

Jenny Cooper Has a Secret

By Joy Fielding

CHAPTER ONE

“Psst . . .”

The word pings against the back of my ear like a well-aimed pebble. I turn toward the sound, see nothing but the long corridor stretched out behind me. There is no one there.

I shrug, take another step.

“Psst . . .”

Really? I stop, my eyes scanning the area. Is someone crouched behind one of the plush purple velvet sofas in the nearby lounge? And if so, aren't we a little old to be playing such games? “Hello?” I say, more question than greeting, my body twisting toward the empty visitors' lounge to my right, then over toward the deserted nurses' station on my left, ultimately completing a full circle. I am about to throw up my hands, as if to say, “I give up,” when I see her.

No wonder I missed her, I think. She is tiny, her skin almost the same shade as the concrete pillar her frail body is leaning against, her uncombed hair a perfect match for her ghostly pallor. If she were any less substantial, she'd be invisible, I think, then laugh, wondering if that's how the younger generation sees me. Or doesn't see me. I'm no spring chicken, after all. Seventy-six, as of a month ago. Well past the age when women become invisible to most of the outside world.

And this woman is at least a decade my senior, I estimate. Although that could be just wishful thinking, I'm forced to concede.

“Are you talking to me?” I ask, hearing echoes of Robert De Niro's famous line from the movie *Taxi Driver* as I take a few trepid steps toward her. And how long has it been since that movie came out? Twenty, thirty years? Longer?

I stop, startled to realize that I'm nervous, although I have no idea why. What can this frail old woman possibly do to me? She can't weigh more than ninety pounds, and I'm easily a hundred and thirty-five. Okay, closer to a hundred and forty, according to the last time I got weighed, although I'm still considered slim for my five-foot, nine-inch frame. Okay, five feet, eight and a quarter inches. I've lost almost an inch since the last time I was measured. Pounds gained; inches lost. Getting shorter and wider. "Nothing to be concerned about," my doctor has assured me. "I'm not worried."

And why should he be? At barely fifty, he's years away from his best-before date. I, on the other hand, am circling cautiously around mine. Yes, everyone says I look much younger than my age; I exercise, have regular facials and the odd chemical peel, my hair is a fashionable lightly streaked bob that keeps the ever-encroaching grays at bay, my wardrobe is current and designer chic. Still, the body knows.

The body definitely knows.

Can anything be more ego-destroying than growing old?

It beats the alternative, my best friend, Carol, used to say.

If we have to grow old and die, I would counter, only partly in jest, could we not at least get better looking?

She'd laugh, dutifully.

She doesn't laugh anymore.

So, what's there to be nervous about? I wonder. I'm standing in the middle of the fourth-floor hallway of the upscale oceanfront memory care facility that calls itself—with not the slightest hint of irony—Legacy Place. Outside the sun is shining, as it does with monotonous regularity here in Jupiter, Florida. There are nurses and orderlies scattered throughout the six-story gleaming white structure. A simple shout would bring them scurrying down the hall. Not to mention that one halfhearted push would surely send this ancient crone flying. Still, I stop several feet away from where

she is standing. "Can I help you?" I ask, hating the tentativeness clinging to the edges of my voice.

"I have a secret," she tells me. Her own voice is surprisingly strong, no tentativeness there.

I say nothing.

"Do you want to hear it?" she presses.

"Do you want to tell me?"

"I don't know," she says. "Who are you?"

"I'm Linda. Linda Davidson," I add when it becomes clear from her silence that she is expecting more.

Her mouth twists from side to side, as if she is literally ingesting this information.

"Linda is a pretty name," she says finally. "You don't hear it so much anymore."

I nod. She's right. Names like Linda have pretty much disappeared from the lexicon in recent years, like the Gertrudes and Ethels before them, giving way to the current crop of Britneys, Skylars, and Briannes.

"I'm Jenny," she says. "Jenny Cooper."

"Nice to meet you, Jenny."

"Is it?"

I'm not sure how to respond, so I say nothing.

"Who are you?" she asks again.

"I'm Linda."

“Linda is a pretty name,” she says, as if for the first time. “You don’t hear it so much anymore.”

“No, you don’t,” I agree.

“I’m Jenny. Jenny Cooper.”

I don’t bother to repeat that it’s nice to meet her, wishing to skip a third go-round of the same conversation. Instead I offer up what I hope is a kind smile. “I should get going . . .”

“Where?” she asks.

“Where?”

“Where are you going?”

There is no point telling her that this is none of her business. “To see my friend. Carol. Carol Kreiger,” I continue, to avoid her having to ask. “She’s in room 403. Down the hall.” I point in what I think is the general vicinity of Carol’s room. This is only the second time I’ve visited in the weeks since Carol took up residence, so I’m not altogether sure. Room 403 could be down the opposite corridor.

Some things are too painful to remember.

“That’s a nice outfit you have on,” Jenny remarks of my canary-yellow sundress.

“Thank you.”

“I normally don’t care for yellow. Where’d you buy it?”

“Saks.”

“Sex?” she demands, sudden alarm flashing through her watery blue eyes.

“Saks,” I correct quickly.

“That’s very rude.”

“I’m sorry,” I mutter, eager now to get away. Even Carol’s hopelessly blank stare will be better than this. “I really should go . . .”

“Don’t you want to hear my secret?”

“Maybe you’ll tell me another time.”

“I kill people,” she says.

“What?”

Behind me, I hear footsteps approaching and turn with relief toward the sound.

“Is everything all right here?” the nurse asks.

Jenny turns around abruptly, scurrying away with surprising speed.

“I’m sorry. Was she bothering you?”

“No,” I answer. “She just . . . she just . . . She’s obviously not all there,” I manage to spit out.

“I’m afraid so. Dementia is a terrible thing.” The nurse smiles, a gesture as unexpected as it is unsettling. “Can I help you with anything?”

“Room 403?”

“That way.” She points down the hall. I nod and start walking.

“Psst . . .” I think I hear as I approach the door to Carol’s room. I swing around. But this time, there really is no one there.

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