

# **Playing Charlie Cool**

by  
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## PLAYING CHARLIE COOL

### Prologue

As if a stranger lived within the silvered glass of the master bedroom's mirror, Adam Joshua Goldberg watched the reflection straighten his tie. His chest rose and fell rapidly as his lips moved, committing to memory the short speech for the cameras and microphones at Gracie Mansion. He'd already submitted his formal resignation from the mayor's staff, which had been accepted with the respect he'd grown accustomed to by virtue of owning a last name famous beyond New York politics. But what would happen after he told the media, not often known for their kindness, he had no idea.

"Joshie, you don't have to do this." Deidre's voice, and the nickname only she and his mother used, threatened to weaken him, but he could not afford to enter this arena unarmored. She reached toward the nightstand for a tissue, dabbing carefully beneath her eyes to preserve her makeup.

"Yeah." He stared himself down in the mirror, willing away his pallor, such a contrast to his dark hair, eyes, and suit. "I do."

"We could just"—she turned her palms up in surrender—"disappear. Until it blows over. People do that. Move upstate. Find a new school for the kids..."

"Deidre." He knelt beside her and rested his head against her pink-skirted knees. "If you want to disappear, I wouldn't blame you. I can handle it on my own."

"A promise is a promise," she said. "I agreed to stand beside you."

The laugh strangled in his throat. "Isn't that how we got into this in the first place?"

Her face softened.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm just...ready to jump out of my skin, here. After hiding for so long, I need this."

She patted his head. "Adam. Come up here. Sit with me."

Reluctantly he rose and perched next to her on the bed. Her bed, technically. For the last six months—since he'd told her about Charlie—Adam had been sleeping in the guest room. The move was not out of anger on her part; on the contrary, she'd offered it to him as a courtesy, out of respect.

He took her hand, squeezed it.

"It'll be okay, Deidre."

"It most certainly will not be okay. Do you have any idea what they're going to do to you? To your family?"

"Dad already knows."

Her eyes widened.

“That’s where I was last night. You were asleep when I got home.”

She patted his arm as if to convince herself he was still there. “Well. The senator didn’t kill you, so I guess that’s good.”

A corner of his mouth crooked up. “I can’t say that he was thrilled. He tore me a new one about keeping it secret for so long. What it would do to his grandchildren. And any future I might have in politics. And you, of course.”

She didn’t answer.

He turned to look out the brownstone’s window at the terrace garden. “I can keep the press away from you. Anything they want to ask, they can ask me.”

She didn’t answer.

“Like I said, you can keep the house. I won’t contest it. I’ll move into that apartment Dad’s firm keeps near Columbus Circle.”

“That’s such a horrid little place.”

He shrugged. “It’s just for now. I want you to be happy, Dee. You deserve so much more.”

She didn’t answer.

“I know I’m in no position to make demands, but I want to see the kids. I want to be part of their lives.”

Her lower lip began to tremble. Tears streamed down her face. He curled her into his arms, acutely aware of how fragile she felt in them, and cried with her. After a while she sniffed and said, “You’ll be late.”

“For my own hanging?” He smirked. “I think the press will stick around.”

While Deidre freshened her makeup, he sent a text to Charlie, a favorite quote from Ben Franklin: *They who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither.*

The reply came within moments. He glanced down, expecting a quip, but nearly teared up again when he read: *When strength and fear shake hands, it can move mountains. Go move mountains, my friend.*

The words pulsed in him, confirmed that he was doing the right thing. Trying to keep his hands from shaking, he wrote back: *When they speak of me, remember me well.*

The phone trilled with a reply—*Unforgettable, that’s what you are*—followed by a smiling emoticon.

Adam grinned. That was the Charlie he knew. The Charlie who’d been so patient with him, and for so long.

High heels clicked into the doorway. She was staring at the phone in his hands, the remnants of the smile on his face.

Her voice barely broke into sound. “I envy you.”

“Aw, Deidre, don’t.”

“No. It’s true. When this is over, you’ll have support. You’ll have a community. I’ll have...pity. People looking at me everywhere I go, wondering how in this day and age a

woman could be so clueless not to know that she's marrying a gay man. Or worse, that I did it on purpose. That we'd made some sort of...political arrangement. The perfect candidate's perfect wife."

He crossed to her and took her in his arms. "Screw what they think. You're none of those things, and I'll defend you with my dying breath."

She pushed away. "Stop. I don't want to fix my makeup again. Just...let's go."

## Chapter 1

Three months later

The usually short wrap meeting after the show had run well past the time Charlie's stomach-clock normally kicked him into getting lunch, but when their meals arrived, his appetite vanished.

"What's up with you?" Liza asked. "Too many donuts on the set?"

Charlie poked at a California roll and glanced out the window of the small Japanese restaurant that faced Eighth Avenue. He didn't know if it was a conspiracy or a coincidence, but the streets of Manhattan seemed inordinately packed with happy couples that afternoon. Clinging together as they moved briskly through the January chill, they seemed to underscore his angst. "I don't want to be that guy."

She looked up from her miso soup. "What guy?"

"You know. *That* guy. The guy in the movie. He's sitting in the coffee shop like a schmuck when the love of his life runs off to meet Mr. Wonderful at the top of the Empire State Building."

"Well, he'd have to be a schmuck to leave you behind in a coffee shop."

"Thank you."

Liza set down her spoon and nabbed a slice of avocado from his plate. "So where's this coming from?"

Charlie shrugged, pushing his plate toward his sister-in-law. "Just a feeling. Things have been a little...quiet lately on the romantic front. And odd."

"Define 'odd.'"

He sank back into his chair and absentmindedly drummed his fingers against the tablecloth. "If someone gave you the keys to a candy store after you'd been held prisoner for, say, almost twenty years and fed nothing but bread and water, what would you do?"

"Find some better food, for one."

"Right. Look who I'm asking, the queen of kale and brown rice."

"What, you think he's taking his, um, business elsewhere?"

"It's crossed my mind. Who stays with his first guy?"

"I think he'd be a schmuck if he didn't. And if he hurts you, I might have to kill him."

"You're sweet." Then he pulled out his phone. "See, this is what confuses me. Zero contact for three days, and right before I left for work..."

He scrolled to the message and pushed the cell across the table.

Her brows rose, brown eyes widening, and when she smiled, so did he. "Expect big news usual time?"

“It’s code,” Charlie said. “We do code. It’s kinda cute. Okay, maybe a little pathetic, but mostly cute.”

“Adorable.” She slid the phone back. “I wish my guy sent me fortune cookies.”

Charlie stared at the screen, reconfiguring the pixels into a more positive line of thought. “Last time we talked, he said the divorce was almost final. You think...?”

“That he wants to take your relationship up a notch?” Liza’s eyes glowed. Actually, her whole face glowed. It wasn’t just a Hollywood myth. “Will I finally get to meet him?”

“I don’t want to jinx it,” he said.

She made a face. “How does meeting me jinx it?”

“Oh, God, I don’t know. I’m sorry. It’s just that...” His insides had twisted up when he’d looked into Adam Joshua Goldberg’s eyes for the first time. Their gazes meeting over the man’s askew tie knot. Knowing, somehow, that something more profound than a flash of lust had passed between them. “He could be the lid to my pot. Like Mom said. And I don’t want to screw it up.”

As she pressed a hand over his, Liza’s phone warbled with her husband’s ringtone. “Speaking of pots, there’s my lid.”

Charlie gestured that she should take it.

“Hi, hon.” He heard his brother’s voice. “Uh-huh. Sure. I won’t be too late. Oh, and please don’t forget to clean the litter box. No, really. The doctor said I shouldn’t touch it.” She laughed. “No, he’s not just making that up to get you to do more stuff around the house.”

Whether a result of the pregnancy or the counseling, it warmed Charlie to hear his brother and Liza getting along a little better. He excused himself to the men’s room to give them some privacy. After he’d lingered long enough over washing his hands, he paused at the mirror, molding a few strands of dark blond hair back into his careful coif. Glancing around quickly to make sure no one was watching, he practiced a few surprised faces. *Stop it*, he thought. *It’s too soon*. Even if the divorce was final, he should lighten up on the guy, after what Joshua had been going through the last few months. *Expect big news usual time*. Maybe that was his big news: the papers have been signed, so one day they might actually be one of those couples outside, huddled together against the cold.

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Charlie ducked out of work early, stopped by his favorite old-fashioned barbershop for a shave, and then picked up dinner. That left him a half hour to tidy up his digs and change into something nicer. His stomach fluttered with first-date nerves as he surveyed his wardrobe. Although they were months beyond the sweaty palms stage, he didn’t remember feeling this twitchy about a man coming to his place since the first time he’d invited Joshua over. He’d been just Adam to him at that point, a friend, teetering on the

edge of coming out, to himself and to the high school sweetheart he'd married. *So adorable, so wounded.* He became Joshua to Charlie because it felt too disturbing to make out with a guy who shared a first name with his brother. Otherwise, there wasn't enough therapy or scotch in the world to solve that problem.

Feeling the need for a little ease in his style, he chose a shirt with a soft nap and a comfortable-but-classy pair of jeans. He then put on some Cole Porter and danced across the kitchen while he prepped his gourmet takeout. He was so absorbed in singing "You Do Something To Me" that the lobby buzzer caught him by surprise. He was more taken aback, however, by how quickly Joshua reached Charlie's apartment.

Readying a smile worthy of anyone who would sprint up three flights to see him, Charlie opened the door to discover that the handsome, broad-shouldered man, decked out in a classy sweater and jeans, was barely breathing harder than normal. "Hey," Joshua said, grinning back.

"Hey yourself." After a moment, Charlie's gaze drifted from Joshua's arresting brown eyes to the bottle of wine in the crook of his elbow.

He shrugged. "I didn't know what you were making, or what Zabar's was making, so..."

"And here I was, hoping to impress you with my mad reheating skills."

Charlie reached for the bottle and their hands brushed and he almost dropped the chardonnay on the tile. *Get it together.* He tightened his grip around the wine and settled it on the side table. *It's not like we just met. Okay, it's been a while since we've gotten together, too long, far too long, but...*

The former public servant moved closer. "I'm already impressed." His eyes seemed even deeper as his lips parted, and his warm palms closed around Charlie's lower back a breath before Charlie slid his own hands around Joshua's waist. The two men drew together until their bodies touched. They were the same height, a hair under six feet, which was handy in many ways and especially good for kissing. Charlie closed his eyes and met Joshua's soft, sweet mouth, and his entire body wanted to sigh at how perfect it felt, how good he tasted, how he never wanted to stop. *It's been too long, way too long.* But then Joshua eased away. Charlie glanced at him and a spark of alarm flickered in his gut.

*He looks nervous. A good kind of nervous?*

Joshua swallowed. His left hand traveled up Charlie's back and down one arm. "Damn, I've missed this," he said. "I've missed you. It's been so weird out there, hiding out, dodging reporters, meeting with divorce lawyers. Everywhere I go, people staring. And I come here and you make me feel..."

Charlie reached up to smooth a favorite disobedient curl from Joshua's forehead. "Sexy? Sinful? Scintillating? Let me know when I'm getting warm. I know a lot of words."



“Normal.” Joshua let out a long breath; the release of tension made him look so young and vulnerable. “You make me feel normal. Like I can be myself. And it’s...” He grinned. “Amazing.”

He embraced Charlie again, wrapping him in heat mixed with that citrusy-wood fragrance he adored.

The playlist shifted into Michael Feinstein’s version of “Unforgettable,” which, in sappier moments that Charlie would never admit to a soul—not even Liza—he’d begun to think of as “their song.” He closed his eyes, taking in Josh’s scent and warmth, the slow comfort of strong hands caressing his lower back. “How long can you stay?” Charlie said in his ear.

“An hour, probably less. I might need to pick Matthew up from karate. Deidre said she’d call.” Charlie’s back felt cold when the hands left him. “So why don’t we talk now?”

Charlie tried to parse Joshua’s expression. Unsuccessful, he hitched an eyebrow. “Should I be worried?”

“I hope not.”

No, that wasn’t good. And Joshua’s face had a bit of frightened animal about it, a look that had meant bad things in the past. “I think we need to open that wine.”

While Joshua poured two glasses, Charlie began plating their dinners, but kept sneaking glances at Josh for clues. Nothing. Finally he set down the dish in his hands.

“Just tell me. When you texted me that you had big news—”

Charlie turned to face him dead on. The desire in Josh’s eyes left Charlie fumbling for words. He was about to kiss him again when a thought sparked through his mind and he pulled back. “I sense you’re trying to distract me.”

“Guilty.” Joshua reached for him again. “It’s fun. And you’re sexy. And...those other things you said.”

Charlie stilled Joshua’s hands. Much as he enjoyed where this little dance seemed to be heading, if the “big news” was something potentially bad, he’d rather hear it with his clothes on. It gave him more options. “Come on.” He tugged at Joshua’s arm. “Sit. Talk to me.”

Joshua settled into a chair with a huff of frustration. Charlie slid a glass of wine toward him. Troubled by the return of the pensive expression, Charlie said, “Or do you want something stronger?”

Joshua dropped his gaze to his plate—lemon chicken with dilled potatoes—and then looked up at Charlie with a quick grin and a low chuckle. “This was so much easier in my head, without you looking at me. Okay.” He paused a moment and resumed speaking with a measured calm he might have learned in law school debates. “When I left my job at the mayor’s office, I never imagined I’d be in this position. I mean, someday, sure, after everything had settled down and the right opportunity came along, where I

could do some good. I never thought it would happen so soon. I thought he'd stay in for one more term at least, maybe two."

Recognition dawning, Charlie sat beside him. "So you're saying—"

"I just heard that our representative is retiring, and I'm considering a run for the seat."

Charlie tried not to look disappointed, but apparently he hadn't told his face fast enough. *Seriously, to do that now, with everything else he has going on in his life? To take on something so all encompassing, so...public?*

Joshua leveled a glance at him. "And you think it's a horrible idea."

A punch of hurt and abandonment surprised Charlie and, rubbing at one temple, he scrambled unsuccessfully to crystallize his thoughts. "Wait," he said, not as much to Joshua as to himself. "So the big coming-out press conference, the time to reflect, the time we couldn't be together...was all so you could jump right back into it again?"

"I get it," came the soft reply. "You have a right to be angry. I've put you off for so long, I could have been a better friend when your mother was sick. But—"

Charlie shook his head. "You did what you could. I appreciated it." He had taken this bargain freely, that following the announcement he wouldn't be seeing much of Joshua for a while. Occasionally the distance had burned. At times, while his mother was dying from cancer, he'd longed for Joshua as if he were an addiction, ached to feel the warmth of another human being, the reassurance of a heart beating next to his. But Joshua had been fighting his own battle. Was still fighting it. Maybe this was something he needed to do. To keep running, to keep fighting.

"I haven't even decided yet," Joshua said. "I just learned about it yesterday. There are a lot of variables to consider. Exploratory committees. Fundraising." His voice dropped. "Whether you'd support me."

Charlie glanced up. "From inside or out?"

Joshua recoiled as if he'd been slapped. Maybe the words had come out a little harsher than Charlie had intended.

"Out?"

"You don't sound very sure of yourself, Congressman. Your potential constituents deserve more confidence."

He set a tentative hand over Charlie's on the table. "You've been so understanding, and I hate to ask you for anything else. But it's a big step, and it could be a great opportunity to help even more at-risk kids than I ever could with the mayor's office, and I need more time before..."

Charlie helped himself to a gulp of wine and set down the glass. "I'm listening."

"And if, after all the preliminaries, I decide to run, I do want you with me."

He swore his heart had skipped a beat. "You mean like in public? In broad daylight?"

Joshua nodded yet drew his hand back and the smile that followed looked forced. “You and me.”

*Holy crap.* Yes, it had happened. Charlie had seen the man’s lips move and heard the words come out. But did he mean it? Did he really think...? “Josh, are you ready for this? You, Deidre, the kids?”

“I haven’t told them yet. I wanted to talk with you about it first. Before I started giving it more serious thought. I have until the middle of April to file.”

Charlie dropped his head into his hand. From watching Senator Sam run for all those terms, Joshua had to know what he was getting himself into. But this could be worse, owing to the younger Goldberg’s new near-celebrity status. National media coverage. Reporters dogging the famous son’s every move. So would that mean more hiding and sneaking around until he made his decision? What kind of life, what kind of relationship was that? Should Charlie end it? But it was Josh’s dream to go into politics—not to follow in his father’s wake but to do it better. To be the kind of public servant Sam Goldberg, with his cigars and backroom deals and hints of corruption, wasn’t. And then Charlie made the mistake of glancing up, into Adam Joshua Goldberg’s eyes. Shiny with hope, yet the furrow between his brows revealed something else. That he was petrified about the next words Charlie might say. He had looked like that right before their first kiss. That face. It might end up being the death of him, but in that moment, Charlie would have promised that face anything. The words were out before he knew it. “Take all the time you need. You know how to find me.”

Silence spread between them. Joshua’s brow relaxed, and he smiled shyly before dropping his gaze to the table. “You know, after all the trouble you and Zabar’s went to, it would be a shame to waste this dinner.”

“I can live with that.” Charlie scooted closer.

No sooner had they reached for each other, the loving hand on the nape of Charlie’s neck, a steamy kiss turning up a few degrees, than Joshua’s pocket vibrated.

Charlie let out a dejected sigh as the former center from Fordham and almost-congressional-candidate took the call.

## Chapter 2

Determining from one of their first couples counseling sessions that, on top of their grief, Liza Stanhope and Adam Trager were suffering from caregiver burnout and the side effects of too much work and too little play, their therapist gave them an assignment: spend more time together.

“Are you kidding me?” Adam said as they got back into his Volvo. “We just paid a hundred bucks for advice I could have found in ten seconds on the Internet?”

To mollify him a little, and because she had a wicked craving for a grilled cheese sandwich with bacon, she suggested they stop for lunch at Johnny D’s Diner in Newburgh on the way home. As they waited for their meals, he looked so damned serious, with that tight jaw and the vein bulging in his temple, that she shot her straw wrapper at him, catching him square between his sea-green eyes.

It was a tiny thing, an impulse, and definitely something she’d done a time or two with Charlie when they were in college, but it was the shot heard ’round the world as far as the beginning of the salvation of Adam and Liza’s marriage was concerned. Adam looked so adorable in his dumbfounded shock that she burst out laughing. Then so did he. Of course, one moment of levity wouldn’t solve everything, but it opened a window.

The weekly lunch dates after therapy became their ritual. They were talking again. Having a bit of fun again. The fourth week into therapy, Adam and Liza canceled their appointment and just had lunch.

“So, listen,” Adam said, after the waitress scribbled down their orders, “I got a call from Nick this morning.”

Liza’s upper lip curled at the mention of Charlie’s old boyfriend. “He’s not coming back to New York, is he?”

Adam’s eyes narrowed. “Not that I know of. Has he been calling Charlie?”

“Once or twice. Said he might visit next time he’s in town.” The vein on Adam’s forehead pulsed, and while Liza didn’t like seeing her husband angry, the sign of brotherly protectiveness made her heart beat a little faster. “Charlie says he’s over it and they’re just friends, but...” There was something about Nick Barpoulis that Liza didn’t trust. He was a little too friendly, for one. And when he’d put money in the bag for dollar dances at their wedding, he made sure everyone saw the wad of bills in his wallet. Especially when Charlie was around.

“Yeah. But he might have some work for me in Seattle.” Adam rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s a short-term thing, a few months, mopping up after a merger. I don’t have all the details yet. It could be a good opportunity, a good chunk of change to put away for the baby. I could work remote most of the time.”

“Most of the time?”

He shrugged. “His client wants the team in-house a few days out of the month. Mainly because a lot of his archive is paper, and he doesn’t want it to leave the building. I wanted to see how you felt about it. I don’t like leaving you alone, especially now.”

She took a deep breath, knowing that his concern was for the baby, for his own fears about fatherhood, and not because he thought her incapable of taking care of herself.

“I’ll be fine.” She pressed a hand over his. “Cara’s just a shout away, and what better neighbor to have right now than a nurse? And there’s Charlie...he says I’m always welcome.”

“Right, of course.” Adam’s attention drifted away. Liza didn’t want to follow. That was a can of sibling rivalry she only wanted to open with Adam in the presence of a trained professional. Or an exorcist. When her husband’s focus returned, he said, “Maybe while I’m out there, I’ll take Nick out for a few and ask him what the fuck’s going on with that.”

Liza stared for a moment. That would be a huge step for Adam. Having a gay brother was merely a piece of data in Adam’s universe—in fact, Adam had been the first family member Charlie had come out to, and from accounts by both Trager brothers, Adam had been supportive—but talk of Charlie’s relationships sent Adam scurrying back to the land of macho backslapping, football, and beer.

“Thank you. I’d like to know that, myself. He’s sort of seeing someone now, on and off. It could be really good, but it’s a little dicey, and I’d hate to see anything derail it again.”

“So you think I should take the job?”

*And he scurries back.* Liza sighed, reminding herself to be more patient with her husband, who was trying so hard. “Sure.”

### Chapter 3

That Friday night, after a trying week of divas, deadlines, and drama, Charlie settled in front of a Knicks game and picked at leftovers. His favorite player had just sunk a sweet three-pointer when his phone rang. Doubting he'd hear from Joshua, and not really wanting to talk to anyone else, Charlie ignored it.

Then the texts started, one after another. "What?" he asked the tyrannical beast on the coffee table, fully aware of the irony that for better or worse, the most intimate relationship in his life these days was with an inanimate object. The game had gone to commercial, so he picked it up.

*Crap. Xander.* He scrolled through the messages, each a more amusingly irritated version on the same theme: *Where the hell are you?*

He vaguely remembered something about a party at Freddie and Xan's loft and vaguely remembered agreeing to attend. It seemed like years ago that his friends had issued the invitation, even though it was probably last weekend. Only when he reached the final text in the string—*Get your fine ass over here, Chuckie*—did he respond.

*Don't call me that or I'll tell Freddie about that night in South Beach. And sorry, but fine ass is dragging.*

The reply pinged in quickly. *He already knows about SB. And he made that thing you like with the bacon.*

*Tempting me with non-kosher meats, bad boy.*

*I'm desperate. His awful client is here and she wants to be my BFF.*

*Good god.*

*Seriously, I will pay you to keep her entertained.*

Interesting. Charlie typed back: *Make me an offer.*

*Celtics. Courtside.*

*Be right there. Red or white?*

*Yes.*

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Charlie did a quick hair check in the hallway mirror and grabbed his jacket. Maybe the cold air would revive his spirits enough to run off-the-clock diva control. On his way down the stairs, he smirked, amused by Xander's transparent ploy. Six-foot-forever and hardly shy, the man could have easily handled anyone's unwanted attention. He was probably angling to get Charlie out of the house and short-circuit what his friend insisted was a tendency to brood over his impossibly high standards in the relationship department. Okay, so he hadn't exactly told Freddie and Xan about Joshua. They knew there was a someone. They knew it had been bumpy and even on hold at times.

But only Liza knew the whole truth. Liza had been the only person he'd called when the infamous press conference had aired.

Concerned for Joshua's privacy, though, he still wasn't ready for the onslaught of questions from his friends. The conflict fairly burned in his head. What did that say about Charlie, that he wanted to be able to hold his partner's hand in public, wanted to kiss him in the middle of Times Square, Grand Central Station, and center court at Madison Square Garden, yet he wanted to shield Joshua from the scornful eyes and wagging tongues of the world? How the hell would Charlie handle watching the man he loved and ached to protect get knocked around during a political campaign?

*Red, white, and Zin*, he decided.

When he finally made it to Xan and Freddie's place, about ten blocks downtown from Charlie's neighborhood, he was wired from the frosty night and the exercise and ready to turn on the charm. The strain on Xander's shaggy face lifting, he kissed Charlie on both cheeks—a habit he'd picked up from his husband—and pulled him by the elbow into the living room.

"Damned glad you're here," he said under his breath.

Freddie, hands occupied by canapé trays, gave Charlie a warm smile and a quick nod, gesturing where to put the wine. Then, in an accent forged from a Brazilian father, a Cajun mother, and a decade of New York impatience, he called out to the twenty-or-so people in the main room, "Everyone, everyone, this is Charlie. You must meet him if you have not already, he is fabulous."

Various voices chimed back, "Hi, Charlie!"

"Is this an intervention?" he said, eliciting some laughter. "God, I hope not."

A drink met his hand and the conversations he'd interrupted resumed. Immediately he spied the problem. A well-groomed, scary-thin woman with expensive highlights and too much Botox seemed glued to Xander's side, giggling at his lame attempts at humor. Charlie eased himself into the pairing. Her name was Lucinda, she was going through a divorce, and she wanted someone to make over her life. Unfortunately, all Xander was professionally qualified to make over was the ergonomic set up of her offices' workstations, but that didn't seem to stop her.

"I don't want to keep making the same mistakes," she said. "Get trapped in some new relationship only to find it's too much work."

On his way to greet a newcomer, Freddie sidled up to Xan, put an arm around his waist and said, "But Lucinda, you do the work together to make the relationship." Then, with a smile for his husband, he was off again, taking coats and pointing guests toward the bar.

Meanwhile, Charlie refilled their glasses and did what he did at work every day: he made people feel comfortable. Over the years he'd learned that in general, the more "difficult" the person, the greater the need for an audience. So Lucinda talked, and Charlie listened, for most of the evening.

As people began taking up their coats and hugging the hosts goodnight, Charlie stayed, tossing cups and plates, folding the rented chairs. Finally, it was just the three of them. Freddie collapsed into one of the paired, steel-gray leather sofas in the living room.

“I do love having people over, but it’s so nice when they leave.” He patted the cushion next to him. “Charlie, *meu amigo*, sit. We’ve barely had a chance to say two words all evening.”

As if on cue, Xander fetched a bottle, grabbed three glasses and then, on his way back to the living room area, pushed a button on the sound system. The smooth jazz and mellow salsa that had been playing most of the night became Rat Pack classics.

“Bless your soul,” Charlie said.

Xan handed Charlie a glass of cognac. “Seriously, thank you for babysitting.”

“She wasn’t so bad.”

“Dreadful woman,” Freddie said. “I wish I could drop her, but she manages a ridiculous amount of office space and has a constant need for architectural photography.”

Charlie shrugged a shoulder. “She just seemed lonely and unhappy.”

Silence crept across the room and Freddie shot Xander a look fraught with meaning.

“What?” Charlie’s gaze darted between his friends—Freddie’s small, pointed features and steady photographer’s eyes and Xander’s broad, open face with the mustache that, since their wedding, he’d trimmed back and coupled with a trendy sculpted beard, which had been Freddie’s idea. Finally, Charlie settled his attention on the big man, who was getting comfortable in the matching recliner.

His mustache twitched. “This *is* sort of an intervention.”

“I don’t”—Charlie looked down at his glass—“drink *all* that much.”

Xander waved a hand and smirked. “Nah. It’s not about that. We’re worried about you.”

“This Mr. Right.” Freddie leaned forward and rested his hands, still flushed from washing dishes, on his knees. “It has been months and months, and you are still ashamed to introduce us? He must be Mr. Wrong-But-It-Feels-So-Right.”

“Kinda agree with him there, Charlie.” Xan lifted a brow. “You’ve been through enough hurt lately, with your mom. I just hate to see you get burned by some guy stringing you along, too.”

Charlie huffed out a sigh. “I *want* to talk to you guys about this. Believe me. I do. I want to hire a goddamned skywriter and tell the world.” He smiled at the thought of it. And vaguely wondered how much that would cost. “But it’s...complicated.”

The newlyweds traded another of those married looks, and as if they’d agreed to it in advance, Xander started. “They’re all complicated.”

“The intern at the network?” Freddie said.

“I’d just graduated from college myself!” Charlie said. “I was only a year older.”

“Your brother’s roommate?” Xan offered.



Dimples and light brown, gold-flecked eyes flashed through his imagination. “Okay, Nick is seriously adorable. There could have been potential, if he hadn’t moved to Seattle.”

Freddie speared his little fantasy balloon with a pointed look. “Your brother’s wife?”

Charlie made a slashing motion with his hand. “She hadn’t even met him yet, and line drawn.”

“Charlie—” Xan said.

“Look, guys? It warms my little heart that you love me enough to worry. Really. But it’s not my secret to tell. There are...innocent parties involved.”

“Oh, God.” Freddie lifted his fingers to his mouth. “That’s it. He’s married. To a woman!”

Charlie started. How the hell did Freddie latch on to that so fast? Was he giving off radar signals or something? He let his shoulders slump. “Was married,” he said softly. “They’re getting divorced.” Maybe that was why he’d felt such empathy for Freddie’s client. *Poor Lucinda. Poor Deidre. Poor Liza, for that matter.* It hurt all the more to imagine what Liza must have gone through when she fell in love with him in college. His own heart had crumbled to pieces, knowing that he couldn’t be the man for her.

“This mysterious gentleman”—Freddie worked his accent as he emphasized the words—“is it serious?”

“If I could get him to stand still long enough, yes, fairly certain of that.”

“Well.” Xander leaned toward his cognac and enjoyed a sip. “Then you don’t want to be his rebound guy.”

*Holy crap.* A new knot of anxiety tightened in Charlie’s chest. “I don’t want to be his rebound guy! Wait...how can I be his rebound guy when he’s never, um, bounded?”

Freddie unwrapped a slow smile, a knowing look in his gray eyes as he said a lascivious-sounding word in Portuguese.

“Virgin,” Xander said. Then his eyes widened at Charlie. “Really? You’re his first guy?”

Charlie shrugged and swirled his glass. “Kinda sorta.” Trying not to betray any confidences, he gave his friends a version of Adam Joshua Goldberg’s actual history: a twelve-year-old Joshua tried to voice his confusion to his rabbi during bar mitzvah lessons only to get emotionally bitch-slapped for it and essentially told that God considered him evil. So he’d forced himself into denial and into the role of husband and father.

“Kids?” Xander sat up straighter. “He has kids? Charlie. This guy...*complicated* isn’t a strong enough word for it. He might be kind of fucked up while he’s dealing with the fallout. Are you ready for that?”

“I don’t know.” Charlie put down his glass and rubbed the back of his neck. “I just know that I’ve never felt what I’ve been feeling with him. And doesn’t it goddamned

figure that now—” In his mind he saw the passion on Joshua’s face as he told Charlie about wanting to run for office. “You know, maybe it is good.”

Freddie and Xan looked confused.

Charlie waved a hand. “He’s going to be busy. With work and kids and stuff for a while. Maybe that’s a good thing right now. Maybe he needs breathing room.”

Freddie patted Charlie’s knee. “You can always come here.”

“Yeah,” Xander added. “Our overpriced loft is your overpriced loft. You know that.”

“And if you want some companionship, I have a friend you can call.” Freddie cocked an eyebrow. “Or if you’re looking for a little rebounder of your own.”

“*Meu amor*, we can’t do that,” Xander said to his husband. “You know our Charlie, the old-fashioned guy that he is, saving himself for marriage.”

“Funny. You guys are hysterical.”

It was late. He grabbed his jacket and hugged them goodbye. During his walk home, he thought about what they’d said. Xander had been right about “old-fashioned Charlie.” Even though he was only thirty-three, he was done with hookups, with guys like Freddie’s friend. Charming a random guy in a club used to excite him. Seeing how many phone numbers he could get had been a kind of validation. Now the idea felt lonely and pathetic. He wanted what Freddie and Xander had. He wanted his Joshua, and he didn’t know how much longer he could wait.

Or how much longer he *should* wait.

## Chapter 4

Much as it nearly killed him some mornings, Charlie tried to get into the studio no later than seven thirty. Even at that hour, he still needed to negotiate the line of potential audience members waiting outside, but the extra time gave him an island of calm before the day went crazy. Although for the last few weeks, his sweet oasis had been overrun with power tools and scruffy union guys. Not the worst combination, in a different context, and he was no stranger to chaos, except the noise was starting to set his teeth on edge. Charlie tried to convince himself that finally getting their promised renovations was a good thing. They'd lost some real estate to Studio Three, where one of the network's higher-rated shows was produced; however, sinking money into improving the divas' dressing rooms and generally making their workspace a little nicer displayed the executives' confidence in them. Better yet, after four years with the show, Charlie finally had his own office. The drywall needed painting and the space barely fit a desk, a small conference table, and a loveseat, but once the door showed up, his name would be on it.

As he attempted to make peace with the intersection of too much scotch the previous evening and his current lack of door, a tumble of copper dreadlocks swung into the opening, followed by mischievous chocolate-brown eyes set into a face that looked about to say something.

"Melanie, how can I help you?" He always tried to stay a step ahead of Diva One. Not only did he consider it part of his job, it also amused him.

"Mr. Producer Man, I could kiss you."

Ah. She must have seen the schedule update. "Thanks, but not my doing." Charlie held up his hands. "Mitchell had a last-minute cancellation. And coincidentally, so did we."

Her grin broadened. "Macon Mitchell on our couch in the flesh talkin' up that piece of trash he calls a book. Goddamn, I got some things to say to him."

Some women kept lists of celebrities they wanted to bed. Melanie Washington kept a list of celebrities she wanted to have political arguments with. Macon Mitchell, a conservative radio talk-show host, was numero uno, at least among the living.

"Aw, relax," she told his apparently worried expression. "I'll be my usual delightful self."

"Yes, that's what keeps me up at night." He stifled a yawn. "Walk with me, hon. Need coffee, stat."

Melanie shook her head and then followed him down the hall. "You're an addict, Charlie Trager. It's all that caffeine keeps you up at night."

"It's also what keeps me from killing certain people in the morning." He smiled at a couple of the interns as he and Melanie threaded around them.

"Hey," she said. "Did you see that memo Trevor sent?"

“Can you narrow it down some?” Trevor, the faux-goth assistant to Charlie’s direct supervisor, flooded their inboxes with all manner of insignificance in the guise of “keeping everyone informed.” Charlie thought it was more in the guise of being too lazy to parse the incoming to see what was actually informational.

“Viewer poll results.”

“Yeah, I gave that a glance. Interesting idea from that woman in Des Moines about wanting us to do a regular feature on new moms.” It had particularly grabbed his eye because of Liza’s condition. *Must be like when you’re shopping for a big-ticket item; you see them everywhere.*

“I gotta warn you about something,” Melanie said. “The Pregnant One has it stuck in her little bitty head that it should be her baby, so to speak. She bent my ear yesterday trying to sell it.”

“Good God.” The Pregnant One, alias Diva Three, alias Australian former game show hostess Steffi Jenks, was five months along and to hear her tell it—which she did, as often as she possibly could—she’d barely gained an ounce.

“Tell me you aren’t thinking of putting her on.”

“Hell to the N-O,” Charlie said. “Our email servers would explode. As it is, I get at least twenty messages a week from viewers who worry about her looking so unhealthy, without making her into some kind of role model of maternal anorexia.”

He perked up from the mere sight of some high-test left at the craft table. Charlie doctored a jumbo cup, and when he spied Mel glancing around for eavesdroppers, he said, “She’s not here. Her assistant texted me something about a Thai massage birthing class.”

“You’re shittin’ me,” Melanie said. “The girl could sneeze and birth that thing.”

“Funny. Can I just say how happy I am that you renewed your contract? You’re one of the few things I like about this job lately.”

“Love you too, baby.” Grabbing a bottle of water, she waved behind her as she sashayed down the hall toward her dressing room.

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Charlie figured that in television, as in basketball, the best defense was a good offense. So before returning to his office, he asked one of the interns to text him when The Pregnant One made landfall. The window of discussion opportunity was rapidly closing, though. After a certain time in the morning, the flurry of show prep, wardrobe, hair, and makeup would consume them. It was best to avoid potentially upsetting topics until they were off the air. He checked his phone again. No messages. No missed calls. And nothing from the young Mr. Goldberg. *Right*, Charlie remembered. On the potential candidate’s agenda that day were meetings, meetings, more meetings, a break, and then the dreaded nine-thirty p.m. redeye to London, after which he’d be gone for three weeks

on some political tour arranged by his father. Charlie dropped a quick coded text to let Joshua know he was thinking about him. With sprinkles and a cherry on top.

“That’s a dirty little smile if I ever saw one,” an Aussie accent purred. “Who’s the lucky bloke?”

He rearranged his expression. “A gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell, Steff, you know that.” His gaze dropped from her knowing smirk to the small Junior’s Cheesecake box in her hands. “But my horoscope said I should beware of gifts from Down Under.”

“Just a little peace offering.” She set it on his desk as she slithered her size-zero bum and microscopic baby bump into the chair. “White chocolate raspberry, that’s your favorite, right?”

His mouth began to water. He had to start eating breakfast.

“I feel horrible about what a bitch I’ve been lately. It’s”—she gestured to the tiny swell of her abdomen—“all these hormones. You boys are so lucky. No Heckle and Jeckle partners to deal with.”

“That would be Jekyll and Hyde,” he said, “and I wish. Mood swings are a sadly universal human condition, I’m afraid.”

She bit her lip and flashed what she probably thought was a meaningful smile. “Anyway, just wanted to do something nice for my favorite producer.”

He glanced at the clock on his computer monitor. *Nope. Too close to showtime to get her upset.* Melanie owned the title of queen bee on stage, but Steffi Jenks was the loose cannon.

If everything wasn’t aligned properly before they went live, if she didn’t have the right spring water or low-carb snacks, her mood infected the other divas, and it brought down everyone’s game. Since the baby, it had only gotten worse. *Weird*, he thought. Liza had her share of symptoms and she seemed to take them all in stride, but Steff acted as if she’d invented pregnancy.

She pressed a hand over her belly—“the little miracle,” as she called it—leaned forward and smiled at him. “So I heard a rumor we’re doing a mum segment?”

He checked his watch conspicuously. “Let’s talk later? You should be in makeup.”

“Oh, pish, I can do that myself. Please, please, let’s talk now. I have oodles of ideas.”

Trying to buy time, he took a long look at her face and asked, “Is that...?” Her hand went to her cheek. “Sorry, Steff, but I think you’d better let Angela take care of you today. Your little miracle is doing not so miraculous things to your skin.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Spots?”

“At least six more since you sat down.”

“Oh, no!”

He cocked his head. “I think there’s another one.”

And she fled.

What he would give for that door! Except if he had one, he might have been tearing into the cheesecake with his fingers.

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After they'd gone to commercial following Melanie and Yvonne's intro segment, Charlie's cell vibrated with an incoming text. He read Joshua's clearly uncoded reply—*you're making me hungry, free between 4 and 6, dinner?*—and grinned as he replied with a simple affirmative and stuck the phone back in his pocket.

Angela, the makeup artist, caught his eye from the set floor and smiled back. Deflecting her attention, Charlie pointed toward the hunky celebrity chef who'd dropped in to plug his new documentary about improving school lunches. Under the hot lights, the man's receding hairline glowed like the Chrysler Building. She was off with her puffs and potions to matte him down.

The production assistant counted down to live and they were back. Hunky Chef's bit went perfectly; the clip dropped in exactly as synced and his personal anecdotes sounded well honed yet spontaneous. Yvonne and Tonya (the newest diva) flirted with him while talking about their own school-lunch horror stories, and he and the studio audience ate it up.

The next guest, a stone-cold pro in the fashion industry whose reality show would be debuting on the network that night, similarly hit her marks and got on well with the divas while they admired some work by her talented cast members.

*This is almost going too well.* Charlie immediately told himself to stop thinking like that. Talk about tempting fate. He wished someone would screw up in a minor way, to blank that negative screen in his head. He tapped on the front window of his booth to catch the attention of one of the PAs standing below him on the set floor and asked for an update. Mitchell, their last guest, was already in the green room, and Melanie was lurking off set—presumably, Charlie imagined, sharpening her claws.

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Normally the interns or PAs fetched the guests from the green room. But with the special ones, whose egos or inexperience demanded personal attention, Charlie took the task upon himself. When Joshua had appeared on the show, which was the first time the two had met, Charlie had decided to go settle him down a little, because clearly the senator's son needed a little handholding.

Mitchell was a different story. His giant ego not only required massaging, but a manicure as well.