**Stork Industries**

**By Elfy**

“This is bullshit!” Charlotte exclaimed.

She banged the desk in front of her in frustration. It wasn’t her desk but the desk of the much older editor of the newspaper that Charlotte worked for, Mr. Bloom. She rubbed her face as she tried to get her temper under control.

At 22-years-old, Charlotte was very new to her job as a journalist and she was eager to make her name for herself. Her impatience was doing her no favours though as she was desperate for a big story. Even though she only worked for a small regional newspaper she knew that she could go all the way to one of the big publications, she just needed the big break. That one story that pushed her over the edge and made her nationally recognised.

“Easy, Miss. O’Brien…” The editor said from behind the desk, “This desk would be harder to replace than you.”

Charlotte closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She found it hard to swallow her emotions when it seemed like all her male colleagues were getting the breaks whilst she languished at the bottom doing fluff pieces.

“I just… I just want a proper story.” Charlotte said with forced calmness.

“You get proper stories!” Mr. Bloom replied.

“The local beauty pageant? The story of the stolen horse?” Charlotte replied with a shake of the head, “These aren’t stories!”

“I don’t know what to tell you.” Mr. Bloom shrugged, “The others work bigger stories because they go and find their leads. If you come up with a bigger story you can write it.”

Charlotte held her tongue when she remembered when she had been brand new and sniffed out a story of civic corruption. She had told Mr. Bloom and was shocked a few days later when one of her male colleagues was given the story.

“Just be patient.” Mr. Bloom continued, “You are young and when you take things into your own hands it can be dangerous. Just keep chipping away and your time will come.”

“I’m going for lunch…” Charlotte replied sulkily. She didn’t want to hear what the old editor had to say, what did he know about being young and ambitious? He was the editor for a tiny newspaper out in the middle of nowhere.

Charlotte walked over to her desk in the middle of the newsroom and grabbed her coat and handbag. She wanted to get away to a quiet café where she could calm down and forget about the world. At college her ambition had been praised and encouraged, in the real world she felt like it was a negative and something to be ashamed of.

Walking down the road away from her offices, Charlotte felt like something was a bit amiss. She looked behind her as she walked and saw a woman who seemed far too covered up for the warm conditions. Charlotte wondered if she was being followed.

Charlotte continued down the road until she encountered her favourite lunch spot, a small café on the edge of the busy part of town. The café was never busy and it was the perfect place to go for some sandwiches, coffee and reflection.

“The usual.” Charlotte said with a smile to the young woman behind the counter as she sat down with her newspaper.

Charlotte opened the newspaper, held it in front of her and started reading. She shook her head at both her internal frustration and another day filled with bad news. She started reading a story about disappearing people that had the police stumped but she had to stop halfway through, the grammar was just atrocious. How did these people get jobs?

“Hello.”

Charlotte jumped so hard she nearly knocked the table in front of her over. She dropped the newspaper on to the surface in front of her and with wide eyes realised that the person she had seen earlier was now sat opposite her at the tiny table.

A young woman, maybe in her thirties, who looked like she hadn’t slept in days. She was pale and haggard and reminded Charlotte of a wild animal. The stranger’s wide eyes looked around the small café as if scanning for threats. She looked positively crazy.

“Do… Do I know you?” Charlotte asked haltingly. One of her hands went to her pocket where she had mace on standby. She knew journalism could be a dangerous job but she didn’t expect trouble at lunch time in the middle of a shop.

The mysterious woman didn’t reply. The swivelling eyes had settled on Charlotte and now she was staring a hole through the young journalist, it was as if she was looking into Charlotte’s very soul. She licked her cracked lips but didn’t speak.

Charlotte, getting over the shock of this woman’s appearance, lowered her voice and softened her face. If this woman was crazy and dangerous then surely she would have attacked Charlotte by now. That said, this was still a tricky situation to navigate. Charlotte could still sense the possibility of danger and she could feel adrenaline pumping to prepare for any situation.

“Is everything OK?” The woman behind the counter making the coffee looked over at the only occupied table.

Charlotte looked at the strangers darting eyes and could sense that she was about to run away. Charlotte didn’t want her to leave, there must be a reason this woman followed Charlotte and if she hadn’t attacked her by now Charlotte felt she never would.

“Everything’s fine.” Charlotte smiled. She spoke with a confidence that she didn’t feel, “Could I get another coffee for my friend though.”

The waitress looked a little confused and suspicious but nodded her head as the coffee making machine whirred into life behind her.

“You’ll love the coffee here.” Charlotte said as she folded up the newspaper and put it back in her bag.

The stranger stayed silent still but Charlotte could almost feel the woman relaxing a little. If Charlotte wanted to know why this woman had stalked her down the street she needed her to relax.

“My name’s Charlotte.” Charlotte said warmly, “What’s your name?”

The woman was still voiceless. Just when Charlotte thought she wasn’t going to answer, the stranger muttered something under her breath. It was far too quiet for Charlotte to hear.

“I didn’t catch that.” Charlotte replied as she leaned across the table a little.

“L… L… Laura.” The woman whispered so quietly that it was almost like she hadn’t spoken it at all. It was as if she had just breathed it across the table.

“Nice to meet you Laura.” Charlotte smiled as she leaned back in her seat.

A few seconds later, the waitress arrived and left two steaming cups of coffee at the table. Charlotte thanked the lady and assured her that they wouldn’t need anything else.

Charlotte sipped her coffee before putting it back down. Laura didn’t move.

“You should really try this coffee.” Charlotte said, “Delicious. Authentic too, not any of that chain shop crap.”

Charlotte watched as Laura rather robotically picked the coffee up and drank from it. She made no indication that she either liked or disliked what she was drinking. She kept her eyes on Charlotte the whole time.

“I’m guessing you didn’t follow me here for no reason…” Charlotte prompted.

“You… You’re a journalist?” Laura asked. Again her voice was so low that it took a moment for Charlotte to realise what she had asked.

“I am.” Charlotte replied.

“Can I trust you?” Laura asked. There was a quiet desperation to her voice.

“I’d like to think I’m trustworthy.” Charlotte replied.

Laura bit her lip, she was looking increasingly agitated again. Charlotte took another sip from her drink. This didn’t feel like a dangerous situation any more, this felt more like a desperate situation, Laura needed help.

Charlotte watched as Laura reached into her pocket and pulled out a photograph. She slid it across to Charlotte who looked down at it. The photo was of two people, an adult and a baby. They were outside in a park somewhere and looked very happy. The woman in the photo was clearly Laura but Laura looked very different now, this photo must have been taken years ago.

“Beautiful little girl you’ve got.” Charlotte smiled at Laura as she spoke.

Charlotte was surprised when instead of beaming with pride and happiness, her words caused Laura to look heartbroken and incredibly sad. Charlotte immediately realised she had hit a raw nerve.

“I’m sorry. I had…” Charlotte began.

“No, it’s OK.” Laura said as she took a deep breath and steadied her nerves, “I came to you because I need your help.”

“As a journalist?” Charlotte asked quietly.

“Yes… I just need someone, anyone, to investigate this before it’s too late.” Laura whispered. She looked out the window as if expecting to see someone watching them.

Charlotte had no experience with this level of story. This seemed like either a potentially career making piece of news or this person was completely insane.

“Talk to me.” Charlotte replied, “What’s wrong? How can I help?”

“My daughter.” Laura closed her eyes and a single tear rolled down her cheek, “She was kidnapped and taken to a secret facility.”

She’s crazy, Charlotte thought. Charlotte just nodded to Laura with a sympathetic look on her face.

“I have proof.” Laura continued sensing Charlotte’s scepticism.

Charlotte watched as Laura looked around again, brought out her phone and opened up a video. When she looked at what was playing it looked like it caused her great pain.

“Watch this.” Laura said as she passed the phone over.

Charlotte looked down at the video and it took her a minute to work out what was going on. The small screen showed what looked to be a close up of a bush, it took a second for Charlotte to realise that the person was sitting in a bush and breathing hard as they peered through the branches in front of them.

They appeared to be deep in a forest and as the hand moved a branch Charlotte could see a large warehouse building. It was oddly placed in the middle of a clearing in a forest and just as Charlotte was trying to work out the scale of this building a van parked outside a large metal shutter which opened.

“What’s goi-” Charlotte started.

“Just watch.” Laura replied quickly.

Two men dressed in black climbed out of the front seats and walked around to the back. They opened the door at the back of the van and started gesticulating wildly. It was too far away to make out what they were actually saying and Charlotte squinted at the little screen to try and see what was going on.

Charlotte audibly gasped as she saw a group of people pulled out of the van in chains. Men and women were pushed through the open door and into the factory. The camera was too far away to pick up what they were saying but Charlotte could see that these people were being herded against their will.

“Oh my God!” Charlotte exclaimed as once the adults had been moved she saw the men pull out a bunch of cages.

The camera zoomed in and Charlotte could see little human beings in the cages, most of them crying. Babies had been caged and were being carried into the warehouse that the chained adults had also been placed in.

“What the hell…” Charlotte gasped as the recording ended and Laura took the phone back.

“I followed them.” Laura whispered, “That warehouse or whatever must be full of people they have taken.”

“But… Why?” Charlotte asked with wide eyes.

“I don’t know.” Laura replied, “That’s the closest I can get. My baby is in there, I just know it.”

“You have to tell the police!” Charlotte whispered.

“I tried but they are either in on it or think I’m crazy. They won’t investigate it, even with the video.” Laura replied sadly, “I need you to get it in the media. They would have to investigate then!”

Charlotte’s first thought was to ask if Laura was crazy. Laura wanted her to visit this factory and get a scoop, she was a journalist not a superhero!

“Laura, I-” Charlotte began.

“I can’t trust anyone with this. I only come to you because bringing attention to this thing is my last hope.” Laura replied, “A young reporter like yourself, surely a story like this would be huge for you.”

Charlotte was stopped in her tracks by what the stranger had said. A story like this WOULD be huge for Charlotte, it was exactly the kind of thing she needed to push up to the next level of journalism. Heck, if this thing was legit she could win a Pulitzer Prize or something!

“Alright.” Charlotte said, “I’ll see what I can do. Give me your phone number so I can get in contact.”

Laura looked relieved that someone was taking her seriously and she quickly scribbled her number down on a napkin and handed it to Charlotte.

“Thank you.” Laura said as she stood up, “You have no idea how much this means to me.”

Charlotte smiled up at Laura as she stood and left the café. As quickly as Laura had appeared in Charlotte’s life she vanished again, mixed in with the crowds of excited shoppers.