

# Introduction

Welcome to Charlie's World! This prequel is a story about how she got started in the oil patch. I hope you enjoy finding out how she worked her way up to Drilling Rig Site Supervisor, and meeting the folks who helped her along the way.

Her adventures in the cozy murder mystery series, "Oilfield Mysteries" can be found on Amazon as paperback, e-book, or audio book. Her skills as a well site supervisor easily transition into super sleuth skills as you'll find in her first adventure, "Derrick of Death". Now that you have subscribed to my website, I'll keep you informed as new books become available. There are links to each book on the "Books" page of my website. I hope all your mysteries have happy endings. Mine do! Happy reading.

**PREQUEL FOR CHARLIE'S OILFIELD  
MYSTERIES  
How She Got Started in the Patch**

**Cast of Characters**

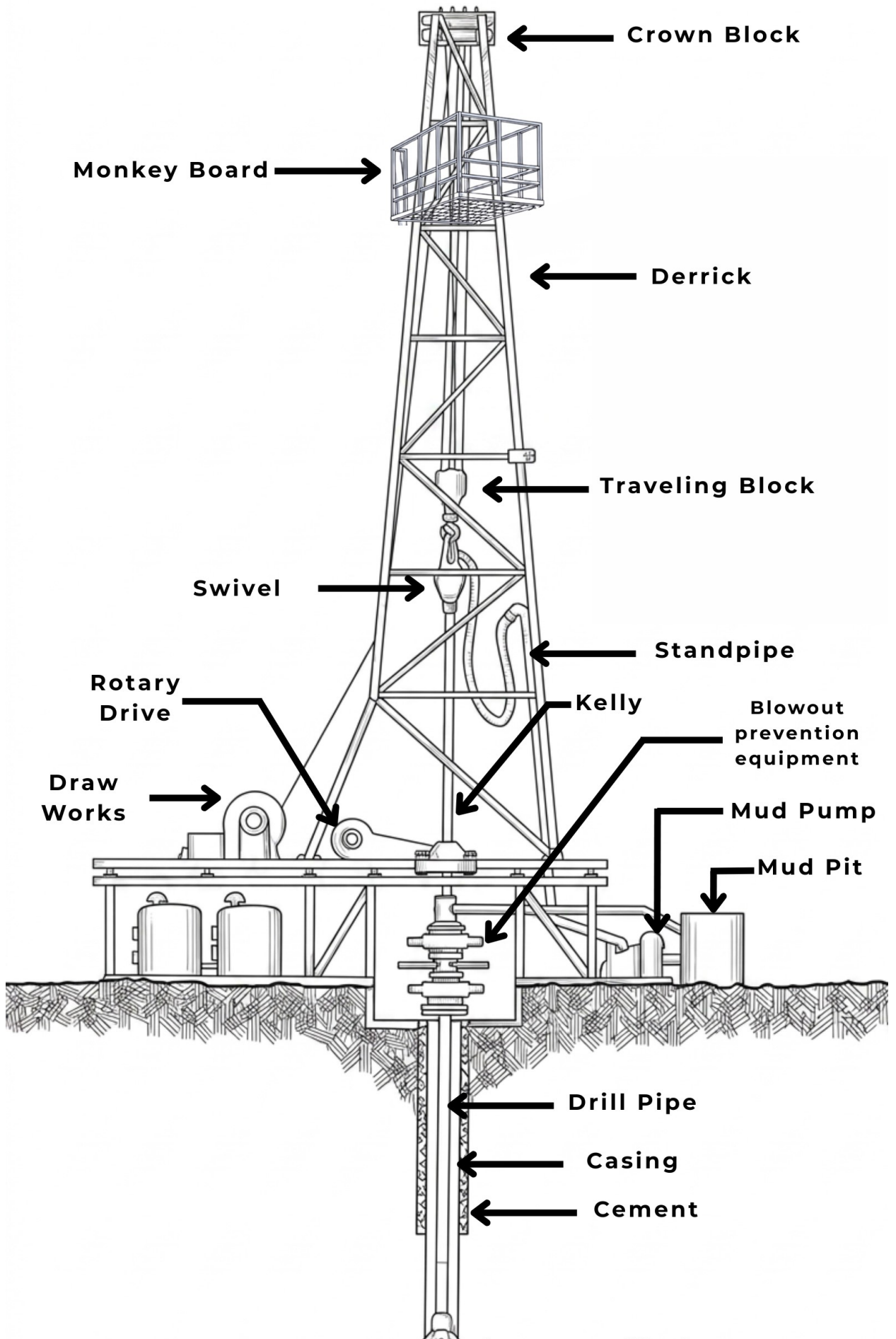
Charlize (Charlie) Pergolas: Mud-woman turned Well Site Supervisor, and eventually amateur sleuth

Mike Saylor: Charlie's high school best friend and son of the mud company owner

Cotton Reynolds: A legendary, weathered, mud man who teaches Charlie the ropes

Gary Martin: Big Chief Drilling Toolpusher, rugged, encouraging, and Charlie's industry mentor

Benedetto Castelli: A sharp petroleum engineer, with an eye for Charlie and her talent



## Chapter 1 High School's Done, What Now?

The big question everyone asks you after high school is, *What are you going to do now?* It seemed like every single person who knew I had a diploma pinned to the fridge asked me that.

I gave them all the same answer: "I don't know."

So the second question was always, *Well, what are you good at?* Again, I gave them all the same answer: "Nothing."

That wasn't entirely true. I was exceptionally good at math word problems. But back then, I didn't think anyone was going to pay me to figure out if Train A leaves Chicago at 2:00 p.m. heading to New York at sixty-five miles per hour, and Train B leaves New York at 3:30 p.m. at eighty miles per hour, exactly what time their paths would cross.

I was also fairly good at playing the piano, but that career path got cut short after six months. My mom couldn't really afford the lessons, and a group of mean girls used to knock me off my bicycle when I rode to the teacher's house. I think that's where my lifelong aversion to female friendships started. Why were girls so catty? Their attacks on me were completely unprovoked—though I did eventually start arming my bike basket with heavy Valencia oranges to hurl at them like artillery. Ultimately, the stress of the commute and the strain on my mom's pocketbook ended my musical career.

My athletic ability was subpar, my social skills were non-existent, and I had zero eye for style or makeup. Working a cosmetics counter was out. My looks were fair to above average, but nowhere near the level that could launch a modeling career. My mom thought I should work in a clothing boutique, but I hated shopping. I'd rather have bamboo shoots shoved up my fingernails than be trapped in a mall for eight hours a day.

I did manage to land a job at a local pet store. To celebrate, my mom took me out to our favorite spot: McDonald's. I've heard folks say fast food isn't healthy, but I've never bought into that. How can pancakes, eggs, and sausage for breakfast, or meat, bread, lettuce, and pickles for lunch be bad for you? It was the exact same food group breakdown they served for the government school lunches we qualified for—it just tasted a whole lot better than what the welfare system gave us. Plus, it came with toys. McDonald's was my absolute happy place. Still, I was secretly hoping for a future with slightly more significant milestones.

I lost the pet store job after six months. A customer's small boy was aggressively pulling the tail of a feeder rat. I politely asked him to stop. When he refused, I firmly (but gently) grabbed his collar and escorted his little rear end out the front door. The mother threw a fit, and the owner placated her by firing me on the spot. After that, my mom suggested I just find a job where I could land a good husband.

My half-sister, Samantha, was ten years older than me. Her dad was my mom's first husband, but he died in a tragic plane crash before I was born. Samantha married an accountant right out of high school, had two girls, and moved to Washington State. They seemed perfectly happy.

But they weren't happy enough to make marriage feel like a viable career goal for me. I refused to depend on anyone else for my livelihood. I'd worked in burger joints all through high school to pay for my own clothes and my first car—a 1965 Ford Mustang. It looked beautiful, but it continually overheated in the Central Valley heat. Still, it got me where I needed to go, and it took the burden off my mom. She had enough to deal with, and she was always running late. I used to die of embarrassment being the absolute last kid picked up from every school activity.

Because guys were generally much nicer to me than the cliquy girls in high school, I tended to prefer their company. I eventually got a job at a local golf course working almost exclusively with men. Part of my pay included free lessons, and to my surprise, I actually developed a decent swing. My main duties were keeping the clubhouse clean and helping out in the kitchen or on the dining floor.

One afternoon, a regular golfer brought his wife in for a drink. The manager asked me to drop off their water glasses. The woman's foot was sticking out into the aisle, and I tripped right over her white leather golf shoes. The glasses went flying, dumping ice water all over her pristine, pink designer golf skirt. She screamed for the manager. I was fired before the skirt could even dry.

The one goal that kept driving me forward was simple: I wanted to live above the poverty line. My mom worked a minimum-wage job, and my dad had vanished before I even hit kindergarten. My entire childhood was a monotonous blur of broken-down cars, unpaid utilities, and taking in sketchy renters just to make the landlord happy. I wanted a different life.

In my hometown of Bakersfield, California, there are really only two main industries that drive the economy: farming and oil. Everyone else just provides services to the people who do the real work. Farming held zero interest for me, and after my customer service disasters, I knew I needed to steer clear of the public.

The oil industry, however, was intriguing. I grew up watching reruns of *Dallas*, and movies like *There Will Be Blood* and *Armageddon*. I could easily see myself as a female Bruce Willis, saving the day with my drilling prowess. So, when my high school friend Mike Saylor mentioned his dad's independent mud company was hiring, I jumped at the chance.

## Chapter 2

### First Job in the Patch

As you'd guess, working as a "mud man"—or mud woman, in my case—is about as far from glamorous as it gets. Mike's dad ran a tight, independent outfit with only six fluid technicians besides Mike and me. There was no formal training program; it was strictly trial by fire. We even had to buy our own steel-toed boots and hard hats. They told me I needed heavy leather boots that laced up past my ankles to protect me from the rattlesnakes basking near the pipe racks.

Before I even earned my first dime, I was in the hole \$150 for gear. Not a great start for a girl trying to build an empire.

Mike was paired up with a senior hand named Lenny, while I was assigned to a veteran named Cotton. I was twenty-three at the time, and Cotton looked like he'd been on earth since the dawn of the oil patch. But underneath his weathered, sun-baked skin, he was kind, patient, and knew more about fluid chemistry than most college professors.

When we first met out at the location, he squinted at me, a look of pure bewilderment on his face. "YOU want to be a mud man?"

"I do," I said, squaring my shoulders. "Can you teach me?"

He let out a tobacco-stained grin. "Well, I reckon you can't be any worse than the last worm I trained. He only lasted six months before he packed up for Texas."

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm Bakersfield born and bred."

He gave my hard hat a friendly tap. "You'll do."

We were dispatched to a well being drilled for Oxy Petroleum, utilizing a massive rig owned by Big Chief Drilling. Cotton walked me through the basics of the rig operation, introducing me to the crew as we went. He pointed out the derrickman, who usually worked high up on the monkey board when the crew was tripping pipe, but spent his time down by the mud pits helping mix chemicals when they were drilling ahead.

The ninety-pound sacks of bentonite gel—used to viscosify, or thicken, the drilling fluid—and the heavy bags of barite used to add weight, were brutal to handle. They had to be manually lifted and sliced open over a mixing hopper. It was backbreaking labor, but I figured if a guy who looked a hundred years old could do it, I could too.

Cotton caught the derrickman's eye. "Hey, we need to throw another sack of gel into the hopper. My girl Charlie here can help you hoist it."

The derrickman stopped, looked me up and down, and shook his head. "The patch is going to hell in a handbasket," he muttered.

I ignored the sting, gritted my teeth, and followed him over to the pallets on the mud pit catwalk. A forklift had just dropped a fresh load.

He grabbed one corner of a heavy sack and barked, "Well, get over here, lil' filly, and help me lift!"

I grabbed the opposite side, planted my steel toes, and lifted with my legs, just like I'd practiced. To his clear surprise, we hoisted it smoothly and dumped it into the swirling vortex of the hopper. He wiped his brow and actually smiled. "Well damn. You did good."

I smiled back, though mentally I noted that I was going to have to add a gym membership to my growing list of work expenses if I wanted to survive the week.

Beyond the heavy lifting, our primary job was monitoring the mud properties. Cotton showed me how to use a mechanical mud balance to check the density.



He filled the small metal cup with raw drilling mud, slid the rider along the graduated beam until it balanced, and read the weight in pounds per gallon (ppg).

"If the mud gets too heavy," Cotton explained, "it slows down our rate of penetration. Worse, it can exert too much hydrostatic pressure and fracture the formation, causing us to lose circulation. That's bad. But if the mud is too light, the formation fluids—gas or oil—can push their way into the wellbore and cause a kick. That's even worse. Our job is to keep it just right."

"So you're the Goldilocks of mud," I remarked.

He chuckled. "Guess I am."

Next, he showed me how to measure the viscosity using a Marsh funnel.



He plugged the bottom of the cone with his finger, poured the mud through a screen until it hit the line, and then timed exactly how many seconds it took to fill a one-quart mug. It felt incredibly low-tech for a multi-million-dollar operation, but it didn't require electricity, it was foolproof, and it gave us answers in seconds.

"How often do we run these?" I asked.

"When we're drilling fast, a couple of times an hour," he said. "The bit is grinding up rock cuttings constantly, and those fine solids get trapped in the fluid, which drives up our weight and viscosity. That's why we rely on that machinery up there."

He pointed to a elevated steel platform vibrating violently above the main tanks. "That's the solids control equipment. The mud has to go through it to get cleaned before the pumps send it back down the hole."

He walked me up the steps to the shale shakers. The return mud from the well poured over vibrating, fine-mesh screens. The large rock cuttings stayed on top, dancing across the screen until they fell into an open waste pit, while the clean liquid fell through the shaker screen into the active mud tanks.

"We check these screens constantly," Cotton said over the roar of the engines. "If a screen rips, the rock cuttings fall straight into the tanks and ruin our mud. You see a hole, you change the screen immediately."

Just past the shakers sat a bank of cones—the hydrocyclones, which used centrifugal force to separate out the microscopic silt and sand that the shaker screens missed.

"Look down at the bottom of those cones," Cotton instructed, pointing to the narrow nozzles. "See how it's spraying out a nice, steady 'umbrella' shape? That means it's working. If you see it stop or start 'roping' in a solid stream, it means the cone is plugged."

"How do we fix it?"

"You isolate the plugged cone using the manifold valve, then you take a stiff rod and poke it up through the apex nozzle to break up the sand bridge." He let out a loud laugh. "But stand to the side when you do it, Charlie. If you stand underneath, you'll take a high-pressure faceful of caustic chemical mud."

"Noted," I said, eyeing the pressurized manifold. "I prefer my skin intact."

Over the next few weeks, Cotton taught me the rest of our lab tests—using pH paper and running chemical titrations to check for contaminants. Between my high school chemistry class and helping friends balance their backyard hot tubs, the science part clicked instantly. The hardest part was just learning the rhythm of the rig floor and making sure I didn't get crushed by a swinging iron roughneck.

I quickly memorized the entire circulating system: the mud being drawn from the pits, forced down the inside of the drill string, jetting out the nozzles of the bit to cool it, and carrying the rock cuttings back up the annulus to the surface. I learned how the hoisting system operated, from the massive drawworks engine to the crown block at the top of the derrick and the traveling block moving up and down. I even studied the massive blowout preventers (BOPs) stacked beneath the rig floor like a fortress of steel valves.

I loved the math, and Cotton was visibly impressed by how fast I could calculate hydrostatic pressure gradients and mud weight increases.

After three months of intense training, Cotton cut me loose. I was officially a solo mud woman, assigned to oversee my own wells.

Because our company got a lot of contract work from Big Chief Drilling, I ended up spending a lot of time around one of their veteran toolpushers, Gary Martin. Gary was ruggedly handsome—he looked exactly like Sam Elliott, complete with the silver-streaked mustache and a low, gravelly cowboy drawl. He was incredibly knowledgeable and fiercely protective of his crew. I liked him immensely as a mentor, though I kept things strictly professional. I could tell he occasionally thought about asking me out, but he valued our working relationship too much to cross that line. I was glad. A "no" would have made the rig site incredibly awkward.

Whenever the rig was just "drilling ahead" and things were quiet, Gary would take me on walks around the location, explaining the pipe racks, the engineering specs of the BOP stack, and the mechanics of the rig floor. I drank it all in. I could easily picture myself running a crew on the floor—though definitely not on the monkey board. I had a terrible fear of heights; even a Ferris wheel made me nauseous.

Gary's rig was a "triple," meaning the derrick was tall enough to pull and stand drill pipe in ninety-foot sections (three connected joints). The derrickman had to work on a tiny platform nearly ninety feet in the air to rack the pipe.

"Think I could ever transition to a rig crew?" I asked Gary one afternoon as we watched the floorhands work the tongs.

"Work the floor, or the monkey board?" he asked with a grin.

"The floor," I said, looking down. "I don't do heights."

Gary's smile faded, replaced by a serious, thoughtful look. He took off his hard hat and scratched his head, clearly searching for the right words. "Charlie... I don't think the rig floor is the right fit for you."

I felt a flash of irritation. I'd spent months proving I could hack it in a man's world. "Why not? Because I'm a woman? I can lift those gel sacks just as good as the floorhands."

"It's not about your strength," Gary said gently, putting his hat back on. "You've got plenty of muscle, and god knows you've got the grit. But the floorhands... they're a tight, rough pack. It's a different kind of team dynamic. But more importantly, Charlie, you're wasting your brain power thinking about the floor."

I frowned, my anger cooling into confusion. "What do you mean? Am I supposed to mix mud for the next forty years?"

"Heck no," Gary laughed. "You're too smart for that. Look over there." He pointed across the dirt location toward a sleek, air-conditioned trailer parked away from the noise. "See that trailer? That's where the Oxy Company Man lives."

"The Well Site Supervisor," I clarified.

"Exactly. He's the operator's representative. He doesn't lift sacks or sling tongs, but he represents the oil company. He commands the whole location. He approves the engineering plans, coordinates the casing runs, orders the cementers, and calls the loggers. He has to know what *everyone* is doing, every second of the day."

Gary placed two large, calloused hands on my shoulders and looked me dead in the eye. "You could do that job, Charlie. I know you could. You've got the math, you've got the drive, and you actually care about how the whole puzzle fits together."

The weight of his words sank in. A slow realization washed over me. "Wait... if I became a Company Man... that means I'd technically be *your* boss on this location."

Gary let go of my shoulders and let out a booming laugh. "Well, I guess it does! Look at that—you're catching on already."

"How do I even start training for something like that? I don't have a petroleum engineering degree."

"You don't need one to be a field supervisor if you have the experience and the certifications," Gary explained. "First thing you need to do is go to Well Control School."

"Well control? Like handling kicks and blowouts?"

"Exactly. You have to learn the exact formulas to calculate kill-weight mud, boyle's law for gas expansion, and maximum allowable casing pressure. It's heavy on the math."

I gave him a confident smirk. "Gary, math is my superpower."

"I know it is. Cotton's been bragging about your calculations to anyone who'll listen." Gary pulled out his phone, scrolling through a few industry training schedules. "There are certified schools right here in Bakersfield and down in Taft. They offer intensive courses on weekends. They aren't cheap, but they're manageable."

"And if I pass?"

"You'll get your certification. But more importantly, you'll be sitting in a room full of other supervisors, engineers, and consultants. You talk to them. You ask what other specialized schools you need—casing design, drilling fluids management, safety leadership. You network."

"And once I have the certifications, how do I get an oil company to actually trust a twenty-three-year-old mud woman with a multi-million-dollar wellbore?"

A knowing smile spread across Gary's face. "That's the trick of the oil patch, Charlie. You have to know someone who can get your resume past the corporate gatekeepers."

I sighed, looking down at my mud-splattered coveralls. "But I don't know any corporate oil executives."

"Sure you do," Gary said, throwing a brotherly arm around my shoulders as we walked back toward the pits. "You know me. And I happen to know a lot of engineers."

### Chapter 3 Making the Big Time

The following week, I signed up for an intensive, two-day Well Control certification course down in Taft. Before the class started, I took Mike Saylor out to breakfast at Denny's to break the news about my career shift.

"Do you think your dad is going to be furious that I'm leaving his company?" I asked anxiously.

Mike laughed, pouring a mountain of syrup over his pancakes. "Are you kidding? Heck no! My dad will just be thrilled you stuck around for a whole year. Most worms quit after the first summer heatwave. Besides, if you become a big-shot Company Man for a major operator, you can start steering their fluid contracts toward my dad's business."

The waitress dropped off our orders—two Grand Slam breakfasts loaded with eggs, bacon, hash browns, and toast.

"Well, Cotton's been a mud man forever," I noted, buttering my toast. "I figured your dad expected that kind of loyalty."

"Cotton is a legend, he's the exception," Mike said, taking a sip of black coffee. "Most guys use mud as a stepping stone, or they break their backs and flame out."

"What about you?" I asked, looking at him closely. "Do you want to take over your dad's company someday?"

Mike hesitated, staring at his plate before speaking quietly. "No. I love the oil patch, Charlie, but I don't want to live in my dad's shadow forever. I want to build something of my own."

"Doing what?"

"An independent cementing company," he said, his eyes lighting up. "Not a massive corporate giant like Halliburton or Schlumberger, but a small, nimble outfit with a couple of used pump trucks. We'd handle the small stuff—surface casing jobs, plugging and abandonments, remediation work. Start small, build a reputation, and grow the fleet."

I watched him enthusiastically map out his future with his fork. I was driven by a desperate fear of poverty; Mike was driven by a need for independence and identity. We were both chasing the exact same thing from different angles.

"Have you told your dad yet?"

He grinned sheepishly. "Not yet. I've got two younger brothers finishing school who will probably want to step into his business. Dad will be fine."

It was a relief to know we were both aiming higher.

The Well Control course was brutal but exhilarating. It turned out my ability to solve the "Train A meets Train B" word problems was exactly what I needed to calculate complex wellbore hydraulics. While some of the veteran drillers in the class struggled with the formulas for calculating Kill Mud Weight (KMW), I blew through the equations effortlessly. During the breaks, I did exactly what Gary told me to do: I networked. I took notes on which safety certifications were trending and which consulting firms were looking for fresh talent.

Over the next six months, I lived a double life. By day, I was testing mud on hot, dusty locations. On my days off, I was taking specialized classes in drilling contracts, safety management, and corporate liability.

To celebrate my official one-year anniversary in the oil industry—and my freshly printed stack of certifications—I took my mom to our traditional celebratory spot: the Bakersfield McDonald's.

My mom ordered a Quarter Pounder combo, and I went with the Big Mac. We sat at our usual corner booth. I went to get the straws while she grabbed her trademark mountain of paper napkins from the dispenser.

"We probably don't need plethora of napkins, Mom," I teased, sitting down. "I'm a grown woman, and a fully certified professional now."

She smiled warmly, smoothing out the napkins. "You can never have enough napkins, Miss big vocabulary. Even big-shot professionals spill."

I laughed, pulling our burgers off the plastic tray.

"So," I began, taking a breath. "I'm officially going to start putting my resume out next week."

My mom's eyes lit up. "Oh, Charlie, I am so glad! I've been worried sick. Your clothes are always covered in that awful grease, and you smell like diesel. You'll never meet a nice, respectable man out there in those dirt pits."

"Mom, I'm not leaving the oil patch," I said gently, taking a sip of my iced tea. "I'm applying for jobs as a Well Site Supervisor. A Company Man."

She stopped mid-fry, looking completely blank. "A what?"

"I'll be the person in charge of the entire drilling operation, Mom. I'll be managing the budget, the safety protocols, and the crews. It pays incredibly well. Well enough that I can finally afford to move out and get my own apartment."

The excitement left her face, replaced by a sudden, fragile droop in her shoulders. Her eyes welled with tears. "Don't you... don't you like living with me?"

Seeing her eyes tear up broke my heart. I immediately slid out of the booth, walked around the table, and wrapped my arms tightly around her shoulders, kissing the top of her hair. "Of course I love living with you, Mom. But I'm twenty-three. You deserve to have your own space, and I need to learn how to stand on my own two feet. I don't want to be a financial burden on you for another second."

She patted my arm, sniffing. "You're not a burden, dear. But I'll miss you."

"I'm staying right here in Bakersfield," I promised, sliding back into my seat. "I'll only be an apartment away. Sure, there will be weeks where I'm living in a trailer out on a remote rig site, but when I'm off shift, I'll be home. Think of how much money you'll save on utility bills and groceries without me tearing through the kitchen!"

She offered a small, reluctant smile. "Well... that is true. You do use an awful lot of laundry soap to get those coveralls clean." She paused, studying me. "It's just... it's a dirty, dangerous job, Charlie. And it's entirely men."

I grinned, playing my ace in the hole. "Exactly! What better place for a girl to find a high-quality husband?"

Her eyebrows shot up, her mood instantly shifting. "Did you meet someone?"

"As a matter of fact, I did," I said, unable to hide my smile. "I met an engineer named Benedetto Castelli during my contracts seminar. He works for a major independent operator, and he's looking to hire a new field supervisor for an upcoming drilling project. He's taking me out to dinner tonight to discuss it."

My mom's smile widened to her ears. "Castelli? He's Italian? Oh, Charlie, they love family! Is he handsome?"

"Very," I admitted.

We finished our lunch, laughing and chatting about the future. But as we drove home, my mind shifted away from romance and straight back into logistics. Even if Benedetto's job offer fell through, I had a plan, a pile of certifications, and a burning desire to never see a past-due notice again.

When I got to my bedroom, I grabbed a notepad and drew up a fresh checklist:

1. Find an outfit for tonight that proves I clean up nice.
2. Scope out affordable apartments on the west side of town.
3. Call Gary Martin for a reference check.
4. Become the most badass Company Ma'am in the state of California.