

Shaking Bridestone: Excerpt

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CHAPTER ONE

Charlotte Singer Brown's midlife crisis arrived unexpectedly one day. It entered her home like a pushy, demanding old aunt, elbowing its way through her foyer and into her kitchen as it opened her fridge without asking and helped itself to her leftovers. One night she went to bed and the next morning it was there – an expectant interloper sitting conspicuously in the center of her bedroom, glaring at her.

It came uninvited, Charlotte, or Charlie, as most people called her, thought indignantly. She rested her head against the wall in the house at 23 St. John's Lane – the mailbox in front assured her that's where she was – and gazed at the wave of heads bobbing and jutting forward as they talked, laughed, drank their cocktails, and made a steady ruckus. She sipped from her pomegranate martini and then laid her head back against the wall again. She could stay here in this position for hours, if she had to. Days, even. Perhaps she could be the proverbial fly on the wall. Or, on second thought, perhaps she could dissolve, disappear, into the wall entirely and no one would notice she was there. The only visible thing would be her small martini glass, hovering aimlessly, bodiless and perky. It wouldn't know of such things as Midlife Crises. Or, if it did, it definitely wouldn't let on.

Charlie's Midlife Crisis, which to her way of thinking was decidedly resplendent in all capital letters, must have been lurking behind the drapes, or under the ficus tree, or between the soap dish and the tiled backsplash of the bathroom sink. She could only assume it had been hiding away for years, perhaps waiting for this one moment, this one random night into day when it would come to her in a fit of blistering sun (blistering)!, shuddering and clawing (clawing, yes)! its way into her tormented (oh so tormented)! psyche.

Okay. Maybe that was a bit much. As if shuddering and clawing weren't enough, the "tormented psyche" part had pushed it over the edge, teetering into the overly dramatic.

She took another sip of her martini. The music was making her head throb. More likely the throbbing was coming from the idea that she might actually have to talk to someone tonight. As in, a person.

Other than herself.

She stared blindly at the cluster of heads, which almost seemed to move as one solitary entity. The situation might not be so grim, after all. Maybe her Midlife Crisis just sort of melted its way in, she decided as she smiled distractedly at a passing party-goer. Maybe it waved and gave a sideways grin as it slid under the window pane, over the woodwork and onto the floor, performing a limbo, of sorts. It was almost a *muse*, her Midlife-Crisis-All-Caps, albeit a dubious one. She rather liked thinking of it as a muse, persuading her into a welcome rhythm of wisdom, bringing her some clarity.

Clarity. It deserved capitalization, too.

Charlie needed Clarity. She needed Clarity more than anything else, especially lately when on most mornings she would awaken already questioning her purpose. It's not a particularly auspicious way to begin one's day, she thought drearily, as she stirred the swizzle stick around in her martini glass. She glanced around the darkened room, the party escalating into controlled madness. She had reluctantly agreed to come, her friend Kate insisting. "You'll meet some new people, maybe," Kate had pressed, her smile penetrating the darkened spaces in Charlie's head, spaces she didn't necessarily want to be illuminated. "Maybe some men. It's been five years, Charlie. Time to get out there."

Charlie didn't want to get out there. She detested it out there. She wanted to stay *in*, wanted to pad around in her blue and white winter-in-Sweden slipper socks and to read old Harpers' magazines and sip tea and eat chocolate-dipped hazelnuts. She wanted to watch old Jerry Lewis movies with a glass of Pinot Noir and laugh aloud at the "Heeey Laaaydeeee's" and not have to make the very-teeny-tiny-talk about her kids or the New York Times bestseller list or the weather in Belize, or toss her head back as if she were enjoying a particularly witty remark over cocktails with people she had only met five minutes ago.

Clarity.

It was almost a girl's name. And a pretty one, at that. If she ever had another girl, she'd name her Clarity. Clarity M.(Midlife) C.(Crisis) Brown.

Ridiculousness, thought Charlie as she took another sip, dismissing the idea of having another child. At forty. With teenagers. Absurd. It would have to be a cat or a dog, then, if she were to have any hope of using the name. Clarity the cat. With translucent green eyes, and a scratchy pink tongue. Licking the discontent away like sandpaper to red lacquered nail enamel.

"...do you know Kate?"

She jumped a little. Someone was talking to her. She looked into the face of a tall man in tan khakis and a black cashmere-looking sweater. He was standing next to her, smiling. Who knows how long he'd been there? Had he been waiting for her to emerge from her paralytic inner dialogue? Hadn't he noticed that she was trying like the dickens to be stand-offish, woman of mystery, only to be viewed but not to be approached? Hadn't he detected that, as in *Pyramus and Thisbe*, the play within a play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, she only wanted to act the part of The Wall, complete with crannied hole or chink for one and all to peep through – a stalwart player, broad and silent, and not ever, no, never to be directly addressed?

She looked at him. He didn't appear to comprehend any such thing. He, in fact, shifted from one foot to the other and pulled his beer in close to his chest. She noticed a clean, shimmering watch wrapped thickly around his wrist.

"What?" she said loudly, the room becoming entirely too frenzied.

"I said, how do you know Kate?" he practically yelled, the smile unwavering.

"Oh. She was a colleague of my...husband's." She cleared her throat. "Once upon a time," she added, swigging back the remains of her cocktail.

His smile faded. The change was hardly perceptible. "Ah. Is he here, too, then?" he asked.

Charlie looked across the room again. "No," she said. "He's...he died, actually. Five years ago."

"Oh, God. I'm sorry."

"It's all right."

Charlie finally spotted Kate, who was chatting it up with a couple in the corner. It looked like a lively conversation. But one that she could potentially interrupt, if it came to that. Which it had.

“Sorry. Excuse me,” she gave the cashmere-watch man a close-lipped smile and pushed her way towards Kate and the small group who comprised her audience. She was laughing now, Kate, her drink tilting back, dangerously close to spilling its contents all over the spectacularly spotless floor.

“Kate?”

“...and he had the door completely open! *Open!* Can you imagine? I mean, if he had...”

“Kate?”

She stopped, her drink in mid-spill. Charlie reached over and tilted Kate’s glass back in the opposite direction, averting certain disaster. She was a cocktail-saving heroine. Protector of clean flooring and vodka gimlets everywhere.

“Kate?”

“What, Charlie? I’m standing right here. What?”

“Um. I’m leaving, I think. Have got to get back to...”

“But, you can’t! We haven’t even started the...”

“Yeah, oh, I’m sure it would have been tons of fun. But you see, I’ve got an early morning, and...”

Kate stepped over to her conspiratorially, putting a free hand around her shoulder. “Charlie,” she said wetly into her ear. “Cut it out. I know you’ve got nothing going on tomorrow.”

“No, I *do*. I was planning on getting up early and doing some yoga, and maybe having some tea and a chocolate doughnut or something, and then possibly taking an extremely sharp chef’s knife and slicing my head off. You see. So I really have to run.”

Kate looked at her, her expression bemused.

“Kidding. I was kidding about the knife part.”

“Charlie...”

“Yeah,” Charlie gently shook Kate’s arm free from her shoulder and handed her the empty martini glass. “I’ve got to go.”

Charlie shifted uncomfortably in her bed. It had been two days since the cocktail party and she was still reeling from the results. The cashmere-wearing-shiny-watch man, whose name turned out to be Dan, had somehow acquired her number - "somehow" most likely being Kate - and had alarmingly called her the next day, asking her out on a date that night. Charlie had had to think fast.

"Well," Dan had said, "hasn't it been a few years since you've been out? I mean, I hope you don't mind me mentioning that. But Kate told me that...well, it doesn't have to be anything serious, anyway. Let's just go out as friends. For a nice dinner. I can get us reservations at Pauline's. I know some people there."

"Oh, yeah, I hear that's a good place, but...the thing is, you see...I mean, I..." Charlie stumbled, silently cursing Kate. "I guess what I'm saying is I'm not really ready yet, thanks so much. I'm, I'm just...not ready, I guess. Is the thing. So." She stopped, wondering why she had this knack for continuing to rattle on when there clearly was nothing more to say.

"Ah. Okay. Well." Dan cleared his throat. "Well, let me know if you change your mind. You have my number, and..."

"Oh, I will."

There had been more awkward murmurings before they hung up, and she felt a pull of regret as she put the phone down. Poor old Dan. She lay in bed mulling over why it was she had refused him. She hadn't really been out on a date at all. After five years. Which was a long time.

Was five years a long time?

Even if five years *was* a long time, it was clear that he wasn't going to be her great romance, which she wasn't at all ready for, anyway, and probably would never be ready for at all. Still, it might have been fun. Maybe he would have kissed her, or something. Being kissed would have been nice.

It was the "or something" that got to her.

She watched her toes move under the covers and thought about the myriad of "or somethings" that seemed to float around her like great gnats refusing to be denied. She couldn't think about having a relationship with anyone. But, sex? Well, it *might* be possible. She hadn't been with a man in years. Years. She hadn't even really looked at herself naked, much, lately. It was almost cumbersome, now, this body. Her sexuality was on hold. It was an after-thought. Her head felt too removed from the physical aspect of her, as if she were just a big head walking

around, quite detached from its counterpart of arms and legs and stomach and knees. She'd paid scarce attention to her toenails, let alone her vagina. She even used stilted words like "sexuality," and "vagina," as if she were a Junior High School sex-ed counselor or something. What word would she come up with next? "Intercourse?" Why couldn't she use sexier words? Practice rampant raunchiness? Vacuum the carpets with nothing on but stiletto heels? She wanted to be a black suede bikini in a room full of white wedding dresses, but suspected she was more like plaid flannel pajamas flapping on a clothesline.

It was still too soon.

Wasn't it?

But just one kiss. Maybe that would have been nice.

She decided to forget all about old Dan and the kissing and the suede bikinis and the or-somethings for the time being, and concentrate on the morning lying in front of her. Normally, at this hour, she might get up, think about doing yoga, think about having tea, think about going for a good brisk walk, but instead would probably just sit and do nothing at all, which actually suited her so much more. In fact, the thinking about all the things that she might be doing lent her a satisfied, yet highly incongruous feeling of actually doing them.

Except now she had this damn Midlife Crisis to contend with. She squirmed as she thought of it, squirmed at the thought of being in midlife. So, if this was her midlife, then that meant she'd die at age *eighty*? Jesus. She'd have to do some serious back-pedaling because there was no way in hell she was going to die that young. She'd have to be in crisis for a few years, just to get to her *real* mid-life. If she could somehow work it out so that fifty was her midlife, then that would be sufficient. Dying at age 100? Sufficient.

It was the tenth of April. She placed her feet on the floor and it was cold. But that was because she'd turned the heat off last night, thinking that the warm weather of yesterday would manage to stick around all night long, and that the frigid air from last month had made its last appearance. Silly girl, she thought. It's New England. It won't really get warm enough to turn the heat off until mid-July. Ha, ha.

She looked out the large picture window, out on the birches and the large oak in the back. An absolutely gorgeous view, no doubt. She'd miss it.

She was startled by the thought. Why would she *miss* it? Where was she *going*?

She stood, trudging to the bathroom to splash water on her face and wake up enough so that she could go down and make a cup of tea. The bookstore didn't open until 10:00 this morning, and she was pretty sure Daphne would be working. She had to go this morning, to talk to Daphne about old Dan's phone call and the kissing and the sex that never happened, but first she wanted to sit in the kitchen with a warm cup for awhile before she left. And make sure Fin was ready for school.

Fin struck the alarm clock with the palm of her hand, sending the entire thing crashing to the floor. "Shit," she murmured, stretching her arms up and then bringing them down to her forehead. She stayed this way for several minutes, on her back, her arms over her face, and then remembered that her alarm clock was on the floor. And was, exasperatingly, going off yet again.

She stretched out a foot, hoping to hit the snooze button, affording her another ten or so minutes of blessed time with her eyes closed. She jammed her big toe down on what she thought was the snooze button, but which turned out to be the radio. The croonings of Bob Dylan filled her head; *Maggie's Farm*. It's way too early to be this profound, she thought. Not even to mention poetic. She was having a hard enough time simply getting her extremities to work the way she wanted them to. Obviously, her big toe was on strike. As well as her arms, fingers, and brain, certainly. Although one could hardly call a brain an extremity.

She managed to stomp on the clock sufficiently enough so that both the radio and the alarm were silenced. She slithered out of the sheets and sat up. Her blinds were closed, but the morning light made its way in, anyway, giving her a slight headache, although she supposed she might look at it another way, and let the light fill her with optimism for the impending day. But instead she thought about her trigonometry quiz, and the piece that she had promised to do for the upcoming art review, and how her mother had been acting so weird, lately. Well, weirder than usual. Which was saying a lot.

She stood up and walked to her bathroom, closing the door behind her, although there was no need to, as her mother wouldn't have bothered to enter her room at all. Still, Fin desired privacy at all costs. It was her one pet peeve, lack of privacy. She simply had to be left alone,

when necessary. Being in the bathroom was one of those necessary private times; she could spend hours there.

She sat on the toilet, and stared at her shower curtain. It would have to be replaced, soon. The whole pink flamingo thing was getting old. She had two pink flamingos standing by the sink – the kind that people usually had in their yards, except that Fin had wanted them in her bathroom, so her mother helped her find two buckets, filled them with course sand, and stuck the flamingos in. It was cute, she had to admit. But she was almost over it. Time to move on. Maybe get some black going in here. Maybe some purple, too. Purple was her new thing. Purple and black. The way she liked to do her eye make-up, when her mom let her do it. Purple eyelids, with a streak of black running across and slanting up at the corners. She loved how she looked when she did her eyes up like that. Like Cleopatra. Or a dark fairy. Or a rocker chick.

She brushed her teeth and turned the shower on. As she stood waiting for the water to heat up, she thought again about her mother, who was so distracted, lately. And forgetful. She had always been somewhat like that, but lately it was...well, over the top. She neglected appointments, twice having to re-schedule a teacher's conference, and once a doctor's exam for Fin. She'd tell Fin something, and then would tell her again five minutes later, which Fin found extremely annoying. "I'm sorry," her mother would say. "I guess the first time I didn't realize that I'd said it out loud." Fin found this excuse unacceptable. What kind of person can't tell whether they've said something out loud or not? She wished her mother would get a job, or find a hobby, or something, but ever since Dad died she noticed her mother progressively become less involved in things, which to Fin's way of thinking was unacceptable.

She stepped into the shower and let the water explode over her, running down her legs and her back. She would stay in here all day, if she could. The shower calmed her, revitalized her, made her feel whole and fresh. No one could see her; no one would criticize her, or instruct her, or talk to her at all. Sometimes she thought that she'd be a perfect hermit – living by herself, painting, maybe gardening. People were too much work. And she was tired; tired of working. There were times when she just wanted to say *enough*, to forget about the grades and the college applications, and the scholarships, and the art exhibits, and just simply be. To stand in the shower, and just be. She ran her fingers through her soaking hair, and let the water spill into her mouth, a little. It tasted good. Sweet, like it came from a pure, unadulterated well. She liked that word. Unadulterated. If there were one word that she would want someone to describe her as, it

would be unadulterated. Like pure water. Like a quiet afternoon, full of solitude. Like a word resting on the lips, but remaining unspoken.

Charlie flipped the light switch on, and walked to the sink, swishing the cold water around a bit, waiting for the heat to take hold, and once it had, scrubbed her skin with her fingertips. She looked at her wet hands warily. Why had she thought about going somewhere? Where *was* she going? Besides to hell in a hand basket, of course? She measured the idea of leaving, weighed it in her dripping hands as if it were a juicy bit of fruit, played with it for awhile as she dried her face with a poppy-colored hand towel. She looked at her freshly cleaned face in the mirror, but it wasn't saying a word. The face's mouth stayed closed, and its expression was defiant, almost vulgar. "Fine," she said to the vulgar face. "You...face. I won't tell you anything, either."

She dressed quickly, into a slouchy pair of yoga pants and a small-ish sweatshirt that she fancied made her look young, and opened the door to the hall. "Fin!" She called into it. "Are you awake?"

There was no answer, but a sort of a thud came from the general direction of Fin's room. "I'll take that as a yes," Charlie said, and took the stairs, almost skipping down to the second level. Not bad for an old lady, she thought. I've still got skipping down, anyway.

"Traacherous in the morning," she muttered, as she practically skidded down the second set of stairs to the bottom floor. The old Victorian was tall as much as it was wide, and she and Fin, being the only ones left in it, had taken up residence on the top floor. God only knows why, thought Charlie, finally landing at the bottom, breathless. It would have been so much more practical to simply establish ourselves on this floor, the bottom. Everything within reach, doors to the outside readily available, so no need to wander off into the upper regions. Although, she supposed, that might have been the point. With no real reason to go upstairs, it would have remained untouched and probably extremely dusty, and she would have had to go up to clean, at least, and that would have frustrated her beyond reproach. To clean something that one doesn't use. What would have been the point? So, they hauled themselves up and down the stairs,

resigned to the fact that whenever they needed to get to their bedrooms they'd likely be all out of breath and sweaty at the end, although fantastically fit with great calf muscles.

Fin complained more than a time or two about the long haul upstairs, particularly when she'd had a bad school day, and only wanted to come home and flop down. Fin often flopped down. It was her way. She seemed to have more boy and girl trouble than Charlie remembered having when *she* was sixteen. Fin was a sensitive soul, which in practical terms translated to being unapproachable, especially once she entered her teen years. If you looked at Fin the wrong way, she would say, "Whsaat?" and then she would flop down – sometimes on the couch, sometimes on the large pillows that ubiquitously covered the family room floor, sometimes on the floor itself. "What's wrong, sweetie?" Charlie would say, but it wouldn't be any use. Fin would stay silent, piteously lying face down on whatever surface she found most handy, and there she would stay until Charlie left the room, at which point she would stand up again, the dramatization clearly unseen and consequently not all that necessary anymore.

Charlie put the kettle on, and opened the cabinet for tea. She thought about running back upstairs to make sure Fin had gotten up, and then heard the water from the upstairs bathroom turn on. "Good." she said aloud. And then smacked herself in the forehead.

She'd been talking to herself a lot lately. In fact, last week in the grocery store she'd been trying to decide whether she should get the strawberries (too early) or the rhubarb (and what in God's name was one supposed to do with that?) and had suddenly realized that she was talking aloud. "Rhubarb," she had said to herself. "Well, I guess I could make a pie. And with the strawberries, it might not be so bad. But will anyone eat it?" And then, glancing up, she realized that she was being watched by an elderly lady standing next to a curly-haired child in her shopping cart, both of them looking at her as if she were a sideshow. Well, perhaps she was. A freaky, unforgivable sideshow freak. The lady had looked at her humorlessly, and the child sucked her index finger as if it were her lifeblood. Charlie nodded at them briefly with a quick smile and then slunk off amongst the olives and pickles, humiliated and somewhat resentful. So she talked to herself – well, what did they expect? She wasn't perfect. She talked about rhubarb in the produce section. Sometimes she discussed cantaloupe in the dairy aisle. So, sue her. She could only be and do so much, and then something had to give. The talking-to-herself issue definitely came from being alone too much, and despite her righteous indignation she was trying to just *stop it*, for God's sake, once and for all.

Alone. Yes, she was alone, now, quite a bit, which allowed her to think. Too much thinking can be fatal, she thought, stirring honey into her Earl Grey. Like that button she used to have, stuck to her backpack. 'I think. Therefore, I'm dangerous.' She chuckled a little, remembering it, and then thought that perhaps chuckling to oneself might turn out to be just as bad as talking to oneself – even worse, if that were possible. More side-showy. So. No chuckling. No smiling. No talking. "Oh, hell," Charlie said as loudly as she could, taking a sip and banging her cup down on the saucer. "Maybe I'll just start the whole damn thing tomorrow."

Fin stood at the bus stop, her hair still wet from the shower. She shivered periodically, stamping her feet as if it were the dead of winter, rather than April, and she was shaking the snow off of her boots. She glared down the road as if she were trying to will the bus to come. Charlie spotted her as she drove by, and honked, slowing down to a stop. "Hey, peanut," she said, rolling down the passenger window. "You look cold, actually. Want a ride?"

Fin paused, and pulled her backpack up further onto her shoulder. She shrugged briefly, and then opened the door and climbed in. She slammed the door - a little harder than necessary, Charlie thought - and sank back into the seat. "Thanks," she said, and looked out the window, hiding her face.

Charlie pulled out again into the road and they drove in silence for a few minutes. "Is that girl still...bothering you? On the bus?" Charlie asked hesitantly. Fin had complained last week about some tough, bullying girl who apparently took pleasure in mentally bludgeoning a lot of unassuming kids, and now happened to be focused on her. Fin had only mentioned it once, but it stuck like a sharpened hat pin in Charlie's gullet as being something semi-alarming. She had to be careful bringing up the subject. There was no place to flop, here in the car, so Fin would have to do what amounted to a semblance of a flop in the event that Charlie said anything remotely unacceptable. But Fin just sighed and pulled her hat down over her face. "No," she said, her voice muffled by the hat. "It's fine." She crossed her arms in front of her and fell into silence again, and Charlie felt somewhat cheated. Why was it that sometimes her daughter told her so much, and then at other times there was nothing? It was all a part of being Fin, she supposed, but

still. It was like she only saw her daughter in short snippets, like snapshots at the seaside. Moments.

She tried again. “How did the set-up go for the exhibit?”

Fin slowly pulled her hat up so that only her mouth and nose were revealed. “Fine,” she said. “Mr. Gallagher thinks I should do the village one.”

Despite all her angst, or probably because of it, Fin churned out paintings with the prolificacy of Warhol on steroids. Fin was, in fact, so obviously meant to be an artist, that Charlie had designated a studio space for her on the third floor of their house, in the south-facing turret room. Fin’s painting happened to be the only topic that Charlie could talk to her about without there being any rolling of the eyes, or annoyed and embarrassed protestations, or fleeing into another room as if her mother were made up of a gruesome, and very contagious, disease. Charlie used the art subject as a wild card, when she couldn’t think of anything else to say. She wondered how long that would last before she was found out, before Fin realized that Charlie was fishing for conversation, in which case, the gig would be up, and Charlie would need to finagle something else into the conversation that would engage her daughter.

“Oh. The one you did of Rockport? That’s one of my favorites.” Charlie winced at herself as she made the turn towards the high school. Geeky, she thought. And too enthusiastic. She drove a little slower, hoping Fin would say more.

“Yeah. Mr. Gallagher said it was a good one. He knows the exact place, in Rockport. He said I captured the...*essence*...of it. So. Uh. Um. That’s what I thought I’d show.” She hunkered down again and turned her head toward the window, her hat still pulled over her eyes, so Charlie knew that the head turn was more about ending the conversation than actually looking out at the passing scenery.

“When’s the show again?” A last ditch attempt.

“Mmm...May 23rd? I don’t remember. I’ll tell you later.” More hunkering and looking out the window at the inside of her hat.

They pulled into the high school parking lot and Fin immediately clicked out of her seatbelt and opened the door, almost before the car had come to a complete stop. “Have a good day!” Charlie called loudly, and Fin distractedly waved and then was gone - gone in an instant, like the impossibly sudden dip of the sun as it sets, or a cup of good chowder. And Charlie had to be alone again, alone in the car, driving to the bookstore. Just like any other day that she’d drop

off Fin; just like any other morning when she'd go to find Daphne at the bookstore, her car key small and hard and cold in her hand as she pulled it from the lock. Except that, on this morning, she had a Midlife Crisis sitting there on her shoulder, nestling itself up into her neck, crooning to her as she drove. And she wished, beyond words, for something, a thing, a thing, just anything else.

Whatever that anything else might be, she honestly hadn't a clue.

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