

## Charlie

When I woke up that morning, I didn't think I'd be on my hands and knees, crawling around in the office like an idiot – with *balloons* tied to my wrist, no less. Trying my absolute hardest to make sure *he* – or as he was known among my friends, 'the diner guy' – wouldn't see me.

It bears repeating. With *balloons* attached to my wrist. Professional, right? That's me. Charlie Davis.

It was supposed to be a completely ordinary Monday morning. Nothing more, nothing less. Just as ordinary as the rest of my days, weeks and ... well, life.

*Wake up.*

*Make your bed.*

*Jump in the shower.*

Get out of the shower, realize what time it is, and then just start running around, as if finding something to wear for work is a completely new concept rather than something you do every day. And then, of course, rush through the New York streets to work at your dad's crisis management company.

At twenty-five years old, my life had already turned into a boring routine. Go to work, come home, sleep, and repeat. Maybe throw in an after-work drink with Rick and Gayle once or twice a week, but even that was too far and between.

I was done with it. Truthfully, I'd been done with it for a while, but I was *done* done with it this time around, and I was determined to do something. Moving away from New York had to be the first thing on the list. It would change my life drastically. I knew it. Everybody knew it. Get away, run away – whatever you want to call it – I needed to move. I was hoping that would be the first step to a better life for myself.

Technically, there was no list just yet, but when I did finally write down the things that were on my mind, moving would be the top priority. The only problem was I'd talked about it so much and yet had done nothing, so nobody tended to believe me whenever I said I was going to move. But this time I was serious about it. Being unapologetically honest was going to be the next thing on the list. It was going to be a great beginning. A new start to my life.

The only difference in my schedule for this particular Monday was that instead of heading straight to work, I was supposed to drop by the bakery and pick up a cake for Rob, who was having his last day at the office. And maybe, if I had enough time, some fun balloons. For the cake, we collected money at the office, but the balloons were going to be my little touch to put a smile on Rob's face, because he was one of the few people I actually enjoyed being around at the office and he had a ready smile for everyone. Not to mention he often played referee between me and my dad and was almost like an uncle to me.

And how was I supposed to know what a terrible, horrible idea it was to volunteer to do these things when I woke up that morning? As the rain started to get more determined to soak me through to my bones, I power-walked the last two blocks from the bakery and, ignoring all the honks and shouts that accentuated New York, ran across the street with my huge box of cake, my umbrella which I used to protect the cake – at least I had my priorities straight – and the balloons. The latter were bound to my wrist, bouncing wildly while I was dripping water from head to toe.

As soon as I was inside the building I worked at, I released a long breath. I successfully fought the urge to shake myself like a dog to get rid of all the water clinging to my skin.

I glanced around and headed straight for the empty reception desk. Holding the cake box with one hand, I did my best to wipe the water from my eyes so I could at least avoid bumping into anyone. A quick glance at my fingers confirmed my suspicions about the fate of my mascara, but I still managed to plaster a smile on my face for all the people giving me strange looks.

Losing the smile when I reached my destination, I put the cake on the reception desk. Catching my reflection in the mirror behind it, I let out a loud groan.

“Jesus,” I whispered, having a hard time looking away from the mess that was me. Who would’ve thought putting on mascara just an hour before could have been such a colossal mistake?

Shaking my head in wonder, I pushed away all the hair that was stuck to my face and leaned a little further forward to take a good look at myself. Unsurprisingly, the view didn’t get any better. *He is going to kill me*, I thought, thinking of my dad. Giving up on my reflection, I started to wring some of the water out of my hair, then started to furiously rub under my eyes to remove the mascara stains, causing the balloons to dance all over, getting the attention of even more people.

*Mental note: Never consider buying balloons for an office party again.*

My eyes strayed from my reflection and I noticed Kimberly walking into the building. I didn’t dare look in her direction again, and for good measure, made sure the balloons were providing some cover. If there was someone else other than my dad who I didn’t want to see me, it was my ‘pretty, perfect’ sister, who didn’t and couldn’t do any wrong in the eyes of my family. Also, as an added bonus, I wasn’t exactly on speaking terms with her since she’d thought I was a little too friendly with her husband. We didn’t talk if it didn’t involve work stuff, and after the things said between us, I was more than okay with that.

I checked the time and realized I was a few minutes late, so I picked up my stuff and headed towards the elevators after I made sure Kimberly had gone upstairs already.

A few steps in, I bumped into someone, and if he hadn’t caught me, I would’ve ended up sprawled across the floor. His hands left my arms and I quickly apologized, but couldn’t actually see who I’d walked into thanks to my hands being so full of cake and balloons.

“No trouble,” he muttered through the balloons – which I must have hit him in the face with.

The voice that answered was rich, deep and amused, and sounded slightly familiar, but I shrugged it off. The amusement was for the balloons, I was sure. Who would’ve thought balloons would be such a surprise to people?

I struggled with the damn cheerful things so I could at least offer an apologetic smile, but the guy was already heading towards the reception desk area in a black suit that fit him and his broad shoulders pretty perfectly – at least from what I could see. The fit was a very important part of wearing a good suit.

After sighing and giving the guy’s rear view one last appreciative look, I turned with my balloons and walked to the elevators. Making sure the cake box was hiding my chest area – which showed off my lilac bra thanks to the rain – I held it up with the hand that was attached to the balloons and tried to do something with my hair. To save time, I took out the elastic that was holding up half of my heavy hair and messed it up some to make it look at least a little intentional – as if I’d just rushed out of the shower. A shower I’d taken essentially with my clothes on.

The doors opened, and before I could take a step forward, there was a rush of people coming out. Holding onto everything tighter and very close to my body, I waited until the stampede ended. When I looked up from behind the balloons, the elevator was already full. I closed my eyes and held in a few choice words. I was not looking forward to seeing my dad at all. A little worry creeping in, I did a full one-eighty so I could check the clock behind the reception desk and then started worrying a little more earnestly. It was twenty past nine. I was officially late. Unable to stay still, I was hitting the call button repeatedly when I heard a ping from one of the elevators behind me. Rushing towards it before it could leave without me, I hit someone in the shoulder with my goddamn balloons, apologized several times without looking since I was still moving, and managed to make it into the steel box safely at last.

Relieved, I reached to press the button for the 20th floor that would take me up to my dad's firm, Atlas Communications, where I worked as a public relations specialist, but instead grabbed a real, live, big and hairy hand. Several seconds passed as I stood there holding onto a stranger's finger like an idiot. Someone in the elevator cleared their throat and I let go of the hand. Leaning forward, I met my second victim's eyes and made an apologetic face. "I'm really sorry. I'm having a bad morning," I whispered and barely heard the murmur of acceptance.

Grateful for the balloons – for the first time – providing me some privacy and hiding my identity, I tried again, and, seeing the numbers from the corner of my eye, this time successfully hit the right button.

Just when I thought things were looking up, I took a step back. The plan had been to close my eyes, lean my head against the back panel, consider my life choices, and just breathe for a minute. The plan did not happen. I walked right into a hard chest and one foot.

Two strong hands clamped onto my waist, I squeaked, my eyes popped open, and I did a tiny little jump in place.

"Oh!"

It was *not* my day. Not at all.

The big, strong hands left my body just as quickly as they had tightened on my waist to stop me from moving further. I hastily took a step forward, moving back to my original spot.

"Easy there," my third victim of the day murmured, pretty close to my ear.

It was the same voice from before. From the guy I'd bumped into in the lobby, not the owner of the hairy hand. A shiver worked its way along my spine and my body warmed, my heart rate slowly picking up speed. Not because of the voice or anything; it was being touched after such a long time that had done it. And yeah, maybe the voice, too, just a little.

*I do not have a thing for voices.*

*I do not have a thing for thick, smooth voices.*

"You've got to be kidding me," I whispered, then in a louder and much more embarrassed voice, apologized to him for the second time in a few minutes.

I hung my head and hit one of the blue balloons with my forehead. "You were also in the lobby." *Kill me now.* "I'm really sorry."

There was no manly chuckle, but I could hear a smile in his voice. "No need to apologize. It's been a ... different morning."

"How ... nice of you to say that. Different can be good sometimes. Still, I'm very sorry."

"No worries."

I tried to turn around, talk to his face like a normal person this time, but when I finally managed to save myself from the tangle of balloons, the elevator door was closing and there was suddenly no one standing behind me.

I backed into the corner, cautiously this time, and waited and waited. The doors opened and closed a few more times, and I belatedly realized that I'd missed my floor.

When I finally made it to the 20th floor and saw *Atlas Communications, Crisis Management* in the black, elegant font on the marble entrance wall, it was 9:26 a.m. and I knew I was dead. Or pretty close to it.

The front desk was empty, but I put the goodbye cake box on it.

"What the hell, Charlie?"

Startled, I whipped around and found a surprised Gayle, my friend and one of the two private investigators that worked in our office, staring at me in horror.

"Don't say anything. I know it looks bad," I said before she could make a comment about my appearance. "It's just rain, I'll fix it. Did the meeting start?"

Raising her hands, she tried to hide her amused smile. "I'm sorry, but I have to. You look both cheery and miserable at the same time while doing a pretty good impression of a drowned raccoon." There was a big smile stretching across her lips, and her eyes lit up with amusement. "Very professional of you."

"You happy?"

"Somewhat. Your skirt seems to be doing fine, but you better do something with your shirt. Unless, that is, you're trying a new look with your purple bra."

"It's lilac. Are we good now?"

"Yes, thank you. And no, the meeting hasn't started yet. Your dad asked four times if you've arrived though."

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath and then listened to the balloons bump each other and squeak as I massaged my temple.

"One more question, because I have to ask. Why are there balloons attached to your wrist?"

"Because I was trying to fly away. Can you do me a favor? Please?"

She raised her brows and pursed her lips, trying her hardest to hold her laughter inside.

I sighed. "Because the guy at the shop needed to go to the storage area to get one of those weight thingies, and I didn't have the time to wait around. That's not important. You owe me one, Gayle."

"Before I circle back to me owing you, let me ask again. Why are there balloons attached to your wrist?"

"Rob, Gayle," I answered, a little exasperated as I moved my arm and watched the balloons almost hit her in the face. "These are for Rob. To say goodbye and ... look ... happy ... something. Goodbye party. Remember?"

She leaned back with a frown. "Rob ... oh, that was today? Are you sure?"

I groaned. "Yes, that was today. You owe me one."

She crossed her arms against her chest. "Excuse me?"

I started to try my best to get the balloons off my wrist, but all I was doing was making the band tighter. "For the blind double date that went horribly wrong."

"That was almost a month ago. And I was doing you a favor. You haven't touched a guy in ages. Ever since your breakup with the elusive and hater-of-kissing Craig a year ago, you haven't dated at all."

Six years of long-distance relationship straight down the drain with that one. "So what if I haven't dated consistently? I saw what's out there and decided I was better off being alone," I shrugged. "Perfectly normal behavior on my part. I'm happy being on my own."

"Right."

"I am," I insisted, frowning at her smiling face. "I'd rather be alone than fumble with idiots who can't even ... Never mind. That's not important."

“Yes, let’s not fight about this right now. You want me to help you out in the bathroom?”

“Yes, that. Can you get me a pair of scissors so I can cut these off? Plus my spare shirt from my office. It’s in the third drawer of my desk. That’s it. Then we’ll be even.”

“Oh, shit. Why didn’t you say that right away instead of making small talk?”

“I wasn’t making small talk. You were ... what? Why?”

“Your dad is coming.”

“Charlie?”

I froze, only for a moment, when I heard his annoyed voice. Leaving the cake box and Gayle where they were, I swiftly walked towards the bathroom with my balloons flying behind me.

“I’ll be right there, Dad. Go ahead and start without me,” I shouted over my shoulder while I closed the bathroom door behind me.

Letting out a deep, deep breath, I took a moment to gather myself. There was nothing I could do but go to the meeting in the shirt I was wearing and make sure I stood behind everyone. Which wouldn’t be the first time.

“This is as good as it’s going to get,” I murmured to myself and ran my fingers through my hair as if that would fix anything. All I had to do was get to my desk, get my shirt, and it’d be easy to explain the rest. Then the balloons were filling my vision and I was cursing myself all over again.

After struggling for quite some time to undo the knot, I gave up and decided to go and find a pair of scissors on my own. As I was passing Blair’s – our receptionist’s – empty desk, I realized everyone was congregating in the middle of the office, standing around the desks and almost creating a human wall between me and whatever they were looking at.

Noticing Gayle standing behind a desk on the far left, I hid my right arm behind my back, hoping like hell it wouldn’t be the first thing people noticed, and made my way towards her.

“Good morning, everyone,” my dad said, causing my steps to slow down. Standing on my tiptoes, I looked over some shoulders, only to realize there was some sort of meeting or announcement being held right in the middle of the office instead of the meeting room. Ignoring the looks and apologizing to anyone I had to squeeze past, I quickened my steps and finally made it to Gayle’s side in one rough piece.

“Why are we not in the meeting room?” I whispered as my dad kept going on with some sort of speech about Rob. “Is this the goodbye for Rob? Is the meeting after? Where is he?”

“You’re still wearing the shirt and the balloons,” Gayle added unhelpfully. “You still look pretty, by the way. A little ballsy with the bra showing, but still pretty.”

“Bite me.”

Reluctantly, I pinched the shirt and held it away from my body so my bra wouldn’t be visible to everyone. Well, to everyone who hadn’t seen it already.

“I tried to get you the shirt, but your dad was standing in front of your office so I couldn’t go in. And this isn’t the meeting we’re going to have later. This is a completely different thing. Oh, and apparently Rob isn’t coming in today.”

*How many meetings were we supposed to have, exactly?*

“Rob isn’t coming in?” I asked a tad bit louder than I’d intended and drew my dad’s attention.

“Glad to see you could join us, Charlie,” he drawled, earning me snickers from some of my other colleagues. I ignored them as I always did. I was pretty sure my dad couldn’t really see me with how I was standing behind Gayle, so I made sure not to make any sudden movements to draw more of his attention.

“I got the cake and balloons for nothing?” I whispered when he started to talk again.

“He’ll be in tomorrow. They’ll keep.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath to calm myself down. “What are we doing here, then?”

“Meeting the new guy to replace Rob,” Gayle answered. “William Carter.” She gave me another curious look over her shoulder. “Your dad didn’t tell you about it?”

I ignored her question and asked one of my own. “I didn’t think he’d find someone so soon. Who is he?”

She turned to study me. “Are you kidding me?”

“Uh, not really.”

“You’re telling me you don’t know who William Carter is?”

It wasn’t really a question – it sounded more like a statement to me – so I opted not to answer.

“Clearly I’m missing out.”

“He’s really good at what he does. You should’ve heard of him. He was based in California, but he’s our new managing director now.”

“Okay ... I guess we’ll meet him eventually. Now, can you reach into the drawer next to you and see if you can find any scissors? I need to get these off of my wrist before my dad bites my head off in front of everyone.”

“I like the new guy,” she offered as she opened the drawer.

“Great,” I mumbled, a little mystified as to why we were still talking about him. “Did you find them?”

“There are no scissors in here. Let me try the other one. Anyway, I might actually want to be on his team. After you see him, I think you’ll feel the same way. No scissors here, Charlie.”

“What are you even talking about?” Frowning, I tried to rise on my tiptoes to look around her to see who they were going on about and got my first look at my new colleague’s profile.

Eyes downcast, he smiled at something my dad said – which I could not for the life of me hear – shook his offered hand, and then turned to face us.

Tall guy, brown messy hair, broad shoulders, and last but not least, if I wasn’t mistaken, brown eyes.

It took me a few seconds – or maybe more than a few, I wasn’t exactly sure – to recognize him, and the moment I did, a low hum started in my ears, drowning everything and everyone out. I dropped back down to my soles. I must’ve let out some sort of a sound, because more than a few faces turned my way. I slapped my hand over my mouth to silence any further objections and hit Gayle’s head with the balloons.

Suddenly, my heart was having some issues. She turned to peer at me, and after blinking at her for a few seconds, I snapped out of it.

“You have to find me scissors,” I whisper-shouted.

“Let me check and see—”

I clutched at Gayle’s arm. “For the love of God, get me some scissors!”

“I will, I will. Jesus, calm down, your dad won’t see you. What’s wrong with you today?”

“Nothing is wrong with me,” I whispered harshly. “I just need the damn scissors to get rid of the balloons.”

She turned to check another desk as I closed my eyes, took a slow and steady breath to center myself, and then took another peek at William Carter.

Gayle came back with no scissors.

“It’s him,” I mouthed to her before she could explain.

“What?”

“Him. Him. The one standing next to my dad. It’s *the guy*. I need my scissors,” I whispered more urgently. When she still looked confused, I kept going with the same description. “*The guy*. Remember? My guy. Diner guy. *The guy* that I can’t shut up about that makes you think I’m so naive? William Carter is my guy. *Was* my guy. And I hit him with these goddamn balloons twice already this morning. I think. Same suit. Same shoulders. I can’t see his ass, but I think it’s his ass. Please find me scissors because I don’t think I can move.”

“Okay. Did you lose it? Is it the rain? Are you cold or someth— Wait a minute ... The diner catch?” Frowning at me, Gayle shook her head. “Don’t be ridiculous, Charlie. That was years ago.”

“Why would I—”

“Charlie?”

My dad’s voice boomed in my ears, and my eyes widened in panic. I might have actually whimpered. Before I could consider what I was doing, I turned away, closed my eyes tightly, and faced the windows behind us. I felt Gayle try to pull down the balloons to help me out, but when my dad called my name a second time, I ducked. The third time he called my name, I was on the floor on my hands and knees ... one second I was there, the next I was completely out of sight.

Like very bad magic. That was me. Bad magic.