

Forbidden Broadway



Jonathan Penn

FORBIDDEN BROADWAY

Charlie Perkins grew up in the middle of nowhere. His mom, the local Drama teacher, instilled in him a lifelong love of musical theater. He sings and dances, but he gave up his childhood dream of performing professionally and got his nursing degree before moving to New York City to work in home health care.

Nate Sonntag is a serious businessman. He gives his all to the success of the import/export company he inherited from his father. Working all those extra hours is also a convenient way to avoid dealing with the emotional fallout of the traumatic events that placed everything in his hands.

When Nate contracts Charlie's agency to care for his elderly grandfather, he ends up getting far more than he expected. Charlie doesn't know what to expect, but he's perplexed when Nate tells him that under no circumstance is he to mention anything about the theater in his grandfather's presence. The subject of Broadway is strictly forbidden!

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

FORBIDDEN BROADWAY

By Jonathan Penn

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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FORBIDDEN BROADWAY

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Photo Description

Sunlit trees and foliage, seen through a large window, provide a bright backdrop for two men in a passionate embrace, kissing. They stand in shadows; much is left to the imagination. They appear to be youthful, physically fit, and very much in love.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Charlie lives for musicals. He has a good voice, better than most others, he can dance, and he knows almost any musical ever written by heart. Growing up in Hicksville, Nowhere, becoming a performing artist was never an option. So instead, after finishing nursing school, he moved to NYC where he is now a nurse, mostly working with providing private duty care, and attends evening classes at Ms. Barbers School for Song and Dance in Brooklyn twice a week.

Charlie is hired to take care of an elderly man living in a large Upper East Side apartment. The man's grandson—a tall, handsome, serious-minded businessman, much younger than he appears at first, and Charlie's absolute opposite—lectures Charlie that under no circumstances may he talk about the theatre business with his grandfather, as it is a sensitive subject and if he gets upset, it might worsen his condition rapidly. But the adorable Charlie, the man whose heart is full of song and dance, just can't shut up about his biggest interest. And—he is curious. The consequences, though, are not at all what the grandson expected, and his heart might just start singing and dancing too, after meeting Charlie.

I want to see Charlie turn the grandson into melting goo. Maybe there is some angst along the way, but Charlie's sweet nature puts an end to that. It's definitely an HEA-story.

Sincerely,

Amelia Mann

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: family drama, nurse, businessman, celebrities, illness/disease, grief, hurt/comfort, age gap, flamboyant characters, humorous

Content Warnings: excessive speeds on a motorcycle

Word Count: 35,722

Dedication

Forbidden Broadway is dedicated to the memory of Alice Mooney, who set aside her dream of performing professionally to raise children and to nurture the talent of young aspiring performers, assisting them in realizing dreams of their own. The benefits of the love and kindness she invested in her family, her students, and so many others will be paid forward without end.

Acknowledgements

A raucous standing ovation for the dogged determination and tireless efforts of the moderators, editors, proofreaders, formatters, and quality assurance volunteers on the team for the 2015 Don't Read in the Closet event. Love is love, and your dedication to spreading it is heartwarming.

Then there's my beautiful Chorus Line: Ofelia Gränd, Kaje Harper, Kris Ripper, and Alexis Woods. As always, your high-kicks are visually stupendous. They're also highly effective when aimed at my butt.

This year's Special Tony Award for Outstanding Performance by a Newcomer goes to Kat Tucker, RN, for her role in verifying Charlie's nursing credentials.

I would be remiss were I not to gesture toward the orchestra pit, calling your attention to my indefatigable maestro. Debbie McGowan, you never cease to amaze me! Polishing all the rough edges off my work may be your job, but all the ways you enrich my life? Well, that's just icing on the cake.

And before the curtain falls, a solo bow for Amelia Mann. When I first saw the prompt you'd concocted, I couldn't believe my eyes. I had to read it three times before it sank in that this is the story I was born to write. Thank you for the opportunity!

FORBIDDEN BROADWAY

By Jonathan Penn

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts...*

—William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene VII

ACT I

Act I, Scene 1

“Five, six, seven, eight. Shuffle-step, change. Sway. Shuffle-step, change. Sway. Turn, turn, turn—Stop!”

Charlie froze in place and winced—more from the cacophony of Seth’s hands collapsing onto the keyboard of the old upright than the thwack of Barbara’s cane striking the floor or her shrill command. He and his fellow dancers turned to face front, grim expressions all around, while their teacher strode across the studio to confront them.

“Strode” might have been overstating things. It always astonished him how a woman built like a yardstick, and with a serious limp, could move with a speed and authority that put powerful locomotives to shame. She marched straight up to Charlie, stepping right into his personal space, and looked him in the eye. Her mouth was drawn in a thin line, but he couldn’t miss the slight twinkle in her eye as she slowly shook her head. He knew he’d spun in the correct direction, but in his peripheral vision he’d seen at least one of his classmates going the other way.

She turned and began pacing down the row of dancers, stopping every few steps to give each person an assessing stare. At the end of the line, she turned and came back in his direction, passing him and inspecting the troops to his other side. Once she’d bestowed her gimlet eye on all eight of them, she moved back to the center, looking at no one in particular and asking, “Melinda? Does this turn sequence begin to the left, or to the right?” Mel cleared her throat and, in a meek voice, allowed as how it began to the left. “Charlie? Is there any pattern to the turn sequences in this number?”

“Yes, ma’am!” No one had trouble hearing Charlie; he projected to the balcony. “Every turn sequence in this number begins to the left.”

“Thank you, both.” After one more slow sweep of her gaze up and down the line, she went on. “I made it that way because I thought it would be simpler. I don’t know what else to try.” She shook her head again. “If you’re not sure, your best bet will be to keep one eye on Melinda or Charlie and follow them. Better you’re slightly behind, than turning the wrong way and running into someone.” She bowed her head and closed her eyes, her nostrils flaring as she inhaled deeply. Her lips pursed as she released the breath, and when she looked up, she was smiling. “Okay. Not the end of the world. The other three group numbers are in great shape, and we have two more Thursdays to get this one

tightened up and polished. Any questions before we try again?” No one stirred. “All right, we’ll take it from—” she looked toward the piano “—is it bar one twenty-eight, Seth?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“All right. And... Five, six, seven, eight!”

Everyone turned to the left at the appropriate time, and they made it through to the end of the number with only a few more brief interruptions for minor corrections and adjustments. There were a few groans and some murmuring when Barb announced they would run through the whole thing one more time before calling it a night. They moved to their starting positions, and Seth began the intro.

Charlie had an uncanny knack for memorizing choreography. Once he’d performed any combination twice, it was like his body took over on autopilot. Tonight, he was more grateful than usual for this aptitude, because his mind kept wandering to tomorrow morning. Starting a new assignment wasn’t normally a big deal, but this one...

Before he knew it, the music had stopped. Everyone was breathing hard, and Barb had a big smile on her face. “Good job, everyone! Next week we’ll work this number first, and then see if we can get through all four without stopping.” Heads nodded with varying degrees of credulity. She took one more look up and down the line. “Thank you very much for all your hard work, and—” turning once more to the piano “—thank you, Seth. I’ll see you all next Thursday. Please be ready to begin at seven sharp.”

The crowd dispersed, people heading for the changing rooms, and Barb came over to him. “Have you given any more thought to your solo?”

“I have. I really want to do ‘Being Alive.’”

Her expression went from hopeful to crestfallen. “No chance of ‘What I Did For Love’?”

“You know that’s one of my favorites, but it’s just not calling to me the way ‘Being Alive’ does. And, I was thinking, Alison could do a great job with ‘What I Did For Love,’ if you two haven’t already settled on something else.”

“No, I’m sure she’d agree to it, it’s just... that solo leads into the finale, and I wanted you for that spot in the lineup.”

“Why?”

“Like Mama Rose always said, ‘If you’ve got a strong finish, they’ll forgive you for anything.’”

Charlie chuckled and glanced away, pleased by her compliment but embarrassed. “Alison has an awesome voice. She’ll give you your strong finish. And besides, there’s not going to be anything they’ll need to forgive us for.”

“You think so?”

“I know so. You’ve done an amazing job putting this recital together, and I can’t believe how lucky we are to have so much talent. There’s really not a weak link.”

“I agree... mostly.” She scrunched up one corner of her mouth. “I mean, the ‘dancers who sing’ all have strong voices. But there are a couple of ‘singers who dance’ who could dance a little better.”

“Thank you for not naming names—though, of course, I know exactly who you mean—but you’re like *The Miracle Worker*. Six months ago, those two were tripping over their own feet, even on easy combinations. Now they get all the way through whole routines with only a few mistakes. You should be proud.”

“I am.”

A wave of gratitude washed over Charlie when he thought of how lucky he was to have found Mrs. Barber’s School of Song and Dance, in Brooklyn, shortly after moving to New York a year before. Barbara Barber. He still had to quell a laugh every time her name came to mind. When he’d first walked into the school and introduced himself, he must have made a face when she said her name. She’d immediately explained that she was born Barbara Simmons and almost didn’t marry her husband, Jerry, due to the ramifications. True love had won out in the end. And their love had survived some rocky years following the accident that ended her dream of dancing on Broadway. Charlie knew about letting go of big dreams. He’d done it deliberately, as a matter of practicality. It would have hurt so much more if they’d been suddenly snatched away...

“...at seven, right?”

“Sorry?” *Someone’s been dreaming.*

She laughed. “Welcome back. I was saying, I’ll see you Tuesday at seven. We’ll work on ‘Being Alive.’”

“Right. Tuesday. Seven.” He cracked a wide grin. “Thank you, Barb.”

She pinched his cheek and winked. “You betcha!” she said with a nasal twang, mimicking his accent and mocking his Minnesota vernacular. He loved the way they kidded each other. She was fast becoming the big sister he never had.

He ducked into the changing room and got into street clothes quick as he could. Tomorrow was going to be a big day, and he wanted to review the file and still have time for a good night’s sleep. He pushed through the doors at the front of the school, ready to fly down the street to the subway, but stopped on the top step when he saw one of his classmates halfway down the stairs, rising from where he’d been seated and turning his way.

“Hey, Charlie.”

“Hey, Joel.” It had only been seven or eight weeks since Joel had joined their little troupe. He was a terrific dancer—he’d picked up all the routines in no time—and he had a beautiful voice. Charlie was looking forward to finding out what he’d be singing for his solo. Joel was also easy on the eyes. His face was angular, and the angles all worked to his advantage. “What’s up?”

“I was wondering if—” Joel looked away for a second “—if maybe you’d like to go out sometime?”

Charlie came down to stand on the same step, and he smiled. “I’d love to go out sometime, Joel—get to know each other better—but I gotta be honest, I’m not really looking to hook up with anybody right now.”

“Oh.” That flicker of dying hope was unmistakable. Joel took a breath, righted the angles of his face, and the corners of his mouth turned up a bit. “Yeah. That would be good. You know, I just moved here a few months ago, and I haven’t had much time for making friends.”

“I know how you feel. I’ve been here a year and—Look, Joel, I need to get going. Tuesdays are usually good for me. I’m here from seven to eight for voice, so, before or after that?”

“Sounds good.”

“My number’s on the class roster. Text me, okay?”

Joel nodded, and Charlie gave his shoulder a squeeze before taking the remaining steps two at a time and dashing for the Greenpoint subway stop.

As he half-trotted along the avenue, the jaunty rhythm and haunting melody of “Another Hundred People” echoed in his head. The lyrics always reminded

him there'd been a time before smartphones, when people who wanted to be in touch had to rely on an answering service—with an actual person—to connect them. Of course, that led his thoughts to *Bells Are Ringing* and Judy Holliday's small, sad voice bemoaning the end of the party when she realized sexy Jeff Moss was never going to be hers. And then, just like every time his brain played Connect The Showtune Dots, it ended up on "Love, I Hear" from *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. He sighed when an image of a tunic-clad, nineteen-year-old Tucker Kirkland popped into his mind, that insouciant smile as bright and clear as if the man were standing there in the flesh. *Oh... Tuck's flesh—*

"Scuze me!" A burly lady jostled his shoulder as she edged past him to the turnstiles. He discovered himself standing, hand in the side pocket of his bag, fingers clasping his Metrocard, as they had been for who knew how long. He gave his head a shake to erase the vision and moved to follow the woman onto the platform. He needed to get a life that didn't revolve around musicals. *Yeah, right! Like that's gonna happen.*

He took a seat by the door of the sparsely populated car and allowed the swaying of his body, in concert with the train's movement, to lull him back into his dreamy reminiscence. Tuck had been the star of the high school basketball team. He was tall—*well, duh!*—and slender. Almost willowy in a way, but muscular at the same time. *Maybe rangy's the word?* He had light-brown eyes and a shock of dark hair that always seemed a little out of control. He was totally devoted to sports, but he also sang in the church choir and had a voice like an angel. *Well okay, a deep, sonorous baritone angel.* Much to his coach's chagrin, Tucker had landed the starring role of Pseudolus in *Forum*, their senior musical. Charlie got the part of Hero so they'd had lots of scenes together, and sharing the stage with Tuck had been a dream come true...

The train pulled into Jackson Avenue, and he moved to the doors as it slowed. He could stay on one more stop to Court Square and then transfer from the G train to the 7 which would double back two stops to Vernon Boulevard, only a couple blocks from his building. That would save him a fifteen-minute walk, but by the time he waited for the 7 it ended up being quicker to hoof it. Some Thursday nights, if he was totally beat, he would go the lazy way. Tonight, he was in that weird space of being equally tired and excited. He wanted to get home ASAP.

While his feet strode purposefully along the street, his mind returned to Tucker and that magical, horrible night five years earlier: the final performance

of the show, striking the set, and a cast party that didn't even start till almost midnight. They hadn't been celebrating long when Tuck pulled him aside, surreptitiously showed him a few cans of beer in his messenger bag, and suggested they take off together. At that moment, he'd been certain his dreams really were coming true. His wet dreams anyway.

They'd found a discreet spot to park, and after some frantic necking, Tuck had admitted he'd never done anything like that before but had to know what it was like. Charlie had never done it either, though he'd been desperate to try, and he couldn't believe his luck. His first time was going to be with the boy he'd been ogling since even before he'd figured out what ogling was. He started with some hand-job action and then managed to situate himself with his knees on the floorboard so he could lean over the console and take Tuck into his mouth. The sensations were startling. Nothing like he'd imagined—and he'd imagined it a lot. Tuck's dick was hot, and it was rock hard but smooth and soft at the same time. The aroma of shower gel mixing with sweat seemed to set Charlie on fire. But beyond the sensory overload lighting up every nerve ending in his body, the thing that had surprised him most was how perfectly Tuck's cock fit in his mouth. It was like hand in glove—two things that were just obviously meant to go together.

He'd thought they were only getting started when Tuck groaned and bucked his hips and grabbed the sides of Charlie's head. The next thing he knew, Tuck was spurting into his mouth. Charlie held on till Tuck settled, and then he pulled off, rolling Tuck's load around on his tongue. He'd experimented with tasting his own, and Tuck's was similar but had its own unique tang. He swallowed and then looked up to find Tuck staring down at him—only for a second before he turned his head, looking out the windows like maybe he was afraid someone had seen. His attention snapped back inside the car, and he started fumbling with his zipper. When it was up, he cranked the engine.

Charlie was confused. "Aren't we gonna—"

"No. We're not." Tuck's face was a blank. "Look, um... that was great and all, but... I can't do that to you."

"Can't?"

Tuck's stare turned icy. "Right. Can't. Sorry, dude. This was a mistake." He shifted into gear and they rolled forward. "Don't know what I was thinkin'. We better get you home."

Charlie was dumbstruck. *What was I thinking? That the school's top jock and I were going to live happily ever after?* He managed to get himself turned

around and seated while they drove across the gravel lot, and he was just buckling his seat belt when Tucker gunned it, fishtailing the turn onto the main road. Charlie leaned his head against the window, ignoring the stony silence between them, and he willed himself not to cry. The next day, he'd called Tucker, not knowing what to say. He'd asked what he could do to make things better. Tucker had told him it would be better if he didn't call anymore.

He looked up and found himself in New York, not Minnesota, staring at the front of his apartment building. He shook his head in wonder at how vivid a memory could be, even after five years. When he thought about the two boyfriends he'd had in college, those images were bland and vague by comparison.

Riding up in the elevator, he gazed at his blurry reflection in the stainless steel wall. He didn't have much confidence in his appearance. He knew years of dancing and working on the farm had given him a good build, but any time he looked in a mirror, he saw plain brown hair, a plain nose, and a plain mouth on a plain midwestern face. Even the little cleft in his chin seemed to say "ordinary." The only feature he thought might be pretty good were his eyes. The irises shone with a bright gold-green. It was a color he'd never seen on anyone else.

His insecurities had been even worse before he came to New York. Since his move to the city, guys had been hitting on him with alarming regularity. Attention like that, and now Joel asking him out, told him there must be something other men could see that he couldn't. Joel, however, was definitely not what Charlie was looking for. And neither were any of the other guys whose advances he'd rebuffed over the last year. He didn't know who or what he was saving himself for—*probably someone a lot like Tucker Kirkland.*

Act I, Scene 2

Charlie's roommate was stretched out on the couch with her feet up, watching TV. Her name was Dusty Hoeffler. The way she said it rhymed with "offer." *Now, I'm no linguist, and I've never studied German, but it sure looks like "heifer" to me.* As he walked past, he paused and leaned down far enough to brush something off her shoulder.

"What?" she asked, craning her neck to try and see the spot he'd just swiped.

"Nothing," he assured her. He opened his palm and blew the imaginary something away. "Probably just some dust from your pasture." She squealed and made a backhanded swipe in his direction, missing when he leapt aside. He chuckled at the sound of her growling as he headed down the hall toward his room. Charlie wouldn't dream of teasing her about it if she was overweight, or even if she tended to be dirty. Instead, she was rail thin and possibly the cleanest person he'd ever known, so he taunted her mercilessly every chance he got. For the most part, she had a great sense of humor. He knew how fortunate he was to have found her through their agency's bulletin board.

In his room, he set his dance bag on the floor, next to the duffel he'd already packed for the morning. This new nursing assignment was unlike any of the others he'd had with the home health service where he and Dusty worked. They'd started him out with one- or two-hour visits that were arranged to minimize travel between clients. Lately, they'd been mixing in some half days and the occasional full eight-hour shift with clients who were on 'round-the-clock care. Apparently the longer shifts were coveted by his coworkers and handed out based on seniority. Starting tomorrow, everything would be different. He would have one client and one client only. It was semi-live-in. He would report on Friday morning and stay until Tuesday morning, at which point another nurse would replace him for the three midweek days.

He had some misgivings about the arrangement, like not being able to leave the client's apartment for ninety-six hours at a time. It had potential advantages, though: he'd be spending a lot less time riding the subway, and he wouldn't be schlepping in and out of dozens of people's homes every week. Best of all, it left Tuesday and Thursday evenings free for his voice and dance lessons. It also had the major perk of paying an hourly rate much higher than what he'd been getting. That was a big incentive. He'd opened a savings account when he

moved to the city, but over the last year it had dwindled rather than grown. If this new position worked out for the long term, he'd be able to start putting aside a few bucks again. Nursing didn't pay as well as he'd hoped when he started school. It was better in New York than it would have been back home, but his share of the rent for a tiny two-bedroom high-rise on the Queens side of the river was more than his folks used to pay on their mortgage.

And then there was the cost of the world's smallest storage unit a few blocks away. Each month when he paid the bill, he reconsidered whether it was worth it. But that minuscule cubicle was just big enough to hold the motorcycle his parents had given him when he graduated high school. They'd offered it as an incentive when he'd reluctantly gone along with his dad's plan for him to learn a practical trade rather than "throwing away college tuition on a theater degree," as Pop had been all too fond of saying.

Everybody had told him that owning any kind of vehicle in the city was crazy. Once or twice a month, when he strapped on his helmet and went roaring off to explore points unknown, he knew that crazy was exactly what he'd be if he didn't have some means of escape. While he loved the city, there were times he just needed to get away and see forests and fields... *and rivers whose banks aren't lined with buildings!* So every month, he gritted his teeth and paid the bill again.

He walked over to his desk and sat down, looking out the window at the brightly lit tower of the United Nations. The client packet from the agency was open on the desktop, and he planned to have one more look through it before going to bed. He scanned the list of medical complaints this elderly gentleman was suffering, but the name at the top of the page kept drawing his attention. *That name!*

Even after living there a year, he felt he didn't know much about New York City. He did know there were a lot of Jewish people, and he guessed there must be a dozen Simon Sonntags in the five boroughs. There was no earthly reason to think his new client was *The Simon Sonntag*. He didn't even know for sure if Broadway's most famous lyricist was still alive—though he liked to think he'd have heard about it if such a legend had passed. If he was still living, he'd be somewhere around the age of this client.

He needed to get a good night's sleep—*first impressions, and all that*—so he knew he shouldn't dwell on it, but, what if... What if he was about to meet the most celebrated, most award-winning, most incredibly-freaking-fantastic lyricist ever to have written for the musical stage? *God!*

He'd even been in a couple of Sonntag shows. His junior year in high school he'd gotten the lead role in *Be My Guest*. In college, he'd been in the chorus for *On A Summer's Day*. He'd wanted to try out for a speaking part, but with all the demands of the nursing program, just getting to chorus rehearsals had been a challenge. Honestly, he thought *Summer's Day* was the best of all Sonntag's shows. The characters had such depth, and the story was so moving, and the music was so beautiful... And, it was Sonntag's one and only flop on The Great White Way. Charlie would never understand how such a masterpiece could be a commercial failure. He guessed that must be the business part of show business. His over-stimulated brain chimed in with "There's No Business Like Show Business!" and almost got away with it. *Whoa! Charlie. Bed. Now!*

He closed the folder and picked it up, stood and stretched, and then slipped it into his bag. After a quick shower, he tried to brush his teeth, but between the grin that kept teasing him from the mirror, and the strains of "One Fine Day" playing in his head, it was next to impossible. He wiggled into his flannel footie pajamas and then shimmied his way across the bedroom floor in a happy blending of the twerk and the bunny hop, pulling back the covers and diving between them.

In no time, he was lying still and quiet with the blanket tucked under his chin, hoping sleep would come sooner rather than later. When it didn't, he tuned in the Showtunes Channel on Mind-Radio and eventually drifted off to an imaginary duet of Bernadette Peters and Ethel Merman singing "Moonshine Lullaby."

Act I, Scene 3

Even though his eyes were closed, Charlie gazed up at the bright-blue heavens above him as “Corner Of The Sky” brought a smile to his lips. Then he realized it wasn’t Mind-Radio; it was the alarm he’d set on his phone. He wondered why he hadn’t picked a Sonntag tune. He jumped out of bed and dashed down the hall to the bathroom, where he splashed water on his face and gave his hair a quick brush. He wasn’t sure if Dusty had a client that morning, but even with an early assignment she wouldn’t be up at this hour. To be on the safe side, he crept back to his room, donned his scrubs as quickly and quietly as he could, checked his bag to make sure he had everything, and silently left the apartment.

He wouldn’t have been up this early either if he was going straight to work. Instead, he’d allowed himself an extra hour to enjoy a pleasure tour. The following Friday—and every Friday thereafter, if this worked out—he would take the 7 train one stop under the river and then change to the 4, 5, or 6 to go uptown to Fifty-Ninth and Lex, six blocks from his new workplace. Today, he was staying on the 7 all the way to the end of the line at Times Square.

The theater district was his mecca, and it was the perfect day for a pilgrimage. He emerged from the stale underground/urine stench into the fresh car exhaust/pretzel/hot dog/urine stench that was unmistakably Midtown Manhattan, and took a quick look around, experiencing the same thrill that quivered through him every time he set foot in this neighborhood. He adjusted the bag on his shoulder. It wasn’t all that heavy—just three days’ worth of scrubs, socks and briefs, shaving kit and, of course, his stethoscope and blood pressure cuff.

He turned north on Seventh Avenue, happy to see the sidewalks weren’t the elbow-to-elbow churning mosh pit they would be in an hour. At Forty-Second Street, he craned his neck to the left and spied the New Amsterdam Theatre with the Lyric right across the way. He had to laugh when he spotted Madame Tussauds Wax Museum just beyond. *Who on earth would pay good money to look at fake people standing still when there are live people singing and dancing a few doors down?*

He paused at each cross street and looked longingly left and right to catch glimpses of his favorite marquees—the Shubert, the Minskoff, the Booth. Every theater was a temple, and he wished he could stop at each one to

worship. He veered left on Broadway and continued his trek, pausing and coming to attention in a mock salute when the venerable Lunt-Fontanne Theatre loomed before him. *Oh, what a beautiful morning!*

Before moving here, he'd figured out if he went to a show every other week that would be twenty-six a year, and that oughta be about right to see everything that was worth seeing. After he'd arrived, the cold, hard realities of a budget forced him to admit that \$3,000 a year for entertainment might not be entirely reasonable. So he'd settled for one big splashy musical each month and something Off- or even Off-Off-Broadway when he could afford it.

He was surprised to find himself already at Fiftieth Street when he looked up and saw the theater he loved best—the Winter Garden—its name in bright lights beneath the two-story, billboard-sized poster for *Fond Farewell*, the most recent revival of a Simon Sonntag classic. *It just can't be him!* A tiny shiver tingled down his spine, along with the feeling this might be a day that would change his life forever.

He turned right when he got to Fifty-Fourth, because there weren't any more Broadway theaters to see north of there—*well, if you don't count the Vivian Beaumont, and really, who does?* He crossed Seventh and Sixth Avenues before turning left on Fifth. When he arrived at the corner of the park, he stopped to lean against a lamppost and watch the sleepy morning stirrings in front of the Plaza Hotel. A few early risers emerged and departed on foot, but at this hour the usual line of waiting limos was nowhere to be seen.

He continued up the avenue, walking along the waist-high wall that separated the sidewalk from Central Park. It was wonderful having this huge oasis of nature in the middle of the urban jungle, and when it was convenient, he'd go for a stroll between clients or eat his lunch there. The space was vast—big enough to fool the eye—but even in the middle of the park, surrounded by trees and shrubs, he could never escape the stink of the city.

Four more short blocks brought him to Sixty-Third Street, and there, diagonally across the corner, stood a building that somehow managed to look both ornate and plain at once. He checked his watch. He still had some time before he was expected, so he sat down on a bench and propped his bag next to him. After digging out his agency name tag and clipping it to the front of his scrub top, he leaned back and gave the structure a second look from bottom to top. Twelve stories. Three times taller than the biggest “skyscraper” in his hometown.

What had struck him at first as showy seemed less so on closer inspection. There were a few cornices and a line of dentil molding above the second-floor windows. Brass poles supported a beige fabric awning, which sheltered the distance from the glass doors to the curb—apparently, the residents were too important to be bothered with umbrellas. Other than those touches, the edifice just looked... solid. *If there were a football team made up of buildings, this one would be a linebacker.* The phrase “reeks of old money” drifted through his awareness, and he realized he had no idea what old money actually reeks of, but he was pretty sure he was looking at it. *I hate it when I mix my metaphors!*

He checked his watch again and decided there was no harm in being a few minutes early. Taking a deep breath, he rose to his feet and slung his bag over his shoulder, an image coming to mind of Julie Andrews alighting from a bus in Salzburg, singing “I Have Confidence In Me.” But then he remembered “that song” wasn’t in the original musical, having been added for the movie, and was therefore, technically, not a showtune. And he was obsessing again! *I suppose there are worse things people torment themselves with.*

Still, confidence seemed like a good idea, so he stood tall, and when there was a break in traffic, strode boldly across the street, under the awning, and up to the door. There was no one in red livery to open it for him, so he did it himself and stepped into a large entryway. The far wall and its double doors were all of glass, revealing an opulent elevator lobby sumptuously decorated in cream-colored marble and brown velvet with tasteful gold accents.

To the side of the inner doors stood a podium with an older man in an expensive-looking suit perched motionless on a stool behind it. If not for a rattle from the newspaper he was reading, Charlie might have mistaken him for part of the décor. Despite having assumed an air of confidence, his approach failed to elicit a response, so he cleared his throat. The man looked up, giving Charlie a momentary head-to-toe scan before shifting his gaze back to his paper. In a tone that would have been hard-pressed to sound any less helpful, he asked, “May I help you?”

“I’m here for Mr. Sonntag.” Just saying the name puffed him up.

The man glanced at him again and indicated the doors behind Charlie with a nod of his head. “Service entrance. Around the corner on Sixty-Third.”

Charlie wasn’t used to being summarily dismissed, and he didn’t like the tight feeling it brought to his chest. He retreated from the foyer and walked to the side of the building. There, he found an unmarked door with a call button

set into the stone wall beside it. He didn't hear any resulting sound when he pressed it, so he just waited. Eventually, the door opened and a gigantic bear of a man in a khaki uniform admitted him to a vast basement that looked and smelled like some sort of maintenance shop. He followed the man into the bowels of the building till they came to an elevator. A placard next to it read, "Sign In Here," and below that was a battered ring binder on a shelf bolted to the wall.

"Sonntag, right?" the man asked.

"Right."

"Just fill in your information there, and I'll call up to let them know you're on your way."

Charlie did as he was told while the man used the phone mounted on the wall.

"Sending up another new nurse," he said. After a moment, he rolled his eyes. "Yes, sir. Will do." He hung up and then inserted a key into the lock by the elevator doors.

"Do I have to do all this every time?" Charlie asked.

The man gave him an enigmatic look and said, "Only if you decide to come back." The doors opened revealing a small cubicle, its walls covered in padded moving blankets. "Third floor," he added, as Charlie stepped in and turned around. When the doors began to slide closed, the man pasted on a fake smile and repeatedly crooked his index finger in a tiny wave good-bye. "Have a nice day."

The vibe of his whole reception was throwing Charlie off his game. In his year of going into Manhattan apartments to provide nursing care, he thought he'd seen it all. In general, people were happy to greet him, grateful for the presence of someone who cared. If the client was in a building with a doorman, there was usually at least a courteous nod between two working men in uniform as he entered. He didn't know what to make of this setup. His stomach began to churn, and he realized he was frowning. *Frowning? That is not you!* He leaned his head back, closed his eyes, and took several deep breaths as the elevator inched upward. When the car shuddered to a stop, he snapped to attention.

The doors opened, and he found himself looking up at an older gentleman who was solid and imposing. The man wore a dark suit—expertly tailored to accentuate broad shoulders and a narrow waist—with a crisp white shirt and a

brilliant-red tie. His dark-brown hair was thick and neatly styled with a part on one side. But it was the eyes that caught Charlie's attention. They too were brown but had arresting flecks of brilliant gold, and they widened as he looked at Charlie.

It took only the briefest moment to register that, though older, this man was still breathtakingly gorgeous. And in that same moment, the scar also registered. It began an inch above his left eye and ran across his temple and down to his cheek, where it made a sharp turn and extended almost to the corner of his mouth. It was subtle—a *guy in a suit like that can afford the best cosmetic surgeons*—but not subtle enough it could be missed. He had to force himself to glance, not stare, at the scar... or the stunning man. Though polished and posh in appearance, it was clear this gentleman suffered no similar pangs of humility. He stood, hands clasped behind his back, openly eyeing Charlie up and down.

“Charles Perkins?” His voice was steely.

“Yes, sir.”

“I'm Nate Sonntag, Simon's grandson.” He stepped back, making a stiff gesture toward a table and chairs in the center of the room. “Come in and sit down.”

Charlie stepped off the elevator with a new appreciation for how Maria must have felt walking into the von Trapp mansion. *At least she got to make her entrance through the front door.* In fact, Nate Sonntag's bearing was so severe Charlie wouldn't have been surprised if he'd pulled out a bosun's whistle and started issuing orders. He glanced around what appeared to be some sort of servants' area as he took a few cautious steps into the room. “This is... nice,” he managed to squeak out.

“Sit down, Mr. Perkins!”

He sat. The strap slithered off his shoulder and his bag slid to the floor, leaning against his thigh.

Mr. Sonntag cleared his throat. “I have an early meeting, so this needs to be brief. Roger will tell you what you need to know for today. I'll be back this evening to instruct you fully on the rules of the house. However, there are a few crucial points you need to be aware of before I go.”

Charlie nodded.

“Simon is your patient, but I am your client. Do you understand?”

“Stern” didn’t begin to describe the man’s demeanor, and “No” was clearly not an acceptable answer. Charlie nodded again.

“Very well. My grandfather is an excellent conversationalist, and talking is good for him, but don’t bring up our family, and above all, do not mention the theater.” Charlie’s puzzlement must have shown on his face, prompting his new employer to explain, “These subjects are troubling for him, and his condition is delicate. What might be a minor upset for a person in good health, could easily put him into a life-threatening tailspin.”

Charlie nodded a third time, though he couldn’t quite believe what he was hearing.

“Do you have any questions?”

It was obvious that answering an employee’s questions was the last thing on the younger Mr. Sonntag’s agenda, so Charlie just said, “No, sir.” From the tightness in his jaw, he could tell that the uncharacteristic frown had crept back onto his face.

“Good. Then let’s get you set up with Roger,” he said, turning and walking away at a brisk pace, no doubt expecting Charlie would scurry after him. They passed a kitchen, which appeared to be about the size of his and Dusty’s apartment, and went through an alcove into a long, open space that looked like an art gallery. The walls were lined with marble columns. Brightly lit paintings hung between them. Charlie wasn’t sure if they were impressionist, or maybe abstract—*art is so not my thing*—but these weren’t pretty pictures of people or landscapes.

Doors opened along one side to a dining room, a living room, and a library, all of which had windows looking out on the treetops in the park across the street. On the opposite side there was a vestibule with two elevators. *The ones for the real people.* He chided himself for the bitter tone of that thought.

At the far end of the gallery, they stepped through a door and across one end of a long corridor into what must have once been a bedroom. On one side, there was a large work table with a computer. A countertop held lab equipment and stacks of medical supplies along the opposite wall.

As they entered, a brawny, buzz-cut man in scrubs pushed back from the computer and rose to greet them, extending his hand.

“Roger, this is Charles.”

“Good to meetchya.” Roger’s grip was firm. His fingers were thick, but not nearly as thick as his accent. Despite his keen ear for such things, Charlie had yet to pick out enough subtleties to distinguish between, say, Brooklyn and New Jersey. In any case, this guy was from somewhere nearby.

“I have to go. You know what to brief him on. I’ll be back around six.” Mr. Sonntag turned on his heel and marched toward the elevators.

Once their boss was gone, Charlie and Roger settled into the office chairs in front of the computer, and Roger said, “Why don’ I give you my report first, and then I’ll show you ’round, ’kay?”

“You bet.”

Roger pulled a small spiral-bound notebook from his shirt pocket and flipped through a few pages. “We have a seventy-eight-year-old male with AFIB, palpitations, CHF with fluid overload, and borderline diabetes, controlled with diet and metformin...” The format for verbal report was rote, and Charlie already knew these facts from reading his packet, but he listened attentively. *You never know when something might change, or a new condition develop.* “History of suicidal ideation and current diagnosis of depression and agoraphobia.” Roger flipped a page. “He’s got three-plus pitting edema—bilateral lower extremities—and he gets twenty of Lasix BID and five of Coumadin in the morning. Weekly stick for sugar and weekly draw for PT/INR. Monitor O-two sat PRN, limit free water, and—get this—daily weights and daily vitals.”

“Well, with the fluid overload, daily weight is reasonable, if he fluctuates.”

Roger raised a meaty palm toward Charlie. “Hasn’t gained or lost more than two pounds since the last time he came home from the hospital, a month and a half ago.”

“Why the daily vitals? Is he unstable?”

“All within normal limits and stable as a rock.”

“Why daily, then?”

“You met the grandson?”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. He’s paranoid, and he gets his way. There’s Doctor’s Orders, and then there’s Nate’s Orders. So—” he looked around the room “—I did his sugar while I was waitin’ for you to show—just a smidge high, as usual—and we do

the weekly blood work over there,” he said, pointing his chin at the equipment. “You know how?”

“We did it in school... it’s been a while.”

“I already drew the blood. We can run it together after I show you ’round, but damn”—he glanced at his watch—“I’m ready to get outta here.” Roger looked back to his notes and flipped another page. “So... What else... Independent ADLs, transfers without assist, ambulates with a rolling walker, which he consistently ‘forgets’ and our job is to ‘remind’ him,” he said, making air quotes.

Charlie grinned. Many of his patients kept up a façade of being more independent with daily living than they really were. Providing the assistance they needed while also maintaining their dignity was a fine line to walk and one of the challenges Charlie loved about his job.

“Yeah, I hope you’re still smilin’ when I get back on Tuesday. The old guy can be a real meanie when he wants. Can’t say’s I blame ’im. You want my opinion, twenty-four seven nursing is way-overkill. An assistant would be plenty—they could stick him for the sugar—a nurse maybe once a week for the blood draw, but like I said, Nate gets what he wants, and he wants a nurse here.” Roger rubbed the back of his thick neck and smiled. “It’s gotta be the easiest assignment I ever had... or it would be if it didn’t mean being cooped up with these freaks three days at a stretch.”

Charlie tried to hide his wince. “How long have you been here?”

“’Bout five months.”

“And why did the other person leave?”

Roger chortled. “Wasn’t her idea. Or the one before her. Or the three before that.”

“Wow.” His tight frown had returned.

“Yeah, I don’t think the old guy really likes me, but he must respect me or somethin’ ’cause I’m still here. Look, how’s ’bout I give you that tour so I can bug out, ’kay?”

“You betcha.”

They stepped into the corridor, and Roger pointed at the door immediately to their left. “That’s Simon’s room. Let’s finish up there, and I’ll introduce ya.” He motioned across to the gallery. “You came that way?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, it’s basically a circle, I’ll take you ’round the back half.” They stopped at an open doorway down the hall. “This is the room I use ’cause it’s got its own bath. The other bedrooms share that bathroom,” he said pointing across and down the hall. “You can use this one, too. It’s closest to Simon, and Rosa changes the sheets every damn day, no matter how much you beg her not to.”

Charlie smiled, not sure what to make of that. “Okay.”

They moved on, passing another pair of doors opposite each other. “These next two are guest rooms.” When they reached the end he pointed to the door on the left. “That one’s Nate’s.”

“Oh. He lives here.”

“Nah. Got a house out on the island somewheres, maybe North Shore? But sometimes he needs to be in the city overnight.”

“And this one?” Charlie asked pointing to the other door.

Roger started making a disturbing sound in his throat, and Charlie wasn’t sure if it was supposed to be the shark music from *Jaws*, or the shower scene from *Psycho*. “This...” he said, with an ominous pause. “This... is The Secret Room.” Then he made a noise Charlie was pretty sure came from *The X-Files*, or maybe *The Twilight Zone*.

“Oh, c’mon. What’s in there?”

“Dude. Seriously? I got no idea. All I know’s it’s locked and nobody goes in there. Ever! I’m sure Nate’ll fill you in tonight—um... I wouldn’t ask too many questions if I was you.”

Another touchy subject? “Why aren’t we supposed to talk about theater?”

Roger shook his head and laughed. “I got no idea and, ya know, I don’ care. If he said don’ talk about hockey, we’d have a problem. Now c’mon, let’s go meet Rosa.”

Roger led him halfway back the way they’d come and then made a right turn into a yet another long hallway. This one was narrow and institutional-looking, so he knew they were back into the servants’ part of the house—*Yeah, okay, it’s an “apartment,” but it’s bigger than any house I’ve ever been in.* Up ahead he recognized the room where he’d gotten off the elevator, and just before they reached it, Roger pointed to a steel door on the right. “That’s the stairs, ’case there’s a fire.”

“Right. Thanks.”

They walked into the kitchen, and Charlie was impressed all over again by how big it was and how beautifully it was appointed, with acres of stone countertops and gleaming stainless steel appliances. A smallish woman was bent over, a silver crucifix dangling from a chain around her neck. She placed a china bowl on a fancy place mat on the floor in front of the biggest poodle Charlie had ever seen. As she stood, she turned and shot Charlie a look that almost made him wish he was the one on that cross. The dog raised its head and gave him a similar scornful glance before turning back to its meal. *What is it with everyone in this house? Even the dog's in a bad mood!*

“Rosa, this is Charles Perkins.”

“Oh,” Charlie interrupted, “I meant to say before, it’s Charlie.” He reached out to shake.

Rosa kept her hands at her sides. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Perkins.”

Charlie let his arm fall, and smiled. “The pleasure is entirely mine, Rosa,” he said with a wink. *Oh, my God! I just winked!* He tried a wider smile. He had to figure out some way to break the tension in this household. She didn’t react—at all—just turned around and started working on something in the sink.

He looked at Roger with a puzzled expression, and Roger shrugged. “Let’s go meet Simon,” he said. He led the way back through the gallery and tapped lightly on the bedroom door. When there was no response, he turned the knob and cracked it open, peeking in. “Hmm. Looks like he’s nappin’.” He started to open the door farther, but Charlie caught him by the shoulder.

“Don’t disturb him. I can introduce myself when he wakes up.”

Roger closed the door quietly, and they stepped back into the workroom. “Any questions?”

“Yeah, how do I know if he needs me? Is there a call bell?”

“He’s gotta smartphone. He calls this one,” Roger said handing it over. “We trade it off at shift change. Oh! His meds are set up on the counter over there, and the eye drops are in the fridge under. Okay? I’m out.”

“Wait a minute, you were going to refresh me on how to run that blood sample.”

“Right!” Roger smacked himself in the forehead. “Let’s make this quick, man.”

And they did. Five minutes later, the centrifuge was whirring, and Roger was hulking his way down the hall toward the back elevator, the bag on his shoulder swaying in time to his stride.

Charlie had tried to get a glimpse of his sleeping patient, but Roger's beefy shoulder had blocked the view. Even if he'd had a good look, though, he wouldn't have been able to recognize the man. The only pictures he'd ever seen had been in the liner notes of his mom's old original cast albums from when he was little. While he waited for the blood sample to finish, he took a seat at the computer, pulled up Google, clicked on "Images," and typed in "Simon Sonntag."

Act I, Scene 4

It was getting close to noon and the phone still hadn't rung. He'd peeped in twice, and each time Mr. Sonntag appeared to be sleeping soundly. He hated to wake him, but there was a medication scheduled for twelve o'clock and it was to be taken with food. Rosa had informed him that lunch would be served at noon. The precision with which she'd clipped her words had made it clear that if he thought she might mean either 11:59 or 12:01, he'd better think again.

He put the pill in a little paper cup and placed it, and a cup of water, on the small pink plastic tray he'd found in the med area. He carried the tray silently into the room next door and paused, cocking his head to one side to study the face of his dozing patient. There was no doubt about it. *You are looking at a Broadway legend!*

He found a dresser with some free space on top, and just as he was setting the tray down, a raspy voice called from behind him, "Hello, young man."

Charlie whirled around at the sound. "Mr. Sonntag!" He drew a flustered breath and then spit out, "I'm-sorry-if-I-woke-you!"

"First name, or last name?"

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry-if-I-woke-you. You said, 'I'm... Sorry-if-I-woke-you.'"

A grin of relief rose on Charlie's lips as he realized his new patient had a sense of humor. *Even if it is a cornball one.* "Maybe we should start over," he said, crossing the room and extending his hand. "Hello, Mr. Sonntag, I'm Charlie Perkins."

The man sat up and smiled, looking Charlie over as they shook. "Good to meet you, Charlie. Please, call me Simon."

"Okay, Simon." Charlie smiled back. "I think it's about time for lunch, and I have a pill you need to take first."

"Yes, yes, bring on the pill," Simon intoned.

After he'd swallowed it with no apparent difficulty, Charlie said, "That was quite a nap you had this morning. Are you feeling all right today?"

"Oh, yes. I don't take naps as a rule, or sleep in, but I was up late reading last night. You needn't worry, I feel fine—well... as close to fine as I ever feel these days."

“Okay, good. And you’ll let me know if that changes?”

“Yes, yes, you’ll be the first to know. Trust me, I’m not one to suffer in silence. Now, why don’t you run along so I can get some clothes on. Rosa tolerates pajamas at the breakfast table, but if I go out there like this for lunch I’ll hear about it.”

Since Simon was allegedly able to dress without assistance, Charlie took his tray and closed the door behind him. He smiled as he crumpled the used cups and dropped them into the wastebasket. A few minutes later, Simon paused at the workroom doorway to give him a nod and a smile. He turned toward the dining room.

“Mr. Sonntag—*Oops!*—Simon,” Charlie called. “You don’t have your walker. Did you forget?”

Simon turned around. Charlie wasn’t sure what to make of the expression on the man’s face. “Let’s get this sorted out first thing, young man. I don’t need it. I can walk just fine. I’ve never fallen down, and I’ve never come close to falling down. The doctor said it was an ‘optional precaution,’ but Nate insists. So when Nate is here I use it. Otherwise it stays parked”—he pointed at his bedroom door—“right in there.”

Charlie opened his mouth to protest, but Simon kept going.

“I know it’s your job to remind me, and now you’ve done your job. I also know I have the right to refuse any treatment or therapy, so can we just let it go?” The corners of Simon’s mouth turned up in a wry grin.

Charlie appreciated Simon’s no-nonsense approach, and he felt he needed to be direct in return. “We can go on with me reminding, and you refusing, but if I see any signs you need it, I’ll have to insist, too. Keeping you safe is also my job. In any case, if your grandson asks me about it, I’ll have to tell him what’s going on.”

“I’ll just make sure he has no reason to ask, then.” And with that, Simon walked away.

The rest of the day was boring. Charlie filled the time by going through Simon’s medical chart on the computer as well as the paper version. He cleaned and organized the med area, and as a last resort, started reading through the manuals for the lab equipment. Every hour or so, he stepped into the hallway and tapped on Simon’s door, sticking his head in to check on his patient. Each time, he found Simon either reading or watching TV, and Simon would greet him pleasantly and assure him there was nothing he needed.

He administered the before-dinner pills, and while Simon walked through the gallery toward the dining room, Charlie took the back hall to the kitchen, planning to make himself a sandwich. The packet from the agency had explained he was welcome to any food items in the refrigerator or pantry, but at lunchtime he'd felt neither adventurous nor hungry, so he'd skipped it. Now, his appetite had overcome his reluctance to interact with Rosa—and a good thing, because there she was at the central island, preparing a plate from several serving dishes on the counter. She didn't look up when he entered, and for a moment he hoped he might make it to the fridge undetected. She looked up. *No such luck!*

"You're welcome to serve yourself dinner, Mr. Perkins," she said, indicating the platters and bowls before her. "There's always enough for the staff at each meal."

"Thank you, Rosa. I thought I was on my own."

"Certainly not. One request though, I know your agency tells you to help yourself to anything, but there've been problems when a nurse took some ingredient I needed for a recipe. So now I label those. Leftovers are always on the top two shelves. If you're not sure, please just ask me."

"I will. Thank you."

Her face softened just slightly. *Was she expecting a confrontation?*

"You're welcome." She turned and carried the plate through to the dining room.

He spotted more plates, as well as silverware and napkins, on the counter, so he served himself and carried his dinner back to the workroom.

An hour later, Charlie heard the elevator *ding* and leaned his chair back so he could see into the gallery. The younger Mr. Sonntag stepped into view and approached, nodding to Charlie as he knocked on Simon's door. He looked every bit as neat and crisp as he had that morning. The only difference Charlie could see was that the lines of his chiseled jaw were now accentuated by a pronounced five o'clock shadow. It didn't make him look any less stern; it did make him look amazingly more hot. *I didn't think that was possible.*

After his patient's grandson had gone in and closed the door, Charlie wondered again what could have happened that would make talking about

theater a problem for someone who was so successful at it. He didn't have long to wonder though, because a few minutes later his new boss emerged and walked into the workroom, his jacket over his arm. He draped it on the back of the other desk chair and sat down facing Charlie.

"So, how was your first day?"

"Can't complain... but your grandfather's answer to that question is what counts. Did he say anything?"

"Yes. He said he likes you. And that's half the battle right there. First time he's said that since Roger started."

Relief washed over Charlie. "That's good, because I like him, and I really want this to work out."

His boss nodded. "I do too." He started thumbing through the manila folders in a rack on the desk. "It would be nice to have some stability in the staffing for a change. Here you are." He flipped open a folder and scanned the contents, turning several pages. Continuing to read, he said, "I didn't have time to review anything beyond your nursing credentials in detail... I seem to recall a four-year degree?"

"Yes, sir. University of Minnesota."

He looked up and studied Charlie for a moment. "I was wondering where that accent's from. Minneapolis?"

"A few hours away. Little town called Cortela."

The older man's right eyebrow rose in a distinctive arch.

"Yeah, nobody's ever heard of it." That eyebrow had drawn Charlie's attention like a magnet. Now that they were closer to one another, and he could get a better look, he realized his initial assessment of "older man" wasn't accurate. Perhaps it had been the haughty attitude and rigid bearing, but this morning Charlie would have guessed the man was in his forties. Now he was pretty sure it was more like thirties, maybe even early thirties.

"Are you all right, Charles?" the not-so-old man asked, some of this morning's tension returning to his features.

Charlie was mortified. *Did he catch me staring?* "I'm sorry, sir. I was distracted for a moment."

"You can call me Nate. 'Sir' makes me feel old."

“Okay. Nate. And...” He took a breath. “If you don’t mind, I go by Charlie.”

“Very good, Charlie. Now... did any questions arise during the day? Any information you need?”

“No. I think I’ve got it.”

“Great.” Nate nodded and then looked evenly at Charlie for a few moments. “Before I go, I remembered one thing I failed to mention this morning. The door at the end of the hall, on the right? That stays locked at all times. No one in or out. Clear?”

Charlie nodded.

“And just to reinforce what I already told you, don’t bring up anything to do with our family or the theater.” Nate stared intently.

The man’s level gaze drilled into Charlie, and after a moment he swallowed. Hard. *Jeez!*

Nate’s stare intensified. “You look... bothered. Do you have a problem with this?”

“I wouldn’t call it a problem, it’s just that... well...” He was worried this could be a deal-breaker, but he knew better than to try and hide who he was. “I love musical theater—and your grandfather’s work—so it’s a shame I’m gonna be here all the time and we can’t discuss it. It’s like winning the lottery, and then finding out you’re not allowed to spend the money.”

Nate’s face tightened.

Charlie hurried to reassure him. “No, no! I can do this. As long as your grandfather is my patient, his well-being is my top priority. I won’t do anything that could jeopardize that.”

Nate continued eyeing him, his face unreadable. After a lengthy pause, he said, “All right,” his expression relaxing just slightly. “As long as you understand and agree.”

Charlie nodded again.

Nate slapped his hands on his knees. “It’s late. I’m heading home,” he said, rising. “Call me if anything happens. I can be back here in under an hour—less when traffic’s not bad. Roger showed you how to reach me?”

Charlie started to nod a third time, but caught himself. “He didn’t. I’m guessing it’s that red binder labeled Emergency Contacts?”

Nate gave him that assessing look again, and Charlie felt like a bug under a microscope. “That’s right,” he said, slipping on his jacket. “Good night, Charles—um, Charlie.”

In the moment between correcting himself and turning to go, something flashed across Nate’s face. It almost looked like a smile trying to form. *As if!* Charlie took a deep breath and frowned, watching Nate walk away. It was so sad to see a man who obviously had everything going for him—intelligence, looks, money—but who seemed to be troubled in some profound way. He wondered if Nate ever smiled.

The *ding* of the elevator stirred him from his brief reverie, and he set about getting Simon’s bedtime pills and eye drops.

Act I, Scene 5

Saturday and Sunday had dragged by in countless hours of nothing to do punctuated by brief flurries of administering medications, taking Simon's vital signs and weighing him, and avoiding Rosa and the dog: *His Royal Highness, Claude of Poodle*. Each time Charlie interacted with Simon, the man was cordial but cool, and although he cracked the occasional joke—some of them even funny—he remained generally aloof. It was almost as if he were trying to prove he didn't need Charlie, while still appreciating his presence.

Charlie hated admitting it to himself, but the high point of each day had been when Nate appeared. On Saturday, he'd come by shortly after dinner and spent an hour or so with Simon, sticking his head in the workroom door on his way out to check on Charlie. He'd returned at midday on Sunday and had lunch with his grandfather, again stopping to speak with Charlie before departing. Both times, Charlie wondered if Simon's cordiality was somehow rubbing off on Nate, because he didn't seem nearly as gruff as he had on Friday. *Or maybe it's my irresistible charm that's winning him over? Yeah, right!*

By Sunday evening, he was so grateful for the Kindle his parents had given him the previous Christmas, he emailed to thank them again. He'd finished the romance novel he'd started the week before, and then remembered a book that had been on his wish list for years. He purchased and downloaded it—*Ira and Me* by Michael Feinstein. It was a memoir of the author's experience as a young man, working for the eminent Ira Gershwin in the final years before the lyricist's death.

Between Charlie's delight with some of the episodes in the book and his own unique brand of natural buoyancy, Monday morning found him whistling a happy tune, and then humming another as he arranged the pills and water on his tray. He'd heard his patient in the bathroom a short time before, so he knew he was up. He went in and found Simon sitting on the edge of the bed in his robe and slippers. When he'd finished taking the pills, Charlie voiced the question he always asked before leaving a patient: "Is there anything else I can do for you while I'm here?"

"Yes. You can tell me what you were singing before you came in here. It sounded like 'Waitin' For My Dearie.' Is that right?" Simon asked with a knowing grin.

"Yes?" Charlie tried not to admit, heat rising to his cheeks.

“And, last night, wasn’t it ‘I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Out Of My Hair’?”

“Um... guilty as charged?” He cringed internally, afraid of where this was going.

“You seem to be quite fond of showtunes.”

“Well...” He looked down at the floor.

Charlie was the kind of guy who had a quick comeback for whatever was thrown at him, but in that moment he found himself speechless. *Here’s a fine kettle of fish!* Nate had made his prohibition crystal clear. From what Roger had said, it was also clear Nate wouldn’t bat an eyelash over firing Charlie. *Must! Not! Happen!* Technically, it was Simon who had raised the subject, so it wouldn’t really be his fault, would it? *Yeah. Long as you pretend you don’t know right from wrong.* He always did his best to avoid lying. How could he answer without breaking Nate’s rules? What if Nate was right? What if simply mentioning the theater caused the old man to keel over dead. *You’re a nurse, damn it! You know that’s not going to happen!* The opportunity to get to know Simon Sonntag was a dream come true—far beyond anything he’d ever imagined. There had to be some way to thread this needle. Then he remembered an old trick he’d learned from one of his nursing instructors: *turn the patient’s question around on him.*

He inclined his head to meet Simon’s gaze and knitted his brow, donning his serious face as he leaned in, staring right into the man’s eyes. “Do you like showtunes, Simon?”

Simon laughed. “I do. So much I’ve even written one or two.”

“I know.”

“You do?”

Charlie hung his head and nodded.

“You seem reluctant. Is something wrong?”

“Nate said I wasn’t supposed to talk about... the theater,” he told his shoes, before looking Simon in the eye again.

“Nate.” Simon’s face fell, his visage going from amused to forlorn.

“He said talking about theater would upset you, maybe enough to affect your health. As a nurse, I know it’s rare for someone to become so upset it causes physical harm. But it’s possible, and your well-being is my number one

concern.” The expression on the old man’s face was grave. A moment ago he’d been smiling. *Quick! Crack a joke!* “Besides, Nate’s the one who signs the checks!” Simon’s head snapped up, and Charlie winked at him. “I want him to be happy with my work, and—”

“My grandson is not a happy man.”

Charlie sighed. “I’ve only talked with him twice, and I can see that.”

“He means well. He thinks he’s protecting me.”

“From what?”

“It’s a long story.”

Charlie grinned. “Um, I can’t leave the apartment till tomorrow.” He was delighted when Simon returned his smile.

“We’ve got a while before Rosa kicks me out so she can clean the room while I have breakfast. I’ll make a deal with you.” Simon patted the bed beside him. “Come sit and tell me a little about yourself, and then we can eat together, and I’ll tell you what you need to know about Nate.”

“Am I allowed to eat with you?”

“It’s my apartment, you’re allowed to do whatever the hell I say!”

Charlie’s face lit up. “Gimme one sec, and you’re on.” He ducked into the workroom and tossed the empty cups into the wastebasket. He turned back toward Simon’s room and stopped, pinching himself on the cheeks to try and calm down. He straightened his spine and brushed his palms down the front of his scrub top, reminding himself he was a professional. *Cartwheels would not reflect well on the agency, my dear!* He walked deliberately back into Simon’s room and took a seat beside him on the bed. “What would you like to know?”

“Let’s start with why you love showtunes.”

“Oh, my gosh! Are you kidding? What’s not to love?” Charlie knew he tended to get a little over-exuberant when he talked about his favorite topic. *But if there’s any place it’s welcome, it’s gotta be here, right?* “It started when I was little. One of my earliest memories is sitting on the living-room floor in front of the hi-fi with my mom, listening to her albums. *The King & I* was my favorite. We even worked out a patty cake game for ‘Getting To Know You.’ She had dozens of shows, and by the time I was seven I had every song memorized, and I’d worked out dances to go with a lot of them.”

Simon was smiling, and one of his eyebrows wriggled slightly. “Your parents encouraged this... erm, behavior?”

Charlie tipped his head from side to side. “I’m not sure how my dad felt about it, but my mom, yeah, she was the Drama teacher at the high school—that’s why she had all those original cast recordings—and, yes, she did encourage me. Told me I was talented. Said I was her little Broadway star.”

“So, you sing and dance?”

“Oh, God! It’s what I live for! I take lessons in Brooklyn, and in two weeks we’re having a recital. I’m in all four dance numbers, and I get a solo. I’m gonna to sing ‘Being Alive’!”

Simon scowled. “Not one of mine.”

“Well, no, sir, but I—”

Simon’s dour look turned into a big grin as he patted Charlie’s knee. “Don’t take me seriously, son. That’s always a mistake.”

Movement at the doorway, and the sound of a throat clearing, caught their attention.

“Breakfast is served, sir.”

“We’ll be in shortly, Rosa.”

“Oh. Shall I set an extra place?”

“Yes, please. Thank you, Rosa.”

She glanced at Charlie before walking away.

Simon stood and went over to the dresser, where he put on a wristwatch and a gold ring. He turned to Charlie and motioned toward the door. “We’d better be going in, Charlie.”

Charlie grinned, the *King & I* reference not lost on him. He bowed formally at the waist and then made a similar gesture. “Yes. We’d better be going in, Simon.”

Simon laughed and led the way.

Charlie stayed behind him and a little to one side, closely observing the way Simon walked. By the time they got to the dining room and were seated, he’d decided he concurred with the doctor. That walker really was optional. Simon’s gait was stable and strong, like that of a much younger man. He was also able to stand and sit without hesitation and with no apparent signs of difficulty.

Once Rosa had served their meal and left the room, Charlie's curiosity steered him back to their earlier conversation. "So, I've told you a little about me. Are you ready to explain why Nate has this rule about not mentioning family or theater?"

"Yes, but"—Simon's brow furrowed—"in order for you to understand Nate, there are some things about me I should tell you. From what you've said, it's safe to assume that the name Lester Braunstein is not unknown to you?"

"Your partner. The two of you wrote fourteen musicals together."

Simon laughed. "A few more than that. Those are the ones we managed to get produced. So, as I'm sure you know, Lester was more than my writing partner..." Simon let out a sigh. "He was my life partner."

"Oh," Charlie said, unsure how to react. "I had no idea."

"Really?" Simon looked genuinely surprised. "I just assumed it was general knowledge. I mean, everyone in New York knew... at least eventually. I guess sometimes I forget there's a whole world out there beyond this little island."

"So, Sonntag and Braunstein—"

"Actually, it's Braunstein and Sonntag. The composer always comes first!"

For a moment, Charlie was distracted by at least three possible interpretations of that statement—one of them potentially profound—but he got himself back on track. "So, Lester and you... and..." He tilted his head. "And you're also Nate's grandfather?"

"Ah, yes. Well... it was the 1950s when we met, and even in New York such things were kept hush-hush back then. I married my best friend, Diane, because she and her girlfriend needed cover as much as Lester and I. Diane wanted a baby, so I... contributed. She raised our son, and I spent as much time with him as I could. My career was starting to take off at that point."

"So, your son is Nate's dad?"

"Yes, David... was Nate's father."

"Was? Oh."

"Now we're getting to why Nate is the way he is..." Simon's voice trailed off and he turned his head, looking out the window but not at anything in particular.

Nate's warnings, which had never drifted far from Charlie's awareness, resumed their rightful place front and center. "If this is too much—"

“No.” Simon returned his focus to Charlie. “Better you should understand. Two years ago, Lester died of cancer.”

“I remember hearing about that. It was right before *Heart’s Desire* opened.”

“Yes. A week before. I couldn’t stand being here in the apartment without him, so I packed my bags and went out to stay with David and his wife Judith on Long Island. I’d decided I wouldn’t attend opening night—there was no way I could face it without Lester at my side—but Nate had other ideas. He kept talking to me about how hard everyone had worked to put the show together, and how they were all counting on me, and how I should be strong for Lester’s sake. Nate... well, Nate can be very persuasive.”

Charlie smiled, hoping to lighten the mood. “Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

Simon chuckled and then took a slow, deep breath. “So... I relented. That night, Nate drove the three of us into the city, and there was... an accident.”

A chill ran up Charlie’s spine and he put a hand to his mouth, certain he didn’t want to hear what was next.

Tears began to pool in Simon’s eyes, but he went on. “David and Judith died at the scene, and Nate was badly injured. I...” He shrugged. “I got a few cuts and scrapes.”

“Oh, Simon!” He felt his own tears welling up. “I’m so sorry.”

“Yes, well...” Simon took another breath. “It’s like lifetimes ago.”

“You seem to be dealing with it pretty well, now. Why does Nate think you shouldn’t talk about it?”

“That’s my fault, I’m afraid. They only kept me in the hospital overnight, and when I came home... I went off the deep end. I told Rosa to pack up all the theater memorabilia and get rid of it. Then I shut myself in my room and wouldn’t see or talk to anyone. She brought my meals, even though I barely ate. By the time Nate got out of the hospital a month later, I was a wreck. He packed me off to ‘Happy Valley’ for six weeks, and the doctors did help with my grief, but when I got home... well, Nate was a changed man. All his life he was so vibrant and... vital. And since then... well, you’ve seen the way he is now. I wanted to talk with him. I knew it had to be eating him up inside, but... I was in so much pain myself, I just couldn’t think how to begin. And the more time went by, the harder it seemed talking would be. And he has no one else to talk to. I’m his only living relative now.”

“What happened to his grandmother, Diane?”

“Ah. She’s been gone thirty years. Breast cancer. They weren’t so careful with all the screening back then, and by the time they caught it, it was too late.”

“So, Nate’s trying to protect you from another breakdown over memories of the theater and your family?”

Simon nodded slowly, concentrating on the fork in his hand. “I’m sure that’s how he sees it, but lately, I’ve been thinking... as long as we avoid the whole subject, well, that means he doesn’t have to deal with it either, right?” He looked up at Charlie. “It’s occurred to me that, maybe subconsciously, what he’s doing is protecting himself.”

Charlie pictured the crooked lines etched into Nate’s face and wondered about the depths of the emotional scars hiding behind his captivating eyes.

He was a bit startled when Simon asked, “When did you say this recital of yours is?”

“Saturday after next.”

“Saturday?” Simon knitted his brow. “What about—”

“Oh! Don’t worry, Roger’s going to cover for me.”

“Ah. Very nice of him.” For a moment, Simon looked lost in thought. “I think you should ask Nate to come to your recital.”

Charlie was grateful he’d just finished swallowing the last of his orange juice. *That would have been a spit take, for sure!* He cleared his throat. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, Simon, but that is a truly dreadful idea.”

“Why?” Simon crossed his arms on his chest.

“Why?” Charlie’s eyebrows quirked in perplexity. “Well...” When words wouldn’t come, he remembered it had sort of worked when he’d turned Simon’s earlier question around. “Why would you think it’s a good idea?”

“He needs something... I don’t know... out of the ordinary. Something to break his routine. All he ever does is work. It would be good for him to go out and do something just for fun.”

“Well, you know him better than I do,” Charlie admitted. “But it’s difficult to imagine coming to my recital would be his idea of fun.”

“You never know.” Simon cocked an eyebrow. The light from the window glinted off his eyes. “Will you think about it? See how you feel the next time you talk to him?”

Charlie nodded on the outside, but inside he was certain that inviting Nate Sonntag to watch him perform would not be on his to do list any time soon.

[FADE TO BLACK]

ACT II

Act II, Scene 1

As usual, Charlie arrived a few minutes early for his voice lesson on Tuesday evening. Seth was already seated at the piano, and Barb was leaning over his shoulder, pointing out something in the sheet music. She turned to look at Charlie as he walked past, her gaze following him in curiosity. He thought he'd gotten his excitement under control on the walk from the subway—Barb would flip if she knew who he was working with, but patient privacy laws bound him to silence. He checked over his shoulder, and the look she was giving him said she knew something was up. *Maybe it's the way you're bouncing up and down?*

He dropped his bag on one of the chairs against the mirrored wall, and she walked up behind him, studying his reflection over his shoulder. "You look like the cat that ate the canary. Spill it."

He turned to face her and took a deep breath. "I'm sure I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about, Barbara."

"Don't give me that, Charlie. Something big's going on. It's written all over your face!"

He tried another deep breath, and it calmed him. A little. "I can't tell you. It's my new assignment, and we can't disclose patient identities."

"Charlie." The corners of her mouth turned down. "I would think after all the—" Her eyes flew wide. "Oh my God! It must be somebody famous!" She put a finger to her lips, her eyes shifting left and right as she scanned her memory banks. Telltale twitches of her nose revealed moments when she thought of a name and then cast it aside. She looked up, aghast. "Is it Chita Rivera?"

Charlie groaned.

Seth swung around on his stool, a stricken expression on his face. "Is it Elaine Stritch?"

"Stop it, you two. I can't tell you his name, and that's all there is to it!"

"His name!" Barb cried out. "That narrows it down."

"Okay, I am not kidding!" Charlie gained a sudden appreciation for the phrase "hot under the collar." He shook his head. "We are dropping this right now, or I'm leaving."

Barb let out an exasperated sigh. “Fine. Fine.” She turned and gave Seth a conspiratorial wink. “We’ll just pretend Charlie’s not about to blow a gasket.”

“Thank you!” Charlie said, praying he’d heard the last of it but expecting he hadn’t. “Now, can we get to work?”

“Might as well”—she scowled and her voice took on a sneering, sing-songy tone—“since you’re being all precious about your little secrets.”

Ouch! Why can’t she understand this? “Barb!” He felt tears trying to form. “Why do you have to be like that?”

Her face softened, and she leaned in close, putting a hand on his shoulder and smiling. “Oh, Charlie. You know better than to take me seriously. That’s always a mistake.”

A laugh burst out of him.

“What’s so funny?”

Relief flooded in as his laughter faded. “That’s the same thing Simon said when—”

Their jaws dropped in unison, their mouths falling open.

“Simon!” she screeched, leaning back and turning to Seth. “Male. Famous. Needs a nurse. Simon...” She snapped her head back to Charlie and brought her hands to her cheeks. “Simon Cowell?”

“Barb!” Charlie put his palms together, pleading.

“It’s not him,” Seth insisted. “I heard he went crying back to England when they cancelled that hideous—” he shuddered “—show.”

Barb spun on her heel, pointing a bony finger at Charlie. “Simon Sonntag!”

Seth gasped. “*The* Simon Sonntag?”

Charlie moaned and sank onto a chair.

“Seth”—Barb gave him the stink eye—“do you think we’d be going through all this rigmarole if it was some cabbie called Simon Sonntag?”

Seth gasped again, raising a hand to his chest. “Is he ill?”

“I wasn’t even supposed to tell you his name, you think I can discuss his medical condition?” Charlie dropped his head forward, covering his face with his hands and sighing. “Just between us, you don’t need to worry.”

Seth's relief was palpable. "Oh, thank Goddess! He's such a treasure but, I mean, he's ancient, right? And nobody's laid eyes on him since Braunstein died. There've been rumors—"

"Well I don't want to hear them! And..." He lowered his hands and looked up at Seth. "Rumors. That's the reason we have privacy laws in the first place." He looked back and forth between them and when he spoke, his voice cracked. "I could lose my nursing license."

Barb sat down next to Charlie and took both his hands in hers. "Sweetie. We're your friends. We'd never do anything to get you in trouble." She took a deep breath. "You know..." She brightened. "If I were you, I'd be asking him a million questions. Have you gotten any juicy stories about the glory days of Broadway?"

Charlie shrugged and sat up. "There's a problem with that."

"Oh?" Barb cocked a penciled-in eyebrow.

"I'm not supposed to talk about theater."

Seth gasped yet again at the same time Barb cried out, "What? Why?"

Charlie shook his head. "It's complicated. There's a... grandson." He looked down at the floor. "Nate."

"Nate?"

"It's his rule for the nurses. Don't talk about family or theater."

Barb glowered. "What a manipulative bastard!"

"No!" Charlie snapped defensively and then, wondering what he was trying to defend, softened his tone. "Like I said, it's—"

"Right. Complicated." She made air quotes. "But sweetie, what kind of monster tries to prevent his grandpa from talking about what he's devoted his life to?"

"It's not like that!" He realized he was shouting and took a deep breath, focusing on the wall over Barb's shoulder. "Nate's not like that. He's... he thinks he's protecting Simon."

"From what?" She gave him that incredulous scowl again, and this time it didn't look pretend.

He returned his gaze to meet Barb's, pleading for mercy. "I shouldn't be talking about their affairs."

For a moment, Barb studied him through narrowed eyes; this time, her brows shot up like they were trying to crawl right off her forehead. “You like him!”

“Barb!”

“This Nate—you... you’ve got the hots for him!”

“Barbara, stop! It’s not like that.”

“Charlie. I’ve known you almost a year. Why else would you be trying to protect someone you say ‘thinks’ he’s protecting someone else—which means you don’t buy it.”

Seth chose that moment to chime in. “So, what does this Nate look like?”

Charlie hid his face in his hands again and let out something between a sigh and a moan.

Seth used his legs to waddle-roll his stool over to Charlie and rested a hand on his knee. “There, there, dear,” he said. “Don’t let the tall lady frighten you. You can tell Uncle Seth all about it.”

Charlie spread his fingers and peeked out between them just in time to see Seth winking at Barb. He groaned. “You two are incorrigible. It’s worse than being in high school.”

Barb put her hand on his other knee. “Well then, unless you want a swirly, you’d better give it up.”

He tried the pleading look again. “There’s nothing to give up.”

She shook her head, grinning.

“Oh, fine!” Charlie sighed in exasperation. “He’s gorgeous! But I’ve only talked with him twice, and... I don’t even know if he’s gay.”

Seth cleared his throat and said, “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

“Oh, Jeez!” Charlie was desperate for an exit strategy. He glanced at his watch. “Oh! Look at that! We’re two minutes into the hour I’m paying for. Any chance we could get to work?”

Seth grunted and shoved off backwards, rolling to a smooth stop a few inches from the piano before swinging around.

“Very well, Mr. Perkins,” Barb said as she rose, a motherly smile twinkling behind her mock-professional façade. “Let us begin your lesson.”

They walked to the piano, and Seth started the intro.

Act II, Scene 2

Charlie's three days off had flown by, what with Tuesday's embarrassing voice lesson—followed by a soothing and pleasant conversation over coffee with Joel—and a dance rehearsal Thursday that had gone very well. In between, he'd spent all of Wednesday running around taking care of things that needed doing before his next four-day sequestration from the real world.

On Friday morning, he was pleased when Roger reported their patient continued to be in stable health. He fell into his easy routine of mostly staying out of the way, except when needed.

Friday evening, after dinner, Nate came for his regular visit with Simon. On his way out, instead of his usual nod from the door, he walked into the workroom. "Hi, Charlie. How's it going?"

"Fine, Nate. You?"

"I'm good, thanks. Mind if I sit down a minute?"

"Please." Charlie pulled out the other chair.

"It's been a week, so I just wanted to check in and see how you're doing."

"Well, I'd say everything's good. Your grandpa's condition is stable, he hasn't had any physical complaints, and he seems to be in good spirits."

Nate hesitated. "Yes... that's great, and I'm glad to hear it, but... I was asking about you. How's it going for you?"

"Oh." Charlie wasn't quite prepared for that. Despite his misgivings about the uniquely dysfunctional family dynamic, and the air of tension that seemed to lurk around every corner of this old apartment, the opportunity to spend time with Simon was still blowing his mind. And then there was Nate—a dark, inscrutable puzzle. He hadn't realized till this moment he was intent on solving it. "I've been doing home health for a year, and this is the best assignment I've had."

"So, you're happy here?"

How much does he really know about happy? "Very much so. I hope I get to stay."

"Oh, yes. Simon's made it clear he's pleased with you."

“Well, that’s a relief. I heard there were a few before me who didn’t last very long.”

“Hmph.” Nate’s eyes shifted to the side. “I hated having to let them go, they were fine nurses, but he didn’t... He won’t come out and say it, but”—he looked Charlie in the eye—“I know he’d rather be taken care of by a male.”

Nate held Charlie’s gaze but said nothing further. Charlie looked into his eyes and, once again, was clueless as to what might lie behind them. It only took a moment for the pause to become awkward, and he looked down at his hands in his lap. When he looked back up, Nate had turned his head and appeared to be studying the papers on the corkboard.

Nate faced him and cleared his throat. “What was the name of that place in Minnesota?”

“Cortela?”

“Right. Cortela. I’ve never been to any of the flyover states.” For an instant, Charlie thought Nate was about to smile. “Is it nice?”

“It was a great place to grow up. And I can imagine maybe retiring there. For the middle part of my life? I like it here.”

Nate nodded, and then there was another clumsy pause. “What do your folks do?”

Charlie cocked his head to one side. *Just when you thought this conversation couldn’t get any weirder. He wants to talk about family?* Taking another look into Nate’s eyes, it struck him the man’s interest was genuine. “My mom’s the Drama teacher at the senior high. It’s a small school, so she has to teach English, too.”

Nate nodded, seeming attentive.

Charlie went on. “She taught me how to sing and dance. I take lessons in Brooklyn, and—” He realized he was about to get revved up on a topic Nate wouldn’t welcome, so he redirected himself. “And my dad runs the farm.”

“What kind of farm?”

“Mostly corn, for ethanol, and some soybeans and hay. A few years ago he set aside some land to transition to organic produce, because apparently that’s a hot market these days. And... you know, there’s a kitchen garden and some chickens and goats.”

“I bet all that kept you busy after school.”

“Yeah, well, everybody on a farm has their chores, but I got out of a lot of them between voice lessons and dance class, and rehearsals when there was a play coming up. Of course, I was solely responsible for mucking out Pippin’s stall.”

“Pippin?”

“My horse.”

Nate’s face came alive. “You had a horse?”

“Have. He’s still mine. But I only get to see him when I go home for Christmas and my birthday.”

“What kind is he?”

“Just an old Quarter Horse. You know horses?”

“I, uh... yeah. I have horses too.”

“You do?” Charlie was stunned. *He so does not look like a horse person.* Then, an image of Nate straddling his mount flashed through Charlie’s mind, and he definitely liked what he saw. “Horses? Plural?”

“Three. And I board five others. I think I mentioned the house on the North Shore, but it’s also a riding stables, with arenas and some acreage and forest trails and a lake.”

“Wow! Sounds beautiful.”

Nate took a deep breath. “You could come riding sometime if you like.”

Charlie’s attention was drawn to the golden flecks glimmering in the deep brown of Nate’s eyes. If only he knew what to read there. This was a “wouldn’t it be great,” kind of invitation, not a “Wednesday at 11:40.” *Does he want to spend time with me?* He shrugged. “That would be nice.”

Saturday morning, after breakfast, Charlie saw Simon approaching through the gallery. Instead of his typical smile and faux military salute on the way into his room, he stopped in the doorway. “May I join you?”

Charlie rolled the other chair in Simon’s direction. “Please.”

Simon sat down and took a deep breath. “It was quite a surprise last week when you said you didn’t know about me and Lester. I forget what a bubble show business is. I’ve never talked theater with anyone who didn’t live within a

two-mile radius of here.” He chuckled. “Well, I guess that includes you now, but you know what I mean. Someone from out there?” He gestured with a sweep of his arm. “In America?” He leaned back and grasped the chair’s armrests. His fingers squeezed and released. Squeezed and released again. “I miss my work.”

“I would think so.” He could tell Simon was on edge and wondered what this was leading up to.

“I’ve been thinking... it might help to talk about it. And talking to someone with an outsider’s perspective could be illuminating.”

“We’ve already broken Nate’s rule.” Charlie pursed his lips. “And you must know... nothing would make me happier than talking musicals with you.”

Simon beamed. “I’d like that a lot.”

“It’s such a shame you threw out all your mementos.”

“Oh. That. Well...” He turned his head aside and coughed into his fist. “Rosa did as I said and packed it all up. I thought it was gone. But I discovered later on that instead of throwing it out, she had Barney, the building super, lug it all down to the storage room in the basement. When I got home from my six weeks at the funny farm, I was regretting how rash I’d been—that I had nothing left to remember Lester by—and then it hit me. His piano! She couldn’t have gotten rid of that. I wanted to sit and touch it—touch something that had been ours. I went to the music room, but there was a new lock on the door. I got Barney up here and asked him what the hell was going on. He wasn’t going to tell me till I threatened to call the head of the residents’ association. He confessed that Nate had ordered him to haul all the boxes back in there, install the lock, and—” he waggled his eyebrows and lowered his voice “—and carry the secret to his grave.”

“The Secret Room!” Charlie bounced in his chair.

“I managed to cajole Barney into giving me a copy of the key. When I went in, I couldn’t believe my eyes. Nate had restored everything to its original place. Of course... I haven’t been able to tell him that I know, and as far as I can tell, he’s never gone back in there.”

Charlie shook his head. “The two of you are going to have to face this at some point.”

“I know. I know. The longer it goes on, the worse it gets. Maybe you can help me find the way?”

“You know I’ll do whatever I can.”

“Well, for a start—” Simon’s worried weathered face broke into a beaming grin “—would you like to see it?”

Charlie started bouncing again. “What was your first clue?”

Simon laughed. “C’mon, then,” he said, rising.

Charlie bounded down the hall ahead of Simon but stopped halfway and turned. “What if Nate shows up?”

“Not a chance,” Simon said. “It’s Saturday. He’s working. Won’t be by till after supper. It’ll be fine.”

Charlie nodded in agreement, but a vaguely queasy feeling seeped into his gut as he walked the rest of the way down the hall and waited while Simon fiddled with the keys.

There was nothing sinister about The Secret Room. It looked much like all the others, with dark wood paneling and plush carpet. One long wall consisted entirely of a massive mahogany shelving unit with built-in lights illuminating its contents. There was a love seat beneath the two windows on the south side, overlooking Sixty-Third Street. A third window, on the back wall, offered a view of the alley. A gleaming ebony grand piano stood in the center. *Lester’s piano*. Charlie’s mind reeled as he imagined the endless hours the two men must have shared in this room.

He turned to the fireplace on the back wall. It had a long, elegant mantel on which stood a row of Tony Awards in a perfectly straight line. “Nine Tonys,” Charlie whispered, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Those are the ones specifically for Lester and me. I once added up all the Tonys for all the categories for all our shows, including the revivals.”

“How many?”

A faint blush rose to Simon’s cheeks and he looked down. “Eighty-seven.”

Charlie turned his attention back to the mantel and walked down the row. Each trophy was identical, the masks of Comedy and Tragedy chiseled on the face of what looked like a giant suspended coin, with a plaque on each base that simply read, “American Theatre Wing, Tony Award.” He turned to Simon. “How do you know which one is which?”

“You have to turn the medallion around. It’s on the back side.”

Charlie reached for the nearest statue, but hesitated. Every summer, as far back as he could remember, he'd snuggled up on the couch with his mother, a gigantic bowl of popcorn, and a six-pack of root beer to watch the Tony broadcast. Not even his move to New York had ended that tradition. She'd made him promise he'd come home for a week every Christmas and a week around his birthday on June seventh. This year, his summer visit had coincided with the award show and likely would in years to come. And now, here he was, reaching out for an object he'd only ever seen on TV... and in his dreams. Suddenly, his eyes went wide with shock. *Oh, my God! I haven't called Mom!*

Simon stepped closer. "It's all right. You can touch them. They were pulled out of the garbage, after all."

Charlie gave Simon an inquisitive glance and then pushed a finger against the edge of the medallion on the first award. It swiveled around, and the back was inscribed:

*The American Theatre Wing
Presents To
Lester Braunstein and Simon Sonntag
This Award For Best Original Score
"Lady, Beware!"
1961–1962*

Charlie swallowed around the lump in his throat. "This was your first."

Simon nodded.

He made his way down the row a second time, turning each of the medallions and reading the names of the musicals he'd grown up with. Of the nine, he'd been in two of these shows and seen productions of four more. He knew each song from all of them by heart. "This is like waking up on another planet."

Simon was all smiles.

Charlie turned to inspect the shelves on the opposite wall and was surprised to see three more rows of trophies. Like the Tonys, they were all identical, but they were smaller. Each statue was in the form of a frosted-glass quill pen rising from a wooden base, and the lights hidden among the shelving made them glow. "Whoa! What are all these?"

"Ah, those are the Drama Desks."

Three rows of six. “Eighteen? That’s twice as many as the Tonys.”

“It’s not a numbers game to me, Charlie. I’d rather have one Drama Desk than a dozen Tonys.”

“Really?” He’d heard of this award, but didn’t know anything about it. “Why?”

“Well, you see, the Tonys are... I don’t want to sound disrespectful, but they’re all about the business of show business. Most of the voters have vested interests. The last thing the Tonys are about is art. The Drama Desks are nominated and voted on by the critics and reporters and editors. Winning Tonys gets you a long run, but the Drama Desk means you’ve created something worthwhile. That’s how I see it, anyway.” His lips contorted in a curlicue, and he rolled his eyes. “And if you ever tell anyone I said something that nice about the critics, I’ll have to kill you.”

Charlie laughed.

“How many Drama Desks in total for all the categories?”

“I never calculated that one. But it wouldn’t be hard to figure out.”

“Let’s do it!” He spied a computer on the desk in the corner. “Do you have the Internet?”

Simon pouted. “I know I look like a relic, but really?”

Charlie fired up the computer, and Simon gave him the password. He went to his favorite site, IBDB, the Internet Broadway Database. Simon pulled up a chair next to him, taking paper and pen, and a gigantic pair of reading glasses, from a drawer. Charlie called up the list of Braunstein and Sonntag shows, opened the first one, and clicked on the Awards link. They counted the Drama Desk nominations and wins, and then moved on to the next show. After they’d counted a few, Charlie was distracted by the sudden appearance of Claude at his side. The dog looked up and gave him a disdainful glare. Then it moved around to sit next to Simon, who gently scratched its ears as they continued to count. It took some time to click through each of Simon and Lester’s musicals. After nearly an hour, they’d arrived at their totals.

“Including all the revivals,” Charlie said, leaning back in his chair, “...two hundred thirteen nominations, and one hundred and thirty-seven people took home one of those statues.” He stretched his arms over his head. “Un. Freaking. Believable.”

Simon leaned back, too. “I said it wasn’t a numbers game, but... well, even I’m impressed.”

A sound from somewhere deep in the huge apartment caught Charlie’s attention, and he felt a sudden flush of guilt. He turned to Simon. “You know, now that I’ve been in here, it could get awkward keeping this from Nate. Just like the walker, I won’t lie to him if he asks.”

Simon sighed and went back to stroking Claude’s head. “I just don’t know what to do about Nate.”

Charlie turned to look his new friend in the eye. “Simon—” he wasn’t sure how to approach this “—you told me all about you and Lester, and how different it was being gay back then compared to now.”

“Yes?” Simon looked up, and his hand went still on Claude’s neck, his full attention on Charlie.

“Well... You suggested I invite Nate to my recital, and... you told me a lot about his background, but... you never said anything about... about a girlfriend or a—” he scrunched his face into a pinched knot “—a boyfriend.” He opened his eyes just enough to see Simon studying him intently. *What the fuck were you thinking?* His words came spilling out so fast his tongue began to trip on some. “I would never ask anybody t-to out anybody else, and... that’s n-n-not what I meant, but, well, I-I guess I did mean that. I mean... I—” And then he realized Simon was laughing at him.

“Son—” Simon pulled off his glasses and wiped the back of a hand across his eyes “—are you interested in Nate?”

“Wh-why would you think that?”

“You seem a little wound up, Charlie. And this is the first time I’ve heard you stammer. And I’ve seen how you look at him, and... well, I’ve seen the way he looks at you.”

Charlie snorted. “He looks at me like I’m some kind of unavoidable complication.”

Simon chuckled. “I’d say you’ve got that right, only... not the way you think.”

Charlie knitted his brow. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, Nate looks at you the way Lester used to look at me.”

Charlie hung his head and said to the floor, “I get confused when he looks at me. You think there’s a chance he might be interested?”

“I think there’s an easy way to find out?”

Charlie brightened, looking up. “Really?”

“Sure. Invite him to that recital, like I told you to.”

Charlie groaned.

Nate arrived after supper and went straight in to see Simon. Charlie sat at the workroom computer playing solitaire and pretending the man hadn’t failed to give his usual nod as he went by. He was expecting to be ignored on departure too, so it was a surprise when Nate stepped into the doorway, a curious look on his face, and said, “Yes?”

Charlie raised his eyebrows and turned away, looking over his shoulder, as if to see who was behind him. He turned back to Nate and grinned. “Me? Yes, what?”

“Zayda said there was something you wanted to ask me.”

“Zayda?” Charlie asked. The meaning was clear from the context, but he was stalling for time. *I’m gonna kill that meddling old geezer!*

“Sorry. Grandpa.”

“Oh. Right. Grandpa.” He nodded. “Is that Yiddish?”

“It is.”

“I see.”

“Well?”

“Oh. Right.” Charlie decided his only option was to man up and get this over with. “It’s nothing, really. I told you I take voice and dance lessons, right?”

Nate nodded.

“Well, a week from tonight, Saturday the sixteenth, we’re having our annual recital and... I have comps... a-and I was wondering if you’d like to come see the show?”

Nate’s expression darkened, and he rubbed his fingers back and forth over the black stubble on his chin. He looked up at Charlie. “I...”

I can't believe you were stupid enough to put the man in this position.
“Look, don't worry about it. It's no big deal.”

“No, I... I'd like to, it's just... I'm not sure... What time Saturday?”

“Eight-fifteen curtain.”

“Wait. You're not working?”

“Roger's coming in to cover for me. It's on the schedule.” He indicated a sheet of paper pinned to the corkboard on the wall.

“I might be able to come. I'm not sure. Can you leave me a ticket at the box office?”

Charlie knew a brush-off when he heard one. “Sure. I can do that.”

Act II, Scene 3

Charlie leaned closer to his reflection to finish the liner under his eyes. He didn't like wearing makeup, but he lived for these rare moments when he was applying it seated before a big mirror outlined in lights. It was a singular experience; all the planning and hard work leading up to that moment suddenly gelled, and any nervous edge he'd been suffering simply melted away. He was calm and centered.

When he'd arrived fifteen minutes before, his stomach had felt like a butterfly farm. It had been very nice of Roger to cover his Saturday night at Simon's. If Roger had also been kind enough to show up on time, Charlie wouldn't have spent the entire trip from the Upper East Side to Brooklyn tied in knots thinking he might hold up the show. Setting out from the apartment at a run, he'd called Barb to apologize and assure her he was on his way. By the time he'd gotten to the theater, the other men were already finished, so now he had the dressing room to himself. He lived for opportunities to perform, and watching the transformation of his face in the mirror somehow told his body that everything was going to be all right.

He slipped on his costume for the opening number and climbed the narrow, creaking stairs to the wings. The plush velour of the main curtain muffled the sounds of the assembling audience to a dull murmur. It took his last ounce of reserve to keep from walking over and pulling the edge aside to have a peek. *Really? What are you? Five?* Just as he started to wonder why it mattered so much whether Nate had shown up, a warm hand slipped into his, and he turned to see Barb beaming at him.

"You got ready so fast!"

"Didn't have much choice, did I? Sorry. Again."

"No worries, sweetie." She rested her free palm lightly against his cheek. "I'm just happy you're here and not a nervous wreck like me."

"Oh please, Barb. You wouldn't be nervous in front of a firing squad."

She smiled and made a move to pinch his cheek, but must have remembered the makeup. "I just want you all to do well."

"We're going to be great!" *I can't resist!* He pinched her cheek.

As he lowered his hand, she caught that one as well, and gave them both a squeeze. “All right, then. I’m going to check on the audience. Then I’ll be back to call places.”

She whisked away, and he took a few deep breaths before going to find his fellow performers.

When Barb reappeared, Charlie was leaning his shoulder against the backside of the proscenium, one eye closed, the other squinting through the tiny crack between the arch and the curtain. He refused to let himself touch the fabric—*that would be unprofessional*—but there was no harm in just peeping. All he could make out was the last two seats on the far end of the front row, where a young couple sat reading their programs.

“Who do you have out front?” she asked, bumping him in the side with her elbow.

“Dusty and her date, and... there might be someone else.”

“The sexy grandson? Nate, is it?”

“Barb.” He turned to face her. “Please. Not now. He wasn’t sure if he could make it. I think he was just being polite.”

She smiled and stroked his arm. “Well, try to put it out of your mind. We’ve got a crowd to dazzle. You ready?”

“Ready.”

“All right.” She turned to the rest of the performers milling about the wing. “Places everyone, and break a leg.” Then she scurried off to watch the opening number from the front.

Charlie took his position near center stage and had a last look around at his classmates. The work lights snapped off, plunging the stage into darkness, and he closed his eyes inhaling deeply. The house lights must have dimmed, because the murmur of the crowd fell silent. And then he felt the rush of cool air as the curtain rose. The music started, and as the lights faded up he didn’t have to remind himself to smile. It came from somewhere deep inside and lit up not just his face but his entire body.

Once they were underway, he tried a few times to see if he could pick out any faces in the audience. He knew better, and he didn’t allow it to distract him—*much*—still, he was sure he’d feel better if only he knew one way or the other. The theater Barb rented for her annual recital was small, maybe two

hundred seats. From what he could make out in the reflected stage lights it was fairly full.

After the first two solos, he was back on for the second dance number. This one had a slower tempo, and he managed to spot Dusty's bright-red dress in the front row. She'd said she was bringing a co-worker. He didn't know who. *At least there's someone out there to cheer me on.*

Next there was a duet, and then the third dance number, and before he knew it he was huddled in the wings with Barb while she helped him with his quick change into the shirt for his solo.

"Being Alive" was one of the most beautiful and stirring songs he had ever heard. He'd never had a chance to see *Company* performed live, but he'd been knocked out by the video of the latest Broadway revival with Raúl Esparza playing Bobby. A few weeks ago, when he'd insisted—over Barb's objections—on singing this song, he couldn't have imagined there being a particular somebody he'd want to sing it to. *Damn! I wish I knew if he was out there!*

Seth started the simple, quiet vamp that would repeat until Charlie was ready to come in. He took the deepest breath he could and then let it out slowly. With head bowed, he walked through the darkness to his position downstage center, stepping into the single spotlight awaiting him there. When he was ready, he looked up, over the heads of the audience, and began the first verse. In a gentle, lilting tone he sang about wanting all the annoying things that come with any relationship. At the start of the second verse, he put some oomph into it and began using the power in his diaphragm to emphasize phrases about being known too well and being needed too much. He let it rip when he begged to be put through hell, if that's what it took to be fully alive. When he came to the bridge, he closed his eyes and felt the reverberation of his voice blending with the piano to fill the space of the theater. His words soared, proclaiming the difference between being alone and being alive.

He opened his eyes again when he launched into the final verse, singing about being crowded with love. Without realizing what he was doing, his eyes began to scan the small pool of audience members illuminated in the reflected glow of his spotlight. He caught another glimpse of Dusty as he sang about being forced to care and then, just when he started the line about being made to come through, he spotted Nate, sitting in the row behind her. If he kept looking, he'd never be able to finish, so he tore his gaze from the man. It happened so quickly, he couldn't be sure. *Was that a tear on his cheek?*

Charlie put everything he had into the last lines of the song and managed to hold the final note longer than he normally could, which was already a very long time.

And then it was over.

Silence.

But only for a heartbeat, before the audience exploded into raucous applause. As he bent forward to bow, movement caught the corner of his eye, and he glanced to that side to see someone in the third row getting to their feet. He hung his head low, and by the time he stood up, the entire audience was standing too, clapping, hooting, whistling. His chest swelled with the praise and acceptance—the connection—but there was one connection he craved, and he stole another glance in Nate’s direction. Nate’s smile was electric, and when their eyes met, Charlie understood why people sometimes say their heart “skipped a beat.” The heat in Nate’s gaze pushed Charlie’s grin wider, and he took one more quick bow before turning and running from the stage.

He wasn’t sure what happened after that. He found himself seated in the wings, hearing Alison sing the intro to “What I Did For Love” while Barb was struggling to help him into his top for the finale. When his head popped through the opening, tears were streaming down her face.

“Baby, did you hear me?”

“What?”

“I said, you were magnificent! And that ovation? They could have eaten you with a spoon!”

“He’s here!”

“What? Who? Oh! Nate?”

Charlie nodded, unable to wipe the grin from his face.

“Oh, sweetie, that’s wonderful. I can’t wait to meet him. But right now, get your ass back out there and sing and dance!”

The finale was flawless, and when the curtain rose for their bows, the entire audience was already on their feet. With each solo bow, hoots and hollers and whistles came bursting from various sections of the theater. *There may be no business like show business, but there’s no audience like family and friends.* When Charlie took his solo bow, the whole crowd roared. There was one last group bow, before they gestured in unison to Seth. The applause swelled again.

They joined hands down the line, taking two steps back and raising their hands as one over their heads, holding them there a moment, before they all swept low in a final bow as the curtain fell.

There was a moment of silence in the dark before the work lights came on and his classmates erupted in a burst of delighted squeals and exhausted sighs. People were hugging and kissing all around him. He collected a few hugs himself as his fellow performers began to scatter and rush to the dressing rooms. They were going out to celebrate, but Charlie had to be back at work first thing in the morning, so he followed them down the stairs to collect his bag, saying his good-nights as they departed. When he got back to the stage, Barb and Jerry were the only people left.

“They all cleared out fast,” Charlie said.

Barb nodded. “The siren song of pizza and beer. Most of them have been eating rabbit food for months, to be sure they looked good tonight.”

Charlie chuckled, thankful for his metabolism. They kissed and hugged and said good night.

He stepped through the stage door onto the tiny stoop outside. When he turned to descend the steps to the alley, his breath caught. Even from the back, it was clear the man leaning against the brick wall at the foot of the stairs was Nate. When he turned around and looked up, Charlie’s breath caught again. *He’s dashing!*

Charlie took in the sight before him. It must have been the height difference—looking down at Nate from above instead of looking up a few inches—because for a moment he saw beyond the impressive package and caught a glimpse of the little boy Nate must have been. He held a single red rose in what looked to be a crushing grip, and when their eyes met, he smiled.

Charlie came down the steps till he was standing on the last one, a little too close to Nate and several inches taller. “Hi.”

Nate swallowed. “Hi.”

“Um—” he looked down “—is that for me?”

Nate startled, surprised to find the flower in his hand. “Oh. Yes.” He held it out. “They were selling them in the lobby.” He swallowed again. “It’s for a good cause. I think.”

Charlie plucked the stem from Nate’s hand, held the blossom to his nose, and closed his eyes as he inhaled. Then he smiled at Nate. “I wasn’t sure you’d show up.”

Nate looked away, his gaze distant. “Me neither.”

Charlie knew coming to the theater—any theater—had to be difficult for Nate. He yearned to reach out and soothe that ache, but anything he might say would reveal what he wasn’t supposed to know. He hated their situation. *How long are you going to let this go on?* “I’m glad you did.”

Nate turned back, and when their gazes locked, the scant distance between them melted in the heat. “Me too.” He cupped Charlie’s cheek in his hand and stretched up on tiptoe, lightly brushing their lips together. He sank back and cocked his head to one side. “I’ve been wanting to do that since the moment I laid eyes on you.”

Charlie laughed. It might have been a guffaw.

Nate stepped back, his ebullient expression souring.

Charlie instantly saw his mistake. *Idiot!* He stepped down to the pavement, taking Nate’s hands in his. “Oh, Nate! No. I’m so sorry.” He looked up into those brown eyes. “I’ve wanted it too.” He squeezed Nate’s hands.

“Then what’s so funny?”

“It’s not funny, I—” He glanced aside. Then he looked Nate in the eye. “I thought you didn’t like me.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Well, you can be a bit... stern, at times.”

“Stern? Is that how I come off?”

“Don’t worry about it.” He grinned and gave Nate’s hands another squeeze. “Can we try that again?”

Nate leaned in and Charlie closed his eyes, giving himself over to sensation—soft, warm lips pressed against his and strong, solid arms wrapped around his waist. He got lost in those arms. When Nate’s kiss went deeper, Charlie welcomed him. Their tongues began a slow waltz. A shiver ran through him like the thrill of the curtain going up, but what he felt “going up” right now was far more personal. He pressed his groin against Nate and ground his hips. The expensive suit did nothing to mask the rock-hard bulge that collided with his own as he slid from side to side.

Nate moaned.

The stage door burst open, and Charlie spun around to see Barb and Jerry spilling out onto the landing. They had their arms full and were laughing as they turned toward the stairs and then froze. “Oh! Sorry!”

Charlie laughed. “No worries,” he said, wiping at his mouth demurely. “Barb, Jerry, I’d like you to meet Nate.”

She shoved her things at Jerry and traipsed down the stairs. “It’s a pleasure,” she said, placing a dainty hand in Nate’s. “I’ve heard so little about you.”

Nate laughed. “I’d have to say the same, though”—he cast a sidelong glance at Charlie—“I think that may be about to change.”

“We didn’t mean to interrupt. We’ll just be going.”

“No, it’s okay,” Nate said. “I was about to offer Charlie a ride home.”

Charlie looked up and grinned. “Excellent!”

“Shall we?” Nate crooked his arm.

Charlie turned and slid his arm through, looking back over his shoulder as they walked away. “’Night Jerry. ’Night Barb.”

“Good night, Charlie.” She put her thumb to her ear and her pinkie to her lips, mouthing the words, “Call me.”

They strolled in companionable silence to an adjacent parking lot. When Nate pressed his key fob, lights blinked on a black Lincoln Navigator, and it chirped.

“Wow!” *That’s as big as dad’s combine.*

Charlie directed Nate through the streets of Brooklyn and across the Pulaski Bridge into Queens. They pulled up in front of his building, and Nate switched off the engine, resting a hand on Charlie’s knee. He turned in the driver’s seat and cleared his throat. “You’re off work Tuesday, right?”

“Right. And for the first time in months, no voice lesson either.”

“So, I was thinking... I don’t have to be in the city that day. We could go for that ride we talked about. Maybe a picnic lunch?”

A huge grin burst across Charlie’s face.

Nate smiled back.

“Are you asking me out on a date?”

Nate’s laugh was deep and throaty—a rumbling baritone to Charlie’s tuneful tenor. “I guess I am.”

Charlie leaned over the console and pressed his lips firmly to Nate’s for a moment.

“May I take that as a yes?”

“Yes.” Charlie planted a quick smooch on Nate’s cheek and then reached behind himself to open the door. He backed out of the car, pulling his bag with him.

“How about I pick you up here Tuesday morning? Around ten thirty?”

“You won’t be at Simon’s for lunch tomorrow?”

“No, I’ve got a ton of stuff to do at the house, and then Monday is wall-to-wall meetings in town. I doubt I’ll even make it over Monday night.”

“Well...” Charlie tried not to let his disappointment show. “I’ll be looking forward to Tuesday even more then.”

“Me too, Charlie. Good night.” He leaned over, reaching out.

Charlie took his hand and gave it a firm squeeze. “Good night, Nate. Thanks for the ride.”

He must have floated through the lobby and flown up the elevator shaft unaware, because next thing he knew, he was standing in the living room, brushing rose petals across the tip of his nose while Mind-Radio played “On The Street Where You Live.” He was startled by the front door opening, and he pivoted toward it.

“Charlie!” Dusty gasped. “You scared the crap out of me! I left as soon as the applause died down. How did you get home first?”

“I got a ride.”

“A ride? In a car? Who do you know who has a car?” she asked, slipping off her jacket and pulling the chopsticks from her bun to let her curly auburn tresses fall over her shoulders.

“Nate.”

“Nate?” She turned to face him, and when her gaze dropped to the flower in his hand, it dawned on her. “Oh my God, honey! He came to the show!” In two strides she was there, wrapping him in her arms and holding him tight. Her hair smelled like peaches and sunshine. She leaned back, looking him in the eye. Then she shook her head and pursed her lips. “You so deserve this! You’ve been here a year, and as far as I know you haven’t gotten any in all that time. I don’t know how you’ve managed not to explode!”

“I’m pretty self-contained when I need to be.”

“Yeah, well darlin’, it’s time to blow the top right off that container. I can’t believe I didn’t get to meet him!”

“I didn’t even know if he was going to be there. I have a feeling you’ll get a chance before long, though.”

She took his hands. “Really?”

Charlie gave her a sheepish grin and nodded.

“What?”

“We have a... kind of, a date.”

“A kind-of date? What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“We’re gonna ride horses and have a picnic.”

“You’re going to ride what? Are you out of your mind? Do you have any idea how big and scary those things are?”

“Yeah, but at least they’re not dusty, like heifers,” he taunted.

She raised a hand in affected preparation to slap him. Instead, she said, “I’m not kidding, you could get hurt.”

“I’ve been riding since I was a kid,” he insisted in a whiny tone.

“Say what?”

“Dusty. I own a horse. I can show you pictures of him if you want.”

She shook her head. “You live with a person for a year, and the things you don’t know...”

Act II, Scene 4

Sunday and Monday at Simon's had crept on in their petty pace—though Charlie was growing to love the old man's unique form of levity, and often found himself groaning at an astonishingly clever pun. The mind that had conceived all those witty lyrics over the decades was intact. *Seth's right. He is a treasure!* Much as he delighted in Simon's company, it was Nate's one brief visit on Monday that had made his heart beat a little faster, and his excitement had grown as Tuesday morning drew nearer.

And now, here we are! Heading east on the Long Island Expressway in Nate's big SUV, Charlie couldn't help but notice they were going a few miles under the posted speed limit, cars whizzing past in the other lanes. He was enjoying the change of scenery, and when a billboard came in sight, showing cattle promoting chicken dinners, he let out a laugh.

“What's so funny?”

“Oh, those cows. They reminded me of Dusty.”

“That sounds kind of mean.”

Nice! Way to show him what a great guy you are. He turned, ready to explain himself, and found Nate smiling at him. “It's not like that. See... well... I guess it's a long story. First, this morning, she was so excited about meeting you I thought she was gonna have a cow. Then, there's this thing with her name. I was very careful to pronounce it right when I introduced you—” *'cause she'd have killed me if I hadn't* “—but the way it's spelled...”

He looked over at Nate again and his smile had grown into a wide grin. *That looks so good on him!* Just a few weeks ago, Charlie had been wondering if the man ever smiled. Now it seemed he couldn't stop. It was a remarkable transformation. “Um... maybe inside jokes aren't worth explaining? You'll just have to trust me. It's funny.” He took another look out the window. “I really like this part of the island.”

“You've been out here before?”

“On my motorcycle.”

Nate frowned. “I hope you're careful. Those things are dangerous.”

It pained Charlie to know where all Nate's caution was coming from, and it was even worse that he couldn't say anything about it. It felt dishonest—and

that was the last thing he wanted to feel with Nate. He knew he had to work this mess out, and soon, if he wanted any chance of getting closer.

Nate exited the freeway onto a state road and Charlie lost himself in the scenery and his thoughts. After a series of turns they came around a curve, and the straightaway ahead was lined on one side with white wooden fencing. *Horse fence. This must be it!* Sure enough, they turned in at a gate where a small, tasteful white wooden sign, embossed with black lettering edged in gold, discreetly announced, “Sonntag Stables.”

The long driveway ran between two riding rings—with what looked like a lesson taking place in one—and past a large, white farmhouse, ending at a stable with a larger building behind it. A groom stood in front, holding the reins of two horses. “Are those waiting for us?” Charlie asked.

“Absolutely. Didn’t want to waste time tacking up, and...” He chuckled. “I have people for that.” He winked and then his expression broke into a self-effacing grin.

“Must be nice,” Charlie jested. “Back on the farm, we didn’t have valet horse parking.”

Nate laughed as they got out of the car, and he strode up to the groom. “Thanks, George,” he said, taking both sets of reins. George moved off, and Nate turned to Charlie. “This old guy’s yours today.” He indicated with his head. “He’s a gelding and gentle as a puppy. You said you had a Quarter Horse, and I thought Art here would be the closest I’ve got.”

Charlie nodded. Art looked taller than Pippin, but not by too much, and he did have a mellow air about him, nuzzling Charlie’s fingers when he held out his hand. “And this is...?” he asked, looking to the other horse.

“This is my baby doll, Gwen,” Nate said, rubbing his nose against her forehead. Gwen nickered.

“Wait, these are thoroughbreds, right?”

Nate nodded.

“Aren’t they supposed to have long, formal-sounding names?”

“Oh, they do. But all that’s just on paper. Nobody calls them by those. If you must know, you’ll be riding Arthur of Camelot.”

“You’re kidding me!”

“Really? You think I’d joke about a thing like that?”

“No. And then—” Charlie’s eyes went wide “—Gwen must be Guinevere?”

“You’re way ahead of me, though for the record she’s Fair Guinevere.”

“You said you had three. Do I need to ask?”

“I bet you don’t.” Nate’s smile lit up the already bright morning. “We can go inside and meet Lance if you like. He’s an Arabian, and he’s a little skittish out on the trails.”

“So, they’re all ‘show horses’?” Charlie couldn’t help snickering at his own pun.

“Well... Arthur’s retired from the stage,” Nate joked. But then his face got that serious look again. “Before my folks died, they used to show them, but...” He took a breath and looked at Charlie. “I don’t have the time for that, or the interest.”

Almost three weeks of pretending he didn’t know about Nate’s parents had been painful for Charlie. At moments like this, it was an ache in his chest. He’d been looking for an opportunity to come clean. The watching and waiting had given him an appreciation for Simon’s reluctance to raise the subject. Now that Nate had mentioned his parents, Charlie thought this might be the day to start a conversation.

They mounted their horses, Nate with the smooth grace of a man who rides regularly, while Charlie felt like he was clambering up a rickety ladder. Riding out, with Nate and Gwen in the lead, Charlie tried to take in the countryside around them, but every other minute he had to focus on shifting his weight around, trying to find a comfortable position. He’d heard that English saddles were different, but this thing was like some medieval torture device. The trail entered a wood, and Nate looked back over his shoulder. “It’s about a half mile to the lake.”

Charlie gave up on finding a comfortable seat and rode up next to Nate. “So, you inherited all this from your parents?”

Nate gave him a long look that Charlie couldn’t read. “Yes. All this and my abba’s import/export business in the city. They died two years ago in a car crash. I was driving. That’s how I got this.” He turned his head, aiming the damaged side of his face at Charlie.

“My God, Nate. I’m so sorry that happened. I can’t even imagine it.”

“No. You can’t.” There was no bitterness in his words. Just fact.

“Is that why you don’t want the nurses to mention family to Simon?”

“Bingo.” Nate still looked serious, though not upset. “It happened right after he lost his partner, and the grief almost killed him. He had to be hospitalized. He’s never recovered, and I won’t have him traumatized by a bunch of nosy questions from people who don’t actually care.”

Ouch! Is that what he really thinks of nurses? Charlie had to remind himself this was not about him. “Sometimes talking can be the best way to heal old wounds. Do the two of you talk about it?”

“Look. Charlie. I know you’re trying to help, but...” He shook his head. “There are some wounds that just don’t heal, okay?”

They rode on in silence until the trail emerged from the trees, revealing a small lake, the sun glinting off the ripples in its surface.

“Ready for some lunch?” Nate’s smile was back.

Charlie satisfied himself that he’d at least made an opening foray. “Sure. This is a beautiful spot.”

They dismounted, and Nate got halters and lead ropes out of the saddlebags, tying the horses to some trees. Next he produced a large blanket and handed it to Charlie to spread on the ground near the edge of the lake while Nate took out sandwiches and chips and two single-serving bottles of white wine, which began sweating in the heat.

“I see we’re roughing it,” Charlie said, quirking his lips into a grin.

Nate laughed and handed him a bottle. They settled side by side on the blanket and dug into their meal. Charlie took in the surrounding glade while he chewed a bite of his sandwich. When he’d swallowed and washed it down with some wine, he turned to Nate. “It’s lovely here. Secluded. Is this where you bring all the guys you kiss?”

“I can’t honestly say that never happened, but... it’s been a very long time since I kissed a guy.”

Charlie looked down at the band of lighter skin on his wrist, where his watch normally was, and then back at Nate, cocking an eyebrow. “Only since Saturday. That’s not so long.”

“I didn’t mean you. God! I haven’t been able to get that kiss out of my mind for three days.”

“Oh. So, you’ve been trying to forget it?” Charlie jibed.

“What? No!” Nate looked distraught. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I was just ribbing you, buddy. It’s been all I can think about, too.”

Nate’s face softened. “I’d like to do it again.”

“What’s stopping you?” Charlie asked, setting aside the rest of his sandwich and screwing the top back onto his wine.

“Apparently, nothing.”

Charlie leaned back, resting on his elbows, while Nate scooted over and then bent to take his mouth with fiery passion, driving into him and pressing down until Charlie lay flat on the blanket. He reached up and ran his fingers through Nate’s hair. He drew a deep breath through his nose, and the heady aromas of pine and sweat and shower gel scrambled his senses, mingling with the taste of salty man and a lingering hint of chicken salad.

Nate’s hand slid down Charlie’s shirt until it came to rest on the bulge at the front of his pants. He rubbed small circles there. Charlie slipped his hand from Nate’s hair and reached between them, delighted to find a matching prominence in Nate’s jeans. Without breaking the kiss, Nate unbuckled Charlie’s belt, and when he undid the button beneath, Charlie emitted a moan of appreciation. He hadn’t risked being the one to make the first move since that awful night in high school, and he was relieved he wouldn’t have to cross that bridge today. Nate tugged ever so slowly at his zipper tab, and Charlie could have sworn he felt a tiny pop each time the next pair of teeth released their grip.

Without warning, Nate plunged his tongue deep into Charlie’s mouth, digging his hand under the waistband of his briefs. Charlie broke the kiss with a gasp. The heat and pressure of a man’s fist wrapped around his cock was almost too much to bear. *Not “a man.” Nate!* It had been so long since he’d done this, he’d forgotten how intense a simple human touch could be.

Nate peppered his mouth with kisses and then rose to his knees, grabbing at the waist of Charlie’s jeans on either side. Charlie looked up to see an expression on Nate’s face that was somewhere between inquisitive and imploring. He nodded his head and arched his hips off the blanket. Nate slid Charlie’s pants and briefs to his ankles. He planted one knee between Charlie’s legs, taking Charlie’s dick in his hand again and stroking. Then he bent, lowering his head to it, but he stopped just before making contact and gazed up into Charlie’s eyes, his face a study in uncertainty.

“I’m safe,” Charlie assured him. “They test us every three months at work.”

Nate nodded. "I got a negative at my last annual, and it's..." He chuffed. "It's been a hell of a lot longer than that." He looked down and squeezed the base of Charlie's shaft. He placed a soft kiss on the underside, just below the head, before flicking his tongue back and forth over that delicate bundle of nerves, tasting, tempting. Charlie whimpered. Then he was engulfed in heat and wet and pressure. Nate slid all the way down, removing his hand and lowering himself until Charlie could feel the tip of his cock pressing against the back of Nate's throat. Charlie cried out, "Nate! Oh God, Nate!" and worked the fingers of both hands back into the man's soft brown hair.

Nate must have chuckled around his cock in response, because Charlie felt both a vibration and tiny pushes-and-pulls as Nate's head bobbed slightly. Nate's fingers encircled the base of his dick again as he sucked all the way up to the tip before plunging back down. He repeated that movement over and over, sinking quickly to the hilt then sliding slowly up. Nate's pace increased and Charlie began to feel that unique tingle in his muscles he knew signaled his imminent loss of control. He'd been merely resting his hands on the sides of Nate's head. Now he gripped firmly, halting the man's ministrations. Nate looked up.

"That's-so-good." Charlie's words rushed out in a breathy slur. "But I don't wanna blow. I wanna taste you first."

Nate smiled and rose to sit back on his haunches. "That can be arranged," he said with a wicked leer. He reached down and started unbuckling his belt.

Charlie worked his leg out from under Nate and scrambled to his knees so they were facing each other. He brushed Nate's hands aside and took over, pushing apart the ends of the belt and undoing the top button only to find another button below it. *501s!* He loved a man in button-flies. When the last one popped, he reached inside and almost yelped from the immediate contact with Nate's hot erection. He pulled it out and looked up at Nate in wonder. "You always go commando?"

"Only when I think I might get lucky," Nate replied, shoving his jeans down past his thighs.

"I'll show you lucky." Charlie moved back, lying down on his stomach with his head between Nate's legs and taking him into his mouth. Nate growled as Charlie sucked down hot, hard flesh as deep as he was able. He pulled back, sucking harder as he ran his tongue up the underside of Nate's throbbing shaft. He circled the head a few times and then set a steady up and down rhythm.

Nate began to moan, and Charlie ran his hands upward from the denim that still covered Nate's knees and onto the exposed skin of his thighs. *Furry! This just keeps getting better!* His senses were pulling him in so many directions at once he couldn't keep track. He managed to divide his attention between the taste of Nate on his tongue and the soft texture of cotton covering a firm abdomen and hard pectorals as he slid his hands up over them.

He began fumbling with a button on Nate's shirt, but Nate followed his lead and saved him the trouble, freeing himself and slipping it off to hang from his shoulders. Maintaining his oral assault, Charlie ran his palms over the planes of Nate's bare stomach and up, once again, to the hairy mounds of his chest. Without breaking the regular tempo he'd set bobbing on Nate's cock, he squeezed those pecs with all his might. He rubbed at Nate's nipples with his thumbs. When that fondling elicited another growl, he tilted his head and shifted his gaze to find the man already looking down at him, studying the spot where their bodies connected. He slowed his pace, pausing a moment at the top of each stroke to swirl his tongue around Nate's crown.

And then Nate stopped him with a hand planted firmly on his forehead. Charlie closed his eyes and sucked as hard as he could as he slid off, releasing Nate with a pop. He looked up again and was stunned by the beauty of the panting hirsute sex god above him. "Too much?"

"No," Nate croaked. "Perfect. But... but let's share this."

Charlie didn't know what he meant at first. It became clear as Nate rolled him onto his side and lay down next to him. Charlie hadn't watched much porn, but enough to know what a sixty-nine was, even if he'd never done it. He took Nate into his mouth again and his eyes rolled back in his head when Nate did the same. His mind short-circuited and he gave up even trying to sort out the sensations. His concepts of self and other shattered and fell away as mouths glided over dicks in unison, their sweaty bodies writhing in tandem.

He faltered for a moment when Nate grabbed his nuts and squeezed them tight. He mirrored the action drawing a groan from Nate. Charlie groaned back and matched Nate's moves, alternately rubbing and pulling on his balls. Nate groaned again, and again Charlie echoed the sound, an erotic call of the wild. With Nate's next squeeze, he realized he'd passed the point of no return. Charlie had never tried to growl—except maybe in acting class—but now he made the fiercest sound he could, and he was shocked by the vibrations charging through his cock and into his groin when Nate growled a lusty, robust response.

Every muscle in Charlie's body seized and spasmed when his climax ripped through him. Just as his hips were jerking into Nate's face, spurt after spurt of Nate's hot jism erupted into his mouth. *Vesuvius has lain too long dormant!* Waves of aftershocks coursed through Charlie, and he felt Nate trembling against him. He traced the form of Nate's thigh with his palm, relishing the texture of that rough, curly hair and the juxtaposition of those rock-hard muscles with the softening member in his mouth. He let it slide out and felt a caress of cool air on his own dick when it fell from Nate's lips.

His breathing and heart rate were returning to normal, and his entire body was limp. *Spent...*

Nate somehow had the energy to sit up. When he did, Charlie rolled onto his back, looking up at the cloudless sky as Nate swung himself around and lay down beside him again. He put an arm around Charlie and pulled him to his still-heaving chest. Charlie cuddled there, first skating the heel of his hand over Nate's pecs and then making lazy circles with the tip of his middle finger in the hairy cleft between them. He looked up to meet Nate's gaze, and his breath caught from the depth of emotion he saw in those eyes. It seemed this might be the moment to ask something important, but what came out was, "Is Nate your real name, or is it short for something, like Nathaniel?"

"Sort of."

Charlie donned his best incredulous expression, cocking both eyebrows and lowering his chin. "Sort of Nathaniel?"

Nate chuckled. "My mom was Orthodox, and she named me after her paternal grandfather. Natanael." Charlie tilted his head to give Nate a questioning glance, and Nate repeated it, slowly pronouncing each syllable. "nah-TAHN-eye-EL."

Charlie propped himself up on one elbow. "Natanael," he mimicked perfectly. He looked into Nate's smiling eyes and stroked the backs of his fingers across his cheek. "A beautiful name, for a beautiful man."

Nate broke their gaze and rolled his head to the side. "Um..."

Damn! He'd been so overwhelmed by his own feelings, it hadn't occurred to him Nate was sure to have issues with his appearance. *Don't spoil this moment!* He took Nate's hand, pulling it toward him and kissing the back of it. "You're completely beautiful to me."

Nate looked back, staring at Charlie's lips where they brushed his hand. Then his gaze rose to meet Charlie's again. "Thanks." He drew a slow breath.

“You...” He swallowed hard and his brow furrowed. “You’re...” He looked down and then rolled onto his side, his back to Charlie.

“Nate, it’s okay.”

After a pause that left Charlie breathless, Nate said, “I shouldn’t be so sensitive.”

“I like sensitive.”

Nate turned back to face him. And there it came again—*that smile!* It was like watching the sun emerge from behind a storm cloud. *Oh, thank heaven!*

“I’ll try to remember that.” Nate looked around at the mess strewn about them. “I guess we should get this packed up and head back in.”

They made quick work of reassembling their disheveled wardrobes and collecting the detritus from their picnic. Nate secured the saddlebags, passed over Art’s reins, and put his foot in the stirrup. He was reaching up for the canteen when Charlie caught his arm. “Today’s been amazing, Nate. I know you’re a busy man, but... I hope you want to—”

Nate cut him off with a firm grip on his chin, tilting his face up and gazing down into his eyes. “I want to, Charlie.” He leaned in and kissed Charlie’s forehead. “I want to.”

Act II, Scene 5

Charlie was a level-headed guy. He'd never had any difficulty staying focused, nor had his moods ever been erratic. But the three days following his woodland encounter with Nate Sonntag were a bizarre combination of dragging on forever while simultaneously flying by.

On Wednesday he'd occupied himself with all his ordinary day-off routines—laundry, food shopping, tidying the apartment. He'd resisted every urge to call or text, vowing to let Nate take things at whatever pace suited his demanding schedule. By Thursday afternoon he'd found himself almost wishing Barb hadn't cancelled classes for the week. At least that might have distracted him from wondering what the man was up to, or if he was ever going to call.

Finally, Thursday night, after he'd packed his bag—strains of Jerome Kern's "All Alone" tugging at his heartstrings—and just as he was settling onto the couch with a pizza pocket, the DVD of *Oklahoma!* cued up and waiting, his phone buzzed. He almost dropped his plate scrambling to pick it up and unlock the screen.

~Next tues 6pm coffee shop?

Charlie's face fell when he saw the text. "Joel," he whined.

~Snds grt. cu ther :)

He put the phone down on the coffee table and had just taken a bite of crispy-cheesy goodness when it buzzed again.

~Hello, Charlie.

~nate hi gd 2 her frm u

There was a long pause. Nothing. He was about to give up hope when it buzzed again.

~I hate these damned things. May I call you?

~plz

A few seconds later, "Hello Young Lovers" started playing—the ringtone he'd assigned to Nate on Tuesday evening. He smiled as he tapped the green icon. "Hello?"

“I’ve been missing you.”

Despite the tinny connection on the mobile, the rumble of Nate’s dulcet tones reverberated all through Charlie. “I’ve missed you, too, Nate. Will I see you at Simon’s tomorrow?”

“I’ll stop by in the morning on my way to work, but it’s a bear of a day. Back-to-back meetings, and then I have to take some clients out for dinner.” He snorted. “They’re Belgians, just here for a few days, so I’m sure it’ll go till all hours.”

“It’s okay, Nate. I know what your business means to you.”

“I’ve got some free time over the weekend. I promise I’ll come spend it with you.”

Warmth blossomed in Charlie’s chest. *He wants me!*

“And I think I could free up most of next Tuesday. Would you like to go riding again?”

“I’d like that very much.”

“Great, well, gotta go, but... I look forward to seeing you tomorrow.”

Nate kept his word and slipped in briefly Friday morning, visited Simon, and then sneaked into the workroom to plant a peck on Charlie’s cheek. It only took a moment for it to turn into something hotter, but Nate pushed himself out of their clench, cursing about his early meeting. He ducked out, promising to return the next morning for breakfast.

Simon’s afternoon challenge to a game of Scrabble came as welcome relief. Concentrating on making crossword connections kept Charlie’s mind off his seemingly insatiable desire to run his fingertips over a hairy chest. He chalked up his being trounced by a man three times his age to his overwrought emotional state as he glowered at the J, Q, X, and Z snickering at him from his letter tray. *I have all the luck!*

By the time he finished his dinner that evening, he was relaxed—leaning back with his feet on the workroom table and his hands behind his head, looking forward to seeing Nate in the morning. He glanced over at the clock on the wall. Again. *Eight p.m.* Twelve more hours till he might have another chance to turn that big, foreboding businessman into a gibbering puddle of gushing goo. He realized his relaxation had segued into boredom when he

found himself reaching over and pulling Simon's paper chart off the rack. He started flipping through the tabs with a lackadaisical sigh.

When he got to the Test Results section, one page in particular caught his eye. At the top it read, IC US SCROTUM. He scanned down the page.

 DICTATED: Mon Mar 9 2015 17:26:14

 CLINICAL INDICATION: 78 yo M with Hx of EVAL FOR VARIOCELE

 TECHNIQUE: Views of scrotum obtained using gray scale and Doppler imaging

 COMPARISON: None

 FINDINGS: Testes uniform in echotexture. Right: 4.4 x 2.2 x 2.5cm. Left: 4.6—

—No. *No!* He did not need the details on Simon's balls! Nate's balls, on the other hand... *Or better yet, in both hands...*

He startled when Simon appeared in the doorway.

"Busy?" the old man asked, eyes bright and smiling.

Charlie smirked. "You're my only business, so you tell me."

Simon smirked back at him. "I found something this afternoon I think you might want to see." He cocked his head to the side and walked off down the hall. Charlie followed and waited while Simon unlocked the door to the music room. He led Charlie over to the piano and picked up a large, leather-bound folio. He undid the string closure and unfolded it to the first page, handing it over to Charlie.

"You said you were in this show in high school."

Charlie gazed at the page before him and nodded, not quite sure what he held in his hands.

"This is the conductor's score from the original production."

"Wow!" Charlie gaped. He reached to turn a page, but stopped, looking to Simon for approval.

"Go ahead. You won't hurt it. The pages are so dog-eared because they were turned eight times a week for one thousand, nine hundred and twenty-six performances."

"This... is amazing!" Charlie declared.

“It’s just an old book.” The look in Simon’s eyes as he held Charlie’s gaze betrayed a deeper feeling. Simon turned and walked away toward the windows. “Would you like to keep it?” he asked, his back to Charlie.

“Oh, Simon!” Charlie was stunned. “I can’t imagine anything in the world I would treasure more dearly, but...”

Simon turned to face him. “But?”

“The agency has rules,” he said, shaking his head. “I can’t accept gifts. I mean, a fruit basket or flower arrangement is fine, but not—”

Simon’s eyes went wide as his attention shifted over Charlie’s shoulder.

Charlie swung around to see Nate standing in the doorway, his fists clenching and his face a fiery red.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” he bellowed. “One rule!” His chest heaved as he took a great gulp of air. “One simple fucking rule and you can’t follow it?”

“Nate, I’m sorry, I can ex—”

“No! No, you can’t explain! What you can do is pack your fucking bag and leave. You’re fired!”

At the sound of a gasp and a cry from behind Charlie, they both looked in time to see Simon clutching his chest and collapsing onto the love seat.

Charlie rushed over and knelt beside Simon’s crumpled form, placing two fingers on the side of his neck, where he was relieved to find a steady, if rapid, pulse. He rested his other hand on Simon’s cheek. “Simon? Can you hear me?” There was no response.

Without taking his eyes from his patient, he said over his shoulder, “Call 9-1-1.” Hearing no reaction, he turned to see what was happening behind him. Nate stood stock still, glued to the spot, horror contorting his blotchy face. “Damn it, Nate! Call 9-1-1. Right now!”

[BLACKOUT]

ACT III

Act III, Scene 1

Charlie hated hospitals. Most people thought that was ironic, what with him being a nurse and all, but he'd known early on in school that he'd end up in a clinic or home health, or maybe hospice. Hospitals just creeped him out. They felt like factories for medical care, and the patients were the products. He sat beside the bed in the curtained ER bay where Simon was lying, holding the old man's hand and watching his chest rise and fall in a steady rhythm.

He closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths of his own. His mind drifted back over the last hour: the ghastly expression on Simon's face as he'd collapsed, the clatter of gurney legs folding up on themselves as the EMTs slid him into the ambulance, the grudging looks on their faces as they'd agreed to let him ride along.

He'd just started to drift off when the curtain jerked aside, and a nurse stepped into the tiny space. Her gaze scanned the monitors and then rested on Simon for a few moments. She turned to Charlie. "They've decided it was probably a vasovagal response."

Oh, thank God! Relief flowed through him with the news it was just a fainting spell, and he realized just how worried he'd been. *But fainting can be dangerous if it's recurrent.* "I didn't see any history of syncope in his chart?"

"No. First time. Our docs think he'll be fine, but we could only get his doc by phone, and he's holding him for observation, at least overnight. We have a room ready. Will you be coming up?"

"Yes, at least till the grandson gets here." He stretched as he stood, finding every muscle tight and achy. "I need some coffee, though. Can you give me the room number, and I'll meet him up there?"

She told him the number, and he stepped out, pulling the curtain closed behind him. He looked down the short corridor to his right, trying to remember if that was the way they'd come in. It didn't look familiar so he turned toward the much longer hallway on his left. As he did, a figure came around the corner at the far end. It was Nate, walking his way. Charlie's chest tightened with grief for the mess the Sonntag household was in—and anger over the part he'd foolishly played in making things worse. But there was also relief that Nate was here, where he belonged.

And where Charlie didn't. *I know my place. And this isn't it.* Nate had already closed half the distance between them, but his eyes were cast down, and Charlie was sure he hadn't been spotted. He turned and strode off in the opposite direction, thankful that his scrubs allowed him to blend into the scenery and escape undetected.

Act III, Scene 2

Charlie hadn't slept at all Friday night. He'd tossed and turned, his mind replaying endless images and scenes from the last three weeks. When he'd finally heard Dusty getting into the shower, he'd rushed to the kitchen and made coffee, waiting with her mug in hand when she'd come out. He'd needed to talk, and talk he had, snuggled up with her on the couch until it was almost time for lunch.

"I guess I'll need to start looking for a new job on Monday," Charlie said, rubbing his cheek against the plush velvet of her bathrobe.

"Why would you quit the agency, sweetie?"

"Quit?" He looked up to see if she was joking. "They're gonna fire me the minute Nate tells them I tried to kill my patient!"

"Charlie!" She shook her head slowly. "That's not going to happen. You did what you thought was right for Simon."

"Did I?" He looked down. "Or did I do what was right for me?"

"Sometimes it's the same thing."

"If I'd just kept my mouth shut and done my job everything would be fine."

"You did do your job." With a finger under his chin, she turned him to face her. "A nurse doesn't just pass pills and change IVs. He takes care of the whole person." She gave him a stern look. "They did teach you that in school, didn't they?"

He tried not to smile, but it was a lost cause.

She ran her fingers through his hair and squeezed his head against her chest. "Some of what you've been babbling about all morning was hard to follow, but I caught enough to know that Simon and Nate's relationship isn't healthy. They're both keeping things bottled up inside, and that kind of pressure builds until something explodes. Sometimes the best you can do is stay clear of the blast zone."

"Yeah, well, that shouldn't be a problem anymore. I just wish—"

A knock at the door caused each of them to turn a quizzical glance at the other. They hadn't buzzed anyone in. Dusty eased her arm from under Charlie and went to look through the peephole.

“Who is it?” Charlie asked.

She turned and looked at him for a long moment. Then she opened the door.

Nate stepped into view.

Charlie grabbed the pillow beside him and buried his face in it, but in the time it took to hide his eyes they’d already taken the measure of a man in distress—messy hair, puffy eyes, rumpled suit. Charlie clenched his jaw and scrunched his eyes tight when he heard Nate say, sotto voce, “I need to talk to Charlie.” After a long pause, and softer still, he added, “It’s about... Simon.”

Charlie sat bolt upright. His eyes flew wide while his heart tried to crawl right up his throat. “Oh, God! Is he...” Tears welled in the corners of his eyes. “Is he—”

“No. No! He’s okay,” Nate said, showing his palms in a “keep calm” gesture and taking a few steps into the room. “The doctors say he’s going to be okay.”

Charlie fell back against the cushions, emptying his lungs with a sigh and closing his eyes again.

“We need to talk, Charlie.” Nate’s tone was beseeching.

“No.” He gave the syllable all the force he could muster, which wasn’t much.

After a few moments that felt like hours, relief flooded him at the sound of the door clicking shut. He opened his eyes and turned his head to thank Dusty, snorting his surprise at seeing the two of them still standing there, looking at him.

“I’ll be in my room,” she said, tightening the belt around her waist and casting soulful eyes at Charlie as she walked past.

Nate cleared his throat. “May I sit down?”

Charlie let his head roll back, and he stared at the ceiling. “No.”

Nate sighed.

“If Simon’s going to be all right,” Charlie told the smoke detector, “I don’t know what else there is to say.”

“I’d like to start with, ‘I was wrong,’” Nate said, barely audible.

Charlie tipped his head forward and stared at the man, who shoved his hands in his pockets and studied his shoes.

“And I’m sorry.” Nate looked up, only far enough to make faltering, momentary eye contact.

Charlie sat in a daze, all the things that were wrong with this situation swirling in his head. What had happened was his fault. Nate was right. It was a simple rule and he’d broken it. And now Simon was in the hospital. *And how about getting involved with a client? That was fucking brilliant!* His mind was reeling. And apparently, it wasn’t satisfied with the torments of the present, because as he looked at Nate, an image of Tucker Kirkland formed. He had sucked Tucker’s cock, and Tucker had rejected him. Now he’d sucked Nate’s cock and been kicked to the curb. The pools in his eyes overflowed, and hot tears ran down his cheeks. *What on earth made me think I could help people?*

Nate sat down on the chair opposite Charlie. “I was angry. And I was a fool.”

Charlie wiped at his eyes with the backs of his hands. His words came out in squeaks. “Why are you apologizing? I’m the one who fucked up.”

“No, Charlie. Zayda straightened me out. I thought my rules were for his benefit, but I...” He turned away. “I never asked him what he wanted.” Then he turned back to look directly at Charlie. “I didn’t have the courage to talk to him.” He took a deep breath. “I couldn’t face finding out how he felt about...” A single tear slipped from Nate’s left eye and slid down his cheek, turning and running sideways when it reached his scar. “I killed my parents, Charlie. I killed his son.” His shoulders heaved, and a wail tried to escape, but he gulped it down as he bent forward and hung his head, tears flowing freely now.

Charlie scrambled over to kneel before him, resting a hand on his leg. “Nate. It’s okay.” He desperately wanted to give the man a hug, but with him doubled over like that, he had to settle for squeezing a knee. “Let it out.”

And Nate did. Keening sobs wracked his body, and he held himself in a tight embrace. His inhalations became gasps, and he choked on a particularly strong one, snot running from his nose. After wiping it away, he began to rock gently forward and back, until his anguished whines gradually subsided, and his breathing slowed. He sat up straight and rubbed at his eyes with the heels of his hands. “Simon needs you, Charlie. Please say you’ll come back.”

Charlie gazed up at brown irises ringed in regretful red. He knew he had to agree, and he was about to when Nate whispered, “I need you.”

Charlie withdrew his hand and sank back to sit on the floor. “Nate. I can’t be involved with you.” *Look how I fucked everything up!* “I adore Simon, and I

want to take care of him, but that's it." *You deserve someone so much better than me!* "If you're asking me back for some other reason, I won't do it."

Nate dropped his head again and breathed with a slow, steady rhythm. "I understand."

Charlie backed onto the couch, hugging a pillow to his chest and nuzzling it with his nose. From the corner of his eye, he saw Nate straighten his spine and brace his hands on his knees, taking a deep breath.

After a long, slow sigh, Nate looked at him and said, "So... you'll come back? For Simon?"

Charlie nodded.

Nate looked around, as if seeing the apartment for the first time. "I suppose I should go."

Charlie nodded again.

Nate stood and moved to the door. He stopped and turned, his hand on the knob, his eyes shiny. "They'll probably let him come home Monday morning. Can you be at the hospital when he's discharged?"

Charlie nodded a third time, but he didn't look up.

The door creaked open. "I'll ask Rosa to call you with the details."

Act III, Scene 3

Monday morning, Charlie stayed on the 6 train two stops beyond Simon's and got off at Seventy-Seventh. He climbed the stairs to street level and found the hospital right in front of him. He went through Security and straight up to Simon's room, where he found him dressed and sitting in the chair by the bed.

"Charlie!" Simon beamed. "I'm so glad you could come."

"Well, we could hardly have you riding home on your own, could we?" He donned his serious-business face and said, "You might get lost."

Simon laughed. "I've been back and forth to this damn hospital so often I could do it in my sleep."

"They never discharge patients this early in the morning. How'd you manage it?"

"Ah... one of the perks of fame and fortune." Simon chuckled at his own joke. "Seriously? They couldn't wait to get rid of me. I could have gone home yesterday, but my doctor was out of town till last night, and he said he wanted to see me before he'd let me go."

A nurse arrived with a wheelchair. "Are you ready, Mr. Sonntag?"

"No—" he rose and turned with a wink, waiting for her to lock the brakes before taking a seat in the chair "—I heard there's veal cutlets for lunch, so I think I'll stick around."

Charlie surprised himself with a laugh, and he liked how it felt. *First one of those in three days.*

"Oh." She nodded, with a knowing look. "They called up to say your car service is waiting, but I'll tell them to come back later."

"No, no." He raised a warning palm. Then, in the fakest-sounding British accent Charlie had ever heard, he added, "Mustn't keep Driver waiting."

She grinned, taking his hand. "It's been so good seeing you again, Simon. I'm glad it turned out to be nothing. I'd say I hope I'll see you soon, but—"

Together, they said, "—nobody wants that!"

"Bye-bye, Millie." He turn to Charlie and cocked his head toward the door.

Charlie took his cue, and as he wheeled the chair past Millie, she caught his eye. She was shaking her head "no," but her smile said "take good care of him."

Once they were in the elevator, Charlie took a few deep breaths. *Maybe this'll be easier standing behind him, where he can't see me?* "Simon, I want to say how sorry I am for—"

"Stop!" Simon raised that palm again. "Don't even try it."

"But, I—"

"No, Charlie. You've got nothing to apologize for."

"But—"

Simon pivoted in the chair and gave Charlie a look that would have struck terror in his heart if he didn't know better. *Whoa! I see where Nate gets that from!*

"Charlie. Regardless of what you did or did not do, or what you think you did or should have done, the fact is, in the last month, I've felt happy for the first time in years. If that's something you feel the need to apologize for, then go right ahead."

Charlie held his gaze, and Simon reached around, patting his hand where it rested on the chair. "There's my boy. Now, let's go find out what's really for lunch.

When they'd finished eating, Simon excused himself to go take a nap. Charlie carried their plates through to the kitchen where Rosa was working at the sink.

"I'd have gotten those," she said, taking them from him.

Instead of her usual dour expression, Charlie detected a trace of a smile. "I know, I just wanted to tell you how delicious that white fish was."

Her smile grew. "That's one of Simon's favorites." She wiped her hand on a towel before resting it on his forearm. "Charlie..."

His eyebrows sprung up of their own accord. *She called me Charlie!*

"It's not my place to say anything, but I want to be sure you know what a difference you're making around here."

"Rosa, I—"

"No. If I don't finish I'll never say it. I'm sorry I haven't been very nice to you, but the last two years have been... impossible. It's taken a toll on me—on all of us. This used to be a happy home, Charlie. For thirty years, I looked forward to getting up every morning just to see what the new day would bring.

But since Lester... since the accident, nothing's been right. It's broken my heart watching Simon and Nate. Two men who were the best of friends, hardly talking to each other at all... or talking about the weather or sports, which neither of them gives a damn about!" Her cheeks flushed pink. "Excuse my language."

He almost laughed. Instead, he set his features in a stern scowl and intoned, "Three Hail Marys, Rosa, and promise me you'll never do that again!"

She laughed and slapped his arm. "You see? That's it right there. You've got Simon smiling and laughing and joking around. I'd forgotten he used to be like that all the time." Her smile faded and the light in her eyes dimmed. "It's a pity Nate isn't your patient as well."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean... Nate used to be... well, 'happy' may not be the right word. He was always serious, even as a child, but he was also lively and... spirited. When his parents died, it was like something inside him died too. I didn't think things could get any worse, but he stopped by last night to make sure everything was ready for Simon to come home, and he looked terrible. Like he hadn't slept."

Charlie looked out the window and studied the bricks in the opposite wall.

"He's not your patient. But you could still help him."

When he looked back, the expression on her face brought a pang to his chest. It was as if she'd seen into his heart and read his dearest secrets. She held his gaze and nodded slowly.

He swallowed. "I'd like to help, Rosa, but... I don't think I'm what Nate needs."

Claude pranced in and seated himself regally at Rosa's feet. She shot the dog a look that reminded Charlie of the one he'd gotten from her the first time they'd met. Holding Claude's attention with her intense stare, she tipped her head toward Charlie. Claude glanced Charlie's way. *Since when can dogs frown?* Claude looked back to Rosa, and she tipped her head again. He shifted on his haunches to face Charlie and raised a paw, batting at the leg of his scrubs and looking up, begging. When he emitted a tiny whimper, Charlie laughed.

He turned to Rosa. "You're siccing the dog on me?" She smiled, and he shook his head. "Like W.C. Fields always said, 'Never work with children or animals'!"

Charlie was leaning back in the office chair, recovering from eating too much of another delicious dinner, when the elevator *ding* reverberated through the gallery. He knew who it would be, and he didn't have a clue what to do or say.

Nate appeared in the doorway and rested a hand on the jamb. Rosa was right, he looked awful. His suit and tie were crisp as ever, and his hair perfectly groomed, but the pain in his face was unmistakable. He looked Charlie in the eye. "I just want to say again how sorry I am."

Charlie shook his head. "I said it on Saturday, Nate. You've got nothing to apologize for. I'm the one who lied."

"You didn't lie. Not really."

"I promised you I wouldn't do something, and then I did it behind your back. It's the same thing."

Nate stepped forward. "The way I see it, you were smart enough, and kind enough, to do what you knew was for the best." His lips formed a grim line. "Even though some jerk made you promise not to."

"It's nice of you to say that, but... I think we should drop it."

"You're angry with me."

"I'm angry with myself!" *Use your indoor voice.* "I made a mess of things."

"Things were a mess long before you arrived, Charlie. You got us started sorting it all out."

Charlie pursed his lips and blew out a long breath. "It's a matter of trust, Nate. How could you ever trust me after what I did?"

"Charlie..." The smile that crept to Nate's lips stood in stark contrast to the hurt lingering in his eyes. "I've watched you with Zayda. I've never seen anyone who cares so much for the people around him." He took a step closer. "It's not just something you do. I can tell. It's who you are." He sat in the chair next to Charlie. "I trust you completely."

Charlie huffed.

"I'd trust you with my life."

It sounded "completely" over-the-top. Charlie tilted his head, studying the man, and the pieces began to fall into place. He knew trust wasn't the core issue—wasn't even sure why he'd brought it up. He knew he was a trustworthy person; knew in his bones he could be counted on. But the incident with Simon

had shaken that. The feeling he was at fault for putting a man in the hospital had undercut his confidence in himself, and it had left him feeling so guilty he'd pushed Nate away. *Oh, my God! What happened to me is what happened to him...* In Charlie's case, it had only been a fuck-up on the job. A serious one, but no one had died. He suddenly felt the full weight of the burden Nate must be carrying. It hit him like a grand piano falling from a third-story window.

He understood now that Nate's guilt had robbed him of the ability to trust himself. It had crushed him—stolen his aliveness. *That's the heart of the matter! Being alive!* What if an exercise in trust could be the key to unlocking those feelings, and giving Nate back something of what he'd lost?

Charlie eyed Nate up and down. "With your life?"

Nate nodded.

Charlie leaned forward, jutting out his jaw. "Prove it."

Nate arched a quizzical brow. "What do you want?" He shrugged. "I could give you my bank card?"

Charlie rolled his eyes and then leveled his gaze. "Is that your life, Nate?"

His expression darkened. "Of course not."

Charlie folded his arms across his chest and leaned back, determined not to speak.

"What, then?" Nate turned serious. "I'd do anything."

Charlie leaned forward again. "Anything?"

Nate nodded.

"I went for a ride on your horse."

Nate cocked his head. "Yes?"

"I want you to ride my motorcycle."

Nate's eyes flew wide.

"You don't have to go far..." *Just far enough to figure out you're still young, and you can let go and have fun.* "Just far enough to get the feel of it."

Nate opened his mouth to speak, then closed it, looking around the room. "Those things are death traps."

"So you've said, but I'm alive and kicking, aren't I?" Charlie contended. Nate stared back at him, employing the hallmark Sonntag family glower.

Undaunted, Charlie continued, “My parents gave me my first ATV when I was nine—that’s a year before it’s legal. I got a minibike at eleven. I’ve been riding motorcycles for thirteen years now, and I’ve never injured myself or anybody else. I know how to do it safely. Will you trust me?”

Nate hesitated. “I said I did, and I do. But... don’t you have to have a special license or something?”

“Oh.” Charlie hadn’t thought this through. Nate was right, he couldn’t drive without a license. *Not on the street, anyway.* Puttering around some parking lot wasn’t quite the freeing experience Charlie’d had in mind. But if Nate trusted him, he could ride on the back. It might not be an exercise in trusting himself, exactly, but the more Charlie thought about it... *It’s at least worth a try.* “You’re right, you can’t drive, but you can let me drive you.”

Nate frowned.

Charlie grinned. “If you really trust me.”

Nate groaned and ran his palms down his face. “What have I gotten myself into?”

Act III, Scene 4

Despite the fact it was morning, “Some Enchanted Evening” was playing loud and clear on Mind-Radio. And it must have been on repeat loop, because when the imaginary Emile de Becque in Charlie’s head slowly dissolved—morphing into Nate Sonntag—he noticed the water was starting to get cold. *Crap!* When he turned the valve all the way to the left, pointing at the “H,” the shower warmed up. A little. *How long have I been standing here?*

Finding the bar of soap already in his hand, he got down to business—doing a thorough job on the important parts, and pretty much just rinsing the rest. After he’d hopped out—shivering—and toweled off, he brushed his hair and teeth. Then it was back to his room, where he made quick work of getting dressed. In no time he was through the front doors of the building and pounding along the pavement on his way to the storage unit. *Today, you have a date with destiny!* Well, somebody does... Maybe.

Thirty minutes later, he was powering his bike up the drive at Sonntag Stables, between the empty riding rings. He pulled to a stop at the foot of the steps in front of the house and killed the engine. Then he swung off and removed his helmet, hanging it from the handlebar and looking up as the door opened. Nate stepped out onto the porch. He didn’t look altogether like a man on his way to the gallows, but Charlie’s heart sank at the trepidation he saw on the man’s face.

Nate stiffened and schooled his features. He stomped down the stairs and up to Charlie. “Let’s do this.”

“Not so fast, Leeroy. There are a few things we need to talk about first.”

Nate gave him a dismissive look and moved toward the bike. “You don’t have to coddle me, Charlie. I said I’d do it. Now let’s go.”

Charlie followed him and stepped into his space, their chests nearly touching. “You’re the last man on earth I’d try to coddle, Nate.” He paused a moment to collect himself when the scent of the man’s shower gel threw his senses a curve. *That’s how he smelled when you...* He snapped out of it, and stiffened his spine. “We don’t need to talk about your feelings, Nate. We need to talk about how to do this safely.”

“Oh,” Nate said, looking abashed.

“Why don’t you climb on and get a feel for it while I go over a few things.”

“Okay.” He swung a leg over, grabbed the handlebars, and took a seat.

“I see you’re wearing boots and jeans. That’s good.” He unstrapped the other helmet and held it up. “This is an extra-large. I can only hope it’ll be big enough.” He winked.

Nate grimaced. “Am I that bad?”

“Not all the time.” Charlie chuckled and grinned. “You see those pegs?” he asked, pointing them out. “Those are your footrests. Go ahead and give ’em a try.” Nate raised his feet to the pegs, leaning a little to the right to counteract the bike’s lean to the left.

“Now. Do you feel the way it’s leaning to the side on the kickstand?” Nate nodded. “I want you to put your feet back on the ground and push against that side till it’s standing up, balanced between your legs.” Nate did so. “Okay, now let it rock from side to side—just a little—so you can feel the weight and the balance.” Again, Nate complied. “Excellent. You see, riding is all a matter of balance, just like a bicycle.” *Oh, my God! He grew up in New York City!* “You do know how to ride a bicycle, don’t you?” Nate smirked at him. “Sorry. So, here’s the thing. Most of the time, your job is to just sit still. There aren’t any seat belts, so you have to hang on to my waist.”

“I like the sound of that,” Nate said with what was clearly meant to be a lascivious grin.

“Pay attention!” Charlie smiled and shook his head. “So like I said, your main job is to sit still, like a sack of potatoes.” *Oh, jeez! Does he even know potatoes come in sacks?* “But when we go around a curve, or turn a corner, I have to lean the bike into the turn, and you need to lean with me.”

Nate nodded, but the look on his face said he didn’t get it.

“Okay, don’t over-think this. You’ll be hanging onto me. Just lean when I lean. You’ll get the hang of it after the first few times.”

“Is that it?”

“Almost. The last thing is communication. With the helmets and the engine noise there’s no way I can hear you, so if you want me to stop”—he stepped behind Nate and wrapped his arms around his waist—“just squeeze me twice, like this.” He demonstrated.

“Got it. Squeeze twice to stop.”

“Okay.” Charlie swept a gaze over his bike and the handsome man sitting tentatively on it. “That’s it. You ready?”

Nate looked down at the bike between his legs and then back up at Charlie, his expression a bit grim again. He nodded. Charlie handed him the helmet and helped him put it on, adjusting the strap and checking the fit. He donned his own before leaning in close to Nate, raising his voice. “Step off. I need to get on first.”

Once they were both settled, Charlie turned the key and checked that Nate’s feet were on the pegs before kicking the starter. The bike roared to life, and Charlie looked over his shoulder giving Nate a thumbs-up sign. Nate returned it, though at best it was halfhearted.

He eased the bike forward as gently as he could and made the return trip down the driveway at a slow pace. When they got to the main road, he stopped and checked on Nate again. This time, his thumb was a little more lively. He took the turn onto the road with extra care, not sure what to expect from his passenger, but Nate handled it perfectly, leaning into the turn with Charlie. He picked up speed and let himself relax, reveling in the cool wind on his face and the heat of the man plastered to his back.

A few cars went by in the other direction, but the road ahead was free of traffic, and he increased their speed to the posted limit. They sailed along through the countryside for quite a while, and just as Charlie was beginning to think this was going better than expected, Nate squeezed twice.

Charlie’s heart thudded to a stop. He pulled over onto the shoulder and stopped the bike, bracing his feet on the ground.

He turned to Nate and yelled, “I’m sorry! Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea!”

Nate yelled back, “Are you kidding? This is great. But...”

“But what?”

“Doesn’t this thing go any faster?”

Oh, Nate! You have no idea. He’d been so careful. He’d wanted to push Nate’s boundaries, but he’d underestimated the man. “Are you sure?” he hollered, “You really wanna go fast?”

Nate nodded, jabbing his thumb up in front of Charlie’s face.

He checked for traffic and eased back onto the road, which lay straight and flat before them as far as the eye could see. He watched the red needle creep up

to sixty miles per hour and kept it there a few moments. Then, he cranked the throttle full open in a sharp snap. The bike leapt forward, the engine screaming as their speed jumped to seventy, then eighty, then ninety. The force of the acceleration shot a jolt of adrenaline into his system, and its strength surprised him. He'd experienced this rush so many times, but with Nate hugging him the thrill was new. *I hope he's enjoying what he asked for.* Just as the needle was crossing the hundred mark, Nate squeezed twice.

Charlie slowed and pulled to the side of the road again, knowing he'd gone too far. He cut the engine and twisted around to face Nate. "I'm sorry! Are you all right?"

Nate scabbled off the back of the bike and ripped the helmet from his head. He held his arms straight out from his sides, and he slowly turned a full three-sixty, scanning their surroundings. When he faced Charlie again, the helmet fell from his hand and he wrapped his arms around himself, swaying. Then he straightened, stretching to his full height, and threw his head back, screaming to the sky, "Whoooooooooooo!!!!!!!"

Charlie had never heard such a sound from a human being. It was feral.

"That. Was. Amazing!" Nate rocked on the balls of his feet. "I've never felt anything like that! I'm tingling all over!"

Charlie was astonished. When he'd set out that morning, his best hope had been that Nate would be able tolerate his own discomfort. Seeing him totally into the rush of it knocked Charlie for a loop.

Nate strode back over to the bike, his boots crunching the gravel underfoot. He planted his hands on Charlie's thighs. "Thank you!" His eyes were on fire.

Charlie snorted and then chortled. "You're welcome?"

Nate looked puzzled for a moment. "Why are you laughing?"

Charlie sobered and took a breath, trying to think what to say. Mind-Radio Showtunes offered up "The Road You Didn't Take," and it served as a potent warning. Imagining a future where he might look back and regret not risking a relationship with Nate was an excellent motivator to summon his courage... and his honesty. "I was scared my idea for this ride might be a mistake. When I trusted my gut with Simon, well... look what happened. And I—" *Am I really gonna tell him this?* "—I felt guilty. I had done what I thought best... and someone I cared for got hurt."

Nate nodded, haltingly, his gaze still burning into Charlie's eyes. When he spoke, his words were deliberate. "I'm with you. Did the right thing. Someone got hurt. Feeling guilty..."

The look in Nate's eyes told Charlie they were on the same page. "And it made me lose faith in myself. I thought it wasn't safe to trust my instincts... or my abilities. I stopped trusting myself."

A cloud of regret dimmed the fire in Nate's eyes, letting Charlie know he was getting through.

"And because I didn't trust myself... I tried to avoid things that looked risky... Like—"

Nate raised an eyebrow. "Like getting involved with someone?"

Charlie looked down and nodded.

Nate tilted Charlie's chin up with a finger. "Do you trust yourself now?"

"That depends. You're sure this—" Charlie indicated the bike "—wasn't a mistake?"

The heat behind Nate's eyes rekindled. "You're joking, right? It's the most exhilarating thing I've ever experienced."

"Really?"

"The best! Nothing could ever top that!"

"Nothing?"

Nate shook his head.

Charlie gave him a saucy grin. "I can think of a thing or two we might try."

"Oh, Charlie!" Nate lunged and crushed Charlie to his chest. Then he leaned back, drilling into Charlie with his gaze. There was a wild gleam in his eyes. "Bed. Now!"

Charlie didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "I guess we should head back to your place, then?"

Nate took a quick look around. "We've been going west. Your place is closer."

"And Dusty's at work." Charlie leveled his most sultry come-hither gaze at Nate and dropped his voice to its lowest register. "Hop on."

Nate fetched his helmet from the ground, and when he was settled, Charlie kicked the starter. Nate wrapped his arms around Charlie, and Charlie grabbed his wrists, pulling him in closer. Nate squeezed once, and Charlie cranked the throttle, spraying a shower of gravel in their wake as he peeled out onto the road.

The bike thrummed between his legs, and it was shockingly erotic with Nate's grip tight around him. Charlie giggled when he thought of *Oklahoma!* and what a total sap that Curly was for taking Laurey out in a fringe-topped surrey, when he could have had Jud Fry on the back of a smokin' two-wheeler, clinging for all he was worth.

He slowed to match the speed of traffic when they merged onto the expressway and then carefully navigated the corners once they were back in his neighborhood. He rolled to a stop outside his storage unit.

Before he could cut the engine, Nate shouted in his ear, "You're kidding, right? This is blocks from where you live."

"This is where the bike lives!" Charlie hollered back.

"No way! I need you now. Drive to your building."

"Nate. I can't leave it on the street."

"Yes, you can. Drive!"

"It'll be stolen!"

"I'll buy you another one!"

Charlie laughed. He was torn. His bike was ancient, but he'd kept it in good running order since he was eighteen. On the other hand... *A new bike and Nate in your bed? What are you? Crazy?* He checked for traffic before pulling back into the street.

The minute and a half it took to reach his building was an eternity. He bumped up the curb and parked the bike in the courtyard near the entrance. They jumped off and made for the doors, tugging at helmet straps as they ran. Charlie dug out his key card, dropping it when Nate leaned in and growled in his ear.

Nate took the lead as they dashed through the lobby, stabbing repeatedly at the call button when he reached the elevators.

"Calm down, tiger," Charlie said, resting his hand on top of Nate's, firmly enough to stop his frantic motions.

“Never!” Nate grabbed Charlie’s wrist and pulled him in for a blistering kiss.

For a moment, Charlie thought he might have to give it up right in the middle of the lobby, but the elevator *dinged* and the door slid open. *Saved by the bell!* Nate kissed and groped him furiously as the car crept upward. The ride had never taken so long.

Just as Charlie was about to slide the key into the deadbolt, Nate began nuzzling his neck. Charlie fumbled his keys and turned a smiling glance over his shoulder. “You’re not helping.”

“Open it!” Nate demanded with another growl.

By the time they made it to the bedroom, Charlie already had his shirt unbuttoned. Nate followed, undoing his own, but he stopped just inside the door. “Whoa!”

“What?” Charlie whirled around to see what was wrong and found Nate looking over his shoulder.

“Nice view!”

Are you fucking kidding me? “All that... and now you wanna look at the skyline?”

Nate’s focus snapped back to Charlie. “Sorry,” he said, closing the distance between them. “There’s only one view I want to see.” He slipped the shirt from Charlie’s shoulders, letting it fall to the floor, and Charlie undid the last two buttons on Nate’s.

They worked feverishly at each other’s flies, shoving their pants halfway down before sitting hip by hip on the side of bed. They bent in unison, doubling over to pull at their bootlaces. Charlie had kicked off one boot and started working on the other when Nate’s hand rested on his, startling him to a stop. He turned his head and gazed into eyes mere inches from his own. The inferno he’d seen raging there since their stop on the highway had ebbed to a smolder.

Nate’s breathing was still heavy, but no longer that of an untamed beast. Tenderness had replaced ferocity. “I want you, Charlie.”

Charlie nodded, his head barely moving. “I’m yours.”

They finished shucking their boots and jeans, no longer in a hurry. Nate turned to watch as Charlie eased himself to the middle of the bed, leaning back and propping himself on his elbows. Nate looked him up and down. “My God, you’re beautiful.”

No one had ever said those words to Charlie—or, not anyone he could believe. Though he swore he couldn't see it in the mirror, he took Nate at his word. "You too," he breathed. Nate crawled across the mattress and then rested a palm on Charlie's chest, lowering him to lie flat on the bed. He braced himself on his arms, hovering over Charlie and gazing down at him for a moment before leaning down to press their lips together.

After all that frantic haste, Nate's kisses were slow and intentional. His tongue explored Charlie's mouth while one hand roved over his body. Nate's wrist bumped against Charlie's proud erection. He gripped it, gently stroking a few times. Then he cupped Charlie's nuts and rolled them in his hand. He began exploring lower, running a fingertip down Charlie's taint and pushing against his tight opening. "I want you."

"Yes!" Charlie whispered.

When Charlie shoved at his chest, Nate rose to his knees. Charlie rolled to the side and fetched the slick from the nightstand drawer, handing it to Nate. Nate laid it aside on the comforter. "Not yet." He spread Charlie's legs and knelt between them, slipping his hands under Charlie's knees and lifting them.

Charlie got the idea and replaced Nate's hands with his own, pulling his legs back as far as he could and rocking backward to expose his hole. Nate scooted closer so his thighs supported Charlie's back. Shivers ran up Charlie's spine as Nate massaged the globes of his butt with silky palms, and his fingertips tugged at the puckered flesh around his pulsing entrance.

Nate rotated his hands, stretching Charlie wider and probing at his hole from each side with the tips of his thumbs. Then he pushed Charlie's ass higher and lowered his head till the tip of his tongue flicked back and forth across Charlie's sweet spot.

"Oh, God. Nate!" he cried out. "God!"

Nate chuckled, and the combination of vibrating stubble with a wisp of hot breath across his hole had Charlie clenching his ass and squeezing the muscles in his groin. Nate probed into him with his tongue, and Charlie began panting and gasping, a whimper escaping on each exhale.

Nate withdrew his tongue, burying his nose in Charlie's ass. He pushed in and growled, jerking his head left and right. Charlie tightened his grip on his legs, pulling his knees down till they were nearly against his chest. Nate compensated, forcing his thighs tighter against Charlie's back. Then he slowly slid his head upward, driving his nose along Charlie's taint and spreading his

tongue flat as it swept across his opening. Nate continued sliding up... up, until the stubble on his chin grazed that quivering crinkle of flesh, setting off a shudder that wracked Charlie's body. Nate slid his face back down the path he had just taken—chin, tongue, nose—and then reversed. Up, then down, over and over, quickening the pace, his features becoming drenched in his own spit.

Charlie thought he knew the meaning of ecstasy, but nothing he'd felt in his life could begin to compare with this... this... *Oh, God!*

Nate slowed to a stop and rose once again to his knees, locking his gaze with Charlie's. He wiped both hands down his face and flicked them to either side. Then he jiggled his head rapidly left and right, blubbering his lips to make a noise that sounded like a horse nickering. *Or one of The Three Stooges?* A laugh burst out of Charlie, and Nate grinned down at him while reaching to his side. He grabbed the bottle of lube, holding it up for Charlie to see and cocking his head to one side with an inquiring glance.

Charlie nodded. His feet had collapsed to the bed on either side of Nate, so he raised them again and pulled his legs back to where they'd been a moment before, watching Nate's movements intently as he greased his cock.

Nate rested one hand on the back of Charlie's thigh and gripped himself in the other, angling his hips and aiming for his prize. His crown pressed resolutely at Charlie's entrance, demanding admittance, but waiting patiently. Charlie clenched and relaxed, clenched and relaxed, as Nate gradually increased his pressure. He clenched again, and this time when he relaxed the head popped in. Nate instantly stopped pushing, allowing his throbbing crown to rest there within the tight ring of muscle.

Charlie sighed. This was unlike any sensation he'd ever felt. The few college boys who'd topped him had taken a minute or two, stretching him with their fingers before proceeding to plow him into the mattress. He'd never imagined being entered could be so... so... *perfect*. He looked up into Nate's eyes. There was no need for words. He hummed his approval.

Nate inclined a bit farther, and Charlie felt the dilation as he opened to accept the widening girth of Nate's shaft. Nate paused again, perhaps halfway in, and gave Charlie an assessing look. Charlie smiled and whispered, "Yes."

Nate pushed again and slid inch by delicious inch into Charlie, until prickly hairs tickled where his thighs pressed tight against Charlie's ass. Nate arched his back, moaning as he pushed harder, seeking more, but he was in as far as he could go. He leaned forward and planted his hands on either side of Charlie's

shoulders. Without letting up the pressure where they were joined, he purposefully swayed his hips from side to side. When he came to rest again, a soft purr escaped his throat, and his eyes rolled back in his head.

Charlie released his knees and reached up, cradling Nate's face in his hands. Nate returned to earth and looked down into his eyes.

Charlie caressed Nate's cheeks with his thumbs, sensing the subtle asymmetry. He drew a breath and spoke the word that was in his heart. "Natanael."

Nate lowered himself to brush their lips together and then stilled, gazing into Charlie's eyes. Charlie studied the flecks of gold shining out from deep-brown pools, and when Nate spoke, his whisper echoed in their depths. "Charlie."

Act III, Scene 5

Six weeks later, on a bright and clear Sunday, Charlie climbed out of a taxi and stood under the canopy, brushing at the sleeves of his new suit. Satisfied, he turned and walked to the front door. He entered and nodded as he approached the man who had risen from his podium to open the inner door. “Good afternoon, Lawrence,” he said, smiling.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Perkins.”

He crossed the lobby and stepped into the lavish wood-paneled elevator, pressing the button for the third floor. When the doors opened, his ears perked to the jaunty sound of Klezmer music. He strolled into the living room to find Simon holding court, seated in an overstuffed chair. Nate perched sidesaddle next to him, his arm around his grandfather’s shoulders. They were laughing. Rosa was seated in a straight chair on Simon’s other side, and Claude stood beside her, sporting a shiny-purple, pointed party hat. In the middle of the coffee table before them stood a cake, frosted in white, and decorated with roses and lettering in lavender icing:

* *
* Simon *
* 79 *

“Charlie!” Simon cried as he walked in. “You look fabulous, my boy!”

Nate turned his way, and Charlie stopped short, goose bumps rising beneath his shirt from the ardor of the salacious gaze that took him in, inch by inch, from head to toe and back again. Nate stood and crossed the room in three strides, taking Charlie’s hands in his and pulling him in for a kiss. Then he cocked his head to the side and whispered in Charlie’s ear, “You do look fabulous, but I know better than to call you my boy.”

Releasing one of Nate’s hands and keeping his hold on the other, Charlie led him to the center of the room to inspect the cake. “No candles?”

Simon huffed. “They won’t let me have them anymore. New York fire codes, you know.” He waggled his eyebrows.

Charlie laughed, pulling Nate down onto the sofa and tightening his grip on his hand. He turned to Simon. “I know we promised no gifts, but I had to do

something,” he said, extracting a large envelope from his breast pocket and handing it across.

“Oh, Charlie—” Simon undid the clasp and slipped his fingers inside “—a card is fine.”

“It’s not a card. It’s... well, just something I thought you might like.”

Simon gave him a curious glance and then slid out the contents, studying the cover. “Cortela High School, 2008, *Be My Guest*.” He squinted and then looked up. “From when you played Jeff?”

Charlie nodded. “My mom had it in the attic. She keeps everything! I know it’s nothing much, but I wanted you to have it.”

Simon looked down and opened the program, scanning the inside for a moment before pressing it to his chest. “It means the world to me, son.”

Charlie’s heart swelled, stirred by a sudden awareness of what the people in this room had so quickly come to mean to him. Especially the man holding his hand. Strains of “Can’t Help Lovin’ That Man of Mine” began to play in his head.

They’d been dating for nearly a month by the time Charlie finally convinced Nate to have Simon’s doctors reevaluate him—and to listen to their advice this time. He’d been as surprised as he was pleased when Nate actually agreed to their recommendations.

Simon’s weighings and vitals had been reduced from daily to weekly. Nate had changed the contract with Charlie’s agency, and now a nurse came once a week to take his blood sample and check his sugar level. Rosa was entrusted with making sure Simon took his pills and helping with his eye drops.

Charlie had gone back to his old routine of home visits, and while his Tuesday and Thursday evenings at Mrs. Barber’s School of Song and Dance remained sacrosanct, he visited Simon as often as he could. He and Nate occasionally spent the night at Simon’s when they weren’t at Nate’s place or Charlie’s apartment. He’d even managed to drag Nate to see a few musicals.

Nate leaned over and brushed his lips across Charlie’s cheek. Charlie was about to return the favor when something in the look on Simon’s face caught his attention. He quirked an eyebrow at the old man. “What?”

Simon shook his head and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I can’t help it. When I look at the two of you... I see Lester and me when we were young. We

went to birthday parties... but we never got to hold hands.” He sighed. “Or kiss.”

“Oh, Simon.” Charlie swallowed around the lump in his throat.

Simon raised a weathered hand. “No, Charlie. It’s good. What Lester and I had, we had to keep private. In a way, that put it beyond anything other people could ever touch, but... when I look at the two of you, I see hope. Such a future! The opportunities you have...” A tear ran down his wrinkled cheek. “I have to tell you boys, you two are... well... you’ve inspired me!”

“What do you mean by ‘inspired’ Zayda?” Nate asked, leaning forward.

“I mean...” He gave Nate a big smile and then turned to Charlie, a twinkle in his eye. “I have an idea for a new musical.”

[CURTAIN]

Author Bio

Jonathan grew up in the South. While new to the world of writing, he has been inventing tales for at least fifty years. He was probably also making stuff up during the two years prior to that, but as this was his pre-verbal period, there's no evidence one way or the other. An armchair linguist, he has taught himself to ask, "Where is the bathroom?" in seven languages. ~~He enjoys gardening,~~ He gardens, and enjoys red wines, cooking, theatre, and of course, writing. Jonathan reminds himself every day how fortunate he is to have shared the best and worst of the last thirty-four years with the man of his dreams.

Also by Jonathan Penn:

Raising Cade

Homme for the Holidays

Turnabout

Aloha? Oy!

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