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gingerbread

a short story



**ONE**

*November twenty-first, 1942*

*Seattle, Washington*

*Five days prior to Thanksgiving, Charlotte Carroll refused to let the bleak season dampen her spirits. If she did not uphold a festive mentality, who would? In these times, she clung to optimism as her little niece clung to a raggedy plush.*

The drug store burst at the seams with women. Charlotte was small enough to slip between the crowd and their buggies; but baby Margie, plump cheeks pink with cold, squirmed enough in her arms to give her aunt the same effect in the throng as a larger woman.

Charlotte put Margie's head against her chest and wormed her way to the refrigerated portion of the shop. This wasn't fair. Certainly, if a woman comes in the week of Thanksgiving only to buy milk, the other women should leave her be; especially with a baby in tow.

But no matter. She would fetch her jug of milk and come home and drink her tea and chat with her sister. If she was lucky, perhaps it would snow while she spent a restful afternoon indoors; she longed so dearly for snow. The air was certainly frigid enough, and the sky cloudy enough. She decided that snow would lift her family's spirits.

And maybe she would return to a letter from Theo. The thought brought a light to her mind and a spring to her step.

Snapped back to reality, a large woman knocked her aside. In a blink, Charlotte dropped the jug of milk to hold Margie with both arms, and by the time she'd recovered enough to process

what had happened, the jug was shattered over the tiles and milk soaked the saddle shoes she had received for her birthday.

No one noticed the calamity; the bustling women were too consumed in getting their hands on turkey and bread and canned cranberry sauce to see the remnants of the shattered jug.

Margie's face reddened, and she began to cry. Charlotte stepped carefully back to the refrigerators for a new jug, and her niece's wails only grew in intensity; *that* the women noticed. Judgmental stares burned through Charlotte's blouse as she hurried to leave.

The boy at the checkout counter couldn't have been any older than fifteen; though only a handful of years younger than Charlotte, he looked like a baby to her. He didn't say a word – he couldn't have, over the noise of the crowd mingled with Margie's purple-faced shrieks. Every time the baby drew a breath to wail again, the boy winced.

“Five cents.”

Charlotte had already dug her coin pouch out of her purse. She put a dime in his hand.

He stared at the coin. “Five, ma'am.”

“The extra five is for the jug I dropped.” Surely, he had seen the scene; this counter was a straight shot to the refrigerators. “I'm very sorry.”

He only turned to drop the dime in the register drawer. Charlotte hoisted Margie higher up on her hip and took the milk from the counter. Before walking out into the chill, she turned to wish the boy a happy holiday; he looked taken aback, but he smiled.

The autumnal air hit Charlotte's face so sharply, she could have sworn she heard a whip crack. Within a moment, her nose burned. She slowed her pace to cast a glance down at Margie, who had gone quiet again; the baby's cheeks were so rosy, she could have been wearing rouge.

Her little eyelids fluttered and Charlotte's rhythmic steps, shoes clacking on the sidewalk, lulled her to a half-sleep.

Watching her, a flash of guilt struck through Charlotte. If Margie were to fall ill, she would never hear the end of it. No, if Margie even shivered once, her mother would have a few things to say about it.

They arrived before the apartment building. It was one of the older structures, with brick chipping at the corners and windows poorly kept. Water dripped from fire escapes; icicles hung from the perilous metallic steps leading up to the second, third, and fourth stories.

Charlotte stepped aside to let an older man in a hat pass by on the stairs before trekking up. The baby began to tremble in her arms, and again returned the guilt. It wasn't as much fear that her sister would chew her out, though she did certainly hate that; it was more concern for Margie's health, and above all, fear that any illness that should befall her would leave only Charlotte to blame. The neighbors' children seemed to be ill every other week. Though they were several years older than little Margie, Charlotte couldn't help but worry.

Her foot slipped, only slightly, but her heart stopped. She caught herself on the railing with the hand holding the milk jug. She looked around to see if anyone was watching her; nobody was around. She continued up the icy steps, stepping with the care of a child trying not to wake his parents early in the morning.

Their apartment lived on the third floor. Charlotte gave the door a knock with her shoulder, as they always kept the door locked; this wasn't exactly the safest corner of Seattle.

Footsteps sounded on the other side of the door, locks clicked, and it swung open. Donna held the door wide open to let Charlotte scurry inside.

“My word, it’s like the Arctic out there,” Donna said, shutting the door behind her. She didn’t hesitate in taking Margie, and Charlotte didn’t hesitate in letting her. “What took so long?”

“The Thanksgiving rush is here already.” Charlotte pulled off her scarf, tossing it over the coat rack. The apartment was a humble one: it was quite what one would expect, upon surveying the building and its surrounding neighbors. It had one bedroom, which belonged to Donna and Margie, while Charlotte lived on the sofa. It was only a temporary arrangement: once Theo and Albert returned from war, Charlotte intended to move out and marry Theo.

Donna clicked her tongue, but her attention seemed to have been stolen by her little daughter. She sat on the sofa, paying no mind to Charlotte’s pile of pillows and blankets from the night before, rubbing Margie’s pink cheeks till her eyes drifted open.

“She’s just freezing,” Donna mumbled, more to herself than anyone else.

Charlotte pulled her hairclip out, hoping her tangles would keep her warm. “I’m sorry. It’s colder than I had anticipated.”

Donna didn’t respond right away; once she did, it was only to say, “You could have at least put a hat on her.”

“I’m sorry.”

Charlotte found herself drifting toward the table, where a stack of envelopes stood. She placed the milk jug down to scoop the mail up.

“Have you looked at the mail yet, Donna?”

“No, dear.” She seemed to have forgiven Charlotte already. “I was afraid it’d be all bills. Can’t stand to look at those. Can we, sweets?” she cooed to the baby.

Indeed, Charlotte found mostly bills in the stack. Bills they could not pay. Three envelopes in, she suppressed a sigh.

“I should find work, shouldn’t I?”

“Nonsense. Albert sends money home.” Donna glanced over at her. “Is there anything from him?”

Charlotte flipped through her stack. “Yes, in fact. But it doesn’t feel particularly packed with change.”

Donna brightened right away and urged Charlotte to read it at once. She didn’t bother to hide how dearly she missed her husband, gone to war early this year. Charlotte knew that her sister had been praying for a Christmas homecoming; she knew because Charlotte wanted one, herself. Though unmarried, she couldn’t deny that she missed her high school sweetheart.

Charlotte tore open the envelope and began reading.

*“Dearest Donna –*

*“Your letter brings me great peace. I find myself far better off when I hear news of yourself and our Margaret. Do not hesitate to send more detailed letters.*

*“I miss you, as well – perhaps more, dare I say. I want to be home with you, and I daresay I will come Christmastime. I have to have some conversations, but I don’t doubt that I will be back in Seattle as early as the start of winter.*

*“Aside from that, I have little news. I expect to see you in short time.*

*Sincerest love,*

*Albert Porter.”*

Charlotte thought Donna should burst at the news this letter contained. She had already leapt to her feet before Charlotte finished reading; and now, as Charlotte lowered the letter, a

tension hung in the room. Margie was first to reintroduce noise to the silence, whimpering as her own form of complaint.

Donna bounced the baby on her hip. “You’re hungry, aren’t you, sweets?” She looked up at Charlotte. “I’ll be in my bedroom.”

Charlotte lifted the letter. “What do you think of this? Albert coming home for Christmas?”

Her sister’s placid face broke into a smile, the sort of smile that held back tears. Charlotte was well used to how Donna expressed emotion, so different than Charlotte herself; Donna did not want others to know of her emotions, and whether the emotions were of the happy or sad sort made no difference to her. A stranger would think she was unhappy at this joyous news. But Charlotte knew.

She smiled. “I’m so happy for you, Donna.”

“Thank you, dear.” With that, she retreated to her bedroom with Margie.

Charlotte waited till she was positive Donna wouldn’t come back for a while before she began rifling through the bills once more. She prayed she had missed another letter, from another lover, in the stack.

Disappointment weighed like a stone in her belly. Theo had still sent nothing.

She threw her shoulders back and rolled up her blouse sleeves. She had cookies to bake for a church fundraiser, and she had best get busy. Her thoughts clouded her vision of the ingredients and mixing bowls she pulled from cabinets.

The intensity of her desire to see her Theo again threatened her deliberate optimism. Even if she could not see him in person, certainly a letter would suffice. Why hadn’t he written? Was he safe?

Worrying would do her no good. Perhaps her last letter, sealed and mailed nearly a month ago, had gotten lost in the sea of letters going out to the men at war; or perhaps the reverse was true, that a letter addressed to herself went missing.

She would write him again. Yes, then she would get a response, she was certain. And she could ask of his Christmas plans, and perhaps subtly hint that she wanted him home.

Everything would be just fine indeed.

## **TWO**

*December second, 1942*

*Tacoma, Washington*

*“Tell me about any previous employment, Ms. Carroll. If any is worth mentioning.”*

Charlotte fidgeted in her seat. This interviewer, Edward Bunch, sat tranquil and at ease; it struck a certain fear in his interviewee, who held none of those qualities herself. In being unable to relate to this man, she was rendered lost.

“Nothing worth mentioning, sir.”

Mr. Bunch’s thin lips hinted at a smile, for the first time during the interview. The expression on such a plain, serious face surprised Charlotte, who didn’t know how to respond. Should she smile back? Should she avert her gaze? Her heart thrummed.

“I said that as a formality.” He twirled a pencil between his knuckles: a gesture likely not intended to strike fear, and only done for entertainment, but Charlotte felt quite threatened. “Tell me about this previous employment.”



Charlotte crossed her arms, then uncrossed them again, finally curling her fingers around the seat of her chair. She had marveled on the size and glamor of the room once she'd entered, when her feet sunk into plush carpet and her face was lit by the setting sun beyond a sparkling window; but now the office was suffocating her.

Thus far, Mr. Bunch had asked none of the questions she had practiced with Donna the night before. Charlotte was wholly unprepared. Every word from her mouth was like spitting out sandpaper.

"I was a nanny, a few months back."

"Oh?" Mr. Bunch put an intonation at the end of the word, but he didn't sound surprised.

"Why are you no longer in that position?"

The contents of Charlotte's stomach threatened to show themselves.

"I only did that for a few months. I wasn't fired," she added at once, hoping to help her situation. "I left for, you know, family."

"Family."

She nodded. She didn't quite feel like elaborating, but she read the expectation in his face. She summoned a breath that didn't want to come readily.

"My sister's husband is at war, and she's got a baby. I only quit to help her."

Mr. Bunch made a humming noise in the back of his throat. "Understood. May I ask you a question, Ms. Carroll?"

Charlotte stared back for a few heartbeats. Was that a trick question?

"Of course, sir."

He curled his fingers in a fist over his pinewood desk. "What persuades you to take up work again at this time?"

She hesitated. Would she be denied this job if she told the truth, that she only wanted the money that came with this work? But what else could she say?

Mr. Bunch spoke up again before she could come to a conclusive answer.

“You don’t have to respond to that. I know the answer already.”

“You do?”

He gave a solemn nod. “Money is tight in these times, Ms. Carroll. I understand.”

Charlotte released a tight breath. “Thank you.”

Mr. Bunch unclenched his hands and glanced over the papers on his desktop. He lifted one sheet to scan the one beneath it, taking leisure in speaking up again. Charlotte squirmed, almost wondering if she should speak first; but what should she say? She was the one being interviewed, not him.

At last, he looked up. He was the sort of man who combed his hair and trimmed his thin mustache every morning, and who wouldn’t deign to let anyone, even strangers, see a single wrinkle on his shirt. Charlotte read him like the newspaper columns she loved.

“What qualities do you have that you believe would make you a good assistant?”

Finally, a question whose answer she had already prepared. Charlotte cleared her throat.

“I love to serve. Helping and talking with people are —” She broke off. She wanted to use *I love* again, but feared repetition would lessen the intelligence she wanted to appear to have. Perhaps she was overthinking it. She used the redundancy regardless. “Well, it’s also what I love.”

“A good quality in a secretary, I must say. Remind me how many years removed from grade school you are?”

“Two years, sir.”

He wrote something on a sheet of paper. Charlotte's stomach flipped; this was the first time he had written anything down.

He continued scribbling for a long time, the scratch of pencil to paper and the ticking of the clock filling the lavish office.

"Is my age a problem, sir? Am I too young?"

"Nonsense, Ms. Carroll. You are the standard age for most secretaries nowadays." He paused in writing to flex his hand. "I'm only five years removed, myself."

That was a relief to hear, though somewhat surprising. Mr. Bunch, who looked older and stonier than he claimed, did not stop writing while he spoke up again.

"It is Ms. Carroll, isn't it? Or are you a missus?"

"Only 'miss,' sir."

He moved his pencil to the bottom of the paper to jot a quick note. He looked up at last, and seeing his face now, Charlotte was able to believe he was only a few years her senior. He stood up, and Charlotte accepted that as her dismissing.

"Thank you, Ms. Carroll. We have received a dozen or so applicants, but believe me, I will put in a good word for you."

### **THREE**

*December sixth, 1942*

*Seattle, Tacoma, Washington*

*Charlotte, with some pride, straightened her freshly ironed yellow blouse in the mirror. She looked every part the assistant she was about to become. It was a strange feeling, accepting her first*

“grown-up” job; she wasn’t even twenty-one yet and here she was, working for a big cooperation out of town; *The Seattle Times*, no less. Her chest swelled in her reflection.

Donna appeared in the mirror, standing in the bathroom doorway.

“You look swell.”

Charlotte smiled, more at herself than her sister. “I had better. I must make a good impression.”

“I’d guess you already did.”

Donna was right: Mr. Bunch had rung the apartment before Charlotte’s train pulled into Seattle. Charlotte was dumbfounded that she had left such an impression on him, but she wouldn’t complain.

Donna went on, “And you know how I feel about that.”

Charlotte scoffed, giving her thick hair a fluff. “You know how *I* feel about how you feel.”

“I’m not fooling around, Lottie. I fear this man – this Bunch or whatever he’s called – has got feelings for you.”

“That’s absurd.”

Donna’s eyebrows shot up, stretching her long face longer still. “Is it?”

Charlotte rolled her eyes with deliberation, careful that Donna should see it. “Even so, I’ve got Theo. Relax for me, okay?” She glanced over her shoulder. “What’s the time?”

Donna referenced her old wristwatch with a soft sigh. “Seven-thirty, just about.”

It was time to leave. The sisters exchanged hugs and good-lucks and be-safes, and Charlotte left for the station.

*Charlotte bounced her leg.* She had been instructed by the receptionist to wait in the lobby for Mr. Bunch's arrival, and she'd been waiting for a half hour now. He wasn't late: she was painfully early.

In that time, she had surveyed the entire lobby. The ceilings spiraled high above her head, leading her to wonder if the tall building was inhabited majorly by this one floor. Grand stairs swung up to the next floor, banister strung with a lush green garland, and she watched men and women in business attire come up and down the elegant steps in no hurry at all. But more people seemed interested in the elevator on the opposite side of the lobby.

Charlotte noted a handful of women her own age, and a lot of graying men and women, but no young men. They were all at war.

She felt someone's eyes on her back. She dared to turn around: Mr. Bunch approached.

Scrambling to her feet, Charlotte did her best to look composed and ready. She stumbled a bit in her heels, which she so uncommonly wore; she prayed Mr. Bunch didn't notice.

"You're here already, Ms. Carroll."

Charlotte gave a single nod, putting on a smile. Mr. Bunch gestured toward the other side of the lobby, and they started walking.

"Quite punctual, aren't you?"

"I try to be, sir."

He said nothing more during the lengthy walk to the elevator. He was not as tall as most men Charlotte knew, but he was taller than she, and she had to walk briskly to keep in pace with him; making her task of walking in heels all the more difficult.

Mr. Bunch punched in a button on the wall. Now that she was closer to it, Charlotte felt the elevator moving between the floors like a drum's baseline in her chest. Or perhaps it was her own heart.

The doors shuddered open. Mr. Bunch stepped inside before the doors could reach their resting place inside the wall, and sucking in a breath, Charlotte followed him. She felt the elevator should suffocate her.

The doors shut tight, and they ascended.

"Ms. Carroll."

She had to choke the word out. "Sir?"

"You look unwell."

Charlotte hesitated. But she glanced at Mr. Bunch, and she allowed herself to relax as much as she could.

"This is my first elevator ride, sir."

He watched her, as though waiting for her to laugh and admit to a joke. She blinked back, and his face cleared.

"You're serious?"

She nodded. Could this elevator rise any slower? She felt as though they should have reached the moon by now.

"I had no idea." Perhaps she imagined it, but she thought Mr. Bunch projected discomfort. He looked straight ahead. "We will use the stairs from now on."

Charlotte said nothing, shame burning her face. If he didn't know of her financial situation, he certainly did now; what near-adult had never been in an elevator before? Even the simplest hotels had them.

The movement stopped; the doors peeled open to a new hallway. As though pressed by obligation, Mr. Bunch said, "It is safe, I assure you."

"I know, thank you."

They stepped off. This hall was not near as luxurious as the lobby below, but the striped wallpaper and clean baseboards made a better impression than the hallways in Charlotte's building.

She felt a compulsion to break this silence. "Whose office will I be working in, sir?"

Her voice still wavered, in spite of her best efforts. The elevator ride shook her nerves more than she would have admitted.

"Mine."

Charlotte hurried to keep in pace with him. They turned a corner, and the hallway kept going for eternity.

"I'm sorry?"

"You will work for me, Ms. Carroll." He stopped before a door labeled with the number 28, pulling a ring full of keys from his blazer pocket. "Did you expect someone else?"

Charlotte responded in the negative, hiding her surprise. As he was so young, she hadn't expected to work for Mr. Bunch directly. She wasn't certain what she had thought, but she supposed she figured he held an intern or an assistant position.

Door 28 opened to a dark room. A light switch illuminated the office, perhaps twice the size of Charlotte's entire apartment, blanketed in clean carpet and outfitted with two oak desks. Nothing hung on the yellow walls, except for a single framed photograph. This wasn't the room in which Charlotte had been interviewed.

"Let us hop right in, Ms. Carroll." Mr. Bunch moved toward the desk furthest from the door. His desk held neat stacks of paper, a clean coffee mug, and a typewriter in the dead center;

the second desk, presumably Charlotte's, was empty. "We'll begin by going over the details of your position here."

Charlotte gave an eager nod. Her nerves subsided, and the excitement of beginning this new job settled over her again like a fresh snowfall.

Mr. Bunch sat at his desk. "I am one of the senior writers."

Charlotte blinked at him. If he was less serious in tone, she would think he was joking. Had he lied about his age? She couldn't get past the implausibility of this.

He gestured to the other desk. "That is for you."

She complied, turning to face him in her new chair. "What do you write, sir? I read the *Times* every week, and I don't know if I have seen your column."

He didn't answer right away.

"You really read it weekly?"

Charlotte nodded, crossing her ankles. Her calves were already sore from these shoes. "Religiously, sir."

Mr. Bunch hummed, hunching forward in his seat. As though deep in thought at the hands of a new brainchild.

"Are you an avid reader? Of content besides the *Times*?"

"When I have time, I do like to read. I don't know if I would call myself an avid reader, though."

He pressed on: "But you like the *Times*?"

"Very much. Sir," she added hastily, remembering that she was in the presence of her superior. Her boss.

"That sounds like the sort of tidbit you should bring up in an interview."



Panic struck Charlotte, until she caught a gleam in his eye. She allowed herself to laugh a bit.

Mr. Bunch put his elbows on his desk. “You are observant. You’re right, you have seen nothing I’ve written in the paper, because I haven’t written anything in it yet.”

“Oh?”

“I only recently secured this position. I don’t have to release my first article until Christmas Eve.”

Charlotte nodded. This gave some clarity to her confusion; had she less respect for him, she would have asked a thousand questions. But she understood her place.

“I suppose I have acquired you for the duties of an assistant.” He drew a long breath, as though tired. “Only with the salary of a secretary.”

Charlotte tried to swallow her excitement. “What are those duties, sir?”

“Fetching coffee for me. Taking my telephone calls. Organizing my meetings.” Mr. Bunch twirled his empty mug by the rim. “Does this seem right to you, Ms. Carroll?”

She supposed it did, and she told him as much.

“Wonderful.” He stood and approached her desk, only a few footsteps from his own. “I’m glad to have you here.”

“I’m glad to be here, Mr. Bunch.” She was, indeed, glad to work for the very *Times* she loved so dearly, even in a position as miniscule as this; but more than that, she was glad to secure enough earnings to keep Donna from worrying herself to death.

Mr. Bunch dipped his head to her, somewhat awkwardly, and returned to his desk without another word. He busied himself in his work, but as Charlotte watched, he only seemed to be fidgeting to fill space. He shuffled papers, then stacked them neatly again; he ran his fingertips

over his typewriter keys; he cleared his throat; he picked up his mug and peered into it, as though surprised it was empty.

“Would you like coffee, sir?”

His eyes turned up. “It’s too early for coffee, I say. Although, I wouldn’t mind tea.”

Charlotte got to her feet at once. “Of course. Where can I find that?”

“There should be a kitchen on the second floor. Feel free to take the stairs.”

Reaching to pick up Mr. Bunch’s mug, she caught a blush over her cheeks and forehead in her reflection. She looked at her shoes to hide it.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Please.”

She looked up, catching his eye. She hadn’t realized till now how rough his skin looked; how the sharp angles of his jaw and eyes contrasted with his soft nose. A chill ran over her shoulders.

It took him a moment to speak again.

“You don’t have to call me *sir*.”

Charlotte tore her gaze away, rubbing her thumb along the mug’s handle. She dearly wished that blink of a moment hadn’t happened; discomfort pricked her arms like needles.

“What’d you rather I call you?”

“Either of my names.” Mr. Bunch said *either* with a sharp *I* sound; a pronunciation Charlotte didn’t often hear in this region. “Edward or Bunch.”

Charlotte nodded once, twice, thrice; too many times. She backed out of Room 28.

“I will fetch your tea, then, Mr. Bunch.”

He said nothing, and she made haste in her exit.

**FOUR**

*December eighth, eleventh, 1942*

*Seattle, Tacoma, Washington*

*“You’re getting home later and later every night. I was starting to worry.”*

Charlotte flung her grandmother’s wool scarf over the back of the sofa. The commute between Seattle and Tacoma was a difficult one to make twice daily; six hours a day on a train had a deeper impact on Charlotte’s exhaustion levels than her job itself.

In truth, she liked little about her work. She dreaded her routine of waking up early, boarding the train on the dark side of the morning, sitting in silence in Room 28 because Mr. Bunch was too awkward for the conversation she craved, then boarding the train again and coming home hours after sunset.

But it wasn’t all bad; above all the complications and inconveniences, she loved being near the writers she loved. Yesterday, she had even gotten the chance to meet a favorite political journalist of hers.

In the back of her mind, far enough to prevent it from becoming a goal, she entertained the idea of becoming one of those writers herself. The idea was too implausible to consider.

“I’m sorry. Mr. Bunch has been staying late in his office, and I don’t leave until he does.”

Donna rolled her eyes, bouncing Margie on her hip. It was far past Margie’s bedtime, but her wide-open eyes didn’t suggest a hint of the sleepiness she ought to have felt.

“He shouldn’t be keeping you that late, y’know. You’ve only got, what, four hours before you’ve gotta leave again?”

Charlotte shook her head, moving toward the kitchen for a late dinner. She kept her tweed coat on, as the nightly chill hadn't yet left her shoulders.

"It's just fine. I won't be at this job forever."

"Who is this Mr. Bunch fella you work for?" Donna followed her to the kitchen, only a couple steps from the living room. "Isn't he the one with a thing for you?"

"He does not 'have a thing for me.'" Charlotte didn't entirely believe her insistence; the moment they had locked eyes on her first day still lingered in her mind, bringing with it some odd anxiety. But nothing of the sort had happened since, and she had made her peace with it; she knew Donna would not make such peace.

"Is he a writer?"

Charlotte gave a single nod, pouring herself a glass of milk. This would have to suffice in place of a meal.

"He's a senior writer, but just barely. He hasn't published anything yet."

Margie made a fussing noise; in between coos, Donna said, "How is he a senior writer with nothing published?"

Charlotte took a prolonged drink. She didn't have an answer.

Donna clicked her tongue, walking toward her bedroom. "Something seems off about him. Be careful, won't you, Lottie?"

"Oh, you worry too much."

*Christmas music wafted up from a few floors down.* Not the hymns one would sing in church pews, but the current sort of Christmas tunes with saxophones and pianos and more instruments Charlotte didn't recognize by sound alone.

Sitting at her desk, her leg bounced. Every few minutes, she would catch laughter from the party below. Mr. Bunch had explicitly shown no interest in attending; instead, he intended to “take the opportunity to stay late and work.”

Charlotte would have been lying if she’d said she shared the same goals tonight. More truthfully, she longed the company and stimulation of the office Christmas party. Sitting in Room 28, only standing when Mr. Bunch requested something – which was uncommon – left her sluggish and bored all day long.

She heard movement behind her. Mr. Bunch had stood; Charlotte released a little prayer that he either planned to go home, or to join the festivities below.

Unfortunately, neither were true.

“I will be back shortly.”

“Where are you going?”

He was already walking to the door. “I only need another coffee. I won’t be long.”

Charlotte rose to her feet. “I can get it, Mr. Bunch.”

He visibly hesitated. Charlotte felt the need to add, “It isn’t any trouble. It *is* what you’re paying me to do, after all.”

Succeeding a pause, Mr. Bunch nodded and put his hands in his pockets. “I suppose that’s fair.”

He gave Charlotte the same white porcelain mug he used daily, and she began her trek down to the kitchen. With each footstep down the stairs, the gay music rose in volume. The party must have been in the kitchen. Her stomach gave a little jump at the thought of the chance to join the celebration, if only observing while she brewed and poured the coffee.

The building's kitchen was not a large one, but it held more occupants than Charlotte would have expected: the room overflowed. The white noise of laughter and conversation filled the air, and women and older men in business attire stuffed the space, not one of them noticing the assistant frozen in the doorway.

There Charlotte lingered. The *Babes in Toyland* melody on the radio stung her ears, and the rank of whiskey burned her throat.

Clinging to the wall, she maneuvered around journalists and managers and secretaries and assistants she didn't know. A large man pressed her against the wall; she squeezed away.

She reached the counter, and at last, somebody paid heed to her.

"What're you looking for, young lady?"

It was a middle-aged woman, clutching a wine glass in one hand and a crumbled-up napkin in the other.

"Only coffee, ma'am. For my boss."

The woman snickered. "You must be Mr. Bunch's." She held out her hand, dropping the napkin. "Beverly Goodwill."

Charlotte shook her hand, smiling. "It's a pleasure. I'm Charlotte Carroll."

Goodwill took an uncomfortably long drink. Charlotte glanced around her, but the kettle wasn't where it was normally kept.

"Where is –"

"Is the Bunch boy too 'shamed to show his face here tonight?"

Charlotte shrunk back, coiling both hands around the coffee mug. Although stunned, she couldn't help feeling defensive.

"He is hard at work, ma'am."

Goodwill scoffed loudly, but not loud enough to be heard over the din of the room. “Sure.”

“Ma’am?”

“I reckon it’d be easier for his daddy to just give him the money outright. Then at least he hasn’t got to pretend to work.” She hiccupped. “But I guess the show is part of the whole thing.”

Charlotte opened her mouth; nothing came out.

“You know what else?” She drew closer to Charlotte, who caught a dank whiff of her alcohol-laced breath. “Word going around is, your Mr. Bunch paid a young man a fat check to take his place in the draft.”

The air was sucked out of Charlotte. She wanted to leave.

“I only need the coffee, ma’am.”

“Please, girl, it’s a party.” She picked up, seemingly from thin air, a shot glass of amber liquid. “Bring this to the boy.”

## **FIVE**

*December eleventh, seventeenth, 1942*

*Tacoma, Seattle, Washington*

*“I don’t drink, Ms. Carroll.”*

Charlotte set the shot glass on the desk with the empty mug. “May I ask you a question, sir?”

Mr. Bunch looked her in the face, something he did not often do. He didn’t look her in the eye; he never had, except for that one time. Charlotte recalled the memory far too frequently.

“Only if you stop calling me ‘sir.’”

“My apologies, it’s an impulse.”

“Understood. What was your question?”

Charlotte’s gaze travelled over his desk, so tidy she wouldn’t have known he had spent all day here. Scribbled-out typewriter pages laid in organized piles around his typewriter, which was loaded with an untouched paper. He seemed to be working, despite what the woman downstairs had said.

She wavered now; to ask an inappropriate question so early could jeopardize this job.

“How did you manage to become a senior writer, when you’re so young and don’t have anything published?” Catching herself by the look on his face, she added, “I’m impressed, si – Mr. Bunch.”

Mr. Bunch seemed to consider this with gravity. While he thought, Charlotte craned her neck in an attempt to make out the words he had typed, then censored. Her eyesight wasn’t strong enough to catch anything more than a word.

Mr. Bunch’s chair creaked as he leaned over his desk. He drew a long breath; Charlotte held hers.

“Nepotism.”

“I’m sorry?”

He breathed a sigh. “I owe my job to nepotism, Ms. Carroll. I suppose you heard someone say that while you were downstairs.”

Charlotte shuffled her feet. “I may have.”

“Listen, though.” He waved his hand. “Take a seat.”

She took her desk chair and turned it around to face his desk.



Mr. Bunch began with an unexpected apology. “I’m sorry if you have been treated poorly for being my assistant.”

Charlotte shook her head. “I have not. That I know.”

“I’m glad.”

Silence. Charlotte tucked her hair behind her ear, clearing her throat.

“Does your father own the company?”

“He is very, very high up, yes.” Mr. Bunch clacked a few keys on his typewriter, gazed over it, and leaned into his fist with worn eyes. “But understand that I did not choose this job.”

“Did you not?”

“My father did. I had no say in the matter.” He shook his head. “Which I realize sounds juvenile, letting my parents decide my future. But it’s more complex than it sounds.”

Charlotte propped herself forward. Burning in her subconscious, she knew she was growing absorbed in Mr. Bunch’s story. She craved to hear, to learn more about him. She didn’t know why; or rather, she didn’t want to know why.

“What did *you* want to do?”

He looked startled. She was ready to believe no one had asked him that in a long time.

“Honestly?”

“Of course.”

Mr. Bunch gathered air in his lungs before he ventured to answer. Charlotte perched on the edge of her seat. In the quiet, the opening bars of an upbeat *O Come, All Ye Faithful* rumbled underfoot.

“When I was a boy, I wanted to be a baker.”

Charlotte, in her surprise, was unable to suppress the quick laugh that escaped. She threw her hands to her mouth.

“I’m sorry. That just wasn’t what I expected.”

He smiled: a real smile this time, not only a shadow.

“I would laugh, too. I wanted to sell Christmas cookies.”

Charlotte felt herself relax. Seamlessly, she had crossed from being in the presence of a superior to talking with a friend.

“Shaped like trees and ornaments?”

“And reindeer.”

“Oh, of course,” Charlotte said. Mr. Bunch chuckled roughly, and she mirrored it.

“Do you still want to do that?” she asked.

He shrugged one shoulder; he seemed to have relaxed, too. “I haven’t thought about it in years.”

Charlotte hummed. “I empathize.”

“With?”

“All of that. My parents never supported what I wanted to be.”

Mr. Bunch’s interest visibly piqued. “How’s that?”

“If you will believe me, I’ve always thought about being a journalist.”

He laughed once, which was the reaction she had anticipated. She laughed, as well.

“Is that why you took this job?” he asked.

Charlotte nodded. “It certainly was a factor.”

“You like to write?”

“Very much.”

The corners of his mouth turned up. “Perhaps you could help me sometime.”

Charlotte didn’t look away. “Oh?”

He gestured at his desk, his trashed work. “This article has to be printed Christmas Eve, and I have nothing of it. If you’re willing, help would be appreciated.”

Her heart thrummed hard in her throat; she swallowed it. “I would love to help.”

Mr. Bunch nodded, quickly at first, then slower. His eyes darted as he studied her face. Charlotte’s sweater somehow felt far warmer than it had before.

The tension stretched thin in the five feet between them. Charlotte had to snap it before it became too taut, but inexplicably, she couldn’t bring herself to ruin this. Who knew a silence could sparkle so bright?

Mr. Bunch blinked, looking down. He cut the cord.

“Tomorrow, though. It’s much too late now.”

Charlotte stood, clasping her hands behind her back. The music downstairs had ceased.

“Absolutely. Tomorrow.”

He smiled at his typewriter. “Tomorrow.”

*Nearly a week later, Charlotte arrived home in full spirits.* Even the gloom of the train stations and the long commute didn’t cast a shadow over her mood.

Uncharacteristically, Donna carried the same feelings. She sat on the sofa in her nightgown, legs crossed over the coffee table; Albert had been home three days now, and his wife was more at ease than Charlotte had seen in a long time.

“You’re back so late.” Donna’s tone carried none of the worry Charlotte used to expect.

Charlotte put her bag on the floor. She had learned by now to bring activities to keep herself occupied while Mr. Bunch worked. Today, she brought a handful of old *Seattle Times* of random dates: both as reading material for herself, and inspiration for Mr. Bunch. He had gained little ground in his writing, and he only had a week to release his first article.

“You should be asleep,” Charlotte said, planting herself on the sofa arm. “You’ve got an early wake-up call in a few hours.”

Donna smiled wearily. Margie had begun waking up earlier each morning.

“I have extra help now.”

Charlotte leaned into the cushion, stretching her sore back. “Where is he?”

“He went to bed. Just a few minutes ago.” Donna used her arms to pull herself upright, putting her socked feet back on the carpet. “You look awful happy.”

“I am, I’m very happy.”

“Just you wait till you read the letter on the table.”

She shot upright. Donna gestured at an envelope on the coffee table, and Charlotte rushed to fetch it.

Addressed to Charlotte Carroll. From Theodore Lemmings.

The spark died inside her chest. The envelope was already torn open – no surprise, as Donna always had to read Theo’s letters first – and she pulled the folded paper out. Clutching the paper, her hands lost their color.

Theo was coming home for Christmas.

Donna made a *ha* sound. “He’s coming through after all.”

“It *is* great.” Charlotte lowered the letter. She had forgotten all about Theo; shame spiked in the pit of her stomach.

“What’s the matter?”

Charlotte pulled her gaze toward her sister, whose deep-set eyes finally displayed the concern they usually did. Charlotte took a breath, righting herself.

“Nothing’s the matter. I was hoping he would come.”

Donna made a disbelieving noise in her throat. “Try to contain your excitement, Lottie.”

Quiet settled over the pair. A deep snore rose from the bedroom, prompting Donna to speak again.

“What is it, really?”

Charlotte laid Theo’s letter on the table as if it would shatter into a million pieces if she was not careful. She put her elbows on her knees, chin in her hands.

“Oh, dear. I’m a dreadful person, Donna.”

“What’s that nonsense?”

“I am, though. I truly am.”

Donna’s hand landed on her arm. “You know what Mama would have to say about that.”

Charlotte sighed. She was right: their mother never stood for her daughters speaking ill of themselves.

She took a shuddery breath, locking her gaze on her knees. “I believe I’m falling for Mr. Bunch.”

## *SIX*

*December nineteenth, 1942*

*Tacoma, Seattle, Washington*

*“This topic is juvenile. There is my problem.”*

Charlotte took a sip of too-strong coffee. “You can’t blame the topic.”

“Well, I’m tired of blaming myself.”

She giggled, pulling her chair closer to his desk. She hadn’t sat at her own desk in days; she found it far more enjoyable to face Mr. Bunch.

“What about it is juvenile?” she asked.

He looked up, running a hand through his hair. As the deadline for the Christmas Eve article loomed like a dark figure in the night, Charlotte noticed he had stopped gelling his hair.

“Doesn’t ‘the true meaning of Christmas’ sound like the theme in a children’s book?”

“I thought you were supposed to write about what Christmas means to *you*.”

Sigh. “It’s the same.”

“I disagree.”

He rose his eyebrows. Charlotte guessed he wasn’t accustomed to someone disagreeing with him, let alone a woman.

“Do you?”

She nodded, lowering her coffee mug to rest on her wool skirt. “There is a definite difference.”

“Do share.”

“I think ‘the true meaning of Christmas’ would focus more on Jesus coming to earth as a baby, treating one another with kindness, ‘Christmas isn’t about the presents,’ everything in that vein.”

Mr. Bunch rubbed his chin as she spoke. She continued, “But ‘what Christmas means to you’ is a personal essay. It’s more about your childhood and how you spend the holidays. *Why* you celebrate Christmas. And, of course, what all of it means to you.”

He remained quiet for a few heartbeats. In the silence, Charlotte added, “Perhaps *that* is your problem – you’re looking at the topic wrong.”

She hadn’t realized the nerve of her statement until it had escaped her lips. To speak to her superior like this would have disappointed her mother deeply; but perhaps Mr. Bunch wouldn’t care.

He straightened himself in his seat, the old chair groaning below him.

“You know more about my own writing assignment than I do, Ms. Carroll.”

She exhaled. “I like these sorts of assignments.”

Something of a smile filtered over Mr. Bunch’s face. “You really ought to be writing this yourself.”

Charlotte chuckled. “Imagine.”

Mr. Bunch put his elbows on the desk. Their eyes met, but only for a moment so miniscule it was possible Charlotte imagined it; she feigned sudden interest in her coffee.

“If this were your assignment,” Mr. Bunch said, “what would you write?”

She scoffed, looking back up again. “I won’t let you use my answers for the article.”

Despite her words, the idea of involvement in this assignment brought her a thrill. Perhaps her name could even be printed with Mr. Bunch’s, and it would be the sort of newspaper clipping Donna framed and hung in her kitchen.

Good humor painted Mr. Bunch’s face. “I wouldn’t consider it.”

“Why would you ask, then?”

“Curiosity.”

“You know what they say about curiosity, Mr. Bunch? ‘Curiosity kills the journalist.’”

He grinned. “I don’t recall that one.”

Charlotte crossed her legs. She wasn’t certain how to answer. She brought the mug to her lips.

“I suppose if I had more time to think on it, I could write . . . something about growing up with my mother and my sister. Perhaps about our Christmases during the Depression.”

His head bobbed. “What about them?”

“I don’t know, perhaps. . . .” She hummed. “There was one Christmas, I think it was in ‘thirty-four, my sister and me made homemade gifts for Mother as a surprise. They were awful gifts: I gave her a stick doll with one of my old rags for clothes, and I think Donna – my sister – gave her some sort of plant she’d propagated.”

Mr. Bunch made no sound; if he were someone else, she could have forgotten he was there.

“The gifts were so bad,” she went on, stroking the wispy hairs that had fallen from her bun, “but Mother loved them. She cried. I don’t know.” She lowered her mug again. “That’s what I would write about. It was important to me.”

To her surprise, Mr. Bunch responded at once, rather than taking his usual silence to think.

“That’s fantastic.”

“Is it?”

“Well, not in that way,” he said hurriedly, catching himself. “The Depression was not fantastic. Your story is.”

Charlotte felt herself swell; in recalling the memory, her eyes swelled, too. She only nodded, for fear of speaking should she burst.



“That is the sort of story that ought to be shared.” He picked up a pencil to chew on the end. “It’s heartfelt, meaningful, relatable. And all too relevant.”

“Thank you,” Charlotte managed to get out.

He looked up at her again, twirling the pencil between his knuckles.

“Ms. Carroll, I would like to make you an offer.”

Her throat dried up. She had a feeling she knew the offer. “Sir?”

“Would you like to write this article?”

She knew it.

At once, both terror and elation rose in her throat; to write for *The Seattle Times*, to have others read her stories. To have her name in print. She could almost see *Charlotte Carroll* in typed letters float across her vision.

She cleared her throat. “I’m sorry?”

Mr. Bunch crossed his arms over the desk and leaned over them. As always, his composure remained calm. But his voice carried ease; or delight, perhaps?

“If you truly enjoy writing as much as you claim, you should write. I don’t want you pressured, however – if you’re interested, just write the article and I will pass it on to my superiors for review. I will still continue to work on mine.” He cast a look at his dormant typewriter. “I’ll try, at least. Then I suppose they will pick their favorite, but if you’re as good a writer as I suspect, yours will go to print.”

Charlotte didn’t know if she should be sick or cry. She stood on wobbly legs, swallowing the glue stuck in her throat, and stepped forward to shake his hand: it was all she could think to do.

“Thank you, Mr. Bunch. It means the world and more.”

His grasp on her hand was firm, but not quite as much as she had expected. He had an unusual gentility about him.

“Don’t think a thing of it. We just need to submit by Monday.”

Monday. The twenty-first. Charlotte gave a steady nod and dropped his hand.

*“Donna, you will not believe what –”*

Charlotte stopped dead in her tracks in the doorway, hair disheveled from falling asleep on the long commute and more out of breath, after taking the tedious stairs up, than she would admit.

Theo sat on the sofa. On seeing Charlotte, his whole face turned into a smile that was all too familiar.

“Hey, darling.” He stood. “Long time no see, huh?”

Charlotte stood dumbfounded. She came to her senses at once and put on a matching smile, stepping forward to embrace him. His khaki uniform was rough under her fingertips; nothing like the soft cotton shirts he used to wear. He smelled different, too: she couldn’t place the scent, but it reminded her of coins. It had been over a year since their last meeting, which, all things considered, was not as long as some soldiers had to wait before coming home. Yet, it was like hugging someone she had just met in the streets.

Theo pulled away first to plant a wet kiss on her cheek. She smiled through a cringe.

“You’re here earlier than I thought,” she said.

“Nice surprise, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Charlotte echoed. She stood still while he kissed her cheek again, then her forehead, then drew back with a sigh.

“Golly, it’s good to see you again.”

She smiled back, but it didn't feel the same as –

Didn't feel the same as when she was with Mr. Bunch.

Her stomach felt ill.

“It's great to see you, too. Just swell.” She was suddenly quite aware that they were alone.

“Where are Donna and Albert?”

“Asleep. But I wanted to wait up for you.” Theo's grin had not shrunk a bit. He looked her up and down. “You look like a lawyer.”

Discomfort pricked at Charlotte. She knew he hated lawyers.

“I have a job in Tacoma now. At *The Seattle Times*. This is how they dress there.”

“Donna said you'd gotten work. What's that about?”

She had hoped he would be keen to hear she had found work at such an impressive company, and though his tone was soft, the words stung.

“What's wrong with it? We needed the money, and I love the *Times*.”

“Hey, hey, nothing's wrong with it.” He rubbed her back. “Am I not sending enough home?”

“It's enough, it's only a bit tight.”

Theo shook his head, taking both her hands in his own. His palms were the size of baseballs.

“I'm sorry,” he said through that never-ending smile, which Charlotte felt the need to reflect until her face ached. “When this whole thing's blown over, you won't have to work another day in your life.” He coughed and looked at his shoes, those dirty old shoes. “No wife of mine's gonna be dressing like this, going all the way out to Tacoma just to make money.”

Charlotte felt her own pulse quake in her fingertips, and she prayed Theo did not.

“Where are you intending to work?” she asked. Before the draft, he worked at a low-end diner downtown; she knew little about finances, but she did know he certainly could not support the family he wanted on a job like that.

“Why, the *Sizzling Grill*. Where else?”

“Oh, of course.” Charlotte pulled her hands away. “I’m sorry, but it’s late and I have church in the morning.”

He held his hands up. “No worries. If you need me, you know my folks’ number.”

She nodded.

He grinned, taking up her left hand to squeeze tight. “I’ll see you tomorrow, yeah?”

She swallowed. “Tomorrow.”

## **SEVEN**

*December twenty-first, 1942*

*Tacoma, Washington*

*In Room 28, where the silence had held up for well over an hour like a thick fog, a deep breath pierced the silence.* Charlotte looked over her shoulder. Mr. Bunch ran his hand through his hair till it stood on end.

“I believe I’m finally finished.”

Charlotte twisted in her seat to face him. “Are you happy with it?”

He gazed over the paper in his typewriter. “Not especially. I imagine yours will be favored over it.”

“If I ever finish.”

Something of smugness spread over his face. "I told you it was a difficult topic."

"I never said it wasn't," Charlotte pointed out. She had worked on her article day and night, barely having a moment to spare for Theo's visit, over which he was not pleased. Charlotte herself minded little.

When Mr. Bunch said nothing in response, she turned her back to him. She looked over her handwritten page, overflowing with script the most well-read person wouldn't be able to decipher. She was as satisfied with the content as one could have been; she only feared she wouldn't reach her deadline in time. What would happen then? Would she get a chance like this again?

Someone was looking at her: a stare locked on her back. A chill ran over her shoulders.

"Do you know what I think, Ms. Carroll?"

She felt a smile creep up her own face, and she couldn't choke it down.

"What do you think, Mr. Bunch?"

He stood from his chair for the first time in hours. "First, I think we should be on a first-name basis now. There isn't a need to be so formal."

Charlotte scoffed. "I *do* work for you, sir."

He brushed that off with the wave of his hand. "Enough of *sir*, enough of *mister*. If you're not uncomfortable with it, you can call me Edward. Or Ed."

A laugh escaped her lips. "Fine, but then you must call me by *my* first name."

"Done. But that wasn't what I intended to say in the first place." He stepped in front of his desk to lean against it, crossing his arms over his chest. "I meant to say, I think you need a break from writing."

The thought was a terrifying one. “I have to finish,” she said, catching herself just short of adding *sir*.

“Not until midnight.” He rolled his sleeve up to reference his watch. “You have thirteen hours yet. I think a break will be good for you.”

Charlotte hesitated, but she pushed her chair away from the desk with a squeak on the hardwood floors. “What did you have in mind?”

Mr. Bunch took his coat from the back of his own chair, stringing his arms through the sleeves. “There’s a place I want you to see.”

Fear melted into anticipation, anticipation to excitement. Charlotte wrapped her grandmother’s scarf around her neck.

*Charlotte knew where they were headed before they had arrived.* Telltale sugary scents wafted up the sidewalk far as a block away, carried to their noses by gentle snow flurries.

The shop was almost more pleasant to look at than to smell: it was a sturdy brick building, though the storefront was swallowed in windows twice as long as Charlotte was tall, displaying collections of cupcakes and cookies and cakes and pies. The white-painted door triggered a merry little bell upon opening.

Inside, Charlotte declared the store delightfully stylish. Modern black-and-white tile floors stretched underfoot, and plain light fixtures bathed the room in warm tones. The clear display case in the back of the store flaunted an array of confections that made the child in Charlotte’s heart squeal.

Mr. Bunch’s words grounded her in the dreamy bakery.

“Choose your favorite.”

Charlotte wasn't aware that her jaw was unhinged until she looked up at him, and he chuckled. She brought her chapped lips back together at once.

"Oh, I don't know. It all looks marvelous."

Mr. Bunch – or Edward, as she supposed she was now obliged to call him – opened his mouth, then shut it again. He hummed in his throat.

"May I make a recommendation?"

"Always."

He pointed to a plate of cookies in the display. "The gingerbread is divine. It's the only cookie I've tried here, but it's good enough that I don't care."

Charlotte gave a nod. "I think I'll try that, then."

They stepped up to the counter, and the jolly woman at the register rung up two cookies for each of them. Charlotte reached into her purse for a dime, but Edward had paid before she could find one. He gestured to one of three little round tables in the whole store, and they sat.

"Here, let my pay you back."

"Don't." He slid her cookies across the table on a napkin.

She had already pulled the dime from her change purse. "Please, I insist."

He shook his head firmly. "Don't worry about it. It's only a dime."

*It's only a dime.* Charlotte couldn't imagine those words coming from her own mouth.

He excused himself from the table, admitting he had forgotten to order drinks. After he stood, Charlotte slipped the dime under his napkin.

The gingerbread cookies were how she imagined Heaven would smell. She took a bite off the edge, and the crunchy cookie crumbled in her mouth. She was never one for gingerbread growing up, but this tasted like Christmas in a single bite.

Mr. Bunch – Edward – returned with two coffees. He gestured to the cookie.

“How do you like it?”

She gave an enthusiastic nod. “You make good recommendations.”

He chuckled and took a sip of coffee. The only noise in the bakery was faint chatter from a couple sitting on the other end of the shop.

Charlotte finished off the first cookie. Swallowing, she said, “This is what you want to do, then? Make things like this?”

“I already have a career.”

Charlotte blew on her steaming coffee. “A career you *hate*.”

Edward looked down with a faded smile. “Lately, I haven’t minded it that much.”

Her cheeks warmed. She tugged her scarf off, hoping he would accredit the heat in her face to heat emanating from the ovens in the kitchen.

“In all honesty, if you don’t like your job, you should quit.”

He ran his hand around the length of his coffee cup. “If only it was as simple as that.”

Charlotte leaned over the table.

“I meant it. Even if you don’t want something like this” – she gestured at the cookies beside his cup, untouched – “I think you should be doing something you love. Or at least something you like a little more than what you have now.”

Edward gave his head a slow shake.

“My father gave me this position. It’s such a good position, what – what kind of person would I be if I threw that away?”

“An intelligent person.”



He said nothing. Charlotte reached her hand across the table, though she didn't quite know why; she froze, and balled her fingers up over the tabletop. He looked at her fist.

"You'll think about it though, won't you?" she said.

At length, he nodded. "I will."

In the hush that ensued, his hand gingerly made its way across the table to meet hers. He didn't hold her hand: he only laid his on top of hers. It was enough to ease the tension in Charlotte's shoulders.

Some time passed like this. The shop had cleared out, as though God had wanted them to be alone in this moment; Charlotte could have laughed at such a notion, but she couldn't deny it certainly felt as such. They each acted as though this was the most normal thing they could have been doing; Charlotte took a drink; Edward broke a piece off a cookie.

He looked at his watch on his other hand. "I suppose we should be getting back."

"I suppose so."

"You've got an article to finish, and I won't keep you in work too long. Especially so close to Christmas."

Charlotte gave a small laugh. "Please, keep me as long as you'd like."

His eyebrows rose. "Really?"

"I'm not quite ready to go home just yet."

"Why is that?"

"My boyfriend is in town."

His hand tore away, as though she had burned him. He rubbed his knuckles. "I see."

"Oh, it's –"

“I’m very sorry if I didn’t keep our, this, relationship, professional. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

His face had returned to its stoic, businessman nature. His disposition hardened to the point that she no longer wished to explain her current situation with Theo.

Disappointment weighed heavy on her chest.

Once they had returned in silence to Room 28, Mr. Bunch sitting at his desk and Charlotte at hers, she still tasted gingerbread on her tongue and felt the shadow of his hand on hers.

## ***EIGHT***

*December twenty-third, 1942*

*Seattle, Washington*

“Say Papa, say Papa.”

Albert bounced Margie on his leg. Sucking on her finger, wide-eyed as always, his baby said nothing. He groaned.

“Come on. *Papa.*”

“If you keep saying it, she’ll just get sick of it,” Theo said sleepily from the armchair across from the sofa, tired from another heavy meal. He had initially sat between Albert and Charlotte, but on Charlotte’s insistence that they were needlessly cramped, he moved.

Albert looked up with a frown. He never said so – not in front of Charlotte, at least – but she knew he had never liked Theo. Donna herself had had a “bad feeling” about him from the start. Charlotte wished those red flags would stop waving.

“Donna’s worried something’s wrong with her,” Albert said.

Charlotte crossed her legs under herself. “How so?”

“Just that she hasn’t said any words yet.”

“I think she’s perfectly healthy.” She reached over to tug on Margie’s foot, and the baby smiled around the fingers in her mouth. “Just look at these fat rolls.”

Albert snorted. “Tell Donna that, would you?”

Charlotte settled back into her seat with a drowsy sigh. She sat unusually still, but on the inside, a hundred-thousand thoughts sprang around her whole being: she would receive a phone call any time tonight from Mr. Bunch. Her article, completed just hours before the deadline, could have been read by thousands by this time tomorrow. Or perhaps not. What a surreal world she lived in.

A clang bounced off the walls. Everyone looked toward the kitchen.

“Do you need help, dear?” Albert asked.

Donna retrieved the bowl she had dropped, uttering a dismissive “I’m fine.” Her refusal for help around the holidays was almost a tradition.

In the bedroom, the telephone rang shrilly like sunlight parting dark clouds.

Charlotte leapt to the room before she was aware of her own actions. She shut the door behind herself, but it caught on something; she shot a glance over her shoulder. Theo had followed her.

“Hey, I need to talk to you privately.”

He must have been joking. But no: his eyes, for once, had deepened.

*Riiiiing.*

“Let me take this call –”

Theo grabbed her wrist as she reached for the receiver. “It’s important.”

*Riiiiing.*

She jerked against his grasp, to no avail. “Theo, please –”

“I’m being serious this time.”

She gave a tug; she was only inches from the receiver. “Let *go* of me.”

“Just let me tell you this.”

The telephone’s rings ceased. Charlotte yanked herself from his grip.

“That could have been Mr. Bunch!”

“Good golly, calm down. He can wait.”

“It was important!”

Theo shushed her. “Calm down and listen.”

Her anger didn’t ebb, and her fists didn’t unclench. For a horrifying, irritating moment, she thought, *he’s going to propose right now.*

She could not have been more wrong.

“I think we should separate,” he said.

Charlotte froze. He stared back with expectation, but she couldn’t will any words to come out. Was this what she had been hoping for? Where had this come from? Shouldn’t she call Mr. Bunch back?

She received too many inputs at once, and her mind fizzled out.

“C’mon, don’t be upset. It’s for the better.”

She spoke, and the feeling returned to her fingertips. “You were talking about marriage and jobs and –”

“I didn’t mean it,” he confessed. His face screwed up, bracing himself for a poor reaction.

“I tried to mean it, I really did. But I couldn’t ‘cause – now, don’t be upset when I tell you this.”

“I’m not upset.”

“I met somebody else. When I was gone.”

A laugh shot out of Charlotte; she couldn’t help it.

“I’m sorry, but weren’t you only with men while you were away?”

Theo reeled; at her comment or her boisterous laugh, Charlotte wasn’t certain. “No, no, no. I met a nurse. Her name’s Donna. Pure coincidence,” he added.

She nodded once, firm. A small prayer flitted through her mind.

*Thank you.*

“It’s all right,” she said.

He winced. “Is it?”

“Absolutely. In all honesty, I met somebody else, too.”

## ***NINE***

*December twenty-fourth, 1942*

*Tacoma, Washington*

*Charlotte had anticipated her next encounter with Mr. Bunch to be uncomfortable.* Fortunately, her anxiety for the news of the morning overruled any awkwardness she might have felt, and Mr. Bunch seemed in a good mood, meeting her in the lobby with a smile.

“What did they say?” she asked before they had even met one another.

His expression said enough. His face swam in her vision, and she didn’t bother stopping it.

“They really like it?” she said.

“It’s already in print.”

Charlotte covered her mouth. This moment was couldn't be real. She lost feeling in her fingers and toes, and her head weighed nothing.

*Her article. What she wrote. It was in the Times.*

Mr. Bunch's voice sifted through the filter. "Congratulations, Charlotte. Ms. Carroll."

Charlotte sniffed, putting her finger to her nose to keep it from running.

"Charlotte' is fine," she managed to say.

Once she got the words out, she started to cry. She felt strangers' eyes, but the knowledge that Mr. Bunch – Edward? – watched her made a far deeper impact.

"I'm sorry." She ran a fingertip along her waterline. "I'm sorry, it's only that – you know."

"I understand."

She looked up, all too aware of how she must have looked. Edward smiled. Somehow, the extravagant lobby gave off the same feeling as home. A real home, not her little apartment: a home where comfort and safety were never questioned.

"Thank you," she breathed. "Oh, thank you."

"You are most welcome."

"No, really. It means everything to me."

He smiled. "I read it, too. You're an excellent writer."

"Thank you so much."

"I've begun to think about what you said the other day." He took a breath, and his tone lowered. "You're right. I shouldn't be working here."

Charlotte nodded, sniffing.

He continued, "I don't know where I will end up, but I do know that need someone to fill this position."

“Oh!” Her arms shook at the weight of the implication. “You don’t have to. You’ve done so much already.”

He blew that off. “I need someone to replace me. I’d love it if it was you.”

Charlotte stared back, grappling with a hundred different thank-yous she could say. She sniffed.

“Oh, Lord, I’m going to cry again.”

He laughed, and before he could say a thing, Charlotte embraced him. Warmth emanated from his suit. He put his arms around her.

For once in her life, time slowed. A second was a minute, a minute an hour. She drank up this moment as though she was at risk of losing it.

Over his shoulder, Charlotte saw snowflakes fly outside the window. Everything would be just fine, indeed.



**\* *THE END* \***



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Photo by Trayce's Photography.

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