

CHARLOTTE'S LIFE

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Charlotte Brewer loved books. She did not love working and slaving her life away. That life was fine for other people, just not for her. In her world, the book and author meant more than a paycheck. Her favorite authors were like her extended family. She read everything and anything she could get her hands on. Most of it was junk, but every now and then.....ohhh, she found a true diamond in the rough. She had a new niche and that was detective stories from years past. Dime novels as they were called back in the day, cause most of them cost no more than a dime. She couldn't believe all the talented authors that went relatively unknown by today's readers. There were so many out there, she had just begun to scratch the surface of what was available. Her mother had turned her onto flea markets. She spent all weekend driving across the midwest to attend the biggest and best. Her favorite was right in Peoria. Most times it was a bust. Turns out this particular trip was not. It was going to have repercussions in ways she could only imagine.

His name was Dave something or other. He was a junk flipper she met a few months ago. He would send her pics of what he had available. It looked like he had some books she would be interested in. He was always very reasonable about price. She parked her car and bought herself a coffee to take with her as she shopped. It was late May and beginning to get uncomfortably warm in Illinois. This made an outdoor flea market more of a hassle than an enjoyable experience. She found Dave and hugged him. He was old enough to be her father, but he was always so damn nice, she just couldn't help herself. She wished more people were just stupidly nice like him, it would make the world a much better place.

"Hey kid, how you been?" he asked

"Busy, between school and bargain hunting, I barely sleep."

"I got something here you might be interested in. Got it out of a storage locker I bid on. Most of it was junk, but there were some old books, and I thought of you."

"Let's take a look."

"She had indeed hit pay dirt. There were several books in varying conditions from years past. She began to get excited. Dave had indeed come through for her. As she was looking, she came upon a small pharmacy-sized novel. She looked at the title. It read in big bold letters:

CHARLOTTE'S LIFE

"Well, this looks interesting," she said as she skimmed through the pages

"Primrose Publishing.....never heard of them. Have you ever heard of them?" she asked Dave.

"Nope. I was in the publishing business for many years. I thought I knew everybody. Where are they located?"

"Right here in Illinois. Some town called Golconda."

"That's in the southern part of the state. Kind of a rural area. Nice binding and stitching on the book though. The print is sized correctly. For a mom-and-pop operation, they do pretty good work, I'd say."

"Alright, I'll take the whole pile. How about fifty?"

"I can do fifty."

"Thanks, would you mind holding onto it for a while, I want to walk around," she said.

"No problem. I certainly appreciate the business."

"I'll bring my mom next time. Then you'll really thank me."

"Sounds good. Stop by anytime. If I'm going to be in town, I'll let you know." he said.

Charlotte loafed around the flea market for the next two hours. She didn't see much that grabbed her attention. She went back to Dave's booth and grabbed her large box of books. She put it in the trunk of her car and forgot about it for the next few days. She was on her way home from class when she remembered the book called CHARLOTTE'S LIFE. She thought it might be the perfect way to spend an evening. She had no boyfriend or any friends at all outside of her study group. She was supposed to graduate next semester then she would literally have no one except her mom and aging grandmother. Books were her nicotine and crutch. She liked to escape into another world altogether, one where she didn't have to worry about making rent or paying back her student loans. She was going to get her master's in library science and could hopefully land a job at a major library. Paper books were unfortunately going the way of the dodo. They existed mainly just for historical reference. Her part-time job was scanning books onto a computer, and then throwing them away. Some were over a hundred years old. It almost made her want to cry. She could clearly see the writing on the wall. The traditional book was on its way out. They were costly to maintain. E-publishing just made way more economic sense for everyone.

She went out to her car and took the box of books inside. She found CHARLOTTE'S LIFE and began reading. Her fascination was slowly turning into something as she read more of the first chapter. It was almost too hard to fathom. She at first thought that her mom and Dave were playing some kind of joke on her. It read:

Charlotte Anne Brewer was born at 11:43AM on Wednesday, February 14th 1997 to Anne Brewer and her husband, James Brewer. She was born in a hospital in Peoria, Illinois. The doctor who delivered her was named Arden Kometh, a resident doctor from Bulgaria. The first few weeks of her life were quite unremarkable. She took her first steps at the age of fourteen months and six days. She spoke her first words only a few short weeks later. Her father left the family in January of the year 2000. She has not had any contact with him since. He died in Mexico in 2015.

The book went on and on. There could be no mistake. This was her name. It was her birthday and birthplace. The author was talking about her and no one else. This was a book about her life past and present. It was written a full year before she was born. How in the hell would the author have known this? She continued reading.

At the age of six years and three months, Charlotte met her first friend, Annie Weingarten. They remained friends right up until their senior year in high school when Annie slept with Charlotte's then-boyfriend, James.

Annie felt like someone had just sucker-punched her right in the stomach. *How in the hell did the author know this?* This was almost too unreal to be true. She continued reading. She stopped right at the part where she received her master's degree. It was all there. Everything of any significance that had occurred in her life was right there in that book. It was like an owner's manual for her life. She had to put it down. Her heart was racing. She found Dave's number and called him. She was trying to remain calm and collected. Some of the things that were in that book were known only to her. She never told anyone. Not her mother, or her grandmother, not anyone. If this was some kind of a joke, it wasn't funny. At least not to her. She googled Primrose Publishing and could only find an old internet page for them from 2002. It had the same address in Golconda, Illinois. It was run by someone named Simon Pierce. She hoped she could get some kind of answer from Dave. Maybe he had a name of who owned the storage locker. It was a long shot, but she had to know. *Her sanity may very well depend on it at the moment.*

"Dave, hi, it's Charlotte. Sorry about the late hour."

"No worries, I'm a night owl anyway, what's up?"

"Dave, those books you sold me the other day. You said you bought them at a storage auction, right?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"You don't happen to have the name of the person who owned the storage locker, do you?" she asked.

"Oh, no. They don't give out information like that at the auction. I know the owner of the storage unit where it came from, I could ask him?"

"Yeah, that would be great. Is everything alright, Charlotte?"

"Oh, yeah, I was just curious is all. The books are great. I can't thank you enough."

"Give me a couple of days. I've done so much business with the owner, I think he might be willing to break the rules, just this one time."

"Okay, I certainly appreciate it. I was just wondering if maybe I could find any other books he has floating around out there. You never know."

"Sure, just give me a few days and I'll get back to you."

She hung up the phone. She knew where her next call was going. This one would not be so easy.

Charlotte didn't do much for the next two days. She ate and slept very little. She went to work and then went straight home. No gym time or hanging out with her study group. She had time to reflect on it and she concluded that it must be some kind of a practical joke. There is simply no way for this book to know the kind of personal and sensitive information about her unless..... someone was playing a very sick practical joke, but who would do this.....and why? It must have taken years to put together. Maybe she had a secret admirer who simply interviewed all of her friends and family. The problem was that the book was clearly old, as in almost thirty years old. Did someone simply find thirty-year-old paper to use for a book? The book even smelled old. There was simply no way around it. The book had to be created before she was born. She didn't know where to turn. She knew the only person who might be able to provide some answers was her grandmother. They were still very close and if anyone could solve this puzzle, it was her. She figured it would be best to call before it got too much later.

"Hi gram, it's me, just wanted to check up on you."

"Charlotte, my dear.....how are you?"

"I'm fine, how are you?"

"I'm dying.....other than that, I'm doing great."

"I just.....gram something happened to me the other day and I'd like your opinion on it."

"Sweetie, if this is about a guy, I'm probably not the best person to ask. Not much experience there besides your grandfather."

"No.....no, it's not that. Gram, I bought a book the other day and read it. It was written in 1996 before I was born. It's my life. It's got everything that happened to me in my life up to this point. I didn't want to read any more after that. Gram, how is it possible for a book like that to exist? To know everything that is going to happen to me before it happens."

"Well, I guess it wouldn't be possible. A book like that couldn't exist."

"But it does Gram, I've got it right in front of me."

There was an awkward pause before Gram next spoke. She seemed to need a moment to carefully compose herself.

"Charlotte, I'm an old lady who doesn't have much time left. I promised your mother I would keep my mouth closed, but I should never have agreed. We haven't exactly been completely truthful with you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean about your father. Your mother.....God, I can't believe she's actually my daughter sometimes....well she did not handle this thing very well at all. Your father didn't walk out on you, we all agreed that it was simply in everyone's best interest if he simply left."

"What? Why?"

"Charlotte, he was a very, very brilliant man. One of the smartest people I've ever met. He had a doctorate in physics. He was employed by the government to calculate blast yields for our bombs. At one point he had a staff of over fifty people. That's where he met your mother, he was her physics professor. One thing led to another, then another, and nine months later, you were born. He was twenty years older than her. See, he was also sick. He suffered from paranoid schizophrenia. He was convinced that the government was out to kill him. He even had some evidence to justify his beliefs, but he was completely wrong. I must have pointed out a hundred times why the government would not want him dead, they needed him to perfect their weapons. It made no sense, but he believed it was true. His delusions and mental state got so bad he had to be hospitalized. The doctors told him that as long as he stayed on his medication, he could function, but his life was basically over. He lost his security clearance and the college had to fire him. It was just one thing right after another. He became suicidal. We all agreed it was best for you to simply forget him before you got too old. I kept in touch with him over the years. When he was lucid, he would always ask about you. He loved you very much. Don't hate him, hate his illness. He was a good man who was given a very lousy hand in life."

"All these years, I thought my father abandoned me. It was all a lie. Why didn't you guys tell me?" she said with tears in her eyes.

"Charlotte, I'm not your mother. I'm your grandmother. Your mom gets the final say on how you're raised. God knows I don't agree with her on a lot of things, but it's not my place to speak out."

"You're more of a mother to me than she is."

"She loves you, Charlotte, but....."

"I know.....she just loves herself a little bit more," said Charlotte.

"She was only twenty-two when she had you. She had no idea how to be a mother. I had her at twenty-nine and I was still figuring it out."

"Hell, at least you tried. I feel like I barely got that out of her. There's no worse feeling in the world to know that you aren't wanted. If it weren't for you and Grandpa, I don't know if I would have been okay." she said, sobbing.

"Oh, your mother loves you, honey. She feels terrible about how she treated you when you were younger. I remember getting so mad at her for missing your tenth birthday that I threw a plate at her."

Charlotte stopped crying and started laughing.

"You threw a plate at her?"

"Yup. I told her I was ashamed of her and that you deserved a better mother."

"Oh yeah, I remember mom wouldn't let me talk to you on the phone for like a month."

"Sounds about right."

"So, getting back to this book of yours. You know none of it can be true."

"But I'm holding the book, reading it. It's right in front of me."

"Honey, schizophrenia runs on your father's side of the family. It has only affected the men. I've always wondered if it affected women as well, just in different ways."

"Gram, I'm not schizophrenic. Do you want me to bring the book to you?"

"No honey, just be careful. Your dad's paranoia started off with small things too. I remember he thought there was a secret camera in the shower recording him. He tore it all apart and of course, he found nothing. If it gets any worse, please get help. I'm sure with today's medicine, it can be much different than it was over twenty years ago."

"I love you, Gram. I know you're in a lot of pain. Is there anything I can do for you?" asked Charlotte"

"Well, since you asked, you know.....you could give me some great-grandchildren?"

"I think I need a guy first. I just want you to know that if I ever do have a girl, her name is going to be Claire. I'm naming her after you."

"Thanks, kid. That means a lot to me. You'll find the man of your dreams, don't worry. Took me twenty-eight years to meet your grandfather."

"Thanks Gram. Don't know what I'd do without you."

"Take care, love you."

She hung up. Claire knew it was hard for her to speak. Her entire body might be going to shit, but her mind was still very sharp for someone almost eighty years old. She was still in a state of semi-shock over what Gram had just told her. She was also very angry at her mother for never telling her the truth about your father. She could already hear her response. Like nails on a chalkboard.

It wouldn't have changed a damn thing Charlotte. He still would have left.

She thought it odd that the book just said he left. Then again, the book never said why these events happened, just that they happened. She had also forgotten about asking David to find the name of the storage locker when her phone rang. She recognized David's number and picked it up.

"Hi, Charlotte. I got a name for you. Not sure if it's going to do much good, but here goes. Does the name David McGowan ring a bell?"

"No, should it?"

"I don't know. I've never heard the name. Now, I spoke to the owner of the rental property. He said he remembers Mr. McGowan well since he was the first customer he ever had, a few days after the place opened. He remembers him being well-dressed and sounding very affluent. He wrote a check every year for the storage rental. After that, the checks came from the McGowan Family Trust. Been this way for over thirty years, just like clockwork until a few months ago when the checks stopped. The first time that storage locker was opened in over twenty years was the day I opened it for the auction. It looks like he was employed by Primrose Publishing Company. That's all the info I have on him. Hope it helps." he said.

"Well, we've got a name. That's going to have to be enough. Thanks, David, I really appreciate it."

"No problem. I've got more books if you're interested?"

"Maybe later. I'm buried right now. I'll have to get back to you."

She hung up and went back over to the box of books she had purchased from David. Sure enough, there was another book in the box that looked like the one about her life. It was titled simply: *Michael's Life*.

She began reading and two hours later she was finished. She immediately searched his name on the internet and discovered that Michael Hofstra was a sergeant in the United States Army stationed in Italy. It had to be the same one. It even had his date of enlistment. He has been in the Army since 2018.

She found out that his family lived only a few hours from her. She desperately wanted to drive over there and give them the book. She might not feel so alone in this fight if there were others in the same boat.

She made herself dinner and poured a glass of wine. Her phone was ringing and she didn't recognize the number. She decided to pick it up anyway. She never picked up the phone fearing it could be a debt collector. She didn't care who it was at this point, as long as she had someone to talk to.

"Hello?" she said nervously.

"Are you Charlotte Brewer?"

"Yes."

"Ms. Brewer, my name is.....well, my name is not important. What is important is that you have certain books, some very unusual and unique books, is that correct?" said the voice on the other line.

"Who are you? How do these books even exist?"

"That's kind of above your pay grade. Needless to say, you were never intended to see them, nor is anyone else. I've heard you got the name of David McGowan, is that correct?"

"Yeah."

"He was a former employee of mine. Decided to go into business for himself at the ripe old age of eighty. We don't get any smarter as we get older, unfortunately. Look, I'm going to need you to return those books to me at once and ask for your cooperation in this matter. I'm going to have to ask you to forget that you ever saw those books and never say anything to anyone about them. I know you told your grandmother about them, but she won't be with us much longer anyway, so we aren't concerned. I cannot possibly stress how important it is that you never, under any circumstances tell anyone else about those books, am I clear?"

"Yeah, I mean, I think at this point, I've got a right to know. I have a right to know how you can know the things you do about us. How did you write a book about my life before I was even born?"

"Like I said, that information is way above your pay grade. It would be much easier for everybody if you simply forgot those books ever existed."

"I'm not sure I can just forget about it. I don't think I'll ever be able to just forget it."

"Charlotte, I'm sure you've read the book by now. How far have you gotten?"

"Right up until now, I guess. The book never said anything about me finding the book. I just read up until I graduate from school in the fall. I read the other book all the way through. Does that poor guy die defending Kiev in 2025? Jesus, what the hell happens?"

"I'm afraid you've gone off script. This is a problem. Can you please bring me the books, it would be much easier for everyone. I trust you have our Golconda address?"

"Yes.....are you going to kill me?"

"Ms. Brewer, we are in the business of managing lives, not taking them. I will expect you tomorrow at our Golconda office. Please don't disappoint me. Things could get.....unpleasant for you if you fail to show up with the books."

"Fine, I'll be there. Just don't murder me."

"You'll be fine. Just don't forget to bring the books."

"Yeah, I got it. I'll be there."

"Good. We'll be waiting," he said and hung up the phone.

Charlotte used her phone to find the address down in Golconda. It was a three-hour drive from her apartment. She decided to turn in a short time later. She had a long drive ahead of her. She

was going to need a good night's sleep. Tomorrow was going to be the best day of Charlotte Brewer's brief life.

She spent the rest of the evening trying to find out anything she could about David McGowan. She didn't find much, just his obituary. He was over a hundred years old when he died. He fought in WW2 and spent much of his life in the publishing business. There just wasn't much online about him. He had family nearby, once this was all over with, she might just have to pay them a visit.

Golconda, Illinois was right smack dab in the middle of nowhere. She had never been to this part of the state before. It was rural, to say the least. She found the address and pulled into the parking lot. The building was for lack of a better term, a freggin dump. It looked like it could fall down at any time. She kind of expected something a little more impressive from a company that was doing very impressive things. Instead, she opened the front door and was greeted with the smell of burnt coffee and wet carpet. The whole operation just looked kind of *Ghetto*. Not exactly what she had in mind.

A man came through another door and introduced himself.

"Charlotte, thank you for coming. I see you brought the books. Please, right this way. Can I interest you in some coffee? Just made a fresh pot."

"No thanks, I just want to get this over with," she said nervously.

"Of course," he said.

He opened a small office door and saw a man sitting behind a desk. The office was a mess. It looked like an office from fifty years ago. The strangest thing was: *the office didn't even have a computer!* Just a giant Rolodex.

"Ms. Brewer, thank you so much for coming down. You can see my secretary about getting some gas money for the drive back home."

"Uh, sure."

"I see you brought the books, excellent. Look, I'll make this short and sweet. You having these books is a big no-no. I mean like a very big no-no. I have people I answer to just like everyone else. They were very concerned that you might say something or show the books to someone. I told them this entire incident was my fault. I should have fired that idiot McGowan a long time ago. None of this is your doing. You should not have to pay for my mistake. No harm will come to you, as long as you keep your pretty mouth shut about all this. Am I clear?"

"Crystal clear. Look, can you at least tell me what the hell is going on here in this office building? I mean who the hell are you people? How can you write about things that haven't happened yet?"

"Charlotte, I can understand your curiosity, but quite honestly, it's just better for everyone that you do not know those answers. See, you're an anomaly. Your book never said you were going to find the book. Do you see the problem we have here?"

"Kind of."

"This means we will have to do a retraction for you. I suppose I should do one for Mr. Hofstra as well. Just to be on the safe side."

"You're going to re-write my life?"

"Correct."

"Look..... I'm going to keep my mouth shut about all this. I'm not going to say a word. I have cooperated with you. I'm just going to ask that you do me one favor. Just one."

"What's that?"

"I don't want to end up like my father. I don't want to become a paranoid schizophrenic. I want to live to a ripe old age and die in my sleep. I'd also like to meet a nice man and get married if that's possible."

"We normally don't take requests."

The look on Charlotte's face said she was clearly not happy.

"I'll make an exception, just this once. Don't expect to win the lottery or anything."

"I just.....I don't want to die alone in a cheap motel in Mexico. Anything but that."

"Very well. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have quite a bit of work to do."

"Oh, and my grandmother. I want her to die peacefully in her sleep....please!"

"I'll see what I can do. Printing retractions is going to require a lot of signatures from the higher-ups."

"Thank you."

"Thank you for cooperating Ms. Brewer. My associate will see you out." said the boss.

He led Charlotte outside and opened her car door.

"I'm really sorry about this Ms. Brewer. None of this is your fault. Please accept our apologies." he said.

"What the hell is this place? Who are you people?"

"We're just a mom-and-pop publishing company. Good day," he said and walked away.

Well, so much for that gas money. She thought to herself.

Charlotte was pulling out of the driveway when she noticed that the building had a new hallway that seemed to connect it to the small mountain behind her. She wondered what was inside the mountain. Was it all just a giant library? Who else had a book written about them? How did such a small company do such incredible things? She was grateful to have gotten out of there. Life usually did not come with any guarantees, but for Charlotte, she did have one. She was not going to end up like her father. If nothing else, she had that going for her.

It had been a few months since she had her meeting with the strange men in Golconda. She was walking down the stairs to her apartment when she saw a man struggling to get his boxes through the door.

"Moving in or out?" she asked, holding the door for him.

"In. I'm lucky I found it on such short notice. My name is Mike, Mike Hoftra." he said, extending out his hand.

Charlotte felt a lump in the back of her throat.

"Mike, I'm Charlotte, nice to meet you. Let me give you a hand with those other boxes."

"You don't have to do that."

"Nonsense. We should all be more neighborly to one another," she replied

They made small talk for the next half hour. She wanted to be friendly and it wasn't hard. Mike was the most gorgeous man she had ever seen.and he seemed like a genuinely nice person.

"I got kicked out of the Army for somehow failing a drug test. Can you believe that? I don't do drugs. Never smoked or inhaled, not once in my life and somehow I failed a drug test. How the hell is that possible?" he asked as he fumbled for his keys.

"No more Army, huh?"

"No, I was planning on doing twenty years and then retiring. It's so weird, everything all at once just seemed to suddenly change for me. It's like my whole life plan was just re-written. I thought the Army was going to be my whole life."

"Could be worse, At least you won't have to die in 2025 defending Kiev from the Russians," she said

"Funny you should say that. That's exactly how I thought I was going to die."

"You don't say?" said Charlotte trying not to smile

"Yeah, it was so weird. It's like one day I just woke up to a completely different life."

"I see we're neighbors. I got to run, but I'll see you around. Maybe we can grab a coffee and catch up some more." she said.

"Yeah, I'd like that. I kind of like to know my neighbors."

"Me too."

She left him and walked down the stairs. She had a feeling from this point forward, this was going to be one book she didn't have to read.....*she was going to live it instead.*