole?” Colby asked.

“Children, portals into the unreachable future and the unattainable past, wormholes.”

David gave Megan his patented ‘You’re sleeping with this guy?’ look.

“Thank you Larry.” Charlie said, then took his father’s arm. “Come on, Dad. Let’s go meet the newest Eppes.”

~

Ian did his best to look awake as he strode into LA Violent Crimes. He had certainly done more on less sleep and he knew he didn’t have anything to prove to these guys; still, he was stepping into Eppes’ shoes and wanted to make a good impression.

Reeves, Sinclair, and Granger were already hunched over their desks and the smell of coffee was wafting through the air.

“Hey.” he greeted. Three heads popped up. All looked tired.

“Morning, Ian. How was the drive?” David asked.

“Long. So...what’s the word?”

“Matthew Alan Charles Eppes, born 4:38 am, three pounds even.” Colby provided.

“How’s Don holding up?”

Everyone shrugged. “His first-born son is in a plastic box, hooked up to heart monitors with a tube up his nose.”

Ian nodded “Fair enough. Hey, Megan, can we talk for a moment?” Ian gestured towards the break room.

“Sure thing.”

Ian poured himself a cup of coffee, going heavy on the sugar. “Look, I know Eppes wanted you to have this gig but the Bureau gave him some shit about manpower and seniority and god knows
what. I’m here mainly as a favor. Everyone knows there would be no way he’d trust you lot to a stranger and if there’s one time in his life he doesn’t need to be thinking about this place it’s now. Outside of some classified moments in South America I really don’t do the field commander thing so if you want this I’ve got no problems, I’ll just sign whatever needs to be signed every day and as far as I’m concerned you can run the whole damn city.”

Megan poured her own cup of coffee. “You know what, Ian, I’m going to do you a favor.”

‘Shit.’ Ian thought at the tone of Megan’s voice.

“Violent Crimes is all yours. You’re a big boy, boss, time to learn to play with others.” Megan gave Ian a pat on the arm and went back her desk.

‘I wonder if she’s been talking to my mother.’ Ian thought as he followed.
A Shade of Yellow

Chapter Summary

"The first days are the hardest days, don't you worry any more."

In later years Don was only able to describe the first days of Mattie’s life as a vague blur of jumbled feelings falling into routine. Fear, worry and panic cut with split seconds of blinding joy. Don wasn’t sure if there was a Saint Martha but he was willing to write a letter to the Pope recommending Nurse Gonzales for the position. At five foot four, small and dark, she handled Mattie as if he was the center of the universe and talked Don and Anne through the never ending cycle of weightings, feedings and tests.

Don had never gone through the phase of wanting to be a doctor and had never had a good impression of hospitals. The never ending smell of antiseptic burned at his eyes and nose and the beeps and hiss of heart monitors and oxygen provided a white noise soundtrack that never stopped.

And yet in the blur a few moments stood out. Reaching his hand in for the first time, slipping just the tip of a finger beneath a tiny hand. Don swore he felt the smallest flex of fingers and sucked in air trying not to cry.

Don could remember holding his breath the first time Mattie was lifted from the incubator, about a week old, and pressed to Anne’s bare chest. Martha quickly wrapped a sling around Anne and Mattie, holding him there. Anne had gazed down at her son’s small head for long minutes before looking over to Don with a shy smile.

“He’s so warm.”

Don had smiled and lay his head on Anne’s shoulder watching his son sleep against her chest.

The next day it had been Don’s turn, just a half hour to start with. Don knew his hands were shaking and he could feel his heart slamming into the inside of his rib cage. The doctor had given them a long explanation about the importance of skin to skin contact but all that fell from Don’s mind as the tiny warm body was pressed to his chest. He was dimly aware of the click beep of Charlie’s camera phone but all Don could focus on was the heady mingle of joy and terror as he held his boy for the first time.

A few days later Mattie rested in Charlie’s trembling hands for just a moment while his bedding was changed. Don had insisted and tried not to laugh at Charlie’s face frozen in terror. This time Colby’s phone gave a click beep as Charlie blinked down at the small life in his hands. “It’s a good look for you, Chuck.” Don had said before Charlie gently settled Mattie back down.

Colby handled his turn far better, picking up Mattie like an old pro, humming some little tune Don didn’t recognize and despite Mattie’s small size Don was struck by how natural it looked, Colby cooing at a baby. Don wondered for the first time since Amita had left town if Charlie would ever have a child of his own, be willing to drag himself out of his own world long enough to let another life into it. Certainly Colby looked as if he wouldn’t mind.
Don rubbed at his eyes as he made his way to the NICU ward. Dawn was just skirting the edge of the LA sky. His dad had sent him and Anne home late last night with orders to get a few hours of sleep. Anne had fallen into the deep sleep of the utterly drained but Don had spent too many years in situations where utter exhaustion meant you probably needed to be twice as alert.

Don’s steps faltered a little as he rounded the corner to the ward. Agent Martin Sherwood, looking as immaculate as ever, was peering through the window at Mattie, hands clasped behind his back.

Don came up beside him. “Agent Sherwood.”

“Agent Eppes.” Martin greeted without looking away.

“Umm…Charlie’s not here.” Don said since that was the only reason he could think of for the NSA agent to be there.

“I know. He’s ignoring my calls, I figured I could short stop him here.”

“Ah.” Don watched as Martin’s head tilted to the side as if he were looking at some alien creature. “He’s small.” Martin said in a matter of fact way.

“Yes.” Don replied.

“I’ve never seen one before.” Martin said having not shifted his gaze the entire conversation.

“A preemie?”

“A baby.”

“Really?”

“Well, not a live one.” Don decided he didn’t want to contemplate what that could mean.

“So no other kids in your house?”

“My homes were never rated for infant fostering.” Martin replied without emotion.

Don tried to hide any surprise at that simple statement. It was probably something the controlled agent hadn’t really meant to let slip. Foster kid, lifelong from the sound of it. Don’s estimation of the man went up several notches. You don’t go from being bounced around the system to firmly settled in the depths of the NSA, in charge of handling Charlie, without being very smart and very good.

“Would you like to come in?” Don offered.

Martin turned to look at Don for the first time. “I can’t.”

Don shook his head. “Weekend night nurse, she doesn’t know all the family yet. Just tell them you’re Anne’s brother if anyone asks.”

Martin nodded and Don led him through decontamination. Don wondered if he would have any sense of smell left by the end when the harsh burn of the antiseptic hit his nose. Wrapping the required yellow robe around himself, he knew he’d never want to see that particular shade of yellow again when this was all over. He’d already thrown out the one yellow tie he owned.
The lights in the ward were dim, simulating night as he walked down the row. There were a few other parents but they were little more than just odd blurs in the corner of his eyes and Don was sure he wasn’t much more to them.

He did a quick visual check of Mattie, then a check of the equipment and the log of the night nurse. Martha had been more than willing to explain what every beep and hiss and notation meant in the first days, easily sensing that Don was a man used to being in control of situations, not that this gave him any more control but knowing what was going on at least let him maintain the slightest thread of an illusion.

Martin peered into the incubator twisting his head first one way, then another.

“I think he looks like you.” Martin said softly.

“You can’t really tell at that size.”

Martin bent over and peered through the side.

“I think he has your nose.”

Don nodded. Mattie fluttered his eyes open for a split second, showing little slivers of blue gray. Don had been told they would probably darken to the same brown as his but they weren’t even meant to be open yet.

“Hello.” Martin said softly. “I’m Agent Martin Sherwood, NSA.” Don tried not to snicker at Martin’s very formal tone. “And you are Matthew Eppes. That is a very important name you have. That name means it is part of my job to keep an eye on you, make sure you don’t get into trouble and trouble doesn’t come looking for you. Luckily your Uncle Charlie picked a hospital with a reasonably good in-house security system.”

Don grew still. As an agent he was always worried about people trying to get to him through his family but he hadn’t put a lot of thought into people trying to get to Charlie the same way. Then again, Charlie seemed to be getting deeper and deeper into more and more dark and secret stuff.

Mattie seemed uninterested. Soft footfalls echoed through the room and Don looked up to see Charlie approaching, looking more than a little perturbed.

Charlie skipped the hellos. “I told you I’m taking a month off and you’ve got a lot of nerve coming here. Whatever it is give it to someone else, anyone, give it to Larry.”

“Good morning to you too, Dr. Eppes. I know you’re taking time off. We would just like your opinion on who would be the best person to farm out a little of your usual work to.”

“Cryptography, Amita. Set analysis, Penfield, as long as someone double checks his arithmetic. Straight ops, go in house.”

“You know we can’t give work to Dr. Ramanajan.”

Charlie rolled his eyes. “Oh for fuck’s sake, she’s a native born citizen, she’s been to India once, she doesn’t speak the language, she knows no one there, she can’t even cook a curry.”

“I don’t make policy and you know it Charlie.”

Charlie threw his arms in the air. “Fine, email me whatever.”
“Are you two quite finished?” Don snapped, still a little tired.

“Yes, my apologies.” Martin answered quickly. Charlie looked down at his feet looking a little guilty.

“How is he?” Charlie asked.

“Had an easy night.”

“Good.” Charlie pulled something from the pocket of the robe. “I brought something.”

What Charlie handed over Don recognized immediately but hadn’t seen in years. It was his rookie year baseball card from the Stockton Rangers.

“How did you find this?”

“I’ve had it lying around for a while.”

Don laid it against the clear plastic. “Hey, look at this. It’s your daddy.” Mattie’s eyes seemed to flutter for a moment. “It’s your daddy a long time ago back when he was batting .323 with 51 RBIs. Which isn’t half bad.”

Charlie chuckled and looked at the picture. “And no matter what your daddy or Uncle Martin here may think, that amount of hair gel is never coming back into style.”

~

Don scowled as the hospital tuna sandwich turned over in his stomach. He knew there had to be an alternative to the hospital cafeteria but he couldn’t bring himself to take the time to find it. Even after three weeks, he more or less had to be forced from the ward to perform basic human maintenance like eating and sleeping.

As he came around the corner, he spotted Ian hanging out by the entrance to NICU.

“Hey, Don,” Ian greeted casually.

“Hey, Ian. What can I do for you?”


Don smiled. “He put on half an ounce yesterday.”

“Good.”

“How are things on your end?”

Ian shook his head. “You don’t need to worry about the office, Don.”

“Just asking.”

“Well, don’t.”

“Had the urge to crack David and Colby’s heads together yet?”

Ian chuckled. “Only a small one.”

Don smirked. “Got into a pissing contest with Walker and Garcia yet?”
“Just a minor one. I think I won.”

“Well, Charlie gets along oddly well with both of them, get him to run interference if the testosterone gets too thick.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Ian said with a nod, then reached into a pocket and pulled out an odd looking thing that seemed to be made of bits of wire and crystals. “Uh, look,” he kinda stuttered. “There’s this guy whose ass I saved a while back and he’s sort of a witch doctor.”

Don couldn’t hide the smirk. “Really?”

Ian rolled his eyes. “He tells me he keeps away the ghosts of all the people I kill.”

“Does it work?”

“Well, I haven’t seen one yet. At any rate, I mentioned Mattie and he sent up this.” Ian handed over the strange little thing. “It’s supposed to keep away the evil eye, bad spirits, plague, dandruff, I don’t know.” Ian shrugged. “I figure it couldn’t hurt.”

Don nodded. “Well, right now I’m willing to try just about anything.”

“I figured as much.” Ian patted Don on the arm. “Don, you are a completely indestructible son of a bitch, I don’t see how your kid’s going to be any different.”

Don gave a half chuckle. “Thank you for that, Ian.”

Ian gave his watch a quick check. “I have to get back.”

“Yeah.” Don gestured to the door to the ward. “Me too.”

Anne paced outside the ward, stretching her legs. She’d been warned that it would be hard, but even when nothing was going wrong she was finding that some days just seemed to be a little longer and harder than others.

She was considering just banging her head against the wall when she noticed David Sinclair coming down the hall. She waved to him. They had never really had a proper conversation but he always seemed like a nice guy and everyone seemed to speak well of him.

“Hey, David.”

“Hey, Anne. How are you doing?”

“Hanging in there. Want me to get Don?”

“Nah, just dropping something off from the guys in SWAT.” David handed over a gift bag. Anne reached in and pulled out a brown teddy bear in a green SWAT uniform.

“Oh,” she squeaked. “It’s so cute.” She tapped the bear’s chest. “I think there’s Kevlar in there.”

David grinned. “SWAT commander’s wife is pretty good with a needle and thread.”

Anne petted the bear. “Well, tell them thank you for me.”

She looked at David, still hugging the bear. “You guys really like Don, don’t you?”
“He’s a good boss and a good man. The part of the world we deal with you find out that’s kinda a rare thing.”

“There’s more than that.”

David shrugged. “Don was tracked to be one of the youngest ADs in the Bureau. Hell, he was tracked for the top job. Sharp, focused, politically savvy and he walked away from that ‘cause a family he barely spoke to at the time was more important. Everyone knows it and they might not all get it, but they respect it. I was assigned to Don’s team to spy on him, more or less. I was offered a transfer after a year; decided I’d rather work for Don. Colby had a free ride to a corner office himself. Turned it down.”

Anne nodded. “I know he appreciates you guys. I know he doesn’t like being away from the office this long.”

David shook his head. “This is more important and we wouldn’t let him in the front door if he tried.”
Ian calls in the cavalry and the Eppes Theorem rides again.

Ian looked at the body spread out on the floor, a bullet hole right between the eyes of the corpse. It should have been a straight-up homicide investigation for LAPD except the victim had been IRS, which gave them a suspect list that included the entire population of L.A. Not that you could tell the guy was IRS by how he lived. The décor of the small whitewashed house was more Shut in Loony than anything else.

Ian picked up a black and white notebook. There were hundreds of them scattered all around the room. The notebook was filled with numbers, rows and rows of numbers with no kind of notation. He showed the notebook to David.

“What do you make of this?”

“Could be anything.”

“Guess?”

David shrugged. “Stock market, horse races, no clue.”

Ian picked up another notebook. It was filled with the same rows of numbers. “Just lots of numbers.”

“Well lucky for you, Ian, I happen to know a guy who’s pretty good with those.”

“Yeah, me too. Think he’ll come in?”

“Won’t hurt to ask.”

~

Ian watched as Charlie flipped through one of the 200 notebooks they had taken from the crime scene. The act looked casual but Ian knew from experience Charlie was processing every number he saw. They had managed to get Charlie just as he was leaving the hospital for the morning. Despite the crisp, tailored three-piece suit Charlie still smelled strongly of hospital antiseptic wash.

Ian couldn’t help but compare the man before him with a memory of a math teacher in jeans and a t-shirt, hiding behind his brother and a clipboard, looking hurt and offended. What Ian hadn’t known at the time was that he’d just become maybe the third person in history to get away with telling Charlie he was wrong, and about math as well. Of course, if he’d had a full understanding of Charlie Eppes at the time he would have stayed an extra couple of days in LA just to properly ravish the kid.

Ian pulled that thought up short. Despite Charlie’s occasional flirting and innuendo Ian knew that
was a ship that had well and truly sailed. The good money around the office was that only Colby’s untimely death was going to split those two up and would probably just leave Charlie a basket case. Still, it was tempting to ask Charlie to point him in the direction of some clubs. He’d been on a bit of a dry spell and if he was going to be in one place for three months it might be as good an opportunity as any to try get some somewhere.

Charlie looked up from the notebook. “Well, I’m seeing some patterns here. A couple of sets of numbers that seem to pop up a little more than the rest, but really, unless I know what they are in reference to it’s not much to start with.”

“Well, the guy was IRS.”

“True, but that was just his job. It could be tax data, it could also be migration numbers of local species of butterflies if that’s what got his blood flowing.”

“Any way of finding out?”

Charlie shrugged. “At this point, brute force data mining.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I make my grad students sit in front of a computer and google the numbers.”

Ian chuckled and Charlie made a move in the direction of the break room and coffee. “I didn’t know there was an official name for that.”

“It would be handy if I knew whether he’d written the journals out in a particular order. He may have headings in the first one.”

“Well, we’re going through them, but there are 200 plus.”

“Right.” Charlie poured some coffee and reached for the sugar jar. “Wow. Now I know Don’s out of the office. I can find this thing and there’s actually more than a teaspoon of sugar in it.”

“What is it with him and that anyways?” Ian asked.

Charlie shrugged. “I think he’s convinced himself that as long as he can still get into his old Rangers uniform once a year he’s not getting old.”

“Oh, that would explain the 0% milk in the fridge.”

Charlie chuckled into the extra sweet coffee. “How are you holding up, Ian?”

“I’m just fine.”

“Sure? ‘Cause I’ve been the substitute teacher before and it’s never a picnic.”

Ian sank into the deep chair of the break room. “Well, I haven’t cracked anyone’s head against anything yet.”

“Not easy going from lone wolf to pack leader, is it?” Charlie said quietly.

“You’re more perceptive than people give you credit for, aren’t you, Professor?”

Charlie smiled. “Perhaps. Maybe I’ve just been talking to your mother.”
“You would. Oh, hey,” Ian picked up a magazine that had been pushed to the bottom of the stack on the small table. “I see the Eppes Theorem rides again.” Ian held up a battered copy of the American Journal of Mathematics. On the cover was Charlie in a crisp white suit, looking like a Bond villain, an evil smirk on his face.

Charlie smiled. “Leaner and meaner for a new millennium. Did you ever doubt?”

“Nope.”

“Have you read it?” Charlie asked.

“Would I understand it if I did?”

Charlie gave a shrug. “Probably not, but I did an interview to go with it.”

“I’ll take a look at it some time.”

Charlie poured a large helping of milk into his coffee, apparently to cool it, then chugged down the rest of the cup. “I’ve got to get going. I’ve got class in an hour but I’ll grab a couple of the notebooks and see what I can find.”

“Thanks. It might not even be connected to the case but we don’t have much to go on right now.”

Charlie smiled. “It’s not a problem. Just doing my bit to hold down the fort.”

Ian looked at the math journal again as Charlie headed out. He flipped it open until he found an article entitled Response to Postulations upon the Eppes Thorium by Dr. Charles Eppes Ph.D. Ian tried to give it a read but more or less lost track around the word ‘The’. Ian realized that this wasn’t the stuff Charlie slapped together in a day or two for the FBI and no amount of clever analogies was going to cut through this. This was the high-end stuff, taking years of work, not even meant to be understood by low level mathematicians let alone a college dropout twice over like him.

Ian flipped a few pages and found the interview. The cover picture for it looked like it belonged in GQ. Charlie leaned against a chalk board in a pure black suit, hair pulled back tight, giving the camera a sinful come-hither look. Ian idly wondered how many lonely mathematicians had taken that picture to bed since the article came out. On the next page was a much older picture of Charlie, probably no more than twenty, peering shyly out from behind messy curls that fell in his face. It was something much closer to the Charlie he had first met.

Ian took a quick glance at his watch and decided to read quickly.

_The office of Dr. Charles Eppes has all the trappings of a room of its kind- sunny, cluttered and smelling strongly of chalk dust. He has taken a seat, dressed casually in jeans and a long-sleeved t-shirt. Dr. Eppes’ partner, a federal agent who asked not to be named or photographed for this piece, is seated behind Eppes’ desk and appears to be marking student papers from an answer key._

_American Journal of Mathematics_: Good morning, Dr. Eppes. Thank you for agreeing to this interview.

_Charles Eppes_: It’s my pleasure.

_AJM_: So let’s talk about the Eppes theorem.
CE: Yes, let’s.

AJM: It must be said, we expected a response from you sooner.

CE: Well I did respond to the publication of the challenge, however I responded in a way not fit for public consumption.

AJM: Really?

CE: Had a bit of a tantrum but I had several other projects on the boil as well as some family obligations so I couldn’t get to a proper response right away.

AJM: Do you think the challenge was unjustified?

CE: Not at all. I do wish Dr. Ramanujan and Dr. Fendworth had felt up to showing me their conclusions first, out of professional courtesy if nothing else.

AJM: Perhaps they wanted the credit for overthrowing the Eppes theorem.

CE: At present it is in no position to be overthrown. In all fairness, the Eppes theorem has always been a little flabby. It should be noted that I was 19 when I was first working on it and was probably putting a little more thought into getting laid than the math, but the core math has always been solid and has yet to fall to a challenge.

AJM: So you are confident in your math?

CE: That I am.

AJM: It has been suggested that there were perhaps more personal reasons for the challenging of the theorem.

CE: Mathematics is a small community and we gossip worse than little old ladies.

AJM: So there’s no truth concerning an unhappy affair between yourself and Dr. Ramanujan?

CE: Dr. Ramanujan was an excellent and devoted student of mine. She has a fine, brilliant, logical mind. I quite literally owe my life to her and like all teachers it is my greatest achievement when one of my students surpasses me. I wish her a long and fruitful career and life and anything personal that may have ever transpired between us is just that. Personal.

AJM: And Dr. Fendworth?

CE: Dr. Fendworth doesn’t like me because I shredded the Fendworth Theorem with adolescent bluntness when I was 17, then hit on his wife.

AJM: You hit on his wife?

CE: I didn’t know she was married. She was an attractive woman who understood my work and I was 17, although at that age a pulse was pretty much my only major requirement in a woman.

AJM: I take it you’ve settled down in recent years.

CE: Happily, yes.
AJM: You said you had other projects on the boil? You haven’t published much of late.

CE: Well, I’ve been trying; however the journals, including this one, have shown little interest in my recent work.

AJM: Have they? What have you been doing?

CE: Well, in the last few years, I have been consulting heavily with various law enforcement and government agencies. I’ve developed theorems and formulas for dealing with serial killers, bank robbers, drug shipments, spree killers, arsonists, money laundering, target selection, terrorist chatter, gang violence. It says Doctor of Applied Mathematics on my door, yet when I apply the math, when I take it out of the realm of theory and into the real world no one in the mathematical community seems to care. It’s more than a little frustrating, so I have recently struck a deal with several law enforcement and forensic journals. I will be publishing my theorems and formulas there, along with how they can be applied on a case-by-case basis. I will be teaching two new classes as well, one as an extension course through CalSci and one as a three-week intensive at Quantico. It will be mathematics for investigative team leads and field agents in all branches of law enforcement.

AJM: That seems rather a diversion from Cognitive Emergence or The Attraction Equation.

CE: Priorities change, people change.

AJM: Rather in that vein, Dr. Eppes, about two years ago there was a two-line item on the news wires that you had gone missing? There was nothing and then reports that you were back to your lectures but had sustained some sort of injury. There were a lot of rumors at the time, can you discuss what occurred?

CE: At the time the incident was part of an active case so it could not really be discussed.

AJM: Can you give us an idea now?

CE: I was confronted by a suspect in an active case, assaulted, taken from my office against my will, held at an unknown location without ransom demands, tortured, and eventually retrieved by a special ops team.

AJM: I’m sorry? Did you say tortured?

CE: Yes.

AJM: For information?

CE: For amusement.

AJM: Were you badly injured?

(Dr. Eppes casually pulls up a sleeve a few inches. Thick white scars can be seen high on his wrists. He then pulls down the collar of his shirt a bit showing similar scars across his collar bone as well as a row of puckered cigarette burns.)

CE: At least he liked my pretty face.

(At this point Dr. Eppes’ partner snapped a pen they had been holding and Dr. Eppes called a temporary halt to the interview.)
Ian could picture the scene, Charlie soothing an agitated Granger out of earshot of the interviewer. He could picture the interviewer wondering what she’d gotten herself into, a puff piece on math and Charlie’s love life suddenly becoming about very real violence.

**CE:** My apologies.

**AJM:** Perfectly understandable, Dr. Eppes.

**CE:** Thank you.

**AJM:** We were discussing the new train of your research, math for tracking bank robbers? When you have done such brilliant theoretical work in the past, don’t you feel that this is perhaps a waste of your genius, and apparently dangerous?

*(Dr. Eppes becomes silent for a long moment and looks at his hands.)*

**CE:** I have heard that. I’ve heard it from my enemies and my colleagues, my friends, even my family. Every day I watch my brother and my partner pick up a badge and a gun and go to work, and every day I calculate out to six decimals the chances of them never coming home. And not just them but many others, good people I count as colleagues and friends. If I can do one line of math to improve those numbers... It is easy to sit here. Sit in offices like this, surrounded by journals printed in black and white. It is easy to argue about prime numbers or perfect spheres. I have seen blood, and not just my own. Every day. Every day people are killed, people are assaulted. I have watched forensic techs scrape brain matter off walls, I have seen them literally mop up the blood of children. I have listened to rape victims forced to recount every degrading detail in hopes of remembering the one thing that could break a case. If I can do just one line of math to fix any of that, to make any of that easier, prevent any of that... For the first time in history, we have the ability to put every great living mind on earth in one room at the same time and yet when we try it all becomes academic. I have seen things I can only describe as evil, and yet true evil is the best of us saying that it’s not their job to care, that it’s not their place to use their genius to try to fix these things. If it’s not their job then whose job is it? God, some days I feel like it’s nothing but me, my brother, and a couple dozen overworked, underpaid agents and cops trying to hold back the tide with our bare hands. As fast as I am, as smart as I am, I’m not fast enough, I’m not smart enough, but there are people in the world who are faster and smarter and better than me who should be here, right here, in the gutter, in the dirt, trying to solve the real problems that spill blood in our streets but apparently it’s not their job to care. It’s all academic. So I have to. So I calculate, and I consult, and I publish with anyone who’ll take me and I’ll teach to anyone with two brain cells to rub together because if I didn’t that would be the true waste of my genius. That would be real crime, real evil.

**AJM:** I see you’re very passionate about this.

**CE:** Comes with the territory.

**AJM:** I’m sure after this interview this publication would happily take your more applied work.

**CE:** Well, the forensic journals have got it first. You can negotiate with them for sloppy seconds.
AJM: I’m sure we will. Do you see any future for your theoretical work?

CE: Oh, of course. I think I’m maybe twenty, thirty years out on cognitive emergence, depending on what comes up. I still doodle on P vs NP when I have insomnia and Dr. Fleinhardt occasionally lets me play with his strings and black holes. We should have something for review in the next six months or so.

AJM: I’m sure that will come as a relief to many.

CE: Well, I never want to disappoint my fans, just shake them up a little.

Ian turned the page. The interviewer had written up a couple hundred words on the rest of her visit to CalSci, watching Charlie lecture and such. That didn’t grab Ian’s attention, what did was one last picture of Charlie. Ian couldn’t tell if it had been taken in black and white or altered after but it was an image he would never get out of his head. Charlie was perched on a desk, leaning forward. He had his shirt open and his sleeves rolled up. White scars streaked across his arms and chest, standing out in bright contrast to his skin. He had his hands on the desk, a piece of chalk in his right hand. You could almost hear it tap impatiently on the desk. Next to his left hand, not touching it but only an inch away, was a standard issue FBI Glock, probably Granger’s. Charlie looked out from the picture with challenge and warning in his eyes.

‘Stand beside me or get out of my way. Challenge my math and I’ll eat you alive. Come after me, my family, my friends, do anything to lower the odds of them not coming home and your own odds will get very bad.’

There was a knock on the wall and Ian looked up.

“Yes, David?”

“I just thought you should know we managed to track down the ex-wife in a halfway house across town. They’re bringing her in.”

“Great.” Ian quickly got up.

David nodded towards the journal. “Reading Charlie’s interview?”

“Well, I’m not reading his theorem.”

“...and yet true evil is the best of us saying that it’s not their job to care.”

Ian blinked a few times. “You’ve memorized it?”

“We almost had it painted on the wall. Every fed and cop in the city’s read it.”

“Really?”

David smiled. “Charlie’s one of the best minds of his generation and he just kicked the base of the ivory tower and told them to get their asses down here and be useful.”

Ian chuckled. “It did sound like a bit of a challenge.”

“I was down at an LAPD station about a month ago, they had it photocopied and posted on one of the message boards along with that photo.” Ian turned around the magazine to hold up the last
picture of Charlie. “Yeah, that one. Kind of a far cry from the ball of nerves and fluff running around in his brother’s shadow.” David said, looking at the picture.

“I kind of miss the ball of fluff, had a soft spot for him,” Ian said.

“Ah hell, we all did, but he was growing out of that pretty fast and what was left drowned in a puddle of blood on a warehouse floor.”

Ian felt a hot stab of anger that took him by surprise. “I’m glad I missed that.”

David closed his eyes for a moment. “Still one of the worst things I’ve ever seen. They had him naked you know?”

“Really,” Ian said quietly.

“Sick bastard, stripped him, sliced him up, had him tied up with these ropes that cut in every time he moved and he must have put up a hell of a fight. He was covered in blood. You know where he came when they let him out of the hospital?”

“Here?” Ian asked, pretty sure of the answer.

“Here,” David said with a bit of a smile “He bullied his way out early, took a cab, he was on a cane, covered head to toe in bandages, he still smelled like blood and practically the first words out of his mouth were ‘have we got a case?’ Don said no, he got pissed and stormed out.”

“At least he had Granger.”

David shook his head. “Nope, they had some big fight at the hospital, didn’t speak for a month, both walked around like ghosts. Rumor has it Don refused Colby’s transfer request and ordered them both to get their shit together.”

“Well, it seems to have worked.”

David nodded. “Yeah, now if the rest of the world would just get their shit together we’d be on to something.”
Chapter Summary

The Eppes aren't the only ones.

Chapter Notes

Warning: OC Death

Daniel Summer had always enjoyed watching people, making up little stories about their lives from the tiny moments he glimpsed. His wife had teased him, saying that he should have been a novelist instead of an accountant. After over a month of sitting in the NICU ward crouched over the tiny form of his third child, he began to look around a little, desperate for a small distraction from the beep of the heart monitor and the small hiss of air being pumped in and out of too-small lungs.

The space next to his baby girl had been empty for a week before a new resident arrived in the early hours of the morning. He didn’t try to make up a story, he knew the story, same story as every other family in the ward but instead found himself trying to put the family unit together.

The mother and father were easy enough, clutching at each other in worry and fear. A first child, Daniel figured, father certainly older than mother and a new relationship, he gathered, from the questions overheard. Father’s brother was another easy peg. Wealthy from the shiny shoes and nice watch, uncomfortable around children by the amount of coaxing needed to get him to just slip a hand into the incubator but he spent nearly as much time in the ward as the father and mother. Brother’s partner was a little trickier to peg. Large and fair, Daniel had first thought he was related to mother until he easily slipped an arm around the brother. He seemed to come early in the morning or late in the evening, sometimes with the brother, sometimes without, but he seemed an accepted part of the family, allowed to hold the baby during tests, looking as devoted as anyone else.

Grandfather was another easy guess, often staying late through the night, sending the younger members of the family home for a few hours of sleep. A few times Daniel saw him bring out a prayer shawl and a small old book but these would always disappear before the sons returned. The small silver-haired woman that sat with him sometimes gave Daniel a moment of pause, since she looked like no one else in the family, but some overheard gentle ribbing put her as grandpa’s girlfriend who would bring tiny, soft, hand stitched outfits for the little boy.

A tall intimidating man that did look like her would stand outside the ward sometimes and catch looks that Daniel recognized as ‘can’t you have one of your own?’ There was much eye rolling involved.

Others would come by and stand outside, most dressed in suits. Father would wave to them and sometimes leave the ward to exchange quick words. There was one small man, always in a black suit, who would send the brother stomping from the ward. As much as Daniel tried not to make up
stories about this family, one of the cards taped to the edge of the incubator had the presidential seal on it and he couldn’t help glancing at it as he walked by.

Late one evening about a month after the little boy had been settled in next to his daughter, Daniel watched as the father suddenly sat up straight, as if waking from a dream. He shook his head as if to clear it and looked around as if suddenly realizing that he was in a room with other people. Daniel knew the feeling. When the worry and fear and tedium had become a crushing constant, there had been a moment where his brain had simply snapped him into the larger world in pure self defense, like the E string on his wife’s violin snapping.

The father tilted his head and read the name on the side of his daughter’s incubator.

“Megan,” the man said softly.

“What?” Daniel replied after a moment. It had taken him a second to realize someone else had spoken.

The man gestured to the name cut out of bright pink construction paper. “Megan.” The man said again carefully, almost as if he’d forgotten how to speak. “It’s a good name. My second in command’s named Megan.”

“Oh” Daniel shook his head for a moment. “Your what?”

“Sorry.” The man said, holding out his hand. “Don Eppes, FBI.”

“Ah. Daniel Summer, CPA.”

Don Eppes FBI looked confused for a moment before smiling at the joke. Daniel felt a little naughty thrill. Parents weren’t encouraged to socialize. He felt like he’d just passed a note in study hall.

Don Eppes looked at his little Megan again. “Your first?” he asked.

Daniel shook his head. “Third.”

“Ah.”

“FBI must give good family leave?” Daniel questioned, wondering how an agent could manage to be there almost day and night.

Don shook his head. “Workaholic in high-risk position. I’ve accrued a lot of vacation time and favors.”

“Still, probably not as exciting as they make it seem on TV.”

Don shrugged. “We get enough excitement, they just never show the mounds of paperwork.”

Daniel chuckled. “See, my whole business is to do mounds of paperwork for other people.”

“Well, you can have mine.”

Silence settled between the two of them. Daniel realized he’d more or less forgotten how to have a conversation. Don Eppes, FBI, was probably in no better shape.

“Third.” Eppes suddenly asked. “You’ve done this before?”
Daniel shook his head. “Jenny was right on time, Robbie was two weeks late.”

“Oh.” Don Eppes shrugged. “They told us this would happen. They told us…” Eppes petered off and shrugged again.

“Emily just woke up in the middle of the night. Said ‘something’s wrong’.” Eppes nodded. Daniel hadn’t understood how Emily could have felt fetal distress that was barely picked up by the hospitals equipment that first night. In the end he just assumed it was one of those things he would never understand as long as he had a Y chromosome.

They fell into silence again as a night nurse headed their direction but a quick smile from Eppes told him he wasn’t the only one who felt like he was passing notes in study hall.

~

Charlie yawned as he made his way down the ward. If he had thought days had been long before, this was heading into new territory, bouncing between CalSci, the FBI, and the hospital. When he got to the double doors of the NICU, he started the decontamination procedures on auto pilot. He’d become almost half afraid that this whole thing was going to trigger off some sort of OCD when he’d caught himself scrubbing to the elbows before making dinner at home.

Once he had the requisite yellow robe wrapped around him, Charlie made his way to Mattie’s incubator, still completely on auto pilot. He pulled up a chair, sat down hard next to Don and finally let his brain engage a little.

“How is he?” he asked Don. That was always the first question.

Don shook his head. “Didn’t put on as much as yesterday, but still breathing okay.”

Charlie nodded. Those were the two big concerns, weight and oxygen. The doctor had said they’d probably get a grace period, but if Mattie grew too quickly he could literally outgrow his tiny lungs. Luckily, that seemed to be the only major worry, as his little heart had been beating strong and steady from the word go.

Charlie rubbed at his eyes. He wanted to talk with Don about this weird case that Ian had handed him. That’s what they did as brothers, talk about cases or sometimes sports. It maybe wasn’t the closest form of communication but at least it was talking, when in the past they’d gone literally years without speaking to each other. But cases were now off the conversation list.

“How is he?” Don asked.

Charlie just shrugged. “No worse than usual.”

Don rubbed at his own eyes. “Um, look, Charlie some bills came in the mail today…”

“It’s taken care of, Don.” Charlie said quickly.

Don looked pained. “Yeah, I know, the balance was zero but it was still itemized. Look, Charlie…”

“Don I told you I’d take care of things.”

“I know, it’s just…it’s a lot and…”
“Don,” Charlie quickly cut Don off. “Don’t argue with me on this one, okay? I’m never going to have kids.” Don rocked back a little. “I’m never going to risk inflicting the screwed up mess that is my head on another generation. That means Mattie is as much my legacy as yours.”

“You might…”

“No, Don,” Charlie said, shaking his head slightly. “No.”

“I just…” Don stuttered, too tired to argue well. “I feel like I owe you something I can’t pay back.”

Charlie rubbed at his own face unsure how to explain to Don just how much he owed his big brother. “No, Don, I’m the one who owes you. Look. There has been more than one moment in my life when I’ve been damn close to death or worse. In high school, the number of times I had a utility knife over my wrists isn’t even funny but I didn’t do it ‘cause I thought of you coming in and finding me. Not Mom, not Dad, you.” Don swallowed hard and locked his jaw tight. “After Susan left, when I was doing some pretty stupid shit to deal with life, probably the only thing that kept a needle out of my veins was the thought of you having to come home and scrape me out of a gutter. How disappointed you would have been. That horrible night with Annie, whatever bit of you is in me as my brother was the one pulling the strings ‘cause I sure as hell wasn’t there. And that warehouse floor, when I was so cold and just wanted to sleep I knew I had to stay awake, I had to stay awake because I knew you were coming for me.” Don wiped at his eyes and Charlie took Don’s other hand in his. “You have saved my life so many times just by being my brother. Please, Don, let me do this. I can’t wave a magic wand and make things better but I can at least take care of you and Mattie this way. Please.”

“It’s still a lot, Charlie,” Don managed to say.

Charlie nodded and lowered his head. “In eight months the military will launch what they will tell everyone are two communications satellites. They’re not. What they do I taught them how to do. My fee had to come out of three different black budget agencies. An entire shell corporation was created just to write one check and that corporation vanished the second the check cleared. I made more in six months then you made in the last six years, Don.” Don blinked a few times, obviously doing a little of his own math. “My tax returns are classified documents for the next five years and do you have any idea what it takes to find an accountant with security clearance?”

Don gave a tired chuckle. “Okay.”

Charlie reached out and laid a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “The Eppes line will continue, Don,” he said softly. “And I’ll put it through med school if need be.” Don gave another tired chuckle. “Besides, what else am I supposed to spend my money on? Colby’s threatening to start randomly throwing out suits for even new one I buy him.”

Don grinned. “Yeah, buddy, when did you become a clothes horse?”

Charlie grinned back. “It’s the best thing about coming out of the closet, Don- you suddenly have all this extra space for fabulous clothes.” Charlie camped up the ‘fabulous’ as much as he could, knowing it would give Don the laugh he desperately needed.
Anne sighed as the breast pump did its thing. As weird as it felt the first dozen times it hurt like hell without it. There were more reasons than one why she was looking forward to Mattie being able to nurse, not the least of which was always having the slight desire to moo when hooked up to the thing. She knew she’d certainly never quite look at a cow the same way again. Not that there were a lot of cows wandering around LA.

She looked over at Charlie who’d been scribbling in a note pad. His eyes flicked quickly away from her.

“Charlie? We’re you just checking out my tits?”

“I’m...ah...” Charlie stuttered. “I’m just impressed. Last time I saw them there wasn’t really anything to look at, and now...”

Anne looked down at her newly arrived D’s and sighed. “Charlie, last time you saw me without a shirt I was 90 pounds and bleeding from every major orifice and frankly you weren’t much to look at yourself.”

Charlie looked away for a moment and sighed. “Yeah... but... look around. Look how far you’ve come. Look how far we’ve come.”

Anne looked around the small room with parenting posters on the wall, and down at herself in the yellow robe she was really beginning to hate. She sighed. “Well, if nothing else, we made it out alive, didn’t we?”

“Yes.”

“Do you... do you ever talk to...?” Anne couldn’t even ask.

Charlie shook his head. “No. I...uh...I actually ran into Johnny a couple years back. He’s an orthodontist in Modesto, has a kid, drives a minivan, most awkward conversation of my life and I’ve had some uncomfortable ones.”

“I hear Sara ODed a few years back.”

Charlie nodded. “Yeah, I saw her face on a list of Jane Does. Went in, told them she went to my free lectures. It was horrible; I couldn’t remember her last name. I don’t even know if I ever knew it.”

“I bet you were expecting to do the same for me.”

Charlie shook his head. “No. Even in the worst moments there was always something in you that wouldn’t break, wouldn’t even bend.”

“This almost broke me, Charlie.”

“No,” Charlie said softly. “You would have survived, that’s what you do. Don it might have broken, still may, but you’ll survive.”

Anne took Charlie’s hand and just gave it a squeeze.

~

It was early but the hours were finally starting to catch up with Don. He’d slept almost seven
hours, waking up in the same positing he’d collapsed in. Anne had already left by the time he managed to drag himself from the bed. He was still fighting off early morning tunnel vision, which is why he almost missed Daniel Summer, sitting on the floor outside the ward.

Don crouched down in front of the other father. “Daniel?” Don said softly. The man had a floppy stuffed rabbit clutched to his chest.

Daniel opened his eyes and Don didn’t even need to ask. His heart leapt into his throat at the sight of bloodshot eyes and a face streaked with tears.

“She wouldn’t breathe,” Daniel choked out. “They tried everything, she just wouldn’t breathe.”

Don couldn’t guess at the number of parents of dead children he’d had to stand in front of in his line of work. Don slammed down his most professional demeanor, hard, to keep from falling into the other man’s grief.

“You should be with your wife,” he said calmly.

Daniel shook his head. “She won’t let me touch her.”

Don knew what he should say next. ‘We’ll find the person who did this.’ That was the script, but there was no crime here; just a too-small baby that wouldn’t breathe.

Don went off script and drew the shattered man to him, holding him tight as fresh tears fell, clamping down on his own fears tighter than ever before. When the tears settled down again, Don drew back.

“You need to be with your wife,” Daniel shook his head. “And your children. Jenny and Robbie? Right?”

“My little Megan,” Daniel whispered.

Don squeezed his eyes shut and gritted his teeth, not willing to let tears fall. Not yet. Not now. “Come on.” He helped Daniel to his feet. “Let’s go find your family.”

As they moved slowly down the hall, Daniel taking shuffling steps like an invalid, Don looked into the windows of the NICU. Anne was holding Mattie to her chest, a soft smile on her face, stroking his head ever so gently. Behind her was an empty incubator, the name Megan still clearly spelled out in pink cutout letters.

~

Ian, by way of being the boss, had drawn the short straw this morning. Word had gotten up to the office- Don was on the range. Don was on the range going through ammo like nothing and snarling at anyone who got near.

The range was empty of all noise except one lone gun being fired over and over. Less than five seconds for thirteen rounds. A ping as the last cartridge hit the floor. Metal scraping against metal as an empty clip was ejected and a new one put in. Thirteen more bangs. Ian reached out and put a hand on Don’s shoulder. Don jumped and whipped around. Ian’s heart leapt into his throat. Don Eppes had been crying. Don Eppes didn’t cry. Rumor had it the man still hadn’t cried for his own mother.
“Mattie?” Ian asked, suddenly terrified. He should have called the hospital first before coming down here.

Don shook his head. “Megan.” Don croaked out. Now Ian was confused.

“She stopped breathing, just stopped breathing.” Ian scoured his memory. His brain came up with the name Megan, worked on in pink letters, next to Mattie. “I know the script, Ian. We’ll find who did this, we’ll bring them to justice, do you have any enemies, any threats?”

“There was no crime, Don.” Ian said carefully.

“I know!” Don shouted, flinging himself against the wall and sinking to the floor. “Her lungs were too small, they just stopped. Nothing to do. Nothing I can do.”

Ian took a deep breath. He did not need this. He had a half dozen dead junkies in the morgue OD’d on something no one had seen before, and a dead IRS auditor whose life read like a rejected X-Files script. He did not need to deal with Don Eppes having a stress-induced breakdown in the middle of the gun range for anyone to see.

Ian reached down, hauled Don to his feet and slammed him against the wall. “All right, Don. You’re going to listen to me ‘cause right now there’s a weird chance I could end up your older brother so you’re going to take this as brotherly advice.”

Don blinked a few times.

“Shit. Happens. Crappy shit happens and there’s not a fucking thing you can do about it. A baby is dead, I’m sorry, but it’s not your baby. He is alive and he needs you. He needs you there with him, not here banging your head against a wall of shit you can’t fix. She had a chance, your son still has a chance, and you’re going to take it because there are parents in this world that never get to see their child take even one breath so you are going to march your ass back to the hospital and you are going to sit there and watch your son breathe. Do you understand me!?” Ian gave Don another good shove against the wall for emphasis.

Don’s eyes were squeezed shut, but he finally nodded.

“Good.” Ian took Don’s gun. “It’ll be in your desk when you come back.” Don nodded again and quietly shuffled from the range. When Ian was sure Don had left, he pulled his own gun, pointed it at the target that Don had reduced to little more than confetti and blindly fired his own thirteen rounds.

~

Four days later, Don walked in to find a new resident next to Mattie. Two women sat by the incubator; one a tall Hispanic woman with a face more handsome than beautiful, the other a petite pale strawberry blonde. They looked up at Don their eyes begging for contact, reassurance. Don quickly looked away and sat down next to his son.
Don slid in the feeding tube under the watchful eye of Nurse Martha Gonzales. His stomach lurched and his hands trembled. It wasn’t natural, no one should have to eat like that. He wondered if Mattie would have sinus problems when he grew up due to having a tube run in and out of his nose for the first month of his life.

Don had taken to these idle wondering despite the odds. When Mattie had just been a grainy blob on a screen it had been easier to accept that things might not work, now Don refused to allow himself to believe otherwise.

The milk began to flow and Anne gently rubbed his shoulder.

“See?” Martha said with a smile. “He’s tougher than he looks.”

Don looked down at Mattie. He’d put on almost a pound and when he was awake he would kick his legs and flail his arms. That actually was worrying the doctors some. They wanted him to burn more energy growing than moving. Another pound, though, and they’d try to get him to nurse.

Martha let out a sudden jaw-cracking yawn. “Oh!” she exclaimed, obviously startled. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s Okay.”

“Are you alright?” Anne asked.

Martha shook her head, clearing it. “DEA busted the house across from my place last night. It needed to be done but they managed to blow it sky high at 3 am. I ended up doing triage in my bathrobe.”

Don felt a kick of adrenaline and worry. “Any casualties? I know some of the DEA crew.” Don asked.

“A few flash burns, some broken bones from debris. They’re all downstairs. Their Lieutenant caught the worst of it. Piece of rebar right through the shoulder.”

“Did you happen to get his name?” Don asked. If it was Charlie’s groupies he should probably go down and touch base.

Martha shook her head. “No.”

“Any chance he was a skinny, kinda short Hispanic guy? About 50? Mustache that went out of fashion in ‘82?”

Martha smiled. “That sounds like him.”

“You want to go down and check?” Anne asked.
“Nah, I’ll go down at lunch and tell them off for interrupting our Saint Martha’s beauty sleep.”

~

Don opened the door to the private room quietly in case the occupant was sleeping. Lt. Thomas Garcia, DEA, opened his eyes and squinted from the bed.

“Eppes?”

“Hey, mind a visit?” Garcia gestured him inside. “How are you doing?”

Garcia nodded to the tube in his arm with a smile. “They’re letting me have the good shit. What you are doing down here?”

“Well, funny thing, Saint Nurse Martha who’s been taking care of my boy came in this morning looking less than perky ‘cause a bunch of dumb-ass DEA agents managed to blow up a meth house across the street from her at three in the morning and being the saint that she is, she rushed outside to pull said dumb asses out of danger.”

“You’re shitting me?”

“Nope.”

“Small world.”

“Yep. So what happened?”

The Lieutenant shrugged and winced. “Who knows? You know how those places are. For all I know the fridge clicked on.”

“Lose anyone?”

“No, thank God. Just a lot of fried eyebrows and burned lungs. We’ll be a little less pretty for a few weeks. I got the worst of it.”

“You’re lucky.”

Garcia snorted. “You’re telling me. I’ve lost two agents in those places. Fucking hate them. Makes me miss the good old days and that’s saying something.”

“What were the good old days?” Don asked. The DEA had always been the bastard children of Federal law enforcement and as a result seemed to always have the best stories and the wildest parties.

“Good old days, we were all mavericks and no one expected results. The Mexicans had the dope, the Colombians had the coke, and the Mob had the heroin, at least out west, and none of it could blow your ass up.” Garcia moaned.

“I can see how that would be comforting.”

“Shit, Eppes, I mean the Mexicans would shoot you, the Mob would shoot you, the Colombians would shoot you and everyone you know ‘cause they don’t like loose ends but now…We’ve got the fucking Russians that will shoot you for fun, the Yakuza who will gut you and feed you to the sharks, the Jamaicans are making the Columbians look like sissies. We found a string of severed chicken heads draped across the office door two days ago.”
Don chuckled. “Yum.”

“Bad magic. I’ve got guys who haven’t been to Mass since their confirmations walking around with rosaries in one pocket and garlic in the other and then we go and get blown up.”

“Hey, at least you’re still alive.”

“God I miss busting hippies. Stoners don’t put up a fight.” Don laughed. There was something to be said for the easy bust. “I’m getting too old for this, Eppes.”

“I hear you there.”

Garcia gave a dismissive wave. “You’re a youngin. Do your thirty like me, then bitch.”

“I don’t think I’m making my thirty,” Don said. “Not in the field, at any rate. Got the whole wife and kid thing going now, I need to get out.”

“Now, that’s where we’re different. I got in ‘cause I got a wife and kid.”

“Really?”

“Well less wife and kid, more knocked up prom date.”

“Oops.” Don said with a chuckle.

“The government was recruiting and the money was a hell of a lot better than picking in the valley. Course that was thirty years, three kids and two divorces ago.”

“You’ve got three kids?” Don asked with some surprise.

“Eppes, I’ve got grandkids. Twin girls and a boy on the way.”

“Congratulations.”

“Grandfathers should not be kicking in doors of meth houses at three in the morning. And you would not believe the shit my own guys gave me about it. They glued every drawer in my desk closed with denture cream and when I got it open it was filled with cans of Ensure.”

Don laughed. “Sometimes I get the feeling you guys have way more fun than we do.”

Garcia grinned. “Work hard, play hard, and we’re always lookin’ for fresh blood if you want to join the dark side?”

“Nah.” Don said with a shake of his head and a smile. “My dad would never forgive me. Going G-Man is one thing, but turning narc? I’d be disowned.”
The Fall of Numbers and Prayers

Chapter Summary

Don hides in numbers. Charlie prays.

Chapter Notes

I'm fudging a bunch of medical stuff in the next couple of chapters. Sorry.

It was Don that first noticed. Mattie had patterns and habits, likes and dislikes that made Don rethink his opinions on nature verses nurture. After being fed mid day, after the tube was removed, Mattie kicked his legs. He kicked his legs for two or three minutes then, fell into an afternoon power nap. Don was trained to look for patterns and breaks in patterns. It was what he did. Don watched the tube come out, the last drops of milk wiped from his nose. Don frowned. Mattie didn’t kick his legs. He twitched once and fell asleep. Don looked at the monitors.

“Martha, do these look right?” Martha looked at the digital read out.

“Everything’s within normal range.”

“He didn’t kick his legs.” Martha frowned as well.

“Well his 02 levels are a little on the low side of normal. How about if I get the doctor to take a listen?”

“Thank you.” Somewhere along the line Don had told himself he wasn’t going to one of those parents that worried over every little thing. A little further down the line Don said fuck it and decided to embrace worrying as a new hobby.

Anne got back from the bathroom as the doctor arrived. Don didn’t particularly like the doctor. There was something cold about him he didn’t trust. Don figured with ten minutes and an interrogation room, he could probably get the guy to cop to tax evasion or insurance fraud.

“What’s wrong?” Anne asked, catching the look on Don’s face. Don put on a smile.

“Just checking something.”

The doctor listened to Mattie’s chest, front and back then turned to Martha. “Get a set of blood samples for the lab.”

“What’s wrong?” Don asked quickly.

“I’m hearing a small amount of fluid in his left lung. Normally this wouldn’t be a problem but he can’t cough yet.”
“Well, what would cause that?”

“I don’t want to speculate until we know more.”

“I mean…” Don felt the panic begin to swell.

“Mr. Eppes, right now it is a very small amount of fluid in one lung. He’s not running a fever, his O2 stats are still within normal and his waste output is consistent. If the fluid increases we’ll drain his lungs. If his O2 stats drop we’ll intubate. If his temperature spikes we’ll do a spinal tap. Right now I’m going to continue with rounds and be back every fifteen minutes to have a listen and put a rush on the lab tests.” The doctor made a note in Mattie’s chart and moved on.

Don growled under his breath. Anne squeezed his hand. “He’s a good doctor, you can’t get him audited for the fun of it.”

Don sighed. “But I’m so sure he’s doing something.”

~

An hour later Mattie was carefully put on his side and the oxygen mix in his incubator was increased. Don tried not to hover, tried not to lose his lunch as his stomach began twisting into knots, tried to be calm and strong for Anne, who was twisting her fingers around and around. By three Charlie had arrived. He sat quietly, hardly moving. Whatever statistics, odds or probabilities were running through his head, he gave no outward sign of them.

At 3:37 Martha went to shift Mattie. He twitched once, twice. Something thick and yellow appeared at his lips and his O2 levels dropped. Don felt his heart stop. There was a dull echo in his ears as Martha suctioned away the mucus. He was peripherally aware of Anne’s hand in his.

Time stopped, started and seemed to jump the way it did when flying bullets were involved. The doctor was there and so was Colby.

‘When had Colby arrived?’

The doctor had lab results. Some part of Don was nodding, agreeing, understanding. Some part had disconnected and was only aware of the rise and fall of a small chest moving faster and harder than it should.

Mattie’s face contorted as a needle, thin as rice paper, went into his skin, into a vein, a comparatively thick tube following. The part of Don that had disconnected counted the drops slowly falling from the IV bag into the tube.

Don lost time again. His father was there saying something. Don’s lips moved in response. A second later he couldn’t remember what he’d said. The doctor was talking again. Tubes, more tubes.

‘Weren’t there enough tubes already?’

Don watched the tube slide down his son’s throat, his face crunched up but suddenly the movement of his chest became even and steady. Don felt his own breath begin to steady out but it still didn’t feel right. Nothing felt right.

It was almost seven when the fever started. Just a point of a degree. No one noticed. Then another point. When his temperature hit 100 and rising the doctor ordered a spinal tap. It was the night doctor, whom Don liked better. He was soft spoken with quick, efficient movements. Don signed
the consent form and felt a strong arm wrap around his chest.

The horror was in slow motion. They strapped Mattie face down so he wouldn’t move. The needle looked sickening it was so large. The needle went in. Mattie’s eyes scrunched up, his mouth opened. There was no sound but Don recognized a scream. He lunged and Colby held him fast in place while the doctor and nurses worked. Don looked to his right. Charlie had put a hand over Anne’s eyes and turned her head away.

The needle was out, the straps removed. Something was injected. The temperature reading went up, the O2 reading went down. Others surrounded the incubator. Nurses pushed him out of the way. Don wanted to see, needed to see. Colby pinned his arms. Don didn’t even feel the pain, just a dim awareness of the click grind of his right shoulder, an old pitching injury.

Don looked over. Anne’s face was pressed against Charlie’s shoulder, Charlie’s arms tight around her, her fists beating against his back. Charlie’s eyes were closed but his lips were moving silently, repetitively. Don couldn’t read lips but he could read Charlie. Whatever words he was saying weren’t numbers. Numbers were random. This was repetitive. This was… Charlie squeezed his eyes tight.

A jolt hit Don, he sagged in Colby’s grip. Charlie was praying. Charlie didn’t pray, Charlie didn’t pray. Charlie didn’t pray because Charlie didn’t believe, couldn’t believe, couldn’t push himself beyond the numbers. Colby let Don go, then turned him around. Don hid his face against Colby’s shoulder and tried not to listen to what he couldn’t see.

~

It was midnight. Anne sat still in the rocker, Don slouched in the cold plastic chair next to her. There were too many tubes. More than ever before. Tubes to put air into Mattie’s lungs, tubes to draw the fluid out of them. Tubes under his skin for medicine to go into or blood to come out of.

The fever had stopped climbing at 102.2. Don stared at the number.

‘102.2 divisible by 2. 51.1. Not divisible again, maybe, 51 is probably prime. No. 17-round extended clip, 3 times, 51 rounds. Still doesn’t work with that point 1. 102.1, now what’s that divisible by?’

Don blinked and shook his head, shaking out the numbers. Charlie would be so proud.

102.0

The number had dropped again. Don held his breath. It could go back up.

101.9

Don breathed. He didn’t say a word, didn’t make a noise, just watched at the number began to slowly trend down.

~

Colby stumbled into the office. He had dozed for an hour or two after the fever broke. He pushed into the war room. Ian looked at him over the top of some files.

“Get out of here, Granger.”
“What?” Colby stuttered.

“We’re fine without you, you look like shit, you know where you need to be. Get out.”

“But…”

“That’s an order, soldier,” Ian barked.

Like a marionette having its strings yanked, Colby straightened up, turned around, and marched himself out of the office.

~

Don ran his hand through his hair, desperate to keep awake as the doctor talked. He wasn’t sure how many hours had passed since he’d slept. His eyes felt like they were full of grit.

“…and we’re going to stop adding supplements to his feedings.”


“The infection is going to stunt lung development for at least a couple of weeks and while we don’t want him to lose weight it would be preferable if he didn’t gain much more until his lungs have a chance to heal and catch up.”

‘Starve a fever.’ The bit of old rhyme popped into Don’s head. “Um…the tubes?” Don tried to ask.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Eppes, but he’s not out of the woods yet. His temperature is still fluctuating and we’re still draining fluid. The intubation really needs to stay until the last possible moment.”

“Of course.”

The doctor patted Don on the arm and walked off just as Colby arrived. Colby turned to watch the doctor leave.

“I’m sure he’s up to something,” Colby said.

“Me too.”

“What did he say?”

“Not out of the woods yet.” Colby nodded, then pulled Don into a hug. Don sagged against Colby.

“What are you doing here?” Don asked.

“Ian threw me out.” Don chuckled. “Where’s Anne?”

“Expressing.”

“Ah.”

Don sat down hard in the rocker. “I’m so damn tired, Colby.”

“Get someone to drive you home. Get a couple of hours.”

“I can’t.” Don laid a hand on top of the incubator. He wanted to reach his hand in, but was afraid of disturbing the nest of tubes.

“He’ll be okay, Don,” Colby said.
“How do you know?”

Colby gave a one-shouldered shrug. “Because I refuse to believe otherwise.”

~

Charlie jerked awake at the sound of his name. His head was throbbing and he felt the muscles in his back cramp. He quickly looked around. He was in the dining room at the table. His father was standing next to him.

“Sorry,” Alan said. “But you’re going to put your back out if you sleep like that for too long.”

Charlie arched his back and winced. “Too late.”

“Come on. Go upstairs, find a real bed.”

Charlie checked his watch. “No, I’ve got to get to the hospital.”

“Charlie, you’re not going to do anyone any good if you make yourself sick.”

“Really? And where may I ask are you heading on this lovely evening?”

Alan looked down at the keys in his hand. “Come on. You can ride in with me. Maybe two of us can talk Don and Anne into going home.”

Charlie grabbed his jacket. “I wouldn’t put money on it.”

Charlie felt himself begin to doze off as soon as he settled into the car. “What are we going to do, Dad?” Charlie mused half asleep. “I don’t want to lose Don. If something happens…”

“Don’t even think about it, Charlie. We’re not losing anyone. Don’t even put that thought into the universe.”

“Okay.”

“Get a couple of minutes of sleep. I’ll wake you when we get there.”

~

Alan rolled his neck around. It had been another long night. He sipped at the cafeteria coffee and tried to keep his eyes focused. Not that there was much to focus on, the hall outside of NICU was that generic hospital blue/grey/green. Alan was learning to hate that color almost as much as yellow.

He blinked a few times as David stepped into his field of view.

“Morning, Alan.”

“Hello, David. Would you like me to grab Don for you?”

“Nah, was just heading into the office, thought I’d just see how things were going.”

Alan leaned heavily against the wall. “His temperature hasn’t gone over a hundred in three days but it’s refusing to stabilize and the drugs that are keeping his temperature down are going to start giving him kidney stones in another few days unless they take him off them.”
“If it’s not one thing it’s another?” Alan shrugged. “How are you holding up, Alan?”

Alan just shrugged again. “I feel old, David. I spent so many years nagging the boys about grandkids and getting married. And I could picture it so clearly, either one of them with a little boy or girl. Dark eyes and curls.”

“Mini Charlie.”

“Oh, Donnie’s hair curls up worse than Charlie’s when it’s long. That’s why he’s always rubbing gunk in it.”

“And here I thought he was just trying to deflect bullets with his head.”

Alan smiled. “It does these really tight little curls so instead of going shaggy like Charlie’s it just kinda fros out two, three inches from his head.”

“Oh, tell me you have pictures.”

“Oh, David, I have never felt more useless in my life.”

“Alan, trust me, your boys need you right now probably more than they ever have. You’ve never been more important.”

“I just wish I could do more.”

“You’re doing plenty. And you’ll all get through this.”

~

It was all about the side effects. The medicine to stop the fever created kidney stones, the medicine to dissolve the kidney stones could depress breathing. They couldn’t risk depressed breathing, not when the fluid coming from Mattie’s lungs was finally starting to dry up. Of course they couldn’t risk stones in kidneys that small and under developed anyways. Steroids to improve the breathing would depress the immune system that was already stretched.

“We’re going to see if his temperature will stabilize on its own,” the doctor said. Mattie’s urinary output had dropped. Don had no idea how much medical information could be deduced from quantity and quality of pee.

Anne was resting her head against Don’s side. Don wanted to argue, wanted a second opinion. “Do what you have to do.” Anne said quietly.

~

It was late. Ian knew he should be at the office going over case files, catching up on paper work. He stood outside the windows of the NICU ward and peered in. Anne and Don sat on one side of the incubator holding each other. Charlie and Colby sat on the other.

“Mr. Edgerton?” Ian whipped around. A young man in a nurse’s uniform was standing by the door.

“Yes?”

“Would you like to come in?” the young man asked.
Ian shook his head. “I can’t.”

The nurse flipped through a couple of pieces of paper.

“You’re listed as an uncle?”

Ian gave a half chuckle, running his hand through his hair. “Yeah, I guess. Sort of a recent development.”

“I gathered.” The young man’s face turned serious. “You might want to come in.”
And Then Morning Comes

Chapter Summary

And then the next day comes, and the day after that.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Don looked at the clock. It was morning. The lights had been turned up at shift change, a simulation dawn. The sun would be up by now. Don wondered what kind of day it was; damp and gray, crisp and clear? It was Tuesday. The garbage needed to be taken down to the curb. It was too late now. The truck rumbled by at six. It was after six.

Don had stopped watching the numbers on the digital read out. It was easy to get lost in them. He understood Charlie a little more. Too easy to distill a small life down to numbers. So many beats a minute, so many breaths.

Don thought he saw the first blush of dark hair come through last night, so fine it might not be real. Don could feel his own pulse. He hadn’t moved in hours, his own breathing had slowed to a point just above sleep and he could feel his pulse sending slight tremors through his body. He knew when to take a shot. In between beats so not even that small shake could affect aim.

‘Now, now, now.’ Don thought in counterpoint to his heart.

Anne stirred next to him, having been so still as to mimic sleep herself, but she hadn’t slept. No one had slept but Mattie, wrapped in plastic and medical tubing when he should have been wrapped safe in his mother still.

Don looked at the clock again. Another minute clicked over. So many beats, so many breaths.

~

Ian shuttered, collapsing on the body under him, their sweat sticking their skin together. There was an uncomfortable grunt under him.

“Oh, sorry,” Ian mumbled quickly rolling off Nurse Andrew and onto his back.

Andrew flipped over and lay a few feet from Ian, still breathing hard. “Well, I could use a smoke after that. How about you?”

“I don’t smoke,” said Ian.

“Neither do I.”

Ian gave a fraction of a chuckle. The grey sun light was peeking under the heavy curtains of the tidy little bedroom. Ian pulled himself up to sit on the edge of the bed. “I’m late.” Ian grumbled to himself.
“Well thank you, ma’am,” Andrew replied sarcastically.

Ian winced. “Sorry, I don’t usually…” Ian waved a hand vaguely around.

“That’s okay. I don’t usually drag maudlin FBI agents home for a quickie after working a double, so we can both just write this one off.”

Ian just nodded. He’d been awake for 24 hours at least. He knew he’d done more on less. Hell he’d gone into combat on less sleep but right now he knew that if he was honest with himself he wanted really not much more than to curl up next to the young, warm, flexible body just a few feet away and pass out for at least eight hours. Preferably ten.

‘Must be getting old.’ Ian thought as he pulled on his shorts. “I’d say see you around but…” Ian let that thought peter out before he grabbed his shirt from the bedside table, his gun under it.

Andrew reached out and put a gentle hand on his arm. “Hey. Look. We can lose one a week on a good week when there aren’t colds bouncing between the parents. Each one is different and you’ve got no way of knowing before it happens. I’ve seen pound and a halfers with no chance practically walk out under their own power four months later. Don’t write the kid off yet. You don’t know until you know. Okay?”

“Yeah.” Ian said softly.

“You want to grab a shower or something?” Andrew asked, gesturing to a side door.

“Nah, I’ll just grab one at the office. Need to change anyway.” Ian looked over at Andrew, pale against dark green sheets. “You should get some sleep.”

Andrew smirked. “Yes, mother.”

Ian pulled on his pants and started looking for his socks. “My mother would tell you to eat more and get a little sun.”

Andrew grinned. “Go save the city from the forces of evil, Agent Edgerton.”

“I’ll see what I can manage.” Ian finished getting dressed and stood by the bedroom door. “Thanks.”

“Any time.”

“Get some sleep.”

Andrew gave a little smile and a nod. “You too.”

~

The doctor’s words were echoing oddly in Don’s ears, a distant scratchy quality to them, as if they were coming down a radio almost out of range.

“He appears to have stabilized at 98.9. That’s a little warm but within human normal. If he can hold that for another couple of hours and I like what the next round of blood tests has to say, we’ll start him on a course of steroids to improve oxygen intake and then something for his kidneys.”

“He’s getting better.” Don’s throat felt dry, his words hurt as if he hasn’t spoken in weeks.
The doctor’s face was serious. “He’s not out of the woods yet, Mr. Eppes.”

‘Not out of the woods.’ That’s what the doctor kept saying. Don sat next to the incubator and leaned his head against it.

“Hey, buddy. We need to talk. I know you’re not feeling too well right now. I don’t know if you’re scared, but I would be. I need you to know that there are people out here. Good, wonderful people who…who need you to get better, who need you to fight. And I know that’s a lot to ask. I know you don’t understand family or responsibility or a single word I’m saying but there are people out here who love you so much already. More than they thought possible and they need you to keep going because there’s so much I want to show you and teach you and I don’t know if I’m going to make it if I don’t get that chance and I know that’s a lot to put on you but…I know you’re strong. I know despite everything the doctors are saying…you’re an Eppes, you’re my son and that means…you’re like the core of a star, to steal from your uncle Larry, the greater the gravity on you the brighter you’ll shine and the stronger you’ll get. So rest now but don’t you dare stop fighting ‘cause you’re strong enough to beat all this. Okay?”

~

The tubes draining the lungs came out first. Mattie winced and Don winced in sympathy, but the tubes had been running dry and there was no sound of fluid when the doctor listened. After that they were allowed to touch. It had been days. Anne slipped her hand in one side and Don in the other. They each slipped fingers beneath tiny hands.

Don felt the small flex of fingers and smiled.

~

Charlie checked his messages before going in. Call the White House, call the Pentagon, call the director, call NASA, call CalSci, call MIT, call Ian. Charlie clicked off his phone. If it was the apocalypse and there was something he could do to stop it then people knew where he could be found in person. Everything else could wait.

Charlie checked over Mattie’s chart before sitting down. He’d never gone through the wanting to be a doctor phase any more than Don had, but he could read a trend chart with the best of them. Charlie smiled. Increase in urinary output. That meant improved kidney function.

He sat down next to Anne, just giving her hand a quick squeeze in silent greeting and settled in for another night of watching and waiting.

~

The I.V. tubes came out next. Don was glad to see those go. Too many memories associated with those. Sitting next to his mother chatting as the cancer drugs dripped into her arm. And later sitting next to her bed, the button to dispense morphine clutched in her hand, the tube in her arm, and the doctor saying it didn’t matter if she got addicted to it.

And then later watching Taylor Ashby slip away, a man with a great mind who’d done great work for his country poisoned and driven half mad, left in a hospital, tubes dripping useless medicine into his arms. Five weeks later, a different hospital bed, Colby, more tubes trying to undo the damage Lancer had done with three little needles. Even later than that, Charlie, his baby brother, another hospital bed, this time the tubes pushing whole blood into him, replacing what was left
splattered and puddled on a warehouse floor.

When the I.V. tubes came out of Mattie, Don closed his eyes and prayed to anyone who might be listening that they never went back in.

Anne cried. She knew it was just stress. Weeks of stress and hellish all-night vigils pouring out. She pressed her eyes into Sasha’s shoulder. She’d cried there enough times over the years either over men or bad reviews. Sasha had told her years ago that the true test of friendship was how much in the way of tears, snot and puke you’re willing to let the other person get on you.

Sasha rubbed her back in broad strokes, making little soothing nonsense noises. Anne kept crying, crying for her son, for herself, for the husband she barely knew before being thrust into all this. For his family, who had so many hopes and dreams riding on a child she hadn’t been able to carry. She cried for the fact that she couldn’t remember a single lullaby her mother had ever sung, and cried for the fact that her own mother may have never sung to her at all.

“Now it may take a moment for his lungs to respond. We’ll monitor it carefully and reintubate if needs be.”

Don nodded and gripped Anne’s hand tight. The tube came out with a slight slurping noise. Mattie lay still. Don heard the seconds tick by in his head. Suddenly the tiny chest seemed to collapse in on itself, then inflate with a breath, then another.

Don didn’t celebrate yet. If he got too tired just breathing or if enough air didn’t get in the tube would have to go back. The doctor watched the monitors. Don watched his son.

“Well,” the doctor said after an eternal ten minutes. “Things look good, we’ll keep him under close observation for the next 24 hours then decide where we’ll go from there.”

Don grinned, a chuckle bubbling up beyond his control. There was a second chuckle, he sat down hard as the chuckles he couldn’t control turned into tears.

David sipped at his coffee as cats rolled around the yard of the suspect’s house. Next to him, Colby checked his phone for the tenth time in as many minutes.

“You know your phone is set to make noise when a message comes in, right?”

“I know, I know. They’re just running some tests today. Charlie said he’d text me with the results.”

“Anything major?” David didn’t even have to ask who or what the tests were being run on.

“Yeah, they’re going to try to get him to swallow without choking. If he can do that they can start him nursing. Charlie’s also arranged for a special MRI with some CalSci specialists so they can check brain development.”

“Oh, very important.”

“Well, it’s almost a guarantee there’s going to be something off somewhere. It would just be nice
to know about it now.”

“He’s an Eppes, man. Even if he ends up 20 points down from where he should be that will still put him a hell of a lot smarter than most.”

“Don’t tell Charlie that, he…hold on.” The suspect came out of his house and peered suspiciously around. “That’s our guy.”

“Think he’s going to run?”

“Yep.” Colby put down his coffee and rolled his neck around. “Oh well, I missed my morning jog anyways.”

~

Alan smiled. “Now that is a beautiful sight I have not seen in a long time.”

Anne looked up a smile on her face. Mattie was held to her chest and was drinking with gusto. “He tuckers out after a few minutes but he’s making the best of it.”

“He’ll get better at it.” Alan sat down next to the two. “How’s it feel?”

Anne looked down at her son and thought about it for a second. “Weird…Good but weird. Better than the pump. There’s still a slight desire to go moo.”

“You should have seen the pumps they had in the 70’s. Only time I saw Margaret truly close to homicide was dealing with one of those things.”

Mattie began to slow down. “Just a couple of more weeks, Alan.” Anne said in a whisper. “We just need to get through a couple of more weeks.”

“Yeah, a couple of more weeks, then the rest of your life.”

“I think I just might be looking forward to it.”

~

Charlie collapsed into bed next to Colby. He sniffed the air, then sniffed his own hands. “If I never smell antiseptic wash again it’ll be too soon.”

“Well…It’s a change from chalk?” Colby mumbled half asleep next to him.

“I like how chalk smells. It’s comforting.”

“You know most people find them smell of their mother’s baking comforting, or something like that.”

“Since when am I most people?”

Colby reached out and took Charlie’s hand. “All someone needs to do is invent lemon scented chalk and your life will be perfect.”

Charlie shifted a little so he was pressed lightly against Colby’s side. Colby began to comb his fingers through Charlie’s hair. Almost instantly Charlie felt himself begin to drift into sleep.

“We’re creeping up on pretty close to perfect now,” Charlie mumbled.
Colby turned and pressed a gentle kiss to Charlie’s lips. “Goodnight, love.”

“Goodnight.”

~

Don was holding his breath. Next to him, Charlie was practically vibrating, bouncing up and down on his toes.

“Well, assuming no further complications and a continuation with this rate of growth I would feel comfortable discharging him at the end of the week.”

Don let out the breath and squeezed Anne’s hand.

‘End of the week, end of the week.’ The words ran through Don’s head. ‘End of the week.’

It has seemed like he’d practically lived a life time in the ward. Well, it had been a lifetime. Mattie’s lifetime.

Martha got Don settled in for some daddy time, Mattie strapped against his chest, over twice the size as he was the first time they did this.

“Hey, Don?” Don answered his brother with a hum. “Have you got any…stuff?”

“What stuff?”

“Baby stuff. Diapers, bottles, clothes. You know, stuff?”

Don looked at Anne, the reality of Charlie’s question hitting. They hadn’t bought a thing. Not so much as a teddy bear, not wanting to jinx it or have a reminder if something went wrong. “Uh… Not really.”

Charlie’s face split into an odd grin that Don had never seen before.

“Annnnniiiiiiiii. What to go shopping?”

Anne jumped up, giving Don and Mattie each a quick kiss. “Sorry, hon, but we need stuff and I’ve got to get out of here.” The two turned to leave.

“Charlie,” Colby almost snapped.

“What?”

Colby held out one hand. “Hand it over.”

“What?” Charlie’s eyes went wide, feigning innocence.

“Charlie.” Colby’s voice was serious.

Charlie sighed and handed over his wallet. Colby opened it and pulled out a couple pieces of plastic while Charlie pulled a face more reminiscent of a spoiled teenaged girl.

Colby handed Charlie back his wallet. “Have fun.”

Charlie rolled his eyes and left.

“What was that about?” Don asked, feeling more than a little confused.
Colby waved a couple of very fancy looking credit cards. “Charlie’s a little bad about very big ticket impulse spending when he’s on manic highs and he knows it.”

“And you get to take his credit cards off him?” Don was more than a little weirded out about this unknown relationship dynamic.

“Don, I balance his check book, pay his bills, make sure his taxes get filed, make sure he remembers to bill for consulting work and make sure his publisher and agent aren’t skimming.”

“Really?”

“Charlie’s got income coming in from six different directions and for a math genius he’s absolute crap at keeping track of it. It’s just this weird little blind spot. It’s a miracle he hasn’t been audited yet. And yet some idiot issued him no limit credit cards.” Colby waved the bits of plastic. “So when he gets in certain moods he has a very easy time mentally justifying things like one of those new electric Mustangs.”

Don made an appreciative noise. He’d seen the ads. They were being hailed as the rebirth of the American car. “He tried to buy one?”

“Not try, did. For my birthday. I made him give it back.”

Don winced. “Well, you’re a better man than me. Did you at least give it a spin?”

“Yeah, drove it back to the dealer.”

“How’d it drive?” Don asked, realizing he was practically salivating at the thought.

“Drove kinda like sex.” Colby’s voice was far away. “Really smooth sex.”

“Oh, definitely a better man than me.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes I know male pediatric nurse doesn’t automatically mean gay but Ian was being so well behaved I though he deserved a treat.
What Perfect Looks Like

Chapter Summary

Mattie goes home.

Don plucked the last of the cards from the incubator and made a note to put them somewhere safe. It’s not every infant that gets a hand-written ‘welcome to the world’ message from the President, after all. Don looked around to make sure he wasn’t forgetting anything. Mattie was safe in Anne’s arms, the car seat was already installed in Don’s SUV, Dad, Charlie and Colby were at the loft setting it up for Mattie’s first night home, and Martha had already taken a picture for the Nurse’s Wall of Victory.

Don looked around again. The few parents that looked his way had envy in their eyes. Don took a deep breath and headed out. By the door he stopped and shook the doctor’s hand. “Thank you,” Don said honestly.

“My pleasure,” the doctor replied.

Don leaned in close and spoke low in his ear. “Look, I’m sure you’re up to something, somewhere. Whatever it is, don’t let it be Federal so I don’t have to come down here and bust you. Okay?” Don gave the doctor a quick pat on the arm, ignoring his startled look, and walked out of the ward for the last time.

~

“This is great,” Don said, looking around. The bedroom had been painted summer sky blue, trimmed with green. Charlie and Sasha had thrown everyone out of the room for three days while they went on an interior decorating spree. It was fully decked out with a changing table, drawers, shelves, all fully stocked with diapers, clothes and blankets, plus the old rocking chair that Don hadn’t seen since Charlie was small.

“Where’s the crib?” Anne asked.

“Your room,” Sasha replied. “We figured you’d want to keep him close for the first while.”

Don felt a hand placed heavy on his shoulder. His father leaned in close. “Told you you’d make it.”

Don sucked in a deep breath of air, the reality hitting. They had made it. Don took Mattie from Anne’s arms and wandered into the other bedroom. An elegant wooden crib sat by the side of the bed that hadn’t been made in months. Don laid Mattie down in it, his eyes flickering open, still an odd dark gray-blue. Don felt Charlie hug him, then his dad.

“We’ll get out of your way. Let you three get settled in,” Alan said. “There’s a casserole in the fridge and some other stuff in the freezer so you shouldn’t have to cook for a few days.”

“Thank you, Alan.” Anne said her voice a little tight with emotion. There was another round of hugs and everyone but Don and Anne filed out of the room.
Don slipped an arm around his wife’s waist and looked down at his son. “Hun, what do we do now?”

Anne cracked up. “I have no fucking clue.”

Don started chuckling himself. “Oh good. As long as it’s not just me.”

~

Don stared at the ceiling, dim, filtered street light coming through the windows. The bedside clock said midnight.

“Are you asleep?” Don whispered softly to the woman next to him.

“No.” Anne whispered back.

Don sat up in bed. “Oh this is ridiculous.” Don got up and sat back down next to the crib. He peered in. Mattie was breathing gently. Charlie had done research and gotten them a top of the line home monitoring system that was really only a dumbed down version of what the hospital used. The read out on the little pink box said that pulse and oxygen were both fine. Don could see that he was breathing easy and steady. Don also knew in his heart it was going to be weeks before he could put Mattie down to sleep without panic and a million ‘what ifs’ grabbing at him. Don looked at Anne. “Tell you what. I’ll take the first watch, you take the second watch?”

Anne chuckled and settled down under the blankets as Don got comfortable ready to spend another night just watching his son breathe.

~

Don ran his thumb along the ring in his pocket, across the flawless edge of the diamond. It was smaller than the one he had given to Kim, even smaller than the one he had considered giving to Robin, but unlike those stones the man in the shop had assured him this one was flawless, a perfect example of what a diamond should be.

When he had given the ring to Kim he had taken her to the best restaurant he could afford. Before ordering dessert he’d slid the box across the table, looking into her eyes. Kim kissed him and they never got to dessert. It was only many years later that Don realized he’d never actually asked the question and Kim had never actually said yes.

Anne lay Mattie down in his crib, the little boy having been changed, fed and burped. It was past noon and she was still in her nightgown. Mattie had had a long night and only a lifetime of compulsive habit had gotten Don into a shower and clothes that were somewhat clean. Don made a mental note to do laundry as soon as he found the energy. It would have to be soon. He was set to go back to the office in just a couple of days.

“You look beautiful.” Don said suddenly.

Anne looked down at herself. “Don, I smell funny and I think something’s nesting in my hair. What are you smoking, and why aren’t you sharing?”

Don smiled and placed a small kiss at her temple. “Marry me?” he whispered.

“I already did.”

Don shook his head, and taking a deep breath went down on one knee, then just to make sure he
couldn’t make a run for it that easily, went down on the other. He pulled the ring out of his pocket.

“Marry me, properly, for real. Please.”

Anne looked down at him. “You couldn’t have waited ‘till I took a shower?”

Don shook his head. “No.”

“Don, we barely know each other.”

“I know.”

“Neither of us have the greatest relationship track record.”

“I know.”

“I’m ten kinds of screwed up.”

“Me too.”

“This isn’t going to be easy.”

“I know.”

Anne chewed on her lip before reaching down, taking the ring, and slipping it on her finger.

“Okay. Yes.” Don stood and placed the softest of kisses on her lips. “Seriously, you couldn’t have waited until I took a shower?”

~

Ian slouched in the old cracked leather armchair that his mother always kept in the corner of her room. He watched as she brushed her hair in front of the mirrored antique dressing table that had been more or less stolen from his grandparents and dragged every place they had ever lived.

“So where’s he taking you?” Ian asked.

“We’re going to dinner, then a concert at the Disney center.” Kathryn replied.

Ian nodded. It was the first night out she and Alan had taken since Mattie was born. “This one is actually working, isn’t it?”

“There’s no reason to sound so surprised.”

Ian shrugged. “You’re two months past your personal best.”

Kathryn sighed. “He’s good to me, Ian. I’m not even sure why. I wish I could have met him years ago, for your sake if nothing else.”

“I think Mrs. Eppes might have had a thing or two to say on that point.”

Kathryn chuckled. “She’s still around.”

“Really?” Ian said softly.

“I feel her sometimes when I’m at the house. There’s no malice, she’s just keeping an eye on her boys.”
Ian just nodded. Kathryn put down the brush and began to twist her long hair to the top of her head before suddenly wincing and carefully flexing her hands.

Ian got up. “Here, let me.” Ian couldn’t guess as to the amount of his childhood that was spent helping his mother get ready for a date. Each guy was The One. The one who would stay, the one who loved her, the one that would make a good father. Ian twisted the mass of hair with practiced ease into a soft bun and carefully slipped in the old silver hair pins that were lined up neatly on the dressing table.

“How do I look?” She asked.

“Lovely as always.”

Kathryn smiled. “You’re such a good boy.”

Ian chuckled and dropped a kiss on top of her head. “Even Ghengis Khan loved his mother.”

~

Colby tumbled through the front door of his apartment, Charlie’s hands practically ripping his shirt off as he went. Life was good Colby thought as he and Charlie raced to achieve mutual nakedness. Mattie was home and doing fine. The case of the paranoid IRS auditor was finally solved, there was a table free at their favorite restaurant and they both had the next day off.

Charlie finished stripping off the last of his clothes and hopped onto the bed, spreading himself out like some decadent offering to a god of sex.

“Is there something you’re wanting Doctor Eppes?” Colby asked, slowing down and peeling off the rest of his clothes.


Colby crawled across the bed, up Charlie’s body and kissed him. “So very demanding.” Charlie wriggled under him.

“Yeah, what are you going to do about it?”

Colby grabbed Charlie’s wrists, pinning him to the bed then began to leave little nips up and down his neck that he knew Charlie’s students would tease him about.

Charlie groaned and rolled his hips looking for any friction.

“You’re a tease, you know that Charlie?”

“Yeah, but I’m your tease.” Charlie answered breathlessly

“You know what happens to teases in this bed?”

Charlie grinned. Colby let him go and Charlie rolled over and got on his hands and knees. Colby landed a dozen quick swats to Charlie’s backside. He only used half strength and it was hardly more than a tickle by their standards, just enough to put a little heat into the skin.

“And two more for making that poor waiter fall in love with you when you are so very taken.” Charlie wiggled his backside at Colby and spread his knees. “You’re being demanding again.”

“I think we established that.”
Colby chuckled and grabbed the lube slicking up his cock and his fingers. It only took a quick moment to stretch Charlie already relaxed from the wine at dinner then Colby lined himself up and sunk in. They both let out soft groans. Colby rested his cheek on Charlie’s back for a moment just enjoying the feeling of being buried in Charlie with no other cares, after so many months of stress. “Charlie, build me something that can freeze time so we can stay like this.”

“I’ll start in the morning.”

Colby pulled out and set a slow easy pace he knew he could keep up for long minutes. Charlie threw his head back his hair falling well past his shoulders these days. He reached his arms around Charlie and pulled him up so they were spooned together, Colby’s thrusts shifting to fast and shallow.

Charlie laid his head back against Colby’s shoulder and made sweet little noises with each thrust. Colby slid his hand down and gripped Charlie’s cock working it in time to his thrusts.

“Oh God, Colby.” Charlie breathed then snapped his hips forward spraying cum across himself and Colby’s hand. Colby chuckled and Charlie limply fell forward. Colby followed and picked up speed, driving into Charlie until with a shout he found himself spilling into his lover, his love.

He collapsed next to Charlie and pulled him close.

“Let’s never go back to work. Let’s just spend the rest of our lives doing this.”

Charlie snuggled in even closer and Colby could feel him smile. “I think I could live with that, I really do.”

~

Don walked through the halls of the hospital. Lost. He knew where he should be but the halls were empty and the arrows all seem to point the wrong direction.

From somewhere he heard a baby cry and rushed through the halls towards it.

He pushed open a door to the hospital’s small chapel. The screams got louder. Charlie sat on the altar dressed in orthodox black, a naked infant in his arms, wailing.

“She won’t stop crying, Don.” Charlie said, tears falling from his own eyes. “The music’s too loud.” Charlie held her out and Don took her in his arms. A tube ran from her neck to Charlie’s arm, blood passing between them. “Take her, please, you’re late as it is.”

“Where?”

Charlie yanked the tube from his arm, blood falling to the floor in thin rivulets. The baby stopped crying and looked up at Don with wide gray eyes.

“The house, a kidney, a pint of blood. It’s all for you, Don. Don’t lose her. Don’t be late.” There was the sound of crying. Don looked down but the baby in his arms was quiet. Don blinked.

Mattie stopped crying almost as soon as Anne lifted him out of the cradle next to the bed. Don gave his head a shake. Mattie still didn’t have the energy for long crying jags but since coming home he’d taken to waking a bit in the middle of the night.

“He okay?” Don mumbled.
“Just fussy. Go back to sleep.” Don shook his head and shifted over to the other side of the bed taking Mattie gently from Anne’s arms. He held the still small baby against his chest and felt himself begin to relax as his son settled back into sleep.
The Taste of Worry

Chapter Summary

Bradford and baby pictures.

Bradford held out his hand.

“Okay, Eppes. Hand them over.”

Don grinned and pulled a small stack of photos out of his jacket pocket.

“That’s the newest,” Don said, pointing to the one on top. Bradford looked at the baby in the Dodgers onesie. There was no doubting who the father was. “He looks like you.”

“I think he got Anne’s eyes, or maybe Charlie’s, they’re kinda wider than mine. Actually, they just went brown last week. They’ve been a kinda dark ocean gray-blue.” Bradford flipped through the photos that seemed to go backwards in time. “That’s when we got to take him home. Seven pounds even, and that was his due date, Six pounds, twelve ounces. He put on over four pounds in two months.”

“I’m happy if I can lose four pounds in two months.”

“Once we got him off intubation and nursing properly he just started growing like nothing, started crying. Best sound I ever heard, first time he cried.”

Bradford just nodded. He’d been getting updates from Colby on the goings-on of the Eppes clan and knew there had been a couple of close calls. Bradford flipped over a few more photos. “That’s priceless,” he said at the picture of a terrified-looking Charlie holding a painfully small baby.

“Colby took that one. Charlie’s getting a little better but I don’t think he’s going to be completely comfortable until he can talk to Mattie and Mattie can talk back.”

The next photo was of a much more comfortable-looking Colby and the baby. “Well, now that’s just cute.”

“Colby’s a natural,” Don provided. “Charlie, on the other hand, not so much, though I’ll be very surprised if they don’t sit down and talk about kids soon.”

“That’ll be an interesting discussion.”

“You’re telling me.”

Bradford picked up another picture that had slipped to the bottom of the stack. “Now that’s great blackmail material.” The picture was of Ian sitting on a couch making faces at a little bundle wrapped in a blue blanket.

“Oh, I’ve seen better. I’ve seen Ian Edgerton baby photos.”

“Oh, dear,” Bradford chuckled.
“And for the record he was not a cute baby. He’s had that ‘I can kill you all’ expression down since he was two months old.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“Oh, and all that time I’ve spent fluffing around about how I’m not ready to be a parent, Kathryn had him at sixteen. Sixteen. At sixteen I wasn’t responsible enough to have a car, let alone a kid.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t easy for her. How are you two getting along?”

Don shrugged. “I like her. I mean, I wish my mom was here. Could have used her a few time lately, but Kathryn seems good for Dad. He needs someone around to keep him on his toes.”

“From what I hear she does do that.”

Don cringed. “I think Charlie’s been permanently traumatized. I would not be surprised if there is a revival of the great condo hunt.”

“That might be best for all involved.”

“Yeah.” Don fell silent.

“So how are you doing Don? You’ve been back a week.”

“Still catching up on paperwork mostly, trying to figure out where Ian left everything. I’m out of shape. Started taking the stairs, hitting the gym again.”

“Yeah, that happens, but how are you doing?”

Don looked down at the photos and picked up one of Mattie in his incubator. “I wish I was home,” he said quietly. “I mean, I’m glad I’m back, I missed the place, but he’s still so small and I feel like I’m missing things or if I’m not there something will happen. I know, me, full time house husband, even if we could afford it, I’d start bouncing off the walls pretty quick. It’s a nice thought, but I don’t think the Bureau is about to grant five years of parental leave.”

“No, probably not.”

“And it all happened so quick. I mean, Anne and I, we haven’t known each other a year and a half yet and we’re married with a kid.”

“Don, the very first time you talked to me about Anne you talked about having kids, getting married, you talked about how happy she made you feel and you’d only known her two months. Does she still make you happy?”

“Yeah, she does.”

“Well, then you just need to take a deep breath and realize you just had the American dream dropped in your lap and you’re just going to have to deal.”

Don rubbed his thumb over the picture of his son. “Is it weird if I say I want another?”

Bradford chuckled. “Have you told Anne that?”

“No, I like keeping my balls attached. Call me picky.”

“Eppes, I’ve got three,” Bradford said with a grin “Survive the terrible twos first, then think about
adding to the Eppes clan.”

“I’ll take that under advisement.” Don quietly flipped through the pictures for a few minutes. “I haven’t been sleeping well.”

“You’re a parent. You’re not supposed to.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“What’s worrying you?” Bradford asked.

Don shrugged. “Absolutely fucking everything. I mean, I still have the ‘what if he stops breathing’ panic. The first two weeks we had him home, Anne and I slept in shifts so one of us could watch him. Then there’s all the, what if he get sick, what if he stops eating, what if I drop him, what if he gets asthma or needs braces, what if I hurt him trying to cut his nails? What if he’s allergic to peanut butter or strawberries?”

“Those are all reasonable worries.”

Don stood up and started pacing the room. “Sure, but then there’s the completely unreasonable ones or the ones that are so far down the line I don’t know why I’m even thinking about them.”

“Like what?”

“Like… what if he has trouble reading, what if he has trouble with math? What if he can’t make friends? What if he hates baseball? What if he wants to be a Fed? What if he’s really good at baseball and signs with the Yankees?” Bradford chuckled but Don was on a roll. “What do I do when he brings a girl home? What if he brings a boy home? What if he never brings anyone home because he’s horribly ashamed of his parents?”

“Don, trust me on this, even if he ends up a socially introverted dyslexic gay Yankees fielder he’s still your son and you’re still gonna love him.”

“Yeah,” Don said softly sitting back down. “Then there’s the really big wake-me-up-in-the-middle-of-the-night-in-a-cold-sweat worry.”

“What’s that?”

“What if he’s a genius?” Don said, voice barely above a whisper, as if not wanting to give the universe ideas.

“Would that be such a bad thing?”

“You mentioned the terrible twos,” Don said slowly. “I remember Charlie’s terrible twos. They were…beyond terrifying. See, he’d have these screaming fits, not tantrums for candy or anything, he’d just scream. He wasn’t talking. He didn’t talk ‘till he was three. He’d just scream for hours on end and Mom and Dad would have to hold him because if they didn’t…” Don petered off.

“What would happen?”

“He’d hurt himself.” Don answered flatly. “He’d rip his hair out in clumps until Mom cut it short. He’d throw himself against the walls or furniture. Climb up on chairs and tables and throw himself off. Mom didn’t let him outside for nearly a year because he was always covered in bruises and she was afraid of getting accused of child abuse.”
“That must have been scary for you?”

“I remember this one time Charlie had been screaming for hours and Mom was holding him and she was crying too in what I’m sure was just frustration. And…he suddenly stopped and gave this little cough and suddenly there was just this blood across my mother’s face. He’d managed to scream until he ruptured something.”

“What did you do?”

Don shrugged. “I ran, I hid, my baby brother was coughing up blood. He was either dying or possessed.”

“When did the tantrums stop?”

“They haven’t,” Don said softly. “I mean he stopped screaming after the math started but…When they give you that ‘watch out for your brother’ speech it’s about not letting him run into the road or take candy from strangers. There’s nothing about what you’re supposed to do when you find your five-year-old brother beating his own skin raw with a stick.” Don squeezed his eyes shut. “He’s channeled it, hid it, figured out how to get off on it, but he’s still… he’s still two years old throwing himself against walls and as much as hearing Mattie cry is something I flat-out prayed for, every time something in my stomach knots up and I wonder if this is the time he’s going to start crying and not stop.”

Bradford nodded and let the room fall into silence for a moment. “You do know that Charlie is a very unique and extreme case?”

“I know,” Don took a deep breath. “Mom was depressed.”

Bradford blinked a few times. In all the discussions with Don about his family this had never come up. “What makes you say that?”

“I’ve just been spending a lot of time thinking about my childhood. And, you know, normal is what you’re brought up with until you find out otherwise.”

“Were things not normal?” Don leveled a look at Bradford. “Aside from your brother.”

“I remember lying in bed and hearing Mom walking around the house in the middle of the night. She’d go two or three days with hardly any sleep, clean everything, organize everything, and then one morning Dad would be making us breakfast. ‘Your mother’s tired, she’s not feeling well.’ She’d stay in bed for a day or two, then spend a couple of days barely hauling herself out of bed and to work and then it would ramp back up again.” Don rubbed a hand over his face. “I mean, she got everything done, held down a job, rewrote city housing law, took care of Charlie, composed half a symphony in secret but… I’ve been looking at old pictures, birthdays, family trips, holidays and there’s just a few too many where she’s forcing the smile and now I can tell.”

“Those could have been signs of a chemical imbalance. Perhaps some form of bipolar disorder.”

“And the thing is I look at those photos and there are way too many where I know I’m faking it too. I mean I’ve always chalked it up to the job, stress, my family but…I mean we’ve never talked about it and quite frankly I’m scared shitless to but what if all the times I chewed on my gun or took some random woman home…or…or quit baseball? What if that’s all just some bit of my brain under secreting or over secreting two teaspoons worth of some brain chemicals and…I don’t want Mattie to ever feel that. I don’t ever want him to look at a…bullet as a viable sleeping pill but there’s all this research and DNA analysis and…I just want him to be happy.”
Bradford took a deep breath. “Okay, Don, I’m going say this as a parent. You can’t write your children’s future. You can worry and wonder but what is going to happen is going to happen. All you can do is make sure he’s strong, smart, healthy, adaptable, and most importantly that he knows he is loved and I don’t think you’re going to have trouble with any of that. Got that?”

Don nodded.

“Now, speaking as your shrink… the problem with the way we used to do things is that no one knew what they were looking at usually until it was too late and too far past a point where it could be dealt with easily. Times have changed. We know what we’re looking at now and what’s more we know how to spot it in its earliest forms. Now Charlie is the way he is because at a very young age he had a problem and found a useful if destructive coping mechanism. By the time anyone tried to stop him or realized what it was he was doing, it was completely ingrained in him. Now let’s face it, the chances of two super geniuses in one family, even yours, are pretty small, but if it does happen you will know what you are seeing. You’ll know what’s coming and you and probably Charlie will be able to help him find healthy and safe ways of dealing before he has a chance to go down a destructive path. And if there appear to be symptoms of a more minor form of depression, again, you’ll know what you’re looking at, and you’ll know what’s coming and as long as you are honest with yourself about it you’ll be able to help him better than nearly anyone else. Are you following me?”

Don nodded again. “Yeah,” he said softly.

“You’re a parent now. That means it’s your job to be worried and mildly panicked every day for the rest of your life and probably for a bit after.”

“That’s not comforting.”

“Not meant to be. You’re a good man and you will screw your kid up a little because every parent screws their kid up a little, but you are willing to learn from your mistakes and more importantly the mistakes of others. Like your own parents. Got it?”

“Yeah. Okay.”

“Keep doing what you’re doing, Don. Keep an eye on him, keep your own head together and he’s going to be fine.”
Chapter Summary

Prep for the wedding begins.

David watched as Don paced in front of him and Colby. Don had wanted to speak to them both privately.

“Okay Don, just spill.”

“I need to request a favor from you both and you should both feel free to say no.”

“Whatever it is…”

“I have been asked to pick out groomsmen.”

“Don it would be an honor…”

“No.” Don cut in quick. “Don’t say yes yet. You don’t know what you’re getting into. This is going to be freaking huge.”

“It really is,” said Colby.

“Half the Bureau’s invited, I mean I’m talking about tux fittings, rehearsals, not to mention agreeing to be under the thumb of my father and Charlie, who have turned into some sort of maniacal evil overlords of wedding planning. Plus Charlie’s promising a stag night that could end in brain damage, liver failure or legal proceedings. I mean really, either of you, feel free to say no.”

David looked to Colby who nodded in confirmation. David took a deep breath.

“Don, I’d take a bullet for you, I think I can handle this.”

Don nodded. “Okay, thank you.”

The man at the tux shop had insisted that the only way to get everyone properly fitted in an hour was if all the assistants were brought in and everyone was fitted at once. This is how David found himself stripping in front of Don, Colby, Charlie, and Alan.

“So, Don, does this count as sexual harassment?” David asked.

“Only if Charlie makes a pass at you.”

“Your place or mine, big boy?” Charlie said flatly, not even looking up from untying his shoelace.

“Charlie,” Alan scolded.

“There, now you’ve been harassed, feel better?” Don asked with a grin.
“Strangely, yes.” David replied. Charlie shot him a teasing smile. David shook his head as he pulled off his shirt. On occasion he still had trouble putting together Don’s asexual walking computer of a little brother with Colby’s boyfriend who was practically the office flirt as well. The change hadn’t even been that gradual, David could practically pinpoint the day and it had been the day Charlie walked in wearing a thousand dollar suit knowing full well he looked hot, as opposed to jeans and a ratty t-shirt.

“Oh, for crying out loud, Colby.” David heard Alan say. “Are you planning on invading somewhere single handedly?” David looked at Colby, who was unclipping a knife from around his calf and stacking it with three guns.

“I was an eagle scout.” Colby said in his own defense.

“So was I.” said Alan. “That’s why I keep a pocket knife on my key chain.”

Colby shrugged. David unclipped his second and last gun from around his ankle. Truthfully he always thought Colby was a little overarmed but considering the life the man had lived he couldn’t really blame him. Not to mention all that armament was what was covering his back.

David looked up to make a comment to Colby himself and froze, then quickly averted his eyes and went back to untying his shoes. David actually felt his heart pounding and he peeked up again to confirm what he had seen.

Charlie was sitting on a table in his shorts, casual as anything, doodling in his notebook. David still had the occasional nightmare that featured lovable little Charlie covered in blood on a warehouse floor but he had the sudden realization that he hadn’t seen Charlie sans clothes since. And why would he? There had been that picture in the math journal but that had been almost abstract, black and white. The roadmap of scars across Charlie Eppes’ body was in front of him in harsh living color.

He flicked his eyes to Colby, who seemed to take no notice. Don was occupied with something on his cell phone. Alan... Alan’s eyes were planted firmly on the floor. It could well be simple modesty about being undressed with four other men but something in the stiffness of his shoulders told David otherwise.

David took a deep breath, quietly schooled his features and finished undressing.

“So are we getting a classic tux, Don?” David asked.

Don shrugged. “Hell if I know. All I know is I’m supposed to show up on the day and say I Do.”

“Charlie picked the tuxes.” Alan said.

“Really?”

Charlie looked up from his notebook. “You think I was going to let a bunch of feds pick out tuxes? We’d all end up looking like rejects from the Hoover administration or an old Bond movie.”


“Hip yes, color coordinated, no. I used some of my old work into light waves to make sure the colors don’t clash with the bridesmaids’ dresses and as the mostly gay little brother I felt it was my duty.”

“ Mostly?” David asked with a raised eyebrow.
Charlie shrugged. “I have my moments.”

“I’m just afraid I’m going to end up looking silly.” Alan groused.

“Dad, you will look great, I promise. You’ll be fighting off the ladies with stick.” Alan rolled his eyes as the fitters traipsed in with an entire rack of clothes.

“For the groom.” The head fitter said, handing Don a set of hangers. The rack was quickly emptied and David found himself standing on a box with a guy attacking him with a piece of chalk and muttering to himself.

“Hey, Charlie. I suddenly know what your chalkboards feel like.” David said.

“I treat my chalkboards very well. Good ones are damn hard to find these days, no one makes them.”

“He actually bought one off eBay.” Colby said. “Had it shipped all the way from Kansas.”

“It had never been used. It was pristine, a completely virgin field of dark green. I set it up in the solarium.”

David shook his head. Charlie was using the tone of voice men usually reserved for talking about their mistresses. “I don’t know Colby, I’d be jealous if I were you. Hearing a man talk like that.”

“The chalkboards and I have come to an understanding, sort of a time share thing.”

“You’d be the first to manage it,” said Don.

“Damn straight.”

Don turned around on his box and posed a little. “So guys, whatcha think?”

Don was dressed all in black, except for a deep green vest that seemed to be made of the same satiny material as the tie. David wasn’t sure but he thought it might have done something to the color of Don’s eyes.

“You look great Donnie.”

“Thank you, Dad.”

“Yeah Don, you look good.” David said.

“Ramundo?” Charlie called to the guy who was buzzing around Don. “Can we get some cufflinks, silver or white gold with a stone or something that goes with the vest.”

“No problem.”

“Great.”

The assistant fiddled with the tie around David’s throat then let him turn to face the mirrors. David had to admit the even with the fitting chalk he looked good. The jacket was made of top line material, the shirt felt like high-end linen. It was cut similar to Don’s and like Don’s it was all in black except where as Don had a green vest and black tie the groomsmen and Alan had black vests and deep green ties.

“So Charlie, what’s the plan for this stag night Don keeps alluding to?” David asked.
“Ah, that is my little secret.”

“At least tell us who’s coming?”

“It’ll be us. Ian if he’s in town.”

David chuckled. “The great Ian Edgerton in an LA bar crawl.”

“We’re trying to talk Larry into coming.” Don said.

“Larry?”

“Well for the entertainment value if nothing else.”

“Donnie, don’t go getting Larry into any trouble.” Alan warned.

Charlie laughed. “Dad, I promise you if Larry wanted to get into trouble he would not need Don’s help. I mean, we’re talking about the guy who managed to orchestrate the theft of every vending machine on the MIT campus.”

“That was Larry?”

“Well, he was the idea guy.”

“How’d he manage that?” David asked.

“He got a grad student to hack into the computers of the vending machine company and fiddle with MIT’s account so all the machines were called in for servicing on the same day. I mean can you picture an entire campus of nerds without access to caffeinated soda or junk food? I’m told you could hear the screams clean across the Charles River.”

“Remind me never to piss off Larry.”

“Well, they did steal our cannon first.”

A phone rang. It got pulled from a pile and tossed by an assistant to Don’s outstretched hand. “Eppes... okay... great. Got it.” Don clicked the phone off. “LAPD just picked up our guy. They’re sending him over.”

“Great,” Charlie replied. “Ramundo. We’re going to have to wrap this up quick. Duty calls.”

~

It was late when David pulled open the right drawer in the file room. Technically the file he was pulling was an unsolved so it was still in the building. He wasn’t even entirely sure why he was looking. Why something in him needed to know so badly. The doctor’s reports were cold and clinical, the initial victim statement was fractured, but the pictures told the story. Bruise erupting, hasty bandages to stop the worst of the bleeding before proper stitches could be put in, thick wet wounds already beginning to ooze with infection, little dots of blackened flesh, you could almost smell the nicotine stink from them, fluid dried on that wasn’t blood, cheeks pale with shock and cold and blood loss. The worst part was how detached Charlie’s eyes looked, how bizarrely calm as if it were all happening to someone else.

David jumped as the door beeped open and quickly tried to file the pictures away.
“Hey David I was heading out and...” David tried to hide the photos from Colby but it was too late. “What the fuck?” Colby actually pushed him away hard enough that he impacted on the opposite wall. “What the fuck!” Colby said again. He scraped the photos back into the folder and roughly shoved it back into the drawer. “What the fuck are you doing, man?” Colby shouted.

David shook his head not having a good answer. “I’m sorry. I just...”

“You just what?!”

“I just...I realized I didn’t know.”

“Didn’t know what?” Colby snapped.

“How bad it was.”

Colby gave him a disgusted look. “It was bad, okay?”

“No it’s... look, we all know Sherwood nabbed Lecroft and he’s dead in a ditch somewhere and it’s better than he deserved, it’s just... if the NSA hadn’t got him it would have... there would have been a trial and public records and follow up reports... and...” David shook his head. “I realized, anyone else I would have known how bad it was and... I guess I was worried, man.”

Colby looked at him, ice coming from the sweet farm boy face. “It’s a little late.”

“I know, it’s just...Charlie’s okay, right?”

“There are good days and not so good days. We take the good ones and we deal with the not so good ones.”

David nodded. “He’s a lot stronger than he looks, isn’t he?”

“Yeah. A lot weaker, too.”

David nodded understanding. “And...” David took a deep breath “He’s a little nuts, isn’t he?”

Colby gave an almost chuckle. “Yeah, but when you’re that smart they just call it eccentric.”

David looked at the floor for a bit. “You know I give you a bit of shit, man, but...you and Charlie, it’s good, I don’t know, two of you together never seemed weird. It’s like something that just always was.”

“Seeing as how you are literally the only guy in the office who hasn’t checked out Charlie’s ass at least once, that means a lot.”

“No problem. Hey, I’m sorry about...” David waved vaguely at the drawers.

Colby shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. I get it.”
The Sound of Murmurs in the Dark

Chapter Summary

One more stakeout and Megan has a secret.

David watched the dark warehouse under the orange sodium lights. Nothing moved. There wasn’t even a breeze. Next to him Don sipped coffee from a thermos.

“You want some?” Don offered, holding out the thermos.

“Nah, I want to be able to sleep once we land these guys.”

“It’s Charlie’s special blend.” Don offered, as if that was a selling point.

David gave a snort. “Definitely no then. I’d like to be able to sleep sometime this month.”

“Sleep is for the weak and childless.”

“Wouldn’t know about that.”

“Oh, one day you might and you will fast learn that sleep is a fond and distant memory along with clean clothes, real food, sex.”

David chuckled. “You’re not selling me on this whole parenthood thing, Don.”

Don grinned. “Worth it, really.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll pass for the time being. Got to find a girl first.”

“Well, there’ll be plenty of pickings at the wedding. Anne’s got some really hot friends.”

David’s ears picked up. “Are they single?”

“Most of them. As far as I can tell Anne’s become the black sheep by submitting to the outdated, patriarchal, binding institute of marriage.”

“Well at least your Dad’s happy.”

“As a clam. Mattie would have been enough; the wedding is just a big gob of icing as far as he’s concerned.”

“And let me guess, he gearing up to get Charlie hitched next?”

Don shook his head. “You know, I don’t think so.”

“Really? I would have thought he’d just be itching to get the both of you hitched.”

“Well, as always, Charlie’s love life is proving a little more difficult.”

“He’s still got problems with Colby?” David asked, concern in his voice.
Don grimaced a little. “You know, it’s hard to say. I mean they play chess every night, Colby’s got that old school, respect your elders thing going, they get along fine but sometimes Dad just gets this look like ‘What is this goy army Fed doing with his hands on my son?’” David chuckled a little at Don’s dead on impression of his Dad. “Not that I blame him, I mean I still have moments where I’m talking to Charlie and all I can think is ‘who is this person wearing my brother’s face?’”

“Maybe if they spit out grandkids he’ll come around.” David offered.

Don snorted into his coffee. “Yeah, I don’t think that’s going to be happening anytime soon.”

“Really? ‘Cause Colby’s seemed a little clucky to me since Mattie was born. He gets this kinda gooe look every time he sees a dad with a kid.”

“Well Colby might want kids and he’d probably be good with them but Charlie, nope, not happening, zero reproductive instinct there.”

“See, I would figure an ego like Charlie’s would be all for having a mini me running around.”

Don shook his head. “Ego aside, Charlie actually doesn’t like himself that much. Sees himself as a bit of a freak, doesn’t want to inflict it on a kid.”

“Now that’s just stupid.”

“If there is one thing I’ve learned about geniuses it is that they have the ability to be incredibly dumb on occasion. Especially concerning themselves and their relationships.”

“See, it seems a bit of a waste to me.”

“I know but as far as I can tell the only thing that’ll possibly lead to Charlie spawn is alien abduction or lots and lots of tequila and after the DEA Christmas party Colby’s keeping an eye on his alcohol intake.”

“Did he really climb on a bar, drop his pants and declare himself a god?” David asked between snickers.

Don grimaced. “According to Lt. Garcia he actually declared himself a goddess, moments prior to falling off the bar.”

“Goddess of what?”

“Sex or math, depending on who’s telling the story. Possibly both.”

“Now see, why didn’t we make it our mission to get Charlie completely liquored up for the entertainment value?”

“Because we are not complete social degenerates like the DEA. We are the FBI, the elite, we have honor, and dignity.” David gave Don a dry look. “And because my father would kill me.”

~

Megan watched as Colby’s phone buzzed. Colby read the message, then stared at the ceiling of the van for a moment before texting back. He’d been doing this for the last hour. The phone quickly buzzed again. He read the message.

“Fuck.”
“What?” Megan asked.

“Checkmate.”

“What?”

“Just a sec.” Colby texted quickly. “Go. To. Bed. Send.”

“Charlie?”

“Yeah. He’s decided I’m not an idiot.”

“Well, that’s nice of him,” Megan said with heavy sarcasm.

“Well, he’s decided that my *slightly* more than average intellect was never properly trained and I’m not thinking to my full potential so he’s got me playing chess.”

“You already play chess.”

“Without a chess board.”

Megan winced a little. “That’s a bit harder.”

“Migraine city the first week. I can keep all the pieces in my head now but I can’t plan more than a couple moves ahead without getting confused. Whereas before I could get Charlie to a stalemate maybe one game out of 30 and get a win one out of 50 if he’s distracted, now I’m just getting my ass kicked.”

Megan made a vague gesture to the phone. “Hey, it’s better than my chess game.”

“You should play with Larry. He’s got a good game on him, could whip you into shape.”

Megan shook her head. “Nah, that’s his male bonding thing with Alan, besides the time we manage to get together I’d rather do something other than stare at a chess board.”

Colby chuckled “Fair enough.” Colby looked out at the dead warehouse. “So, Don got you guys thinkin’ about tying the knot, having some munchkins?” Megan became still and looked away.

“Megan?”

“Can you keep a secret, Granger?”

“I think I have a proven track record in that category.” Megan looked at Colby hard. “Did Larry propose?”

“No.”

“Then…” Colby’s eyes flicked down to Megan stomach. A light bulb went on. Colby grinned.

“Touch my stomach and I’ll break your wrist.”

Colby’s grin got even bigger. “How long?”

“Seven weeks.”

“Does Larry know?”

Megan nodded “And is in a complete unbridled panic about it.”
“I’m not surprised. What are you gonna do?”

Megan shrugged. “I’m actually old enough that this counts as a higher risk pregnancy so basically we’re not spreading it around ‘till someone makes a crack about my weight.”

“And you know Don will go into hyper protective uber alpha male mode once you do tell him.”

“That’ll be the other reason for not spreading it around. Only telling you ‘cause Larry’ll tell Charlie sooner or later.”

Colby seemed lost in thought for a bit. “Wow. So…are you going to take time off or..?”

“I take time off now I can kiss my next promotion goodbye. Larry’s going to take a year’s sabbatical. Be a stay at home dad. Money will be a little tight but…”

Colby’s eyes got big. “Uh, Megan… This is Larry we’re talking about.”

Megan cringed. “I know but… panic aside he’s been wanting kids for a long time. This is certainly his last shot.”

Colby shook his head again. “Wow. Well… good luck.”

“Thanks.”

“You know I’m so not letting you go through the door first tonight, right?”

Megan rolled her eyes. “I can still drop kick your ass Granger.”

“Yeah and our vests don’t go down quite far enough.”

Megan sighed, the semi chronic heartburn flaring up again. “Whatever.”

~

“So,” David said. “I’ve been hearing an interesting rumor.”

“Yeah, about what?” Don asked flatly.

“I’ve been hearing a rumor that the Bureau is going to authorize a second violent crimes unit out of the L.A. office in a year or so.”

“Yeah, I heard that too.” Don said eyes glued to the building.

“I figure a second unit, they’re going to want someone who knows the turf to run it.”

“That would make sense.”

“And they’d probably be asking the head of the current unit for recommendation.” David mentioned lightly.

Don sighed. “You’re not ready, I’m recommending Megan.”

David’s head whipped around. “Not ready..?”

“It’s my own fault.” Don said taking a sip of his coffee. “The Bureau is going to want to see a hard edge on whoever I recommend. I’ve let you pick up too many bad habits. You go by the book when you should be thinking outside the box and I let you pull cowboy maneuvers when I should
be pulling you back.”

David rubbed his face. He’d just been hoping for conformations on some rumors, start maybe angling for the gig. “So… what do I do, Don?”

“Go with Megan as her second. She’ll breathe down your neck, sharpen you up, give you what the Bureau’s looking for.”

“Then what, wait for a third unit?”

Don shook his head. “I’m getting out, David.”

David’s eyebrows hit his nonexistent hairline “Serious?”

“Yeah, couple, three years I’m out of the field, desk job, teaching, something.”

“You love field work, man.”

“I know but… I promised Anne, promised myself. I don’t want to be the father who drags himself in at 10 o’clock at night stinking of gun powder, drinks two beers and passes out on the couch. I want to coach Little League.”

Don shook his head. “Wow.”

“I want to leave the team to someone I can trust not to fuck it up, so sharpen up, toe the line, have a little patience and one day,” Don gestured grandly around the van. “This can all be yours.”

“What about Colby? His record’s as good as mine.”

Don nodded. “Colby could do it; I’d trust him to do it. He doesn’t want it. He doesn’t believe he can do it, for one. He pulled that dumb farm boy act long enough that he still half believes it himself but even so he has no ambition beyond where he is now.”

“Yeah, I heard after that Janus list fiasco the Bureau offered him whatever the hell he wanted.”

“He could have fast tracked himself into an AD’s office. He likes what he’s doing here and as long he’s Charlie’s kept man he doesn’t need the money.”

David gave a chuckle. “Now see, why couldn’t I have found some rich doctor to keep me in a comfortable lifestyle in exchange for sex?”

Don grinned. “Be damn thankful Charlie didn’t make a play for you.”

“Serious?”

“You’re his type, man. Tall and built. I think Colby’s big green eyes are the only thing that edged you out.”

David snorted. “Never in a million years.”

“Yeah, and I’d bet real money Colby said the same damn thing about five minutes before Charlie got his pants off.” Don took another sip of coffee. “Remember, what Charlie wants Charlie gets.”
A Taste of Life

Chapter Summary

A night out with the boys.

Ian pulled down the cuffs on the black silk shirt. Charlie’s brief for the evening’s dress was casual but cool and layers in case of outdoor activity or weather change. Ian was not exactly a clotheshorse. He had maybe three outfits, if they could be called that, which he dragged around the country with him. When he mentioned this to Charlie, Charlie actually sighed, slapped a couple of C-notes in his hand, and told him to go shopping.

Most of the stag and hen parties were already milling about the Eppes house. They were just waiting on Megan and Larry. Larry had been talked into spending the night with the boys and Megan had been offered a place with the ladies even though she really knew none of them. Anne argued that having a little FBI muscle in the party wouldn’t be a bad thing.

Little Mattie was in a bassinet in the living room being cooed over by a woman with dark green hair. Ian became aware of woman with a puffy shirt who kept looking at him sideways. Ian was used to odd looks but this one seemed more than a little amused.

“Yes?” Ian finally asked.

“White.”

“What?”

“Your aura, it’s white. Very rare.”

“Oh, thanks.” Ian had grown up with odd women who read auras and tea leaves and tarot cards. Looking around at Anne’s friends, he realized that most of them could have been his mother’s friends 30 years ago. They all looked destined to become weird, lecherous little old ladies that told very dirty jokes and kept a few too many cats.

“Hey, Ian,” Don called out from over the railing of the stairs, “could you grab Charlie, I think he’s in the garage?”

“Sure thing.”

Ian knocked on the garage door just in case he was interrupting some spontaneous moment of math genius. It was a habit he picked up the first time a piece of chalk got him right in the chest. He peeked in. “Hey, Charlie, Don’s looking for you.”

“Just a sec.” Charlie was at the air hockey table. Ian wandered over.

“Shit.” Ian said, looking at the stack of cash Charlie was counting out. “What kind of interest did the loan shark give you on that wad?”

“This is from my publisher. Pre-sales on the new book are going very well and considering the subject I figured I’d blow it all on tonight.”
“How to Drink Yourself into Debt?”

“Proofs are in the box.” Charlie gestured with his head to a cardboard box. Ian pulled a book out.

“Solve for Crime, the Math of Catching Criminals by Dr. Charles Eppes.” Ian flipped it open. He recognized pursuit curves and soap bubbles and a few other things. “Giving the bad guys our play book?”

“Nah. That’s just sensationalist crime stories with a little math on the side for public consumption. The play book’s the other one.” Ian pulled out a second book.

“Applied Mathematics of Criminal Investigation and Pursuit.” Ian flipped it open and saw things a little more technical. Some complicated formulas but also diagrams for bullet path analysis, crime scene photos with overlays of the pertinent measurements to take, target prediction.

“Quantico’s already picked it up as a text for their next intake. So’s Scotland Yard, and my publisher is working on a deal with Interpol.”

“That’s high end.”

“Yeah, well, with every major set I’m supposed to do a week long lecture intensive to go with it. My French is nonexistent.”

“I’m sure you’ll manage.”

Charlie rolled up the last of the cash. A few bills went into his pants pocket and the rest went into an inner coat pocket. Ian gave Charlie a quick perusal. He had to admit the kid looked like sex on toast. The jacket was long but pinched at the waist, giving it an almost 18th century feel, and the high-collared shirt was just begging to have the dozens of buttons popped off, and it would probably only get worse once he turned on this weird Charlie Eppes sex god persona he had magically picked up from somewhere.

Out in the dining room Don waved Charlie over. “Is this going to work?” he asked, showing off tight black jeans, a dark red shirt and one of his better suit jackets.

Charlie looked his brother up and down. “You should put in one of your old earrings.”

Don rolled his eyes. “Those holes closed up in the 90s.”

Charlie shrugged. “It’ll do.”

“Well, if you’d tell us what we’re going to be doing?”

“Nope.”

There was a knock at the door and it opened. “Hey, guys,” Megan called out. “Sorry we’re late. There was some fashion disagreement.”


“I think I look very hip.”

“Larry, you are my best friend. I love you dearly, but you have never looked hip. I’ve seen
“And you think you can do better with your newfound sense of fashion, Dr. Eppes?”

“Yeah.” Charlie grabbed Larry by the wrist and dragged him upstairs.

Colby looked over to David, Don and Ian. “How long before we send a rescue party?”

“Who’d we be rescuing?”

Colby shrugged. “Whichever one screams the loudest.”

“I don’t know. Larry doesn’t seem like a screamer to me.” David pointed out.

“Hey Megan, is Larry a screamer?” Ian asked with a leer.

“None of your business.”

There were yelps a few minutes later as Larry was dragged downstairs in a white flared collared shirt and a tight black vest. “Charles, I look absolutely silly. I didn’t wear shirts like this the first time they were in fashion, let alone now.”

“Now they’re called vintage and you look great.”

Megan pulled the squirming, fighting, Larry over by the vest. “I think it makes you look hot,” she said softly.

Larry stopped fighting and looked at the floor, blushing a little.

Charlie laughed. “He can keep it, I never wear it anymore.”

“Thanks.” Megan said.

“Okay. Is everyone here?” Alan asked, coming out of the kitchen.

The assorted groups looked around. “Looks like.”

“Don, come here.” Anne said. She pulled the ring off her finger and then took Don’s off his. She handed them both over to Alan. “Thanks for the loan.”

“My pleasure.”

“Don, tonight you are once again a free man, have sex with anyone and I’ll kill you.” Anne said, a slightly scary smile on her face.

Don nodded. “Fair enough.”

Anne turned to Charlie. “Charlie?”

“Yes?”

“I know you better than you like to admit. He stays virtuous or else.”

Charlie thought for a second. “Do blow jobs count?”

“Yes!”
Charlie looked at his brother. “Sorry, Don,” he said with a laugh.

There was a honk outside. One of the women peeked out.

“Oh, ladies, our ride is here.”

Anne gave little Mattie a kiss as he was held in his sorta grandmother’s arms and headed out.

“Our ride should be here in a minute.” Charlie offered.

“So what’s the plan?” Don asked, obviously eager to get the night going.

“Well, I though we’d start with a symposium on lateral equation analysis...”

Don froze. “You better be joking, Chuck.”

“Strippers will be involved at some point tonight, I promise.”

Alan snorted. “How common.”

“Really, Dad? And what did your stag night involve?” Charlie asked.

“If I recall, a half pound of Humboldt regular, two blotters of acid and an orgy. Of course, it all got a little blurry once the acid kicked in.”

“Dad!” Don exclaimed in absolute shock. Nearly everyone’s jaws, including Ian’s, was on the floor because they were all fairly sure dear old Alan Eppes wasn’t joking.


“Oh, don’t worry, your mother was there.”

Charlie slapped his hands over his ears. “I don’t want to know.”

“Oh god, just tell me I was born more than nine months after the wedding.” Don moaned.

“Oh, you know you were.”

“And I am leaving my only child in this man’s care.”

“He’ll be fine. Go have fun tonight.”

“If you drop him during an acid flashback I’m never forgiving you.”

“Haven’t had one since ‘72.”

There was a knock at the door. “That’s us.”

Don gave his son a kiss and his dad a hard look before getting herded outside by Charlie.

Outside was a limo. Not one of those tacky stretch limos that teenagers rented for prom but one that looked like it was owned by old money. The driver opened the door. Don got in first. Charlie approached the driver.

“Hey, I know we’re booked ‘till 3 but I think we might end up going a little later and probably a little drunker.”
“Hey I’m just paid ‘till three.” The driver said. Charlie peeled off some hundreds from a roll. “That’ll get you ‘till dawn, boss, as long as no one gets sick in the back.”

“Great,” said Charlie.

He climbed in and Ian followed.

Don was already working the foil off the top of a champagne bottle when Ian settled into the plush interer.

“Nope.” Charlie pulled the bottle from Don’s hand. “Hate to say it, but sobriety is actually required for the first event of the evening.”

Don looked to Colby. Colby shook his head. “I am as far in the dark as you.”

“I better be getting drunk at some point tonight, buddy, ‘cause I’m not getting laid.”

“I promise you, Don there will be opportunity to get completely trashed.” Don squinted suspiciously at his brother. “Of course, if you hadn’t gone and gotten married before getting married I would have just dragged you to Nevada for a weekend at Madam Rose’s.”

Ian let out a low whistle. “Let no one ever say you have cheap tastes, Professor.”

Charlie raised an eyebrow at him. “You know Madam Rose’s?” Charlie asked, not sounding like he believed it.

“Yeah, Rosie and Bob let me crash there when I’m passing through town.”

Charlie blinked and blinked again, his jaw hung a little open. David waved a hand in front of Charlie’s face, then snapped his fingers in front of Charlie’s eyes to no response. “Dude, I think you broke him.”

“Ian,” Charlie squeaked out, his face contorting in a close approximation to pure pain, “I know what I had to do to make the VIP list at Madam Rose’s. Would you mind explaining, in detail, how you get crash privileges at the most decadent, exclusive, expensive, brothel in Nevada and how exactly you get away with addressing Mistress Rose and Master Robert as Rosie and Bob without getting your hide flayed off?”

Ian shrugged. “I took out a guy who was holding one of Rosie’s girls at knife point from a hundred yards with a busted scope and I went to college with Bob. And I get to call them Rosie and Bob with impunity ‘cause I’m a friend, not a client.”

Charlie blinked a few more times, squeezed his eyes shut and gave his head a little shake. “I am in a parallel universe.” Charlie said quietly to himself.

Ian smirked. “Now I got to ask, Professor, what did you do to make the VIP list ‘cause I know Rosie’s tastes and you’re a little short.”

Charlie straightened up looking a little offended. “Height isn’t everything. Mistress Rose happens to be a fan of some of my early work on organizational dynamics.”

“Right.” Ian drew out the word so it dripped with sarcasm and disbelief.

“And I built the encryption software for their client database and ran efficiency scenarios for their security system,” Charlie finished a little lamely.
Don snorted. “God, Charlie, only you would use math to score with hookers.”

“Don, Rose and her girls were worth every grain of chalk, not to mention good use of fluid
dynamic money.”

David raised his hand. “Is anyone else finding this conversation a little surreal?” Larry and Don
both raised their hands.

Colby shrugged. “I’m so immune.”

Ian just gave a snort as the car pulled to a stop. “Next time I see them I’ll say hi for you.”

Charlie opened the door. “And here we are.”

Don looked around. “Work?”

“Gentlemen, to the gun range.”

~

Anne dipped a strawberry into a free flowing river of chocolate while a half naked Greek god of a
bartender mixed something involving rum and chocolate sauce.

~

The gun range was empty as the stag party gathered around. Charlie pulled out a case.

“Because I was informed that it’s not a proper FBI stag night until someone shoots something…”
Charlie flicked open the case. “Gentlemen, may I present the Glock 40.”

“Uh…Charlie, there’s no such thing as a Glock 40.” Don pointed out.

Charlie gave an enigmatic smile. “It’s the factory prototype, so no you can’t keep it and don’t ask
how I got it.” Charlie took it out, loaded it and handed it to Don.

Don weighed it in his hands.

“How’s it feel?” Ian asked.

“Not bad. Little light.”

“It takes .45s instead of .40s so it’s got a kick.” Charlie said as he pinned up a target and sent it
down range.

Don grinned and slapped on hearing protectors before pointing the gun down range and pulling off
a shot. He gave a chuckle. “It kicks like a classic 17, guys.”

“Fun,” Colby replied with a bit of sarcasm.

“Hey, I loved my 17,” David defended. “Saved my ass in Tel Aviv more times than I can count.”

Don finished off the clip, adjusting for the recoil. “That was fun,” he said, giving his hands a shake
and handing the gun back to Charlie.

Charlie quickly reloaded from a stack of clips.

“Ian?” Charlie offered.
“You know it.” Ian took the gun, stepped into place and fired, taking a good moment between each shot. The target ended up with an almost perfect circle of holes.

“Show off,” Don said as Charlie replaced the target. Ian just chuckled.

David took the next round, taking time to get the feel of it in his hand. After firing a neat cluster he gave his hand a little shake. “Yep, that feels like my old 17 with a better grip.”

Colby took it next. “That is light. Feels like a toy.”

“They’re doing something new with formed carbon.”

Colby fired off his clip then shook his head. “Nah, give me something heavier.”

Charlie reloaded. “Larry?”

Larry shook his head. “Absolutely not.”

“Ah, come on, Larry.” Don said, giving Larry a little shove.

“I have never handled a firearm and I have no intention of starting.”

“Reeves hasn’t taught you how to shoot?” Ian asked.

“No, she has not.”

“That’s supposed to be the third date, I’m pretty sure it’s Bureau policy.” David said.

“Our third date was a Kurosawa retrospective.”

“Come on Larry, one shot.” Don prodded.

“This is peer pressure.”

“Yes it is.”

Charlie grabbed Larry by the wrist and dragged him forward, slipping the gun into his hand in the process.

“Charles, really…”

“Just hush.” Charlie said positioning himself behind Larry. “Both hands, arms out, sight down the barrel.” Charlie put his hands over Larry’s to keep them in place. “Now just squeeze.”

There was a bang and Larry jumped, letting out a squeak. He quickly put the gun down with shaking hands.

“Oh my, that felt wrong, I am never doing that again.” Don gave Larry a pat on the back.

“Hey, you hit the target.”

Larry perked up. “I did?”

“You didn’t hit the figure on the target but you winged the paper.”

“Oh.” Larry said, obviously trying to smother a bit of testosterone-fueled pride.
Don chuckled. “You going to finish off that clip, buddy?” he asked.

“Might as well.”

Charlie took firing posting and slowly pulled off twelve shots before bringing the target forward. Don’s jaw dropped a little at the tight cluster.

“You’re still pulling left, Professor.” Ian said.

“Charles,” Larry exclaimed with a shake of his head, “I’m not sure if I should be proud or a little horrified.”

Charlie just laughed. “Anyone want another go?”

Most everyone but Larry took another couple of rounds until they’d worked through the ammo Charlie had brought. Don finished off the last clip and handed the gun back to Charlie.

“Why don’t you all go back up to the car and break out the champagne? I’ll be up in a minute.” Charlie said as he put the gun away.

~

Anne leaned across the table and shouted over the music. “So has the heartburn kicked in yet?”

“Yeah,” Megan shouted back. “It’s absolutely killing me.”

~

Don looked out the window as the driver slowly pulled up to the curb in front of a busy club.

“No way,” Don said as they piled out of the car. “You can not get into this place.” There was a line of beautiful wanabe starlets and party girls lined up behind a velvet rope being rebuffed by a bouncer that made David look a little shrimpy.


“Hey, Dr. Eppes,” the bouncer said with a grin, offering Charlie a high five. “Was told you’d be coming tonight.”

“And here I am.”

“Hey, Dr. Fleinhardt,” the bouncer said with a wave, spotting Larry.

“Hello, Maurice.” Larry replied pleasantly.

“Let me just call the back and make sure they got everything ready for you,” Maurice said, then spoke quickly into a radio.

Ian leaned over to David, Don and Colby. “Since when does being a math professor get you into the hottest club in L.A?”

Colby chuckled. “Since the owner used to be on Gary Walker’s team before getting a 10th of a Lotto win and the bouncer happens to be one of your students.”

“You’re good to go,” Maurice said, obviously getting word from the back room.
“Great. Are you going to be at the seminar Thursday?” Charlie asked.

“You know it.”

Charlie smiled and breezed into the club, everyone quickly following. Ian couldn’t help smirking at some socialite who was giving them dirty looks.

Inside the club the first thing to hit was the music. A large dance floor contained the young and beautiful, moving to a heavy bass beat. Charlie led the group past the twenty-somethings and through a set of padded doors. The guard on those doors gave them a quick nod. On the other side was a slightly brighter room with a stage where beautiful girls slowly undressed. All around the edges of the room were deep, semi-private booths where girls were dancing more up close and personal for groups of men. The whole thing had a slight Prussian feel to it, reeking of opulence.

A young man dressed in black approached and Charlie stepped to the side and exchanged quick words with him, along with a bit of cash. Charlie patted the young man on the cheek, then slipped him a few more bills.

David chuckled. “Charlie Eppes, pimp daddy.”

“Let him have his fun,” Colby said.

The group was quickly led to a deep booth that had a good view of the stage and was scattered with lush silk pillows. Iced beers were already waiting. Ian couldn’t help feeling a bit like a sultan as he sank into the leather upholstery and a beautiful girl opened his beer. Charlie raised his bottle.

“To Don and a final night of decadence and inebriation.”

Don grinned. “Here, here.” The men clinked bottles and drank deep.

A stunning buxom redhead in pigtails dressed in a warped anime version of a school girl outfit sauntered over and straddled Charlie’s lap.

“Hello, professor,” the girl greeted sweetly.

“Hello Crystal.” Charlie said with a smile. Ian couldn’t help wondering how often Charlie came here if he was on a first name basis with the strippers. “Are you working tonight?” Charlie asked. The girl shook her head.

“Just got off shift, but wanted to pop over and say hi.”

“Well, hello to you too.” Charlie said still grinning.

Crystal looked down the row of men to the far end and waved. “Hi, Dr. Fleinhardt.” Ian almost choked on his beer as Larry waved back.

“Hello, Crystal.”

“Are you coming to the seminar on Thursday?” Charlie asked Crystal, suddenly sounding serious.

“I can’t,” she answered. “I’ve got to work.”

Charlie scowled. “You are falling behind.”

“I know, it’s just…”
“Can you make it to office hours Wednesday?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Come to office hours and we’ll figure out some way of catching you up. I’m not going to see you fail. You are too smart.” Charlie gave her a tap on the nose that seemed almost brotherly. The girl nodded. “Okay. Go home and study.” The girl nodded and got off Charlie’s lap and gave another wave to Larry.

“I’ll see you on Monday, Dr. Fleinhardt,” she said.

“Absolutely,” the physicist replied as the girl sauntered off.

Don, Ian and David turned first to Charlie, then to Larry.

“She’s one of your students?” David finally asked.

Larry shrugged. “It is a sad truth that CalSci is not inexpensive. If a student shows a willingness to learn and it is within the bounds of legality we don’t ask where they get their tuition from.”

David sipped his beer. “See, if someone had told me the nerdy girls in school were going to grow up to look like that I would have been a lot nicer.”

Larry raised his own beer. “For is it not written that the geek shall inherit the earth.”

As Charlie was toasting that particular sentiment another girl headed their way. She was in a stripper’s rendition of a ballet costume, complete with toe shoes. Next to him, Ian felt Don straighten up.

“Oh, Charlie,” Don said quietly, “You’re going to get me in trouble.” Down at the other end Charlie had a shit-eating grin on his face.

“All for you, Don,” Charlie said. Ian watched as the girl began to give Don a slow, sultry and very inspired lap dance. After a couple of minutes Ian leaned across Colby to whisper to Charlie.

“Ballet dancers?”

Charlie’s grin got bigger. “Everyone’s got a secret thing, I just happen to know what Don’s thing is.”

The girl was running the point of a toe shoe across Don’s chest and Don looked like he’d stopped breathing. When the girl spun around Don took a quick swig of beer and put the bottle down directly into his lap in what was obviously a desperate attempt to keep a little blood in his brain as opposed to other places.

As one song from the sound system turned into another other girls came over, obviously one for each of them. A little Japanese Cowgirl in red cozied up to Larry. Ian would have sworn the part time monk would have been completely uncomfortable that close to a stripper but Larry just leaned back and seemed to enjoy himself.

Ian was trying to get a good look at the handcuffs that dangled from the belt of the girl who was dancing for David when a reasonably good looking blonde landed in his field of vision. She was curvier than most of the other girls, dressed in a black leather corset that gave her the type of curves Ian loved to get his hands on. He wasn’t sure how exactly Charlie knew that about him but for the time being he wasn’t complaining.
A girl next door cheerleader ran her pompoms across Colby’s chest and Charlie… Ian found his attention torn between the blonde on his lap and the blonde on Charlie’s. It wasn’t that she was any better looking, but it was the way Charlie was looking at her. Charlie had leaned back, stretching his legs out, forcing the girl to spread her legs to stand over them. And Charlie watched her eyes. Just her eyes, as far as Ian could tell, moving his head ever so slightly to follow them. Ian could see the girl begin to falter in her dance and blush. She tried to drop her eyes. Charlie made the smallest of tisking sounds and the girl’s head snapped back up. Ian sucked in a deep breath and realized what was happening. Charlie was dominating the girl. He hadn’t said a word or laid a hand on her, but Ian could tell that in another ten minutes that girl would be willing to suck Charlie off in front of the lot of them just to make him happy. She kept dancing and Charlie kept looking at her eyes, pouring his will over her. It was simultaneously one of the most disturbing and most erotic things Ian had seen in a long time.

Ian quickly looked around. The other men and the other dancers all seemed oblivious to what was happening at the far end of the booth. The girl finally faltered in her dance and stopped, head down and breathing hard. Charlie reached out and broke the no touching rule by placing a finger under her chin and raising her head. With his other hand, Charlie rolled a bill into a tight tube that spoke of a long ago bad habit then slid it behind her ear. The girl blushed bright red and with the slightest move of his head Charlie sent her scurrying off.

Ian turned his attention back to the corseted girl moving against his lap. She leaned in close and whispered in his ear, “Girls aren’t allowed to dance for the Professor more than a couple of times. They get too attached to the way he looks at them.”

~

Anne watched as Mary laid a hand against Megan’s stomach.
“Girl,” Mary said. “An old soul, but feisty.”

~

The girls had gone and Charlie had stated it was time for food. Ian did notice that his stomach was a little too empty to be loading it with any amount of alcohol. Some beautiful girls in tight black dresses were headed their way carrying trays. Charlie leaned around to talk to Don.

“Don, remember I told you a bit about the fun of fluid dynamics?”

“Yes?” Don answered carefully.

“Consider this a blast from my past for tonight,” Charlie said with a grin. The girls put down the trays, showing off substantial cleavage in the process, and lifted the lids to reveal a not insubstantial amount of caviar on ice. They also began pouring champagne from bottles with yellow labels.

“Oh, hell,” Don said softly.

“Would you like a taste?” one of the girls asked in an eastern European accent. She scooped up a few of the black eggs with a tiny bone spoon and held it out seductively.

“Charlie, you’re going to get me in trouble.” Don said before leaning in and clearing the eggs from the spoon. After that everyone dove in, helped along by beautiful girls who perched on the edge of the table to feed them not just the caviar but tidbits of fruit, meat, and cheese. All top quality.
Ian was feeling his head begin to spin. He’d already surpassed his regular alcohol intake, which was little to none. Unfortunately, he’d seen both Don and Charlie put back three or four beers in a row and walk a straight line and had heard stories about how much the Eppes men in general could keep down. Ian shoved a caviar covered mini pancake in his mouth in an attempt to soak up some alcohol but had the feeling it was already too late. Ian sent up a prayer to whomever might be listening that he wouldn’t do anything too stupid tonight, like grope Charlie and incur the wrath of Colby.

Speaking of Charlie, Ian looked beyond the petite Asian girl that had been feeding him grapes with a pair of lethal looking chopsticks to where Charlie was half curled up against Colby’s side. Without even looking at Charlie, Colby picked up a bit of pineapple and held it out to the professor. Charlie nibbled it from Colby’s fingers, then cleaned Colby’s fingers of the juices. Colby didn’t even seem to be paying attention, like Charlie ate from his fingertips every day. ‘Maybe he does.’ The thought popped into Ian’s head and Ian found his pants suddenly restrictive and he tried to drag his eyes back to the girl in front of him. Before he managed that, though, Charlie caught his eye, smirked and made a production out of eating a grape. Ian squeezed his eyes shut. ‘Oh, Ian, you are so screwed.’

Anne knew she was grinning like an idiot as ‘Mitch’ danced on their tabletop in little more than a gold thong. She found she really didn’t care.

Don had to say he was enjoying himself. There was something to be said for a night of decadence. The food had been cleared away and Don was enjoying a soft buzz and a full stomach. Charlie had warned them not to get too wasted as there were other stops for the night.

A couple of girls were now slowly dancing on their table with judicious amounts of touching going on between them. As they got down to their final scraps of clothing Charlie turned to the group. “I’m going to hit the dance floor. Get the blood flowing for a bit. Anyone want to join me?”

Don shook his head and was only marginally aware of Ian getting up.

The girls finished undressing each other and made their goodbyes. Don looked around and tried to do some thinking through the alcohol. “Wait, is Ian dancing with Charlie?” he suddenly asked. Don and David looked at each other.

“Oh, I’ve got to see this,” David said quickly and got up, the rest of the group following.

They pushed through the crowd out in the other room until they spotted Ian and Charlie. Don felt his jaw drop. Colby had mentioned that Charlie could dance but what he was watching was possibly closer to vertical fucking, and with Ian who was moving like he was made of liquid sex. The two weren’t actually touching, which was probably a good thing. Touching would probably produce some pheromone-induced combustion that would burn the place down.

“Well,” said David. “I guess we know what team Ian’s playing for.”

Don looked at Colby. “Um...are you okay with that?” Don gestured to the dance floor.

“My therapist feels I’m overly possessive of Charlie and it’s something I need to work on.” Colby said flatly.

On the dance floor someone bumped into Charlie, pushing him into Ian. Ian grabbed Charlie’s
hips so he wouldn’t topple over then didn’t let go.

“Okay,” said Colby quickly. “That’s enough work for one night.” Colby took long strides onto the dance floor, picked Charlie up, threw him over his shoulder and walked back off the dance floor like it was the most normal thing in the world. Ian followed like a puppy who’d just had a toy taken away. Charlie just giggled drunkenly.

~

“So,” Anne said, perched on Mitch’s lap. “Have you ever done any art modeling?”
The Soft Shift of Sand

Chapter Summary

The stag night continues. Colby and Ian have a talk.

David knew from experience that Charlie was a happy, funny drunk. Admittedly, most of what Charlie found funny went over his head but Charlie laughed anyway. What David never expected was that Ian was a funny drunk as well. He had expected the sniper to be a dark broody drunk. Instead Ian was giggling almost hysterically in the back of the limo over some psychology pun Charlie’s therapist had told him.

The limo stopped and Charlie shooed everyone out into the street in front of a bunch of concrete-block converted warehouses. There was a blinking neon sign over one door that read ‘The Place’.

“What are we, Charlie?” Don asked.

“We are at the serious drinking part of the evening. This place makes the best mojitos in L.A.” Charlie led the way through heavy metal doors that had bits of bamboo stuck to them. Inside it looked like a Day-Glo black light version of the tiki room at Disney Land, and an odd techno reggae was coming from the DJ’s turntables. The clientele was distinctly older than the last place. Instead of over-primped twenty-somethings this crowd looked more like professional thirty-somethings cutting loose for the weekend. The dance on the small wooden floor looked less like vertical mating and more just moving for fun.

Charlie led them to the bar. The bar menu had a list of Brazilian food but only one drink listed. Charlie gestured to the bartender and a minute later there were six of the lethal concoctions lined up for the party. David was actually a little nervous. The last time he’d done a serious drink on mojitos he was in college and he’d lost 18 hours of his life. Charlie raised his glass in silent toast and everyone did the same. Dave took a sip. ‘Yep.’ That was definitely the best mojito David had ever had.

Charlie pointed to a booth that was being abandoned by a gaggle of women. Before they could even get halfway across the floor a stunning woman in a red dress slinked up to Ian. There was a quick exchange of words, Ian chugged his drink and, with a shit-eating grin, followed the woman onto the dance floor. As they took their seats David noticed a group of women checking out their party. He suddenly realized that Charlie had lead them into a mid-30s meat market and their group, composed mostly of hard-bodied federal agents, looked pretty damn good. David grinned. ‘Thank you, Charlie.’

Megan sipped at a Mountain Dew while the other women passed around a bottle of five-dollar bubbly wine, giggling as if they were teenagers and had managed to steal it. Megan wasn’t going to drink alcohol while pregnant but the child was going to be the offspring of an FBI agent and a physicist so she didn’t feel too much guilt in getting the caffeine addiction started now.

~
David leaned against the bar and tried to catch his breath. An office manager named Bianca had tried to dance him into the floor for almost an hour. He finally managed to beg off the dance floor but did slip her his number first.

David was finding that it was kind of amusing watching which women went after which guys in their group. Only the ones oozing confidence and a little danger went after Ian. Charlie seemed to be picking up the few twenty-somethings around. A pack of lawyers made an attempt to pick up Don and Colby en masse, and Larry had spent the last hour drunkenly explaining the finer points of the Higgs-Boson particle to a pair of twin redheads that actually seemed interested.

Larry excused himself from the redheads and headed towards the bar. Leaning next to David, he ordered up another round.

“Go easy on those things, Professor. They’re lethal.”

Larry smiled up at David. “Agent Sinclair, I have eight years of university education. I know how to drink.” Larry picked up his drink and two more and headed back to the redheads.

Ian Edgerton the funny drunk stumbled off the dance floor and grabbed a chunk of bar next to David.

“Hey, David.” Ian greeted in a way that was almost bubbly. David tried not to laugh.

“Hey, Ian. How are you doing?”

“I’m doing great.” Ian pulled four slips of paper out of his pocket. “Blonde, brunette, redhead, and that waiter with the really nice ass.”

“Larry seems to have landed twins.”

Ian gave a dismissive wave. “Nah, he’s just trying to convert them. Megan would kill him.”

“That she would.”

David watched as an average looking guy in a tan suit moved in between them and ordered two drinks. He also watched as the man’s hand went from his pocket to the top of one drink. There was a tiny plop as the man picked up his drinks and headed to a table towards the back of the place.

“You see that, Ian?”

“Yep.” Ian answered quickly, suddenly sounding far more sober.

David grabbed the bartender. “Call the cops, guy just spiked somebody’s drink.” David gestured to the man in the tan suit. The bartender nodded and also waved over the bouncer.

Ian was already following the man in the suit across the floor and David trotted to catch up. The guy put the drink down in front of a sweet little doe-eyed girl who barely looked old enough to be in there. She raised the drink to her lips. Ian whipped out a hand and put it over the glass.

“You might not want to drink that, this asshole is trying to slip you something,” he said with a predatory grin.

“Now just a sec…” the man objected, starting to get out of his seat. David quickly put him back down into it, hard.

Ian took the glass from the woman and held it to the light. “See, you can still see the tablet
dissolving.”

The poor girl looked to be in absolute shock as she looked back and forth between the glass and the man who had given it to her. Before the man could put up more objections Don and Colby wandered over.

“What’s going on?” Don asked.

David grinned. “This Casanova here decided to put an additive in this nice lady’s drink.”

“Really?” Don drew out the word and Colby cracked his knuckles in a distinctly menacing fashion. Before the man could wet himself the bouncer showed up with Charlie and Larry right behind.

“Is this the guy?” the bouncer asked David.

“Yep.”

“And this is the drink,” Ian said, half toasting the group with it.

The bouncer took the drink from Ian. “Well, thanks, guys, I’ll sit on him until the cops get here.”

“Say,” Ian said brightly. “We’re FBI, mostly.” Colby fished out an ID. “And we wouldn’t want to upset your customers. Have you got a back alley to this place? We could sit on him for you ’till the cops get here and you can make sure this nice lady is okay.”

The bouncer grinned. “Out the fire exit, it’s not alarmed.”

~

“So why are we egging this guy’s car?” Megan asked.

“Ritual separation of past relations.” Mary answered.

“He’s the asshole I dated before Don. Put me off men for a year and he still owes me a hundred bucks,” Anne said.

“Cool,” Megan replied and picked up an egg.

~

David looked at the man sitting on the floor of the alley. His hands were bound with one of his socks and the other sock was rolled up and shoved in his mouth. Charlie had produced a Sharpie from somewhere and had boldly written the man’s crime on his face with it. And if going to lockup with ‘Attempted Date Rapist’ written across your face wasn’t bad enough, Larry had decided to display his little-used artistic talent by doodling rather pornographic figures across the man’s chest. If anyone took those doodles as a suggestion the man was going to have a very bad night indeed.

David looked at the doodles. “I didn’t know you were an artist, Larry.”

“My father was a painter, insisted I study art for years. Never quite had the passion for it he did.”

“Well, you certainly have technical skill.”

“Thank you, David.” The man tried to yell out an objection through the sock. “What do you think he’s saying?”
“I hardly think it matters.”

David sipped at the drink the bartender had been nice enough to bring out for them.

The back door to the club opened and a couple of LAPD uniforms came out with the bouncer. The cops did a quick look around of the scene. The man with the sock in his mouth started his protests again.

“I take it this is the guy?” the older of the two cops asked.

“Yep!” Ian said, the bubbly enthusiasm for life having returned.

“And you’re all Bureau?” the younger cop asked. Everyone dug through their pockets for ID.

“I’m not!” Larry stated boldly. “I’m an astronaut!” The cops looked like they were mentally sorting Larry as raving drunk until Larry held out his old ISS/NASA ID.

“No shit,” the older cop said with a chuckle, looking at the ID. Then Charlie held out his ID.

“I’m not a Fed but I’ve got presidential security clearance. Does that work?”

“Uh…” The cop obviously had no idea what he was looking at as Charlie held out a plastic card covered in holograms and agency logos with the white house seal in the center. “Sure.”

“So who saw the guy dose the drink?” The younger cop asked. David and Ian raised their hands. “Okay, you guys are going to have to give a statement.”

David and Ian looked at each other. “Uh…look…” David said. “We’re in the middle of a stag night and honestly pretty well wasted.” Everyone raised their drinks. “Any chance we could just give you our cards and do it over the phone in the morning?” David thought about the almost guaranteed hangover, “or afternoon, yeah, afternoon would be better. When’s the wedding?” David asked.

“Four thirty.” Don supplied.

“Right. You could stop by, more the merrier.”

“We haven’t searched him.” Don said. “I’m sure he’s holding something that’ll let you keep him in lock up for the night.”

The older cop turned to the guy on the ground. “Did they search you?” There was a string of angry mumbles.

Larry whacked the guy on the side of the head. “Oh, just shake your head.” The guy shook his head.

The cops hauled him to his feet but left the sock in his mouth.

“A sock?” The younger cop asked, looking at the guy’s hands.

“No one brought cuffs. Again,” Don said, eyeballing his team.

“You didn’t bring cuffs either,” Ian pointed out.

“They would have ruined the line of the jeans!” Don blurted out in his own drunken defense.
Charlie cracked up along with everyone else. “Don, can we please try to remember that I’m the gay brother and you’re the one marrying a chick tomorrow.”

“Oh, shut up.”

The cops patted the guy down and pulled out a couple of baggies of various pills and a butterfly knife.

The older cop held the knife in front of the guy. “For the record, these are a felony in California.” The guy shouted through the sock. “You’ll get your lawyer and your phone call, don’t worry.”

David handed the younger cop his and Ian’s card. “Maybe call around…three. We should be together by three.”

“Sure thing, have a good night.”

Everyone gave a cheery wave goodbye as the cops dragged the guy out of the alley to the street.

David turned to Charlie. “So, where to next?”

~

Anne looked down on LA from the back side of the Hollywood sign. “I have lived in LA my entire life and I’ve never been here.”

Megan nodded. “From here the city almost looks livable.”

~

Don stumbled through the door to Gonzales’ under his own demands for a simple beer. It was still a couple of hours before closing, enough time to drain the bottom of the kegs. The bartender didn’t pay them much attention. He’d seen them stumble in still in TAC gear, armed, dripping blood on the floor and start ordering shots. Already drunk and dressed up did not exactly count as notable. They ordered beers and settled into one of the larger booths, having hit the happy mellow stage of drunk.

The beers arrived and everyone drank deep. Before they could get to the bottom the bartender came over again with a jumbo bottle of tequila and a stack of shot glasses. “Wedding present from the management for a valued customer.”

Don grinned. “Thanks, man. I think I’m going to need it.”

Don passed around the shot glasses. Colby shook his head. “Oh no. I have learned better than to drink tequila with an Eppes.”

“Stop whining.” Don poured shots all around then lifted his own glass and studied the yellow-gold liquid. “To those we love who actually put up with us.”

Don grinned. “Thanks, man. I think I’m going to need it.”

Don passed around the shot glasses. Colby shook his head. “Oh no. I have learned better than to drink tequila with an Eppes.”

“Stop whining.” Don poured shots all around then lifted his own glass and studied the yellow-gold liquid. “To those we love who actually put up with us.”

“Here, here.” Ian said and everyone tipped back their drink. Don snickered at Colby and David wincing. Ian tossed his back like a pro and so did Larry. Don had never had a problem with tequila and neither did Charlie. He wondered if it was genetic or if it had something to do with their Dad rubbing it on their gums when they were teething and Mom wasn’t looking.

Charlie snickered to himself then held out his glass to Larry. “Larry, I never?”

Larry rolled his eyes. “I am never playing that with you again, Charles; I was hungover for two
days.”

“And I wasn’t?”

David chuckled. “I haven’t played that since I was seventeen.”

Charlie shook his head. “You need to be nearly thirty to play it right. At seventeen you just haven’t done enough.”

“Well, some of us haven’t,” Larry said.

Don winced a little. “I have a couple of vague memories of playing that in college with some girls.”

Charlie snickered again. “Larry, I never…”

“No,” Larry cut in. “You know too much about me, Charles you’ll only end up getting me drunk.”

“Larry, you’re already completely drunk.” David provided.

“True.”

“Come on Larry.” Charlie whined “I want to play.”

Larry lowered his head to the table top and banged it a few times.

“Yeah, come on Larry.” Don said reaching around and poking him in the ribs.

“Oh, what are we, seventeen? And girls?” David complained.

“Come on David.” Colby said, getting into the swing of things. “We all know enough shit about each other to be brutal.”

David gave a chuckle and shook his head. “Sure, man, whatever.”

Charlie raised his glass again. “Hey, Larry, I’ve never been banned from a swimming facility.” Larry gave Charlie the finger and tossed back his shot.

“Which one?” Don asked.

“Princeton Pool.” Charlie answered for Larry. “For an incident involving the dean of the medical school, her twin sister, a visiting MIT chemist, an after-hours trespassing charge, and gross misuse of university bathing facilities.”

Everyone cracked up. “That was long before your time, Charles,” Larry said, as if it were some sort of defense.

“Maybe, but I still heard about it maybe five minutes after getting you as an advisor.”

“Okay, who’s next?” Don asked.

David rolled his eyes. “I can’t believe we’re playing this.”

“One round.”

“I think David just volunteered.”
David shook his head and raised his glass. “Okay. I’ve never kissed another dude.”

Charlie, Colby, Ian and Larry all shrugged and downed their shots, almost missing Don drinking his. Charlie sputtered. “Who and when?” he demanded.

“College, and for the record I was really, really, really, really, really stoned and… I don’t exactly remember his name.” Don finished quickly.

“Don, you bastard heart breaker!” Ian accused.

“I think he was on the swim team,” Don said with a wince.

“Was he at least hot?” Charlie asked.

“I was stoned. I would have kissed a yak at that point.”

“I am so finding you an inflatable yak.” Colby muttered into his empty glass.

“Okay, okay, who’s next?” Don asked.

“Larry,” Charlie declared with a grand wave of the arm.

Larry raised his glass. “In the spirit of encouraging maximum alcohol consumption I’m sure I am the only person at this table who’s never been shot at.”

Five shots went back in perfect unison and a fresh round was poured. Don poked Colby in the ribs.

“Okay, let me think. Ah, I’ve never had a threesome.”

“Is that a request?” Charlie asked in a heavy sultry tone.

“Just drink your tequila.” Everyone at the table drank. Colby looked at David. “Seriously?”

“I haven’t told you every story from Tel Aviv.”

“Obviously, next stakeout you’re naming names.”

“You wish.”

“Ian,” Don said.

Ian looked at Charlie. “I have never danced on a bar top.” Charlie gave Ian a dirty look and drank. Larry did too. “Someone just tell me it wasn’t at the same time.”

“No,” Charlie and Larry stated firmly.

“Ok, Don. Last one up.” Ian said.

Don grinned. “I have never worn tights.” Charlie drank.

“I’ll get you for that, Eppes.” Ian said as he drank.

“Tights?”

“Seriously?”

“Shut up.”
“I’ve seen the pictures.” Don said. “Little green tights.”

~

Megan giggled and sipped at her Mt. Dew.

“Okay, okay,” one of the girls said. “I’ve never had sex with another girl.” Everyone else in the hen party shrugged and drank.

~

Ian nearly tripped over a lump of sand in the middle of the beach they were stumbling down. Any plan that might have existed for the evening had vanished when Don bet Charlie twenty bucks he couldn’t get them into the very elite Club 7. The elaborate con to pass Ian off as the crown prince of the Philippines got them only as far as the front door. After that they acquired beer somewhere, Ian wasn’t exactly sure where any more, and now each man had a six pack of Guinness and was stumbling down a beach towards a bonfire Don wanted to investigate.

As they got close fiddle music was coming from somewhere. A couple of girls in long skirts were dancing around the fire and another dozen or so people seemed to be scattered around the sand. It looked like a good, old fashioned, probably third generation hippy bonfire. And when a very particular smell hit his nose Ian became worried he might die under the waves of pure childhood nostalgia. Someone must have seen them coming because the music got turned down and a guy with an old ‘Impeach Bush!’ t-shirt and dreads stood up and faced them as they reached the edge of the fire light.

“Hey,” Don greeted.

“Hey,” the hippy replied.

“Good night for it.”

“Yep.”

Don gestured to the joint blatantly held in the guy’s hand. “Can you share that?” Don asked. Ian was too drunk to be anything other than amused at Special Agent Don Eppes’ blatant solicitation of a controlled substance.

“Don’t know.”

Don held up the six-pack. “Guinness?”

“Cool.”

The music was turned back up and beer was exchanged for the joint. Don took a long drag and held it for a moment before giggling. “Oh shit, I’ve missed that.”

The little party got back underway with the addition of a half dozen squares and a couple dozen cans of Guinness.

Ian found himself looking at a young woman of probably no more than twenty with a toddler asleep in her arms.

“Yes?” The woman asked, noticing Ian’s stare.

Ian shook his head. “Sorry, was just thinking that could have been me a very long time ago.”
The woman petted the little boy’s head. “He’s a good boy.”

“So was I.”

“Not any more?”

Ian shrugged and sipped at his beer. “The US government pays me a living wage to hunt down the worst people imaginable and kill them, so honestly I don’t know anymore.” The girl, and really she was hardly more than a girl stiffened and drew the boy tighter to her. “Bit of advice. Don’t make yourself crazy trying to find the perfect father for him. Just be a good mother. More important.”

Before the girl could answer a heavy arm fell across Ian’s shoulders.

“Ian, you and I need to talk.” Ian looked into the serious eyes of a very drunk Colby and quickly tried to figure out if, in his equally inebriated state, he could take Colby in a fight.

Colby dragged the two of them to a log outside the ring of fire light. “You like Charlie.” It wasn’t a question.

“Look, Colby, I promise I’m not…”

“Yeah but you would. I mean, if I weren’t here, you’d be all over that.” Colby gestured with a can of beer to Charlie’s silhouette, joyfully spinning around with some girl, backlit by the fire.

“Colby, I’m really drunk.”

“So am I.” Colby became silent, his face pensive. “I love him so much,” he said in barely a whisper.

“I know that. Everyone knows that.”

“Charlie is hurt.” Colby stated flatly as Ian tried to keep up with the shift in conversation. “He’s broken, he’s broken in so many ways I can’t fix. I just try to keep him from ripping off the bandages. He would. He’d let himself bleed out.” Colby turned to Ian. “We have rules, very important rules, but they’re an equation, see, have to be balanced. He has half the rules and I have the other half but they don’t work alone, understand?” Ian nodded, not understanding a thing. “I take a bullet, Charlie will keep to his half of the rules but there won’t be balance. I take a bullet Charlie goes insane. A week, a month, it won’t take long.”

Some bits of twisted drunk logic were beginning to click into place as tears glistened in Colby’s eyes. “So someone else has to pick up the other half of the equation?”

“Exactly.” Colby gave a firm nod. “The only way the Arrangement works is if there are two people to follow the Rules.” Ian could hear the capital letters. “Not the amendments.” Colby said suddenly, harshly. “Those are mine. I fought for those.”

“Okay.”

“Someone has to make the numbers go away, though. There has to be balance. There has to be two. Someone who knows what he is, won’t try to use him.”

“Me?” Ian asked carefully.

“Not the Amendments.” Colby said quickly.

“Okay?”
“Just the Rules.”

Ian knew he was drunk and Colby was utterly wasted but he had the funny feeling that on some level he’d just been willed Charlie like a beloved pet. “Colby, I’m very drunk and so are you. Write it down, put it some place safe. You go down, I’ll take care of things.”

Colby grabbed Ian by the collar. “I’m serious, Ian.”

“I know.”

“He’s so important. Give him a running start and he’ll save the world. He can’t lose himself. He can’t pine for me. I’m just a field grunt and a selfish bastard and he’s so important.”

“I know. I’ll take care of it, Colby. I promise.”

Colby closed his eyes and let go of Ian, then turned back towards the fire. “Charlie,” he called out. Charlie turned and trotted across the sand towards them, like an eager puppy to his master’s voice. His master’s voice.

A thousand quick moments fluttered across Ian’s mind. Touches, looks, quick words in just a certain tone of voice. His master’s voice. A thousand more images rushed across Ian’s mind, lurid, pornographic, Charlie on his knees, Charlie bent over, Charlie hard, desperate, pleading, moaning first Colby’s name, then Ian’s. Ian was never so grateful for the dark as he felt his face burn and his dick become brutally hard.

Charlie was straddling Colby’s lap, legs wrapped around Colby’s waist. Colby was peppering soft kisses across Charlie’s face.

“I love you so much,” Colby said against the skin of Charlie’s cheek. “I love you so much it hurts.”

“I know.” Charlie whispered, pressing himself against Colby. Ian wanted to run, he shouldn’t be watching, a grotesque voyeur into something he had never found, never let himself feel. He couldn’t move his legs.

“I will always take care of you. Always. No matter what, I promise.”

“I know, love.”

“I wish I could let you go, wish you didn’t need to be bound, wish you could come to me freely.” Ian could hear the crack in Colby’s voice. Charlie pulled back and cupped Colby’s face, wiping away the tears with his thumbs.

“No, love, you save my life. Every day you save my life.” Charlie pressed his forehead to Colby’s. “Who’d want to be free of that?”

Colby lifted his face and kissed Charlie deep, wrapping his arms around him tight. Ian watched as Charlie melted into the kiss, him and Colby flowing into one form in the dim flicker light of the fire.

Without warning Colby stood, unceremoniously dumping Charlie into Ian’s lap in the process. Charlie giggled and Ian grabbed hold before Charlie could topple into the sand and once he had
grabbled hold he didn’t let go, he couldn’t, not with Charlie warm and soft against his body, lips full from kissing. The moment stretched, Charlie breathing hard, a gap of only a foot between their lips. Ian looked up. He couldn’t make out Colby’s face but he had the feeling he’d past a test. He hadn’t let Charlie fall.

“Charlie,” Colby said quietly. Charlie jumped up, slipping from Ian’s grip, not even a hairsbreadth of hesitation, and followed Colby back to the fire.

Ian fell backwards off the log into the sand. There were only a handful of stars in the sky and they seemed to swim. He rolled over and crawled into the dark until he was behind a large boulder on the beach. He prayed no one was watching but his eyes weren’t focusing and his head was swimming in a lethal combination of alcohol and lust. With half numb fingers he yanked down his jeans and quickly worked himself to climax. For the first time in his life he felt shame in the act, picturing someone who was loved so totally by someone else. Ian clamped his jaw shut as he came hard to a vivid image of Charlie on his knees, looking up, eyes filled with devotion and love.

~

David was impressed by Don’s sense of balance as he climbed onto a driftwood log.

“I have something I would like to say,” Don slurred out, raising his can of beer. The hippies all looked at him in morbid curiosity. “Almost two years ago now I had a very bad day and tried to eat my gun.” David knew if he was sober he’d be more shocked. “And Charlie, my dear, beautiful, messed up little brother Charlie stopped me. Said I couldn’t, wasn’t allowed. And I need to thank him for that ‘cause if I’d blown my brains out like I wanted, one week to the day later I would have missed meeting Anne, my beautiful wife, mother of my child, a woman I love so much I’m actually marrying her again tomorrow…or I guess today, whenever the sun comes up. So to you, Charlie, for not only saving my life but being good enough to take me out and get me completely shit-faced drunk tonight… I’ll return the favor as soon as Colby decides to make an honest man out of you.”

Colby managed to snort an entire mouthful of beer, sending it out his nose in spectacular fashion, much to the amusement of the crowd. Don almost fell off the log as he erupted into uncontrollable stoned/drunk giggles.

“To those who love us,” one of the hippies toasted.

“To the mothers of our wormholes,” Larry said, raising his own beer. Strangely, it was Ian who caught up first with that one.

“You knocked up Reeves?” he exclaimed. Don fell off the log.

Larry giggled. “She is my sun, my stars, my gravity, like a rogue planet she fell into my orbit, drew a moon from me and forever altered my rotation.”

Don managed to crawl over the log, haul himself to his feet, and grab Larry. “Larry,” Don started carefully. “Have you gotten my second-in-command pregnant?”

Larry giggled again. “Only a little.”

“Uh… Larry, I’m not an expert but I’m pretty sure it’s a binary state.” Charlie pointed out.

“You’re making an honest woman out of her,” Don said. It wasn’t a question.

“As soon as she makes an honest man out of me.” Larry stated firmly.
Charlie swung an arm around Larry’s shoulder and kissed him on the cheek. “Larry, I’ve got to say, it’s about fucking time.”

Megan sank into bed. It was annoying, barely eight weeks and she was already feeling tired more easily. She put her hand over her still flat stomach and wondered how Larry was doing out with the boys. She sighed and decided she’d tell Don in another few weeks. The rest of the office could find out in their own time.

Ian stumbled through the front door of the Eppes family estate, trying to be quiet. He figured he must have failed along with everyone else, because Alan was quickly coming down the stairs.

“It’s about time you lot got in. I was about to call the police and the hospitals.”

“Don’t worry, we talked our way out of that,” David said.

Alan sniffed the air. “Lord, I hope none of you get a random test on Monday.” Don was slumped against David and mumbling to himself. Charlie was being more or less held up by Colby. Larry had already passed out on the couch. “Okay, all of you get to bed. David, Ian, if you could drop my eldest son off in the guest room there are two inflatable beds set up in the solarium.”

“Good night, Alan,” Colby mumbled as he dragged Charlie up the stairs.

Alan manhandled Larry into a better position and tossed a blanket over him. “Well, go on.” Alan gestured to the stairs that suddenly looked a little daunting. Ian took a big breath and got an arm around Don’s waist and started steering him upstairs with David’s help.

They flopped Don onto the bed and Ian pulled off his shoes while David tried to get off Don’s jacket.

“Charlie?” Don mumbled drunkenly.

“It’s just us, Don,” Ian said. Don’s eyes were closed but he somehow managed to snag David’s wrist.

“I’m sorry, Charlie,” Don mumbled.

“It’s okay, Don,” David said.

“I lied, wanted you to hit me again, wanted you to break me.”

David pried his wrist free. “It’s okay Don, go to sleep.”

“You should have hit me again. I said yes. Consent.”

“It’s okay Don.”

“Next time, brothers again, okay? I’ll do better. I promise.”

“Sure,” David said softly. “Go to sleep.”

Don sagged into himself and finished passing out. David and Ian snuck out of the room and looked at each other in the hall.
“Okay, I’m still way too drunk to process that.” David said.

Ian nodded in agreement, “You don’t know the half of it. Let’s go pass out.”
The Smell of Flowers and Pepper

Chapter Summary

The day is here.

David was not stupid enough to open his eyes. He knew the second he did he would regret it. His mouth tasted foul and he could feel the promise of a killer headache just on the edges of his mind. Keeping his eyes shut, he tried to convince himself that it was perhaps still early and despite the pressure on his bladder he could maybe get back to sleep. Then he felt an arm flop across his chest.

David pulled one eye open just a crack. Sunlight streamed through the windows of the solarium and reflected off the smooth black hair of Ian Edgerton. At some point in the night Ian had obviously, drunkenly gravitated to the nearest warm body. Part of David wanted to just roll Ian off him but thought that manhandling someone as dangerous as Edgerton might not be the best idea, even if Ian was snuggled against his side.

“Ian.” David hissed softly but got no response. “Ian, wake up.”

Ian mumbled something that could have been ‘five more minutes’ and actually pulled himself tighter against David, shoving his morning erection rather affectionately into David’s thigh. David cringed. He knew there were plenty of people on the planet, female and male who would love nothing more than to be in bed with a cuddly Edgerton. David and taken the Kinsey test in college and out of curiosity had been 100% honest with himself; he’d scored a zero. The fact that he had a hangover and really needed to visit the toilet did not add to the potential awakening of very repressed homosexual urges.

“Agent Edgerton, wake up!” David hissed with as much force as he could muster. Ian’s eyes snapped open and then very quickly squeezed shut. Ian rolled over, freeing David, and curled into the proper, completely hung over, fettle position. There was a mumble that David guessed was something along the lines of ‘fucking kill Charlie.’

David crawled to his feet, ignoring the softly whimpering Edgerton and stumbled across the house to the bathroom. David had loved the Craftsman from the very moment he stepped into it. When he’d heard Alan was going to put it on the market he had put a moment of honest thought into an incredibly long term mortgage before Charlie snapped it up. Really the only fault he could ever find with it was that it only had the one bathroom.

David knocked softly and was relieved that the bathroom was apparently empty. After relieving himself of probably more alcohol than he’d consumed since college David engaged in the fine hangover tradition of rummaging around someone else’s medicine cabinet trying to find something for the headache.

David had never pegged Charlie for being a health nut. He’d scarfed pizza with the man too many times but the quantity of vitamins and supplements he found seemed a little absurd. Looking over his shoulder to guarantee the bathroom was empty David picked up a prescription bottle with Charlie’s name on it. It was completely full of Tylenol 2s and a little dusty, it looked like it had never been opened. David checked the date and did a little math. It had to have been from the Leacroft incident. Beaten, tortured and Charlie hadn’t taken his pain killers. David shook his head.
and put down the bottle, picking up a bottle of regular Tylenol and shaking out a couple for himself.

He dry swallowed the pills just as the bathroom door burst open and Don stumbled in with one obvious goal in mind. David jumped out of the way just as Don’s head disappeared into the toilet. David’s own stomach lurched a bit and he made a hasty retreat only to run into a slightly green-looking Charlie. They only exchanged passing glances as Charlie rushed to join his brother.

~

Ian pried his eyes open. He was going to kill Charlie. As a rule Ian didn’t really drink, he didn’t lose control. One beer was his limit. More than one beer led to unfortunate things like dirty dancing with Charlie and apparently molesting David a little in his sleep. Ian held his hands in front of his face. They shook.

“Well, I’m not shooting anyone this morning.”

~

David stumbled into the dining room. The table was set for breakfast and Larry was already trying to divine the secrets of the universe in the bottom of a cup of coffee. Alan came out of the kitchen with a large bottle of orange juice and put it on the table next to the coffee, soda water, fruit, milk, cereal, and a jumbo bottle of aspirin.

“Good morning, David.” Alan greeted. Larry winced. “Have some breakfast if you can manage it.”

David looked at the spread. “Alan, you are a saint. A patron saint.”

“Patron saint of what?”

“Dumb-ass FBI agents?” Alan snorted and headed back to the kitchen. David poured some soda water to settle his stomach. “How are you doing, Professor?” David asked.

“I do believe the last time I felt like this was after accepting my Newton Lacey Pierce Award.”

David just nodded and wondered if he shouldn’t have maybe nabbed something stronger from Charlie’s drug supply.

David sipped his soda water and Larry his coffee as the other men slowly stumbled down in varying states of disrepair. Ian and Colby both tried to crawl into cups of tea. David noticed that Ian didn’t even try to meet his eyes. Don and Charlie appeared last, both looking drained. Don looked around.

“Where’s Mattie?” he asked his father.

“Anne picked him up this morning. I got the feeling the ladies were a little more restrained last night than you lot.”

“Oh,” was Don’s reply as he sipped carefully at some orange juice.

Charlie didn’t even bother trying to drink anything, just dry swallowed some aspirin. David watched as Ian poured some soda water and handed it to Charlie.

“You shouldn’t take those dry,” The sniper advised. Colby shot Ian a look that David couldn’t
interpret but obviously something had passed between those two last night.

Charlie raised his head slightly from where it was pressed against the table. “Did I try to get us into Club 7 last night by passing Ian off as a crown prince?”

“Yes,” The table answered.

Charlie frowned. “Did it work?”

“No,” was the reply.

“You almost had the bouncer sold until you tried to claim Larry was my concubine and Don cracked up.” Ian said, filling in the blanks. Charlie just groaned and reached for the coffee.

Alan looked around the table then at his watch. “All right, gentlemen,” he started with just a little more volume than David felt was strictly necessary. “We are at T minus six and a half hours, that means the wedding party leaves here in 5.5 hours. That should be plenty of time to pull yourselves together.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Ian mumbled.

“Well, you and Larry don’t have to look alive for photos, the rest of them do, so, gentlemen you know where the showers are. Don, you should go last so you have less time to get dirty.”

“Since when am I three?” Don asked.

“Tuxes are not to go on until a half hour before we leave, that would be 1530 hours and I suggest once you’re able to, eat something solid. It’s going to be a long day.”

Colby squinted at Alan. “Are you sure you weren’t military?”

“Positive. I just want to make sure nothing goes wrong today.”

Anne quickly slipped through the front door of her loft, pulling her blue bathrobe tight around her and watched as a skinny guy in a purple suit climbed the stairs. When the man got to the top he spread his arms open for a hug.

“Johnny, what the fuck are you doing here?”

The man dropped his arms. “What the fuck am I doing here? Well, I happened to be in town and happened to talk to a couple of old friends and I hear third-hand that my favorite, not to mention only, sister is getting married and I happen to do a little more digging and find out it’s today.”

Anne sighed. “Do you need money?”

“No, I do not need money. It is your wedding day and I have come to celebrate your happiness and possibly threaten this bum you’re getting hitched to ‘cause I’ve never met him.”

Anne wanted to cry. This was the last thing she needed today. “Johnny, you can’t be here.”

“Why not?”

“You’ve got bench warrants.”
Johnny shook his head. “So?”

“So, I’m marrying an FBI agent.”

Johnny took a quick step back. “What?”

“Don is an FBI agent. Half the FBI agents in LA are going to be there. Not to mention LAPD, DEA, NSA and Secret Service. One of the top snipers in the country is going to be in the front row!”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes!” Anne flung her arms into the air “God, Johnny, even if I had been able to get a hold of you I wouldn’t have invited you, I wouldn’t have done that to Don.”

“I see.” Johnny nodded. “So, what, you’d pick this guy over your family?”

Anne rubbed her hands across her face thankful they had put off the makeup ‘till last. “Look, Johnny, I have a good life now. I’m clean, I’ve got good friends, people buy my paintings, I am in control of things, I don’t bother people and people don’t bother me. Now you’ve always been a useless shit of a human being…” Johnny gave a snort “…but I know you’ve always tried to do right by me as a brother. Please, Johnny, don’t drag my old life into this, I cannot deal with your mess anymore.”

Johnny folded his arms and leaned against the cement wall. “This Don guy, he treats you good?”

“Yeah, he does.”

“Good family?”

Anne nodded. “Yeah, Alan, Charlie, they’ve been great to me.”

Johnny looked Anne up and down, a frown on his face. “Did you get some work done, Annie, ‘cause I don’t remember you having that much…?” Johnny waved his hands in front of his chest.

Anne rolled her eyes. “I’ve been nursing if you don’t mind.”

Johnny’s eyes almost popped from his head. “Nursing? You’ve got a kid?”

“Yes.”

“Can I see him? Her?”

“Him.”

“Can I see him?”

Anne sighed, kicking herself for not just lying or smacking her brother. “Johnny…”

“Please, you’ve got a kid, I’m an uncle.”

“Johnny, I can’t have you in my life anymore. Not like this.”

“Please, let me see him and I’ll go. I’ll leave you to this great new life of yours.”

Anne sighed and ducked back inside and picked up Mattie, not answering the questioning looks
from the other women. Johnny was still leaning against the wall when she stepped back into the stairwell. Johnny smiled and stepped close.

“Hey there, look at you.” he cooed at Mattie. “Aren’t you a big boy?”

“He looks a lot like his father.” Anne said quietly.

“Oh, so you’re marrying an ugly bastard?” Anne couldn’t help snickering. “What’s his name?”

“Mattie. Matthew.”

Johnny nodded. “For grandpa?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s a good name.” Johnny wiggled his fingers in front of Mattie’s face.

“Does mom know?” Johnny asked.

“No. I haven’t…I wouldn’t know where to find her.”

Johnny nodded. “Hey there,” He cooed at Mattie “I’m your Uncle Johnny. I am, as your mother so delicately put it, a bit of a useless shit of a human being, that being said your ma here has always been a good person, so you grow up smart, do right by her or I’m going to come back and kick your ugly ass, got it?”

Mattie stuck his fingers in his mouth and kicked his legs.

Johnny gave a firm nod. “Good.” He took a step back and looked at Anne again. “You look good like that.”

“Like what?”

“All wrapped up in blue, holding a baby. Like those pictures of Mary in church when we were kids.”

Anne gave a snort. “Some how I don’t think I’m getting sainted anytime soon.” Silence fell between the two of them. “You sure you don’t need any money?”

“Yeah, I got some people who owe me then I think I’ll head south. Mackie just bought a boat down in Baja. Said he could use a hand running charter fishing.”

“You get sea sick.”

Johnny shrugged. “I’ll manage.” Anne shifted Mattie in her arms. He was starting to get big. Still a little under the growth curve, but it was getting harder to hold him for hours on end. Johnny stepped forward and placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. “Have a good life, Annie.” He said softly.

“You too, Johnny.”

Johnny nodded and headed back down to the street.

~

David checked his watch. T-2 hours. He’d borrowed sweats and a t-shirt from Colby and was
starting to feel a little more human after a morning of doing nothing much. He was even considering a quick nap in the living room when Don waved him over.

“David, you up for a drive?” Don asked.

“Sure.”

“Can you run something over to Anne’s place?”

“She forget something?”

“Not really. I want to give her a little surprise.” Don took a long slim box out of his pocket and flipped it open. David let out a low whistle. Inside was a necklace that looked like it had been spun out of spider silk then somehow dipped in gold and silver. It was the most delicate looking thing he’d ever seen.

“Where’d you find that?”

Don grinned. “Friend of Anne’s made it. Sells his stuff on street corners if you can believe it.”

“How much did it set you back?”

“Cost. Actually, it was a bit of a thank you gift.”

“Thank you for what?” David asked, wondering what was involved in getting a piece like that at just cost.

“Helped him move.”

Don leveled a look at Don. “Moving furniture got you that?”

Don shrugged. “Well, it was less moving furniture and more getting him to a secure shelter in the dead of night while the heavily armed boyfriend was passed out drunk.”

“Ah, and what might have happened to the boyfriend?” David asked, having his own suspicions.

“Someone called in a weapons complaint to LAPD. Not sure who,” Don said, managing to look completely innocent.

David snickered and took the box. “I’ll make sure Anne gets it.”

Don let out a long sigh and ran a hand over carefully set hair. “I just want one perfect day in my life, David. Is that too much to ask?”

David shook his head. “Nah, don’t worry, odds are it’s got to happen once.”

Anne stood in front of the tall mirror, carefully running her hands along her dress. Sasha and Mary stood on either side of her in dark green.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” Anne said softly.

Sasha chuckled. “Yeah, someone’s losing money today. Anne Finnegan walking down the aisle in a white dress.”
“Well there’s serious money bet that Don’s either going to bolt, faint, or cry.”

“How much money?” Mary asked.

Anne chuckled. “Let’s just say if I can get Don to cry first I get a cut that’ll be worth it.”

Sasha and Mary both snickered. Anne adjusted the crown of wheat and roses on her head. “I think the last time I thought I’d ever wear a wedding dress I was ten.”

“Children are often aware of our future paths in ways we forget as an adult,” Mary said softly.

Sasha and Anne both nodded.

“Come on,” Sasha said firmly. “Let’s go get you hitched and so I can see if I can’t snag myself one of those beefy Feds for the night.”

Anne cringed. “Just keep your hands off Colby. You do not want to fight Charlie for him.”

~

Don crouched down, brushing the first autumn leaves from the marble stone. He had gotten Charlie to sneak him from the house ahead of their father’s schedule, then took a quick detour.

He placed a bouquet on the stone. White roses and golden wheat wrapped in deep green silk. Don had snuck the order into the florist’s with the rest. One extra bunch of flowers mixed in with dozens of others.

Don took a deep breath “Hi, Mom...um...sorry it’s been a while. I’ve just...stuff has been happening. You’re a grandmother. I guess you probably knew that. His name is Matthew. I think he got your hands. I’m getting married today. Her name is Anne. I think you’d like her. She’s not even a Fed. I wish... I wish you could be here.” Don felt a lump solidify in his throat. “I wish I could have found Anne sooner so you could be here. I was looking, I really was. I... I miss you. I really wish you could be here today.”

Don ran his fingers over the name on the stone one more time and wiped at his eyes. Then he stood, making sure there was no grass on his tux before heading down the hill to where Charlie was waiting for him.

“Ready now?” Charlie asked.

Don nodded and took a deep breath. “Yes. Now I’m ready.”

~

Where were you?” Alan hissed as his sons came through the side door of the hall.

“We had to make a little detour.” Don answered.

“Detour?”

Don checked his watch. “We’re not late.”

“I know you two. A little detour could mean a six month homicide investigation.”

Don smiled. “Not today, Dad.”
Alan just pursed his lips. Don cracked open a door and peeked into the rented hall. Half the seats were filled. It was fairly easy to tell the difference between the bride and groom’s side. The groom’s side looked like Feds where as Anne’s friends, well, looked like Anne’s friends. Don could already see Lt. Garcia twitching with the urge to bust someone for possession and both sides were giving each other hairy eyeballs.

There had actually been some debate over how to do a wedding between a not very good Jewish Fed and a lapsed Episcopalian sorta neo-pagan painter. In the end Don had just called a judge that owed him a favor.

Don watched Ian, Megan and Larry take seats in the front row and suddenly, like a brick, reality sunk in. Don felt his pulse spike and his vision blur. In five minutes he was going to walk out there and get married. The fact that technically he’d been married for over a year didn’t matter. He was going out there in front of everyone he knew and getting well and truly hitched. Don was suddenly sure his tie was trying to strangle him.


“What is it?” Ian asked.

“Are you packing?” Don asked softly.

“Yes.” Ian answered and Don saw him tense a little, suddenly on alert.

“Good. I need a favor.” Ian just raised a questioning eyebrow. “If I run, I need you to shoot me.”

Ian nodded. “Okay.”

“I’m serious. Not a kill shot. Anne should get to do that herself, just a leg or something; something that’ll take me down.”

Ian gave Don a comforting pat on the arm. “I’ll take care of you. Don’t worry about it.”

“Thanks, Ian.” Ian went back to his seat and Don faced his father, his brother and his team one more time. “Okay, let’s do this.”

Don made his way into the hall as the last of the seats began to fill. Don took his place with Charlie, David and Colby lined up next to him. An odd scent tickled at his nose. It was sweet and spicy like flowers and pepper mixed together. Don closed his eyes and breathed deep.

“Charlie, do you smell that?” he asked softly.

“Yes.”

“Someone’s wearing Mom’s perfume.”

“Don, they stopped making it in ‘02. Mom hoarded the last bottles.”

“Oh,” Don said quietly, trying to hold onto the scent.

Music started and Don opened his eyes. The doors opened and the bridesmaids walked serenely up the aisle in gowns of dark green, Sasha’s hair dyed to match. Don felt his mouth go dry and his hands shake. Charlie’s hand landed on his shoulder.

“Breathe,” Charlie advised. Don couldn’t help thinking it was possibly the best advice he’d ever heard.
The music changed and everyone turned to look. Anne walked down the aisle and Charlie’s grip tightened on Don’s shoulder. Her simple gown of pure white was the same color as the roses she carried and had woven in her hair. Don thought she looked like a virgin goddess brought to earth. Charlie didn’t let go until Anne was standing beside him.

The judge cleared her throat. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered her today to witness the joining of this man and this woman in the bonds of matrimony. This ceremony is not needed but rather is here as a show of the love, commitment, and solidarity these two people have found in each other.”

She turned to Don. “So, do you, Don Eppes, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife, to love, honor, and cherish, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, as long as you both shall live?” Don tried to swallow, but his throat didn’t seem to want to work, his tongue felt thick in his mouth, he wondered if he was having an allergic reaction to something.

“I do,” Don croaked out, barely able to hear his own voice over the sound of blood rushing in his ears.

“And do you, Anne Finnegan, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband to love, honor, and cherish, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, as long as you both shall live?”

Anne smiled a smile of pure serenity. “I do.”

Don quickly wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and Anne’s smile broadened.

“If anyone has a reason why these two should not be wed speak now or forever hold your peace.”

Don froze. He had at least three exes in the crowd and Anne had at least four. Silence reigned, Don figured, in part due to the two federal agents probably giving the crowd hard looks.

“The rings?”

Don turned around and with shaking hands took the gold band from Charlie. At a nod from the judge Don slipped it on Anne’s slender finger. A moment later Don felt a ring slipped on his, already warm from Anne’s hands.

“Then by the power vested in me by the State of California I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

Don went in for a polite public kiss but Anne was having none of that. He barely heard the cheering as the world contracted down to one set of lips and the woman in his arms.
A Taste of Champaign and Joy

Chapter Summary

The reception.

Chapter Notes

Here it is the grand reception with lots of friends, family and maybe a surprise guest. Oh, and I stole a line from the wonderful cpwatcher for this, with permission. I challenge everyone to go read through her smut and find it.

Don was pretty sure he’d rejected the idea of a reception line but somehow that rejection had gotten misplaced. Instead he found himself standing there holding Mattie, who had been thankfully quiet through the ceremony, in one arm and shaking hands with the other. When he saw a redhead coming down the line he quickly handed Mattie over and went in for a hug.

“Cooop! I thought that was you I saw sneaking in at the last second. Whey didn’t you RSVP?”

Coop stepped back from the hug. “I just found out three days ago. I’ve been driving like mad to get here.”

“Three days? We sent out the invites months ago.”

“And how often do I check my mail?”

Don laughed and turned to Anne. “Anne, this is my old partner, Billy Coop.”

“Ma’am.” Coop greeted, kissing her hand and putting on his most charming smile.

“Ah, the legendary Agent Cooper.”

“Please, the ladies call me Billy.”

“Careful,” Don growled and Anne laughed. Billy looked at the infant in Anne’s arms.

“And look at that, a mini Eppes.” Coop looked at Don. “Took you long enough.”

Don rolled his eyes. “You sound like my Dad.”

“Let me guess, you were just waiting for the right girl.”

“Damn straight.”

Coop laughed. “Come find me later,” he said, turning to Anne. “I’ll fill you in on Don Eppes, the missing years.”

“Like hell you will,” Don objected with no small amount of terror.
Anne gave an evil grin. “It’s a date.”

Coop gave Don a clap on the shoulder and Mattie a little tickle under the chin before heading off in the direction of the bar.

Suddenly Don found himself crouched over in another hug.

“Martha. I’m so glad you made it.” The tiny nurse that had taken Mattie through every early crisis gave Don a tight squeeze.

“Like I would miss it.” She let go and turned to Mattie. “And who is this big boy? Look at all that hair.” Don grinned as Martha fussed with Mattie’s hair that had started growing out dark and thick almost as soon as he was home.

“He eating well?”

“Oh, yes.” Anne said with a sigh and a smile.

“And are those teeth I see? Such a big boy.”

“Getting bigger every day.”

“As it should be.” Mattie smiled and giggled, reaching for his old nurse. Martha held out her finger and Mattie grabbed on. “And a good strong grip.”

“Grip like that he’ll be playing first base.” Martha and Anne exchanged eye rolls. Martha retrieved her finger and gave Anne a hug.

“Congratulations, you two.”

“Thank you.”

Don suddenly felt a prickle on the back of his neck followed by the same cold chill he got when someone had a bead on him. Don looked over his shoulder then quickly took Mattie from Anne’s arms.

“Hon, please don’t think less of me as a man, but I’m using our son as a human shield.” Don said softly as he tracked the approach of the three people he figured wouldn’t show up. Robin, Liz and Kim, moving together like a pack on the hunt.

“Hello, boss.” Liz greeted. Don put on the same smile he used on armed crazies.

“Liz, Robin… Kim… um… Hi… uh, this is Anne. Anne, Kim, Liz, Robin.” Anne politely shook hands with the three women giving Robin a hard eye in the process. Don winced. Robin had messed him up a little the second time she walked out and Anne knew it. “Sooooooo…wasn’t sure if you’d be able to make it.” Don said in the general direction of the three women.

“Oh come on, Don, I wouldn’t have missed this for the world.” Kim said.

Liz leaned over to get a good look at Mattie.

“Well look at that, a mini Don.” Mattie reached for the necklaces dangling from Liz’s neck, missed and wedged his baby hand firmly in her cleaved, giggling in the process. Liz looked down and carefully removed the hand. “Yep, that’s your kid Don.”

Robin, Kim and Anne cracked up as Don turned bright red.
Liz looked at Anne. “Oh, better you than me.”

“Ditto,” said Kim.

Robin looked at Anne. “If that thing he does with his teeth gets to you and you feel the need to kill him give me a call first. I’ll get you a temp insanity plea bargain, you won’t do a day.”

Anne nodded in a way that made Don a little nervous and he held Mattie closer. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Robin turned to the other women. “Come on ladies, let’s go drink Don Eppes out of our systems.”

Anne shook her head as the three women walked off. “Some poor man is going to get horribly, horribly used by those women tonight.” Anne mused.

Don took Anne’s face in one hand and kissed her passionately. “Thank you for putting up with me,” he said once he broke off the kiss.

Anne smiled. “Ditto.”

Liz, Robin and Kim sat together and watched as the happy couple greeted friends and colleagues.

“She’s kinda mousey,” Kim finally said breaking the silence. The other women noded in agreement.

“A little on the plain side really,” Liz mumbled.

“There’s something kinda submissive about her,” Robin said into her drink.

From a distance they watched as Don whispered something into the ear of his plain, mousey, submissive bride. Anne scowled and punched Don in the arm hard enough that they could see him mouth ‘ow’ and furiously rub the point of impact.

Robin snorted into her drink. “Never mind.”

“God, we sound catty,” Liz sighed.

Robin looked around. “See I always figured if Don and I were going to get hitched we’d just run off to Vegas.”

“And risk the wrath of Alan?” Liz asked.

Robin shrugged. “Good point.” She gave a long sigh. “Lord, I miss that man’s cooking.”

“Don?” Kim asked in confusion.

“Hell no, Alan!”

Liz nodded in agreement. “True, that was one of the few perks of dating Don, Friday night brisket.”

Robin chuckled. “There were a few months there when I think I had preferred potential daughter-in-law status over Amita ‘cause I ate red meat.”
Kim shook her head. “I only met Alan the once after Don and I were engaged. We went out for dinner and the whole time Margaret was working me over like a witness on the stand.”

Liz and Robin both winced.

“God, that’s right. You two were engaged.” Liz said.

“We never got around to setting a date then Don transferred to L.A.” Kim took a long pull on her drink. “Just a few months. He just needed a few months to make sure his dad and Charlie were okay.”

“And you thought you could compete with Charlie?” Robin asked.

Kim shook her head. “They were barely on speaking terms in those days. We were dating for months before I even knew he had a brother.”

“Speaking of Charlie,” Robin cut in. “Would someone please tell me when that happened?” She pointed across the large room to a secluded corner just as Colby swooped in to steal a quick kiss from Charlie. Charlie whispered something in Colby’s ear that made him flush and give Charlie a more heated kiss.

“That happened a few years ago now,” Liz provided. Charlie cupped Colby’s ass possessively.

“Am I the only one finding that kinda hot?” Kim asked.

The other women shook their heads.

“Okay. That’s it,” Liz said forcefully and raised her glass. “We are still young, hot and single and this is a wedding, so, to the Brothers Eppes. May they have long and happy lives.” The women clinked glasses, threw back their drinks and went on the hunt.

~

Sasha held aloft the glass of champagne. “I’ve known Anne for a while now and thought, as all friends do, that I had her figured out. Or at least her taste in men figured out. There was Bill the fire eater, Randolf the performance artist, Jake who was finding himself, the acrobats Phill and Will. We were never sure which one she was seeing.”

“It was Phill,” Anne provided.

“Dave the actor who was this close to his big break, Eddie the poet and... well, you get the idea, then the men dried up for a while. Then one bright sunny day over coffee Anne started talking about this guy called Don. Wouldn’t say where they met, wouldn’t say what he did, she’d just giggle and blush into her coffee, talk about how sweet he was, how fun and exciting, gallant and shy. Then one night we’re all up at Anne’s place and this guy gets let in, and he’s got a badge and a gun and the most boring brown suit you’ve ever seen, a shirt that went out of style with Eisenhower, and a tie, oh great goddess that tie, he had a tie that said ‘I spend New Year’s Eve doing my taxes and I don’t even take deductions.’”

“Hey!” Don objected to the critique of his tie, even if it was accurate.

“And Anne puts her arm around him and says, ‘this is Don’. Well, you could have heard a pin drop. ‘This is Don?’ we were all thinking. Well a few of us were thinking ‘shit I’m holding’ but the rest of us were thinking no way could this be Don, where are the tattoos, the pricings, the drama queen strut? This could not be the guy that had Anne blushing and giggling into her coffee for six weeks. Well, she sent him off to get rid of the tie before it hypnotized all of us and when he came back he looked a little better but still...” Sasha shook her head. “Then Anne said something, I don’t
even remember what, what I do remember is Don smiled and for the first time ever I saw a man smile with his entire soul. His eyes didn’t just light up, I saw his whole spirit illuminate and every particle of it was directed on Anne and she smiled back and in all the years I have known her I have never seen a smile like that on her face. And I got it. No other explanation needed. When two people can smile like that at each other over the smallest of things I know of no greater beauty or honest truth. So Anne, Don may your lives be full of joy, strength and prosperity and may your souls always have a reason to smile.”

Charlie raised his glass. “Today is a day I never thought I’d see. A day like this is one hoped and prayed for but never really expected, ‘cause you see, my brother Don, despite his many faults is a good man. But he spends his days fighting against a world that’s not so good. Not too long ago I found myself afraid that it had become too much, that we’d lost him to the dark, to despair, to his own demons. Then one day he started to smile again and frankly it was a little creepy.” There were snickers around the room. “It was so creepy it warranted its own interagency investigation. Now there are only a few things that make Don smile and frankly the Dodgers weren’t have that good a season so every woman in the Los Angeles Federal Building found herself thoroughly questioned on the subject of Don Eppes, which was interesting but didn’t yield the desired results, we even started questioning some of the men ‘cause hey, you never know.” Don buried his face in his hands. “Finally we got a tail on him and late one night witnessed him climbing the stairs to a loft owned by one Anne Finnegan, 30, painter, no felonies, couple of parking tickets.”

Anne tossed a wadded-up napkin at Charlie.

“And with that mystery solved we all stepped back and watched, we watched as Don grew strong again, we watched the despair slowly vanish, replaced by calm and peace. I watched as this beautiful, bright woman brought back the man I remember as my brother with her strength and grace, courage and stubbornness. I watched as they created a life together and fought so hard for this day. So Anne, Don, may you have the kind of life promised by a day like this and may the joy you find in each other always keep the darkness at bay.”

Everyone raised their glasses and drank deep.

~

Don felt loose. The one glass of champagne had bypassed his nearly empty-at-the-time stomach and crawled straight to his head. He slung one arm around Anne’s waist and pulled her close, shutting out the people watching, falling into gray eyes, moving more or less in time with the music. The band, all friends of Anne’s, played a slow, almost folk-rock rendition of Mysterious Ways. Don barely heard it. This was something he had missed in the brief courtship and panic over the pregnancy and Mattie, he had missed the chance to slow dance, the joy of just feeling their bodies move together.

As the music changed, Don became marginally aware of others moving on the dance floor. His father was dancing with Kathryn. It made Don a little sad, but his father seemed honestly happy with her and he couldn’t begrudge him that, especially on his wedding day. Megan and Larry moved awkwardly together but obviously trying. The height difference between them reminded Don a bit of Junior High dances where the girls had all been taller and the boys lived in a mixture of terror, confusion and desire. David had even managed to lure Liz onto the dance floor.

“Don?” Anne asked. “Who’s that talking with Sasha?” Don looked to where Anne gestured with her head.

“That is Lt. Gary Walker, head of LAPD Organized Crime Task Force; general all-around badass and solid leader. Spanked me a few times, even put Charlie in his place.”
“Really? Well for a badass Sasha’s playing him like a Stradivarius.”

Don watched as Sasha subtly flirted until Gary bowed gallantly at the waist and led Sasha onto the dance floor.

“Then again, he has been married three times.”

“Sasha doesn’t really believe in marriage.”

“What does she believe in?” Don asked.

“Mainly Goddess sex magic.”

Don grinned. “I’ve got to say I can think of no one on Earth who could use a little goddess sex magic more than Gary.”

Don danced through another few songs before he felt a tap on the shoulder. “Mind if I cut in?” Alan asked. Don let go and took a step back, letting his father sweep Anne out across the dance floor.

Anne smiled as Alan led with a little more experience than Don.

“So, Alan, any advice for a new bride?” she asked.

Alan nodded “A little.”

“Hit me.”

“Don’t go to bed angry. Stay up all night. Fight it out if you need to but there’s nothing worse than sleeping two feet from someone you’re mad at and nothing worse than sleeping alone where you’re used to having someone hold you.”

Anne gave a serious nod. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Alan smiled. “You made it this far already. You’ll be fine.”

Anne and Alan continued the dance until Colby smoothly cut in.

“Hey, Colby.” Anne said with a chuckle.

“How you doing?” he asked.

“I’m good. Going to dispense advice as well?”

“If you like.”

“What have you got?”

Colby was quiet for a moment. “Do you know how to unload Don’s service weapon?”

Anne frowned. “No.”

“Have him show you.”

“Colby...” Anne started to object.

“Look. He’s happy now but even if he quits the job tomorrow there’s still a lot of ghosts. He won’t
do anything stupid ‘cause he promised he wouldn’t a long time ago but some nights you don’t even need the temptation there.”

Anne nodded, being too familiar with the late-night whispers of her own ghosts. “I get it.”

Colby smiled. “He’ll be fine, you’ll both be fine.”

Anne nodded and let Colby continue the dance. The music changed to something a little sultry and Charlie smoothly cut in. He pulled her inappropriately close with a devilish grin.

“Hey, Christian,” Anne said as Charlie maneuvered her into a dip.

“Hey, Annie,” He replied casually as if they’d just bumped into each other.

“Well, what do you say?”

Charlie smiled. “I am so glad you’re here.”

Anne nodded “So am I.”

“Make sure he takes care of you. Don’t let him be an ass.”

“I’ll try.”

“He gets kinda hyper focused on things. I recommend a good whack up the side of the head.”

Anne chuckled. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“And you’ve got my number if all else fails.”

“Okay.”

Charlie leaned in and gave Anne a kiss on the cheek. “I am so very glad it’s you standing here.”

“Me too, Charlie, me too.”

~

Coop was picking his way across the buffet table, which contained a suspiciously large amount of vegetarian content, when he bumped into someone, nearly spilling his beer in the process. He was about to tell the other person to watch where they were going when he got a good look at him and froze.

“Edgerton.”

“Agent Cooper,” the sniper answered coldly.

Coop could not believe Edgerton was standing there in the middle of Don’s wedding. The two of them had crossed paths a few times before and showed pretty much equal levels of disdain for each other. Edgerton had called him a jumped-up bounty hunter after a few drinks and Billy had retorted with ‘sociopathic snob.’

“Fancy meeting you here,” Coop said politely, knowing if he picked a fight here and now Don would kill him.

“I could say the same.” The question was implied.
“Don and I ran together for a few years. He was damn good. What brings you here?”

Edgerton gave a smile, teeth white and shark-like. “I’m family.” He answered smoothly.

“Like hell,” Billy retorted before he could think.

Ian gave the slightest twitch of the head towards the dance floor. “Nice lady in blue dancing with Alan Eppes?”

“Yeah.”

“My mother.”

Billy almost choked on his own spit. “Shit. You’re a step-Eppes.”

Edgerton chuckled. “Well not quite yet but I think Alan’s working on it.”

Billy nodded slowly. “And how’s that working for you?”

“Well, Alan’s a good cook and I’m pretty sure he doesn’t have dead hookers lined up in the basement so…”

Edgerton shrugged.

This was what Billy really didn’t like about Edgerton. You were never entirely sure if he was joking and you were always worried that he wasn’t.

~

Don was having fun just spinning round the dance floor with Anne, feeling like something out of the romance novels his mother used to secretly read and he’d flip through looking for dirty bits. Don looked around doing a quick scan of where everyone was. Lt. Garcia was continuing to monopolize Nurse Gonzales’s dance card and Edgerton appeared to be chatting up Agent Sherwood near the punch bowl. Don cringed internally in terror of the thought of that combo. Charlie was at a table chatting with Megan and Larry, and Colby appeared to be nibbling at the buffet.

Don frowned and did a quick replay of the evening so far. Something was missing. As they danced close to Howard Meeks Don grabbed him.

“Howard, keep this spot warm for me.” Howard smiled and introduced himself to Anne before dancing off with her. Don moved towards Colby with purpose.

“Hey, Colby.”

“Hey, Don, how’s it going?”

“Great.” Don leaned causally against the table. “Charlie looks good tonight, doesn’t he?”

“Well, he certainly knows how to pick a suit.”

“Why aren’t you dancing with him?”

Colby froze. Don knew the answer to the question. Most of the office was there, not to mention representatives of various other law enforcement branches, and while they weren’t exactly in the closet, Charlie and Colby did try to behave in a professional manner in public, or at least not be
“...uh...” Colby stuttered.

“Colby, it’s my god damn wedding, go dance with my brother.” Colby nodded and headed towards Charlie. Don smiled. Colby always could follow a direct order. Don watched as Colby interrupted Charlie’s musings with Larry, took his hand and led him onto the dance floor just as a slow song started. Charlie moved stiffly for a moment before sighing against Colby, a content smile on his face.

Don retrieved Anne from Howard’s stumbling steps and pulled her into his own slow dance. From a few feet away Charlie raised his head from where it rested against Colby’s shoulder and caught his brother’s eye.

“Thank you,” he mouthed silently to Don before closing his eyes and pulling himself even closer to Colby.

~

Don rested his feet and nibbled some cheese puffs while the band took a break. Alan sat down hard next to Don and stole a cheese puff.

“I haven’t spent that much time on my feet in a while.” Alan said with a sigh. Don gave a chuckle. “How are you doing, Donnie?” Alan asked

Don smiled. “I’m doing good.”

“Good.” Alan took a deep breath. “I know things haven’t always been easy for you and there’s still going to be rough patches but I’m proud of you. I want you to know that. Your mother would be proud to see you today.”

Don blamed the bit of misting in his eyes on the champagne. “Thanks, Dad.” Don watched as Kathryn and Anne chatted and fussied over Mattie. “How are you doing, Dad?” Don asked.

“I’m doing well.”

Don gestured towards Kathryn with his chin. “Does she make you happy?”

Alan gave a soft smile. “Yeah, she does.”

“Good.” Don gave a chuckle. “All three Eppes men happy at once. Isn’t that listed as a sign of the apocalypse?”

Alan just chuckled as Charlie wandered over and sat down on Don’s other side. “So what’s the conversation?” he asked.

“All three of us happy at once. It might be tempting fate a bit.” Charlie chuckled and started picking the label off a beer bottle.

“We make our own fate, Don. Fight for our own happiness and we’ve fucking earned it.”

Alan raised his glass. “That, boys, I will drink to.”

~

The band came back on stage and Don went to collect Anne for another dance.
“Hey, everyone.” The lead singer said into the mic. “Hope you’re all having a good night. Um… Some of you may know Annie and I had a thing a while back and anyway, Don, mate, I don’t really know you, but better you than me.”

“No shit.” Anne called out to much chuckling.

“Anyway, ‘cause I’m sure you’ve still got that secret collection of vintage Stones albums this one’s for you Annie, from all of us blokes that didn’t make the cut.”

The drummer gave a quick count and the band launched into a strangely poppy rendition of Honky Tonk Woman that left Anne in almost hysterical giggles.

Once that was finished Don watched in some trepidation as Charlie mounted the stage, a slightly drunken weave in his step. ‘Oh well,’ thought Don. ‘It’s not a proper wedding until the best man does something stupid.’

“No shit.” Anne called out to much chuckling.

“Anyway, ‘cause I’m sure you’ve still got that secret collection of vintage Stones albums this one’s for you Annie, from all of us blokes that didn’t make the cut.”

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“Annie,” Charlie said into the mic. “This one says everything I think. It’s a Bob Dylan tune.”

Charlie paused for a moment. “Luckily Bob Dylan can’t sing any better than I can.” Don cringed and the band started up with some guitar cords that tickled the back of Don’s memory, probably something his father had played on vinyl back in the day.

Charlie took the mic from the stand, obviously if he was going to make an idiot of himself he was going to do it with style.

“‘Twas in another lifetime, one of toil and blood
When blackness was a virtue and the road was full of mud
I came in from the wilderness, a creature void of form.
"Come in,” she said,
“I’ll give you shelter from the storm."

Don pulled Anne in close. Charlie wasn’t actually singing too badly and he’d been right, the song just might have said it all.

~

Colby cut Don off from the crowd. “Hey Don, got a sec?”

“Sure.”

Colby handed Don an envelope “This is from the team.” Don looked curious and opened the envelope. Inside were two hotel room keys. “We know you’re not taking a proper honeymoon so we all clubbed together, got you a room upgrade for the weekend. Honeymoon suite, in-room spa, chocolates on the pillow, you know.”

Don broke into a grin. “Thank you, man.”

“You’ve earned today Don. Both of you.”

Don took a deep breath. “I just don’t want to screw up tomorrow, or the next day.”

Colby shrugged. “You’ll screw up some of them but as long as you’re alive and kicking you have the day after to try again.”

~
Anne stood on the edge of the stage, hands on her hips, bouquet clutched in one hand.

“I’m only chucking this thing if everyone’s going to try for it. Guys too, come on.” Most of the remaining guests gathered around the base of the stage. Anne looked out at the crowd. “Ian! Martin! Get your skinny federal asses over here.” Ian and Martin snapped out of the discussion that had had the two men engrossed for the last three hours and slinked to the edge of the crowd.

Anne turned around and chucked the bunch of roses over her head. When she turned back around there was a void in the middle of the crowd, in the center of which was Howard Meeks, holding the bunch of flowers and looking more than a little startled. Anne’s laughter joined everyone else’s.

A few minutes later with Mattie in her arms and Don by her side she headed upstairs to the hotel’s honeymoon suite.

~

Gary Walker was fairly sure a pinecone was under his hip and a rock was jabbing him in the shoulder. He didn’t care. A giggle he would never admit to bubbled out.

“What’s so funny?”

Gary rolled over onto his side so he could look at Sasha laid out bare in the moonlight. “I just committed my first crime.”

“Really?”

“Trespassing on city park land after hours, public indecency.”

Shash smiled. “Well, since we’re working on your rap sheet, Lieutenant, I know how to do a few things that are still illegal in red states.” Gary grinned and found that he really didn’t care about that pinecone.

~

David tried to blink through the beer and champagne that was spinning around his head. Pale hands were stripping his shirt from him before he fell backwards onto a bed.

“You know, David,” Robin said as she yanked off his shoes. “I’ve always heard a rumor that a stamina test was required before joining Don’s team.”

There was a clink and David looked over to see a pair of handcuffs dangling from Liz’s finger and Kim already in her underwear. “Yeah, David,” Liz said. “How much stamina have you got?”

David swallowed hard and tried desperately to remember what Colby had once told him about safe words.
The Feel of Love

Chapter Summary

The Wedding Night

Don toed off his shoes and sat hard on the bed, letting out a long sigh, the sheer length of the day finally catching up. The bed was soft and there was a real temptation just to fall back on it and go to sleep. In the other room of the suite, Don could hear Anne softly humming to Mattie. Despite a couple of teeth still pushing in he’d been a real trooper all day, the rather matronly head of the catering staff keeping him well stocked with ice rings and frozen apple slices.

Don stripped off his tie and his jacket, letting them fall at the foot of the bed. Anne slid into the bedroom, pulling the door mostly shut behind her.

“He’s asleep,” she said with a soft smile.

“Did I get a chance to tell you today how beautiful you look?” Don asked.

“Maybe once or twice.” She stepped near the bed and Don pulled her close, resting his cheek against her stomach.

“Walking down that aisle you looked so beautiful, like a virgin goddess on earth.”

Anne chuckled. “You’re the second person today to accuse me of looking like a virgin.”

“It must be the dress.”

Anne bent over and kissed Don softly. “Have I managed to tell you today how handsome you look, Agent Eppes?”

“I think once or twice.”

“My knight in shining Kevlar.”

Don grinned and Anne began working the buttons on his shirt until he could shrug it off. Don stood and reached his arms around Anne and began undoing the long row of buttons that went down her back until she gave a shrug and the dress pooled at her feet. She went to lift the crown from her head but Don stopped her hands.

“Leave it. A knight needs his princess.”

They kissed and with practiced hands managed to strip the last of the clothes from each other except for Don’s socks. Don looked down. “Explain to me how every woman looks sexy standing in just her stockings but every guy looks like an idiot standing in just his socks?”

Anne shrugged. “It’s just one of those things,” she said, trying not to chuckle. Don sat on the bed and pulled off his socks.

“Better?”
“Much.”

Anne settled herself onto Don’s lap her legs wrapped around his waist. Don groaned into their kiss, feeling her wet warmth pressed against his length. He slid a hand between them, his fingers seeking a hard little nub and once finding it teasing at it oh so gently.

Anne’s eyes fluttered shut and her head rolled back as she began to rock against Don’s fingers. Don wanted this to last, wanted to hold this moment forever, but knew they were both just too tired. In the morning they could lay in bed, take hours to make love, but for tonight…

Don laid back slowly his hands never leaving Anne’s body, her skin flushing a lovely pink, as she slid and settled first on him and then with a smooth move, around him. Don nearly whimpered as Anne pulsed around him, smooth, hot and wet.

“Have I mentioned today that I love you?” Don asked in a breathless whisper.

“I think once or twice.”

“Never let me forget to tell you that.”

“I promise.”

~

Colby watched Charlie toss the jacket of his tux across the room with a grand sweep of his arm, then flop down on the bed with a happy bounce, his face a picture of bliss.

“We did it.” Charlie proclaimed, throwing his arms wide. “We have successfully married off the commitmentphobe of the millennium, my dear brother. We got him walked down the aisle, ring on his finger, first dance, wedding night, the whole shebang, and Ian didn’t even need to shoot him.”

Colby smiled, feeling a little blissed out from the champagne himself.

“Wedding night.” Colby half mused aloud.


Colby shook his head. “Nothing.” He took off his own jacket with far less flair and sat down next to Charlie, cupping his face for a kiss.

Charlie’s lips were soft and a little dry and his kiss tasted spicy with an odd mix of champagne and the salsa he’d gorged on towards the end of the night.

It was like their first kiss, soft and unhurried, pressed against Charlie’s car in the CalSci parking lot, breaking every rule and there for anyone to see but neither had rushed to break it off.

Colby pulled back and kissed his way down Charlie’s neck, his hands going to the buttons on Charlie’s shirt and Charlie’s hands going to his. There was no rush between them. Each button undone at its own pace until both of them shrugged their shirts off. Colby felt his ring clink against the cufflink. They had been Colby’s idea to begin with, wanting to make it very clear to the office, the family, himself, and Charlie, that this was not a fling and what they had was not going to be put aside lightly, if ever. He had meant what he said, kneeling in Charlie’s garage, Charlie’s hands in his. He knew at that moment it was probably going to be the closest thing to a wedding he’d ever get, with no witnesses but the math and the ghost of Mrs. Eppes.
Colby took Charlie’s hands in his. With a quick twist he had Charlie’s ring off and was slipping it on his left hand. Then Colby did the same to his.

“Colby?” Charlie questioned, looking clearly confused.

“Just for tonight.” Colby leaned Charlie back and kissed him again.

Charlie kissed back, their tongues dancing around each other at a slow lazy pace. Colby closed his eyes. They didn’t spend enough time just doing this, just kissing like they had managed to stop time and the moment could stretch on in a loop forever.

Charlie pulled away from the kiss and gently steered Colby onto his back. He straddled Colby’s hips then went back to kissing him. Colby opened his mouth to Charlie’s tongue and sighed as Charlie’s weight settled against his body. Somehow Charlie always knew when he needed this, when he needed Charlie in him, making his claim on Colby as purely as Colby made his claim on him.

They moved slowly against each other, still half dressed, the fine cloth of the tux pants sliding with only the slightest hiss of noise, their skin flushed warm with champagne and dancing.

Colby sighed as Charlie’s hands worked down his chest, stopping just above the waistband of his pants, then working their way up again, ghosting across Colby’s chest. Colby closed his eyes and let himself just drift in the sensation of Charlie’s hands, soft, strong, calluses on the right thumb and forefinger from a lifetime of holding chalk in scholarly pursuits. Colby knew those hands as well as his own, possibly better.

Charlie’s hands slid down again. Colby raised his hips so Charlie could slide his pants down with just a couple of quick movements. Colby fluttered his eyes open long enough to watch Charlie strip off the last of his clothes as well.

Then Charlie settled back on top of him and resumed their kissing, Charlie cradling Colby’s head in his hands and Colby wrapping his arms around Charlie’s narrow waist, letting his thighs fall open so Charlie could kneel between them.

They kissed for long minutes, ignoring any other demands of the body. When Charlie finally pulled back his lips were swollen, red and gorgeous. His eyes were dark and strong, no hint of pain or fear, madness or uncertainty. Colby loved to see that look, his heart filled with love and pride that he had perhaps some small part in helping Charlie find that strength.

Colby watched as Charlie reached for the lube on the bedside table. Charlie lubed himself up first, making a production of it for Colby’s benefit, leaving his cock red and glossy, almost unreal looking. Then Colby spread his legs and rolled his hips a little.

Charlie’s fingers teased gently at his opening. They did this so rarely each time was nearly like the first, Charlie working in just one finger so slowly and gently Colby barely felt it. The minutes ticked by as Charlie worked just that one finger in and out, twisting and turning it occasionally, sending soft rolling waves of pleasure up his spine. Colby let himself melt under the simple touch, his body going loose and comfortable, open to Charlie’s will.

Charlie slipped in a second finger. It went in easy and Colby hummed in approval. There wasn’t the faintest hint of pain, there never was when Charlie did this, prepared him so carefully, the first time it had taken over an hour. Charlie twisted his fingers and slowly spread them as they shifted in and out in no particular hurry. Colby felt that lovely slow warmth begin to build and he shifted his hips a little, drawing up his knees.
Charlie used his free hand to stoke along Colby’s shaft as a third finger slipped in. Colby let out a moan and Charlie flicked his tongue just along the tip of Colby’s cock. Colby bucked his hips and let himself ride up and down on Charlie’s fingers for a few moments, enjoying the feeling, knowing it was just a hint of what would be coming soon.

“More.” Colby gasped out as Charlie twisted and spread three fingers. Charlie just made little shushing noises and continued.

Colby tossed his head as the heat began to build and he clutched at the sheets to keep from grabbing Charlie.

“Please,” Colby whimpered.

The fingers disappeared and Colby felt himself trying to clench on to nothing. He watched as Charlie got into position, hovering over him, deceptively strong arms holding himself above Colby.

“Are you sure?” Charlie asked. He always asked.

“Yes.”

And with one easy, slow, controlled thrust Charlie entered.

Colby squeezed his eyes shut and fought to draw breath. There was a little pain but the simple sensation of Charlie filling him always drove him to the edge. Charlie drew out with as much control and started a slow rhythm of deep, long, strokes.

Colby gasped and twitched, he keep his eyes squeezed shut because he was not sure he could open them, each thrust sending heavy waves of pleasure rolling up his spine each one following swiftly upon the last. When it felt like the waves were about to batter him apart Charlie shifted his hips and gave a quick thrust. Colby’s eyes flew open and he let out a guttural cry. He locked eyes with Charlie and that is all there was.

Charlie shifted to short hard strokes that hit just the right spot and Colby came without a touch, falling into Charlie’s wide brown eyes and knowing that this was love.
Colby looked at the letter and sighed. He was sure his family were the only people left on Earth who actually sent letters this way. His sister and gotten the job this year of sending the letter to the far-flung little brother telling him it was time to come home.

Colby sighed again. Apparently there was snow in Idaho. Apparently Mom’s cake had toped the church cake auction. Again. Apparently he had another niece fathered by one of his brothers. Apparently the girl he had kinda liked in high school was single again and had never actually gotten around to marrying that other guy so it’s not like she’s divorced and she really wants kids and still has that picture of him in his ROTC uniform and damn it didn’t Colby realize that he had family obligations and if he insisted on staying with the FBI surely he could get a transfer up to Idaho and Mom wasn’t getting any younger and of the five of them he was the last one single with no kids?

‘Maybe, dear sister, I firmly believe that the world does not need anything else from the stagnant pond known as the gene pool of Winchester, Idaho.’

“This has got to stop.” Colby said to himself as he pulled out a pen and a piece of blank paper.

Dear Bethany,

I am writing you this because you are my sister and there is the possibility that you may posses discretion, tact and empathy.

I am not coming home. I assure you the family does not want me to come home. I am happy here in LA. I am happy because I have a great job that I love and am in a committed, loving, wonderful relationship with someone who means more to me than anything else. His name is Charlie. He’s a math professor and one of the smartest people on earth. We are deeply committed to each other and have the support of his family. He takes care of me and I take care of him and I couldn’t be happier. I’m more at peace with myself and my place in the world than I have ever been.
I’ll leave it up to you to decide how much, if any, of this letter you want to share with the family. Please just know and try to respect the fact that where I am, I am happy and loved and considering the nature of that love I doubt the family would like me traipsing back to Idaho.

If you’re willing to accept this I’d like to be kept abreast of general family news.

Your Loving Brother,
Colby Granger

P.S. I’m enclosing a picture of me and Charlie taken at his brother’s wedding. You’ll note the lack of snow.

P.P.S. Consider getting email like the rest of the planet.

Colby folded up the short letter and placed it in an envelope, sure this would be the last message between him and his family.

~

Megan sat down across from Don in the small diner booth.

“So what do you want, Don?” she asked, quickly cutting to the chase.

“Can’t a boss treat a subordinate to lunch?”

Megan sighed. Her stomach had been rolling all morning and she was in no mood to play. “Just spit it out.”

“So I heard something interesting from Larry the other night.”

“Really?”

“Now I don’t know anything until you officially tell me Megan but there’s some stuff coming down the line that’ll affect you and as your friend and your boss I’d like to be able to back whatever play you decide on.”

“Larry told you.”

Don grimaced a little. “Well not so much told as drunkenly declared his undying love for the mother of his yet to be born wormhole.” Megan put her face in her hands. “Now it took a little while to decipher that one but we got the gist in the end.” Megan let out a long sigh. “How far are you?”

“Two months.”

“So still at a risky bit.”

“Yeah.”

“How’s everything looking so far?”

Megan shrugged. “Doctor says it all looks good, blood pressure, blood sugar, I just have the chronic heartburn from hell.” Megan complained.

“You know, Anne swore two spoonfuls of vanilla ice cream worked better than Tums on that.”
Megan shrugged again. “Sure, I’ll try anything at this point.”

“Are you planning on staying with the Bureau?” Don asked seriously.

“Hell yes. Kid or not I’ve worked too damn hard, Don.”

Don nodded. “Fair enough. Let me level, about the time you’re going to be hatching that kid the Bureau is going to be asking me for a recommendation on someone to head up a second violent crimes unit out of the office. I got one name on the list and it’s yours if you want it.”

Megan felt her jaw drop. “Serious?”

“David’s not ready, Colby doesn’t want it and I don’t trust anyone else. If you take this I know you’ll run a good, hard, smart team. You’ll do good work.”

Megan felt herself blink a couple of times. “Yes, absolutely, I mean… Larry has every intention of being a stay at home dad the first year, we could certainly use the extra money.”

“It’s not that much of a raise.”

“It’s something.”

Don nodded. “Okay. Good. When you get the gig take David as your second.”

Megan frowned. David had been on Don’s team the longest. “Really?”

“Yeah, he needs a bit of polishing, and you can give him that, plus you won’t have to train an entire team completely from scratch.”

“You’re going to break the guys up? Colby’ll be heartbroken.”

“Colby’s a big boy, it’s time he learned to play with others and I let David get away with too much shit, it’ll affect his career soon.”

Megan nodded. “You’ll keep Colby.”

“Well, someone’s got to. He’s probably given me as many gray hairs as Charlie at this point.”

“And you didn’t think about him for this? I mean, he’s got more tactical experience than me…”

“True but you’re a better investigator and David’ll pick up the tactical slack for you and…he flat out told me he doesn’t want it plus…” Don shook his head. “I don’t know…”

“What?”

Don gave an odd half chuckle. “My whole life, people were always talking about how Charlie was so brilliant he was going to change the world one day, like his genius was a magic wand or something, but he really hasn’t.”

“He’s done some pretty impressive shit, Don.”

“I know, I know, but I always got the impression he was looking for the really big thing, the project that’ll change the face of the world, let him go down in history, and he’s false started a few. I mean, those shooting chains, part of him honestly thought he could fix gang violence with them but…” Don chewed his lip a bit. “There’s different math on the boards these days, stuff I don’t recognize and I’ve gotten pretty good and guessing what he’s working on, this is…it’s just a
feeling but I think he’s found the big thing, I don’t know what but I just get this little itch in the back of my head that this is going to be huge and I think he’s been waiting until he found a partner. Not for the math but…”

“For everything else.”

Don nodded. “Whatever this is, I get the feeling it’s only going to work if he’s got Colby at his right hand.”

“You know, there are clinical names for relationships like theirs.”

Don gave a snort. “Whatever clingy, needy, co-dependent thing they’ve got going, Megan, trust me, it’s better than what I first walked in on.”

“Colby said you pulled your gun.”

“Yeah, and by the end of the night I didn’t know who I wanted to shoot more, him or Charlie. Seriously, three years playing secret agent and the man’s a rock, one year of dealing with Charlie solo and he was on the verge of a breakdown. What they had going was…borderline abuse and Colby was getting the short end of the stick.”

Megan blinked a few times in surprise. “If it was that bad Colby managed to keep it under wraps pretty well.”

“Yeah. Seriously if I could have hauled Charlie in on charges of being a manipulative asshole I would have.”

“If that was a federal offense we’d have to start building skyscraper prisons.”

Don looked at his coffee. “You know it’s all kinda my fault.”

“How do you figure that, Don?”

“Charlie was flat out using Colby for…well sex, among other things, completely on his terms. No romance, no kissing.”

“No kissing!” Megan exclaimed “What’s the point?”

Don shrugged. “I don’t know, but Colby wasn’t going to break it off for his own reasons, so I told him to make Charlie at least take him out for coffee once in a while. Next thing I know they’re both walking around with springs in their steps and making eyes at each other when they thought no one was looking. I could have just made up some reason to send Granger to Anchorage and Charlie would be miserably married to Amita by now and sneaking out at night to troll gay bars.”

Megan laughed, having always wondered at what exactly had pushed those two together but never thinking that it was Don. “Well if it’ll help Charlie change the world I guess it’s a good thing.”

“I guess.” Don said with a sigh. He looked at Megan the carefully took her hand. “Hey, I’m happy for you and Larry, I really hope it works out.”

“Thanks, Don.”

“If for no other reason it’ll be nice to have another parent around to bitch to about the price of diapers, and feeding schedules, and sleep schedules, and growth charts and that smell.”

“What smell?” Megan asked.
“I don’t know, I’ve cleaned everything top to bottom, including Mattie, and there’s still this odd little… smell. I’m starting to think Anne and I are the only ones who smell it.” Megan nodded slowly. “Oh don’t look at me like that. Just you wait, seven months you’re going to walk into the office and go ‘Don, what the fuck is that smell?’”

Megan laughed. “Oh, god, Don, do I get to admit to being terrified yet?”

Don gave a soft smile and a nod. “Yeah, and believe me it doesn’t go away, but you’ve got a good crew here and we’ve all got your back.”

Megan rubbed at her face. “Anne and Larry can set up play dates.”

Don snickered. “Oh god, these kids are gonna grow up a little weird.”

Megan nodded, “Yeah, but weird can be good.”

Don raised his cup of coffee. “Here’s to being a little weird.”

~

Colby stretched out on his couch as Charlie wriggled into his lap, pepperling little kisses down his throat.

“Well, I did it.” Charlie mumbled against Colby’s neck.

“Did what?”

“Signed the papers today.”

Colby sat up a little. “Really?”

“They just have to go through escrow.”

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Colby asked seriously.

“Yes.” Charlie answered with more than a little force. “This arrangement is absurd. We should have been living with each other three years ago.” Charlie pressed soft kisses against Colby’s eyes. “We need to stop pretending. I have every intention of spending the rest of my life with you and this will be good for us.”

Colby nodded and wrapped his arms around Charlie. “I still think you should have talked with your Dad first.”

Charlie snorted. “If I did that, then he would have insisted on moving out himself and I would have been left feeling like I just kicked out my own father. The condo’s right around the corner from the house so we can still pop in. This will be good. It’s time Dad and I started living like adults in our own relationships.”

There was a knock on the door. Charlie and Colby looked at each other.

“Expecting someone?” Charlie asked.

Colby shook his head and got up approaching the door with caution, Charlie a few paces behind. He looked through the peep hole and saw a face he hadn’t see in years. Knowing better, he opened the door wide. “Bethany?”
His sister smiled sadly. “Hello, Colby.” Suddenly the hall was filled with people, driving him back into his apartment. Colby had always been the runt of the litter but after so many years from home he’d forgotten just how much larger his brothers were. Colby felt his heart race. There was only one reason they could be here. A broad-shouldered woman with steel gray hair and eyes pushed through the large men to stand before Colby.

“Hello, Mom.”

His mother shook her head. “I thought I had raised you better than this, Colby. But I suppose we can blame your father.” Colby felt a dull roar in his ear and red ghosted over his vision.

“Colby?” Charlie asked softly behind him.

“Charlie, this is my family,” Colby said in the most controlled, level tone he could manage. “Everyone, this is Charlie.”

“I have no interest in being introduced to your live-in catamite,” Colby’s mother spat out. Behind him Colby could just feel Charlie straightening up, getting ready for a fight. ‘Not this fight.’

Colby whipped around and grabbed Charlie, dragging him down the hall. He flung the front door of his apartment open. “Run,” he said to Charlie, shoving Charlie’s keys in his hand.

“What?”

Colby pressed a quick hard kiss to Charlie’s lips. “I love you, I will always love you no matter what. I’ll come find you. Do not come back. Go Home. Run!” Colby shoved Charlie into the hall, slammed the door in his face and locked it behind him.

Colby took several deep breaths and turned to face his family, plastering on a smile. Behind him he could feel Charlie pounding on the door and calling out his name. “Well, can I get anyone a beer?”

~

Alan heard the front door slam. The last time he’d heard it slam quite that loud Charlie and Colby had just gone from bad to worse. He and Don looked at each other then rushed out of the kitchen. Anne pointed in the direction of the garage where much banging could be heard.

Alan carefully opened the garage door. Charlie was currently kicking the hell out of a metal trash can.

“Charlie?” Alan asked carefully. Charlie whipped around. There were tears in his eyes but they were coupled with more pure rage than Alan had ever seen. “Charlie, what happened?”

“I’m a coward; I left, I fucking left. I ran.”


“He told me to run, and I ran,” Charlie said, softly scraping his fingers through his hair. “I’m a coward, I ran. I just left him there.”

“Ran from what, Charlie? Is Colby in danger? You need to tell me.” Don had snapped into agent mode very quickly.
“How can he not be in danger, his family’s here?” Charlie spat out the word family like a bad taste. Alan’s stomach dropped. “Colby’s family is here?” Alan asked, knowing that a ‘yes’ could not be good.

“For an all-redneck intervention, apparently they don’t feel he should be taking up with some little catamite and I’ve got to give them credit, no one’s called me that since I was fifteen. Oh, and when Colby said he was the runt of the litter, he wasn’t fucking kidding.” Charlie’s voice had gone cold and what Alan saw in his son’s eyes scared him. It was raw anger and loathing backed by genius burning so hot Alan was afraid Charlie may burn down the very world with it. “What the fuck am I doing here? I’ve got to go back.” Charlie headed to the door with Don just a step behind already checking his weapon. Alan stepped in front of them.

“Give me your keys, Charlie.” Alan said, holding out his hand.

“What?”

“I said give me your keys.” Charlie held out his keys that had been clenched in his hand. Alan snatched them and quickly headed out of the garage. “You two stay here, I won’t be long, don’t let the sauce burn.”

Don and Charlie followed him out of the house. “Where are you going?” Don shouted as Alan got into his car.

“To get Colby.”

~

Colby heard his door rattle ‘Oh god, please, Charlie don’t come in.’ Colby thought. He couldn’t see around the huge form of his brother-in-law that was lurking in front of him, but most of the family turned their heads to see who had entered.

“Excuse me,” a voice said politely and a form pushed through the crowd.

“Alan!” Colby exclaimed and tried to stand, but his brother’s meaty hand pushed him hard back into the chair. Alan slid right past the masses, ignoring them. “Alan?” Alan took his face in one hand and carefully examined Colby’s soon to be very black eye.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. What are you..?”

“Hush.” Alan ordered. Colby’s jaw snapped shut. Alan turned to face the room clasping his hands behind his back. “Hello, you don’t know me and I don’t intend for you to, just know that I am the person who is giving you one chance to get out of very big trouble. Someone in this room has struck a federal agent and is apparently holding him against his will.”

“We’re his kin and we don’t have any intention…”

“Silence.” Alan snapped. The room was suddenly so quiet Colby could hear every beat of his heart rushing in his ears. “What you have done to Agent Granger is not your primary concern, your primary concern is that you have angered and irritated Dr. Charles Eppes who is an extremely valuable national asset. If it is revealed that one of you has so much as ruffled a hair on his head
you will all be charged with treason and you will find yourselves raising the flag at Gitmo faster than you can say ‘I want a lawyer.’” Colby’s eyes went wide and he wondered if his family was actually going to buy what Alan was selling them. “This is your one opportunity. Leave. Now. Do not return.”

Colby watched in slow motion horror as his brother-in-law made a fist and began to swing at Alan’s face. The fist stopped millimeters from Alan’s face. Alan didn’t flinch. He didn’t move a muscle. Colby couldn’t help but think of Charlie’s ability to hold still through sheer force of will.

“Leave.” Alan said leveling an ice cold gaze at each person in the room.

“This ain’t over.”

“Yes. It is.”

Colby watched as his family shuffled out with many dirty looks. Alan didn’t move, only stood there with a look that could have solidified lava. When the door clicked shut Alan turned and looked at Colby, shook his head and headed towards the kitchen.

“You didn’t flinch.” Colby heard himself say.

“What was that?” Alan called from the kitchen.

“When Mark went to hit you, you didn’t flinch.” Alan returned from the kitchen with a bag of frozen peas.

“I was staring down armed national guards on protest lines long before you were born. One sit-in I took a police club to the side. Broke my wrist and three ribs; didn’t move a muscle.”

‘Must be genetic.’ Colby thought. Alan handed over the peas and Colby pressed them to his eye. Alan pulled up another chair and sat down a few feet from Colby.

“So that’s the family?”

Colby shrugged. “We haven’t been family since Dad died and we weren’t much before then.”

“Still, they came all this way to see you.”

“They just don’t want the second-hand stigma of having a queer in the family.”

“And they thought they could beat it out of you?”

Colby gave a half laugh. “Actually, Mark took a swing when I pointed out that aside from being my lover Charlie is rich, a Democrat, and Jewish. Not sure which one pissed them off more.”

Alan gave a laugh. “Margaret’s family couldn’t stand me ‘cause I was poor, a commie and not Jewish enough.”

“You were not a commie.”

“A spectre is haunting Europe -- the spectre of communism.” Alan said grandly. Colby raised an eyebrow, Alan shrugged. “I did the required reading at any rate.”

“I’ve read better manifesto opening lines.”

“Haven’t we all.” Alan let out a long sigh and rubbed his face as if trying to wake up from
something. “Colby, I haven’t always been as…gracious to you as I should have been.”

Colby shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“You love Charlie. I know that. I’ve known that since the moment I saw him lying in that hospital bed and you were running your fingers so gently through his hair.” Colby shivered at the memory. “That should have been enough for me. I know Charlie is a difficult man, he was a difficult child. I’m a father and I always wanted him to be happy but my happiness was a home, a wife, and two sons. I don’t know why I ever expected Charlie to find happiness the same way but I did.”

“He got one out of the three.”

“True.” Alan looked lost in thought for a moment. “Charlie was the eternal child for so long. I suppose we kept him that way, his mother and I and Don. As long as he was doing the math we took care of everything else. With you…since you came into his life he’s been an adult, a man. I know you take care of him in ways no one else will but at the same time he’s become stronger, focused, confident, he has presence, Larry even tells me the math has gotten better.”

Colby shrugged “He’s just Charlie, there’s nothing there that wasn’t there before.”

“Yes there is. There’s you. You love him. I know you love him. That ring on your finger- I know if this was a kinder world, more understanding you’d put it on your other hand. I know you’d walk down an aisle, make your vows to the world, call him your husband.”

Colby squeezed his eyes shut. He thought of Charlie in a tux, kissing him under an arch of flowers, maybe a child, somehow, with Charlie’s curly hair or soft brown eyes. For a moment it felt like something in his chest was going to burst.

“I’m getting old but I haven’t forgotten what it is to love, or to be the father of difficult children.” Colby looked at Alan. Alan seemed to come to some sort of decision and stood up. “Come on, get your coat.” Colby stood.

“Where are we going?”

“Home. It’s spaghetti night. We have to get back before Charlie calculates the sauce to death.” Colby grabbed his coat and followed Alan, still not entirely sure what had just happened.

When they got to the house Colby found himself standing just inside the front door suddenly feeling like a stranger. Alan stopped on his way to the kitchen only long enough to have some quick words with Don and Charlie that Colby couldn’t hear. Alan continued on and Don approached Colby.

“So.” Don said.

“He can be a very scary man when he wants to be.”

Don nodded. “He’s a father. He does what he has to for his sons.” Colby nodded in agreement. Suddenly Don shoved him hard. “Stay out of my room and keep your grubby hands off my baseball cards!”

Colby’s blinked a few times and his jaw dropped, the full implications of the last few minutes hitting him. Colby looked at Don and did the only thing he could think to do. He stuck out his tongue and blew a raspberry.

“Daaaad!” Don shouted out. “Colby stuck out his tongue at me.”
“Stop it, you two!” came a shout from across the house. “Set the table.” Colby followed Don into the dining room, where Charlie was already setting out places for five. They didn’t say anything. Charlie only gave his hand a quick squeeze, a soft smile on his face.

Dinner was served; conversation was mainly around the Dodgers’ pre-season line-up. Colby held Mathew while Anne ate and Charlie argued that his calculations demanded more oregano in the sauce.

After the dishes were cleared and goodnights were made Charlie and Colby climbed the stairs. They had hardly spoken since Colby had arrived at the house, but Charlie had twisted their legs together under the dinner table. Both got undressed and climbed into bed. Colby felt Charlie’s arms wrap around him and he began to shiver.

“Are you okay, love?”

Colby felt a smile creep across his face. “I’d… I’d forgotten what this felt like.”

“What felt like?”

“Family.”

Charlie pressed a kiss gently to his lips. “Well, we’ll make sure you never forget it again.”

~

It is I, you women—I make my way,
I am stern, acrid, large, undissuadable—but I love you,
20. A Woman Waits for Me

~

Chapter End Notes

Okay. Feeling like maybe that's not quite the end? Feeling like you just had a big Chinese dinner, paid the bill, walked back to your flat and are suddenly feeling a little puckish and realize some cheese on toast would go down nice? Yeah, me too. So at some point I realized I was writing a trilogy and this is the middle bit. This makes this my personal Two Towers or Empire, so lots of plot and maybe not quite enough resolution or sex for some. But have no fear Whitman 5 is already in the works. It will swing back around to Charlie and Colby have a lot more angst and A LOT more really kinky sex. And all those OCs and little side stories will be paid off, I hope. For a B plot I'm hooking Ian up with Martin Sherwood just for even more angst and kinky sex. (And when I say a lot more kinky sex I mean I'm locking Charlie and Colby in a cabin for a week with a box of toys and not letting them out until they've used them all.)

So what was the point of all of the above? Basically the whole point of this was to get Don and Charlie's relationship in a particular place because in the next one Don is going to ask Charlie an important question and Charlie needs to say yes, but in order to say yes Charlie's going to have to finally face up to a lot of ghosts in his past and start looking at the future. And just so you know it's not a proper trilogy. The next story
will be similar to this one, covering about two years of time, after that the stories will be smaller looking at a particular event, like Don moving away from field work, the guys going to their high school reunion, Ian and Martin building a family, a Granger cousin coming to visit (and yes I made those sound benign on purpose). So keep your eyes peeled but give me time. I’m trying to go pro and need to focus on that for a bit. Thank you for all the feedback and I hope everyone enjoyed this rambling of my mind. And before I go I need to give a huge thanks to swingandswirl who was my cheerleader and beta through this and riverrotter1951 who is a god of the beta and twisted the last screw into place. Not to mention everyone who has given analysis and feedback along the way.

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