

# 1 GREEN PEPPERS ALL DAY LONG

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Charlotte ate green peppers all day long. It was all she'd learned how to grow after everything went to hell. Day in, day out...green peppers raw, roasted over weak fire, sometimes pickled if she felt ambitious. She dreamed of steak, the way Daddy used to sear his famous T-bones. But animals were scarce now, and even if she caught one, she doubted she'd know how to butcher it.

If she could just find two animals, one male, one female, she could start a farm. A real one. Until then, she lived on peppers and memories. Maybe it was time to travel to the outer edges, try bartering with the scattered locals. It wasn't safe out there. But nothing was safe anymore.

"You could make a living doing that kind of thing,"

Daddy's voice sounded clear in her head like it always was.

Charlie, he always called her Charlie, didn't know if it was her imagination or something else, but she heard him often. Sometimes he gave her advice. Sometimes he just rambled. But today? Today it made sense. Maybe she could sell peppers. Trade, at least. It was more than nothing.

The problem was that the bandits were getting bold. She had no weapons worth a damn. She couldn't fight and wasn't big enough to scare anyone off. She was small and quiet, the kind of person who vanished without a trace in times like these.

Whenever Charlie was lucky enough to hear daddy's voice, it was like he'd never left. She could still picture him sitting with his arms crossed in his beat-up chair. She was giving him that root beer float kind of smile. That's what he used to call it when she grinned like the *Cheshire Cat*. Charlie and her dad were tight, closer than most.

After her mother split when Charlie was still in diapers, it had just been the two of them. And that was just fine with her. Why did it have to go and change? Just after the world started falling apart, Daddy's heart couldn't handle it. One night he went to bed and never woke up. Now, Charlie was alone. Except for his voice. That, and the hollow feeling in her belly.

The smelly, old microwave hadn't worked in weeks, not since the power started

flickering for good. Not that it mattered. Peppers were the only thing on the menu, and those didn't need nuking. A hot meal would've been nice, though. Even hot peppers. Sometimes, she stumbled across something edible—an unopened can, but mostly, it was peppers. Always peppers. She wished the latest band of hostiles would move on. She'd avoided them so far, but close calls were coming more often.

The sound of the dishwasher used to calm her, the way water squished and spun reminded her of summers at the river with Daddy. He was so proud the day he installed that thing, beaming like he'd just won the lottery. Funny how something so simple could feel like luxury now. It was too dangerous to go near the river anymore. Too many eyes. Too many guns.

### **Paris in August.**

Charlie shifted her thoughts on purpose, yanking herself back from the edge. It was her trick. Whenever her thoughts got too dark, she'd imagine something absurd or random. Today, it was Paris in August. Hot pavement. Tall buildings. A baguette under her arm, just because. It didn't have to make sense. That's why it worked.

Daydreams of Paris and Daddy's voice were cut short by the sharp pop of a revolver in the distance. Charlie's brain stalled for a split second. Then, like a backup generator kicking on, her body powered up.. Everything Daddy taught her snapped into place. All the drills, the late-night what-ifs. It had been a long time since anyone had come close to the property.

Even before the country spiraled, visitors to these parts were rare. It was usually folks who'd taken a wrong turn and turned right back around. Both the property and Daddy had a look about them. To everyone that knew Daddy knew he was as good as they came. Folks who didn't... didn't want to mess around and find out.

With all the history soaked into the soil here, you'd think it'd be Charlie and Daddy who needed to worry. That wasn't the case, folks minded their business when it came to the Clemmons family. It was Daddy's family name, and they were always known as the family, "best to be left alone." It might've been because of great-grandma Vlena. Daddy said, "She possessed an uncanny knack to make things happen."

Charlie's nearest neighbors, the Johnsons, lived about half a mile up the way. Or used to. As far as she knew, they had scattered when everything went south. Their old farmhouse was up by the "main road" if you could call it that. A dusty path of loose gravel that led to a real paved road, and eventually, civilization. That's where Charlie used to catch the bus to school.

Most locals fled when the hostiles from other larger counties came blowing through like a storm. The brave ones knew when to leave, when to watch, and when it was safe to return.

One town over had gotten smart and put up wooden fencing around their development

and ran a tight operation. It was the closest place where you could still barter goods, but they weren't taking in anyone new. Not even a fourteen-year-old girl left to fend for herself.

It'd been a few weeks since the last group of bandits came close to the Clemmons' property. They'd come to participate in their disgusting mating ritual that Charlie wanted no part of. They stayed just far enough away, but she could still hear them hootin' and hollerin' like a pack of wild dogs.

But no one had ever fired a shot.

Until now.

Daddy had taken great care to prepare the property. His foresight was the only reason Charlie was still alive. He always said he came from "a long line of people who just knew things." That sense, that knowing, came from his momma's side.

He started prepping long before anyone else believed there was something to prepare for. It started when the CEO of Sanders Holdings, one of the biggest construction conglomerates in the country, decided he wanted to be president.

He knew something was up. After all, the country had just barely survived a former action star for president. All his presidency did was open the door for other inept leaders.

And here came Ronald Sanders, a soulless business tycoon dumb as a box of rocks, with old money and older values. He stood for the folks who didn't want things to change especially for people who didn't look like them.

Once Daddy saw Sanders amassing a following, he knew things were about to change. Tensions rose as Sanders laid the foundation of bigotry. Supporters mistook his inexperience for authenticity. They seemed to think this was needed to bring about change. Sanders fed a need to return to a time when the country wasn't progressive.

When Sanders started to gain momentum, Daddy started to build. Nights and weekends were spent reclaiming wood, rewiring walls, laying the foundation for something new. That fall, after Sanders won the 2020 election, Daddy quietly began remodeling their home. That fall, after Sanders won the 2020 election Daddy started to build.

One year into Sanders' term, he had rolled back several environmental protections and gutted food safety regulations. People started getting sick. Things began to unravel. Daddy used to laugh at the doomsday preppers on TV until he wasn't laughing anymore.

Daddy's suspicions were coming to life in a terrifying way by the second year of this president's term. Despite the protests that broke out almost every week, little was done to stop the determined regime from making America over.

Daddy taught Charlie how to grow and harvest her own food. She was barely twelve and already knew how to can, pickle, and cure meat better than most adults. Hunting? That was a

different story. She wasn't sure she could butcher anything, but Daddy made sure she knew how, just in case.

While some people were panic-buying and causing temporary shortages, Daddy would only grab a few extra items with each trip to the grocery store. By the third year of that god-awful presidency, Daddy had finished building something he was proud of: a hidden home inside the hill.

The newly expanded cellar had now become fully stocked with food and supplies. And Daddy's old Ham radio parts; covered under a white sheet, it represented a connection to the outside world. He'd talk to his friends when locked down during the pandemic.

Daddy had managed to build an in-hill home in just a little over three years. It was his proudest creation behind Charlie, of course. It wasn't underground exactly, more like buried, carved into the earth. Enough to stay hidden but not cut off from the trees and the breeze.

He wanted Charlie to still enjoy the outdoors. He figured some day they might not be able to stay in the main house, but he could keep this one from being found easily. The mini home didn't have all the bells and whistles as the main house did, but it was built for protection.

Charlie had never stayed there. It was for emergencies only. And the sound of a pistol? That counted.

Charlie moved fast, her voice low and sure. "I'm going, Daddy."

She locked up the main house, setting every trap and barrier in place. Daddy had planted thick, wild shrubs. Laid down tarps with fake foliage. He created tarps with fake foliage for camouflage and even dragged a fallen tree to block the main path to the house. From a distance, it looked like an overgrown jungle. Nothing worth exploring.

Charlie crawled under the dining table and lifted the rug. Underneath was a trap door. She lowered herself down the rope ladder and removed it after locking the hatch. She made her way through a narrow passageway. It was dark. It was damp. Spiderwebs clung to her forehead. Charlie pressed through, brushing silk and dust from her forehead as she made her way to the hill house.

The cellar led to a hidden door and then to a smaller living space; one Daddy had poured his soul into. Charlie had her own bedroom space with a privacy curtain. He had built makeshift beds for them in case they needed to hideout for a few days. Daddy thought of everything. Charlie sighed, thinking about Daddy not being down there with her.

After admiring the space for a moment, Charlie climbed the small staircase upstairs. There was a kitchen. A tiny living room with a coffee table, a bookshelf, even a little desk. All

made by hand. Charlie stared at everything. Tears pooled in the corner of her eyes. She thought if she didn't blink that the tears wouldn't fall. But they did. And they didn't stop for a long time.

There was still shoddy power when Daddy built this place so there was a microwave in the kitchen. It wasn't fancy, but it was clean unlike the one at the main house. It didn't smell like burnt popcorn and mold. Charlie stood in the middle of the room, her chest aching.

She whispered, "How'd you do this, Daddy?"

Even though Charlie had been surviving on her own for a while, she was still a kid. Kids were supposed to have parents to aggravate. Instead, she had no one, just the creeping possibility of being found.

*What if they take over my house?*

*What if they find the garden?*

*What if they make me a slave, or worse?*

Charlie's hands began to shake. She gulped in air and hiccupped quietly.

**Do cactuses ever get lonely?**

She imagines a lone cactus in the middle of a desert. No shade, no friends, just prickles and stubbornness. She wonders if plants even notice each other. Maybe her peppers get chatty when she's not looking. The thought makes her smirk, just enough to pull her back from the edge.

Now that Charlie had cleared her head and her knees stopped knocking, she walked to the hill-house entrance. But instead of a real door, Daddy had installed a fake one. When she tried to pull it open, it didn't budge.

"What the hell?!"

She cupped her hand over her mouth. She looked around the room, as if Daddy might hear her from the other side. He would've had something to say about her tone. But honestly? It was the apocalypse. If ever there was a time to use a sassy tone and a cuss word, this was it.

Charlie stared at the "door" That's when she noticed a small flap near the bottom. It was almost invisible unless you were up close.

*Nice job, Daddy.*

She lifted the flap and saw... a doggie door?

Sunlight streamed through the clear square. Startled, she dropped it again.

*"Calm down! The shot came from far away. They couldn't have made it here that fast."*

Still, she moved slower now. She lifted the flap again and knelt to look outside. The view was mostly blocked by tall grass and weeds growing wild behind the main house. But she didn't need a perfect view. She knew where everything was. Off to the right, her pepper garden.

Those resilient green gems had survived where nothing else could. After Daddy went to sleep forever, her plants began to wilt, as if mourning with her. No matter how hard she tried, they wouldn't come back. All except the green peppers. They had a fighting spirit in them. Those refused to die. They thrived. The worse the soil, the stronger they grew.

Charlie noticed they'd gotten a glow-up. Quite, literally. They were taking on a new and interesting shape and growth pattern. But even cooler, there were times that Charlie could swear they glowed. She'd be sitting outside at dusk seeing twinkling through the wild shrubs. At first, she thought they were fireflies. But no... they were coming from her plants. Maybe she was imagining things.

Maybe not.

Either way, Charlie knew with the same instinct Daddy used to call *the knowing*; she had to keep that garden hidden. That shot threatened to expose her secret.

She couldn't let anyone find out.

Charlie steadied herself on the balls of her feet and inspected the see-through square. It was clearly the entrance. Small and low to the ground, perfect for slipping in and out unseen. She pressed at the edges, trying to pry it open.

Nothing.

She fell backward, frustrated. That's when she saw it, a tiny keyhole in the lower right corner of the door.

*Of course.*

Daddy always kept his keys in the desk by the front door. She turned to the new desk inside the hill-house, pulled the drawer open, and there it was. The key. Charlie held it in her hand for what felt like an hour.

"You've got to stay ready, Baby Girl."

Daddy's voice again. Right on time. Crystal clear.

He used to say that every day especially toward the end. She took a breath, stood up straighter, and pulled her shoulders back.

She was Hollis Clemmons' daughter. She was ready.

Charlie unlocked the tiny door. It swung open just enough for her to slide through. No grown adult would fit. That was oddly comforting. She crawled out onto the earth and slithered a few feet into the tall grass. That's when she heard them.

Voices.

The strangers had made it to the clearing on the other side of the hill. About fifty feet beyond the hill-house, the terrain sloped deeply. Wild bushes and scattered trees lined the far side. She was maybe a hundred feet away. Close enough to hear them, not close enough to see. Curiosity clashed with fear.

*Should I keep watch or get back inside?*

Then a man's voice cut through the stillness:

"Hey, let's climb up there."

Nope.

Charlie turned, scrambling back toward the door. But then:

"I'm not climbing up there. Let's get the hell out of here," a woman whined.

"Go on, then," the man muttered.

Charlie exhaled in relief, almost at the threshold when...

**Pop.**

It wasn't a gunshot this time. It sounded more like a balloon bursting... but heavier.

Then the man screamed, "Ow! My eyes!"

The woman's voice came next, "Are you oka..."

She stopped mid-sentence and started coughing hard. "Did you see that?" She asked between coughs.

"Something... hot," he muttered. "Like fire. But no smoke. I swear I saw... a girl. Real quick."

"A girl?"

He nodded, dazed. "Might've been the heat messing with me. Or the mist. But she was watching."

The woman glanced around uneasily. "Let's just keep moving."

Charlie turned toward the commotion. A hazy mist floated over the top of the hill, creeping closer. She heard the stranger scream out again.

The man slurred, “Get it off me. Get it off!”

“What are you talking about?” the woman asked, panicked.

“The giant fucking spider crawling up my leg! Help me!”

They argued for a minute; the woman pleading, and the man panicking.

“I told you there’s nothing there! I’m going back. Stay if you wanna, but I’m leaving!”

“No, don’t leave me,” he cried. “I don’t feel so good. You can’t leave me here!”

They trudged on, but the man glanced over his shoulder twice. Like the flare hadn’t just startled him, it had marked him. Somewhere near the foot of the hill, the earth settled.

Charlie tried to crawl, but her limbs felt heavy, like someone had strapped weights to her arms. Her stomach twisted. Something was wrong. Really wrong. Her vision blinked in and out like a strobe light. She got halfway through the doggie door before everything went black.

She came to as someone pulled her the rest of the way inside. A woman with stringy brown hair, wearing a tie-dye tank top and faded blue jeans, dragged her through.

Their eyes locked.

The woman smiled.

“Hi, Charlotte.”