

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.

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.

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?