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Baby Charlotte clung to the skirt of the sofa. She yanked the dense pleats this way and that with her tiny fist as if testing their construction, their ability to withstand duress. Satisfied, she extended her left hand up to the top of the seat cushion, her fat fingers clawing at the white piping along the perimeter, but after several attempts, including a last-ditch swat, she relented and laid down her arm. Quickly, as if not to lose momentum, she reached up with her right hand and grabbed a good chunk of upholstered fabric in the middle of the seat, and, while working her other hand up to steady herself, planted her feet and pulled on the material so hard that she let out a little grunt.

Stunned, Charlotte stood against the sofa front, her arms stiff and locked into place, her hold so tight that the pink skin around her knuckles had become blotchy. She peered at the tops of the cushions, the silk decorative pillows, the things she rarely saw from her usual ground-level vantage point. Then she let go, holding her hands in the air dramatically, as if she were performing a death-defying circus act, and stood on her own, wobbling, for a full second before toppling back down onto her diapered bottom, a puff of baby powder released upon impact. She giggled.

From a few yards away, Rosalia giggled too. She had been watching the determined ten-month-old for days as she attempted to stand on her own. It seemed like only yesterday that those blonde

curls were zigzagging their way across the floor in a hurry. The only crawling Charlotte did now was straight toward the walls or sofas or coffee tables—any vertical surface, really—so that she could begin her climbing regimen. That morning at breakfast, Rosalia caught Charlotte, who was eating Cheerios in her high chair, studying the back-and-forth of her legs as she wandered about the kitchen. Rosalia tried to move a little slower for her rapt spectator, conscious of every step and muscle flex. It took her twice as long to unload the dishwasher and clean the countertop, but she enjoyed the attention—it had been a long time since anyone took such interest in her legs.

Now Charlotte had decided to try a new tack: she placed her palms on the floor under her shoulders as if she were going to do a push-up and straightened her legs. With this approach, her butt arched up into the air and wiggled, but her little knees gave out, and she tumbled to the hardwood floor again.

“*Hmpf*,” Rosalia groaned, eyeing the unforgiving surface of the strip flooring.

As beautiful as genuine hardwood was, Rosalia always had been fearful that the baby would hurt herself with every move across the floorboards. She had been only too happy to see several area rugs being brought into the house, which not only warmed up the worn, aged look of the historically decorated living and dining rooms but offered Charlotte more comfortable spots to crawl and play.

Charlotte had found something interesting in the far corner of the room—the latest issue of *Time* magazine—and, taking a break from standing, crawled her way over to it. Rosalia left the kitchen to be sure that Charlotte would not be getting into any trouble, that there were no electrical wires or loose, small objects lying around, and took the opportunity to walk upon the sumptuous threading of the Persian area rug in the living room with her bare feet. Mrs. Grand frowned upon the staff taking their shoes off when indoors, even late at night or on the weekends, but neither the governor nor his wife were home, so Rosalia took the opportunity to stretch her tired arches. The hand-sewn rug felt good on her soles, and she

bunched the pile fibers between her crooked toes. Rosalia smiled as Charlotte leaned backward and kicked her feet toward the ceiling and appeared to be reading the magazine, which was upside-down, over her head.

The arrival of little Charlotte to the Grand household had been a blessing to Rosalia and had reignited a fire in her belly. Her own two children, who were grown and living downstate in Queens while attending college, didn't seem much interested in babies—having them or acting like them, not even for the sake of their aging and lonely mother—so Rosalia was more than thrilled when Mrs. Grand told her that she was *with child*, as she put it; she'd said it as an afterthought during Rosalia's year-end evaluation two Christmases ago. Rosalia suspected that Mrs. Grand had become pregnant mostly to please the press and her husband's constituents, and after the baby was born, the governor's wife seemed to want nothing more than to get back to her social calendar, which was a dream come true for the lonely housekeeper, who would become Charlotte's primary caretaker.

Those first few weeks after Charlotte had been brought home, Rosalia had begun spending some nights at the mansion, rocking the baby to sleep and singing her the songs that Rosalia's own mother used to sing to give her good dreams. Rosalia had met every feeding and diaper change with enthusiasm and would sometimes just let Charlotte sleep in her arms during the day so that she could feel the warmth of her body against her breast. In the past ten months, Baby Charlotte had grown into a beautiful, inquisitive, and headstrong child.

Having spotted Rosalia, Charlotte scooted across the wood floor toward her, but made a pit stop at the center of the area rug in the main dining room, where her favorite doll, Miss Beatrice, whom Charlotte called MaBa, had been abandoned earlier.

Rosalia returned to the kitchen to continue unpacking groceries. She sensed that she was running late, and she was right. It was nearly ten o'clock, time for Charlotte's morning nap. Rosalia tried to keep Charlotte on a strict schedule, so that she could do most of her chores in the morning and leave the afternoon free for playtime.

There was a tug on her polyester skirt. Charlotte was trying to pull herself up, but she was slipping on the marble floor.

“*Ay, Carlota!*” Rosalia said, bending down to scoop up the child. She ran her hand through Charlotte’s tiny blond curls, and the child mimicked her motions by wrapping her little hand around Rosalia’s long gray hair.

“Time for a nap, my angel,” Rosalia said, kissing Charlotte’s forehead. “We play later.”

The nursery, tucked away on the top floor of the mansion away from the publicly viewed rooms, was a pale shade of yellow, and the furnishings were made of delicately hand-carved brazilwood, which also complemented a small bookshelf and an old-fashioned rocker. It was a pretty little space, decorated by some local designers who got their pictures in the area newspapers for their handiwork. The afternoon sun shone through the large window on the southern wall, and a cool, gentle breeze caused the sheer drapes to billow, giving the room a fresh scent.

Rosalia placed Charlotte on her back in the crib, covered her with the checkered blanket that she had knitted, wound the mobile above her head, and placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. “*Te amo, Cara,*” she whispered.

As Rosalia was leaving, she heard tiny protests from Charlotte, who remained lying on her back and peering at her through the crib bars, the blanket still neatly placed up to her neck. The child hadn’t moved, but her eyes had followed Rosalia across the room, and her usually happy face had turned into a slight pout. Rosalia blew a kiss toward the crib as Charlotte’s eyes blinked with drowsiness, and she turned and left.

Downstairs, Rosalia entered the kitchen and turned on the baby monitor. She could hear Charlotte still making some weak sounds of disapproval. Rosalia took some boxes of crackers off the table to put into the pantry, which was well stocked with foods of all ethnicities and types, including a variety of cookies, the governor’s not-so-secret guilty pleasure. Sometimes Rosalia would come to work in the morning and find cookie crumbs hastily brushed into the corners of the pantry

floor and brand-new boxes of candy-topped chocolate-chip cookies, purchased the day before, half-eaten and stowed under full boxes. More than once, the governor had chastised Rosalia in front of Mrs. Grand for buying the bargain brand cookies, but when she wasn't looking someone inevitably would scribble things like *Mini Oreos* and *Chewy Chips Ahoy* at the bottom of her shopping lists. Rosalia never tattled, and she suspected that was one of the reasons she managed to stick around for six years, well into the governor's second term, while her coworkers seemed to come and go.

Rosalia glanced at the baby monitor, which was now silent, the red indicator light showing an uninterrupted glow. She smiled and grabbed some more groceries to put away.

After the kitchen counter was cleared, Rosalia ran her palm over the smooth granite, feeling for crumbs, and spotted Miss Beatrice lying facedown near the dishwasher. She picked up the doll and examined it. The threading was beginning to unravel under the left arm; she'd have to fix that. Rosalia brought the doll to her face and brushed it against her cheek. She could smell Charlotte's shampoo on the fabric, and there were traces of baby powder in the seams. She tucked the doll under her arm and walked back up the staircase.

The nursery was quiet. She tiptoed over to the far wall and placed Miss Beatrice on the top bookshelf with all of Charlotte's other doll friends who leaned lazily on one another with the familiarity of old pals. Then Rosalia had a thought: She picked Miss Beatrice up again, brushed her off, and matted down her hair as she walked toward Charlotte's crib. She smiled as she brought Miss Beatrice up over the bars to place next to the sleeping child.

But the crib was empty.