

THE QUEEN OF SECOND CHANCES

by D.M. Barr

EXCERPT

Chapter One

I couldn't take my eyes off the man. He came barreling into the recreational center at SALAD—Seniors Awaiting Lunch and Dinner, Rock Canyon's answer to Meals on Wheels—as I sat in the outer office, awaiting my job interview. He was tall, but not too tall. His expensive suit barely concealed an athletic physique that fell just shy of a slavish devotion to muscle mass. Early thirties, I estimated, and monied. Honey-blond curly hair, blue eyes, high cheekbones, chiseled features, gold-rimmed glasses, and of course, dimples. Why did there always have to be dimples? They were my kryptonite, rendering me powerless to resist.

I nicknamed him Adonis, Donny for short, lest anyone accuse me of being pretentious. He was the stuff of every girl's dreams, especially if that girl was as masochistic as yours truly. Men like that didn't fall for ordinary girls like me, gals more Cocoa Puff than Coco Chanel, more likely to run their pantyhose than strut the runway. I leaned back on the leather couch, laid down my half-completed application, and prepared to enjoy the view. Then he opened his mouth, and the attraction withered like a popped balloon.

"I want to speak to Judith. Now. Is she here?" The sharpness of his voice put Ginsu knives to shame. It was jagged enough to slash open memories of my mother's own barely contained temper when refereeing sibling disputes between Nikki and me. Well, at least until she prematurely retired her whistle and skipped town for good.

The attendant working the main desk looked fresh out of nursing school and had obviously missed the lecture on dealing with difficult clients. She sputtered, held up both hands in surrender, and retreated into the administration office, reemerging with an older woman whose guff-be-gone demeanor softened as she got closer. Her name tag read, "Judith Ferester," the woman scheduled to conduct my interview. She took one look at Donny, sighed as if to say, *Here we go again*, and plastered on her requisite customer service smile.

“Mr. Prentiss, to what do we owe the honor of this visit?” she asked in a tone sweet enough to make my teeth hurt.

“Judith, I thought we had this discussion before. I trust you to take care of my nana, but day after day, I discover goings-on that are utterly unacceptable. Maybe we shouldn’t have added the senior center, just limited SALAD to meal delivery. Last week you served chips and a roll at lunch? That’s too many carbs. This week, I find someone is duping her out of her pocket change. No one is going to take advantage of her good nature, not under my watch.”

I half-expected him to spit on the ground. Was such venom contagious? I didn’t want my prospective employer in a foul mood when she reviewed my application. I really, really needed this job.

“Mr. Prentiss,” Judith answered, her patronizing smile frozen in place, “I assure you that your championing of our senior center was well founded. The reason your nana isn’t complaining is that she receives the utmost care. She is one of our dearest visitors. Everyone loves her.”

“Tell me then, what is this?” Donny—scratch that, Mr. Prentiss—drew a scrap of paper from his pocket and flung it onto the counter. I leaned forward to make out the object of his disdain. Then, thinking better of it, I relaxed and watched as this melodrama played itself out.

Judith glanced down at the paper. “This? It’s a scoresheet. They play gin for ten cents a hand. We monitor everything that goes on here; your grandmother is not being conned out of her life savings. You have my word.”

Prentiss shook his head so vigorously his gold-rimmed glasses worked their way down to the tip of his perfect nose. He pushed them back with obvious annoyance. Even when he was acting like a jerk, his dimples were captivating. Would they be even more alluring if he smiled? Did he smile...like, ever?

“It’s not the amount that worries me. It’s the act itself. Many seniors here are memory impaired. How can you condone gambling between people who aren’t coherent? Could you please keep a closer eye on things? Otherwise, I’m afraid I’ll have to take my nana—and my support—to the center I’ve heard about across the river.”

Without waiting for Judith’s response, Prentiss departed as brusquely as he’d arrived. Ah, the entitlement of the rich. Walk over everyone, then storm off. He never even noticed my presence. Just as well, considering my purpose for being there. Even if I wasn’t sorry to see the back end of his temper, his rear end was pleasant enough to watch as he exited, I noted with a guilty shudder.

Judith shook her head, rolled her eyes, and let out a huff. Then she noticed me. “I’m so sorry you had to overhear that. I’m the director here. How can I help you?”

“I’m Carraway Quinn. Everyone calls me Carra. I have an appointment for the recreational aide position.”

Judith typed a few keystrokes into the main desk’s computer. “Ah yes, Ms. Quinn. Carraway, like the seed?”

“Something like that,” I said with a smile.

They always guessed, but no one got it right. Some man would, one day. That’s what my mother said a million years ago, when she still lived within earshot. One man would figure it out, and that’s how I’d know he was the one for me. Not that it mattered right now. I had bigger problems than finding a new boyfriend.

“Tell me, would I have to deal with people like that all day?” I tilted my head in the direction of Prentiss’s contrail.

“What can I say? He loves his nana.” Judith shrugged, staring at the door. “Though I’ve never seen him lash out like that before. He’s usually so calm.” She quickly shifted into public relations mode. “Jay Prentiss is one of our biggest contributors. It’s only because of his generosity that we have this senior center and can afford to hire a recreational aide.” She beckoned me into the inner office. “Shall we proceed?”

I followed, but I had my doubts. I belonged in the editorial office of a magazine or on a book tour for my perennially unfinished novel, not at a senior center. This job was my stepmother’s idea, not mine. Calling it an idea was being generous; it was more like a scheme, and the elderly deserved better than someone sent here to deceive them. I was the embodiment of what Jay Prentiss worried about most.

The interview lasted less than ten minutes, as if Judith was going through the formalities but had already decided to hire me. I was to start my orientation the following day. I shook her hand and thanked her, all the while wishing I were anywhere else.

Afterward, I wandered into the recreation area, where I’d be spending most of my time. The room was dingy, teeming with doleful seniors watching television, playing cards, or staring off into space. A few complained among themselves about a jigsaw puzzle they were unable to finish because the last pieces were missing. I wondered how many had lost their spouses and came to the center out of loneliness, their children too busy with their own lives to visit. It was a heartbreaking thought.

Jay Prentiss was complaining about carbs and gambling when he should have been concentrating on ennui. The seniors' dismal expressions told me they were visiting SALAD more out of desperation than opportunity. It was clear they needed an injection of enthusiasm, not some aide looking to unsettle their lives. It came down to my conscience. Could it triumph against my stepmother's directives and my plummeting bank account?