

I've Been There
A Christmas Story

by Rachel Anne Cox



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"There are no strangers here; only friends you haven't yet met." ~William Butler Yeats

The songs of the carolers outside the music store warmed hearts, but not the air as May rushed in from the cold. The sudden warmth of the store sent a shiver through her. She had been waiting in her car for most of the afternoon. While her fingers were warm enough, she had worked on her last paper for the semester, but when they were too cold to move, she had settled for reading a book to pass the time when she could go to the store to meet Charlotte Williams. Arriving hours early, May wanted to be sure to beat the crowds that would come. It wasn't every day that a Tony winning actress and singer came to their small town.

Lights from the main street made it look like a Christmas village on someone's mantle, not real at all. Their twinkling and blinking matched the rhythm of May's quickening heart. She had loved Ms. Williams' music for as long as she could remember. Growing up, her allowance had always gone to the newest Charlotte Williams album or Broadway soundtrack. May couldn't imagine what had prompted the star to join in the annual Christmas celebration with her town choir, but she wasn't going to question the fate that had led her here. She knew that she would never be able to make it to New York to see Ms. Williams on Broadway, so this was her only chance. She had bought the first ticket on the opening night of the Christmas celebration and thrilled at the angelic soprano notes that filled the town assembly hall. Never in its 150 years had that hall been touched by such music.

Now May would be the first in line for the meet and greet and CD signing for the fans. She wandered around the music store, decorated to the hilt with Christmas ornaments. Every instrument had a sprig of holly, every cross beam in the ceiling a bunch of mistletoe. A table was set up with stacks of Charlotte Williams CDs, bottles of water, and a cup of pens. A large sign next to the table stood on a tripod with Ms. Williams' shining face smiling at all who walked in the door. May's nerves started to

kick in, and she debated about just running home. What would she say? How could she speak to someone so removed from her world? But something had drawn May here this night, days before Christmas. Something beyond her love of music or theater. She had convinced herself that this night would be a turning point. Meeting Charlotte Williams would mark a shift in her life, and nothing would be the same after tonight. Something deep in her, beyond logic or reason, understanding or even conscious thought told her that if she could just talk to Ms. Williams, if she could just tell her what her music had meant to her, it would mean that God saw her, knew her, and would help her make something special out of her life, something better than the pain she had come from. May looked at the clock on her phone for the twentieth time in an hour. Charlotte Williams would be in the same room with her in thirty minutes.

“I can help the next guest in line,” the clerk called from behind the counter.

May walked up and handed him the newest solo album *Christmas Past*. She looked a little guiltily at the price tag. Twelve dollars. With tax, it would be almost fourteen. She knew she only had twenty in her bank account, but she didn't care. She had to buy a CD to be able to have something for Ms. Williams to sign. She swiped her debit card and tried to calculate how many days the groceries she bought that afternoon could last. Three days, maybe four. It would be another week until payday. It didn't matter, though. She would figure it out.

Looking at the CD in her hand, May smiled to herself. It had most of her favorite Christmas songs. As with most things in her life, May's relationship with Christmas was complicated. It was her favorite holiday as a child. She loved every single tradition associated with it. But Christmas also meant fights with her family, dashed expectations, and cold silences. She had two visions of Christmas in her mind, one was the happy family around a fire and tree, singing carols, loving their gifts and each other. Another was the reality of forced “Merry Christmases” from her father and brother, the never quite dull ache of missing her mother, and an elaborate Christmas dinner that would sometimes receive a grunted “thanks” before the football game.

Before May knew what was happening, Ms. Williams was sitting at the table in front of her and there was a flurry of excitement in the room as the store employees prepared to herd the crowd through as

quickly as possible. Everything around her was buzzing with life, but Charlotte Williams sat at the table, quiet and serene. She wore a simple black dress, and her blond hair flowed over her shoulders. But what May noticed first were her eyes. She had a smile on her lips, but a sadness and weariness in her eyes.

“Ms. Williams will not be taking any questions as she has to save her voice for upcoming performances. Please move quickly as she signs your CDs. There are many people we have to get through,” one of the staff was saying. “Step this way if you please.”

May stood in front of Charlotte Williams in awe. Everything that she had planned to say flew right out of her head. She wasn't even sure what words were coming out of her mouth besides, “Thank you so much. Thank you.” Ms. Williams smiled and handed her the signed CD. Someone snapped a picture with May's phone, and it was over. She was standing on the side of the table, unsure of what had just happened.

Her umbrella slipped from her hands, and as she bent to pick it up, the sign with Charlotte Williams' smiling face went crashing to the floor. May was mortified. “Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry.” She felt the heat rising in her face as she tried to right the sign again. “I'm so sorry.”

A soft voice was at her side, “It's alright, honey. I've been there. Are you alright?”

Charlotte Williams was standing next to May, looking right at her. No one had called May “honey” since her mother had passed away a few years before.

“I'm so sorry,” May managed to squeak out.

“It's really okay. I've totally been there. Have a good night.”

Ms. Williams was back at the table attending to her other fans. May stood transfixed, unable to move for a few moments. She couldn't believe this was the impression she had left her idol with. A blundering, silly girl. As she began to leave the store with her head bowed, she heard Charlotte Williams say the same words again, almost to herself, not to anyone in particular, “I've been there before. I have. I've absolutely been there.” May turned to look one last time, and Ms. Williams had a kind of far off look as she said again, “I've been there.” May stumbled out of the store and back out to her cold car.

May dropped her things just inside the door of her apartment, but left her coat and gloves on. She hadn't had the money to turn the gas on in her new apartment yet. Given the choice of paying the electric bill and the gas bill, she had chosen the electric. She wondered at the strangeness of the day. She had been so sure that meeting Charlotte Williams would change something. She would be somehow different. But it hadn't worked. Nothing had changed. She was still on her own in the same sad little apartment.

She thought of wrapping the CD and placing it under the small twig of a tree on the end table, decorated with popcorn string and candy canes, but no lights. The small nativity set that had been her mother's sat under the tree. Joseph's staff was still broken, and one of the wise men was missing. The CD of Christmas songs would be the only present this year. There would be nothing from her dad or brother. Her co-workers at the restaurant didn't really do anything for Christmas besides sharing a meal on Christmas Eve before the rush of people at lunch began. But she didn't want to wait until Christmas morning to listen to the CD, so she popped it into her CD player on the kitchen counter before heating up a bowl of soup in the microwave.

As Charlotte Williams sang her version of "A Cradle in Bethlehem," May started to feel that her apartment in her new town was finally becoming home. She'd only moved in a couple of weeks before. She had thought she would live at home until she finished college. It would be cheaper that way, but the house she'd always called home had become untenable.

A mother tonight is rocking a cradle in Bethlehem...

May winced at the memory of her meeting Charlotte Williams. How could she have been so clumsy, she wondered. She had ruined her one chance at meeting her. She ran over it in her mind again and again. She hadn't told Ms. Williams her name or said any of the things she loved about her music. Then she'd knocked over the sign and bolted like a child. Unbelievable.

"Did you put butter on your shoes too, butterfingers?" her brother Mark would have said. "We're gonna have to get you some bumper pads, Stumble Butt." Her Dad would have laughed at Mark, and they would have nudged each other like old pals. She never thought his teasing was funny. But after their mother had died, Mark had grown downright cruel. After one grand final battle that had degraded into a

physical fight, her father had finally said, “Maybe it’s time you got your own place, kid. You don’t really fit here anymore, do you?” And that was it. She’d changed houses, changed towns, and tried to rewrite her whole life. She told herself she didn’t come from a cruel home. She came from a loving mother, one who decorated every Christmas with homemade ornaments and a hand-painted nativity. But the bruises still on her arms and neck told a different story.

I’ll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams. Charlotte Williams comforted. May rubbed her arms, aching in the cold. She looked through her curtainless window into the snow-filled night, her tear-stained face reflecting in the window.

“I’ve been there,” Charlotte thought to herself as she signed CD after CD. She tried to pay attention to the people in front of her, and she smiled for all the pictures, but she couldn’t get the girl out of her mind. She thought back to not so many years ago at her first audition.

Charlie Williams, as she had called herself back then, heard her name yelled from the cavernous theater. “Charlie Williams! Next auditioner, please.”

She tried to walk onto the stage with more confidence than she actually felt. She looked up for a change, instead of down at her shoes, so she didn’t see the electrical cord in her path. Her foot caught on it just as she came into the light of the stage, and she went sprawling, taking a piece of stage lighting with her. She heard, but couldn’t see, the director from a few seats back in the house. “Man, what a klutz,” he laughed. “She’ll knock the whole set down and cost a fortune in insurance. Next!” he called before she had ever sung a note.

Even in a new city, her luck hadn’t changed. She was still the same clumsy Charlie from Elk City, Oklahoma. She walked to the corner market, still smarting from the embarrassment of her failed audition. Non-audition really. She had needed that job badly. But she was less upset over losing the job than she was over the way the director had cruelly dismissed her for being human and not some performing robot. This audition had been one of the last pieces of hope she was holding onto. She wondered if it was time to go back to Elk City.

As Christmas music piped through the store speakers, she threw a few meager groceries in her cart. *Have yourself a merry little Christmas...* “How could someone be so heartless at Christmas of all times,” she wondered. In those moments she promised herself she would always be kind. She would never be so busy or embittered as to take it out on people who crossed her path. After getting enough food to get her through to her next audition, she threw her last two dollars into the Salvation Army bucket with bells ringing in her ears. That was twenty years ago before she was Charlotte Williams, Tony winner. There were a million miles between that girl she used to be and the woman she’d grown into. If she had only known then how things would work out, how much happier she would have been.

“Okay, everyone, that’s it. Ms. Williams must rest for her performance tomorrow. We hope to see you all at the concert,” Charlotte’s manager, Allen, was trying to be heard over the crowd. An audible disappointment swelled and rippled through the music store. Slowly they began to disperse, a few stragglers snapping hasty pictures of Charlotte before being shoed out of store.

Charlotte rubbed her shoulders and drank from her water bottle thirstily. She hoped that scratchiness in her throat was just from tiredness and not from illness.

“Well, that went well, I think,” Allen said. “Now let’s get you back to the hotel. You’ve got a full day tomorrow.”

“Hey, did you see the kid that bumped into the sign.”

“How could I miss her?” he laughed as he bustled around helping to clean and organize the space in the music store before they left.

“No, I mean it. Did you notice her bruises?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“A few on her arms. One on her neck. I didn’t really register them until she had already left. I wish I knew who she was. Can you ask the store manager tomorrow? Maybe they know her.”

“What? Why? What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. She just reminds me of me once upon a time. I’d just like to talk to her, I guess.”

“Ms. Strictly Business Williams wants to talk to her? Not really like you. Besides, we’ve got a non-stop schedule right up until the minute we get on the plane.”

“I know. But just during tomorrow’s concert, can you try to ask around?”

Allen didn’t respond.

“Please?”

“I’ll do what I can.”

The next morning as she walked to the steak house where she worked, May made her way through snow drifts still on the sidewalks from the storm the night before. She decided to walk to try to save money on gas. She stood at the traffic light on the corner, waiting to cross. Nearby, sitting at the bus stop, May noticed a woman pulling a thin coat around her shoulders. She had several bags around her, one filled with clothes, one filled with what seemed to be toiletries, and one holding framed pictures. Her clothes were nicer than other homeless people May had seen. Maybe she hadn’t been homeless very long. She looked as if she had tried to maintain her appearance as much as possible under the circumstances. Although the woman held no sign and asked for nothing, people gave her a wide berth. They either looked at her as if she were insulting them by her homelessness, as if her situation was somehow contagious, or they blatantly avoided looking at her all together.

May always made it a point to give a little money to people she saw who needed it, but she thought of the CD she had bought the night before, and knew she couldn’t really afford it this time. She had her emergency five dollars in a hidden pocket in her purse. But that’s all she really had left until her next payday. “But then,” she thought, “at least I have a next payday.” She was going back and forth with herself like this while she waited for the light to change for the next few minutes. A city bus pulled to the curb, and the woman at the bus stop tried to rise with all her bags but stumbled. May ran to her to help her up out of the snow. “Are you alright?”

“Sorry, honey. I’m a clumsy one.”

May cringed again, remembering the night before and the kindness and understanding Ms. Williams had shown her. “It’s okay. I’ve been there before myself. Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

May reached in her purse and pulled out the five dollars. “Here you are,” she said quietly. “Why don’t you go over to the cafe and go inside for a while? Get some hot soup. It’s freezing out here.”

“Thank you, honey. God bless you.”

“God bless you too.”

Walking into the cafe, the woman shoved her bags under a corner table before ordering a small cup of soup. She sat down slowly, relishing the feel of the cushioned seat beneath her. Her cheeks stung as the blood returned to them and warmth started to permeate through her. She sipped the soup slowly, trying to make it last as long as possible. The flavor and aroma of the chicken and vegetables was almost overwhelming to her deprived senses.

She heard a song over the radio. “I’ll Be Home for Christmas,” but it was a new version, one she hadn’t heard before. Was that Charlotte Williams? The woman thought back to when she had been on a business trip in New York a few years before and had seen her on Broadway in a revival of *Brigadoon*. She had loved the other-worldly quality of the singer’s voice, the way it could transport you to another life. A million miles separated the woman she had been then from the woman she was now.

That was before. Before she had gotten pregnant. Before her position had gone to someone who would sacrifice family for the company. Before she had lost her insurance. Before she had had a miscarriage and an emergency surgery that killed her credit in one blow. Before she had watched her life come down like a sandcastle because of one choice. Family. There was a time when there was nothing in her life beyond who she was and who she wanted to be with her husband and child. Yet when it was all over, she was alone.

She lived in her car, the only asset she owned outright. She would move it from time to time from one grocery store parking lot to another. It was a Lexus, so people mostly assumed that it was meant to be

wherever she parked it without question. She kept some things in the car, but some she brought with her, afraid to have them stolen: a few nice outfits, some toiletries that kept her feeling human, and pictures of the family she had once had.

Not wanting to draw attention to herself, the woman tried to stay as presentable as possible, so she could just blend in with the crowd. There were enough public restrooms where she could stay clean for the most part. But her hair was growing too long to be manageable. She couldn't afford to cut it. It would become a problem before long.

As she was draining the last bit of soup from her cup and wondering where she would go next to keep warm, the woman felt someone's eyes on her. Another woman at the next table was obviously staring. She tried to move her bags further under the table out of sight. After a few minutes, the woman from the next table approached her.

“Jo? Is that you?”

The woman was shocked to hear her name. No one had called her by her name in almost a year. She had started to wonder if it was ever really her name. She sat looking up at the woman who was expecting her to answer.

“Jo, it's me—Amy. God, how long has it been? I almost didn't recognize you with your hair so long. I lost touch with you after you left MacLaren and Davies. I'm so sorry. Where are you working now?”

Jo, that was her name. The woman remembered now. She was Jo. Suddenly, she was very aware of her appearance. She couldn't stop staring at her old friend Amy from that other life. And she still hadn't responded. People expected her to speak back when she was spoken to. That's what you did in polite society. She started grasping at words.

“Oh well, you know how it is. I've tried to take some time off for myself for a while before going into another non-stop job.” Jo smoothed her shirt and her hair.

“Yeah, I get that. I'm sure you've been fielding a lot of offers.”

“Oh sure. Just trying to find the right fit.” The small talk came more easily than she thought it would. Why did people spend so much time talking about nothing?

“Well, you probably heard that I went off on my own and started my own company. I was tired of the BS over there. They didn’t care about people. I’m pretty small still. But I like not taking orders from corporate anymore.”

“Must be nice.”

“I don’t suppose you would consider coming to work for me, would you?” Amy laughed like she was proposing something unthinkable. “Not with the kind of offers you’ve been getting. But, man, I could use someone with your experience that I don’t have to teach everything to. Plus to have someone with a heart, rather than just another shark, that would be a plus.”

“I could definitely consider it.” Jo tried not to sound too eager.

“Are you serious?”

“Sure! What are old friends for?”

“That’s great, Jo. I can’t believe the luck of running into you today.”

“Me either.”

“You still have my number?”

“My phone actually broke a few days ago. Can I get your card?”

“Sure. Here you go. Call me first thing Monday, and we’ll talk salary and plans. It won’t be as much as you were making at MacLaren and Davies, but that’s just for now. We’re growing pretty quickly.”

“I’m sure it will be great. I’ll talk to you on Monday.”

Jo sat taller in her chair and finished her soup paid for by the young woman out on the street. She wished she could thank her again. She had so much more to thank her for than just the soup.

Charlotte looked at her phone. Her husband was calling. She couldn’t put him off anymore. She had to tell him.

“Hey, Chris, I’m glad you called. I needed to talk to you about something.”

“What is it this time?” The frustration was evident in his voice.

“I need to stay here for another day or so.”

“It’s almost Christmas, Charlotte. What is it, another gig? More money and obligations? Why am I not surprised?”

Charlotte took a deep breath. Her husband had a right to be upset. She hadn’t been as present with her family lately as she would have liked. They had been married for ten years. They had given each other their hearts, and both had been cracked from time to time, yet still they hung on. “It is a sort of obligation, but not what you think. And it won’t actually pay me anything.”

“Perfect. And what am I supposed to tell the kids?”

“I will definitely be home before Christmas. Tell them Mommy has to help someone.”

“Help someone? What’s going on?”

“Remember the day we met?”

Chris took a moment to respond. Charlotte started to panic that he might not remember. “Of course I do. You were waiting on my table, and you dumped a bowl of soup in my lap. Then you broke my nose when we both tried to pick up the bowl at the same time. Our first date was in the ER. What about it?”

“There was a girl at the bookstore last night who reminded me of that girl I used to be. But I think there’s something wrong. I think she needs help.”

“You’re serious.”

“Absolutely. She just looked so alone and defeated. No one should be alone on Christmas.”

“So what are you going to do if you find her? Bring her back with you?”

“I might. I don’t know. I don’t really have a plan. The only thing I know for certain is that I don’t have any answers.”

A smile entered Chris’s voice. “Then that is a very hopeful place to start.”

“I’m going to poke around for a couple of days, see if I can find her. But I promise to leave in two days, no matter what. And I promise to take a full month off to spend time with you and the kids.”

“She really got to you, didn’t she?”

“I was so tired last night, but looking at her, I saw someone more tired than I am. It was the sadness in her eyes and the way she said ‘sorry.’”

“Okay, honey. I’ll see you in a couple of days.”

“You haven’t called me that in forever.”

“You are starting to seem like my old honey again.”

“I love you, Chris.”

“Charlotte, I don’t know what to tell you. We can’t find her. I asked the people at the music store—they didn’t know her. I’ve asked around at places nearby. No one recognizes our description of her.”

Charlotte was frustrated. It shouldn’t be that hard to find someone. “Allen, in a town this small, it doesn’t make any sense that people wouldn’t know her.”

“She probably came over from another town for the concert, that’s all. It happens all the time.”

“What did the music store employees say?”

“Some of them overheard her conversation with people in the line while they were waiting. She was gushing about how she’s been listening to your music for years. She cried when you won your Tony. She’s at a community college somewhere. She said she listened to your music to help her when her mother died and then when her dad kicked her out of the house.”

“Her dad kicked her out?! This is getting worse and worse. I can’t stand it.”

“You can’t save everyone.”

“Who else have I saved lately?”

“I just mean you’re one person, and we don’t have a lot to go on.”

“I should have talked more to her when she was right in front of me instead of letting people be rushed through.”

“We did that for you, to save your strength.”

“I know. Let’s just dig a little more. If we don’t find anything, we can fly back to New York tomorrow.”

After not finding any more information about the girl from the music store, Charlotte woke at 6 am the next day to go to the airport. She hadn’t slept more than a couple of hours, but she convinced herself it was time to go home and focus on the people she could actually help. Her family needed her too.

She asked Allen to stop at the little cafe across the street from the music store. She needed caffeine if she was going to make it through a day of traveling.

“I’ll go get you a latte,” Allen offered.

“No, I can get it. Keep the car warm for me.”

May sat at her usual table in the cafe, going over her budget and trying to ignore the growling in her stomach. She was trying to figure out a way to stretch her next three hundred dollar paycheck over two weeks. She drank the free water in her cup, only sitting in the cafe because it was warmer than her apartment. A woman rushed by her table, but stumbled before she reached the door, dropping her to go cup of coffee. May jumped up to help her, grabbing some napkins from her table. “Are you alright?” she asked.

“Yeah, just embarrassed.”

“I’ve been there,” May laughed. As the two stood up, they looked at each other, recognition dawning on them both.

“You’re the girl from the music store. I’ve been trying to find you.”

“Find me? Why would you want to find me, Ms. Williams?”

“ Please call me Charlie. It’s hard to explain now that you’re standing here in front of me. I guess I was worried about you.”

“Because I knocked over your sign?”

“No, it wasn’t that. I noticed...There was something that made me think after you left that you, I don’t know...I don’t want to embarrass you or pry, but are you alright?”

The tears came unbidden to May’s eyes. No one had asked her that and meant it in a long time.

“Let’s sit down,” Charlotte offered. “You can tell me all about it.”

May couldn’t believe what was happening. Charlotte Williams was asking her to tell her about her life, and really listening. She talked about her mother’s death, the break with her family, and trying to start a new life. But mostly she spoke of loneliness.

“That was it,” Charlotte responded. “I knew there was something in you that reminded me of me.”

“Really? You’re lonely, Ms. Will...Charlie? How?”

“It’s possible to be lonely even when you are completely surrounded by people, especially if you don’t feel seen or understood. But true friendship helps, and finding a safe place within your own heart. It takes time, though.”

As the story unfolded, the two new friends heard Charlotte’s “White Christmas” over the radio. They smiled at each other. Another customer at a nearby table recognized the Broadway star and started singing along with the song. May and Charlotte joined in, and before long the cafe had sprung to life with people sharing a Christmas song known to all.

Jo walked into the cafe on her way to meet Amy. She had sold her car and put a deposit on a new apartment near the office so she could walk to work for the first few months. She had enough money left to buy one new outfit and get a haircut. She felt like herself again. As she walked into the singing cafe, she saw the young woman who had offered her five dollars a few days before. She was singing too, but crying, holding Charlotte Williams’ hand. Jo felt as if she had walked into a Christmas movie. The cafe was warmed by the singing. Jo smiled at the young woman as she rushed out of the cafe.