

## YOUNGER EVERY DAY

Charlotte Smith (14) has the face of a cherub and the temperament of a Florida retiree. That's because she's been living with her wealthy grandparents in Fort Lauderdale for as long as she can remember. Life is, and always has been, perfectly predictable. A morning walk with the senior club at the indoor mall, lunch at noon, dinner at 6 and Miss Marple at 9. One always says please, and never-ever asks 'personal' questions.

It's just the way Mr. And Mrs. Alistair Smith like it, and just the way it's going to continue. Until the old couple make an unexpectedly quick departure from this life into the next after sampling some raw Mahi Mahi on a Caribbean cruise.

Overnight, poor Charlotte is orphaned and alone. Oddly, she discovers that her grandparents' absence makes very little difference in her life. As always, she finds herself turning to Anna, the housekeeper, for comfort and advice. Not until the funeral does our heroine get a feeling for how much her life is about to change. For the first time, Charlotte gets a close look at her greedy aunts and uncles, all vying to get their hands on the Smith estate. But before she and Anna can figure out what to do about it, the maid gets the boot and Charlotte is on her way to the Pinecrest Girl's Rehabilitation School somewhere in the mountains of Idaho.

Suddenly, our heroine finds herself miles from civilization, surrounded by a motley crew of drop outs, dopeheads and delinquents. It's like a trip down Alice's rabbit hole, as the demur Charlotte finds herself on 'readjustment' weekends, where she ends up eating grasshoppers, running from bears and trying to navigate a rapids while clutching the antlers of an angry moose.

Nothing is more challenging, though, than standing up to the school's notorious bully, Big Sally. Not even Charlotte herself could imagine finding the courage and the smarts to get the better of a real ex-gang member from Topeka. But she does, and to everyone's surprise, the unlovable Sally takes Charlotte under her wing.

It's not long before the two unlikely friends are plotting their escape. The only problem is they have no where to go.

That's when Sally asks one of those 'personal' questions Charlotte was never allowed to ask and has long forgotten—*so where are you parents?* The truth is, Charlotte has no idea, and is afraid to find out. But not Sally, who decides Charlotte's ignorance is an open invitation to break into the school office and go through her new friend's records.

The shock of discovering she not only has a mother, but that this same person is alive and well and living in Seattle is more than Charlotte can bear. She tells Sally she's not leaving. Relying on her old 'leadership skills', Sally calls Charlotte a 'little old lady' and says she can't have a future without facing up to her past. For the first time in her life,

Charlotte realizes it's time to grow up and is determined to go to Seattle, no matter what happens.

Just as they're about to leave, Sally suddenly insists that she can't leave the other rehab inmates behind. But Charlotte sees through the excuse, telling her friend it's time for the formidable teenager to face her own fears --- that she can't hide out in reform school forever.

Encouraged by the support of the other kids and the trust they have in one another, the two girls set out to find the missing Mom. However, getting to Seattle is no easy task. They have to use all of Charlotte's ingenuity and Sally's street smarts - not to mention two very adult-looking pair of high heels - to get there. In the process they hotwire a car, sell retirement time-shares and pose as diehard fans of a boy band.

It's a raucous journey, but well worth the effort, when Charlotte discovers that the woman who her grandparents have worked so long to keep away, has been yearning to be with her daughter, too.