

Chapter 1

“Perky people disgust me.” My mother punctuated this statement with a sharp little nod and then presented me with her empty wine glass. Having nailed the adjective, she felt an award was in order.

“Yeah,” I added a modest amount of Chablis to the stemmed plastic glass, “they’re the dregs of society.”

“There’s no need to be snide, Robyn,” she shot back.

I sighed. Whoever thought a “Sexiest Senior” contest at Dryden Manor was a good idea, deserved this. I sure didn’t.

“Ivy is perky,” I said. “She admits it. Probably thinks it makes her seem younger.”

“Well, it doesn’t. Besides, one shouldn’t be perky at her age.” She took a dainty sip of wine and licked the moisture from her upper lip. “How can one be perky and sexy at the same time?”

“I’m not sure it’s possible.”

With a satisfied nod, Lizzie Guthrie eased back into her chair. “Besides,” she added, “she’s new. People just don’t know her well enough to dislike her.”

Arguing was pointless so I drank some wine and kept my mouth shut as I wondered how long this snit would continue.

Right after the contest’s winners had been announced—and my mother’s subsequent humiliation—we retreated to her small room in the assisted living home. She had nestled into her massive reclining swivel chair and cranked the lever down like she was wielding a Ferrari’s gear shift, elevating the foot of the chair. I considered offering a few words of comfort, then thought better of it. She needed to hold onto her indignation

for a while longer. Outside, a sparrow pecked at an April bud on the maple tree branch that brushed the window, glanced our way, then took off. My mind started to follow the bird, but I held it back. “It’s a popularity contest, Mom. You know it is.”

“Well, I’m ...” she began, then let the thought die in the air.

“And, around here, ‘perky’ trumps ... ‘feisty’.” The more accurate word would have been “bitchy,” but I took the higher ground.

She just nodded. Neither of us harbored any illusions regarding Lizzie Guthrie’s popularity at Dryden Manor. It was virtually non-existent. I say “virtually” because Lionel Harkness, the winner of the male title for “Sexiest Senior,” was quite taken with her.

As sometimes happened between us, she picked up on my thought trajectory. “Poor Lionel,” she said. “He’s probably miserable right now.”

I had my doubts. Although he clearly favored my mother, Lionel was the consummate charmer and liked to spread it around. He was quite active at Dryden. He taught a watercolor painting class, which was well attended by dewy-eyed female residents. More recently, he’d assembled a group of puzzle solvers called the Puzzling Geezers. Again, mostly women. To be fair to my mother, some of the resentment the women of Dryden felt toward her no doubt had to do with her relationship with Lionel. There weren’t a lot of men to go around, let alone interesting, sexy men. I couldn’t decide whether the fact that one never outgrew jealousy was depressing or, in an odd way, affirming.

As if the man had been hearing my thoughts, there was a soft knock at the door and, before either my mother or I could respond, it opened and Lionel Harkness poked his shaggy head into the room.

He was difficult not to like. Charming, without being obsequious, he always had the right words or gesture. He seemed genuinely interested in what I was up to, often asking about my journalistic endeavors. But I don't thoroughly trust charming men, which may say more about me than the male gender, but there it is. In my experience there's a thin line between a charmer and a sociopath.

Lionel's gaze flickered from my mother to me and then back. Not that I minded my mother having a gentleman friend. I thought it was a good thing. But I know my mother, and I know that she's not the most lovable person on the block, so I kept looking for ulterior motives. The fact that I hadn't found any didn't comfort me much. Still, they did spend a lot of time together, and I'd never seen him be anything but dutiful with her. And, watching her now, there was no doubt that he brightened her day.

"May I come in?" he asked.

"*S'il vous plait,*" she said. My mother had recently begun peppering her conversation with the few phrases she remembered from high school French. I'm not sure why. "My daughter was just leaving."

I was? Well, why not?

"You don't have to go, Robyn," Lionel said, moving into the room. In addition to this thick, white hair, Lionel also had striking gray eyes and a crooked, slightly rakish smile. Add all that to the fact that he was lean and spry and you had the makings of a geriatric George Clooney.

Lionel held one hand behind his back as he approached and when he stood in front of my mother he presented her with a small bouquet of flowers—daisies and carnations with a red rose in the center. “This is so you know that you are, indeed, the most beautiful, sexy woman at Dryden.” He bowed as he presented it to her.

As she reached out for the bouquet, her hands crippled with arthritis but her nails recently painted a bright pink, I got a glimpse of the woman she used to be and the one I might become, depending on whose genes I inherited. “Why, thank you, Lionel. Oh, I love daisies.”

Daisies. “Those cheap flowers,” she liked to call them.

Lionel settled onto the edge of her bed—there were no other chairs. “Your mother is easily much lovelier than anyone else. Don’t you agree?”

“Of course I do.”

My mother issued a little snort. “That horrible Effie was giggling. I think she had all her friends vote for Ivy just so I wouldn’t win.”

Effie was the Joker to my mother’s Batman. She was a small, toad-like woman who was way more unpleasant than my mother and didn’t stand a chance of winning the title herself. I would not have put it past her.

But Ivy may have won it on her own. She was both attractive and relentlessly cheerful. While my mother believed that constant optimism was the sign of a half wit, many people found it pleasing.

“How have you been, Robyn?” Lionel asked me. “Are you in your new house yet?”

I had to hand it to Lionel. He had a pretty good memory. “Moved in yesterday.”

“Still unpacking?”

“Yeah,” I sighed. Truth was, as the poster child for minimalism, I had little to unpack.

“How is your friend, Mick?”

“He’s fine,” I said, groping for another subject. Even my mother didn’t know where Mick and I stood right now.

To my relief, Lionel changed the subject, asking my mother if she wanted to go to see the movie tonight—a contemporary romantic comedy.

When my mother agreed, I knew she’d fallen hard for Lionel. To her mind, any movie made after 1965 was “dreck.”

I started to collect my things and make ready my escape. I’d brought my mother another bottle of Chablis, which I slipped into the small refrigerator, and then I tucked a clutch of tea bags into a drawer. She didn’t have much else in her room except for a microwave, which she heated water in. She used to enjoy popcorn, but found chewing too much of a challenge these days, what with the hulls getting stuck. Sad. (She still had her original teeth, but the spaces between them had widened.)

Lionel had left the door open, a habit not unusual at Dryden, and now Barbara, the new floor nurse, slowed as she walked by, seemed to hesitate, then stepped into the room. She was in her early fifties, tall with very short blond hair and dark brows that stood out against her pale complexion, made even paler by a heavy layer of face powder, which never seemed to wear off. She reminded me of a mime, and I was always just a tiny bit surprised when she said something. My mother, who categorized people faster than an advertising executive, had pronounced her “a sneaky person.” My mother should talk.

Lizzie Guthrie, who had a reputation for spiriting a cigarette whenever she could, had bristled when I'd said, "Takes one to know one."

"Congratulations, Lionel," Barbara said. Lionel glowed. My mother glowered.

Then Barbara said to me, "I wonder if I could speak with you for a moment before you leave, Robyn."

"Um, sure."

"I'll be at the nurse's station."

After she walked away, I lowered my voice and said to my mother, "Tell me you're not smoking in your room again."

"*Je suis blessé*," she said, and from her wounded look I assumed this meant that I'd hurt her feelings. But I don't speak French, so I couldn't be certain. When this didn't draw a response from me, she raised her brows and drew back. "Of course I'm not."

"Watch her, Lionel," I said, only half joking.

She tilted her chin, offering me her right cheek, indicating it was time for me to kiss her good-bye and be on my way.

It wasn't a long walk to the nurse's station, but I had plenty of time to wonder what indiscretion of my mother's Barbara wanted to share with me. Since my mother had moved into Dryden a couple of years ago, there'd been several instances when a nurse or administrator had brought some Lizzie stunt or behavior to my attention, and I always felt like I was being called down to the principal's office.

I found Barbara sitting at the desk at the nurse's station where they dispensed pills to the residents. She motioned for me to sit in one of the small, padded chairs that were lined up against the wall.

She gave me a smile, folded her hands in her lap and leaned toward me, cocking her chin. “How are you doing, Robyn?”

“Fine,” I said, uncomfortable with this woman’s over-the-top sincerity and the way she invaded my personal space. “Is this about my mother?”

She sighed and bowed her head, as though the weight of this news saddened her. I braced for it.

“I suppose you’ve noticed that your mother and Lionel are spending a lot of time together.”

“I know they’re friends.” I didn’t know how she defined “a lot.” Then I added, “I think it’s kind of nice.”

“Well, yes.” Her smile faded a bit. “The thing is, Jeffrey—Lionel’s son—well, he seems a little ... concerned.”

“Really? Why?” Interesting that Barbara would refer to Jeffrey as Lionel’s “son,” when I was pretty sure he was a stepson. I’d met Jeffrey only once, and he’d barely taken the time to acknowledge my mother and me before some tweet or text message called him away on urgent business. Lionel had simply rolled his eyes as his stepson scurried toward the elevators. In short, Jeffrey didn’t seem overly concerned about anything that wasn’t somehow integrated with his smart phone.

“Well, he’s not sure it’s appropriate.”

I knew I’d heard what she’d said, but I was having trouble parsing the word.

“‘Appropriate’?” These people were in their eighties.

She swallowed and drew in a breath. When she spoke, her voice was low. “It may shock you to know that some nights they sleep together.”

“It doesn’t shock me,” I said. “It doesn’t really surprise me either. I mean, why not?” While I wasn’t shocked, I did need a moment to absorb this fact. Once I did, I had to fight the urge to smile.

Barbara drew back, regarding me as though she’d just found me on the sole of her shoe.

“And why should Lionel’s stepson care?” I pressed. “I’d think he’d want his father to be happy.”

She gave me one of those looks that implied all the wisdom in this discussion was on her side. “It’s not that simple, Robyn—“

“You know, actually, I think it is.”

“Jeffrey—Mr. Harkness—has concerns.”

“What? Is he afraid my mother is going to get pregnant?”

She started, stiffening as though shocked, but then she seemed to center herself with a deep breath and, after releasing it, said, “Well, of course not, but—”

“I know there’s a rule against smoking in these rooms, but is there also one against sex? Is there a morals clause? Because if there is, it’s not in the contract. My mother never would have signed such a contract.”

She blushed beneath the layer of powder, rendering her skin a washed-out shade of pink.

“His heart isn’t strong.”

“But his mind is pretty sharp.”

“Reasonably, but—”

“Then maybe you’d better let Lionel decide what’s good for him.”

“That’s not the only issue. Jeffrey Harkness believes that sex outside of marriage is wrong.”

“Really?” Who did this Jeffrey think he was? And who was this nurse to go along with it? “Then tell him not to screw around on his wife if it bothers him, but don’t let him tell his stepfather, and especially my mother, what to do.”

It had apparently not occurred to Barbara—or to Jeffrey—that they might simply be sleeping together. Without the sex.

“If you could speak to your mother—” she began, as if I hadn’t made my point.

“About what? If I talk to my mother about this at all, it’s going to be to find out what her secret is.”

Barbara watched me stand, her gaze hardening. She opened her mouth as though to speak, but before she could, I said, “And don’t say anything about this to my mother.” I stalked out of the little office.

As I waited for the elevator, I took a moment to digest it all. (I am pretty good at delaying a reaction.) Was I surprised? A little. Although, maybe I shouldn’t have been. It was clear that they cared for each other, and why should age temper their instincts? If anything, that ticking clock might give them a nudge. And then I found myself smiling. Three months ago my mother had started complaining about her mattress—it was too hard and she couldn’t sleep on it. I’d replaced it—at her request—with a double bed. That little minx!