



Sweet September

By Tricia Goyer

Excerpt provided by www.triciagoyer.com

One

The nip from the air seeping in through the cracked kitchen window caused a shiver to dance up Charlotte's spine. Autumn had slipped into summer's place without her realizing it.

Changes. More changes. It's all her life had been about lately.

The *beep-beep-beep* of the GameBoy in Christopher's hands joined with the sound of bacon frying and the energetic tune from the radio in Emily's room. Charlotte imagined Emily using the curling iron to curl her straight blond hair, just as she herself had used an iron to straighten her curls when she was fourteen.

"Two pieces of bacon, Christopher?" Charlotte asked the 10-year-old.

"Yes, please."

She noted the edges of his lips curl into a smile though he neither looked up from his game nor gave any hint that he'd noticed the plate in front of him stacked with his favorite chocolate chip pancakes. Lightning weaved her way around his feet, but even the cat couldn't distract the boy this morning.

Charlotte turned off the burner and carried the plate of bacon to the table, using the tongs to place two pieces on Christopher's plate.

From across the table, Bob took a sip from his coffee and then sniffed the air. "I'll have what he's having." He reached for a slice of bacon, and Charlotte swatted his hand.

"You know what you *really* want is to finish that oatmeal, mister, and then get cleaned up. I have some errands in town today I was hoping you could help with."

Without a word, Bob curled his lips, picked up his spoon, and unenthusiastically scooped up a spoonful of the steaming porridge. Changing his eating habits due to his diabetes hadn't been easy on him. He stared at the oatmeal as if it was glue, even turning the spoon upside down to watch it plop back into the bowl.

Wiping her hands on her apron, Charlotte moved past the pantry, down the hallway to the stairs, and then jogged up them toward the bathroom. As she did, she was certain she heard the sound of his fork scooping up a slice of bacon.

"I may have gray in my hair, but that doesn't mean my hearing's gone yet," she called over her shoulder, loud enough for Bob to hear.

"What did you say?" he called back. But she knew full well he'd heard. Instead of bantering with her husband, she knocked on the bathroom door.

"Breakfast."

The gurgle from the water in the bathroom sink shut off and the door swung open. Sam offered no smile, and instead tossed his dark hair, once then twice, glancing in the mirror to make sure it laid *just so* across his forehead. Towering over her, Sam peered over Charlotte's head and down the stairs, cocking his head.

"That's the music from Mario ... is Christopher playing a game? I thought he was supposed to be studying for his spelling test?" He raised his voice.

"It *is* a game. I'm surprised you can hear that." Charlotte cocked an eyebrow. "Um-hum. Now I know you can hear me when I call you down for chores." Charlotte placed a hand on her grandson's arm. "But don't you worry about Chris's spelling. We already took care of it this morning. He got them all right, two times in a row."

"Sorry, Grams." Sam offered an apologetic smile. "It's just that one of us Slaters needs to make the honor roll, and I vote for Chris."

She pursed her lips and nodded. Even though Sam smirked at his joke, Charlotte could see more in his gaze. Once again, she was amazed at Sam's fierce care for his brother and sister. She reminded herself again that their lives hadn't hit the reset button the moment they'd arrived on her doorstep. They'd already had a lot of heartache in their young lives—first with their father abandonment, heading off to places unknown. And now their mother's death. *Please, Lord, help me to remember to make it easier—not harder—for the kids to adjust ... and me not take it personally. Let Sam learn to trust us to care for Emily and Christopher. And for him too—though Sam doesn't like to admit he needs caring for.*

"And what about you?" she asked as Sam squeezed through the doorway past her. "Didn't see any books come out of your backpack last night."

Sam shrugged. She followed him down the stairs. He entered the kitchen and turned his chair backward, straddling it. Then, in one motion, he filled his plate with pancakes and bacon. “Don’t know. Maybe the teachers decided to go easy on us for a change.” Sam plopped a piece of bacon in his mouth and wiped his greasy fingers on his pants.

Charlotte lifted one eyebrow, but said nothing. *They’re only pants ...* she reminded herself. *Besides, it seems like the more ripped up and stained, the more kids like them these days.*

Lightning, Christopher’s cat, wove his thin body around the legs of the dining room chairs, keeping his eye on the table for any sign of a nibble cast his direction.

The cat meowed once, and Sam pushed it aside gently with his stocking foot. Christopher didn’t look up from his game.

“Give it.” Sam glared at his brother.

Christopher frowned but passed the electronic game to Sam, who eagerly picked up where Christopher left off.

“Grandma, can I take a walk?” Christopher asked. “I still got time before the bus arrives.”

“Sure.” Charlotte ruffled his close-cropped blond hair. “But don’t get too far, hear? I don’t want to lose my voice having to call after you. I have to holler enough around here, keeping your Uncle Pete out of trouble.”

Christopher cleared his plate, tossing his napkin in the trash. No sooner did he exit the back door, then she heard Pete’s heavy footsteps stomping as he wiped his boots on the mat. She also heard Christopher repeating their conversation.

The door swung open with a loud bang as it hit the wall, and Pete entered with an over-exaggerated scowl.

“I hear someone in here is calling me *Trouble*,” he said in the same loud voice he used to call to his friends across the parking lot of the feed store.

“No, I said I’m keeping someone *out of trouble*. There’s a difference, you know.”

Pete shrugged but didn’t say a word as he occupied the seat Christopher had just emptied. A smile filled his face as he saw Sam intent on the game in his hands. Soon two sets of eyes were fixed on the small screen.

“Grandma?” It was Emily’s voice from the top of the stairs.

“Hmmm?” Charlotte answered, getting herself a piece of bacon from the plate and nibbling on one end.

“Do you think you can make me a smoothie? My nails are wet, and I’m waiting for Ashley to call me back. She’s checking to see if she can stay over tonight. It’s something called teacher in-service and there’s no school. You said it was all right, didn’t you?”

“Yes, and yes. One monkey-berry, coming up.” Charlotte tore off a banana from the bunch and placed it by the small green carton of strawberries on the counter. Then she pulled the blender from the cupboard. She was glad Emily and Ashley were becoming so close. Emily still texted her friends from San Diego sometimes, but she wasn’t as obsessed with her cell phone as she had been when the kids had first come to the farm in the spring. Sam hadn’t even bothered to get a new charger for his phone and didn’t seem to mind that it didn’t work.

“With yogurt too—” Emily’s words were cut off by the phone ringing.

“With yogurt, too.” Charlotte nodded, knowing she was talking to thin air at the top of the stairs. She could hear Emily answering it on the upstairs extension in the guest room.

“You shouldn’t be catering to the girl.” Bob rose and took his dirty jean jacket off the back of the chair, sliding it on as he stood. “You know it’s not healthy for her—”

“It is healthy,” Charlotte interrupted. “It’s fruit, yogurt and milk. Everything Emily eats is healthy.”

“But kids need protein for strong muscles. How in the world is she going to have energy for her chores? Harvest starts tomorrow and these kids aren’t going to know what hit them.”

It was obvious Sam didn’t see the humor. He set down the game and let out a groan. “More work?”

Charlotte ignored her grandson, keeping her eyes fixed on her husband. Then Charlotte lowered her voice. “So, the girl doesn’t like meat. That’s why I always add an extra ingredient.” She tossed two scoops of protein powder into the blender, then winked at Bob. “In fact, maybe we all should follow her lead. It wouldn’t hurt us the slightest.”

Bob approached. She reached out a hand and patted his round paunch that hung over his belt buckle.

“Hump.” The grunt was both a sign of Bob’s disapproval and his goodbye. He placed a kiss on her cheek and headed out the back door like he’d done every day of their married life. She watched him from the kitchen window. One would think by his quickened pace that he still ran the farm without any help. In truth, Pete had already taken care of the morning chores.

Charlotte noted Pete’s gaze also following his father’s footsteps. “Don’t know why he does that,” Pete grumbled, returning his attention to his plate. “Does he still think he needs to check up on everything I do? It’s not like I’m a kid anymore. But you watch, Dad’s gonna come back in with some comment—something I missed.”

Charlotte waved a hand his direction. “Nonsense. He’s just trying to feel needed, that’s all. You know he doesn’t like being unable to do what he used to. You realize, don’t you, that years from now when our Maker calls him home, he’s going to be arguing that he can’t leave until the cows are in?”

“Not like arguing makes any difference.” Sam rose and tossed his dark hair, like the skater boys he liked to watch on TV. “Arguing doesn’t make one difference when it comes to your time to go...or about chores.”

Sam set down his plate in the sink, and then he rubbed his hands together like a little kid in a candy store.

“Harvest, hmmm? Wee-ha! Can’t wait.” Sam faked eagerness. “Fun, fun, fun.”

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