



*Could Mr. Right be Mr. Wrong?
What will it cost to find out?*

CHARLOTTE MASTERSON
gets a life

CAROL
RAJ

Charlotte
Masterson Gets
a Life

Carol Raj

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Charlotte Masterson Gets a Life
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Dedication

To my mother, Leonora Mary Sanders.

1

“Take a peek at the girl behind you,” Mom says. “No! Not like that. Don’t you have a mirror?” She opens her oversized purse and rummages through it.

“Honestly, Mother. What is wrong with you?” I turn my head and scratch the side of my neck so I can see behind me without being obvious. Just as I suspected. A blonde with a turned-up nose. Mom is obsessed with young blondes with turned-up noses. Too bad I don’t fit that description.

“How old do you think she is?” Mom takes a sip of her coffee.

“How should I know?”

“You’re nearer her age than I am. Seems to me she’s maybe twenty? Twenty-one?”

“Could be.” I take another bite of my hamburger. I’m not good at telling people’s ages. I’m only sixteen. I know the girl behind me must be older than that. But twenty? Twenty-two? Twenty-five? I haven’t got a clue. At least she’s not stuck in a coffee shop with her nose-obsessed mother. I wait until Mom swallows her

coffee. I don't want her spitting it out when I speak. "Mom, do you remember saying I could date when I turned sixteen?"

She narrows her eyes. "Dating's dangerous these days. Boys want...things. You know. Things."

"I know, Mom. I had sex ed in school. You signed the permission form. Remember?"

"Boys can get you into all sorts of trouble. Your father and I want you to concentrate on your schoolwork, not get distracted by the dating scene."

"I've been sixteen for weeks. You promised."

She takes another sip of coffee. "When I was sixteen, I thought I knew more than my parents. Turns out they were right about some things. I don't want you having problems like I had."

"I won't." I don't know what kind of problems Mom had. But they can't have been that bad. She drags Dad and me to church every Sunday. Won't even shop that day of the week because it might be breaking some old-fashioned law.

"So why are you bringing this up now? Did someone ask you out?"

"Well..." I wipe up catsup with one of my French fries, avoiding her eyes.

Mom leans forward. "Is it someone I know?"

I feel my face turning bright red. Might as well just smear the catsup on my cheeks.

Mom clears her throat. "There will be rules, you know."

I figured that. Rule number one: let Mom ride in the back seat of the car. Everywhere. Every time. Like that's going to happen. If my mom weren't so unreasonable, my life would be a lot more fun. "I know, Mom."

“Does this boy drive? You know, if he just got his license, he might not have enough experience.” Mom gasps. “He’s not an older man, is he?”

I stare at her, mouth closed, just to watch her squirm.

“There is absolutely no way your father and I will let you go out with an older man. If he wants to date you, he doesn’t have your best interests at heart.” Mom swallows as if she has something stuck in her throat.

I let her off the hook. “Don’t worry, Mom. He’s only one grade ahead of me. So maybe seventeen or eighteen.” What am I supposed to do? Analyze his birth certificate?

Mom relaxes. “Your father and I will want to meet the boy, maybe meet his parents. I hope he doesn’t think he can just honk the car horn and expect you to run out.”

“Do you want him to fill out an application? Maybe in triplicate?”

Mom glares at me. “I’d feel more comfortable if you went with another couple. One-on-one can be dangerous.”

“Double dating might distract him driving. You know, having so many people in the car.” Whoops. Shouldn’t have said that.

Mom gets a faraway look in her eye. “Oh, my. You’re right. Maybe you could just invite him over for a game night. We could make it a double date. Pop popcorn.”

A double date with my parents? Even Mom should realize that’s ridiculous.

“It’s not until Saturday, Mom. Please. Can we just get out of here?” I turn my legs to exit the booth.

Smash! The busboy trips over my humungous feet.

Dirty plates and glasses fly off his tray and crash to the floor. Everyone turns to look.

I should have looked before I put my legs out. The busboy should have watched where he was going. Maybe anticipated that nobody in their right mind would sit across from my mother and not be eager to escape. I avoid looking at him.

“Charlotte,” he says. “Charlotte, is that you? I am so sorry.”

Mom jerks her head toward him and raises her eyebrows.

My words come out like a hiss. “No, Mother. Rodney’s just a guy in my history class.”

He lowers his gaze. To target a broken piece of china? Or to pretend he didn’t hear how I’d just put him down? I don’t know.

Mom’s already halfway to the door. “Kind of cute. Nice dimples.”

“Mother!” I do hope he didn’t hear that.

2

“Maybe you should wear pants. You look really nice in pants, Charlotte. You have such a cute butt.”

Julie’s been my best friend since kindergarten, but I still don’t like the way she throws the word butt around. Not when it comes to mine. Mine isn’t cute at all. It’s a big blob that jiggles like Santa Claus’s belly.

I take off my red dress and throw it at her. How can I have so many clothes in my closet and still have nothing to wear? I push the hangers from one side of the rod to the other. Again. “Should I wear a black skirt? Maybe one of those cute new tops. The ones that show a little skin. Do you have one I could borrow?”

Julie shakes her head. “How about one of those saris my aunt keeps buying me?”

I look to see if she’s serious. She’s grinning. Her real name is Anjuli, but she’s shortened it to sound American. “Seriously, Julie. Football players like Tony never ask girls like me out. I want to impress him. Prove I’m somebody special.”

“You’re special to me.”

I roll my eyes. "So do you have something I can borrow or not?"

"Charlotte, be serious. Have you ever seen me in anything that looks remotely fashionable?"

I shake my head.

"My mother says I already have too many clothes. She doesn't understand they haven't been in style for ages. She says: 'You buy them, you wear them.' Do you think they'll ever come back in style? You know, like, in my lifetime?"

I pull out a green dress I had forgotten about. It's too long. Mom likes my dresses that way. "You don't want to give boys ideas," she says. "They have enough ideas of their own. You don't have to help them along."

Sometimes I go into the bathroom at school and hike my dresses up at the waist or use tape to shorten the hem. Mom thinks I'm so into my schoolwork that I get there early to ask teachers for extra help. If only she knew.

Julie throws the red dress to one side and gets off the bed. She pulls the neck of my green dress down a good two inches, but it pops right back to my collarbone. "Too bad we're not friends with Tiffany," Julie says. "She has the cutest clothes."

Tiffany has the cutest everything. Even her yellow convertible is cute. Me? If I want to drive somewhere, I have to borrow one of my parents' sedans.

"Girls! What are you doing in there?" Mom must be standing right outside my bedroom door. She's probably hoping I'll invite her in. A mother-daughter moment. Maybe that's why she didn't volunteer at the pregnancy counseling center tonight.

"Just getting dressed, Mom."

“Well, hurry up, Charlotte. I want to look you over before your young man gets here.”

“Mother!”

“Guess I should go,” Julie says.

All of a sudden, I feel a little dizzy. My first date. Not including the time I went to a fifth grader’s house because he said he was having a party, and nobody else came, and he kissed me long and hard before his mother figured out I was there. Tonight will be magical. I just know it. Tonight I’m not the loser who pretends her social life is exciting. Tonight it will actually be exciting. Who would have thought a football player—any football player—would ask a nobody like me out? Let alone the quarterback. I hear the doorbell ring and feel relief. If he had just honked, he would have gotten a lecture for sure. What guy wants to date a girl whose parents lecture?

“Julie! Can you sneak out after I’m gone? I don’t want Tony to know you were helping me dress. You know. Like this was a big deal for me or something.”

“Your shoes!” she whispers. “You forgot to put on shoes.”

I don’t have any shoes that go with my green dress. The closest thing to acceptable is a new pair of sandals Mom bought me. They’re a little too big so I can grow into them. *Really, Mother. Am I three years old?* I slip them on.

“Your young man is here!” Mom sounds overly enthusiastic. And he’s not really my young man. Not yet anyway.

I blow a kiss to Julie, open my bedroom door, and start down the stairs. *Ka-pow!* I trip over the sandal toe that extends a good inch from the front of my foot. I feel myself turning over and over. Feel myself reaching

for the banister. Feel my face turning red. Feel disappointment and annoyance and despair. But most of all, feel helpless. It's all my mother's fault. Stupid shoes! Pain makes me squeeze my eyes shut. I hear Tony's voice.

"Charlotte. You OK?" There's a hint of concern in his voice, and a hint of something else. Maybe he's trying not to laugh.

Mom runs to me, Tony excuses himself, and off the two of us go to urgent care.

My chance to be popular has ended for all time. Or at least for the rest of high school.

3

The next day I'm in school with a pair of crutches and a cast that looks as if it were cut off an Egyptian mummy. So far I've stabbed two people trying to make my way down the crowded halls. Thankfully, I don't know either of them. My backpack is heavy enough under normal circumstances. The morning classes won't be too bad. But in the afternoon, I have to make it from the Seattle side of the building to the southern tip of Florida. Even worse, the classes are on different floors. How will I make it up the stairs?

Last night, Mom set me up on the sleeper sofa downstairs and brought my toothbrush and toiletries to the downstairs bathroom. This morning she ran up and down the stairs until I was satisfied with my outfit. It was the least she could do.

But now I'm standing in front of my open locker ready to burst into tears. I can hear a group of guys walking toward me. Tony's one of them. I hear his voice, but it's not directed at me, so I don't turn around. Couldn't he stop to help? Or at least ask how

I'm doing? Maybe he doesn't see me. Maybe I've turned invisible. Don't I wish! More likely, he never wants to speak to me again.

"Hi, Charlotte." Rodney leans against the locker next to mine.

So much for the invisibility theory.

"Hi, Rodney." Anybody with any social skills could tell from my tone of voice that I wasn't interested in continuing a conversation. Not Rodney.

"What's wrong with your foot? Did you hurt it?"

Well, duh. "I fell." Two words. Crisp. Even Rodney ought to get the hint.

He continues to lean, watching my every move as if I'm some sort of laboratory animal.

"Do you want me to carry your backpack for you? I'm heading the same direction."

If a guy carries a girl's backpack in this school, it means something.

"I can do it myself. No problem. Thanks anyway." I take two books from my locker, put them in my backpack, and hitch the backpack over one shoulder while supporting myself with only one crutch. Sure, I can do it myself. What am I, stupid? I can't even manage two steps down the hall. Not with this load. Not to the other side of the building. Not up a flight of stairs. It's impossible. No problem.

Clueless Rodney hasn't moved. He hasn't said anything either. He's making me ask him. And I do. I have to. "I really could use some help. Just for today. But won't you be late for class?"

Rodney shrugs. "No problem. My teacher likes me."

No surprise there. Rodney's every teacher's pet. He holds out his hand. "Give me your backpack. You

handle the crutches.”

He carries my backpack with one arm and his with the other. He’s stronger than he looks. And just for a minute I think maybe he’s not so bad after all.

Then Tony walks by. He raises his eyebrows and doesn’t say a word.

As I said, when a boy carries a girl’s backpack in this school, it means something.

4

Mr. Brown glares at me as Rodney follows me to my seat in the biology lab, places my backpack on the floor, and starts to leave. He blocks Rodney's escape by standing in the doorway. He may not be the meanest teacher in the school, but he's pretty darn close. "You have no right to make my student late," he says.

Rodney's right on it. "She's on crutches, sir. She'd still be struggling up the stairs if it weren't for my help."

Mr. Brown doesn't say any of the nasty things I think he'll say next.

He just asks, "You need a late pass to your own class?"

"No, sir. Thank you. My teacher likes me." He gives Mr. Brown a warm smile. It's not returned.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen. We're doing something fun today." Even Mr. Brown's expression belies that announcement. He has a bunch of kits up front and holds one up like it's a Christmas present. "Today, ladies and gentlemen, we're finding out our

blood types.”

I glance at Kelly, my lab partner. She’s no more thrilled than I am.

I hear Tiffany two rows back giggling. “Bet you Charlotte’s blood type is fat. Like her Mama’s.”

Great. More fat mama jokes. My mother’s not that overweight. She’s just not fashion model thin like Tiffany’s mom. But the truth doesn’t matter. Not for someone who only says things to be mean.

“Shut up, Tiffany.” I glare at her.

“Miss Masterson. Do you have something to contribute to our class discussion?” Mr. Brown looks right at me.

“No, sir.”

“Nothing to contribute to anything, anywhere, anytime.” Tiffany’s voice is a stage whisper. The kind that can be heard in the back row of an auditorium. But Mr. Brown apparently has selective hearing. I stick out my tongue at Tiffany. It’s the only safe thing to do. Mr. Brown can’t hear me stick out my tongue, and he can’t see me do it, because Tiffany sits behind me.

“Well, well. The truth hurts.” Tiffany clucks her tongue and rolls her eyes.

Mr. Brown passes out kits to the students at the front of each row. “Take one each and pass the rest back.”

The test is simple. Prick your finger with the sterile lancet, put a few drops of blood on a slide, add an agent, then wait.

Kelly leans over to look at my results.

“A negative,” I say. “Same as my mother.” A negative is not all that common. The chart in front of the room says only six percent of people have A negative blood. Maybe children get their blood type

from their mother? I could ask Mr. Brown if I actually liked him. I know my mother's blood type because the blood donor people keep calling her. Apparently if she doesn't give, hundreds of people will die, and it will all be her fault.

Mr. Brown makes his way around the room. He stops at our table. "Well, ladies?"

Kelly speaks first. "I'm O positive, sir."

He looks at me.

"A negative."

"That's very uncommon," he says. "Take another sample and try again."

He moves to the next table. I pick up the lancet, prick my finger again, put more of the agent on.

A negative.

"Well?" he asks on his next round.

"A negative, sir."

"That can't be." He picks up the lancet and sticks my finger a lot harder than I stuck myself. "Let's get a decent amount of blood this time. Stop fooling around."

The results come back the same. A negative. He wrinkles his forehead and sighs. "OK. You might be A negative, after all. But that doesn't mean you did the test right."

According to him, I never do anything right.

"Can't even do the blood test right," Tiffany says. "Must be all those fat cells."

I hate my biology teacher. But I hate Tiffany even more.

5

Tony has football practice after school, so there's no hope of him driving me home. He won't even be able to help me get on the bus. Julie didn't have an eighth period class today because her French teacher's out sick, so she walked home after seventh period. She'll still get there faster than if she waited for the bus.

I call my mom. She's a real estate agent, so her schedule's pretty flexible. When she answers on the third ring, I hear a couple arguing in the background. "Sorry, honey. I have two more houses to show this couple. Then I can pick you up. It'll take maybe an hour or two. Depending on whether they like the next house."

"And whether they stop arguing?" I say.

Mom talks so the couple can't possibly think I said anything about them. "You're absolutely right, honey. I should have arranged my schedule differently today. I'll give you a call." There's a click on the other end of the phone. Great.

"Charlotte! You still here? You'll miss your bus."

Rodney looks hurried himself.

I can't believe I have to ask another favor. "Could you help me again? Just to the bus?"

"Charlotte, I am so sorry. I have band practice, and I'm already late." He runs off before I have a chance to say another word.

6

When my sprain is finally healed, Tony wants me to go roller skating. His whole gang has the afternoon planned. Mostly football players and cheerleaders. The in group. It's my golden opportunity.

"Tony, I can't. I'd love to, but I can't. I'm too tired."

"Fine, Charlotte. Be that way."

He could sit with me. Hold my hand. Watch TV. But no, off he goes to have a good time with his friends.

I can't help it. My three states of being are tired, more tired, and flat out exhausted.

"You have to eat better, that's what I think." Dad puts his fork down, picks up the bowl of broccoli, and passes it to me

I hate broccoli. Mom boils it until it's gray and soggy. "I'm just tired, Dad. I'm not starving to death. I eat lots of vegetables." OK, so I had a few carrot sticks last week. And don't potato chips count? Mom may not be buying them for home, but they're in the