

## **CHARLIE**

**By Liane Fazio**

The elevator bounced to a stop, its floor indicator dinging hollowly, and the doors sliding open onto the noisy first-floor hallway. Charlie waited for the other riders to get off, pushed the empty wheelchair over the threshold, turned left, and maneuvered it expertly through several people walking or standing while playing on their phones in the busy triage waiting room. He parked the wheelchair behind the security stand. The security guard was kneeling, picking up items off the floor and placing them into a plastic bin labeled 'Lost and Found.'

"I'm going on lunch, Stan," he told the security guard.

Stan shelved the box under the stand, then took his seat to watch the security cameras.

"Enjoy, Charlie," he replied.

Charlie walked past the security desk and tapped his ID card against the dark gray box on the wall, and the double doors slowly opened. Walking through, he turned right, passing behind the triage desk and waving to the ER Techs. Such an organized chaos, he thought, and smiled to himself. There was no way he would have been able to handle all of this in his previous life. Two doors down, he entered the men's restroom. He went into the only stall and sat down. Previous life, he thought again and smiled. If it weren't for his previous life, as he liked to refer to it, he wouldn't be where he is today. He wouldn't have had to complete court-ordered anger management therapy, and his parole officer wouldn't have helped him get this wonderful job. In fact, this was the best job he ever had, and the most honest one. Fifteen months into his new life and he would never think of jeopardizing what he has now for the unorganized chaos of his previous life.

Shoes appeared under the door of his stall, bringing him out of his reverie. "Occupied," he called out. The small shoes didn't move. Charlie cleared his throat. "Someone's in here," he said louder, his voice echoing off the restroom walls. The small shoes slowly stepped back, one after the other. Charlie sat still and listened. The restroom was quiet. Leaning to his left, he peered between the gap in the stall door. He couldn't see anyone. He leaned to his right and, again, couldn't see anything through the gap in the door. Charlie took a deep breath, counted to ten, and exhaled slowly, just like he was taught in therapy. He quickly finished his business, pulled up his scrubs, flushed the toilet, and slowly opened the stall door and peeked his head out. The restroom was empty. He frowned. Must've missed the door closing when the toilet flushed, he thought. He shrugged it off and washed his hands in the sink. When he turned around to grab paper towels from the dispenser mounted on the wall behind him, a little boy was standing there.

"Jesus, kid! Where did you come from?" he said, backing up against the sink counter.

"Over there," he replied, pointing to the door.

Charlie laughed nervously. "You scared me. Are you lost? Want me to help you find your parents?"

"No. They know where I am." The boy stared at Charlie.

"You ok? If you need help going to the bathroom, I can't help you."

"No. I'm a big boy. I don't need help with that."

Charlie smiled. "Ok, well, do you need something? I can't just leave you alone in here. It's not safe."

The boy continued to stare at Charlie. "I'm looking for my glasses. Can you help me find my glasses?"

"Maybe your mom has them?"

"No. I... I think I lost them. I was supposed to be wearing them, but I put them in my pocket, and I think they fell out. I don't want her to get mad."

"Where did you last have them?"

"I had them when I was fishing with my Pop Pop."

"And when was that?"

The boy shrugged, thinking, then his face lit up. "I got to ride in the ambulance! It was really cool! The siren was on the whole way! Do you think they had the flashing lights on, too?"

Charlie smiled. "Yes, I'm sure they did."

"They had the flashing lights on in the daytime? Cool!"

"Is that where your parents are, with your Pop Pop?" asked Charlie.

"Yeah," the boy said softly.

"Ok," Charlie said, reaching above the boy to grab two paper towels. "Let's go to the security desk and see if anyone has turned in your glasses. There's a 'Lost and Found' box there. The security guard is my friend. We'll ask him."

"I already tried, but he didn't hear me. And I looked in the box and they're not there."

"Ok, then, let's try to retrace your steps. Where was the last place you remember having your glasses?"

The boy's face scrunched up in concentration. Then he slowly began to walk backwards to the restroom door. Charlie held up his hands to stop him. "No, I mean like retrace in your mind," he laughed softly.

"Oh," said the boy. He closed his eyes tightly and took a deep breath. "I remember fishing with Pop Pop. I took them off and had them in my shirt pocket. See?" He pulled open his shirt pocket with his finger. "Me and Pop Pop have the same shirt. My pockets aren't as big as his, but my glasses can fit in there. But they're not here anymore."

"Ok. You said you came in an ambulance, so let's go to the ambulance bay. Maybe they fell out there when you got out." He held out his hand to the boy.

The boy backed away and crossed his arms. "You're a stranger," he said sternly.

"But you want me to help you find your glasses, right?"

"Yeah, but mama says not to ever go with a stranger."

Charlie smiled and clasped his hands in front of him. "Ok, then. My name is Charlie. I work in this hospital. See my ID badge?" He bent over and pulled the ID card attached to the lanyard around his neck so the boy could see. "That's my picture and my name, right there." He tapped his picture, and the boy leaned closer and looked from the ID to Charlie. "What's your name?"

The boy thought for a moment. "I'm Jacob, but my dad calls me his Little Buddy."

"Ok, Jacob. Now we're friends, but you don't have to hold my hand. Just stay close to me, ok?"

"Ok." Charlie held the door open for Jacob, and they exited the restroom. "I came from that way," Jacob pointed left down the hallway.

“Yes, that’s the ER. We’ll go this way to the ambulance bay.” Charlie walked with Jacob down a short hallway that led to a set of secure doors. He tapped his ID against another dark grey box, and the doors slid open. “You stay here and look on the floor. I’ll go outside and look around, but I don’t want you to come with me in case your parents are looking for you, ok?”

“Ok,” Jacob replied. Charlie stepped outside in the bright afternoon sunlight and looked on the ground for Jacob’s glasses. He didn’t see them and went back inside. Jacob looked hopeful. “Did you find them?”

“No. Let’s walk toward the ER and keep our eyes to the floor.” They walked slowly down the hall. “Are you in school?”

“Yep, I just started kiddie garden,” he proudly said.

Charlie laughed. “You like kindergarten?”

Jacob shrugged. “It’s ok. We don’t get to nap like we did in preschool.” He paused and quietly said, “The other kids make fun of me cuz of my glasses.”

“Well, that’s not nice.”

“No, it’s not. I took them off today cuz Emmy was at the playground. The one by the pond where we were, and I didn’t want her to see me wearing them.”

“Is Emmy one of the kids who makes fun of you?” Charlie asked.

“Yeah,” Jacob said sadly.

Clearing his throat and changing the subject, Charlie asked, “So, you like fishing?”

“You bet! ‘Catch and release,’ that’s what Pop Pop says is best. And that’s good cuz I don’t like to eat fish. They taste the way the pond smells.” Jacob pinched his nose closed and

made exaggerated hand waves in front of his face. "Catch and release is more fun. That way they can keep on living, and we can keep on fishing."

"Is that right?" Charlie asked with a smile. "Where do you fish?"

"At the pond by Pop Pop's house. It's at the end of his street. We walk there with our fishing poles. He carries the worms. I don't like worms." Jacob made a gagging face.

"That sounds nice," Charlie said. "Does your Pop Pop have a boat?"

"No, no boats allowed. We have to stay on the grass." Jacob's face fell, and he looked sad.

An announcement came over the loudspeakers in the ceiling. "Attention please. Attention please. Code Blue. Emergency room 14." The announcement repeated.

"What's that mean?" Jacob asked.

"That means someone needs help in emergency room 14."

"Oh." Jacob continued to scan the floor as they walked. "They said my Pop Pop got a widow maker, whatever that means."

Charlie stopped walking. He closed his eyes and rubbed his face with his hands. "Hey, let's get you back to your parents," he said brightly.

"But what about my glasses?" whined Jacob.

"I think your parents have more to worry about than your glasses, kid. Come on." As they walked into the ER, there was much commotion; nurses and aides running in and out of rooms, paramedics and police officers standing in groups watching. Charlie stood with Jacob in the hallway next to the nurses' station, waiting for a break in the commotion so he could safely walk him to his parents. One nurse was manning the nurses' station while holding a crying baby.

“That’s my little sister,” Jacob said, pointing to the crying baby. “I bet she’s hungry. She’s always hungry. And crying.”

“It’s pretty loud in here. The noise is probably scaring her.”

“Yeah, probably,” Jacob said absentmindedly. He waved at his sister until she saw him over the nurse’s shoulder. Her crying slowed. Then she spit up and began crying again. “There’s my mom and dad,” he said, pointing to a couple standing outside a room straight ahead of them at the front of the nurses’ station. They were crying and holding each other. His dad was wearing scrubs.

“Does your dad work in the hospital?” asked Charlie.

“No. His clothes were wet, so they gave him that stuff to wear,” Jacob answered. He gasped and pointed to the room next to where his parents stood. “Pop Pop!” Suddenly, he ran from Charlie, into the nurses’ station, and out the other side to an older man who was wearing the same blue and black flannel shirt as Jacob. When the older man saw Jacob, he bent down and scooped him up in his arms. They hugged and looked through the window of the room. As the older man held Jacob on his hip, he pointed at the room where his parents were standing outside, spoke to him, and the boy nodded his understanding. Then his parents started screaming.

“Buddy! My Little Buddy! NO!” His dad was yelling and pounding on the window of the room.

“Jakey! Wake up, Jakey!” his mom screamed. “WAKE UP!” She collapsed against the wall. The police officers and paramedics standing close by ran to her.

“You’re early.”

Charlie jumped. "Huh?"

"Someone called for transport too early. We're not ready yet," a nurse told him.

"Transport?" Charlie asked, confused.

"Yeah, it's gonna be another hour or so before we get this mess cleaned up. What a tragedy," she shook her head, watching Jacob's hysterical parents.

"What happened?" Charlie asked. He looked at the room where Jacob and his Pop Pop were and saw them walking away.

"Drowning. Poor little guy. Only five. His grandpa was in that room," she pointed to where Jacob and his Pop Pop stood moments ago. "He passed too. Two family members gone in one day. Can you imagine?" She shook her head and sighed.

Charlie broke out in goosebumps and shivered. "What? What happened?"

The nurse gestured towards Jacob's parents. "The boy, dad, and grandpa were fishing. Dad said his line snapped, and turned and bent down to the tackle box when he heard a splash. He looked back and saw Grandpa pulling the kid out of the water. Then all of a sudden, grandpa fell in too, and both were under. Dad ran in and pulled Grandpa out. He said he couldn't find his son. When he did, the kid was already under for a few minutes. Turns out grandpa fell on top of the boy, and he was stuck in the mud, face down."

"Oh my god," Charlie breathed.

"Such a tragedy," the nurse tsked.

"Did the grandpa drown too?"

The nurse shook her head. "Massive myocardial infarction. Must've happened when he tried to pull the boy out of the water."



“The Widowmaker,” Charlie whispered.

“Yep. His heart didn’t stand a chance, the poor guy. Died instantly. But, like I said, it’ll be a while until we’re ready for you to transport them to the morgue,” the nurse sighed.

An hour and a half later, Charlie walked back to the ER from the morgue after transporting Jacob’s grandfather. The emergency room was quiet, and the air felt heavy with grief. Jacob’s family and the police were gone. Charlie walked into Jacob’s room and stopped. There was a small lump under a white sheet lying on top of a long, flat steel cart. He knew that was Jacob, zipped in a body bag. Charlie shivered. Jacob’s belongings were in a large white bag, tied with a drawstring, and placed at the end of the cart at his feet. Charlie looked at a nurse and held up the bag questioningly, his voice stuck in his throat.

“They have to go with the body for the coroner’s inquest,” the nurse responded quietly.

Body, Charlie thought. He wasn’t a little five-year-old boy who just started kiddie garden and loves to fish with his Pop Pop anymore. No. Jacob was just a body now. Charlie felt the old anger rising. He took a deep breath, held it, and exhaled slowly; the anger quickly replaced with sadness. He sighed and grasped the cold handles at the head of the cart and slowly pushed Jacob through the emergency room. He could feel the eyes of the doctors and nurses watching the steel cart go by, but kept looking forward, swallowing the hard lump in his throat. Stan, the security guard, was waiting for him at the unmarked morgue door. They locked eyes and silently nodded their sympathies. Stan unlocked the morgue door with his key and held it open. Charlie pushed the steel cart into the hallway and stopped, waiting for Stan to shut the door and lock it. After hearing the soft click of the door and the lock engaging, Charlie hung his head, inhaled slowly, and counted to ten.

Tapping his ID to the dark grey box on the wall, he opened the inner door and maneuvered the steel cart into the sea foam green morgue and stopped in front of the walk-in freezer. Charlie put Jacob's paperwork next to his grandfather's on the counter, snapped on a pair of purple gloves, and picked up the bag of Jacob's belongings. The knot was tight, but he unfastened it quickly. He gently opened the bag, and a strong fishy smell wafted out. The nurses folded Jacob's damp clothes with care. Charlie tugged Jacob's shirt to the top of the bag. He gently patted the front pockets and stopped when he felt something bulky. Reaching into the pocket, he eased out a pair of small glasses. The left lens was shattered. Charlie nodded, swallowing the lump in his throat again and sliding them into Jacob's shirt pocket, tucking it back into the bag and re-tying it. He placed it at the end of the cart near Jacob's feet. He threw the gloves away, took a deep breath, and counted to ten.

The creaking freezer door echoed in the silent stillness of the morgue as Charlie pulled it open. He couldn't swallow the lump in his throat any longer and was sobbing now, his frosty breath floating lazily in the frigid air as tears fell onto the white sheet, leaving light grey icy circles. Slowly, he pushed the cold steel cart carrying Jacob's body inside the walk-in freezer. "Jacob," he choked between sobs, "I found your glasses." Charlie walked out and tenderly shut the morgue freezer door.