

Chapter 1

The fact is, I'm in the process of panicking in front of Dan Briggs. We're sitting in my living room late on Sunday night, and although I only met him a month ago and nothing has been said outright, the air has a sudden crackle to it that even I know means it's time we decided whether we'll sleep together. We've kissed three times—although not yet tonight—and he's called me on the phone five times, and we've gone for two walks that turned romantic. That adds up to one overdue sexual encounter by today's rules, I believe.

Here's the thing: theoretically I would love to sleep with him, but I can't remember how you get started. It has now been so long since I've been with a guy and had sex as a possibility—I am still technically married, after all—that I can't for the life of me remember how it is that two people can go from having a conversation to passionately kissing. What is the signal that gets sent? And how in the world do the clothes come off? I'd like it if I could press the "pause" button on this relationship and call a few friends. What I need to know for starters is this: since it's my house, do I have to make the first move? Or shouldn't he, as the male of the species, simply ease me down onto the floor and start in with some heavy petting? And...well, is it possible to have sex without the other person seeing you naked?

Worse, we've somehow stumbled into an endless loop of a conversation about the benefits of whole wheat flour versus white flour, and I don't see how we'll ever get out of it. Dan, you see, is a naturopathic physician who's just moved to town to open a practice, and I'm a baker in a health food store. Or more truthfully, I simply pass as one. I'm actually the last person you'd think would be concerned about all that tofu and granola stuff. Really, I just follow a bunch of somebody else's recipes: carob brownies, non-dairy tofu cupcakes, carrot-soy bread. I don't even own any whole wheat flour.

But then, just as I've resigned myself to a whole evening's two-person seminar on wheat bran, Dan suddenly shifts gears. He reaches over and takes my hand. "Tell me," he says gently. "When you named your daughter Hope, what was it you were hoping for, do you think?" He says, "Do you remember exactly?"

I take a jagged breath, and that is when the phone chooses to ring.

It's my mother.

"Baby!" she yells into the phone. "I've got the most amazin news!" Not: How are you? Not: What's going on in your life? Not: Is this a good time to talk? She has never asked any of those questions, as far as I can remember. She is Madame Lucille, the fortune-teller, which gives her license to call people at the most annoying times possible.

"Actually, Lucille, I'm just the tiniest bit busy—" I begin. I look at Dan's beige sweater with little nubbly things all over it, and he smiles at me and sprawls out on the rug next to me. He has this shaggy, pleasing brown hair that keeps falling into his brown eyes, and he's long and lean and handsome in that vulnerable, non-traditional, non-model kind of way. Good lines to his face.

Crinkly eyes. What I like best about him, though, is a contradiction I've noticed: even though he seems completely put together and way more sane than most people I know, his socks do not match. One is dark blue and one is brown. I love that.

"So," I say to Lucille, looking yet again at the socks and taking a shaky breath. "Busy. Let's talk tomorrow."

"The answer is yes," she says. "Sleep with him. Definitely."

"What?" She is always doing stuff like this, showing off.

"You heard me. Do it. Whoever he is. Sleep with him." She starts clicking her lighter and laughs her wild, cackly laugh. "Oh, never mind. You never take my advice anyway. Listen, darlin, here's why I called. You won't believe this, but I'm bitin the bullet and gettin married again."

"What?" I say.

"I'm gettin married!" she shouts. "Mar-ried! Me! Can you believe it?"

Actually, yes. I can. She gets married all the damn time. But you see, this is exactly what I do not want to get into with her. I put my head down. Dan Briggs is so nice and normal, and I'm practically certain he doesn't know how screwed up lives can get. Do I really have to let him in on everything weird and dodgy about me all at once? It's bad enough that I've already had to explain about Lenny, who left me to go to Santa Fe a year ago saying he was off to earn money for a few months but then never returned—and also about our two high-strung daughters who are barely coping with being left behind. Dan had been more than understanding of all this technically-married-and-have-kids stuff while I was explaining it to him, but—you know how it is. He had that kind of overly sympathetic, textbook way that some people have. Probably there was a chapter in his naturopathy school about the psychological ramifications of divorce on people's immune systems or something.

But—God!—now to have to explain about my crazy mother and her fortune-telling and her life of serial marriages—it's too much. I frown, turn my body slightly away from him and cup my hand around the receiver, as if that would be enough barrier to keep her words from leaping out of the telephone and landing on him. I'm almost sure he's heard her ordering me to sleep with him. Still, he politely takes the hint and gets up, unfolds himself and heads to the bathroom. He touches my shoulder lightly as he passes—my nerve endings go zzzzzt—and I turn and smile at him. I mouth, "Mother" to him, and he pantomimes back, "what-are-you-gonna-do."

God, he has no idea.

Lucille is still jabbering away, and just from the way she's gone all Southern, I can tell that she's in a crowd of people, and that she's sure all of them are thinking she's just the most outrageous, special person they've ever met. She's got the Scarlett O'Hara thing going so hard that I'm afraid that honey will start dripping into the phone and clogging up the wires.

“So, darlin’, he’s a retired investment banker,” she says, only at first she’s exaggerating her vowels so much that I think she’s said he’s a retard investment banker, “and his name is Harold Morgenthaler, and darlin’, he’s just the most handsome man ah’ve ever seen in mah whole life, and just the sweetest thang you evuh saw. Besides all that, he’s rich and he’s got piles and piles of luscious white hair. Oh, yes, you are too, you big ole monkey man! You are! You’re the richest thang since Donald Trump, darlin’, and you know it. Ah swear, Maz, this has been the best two weeks of my life.” She’s making smooching noises, and I can hear people around her laughing.

“Two weeks?” I say, unable to help myself. “You’ve known him two weeks?”

“Now there you go! Okay, folks, here she goes,” she says loudly. “Ah knew Maz would be the one who would need to point out that people aren’t supposed to get married until they’ve known each other so long they’re already bored.” Then the wheedling voice starts, and I squeeze my eyes tight, but I can still see her: dyed black wig piled up in ringlets, and her huge blue eyes, which she claims are violet, outlined in black, twinkling with imagined mischief and showmanship. It’s Lucille’s eyes that make you think it really is possible she’s seeing into the future or the human heart, or wherever she gets all those messages from—intense, smoky, possibly they really are violet, like Liz Taylor’s, like she always said. She also said, after her fifth marriage ended, “God, Maz, don’t let me end up like Liz, marrying men all the goddamn time. When I get up to Liz, won’t somebody just shoot me, please!”

She’s probably forgotten that. She’s saying in her matter-of-fact, don’t-argue-with-Madame-Lucille voice: “Honey, now you just go wake up those younguns of yours an’ git in the car and come on down here and be with us. I can’t be havin’ you up there in that cold old Connecticut when I’m down here havin’ the time of my life. We’ve raised all the hell we can raise for one day, and now we’re all just sittin’ round the pool tryin’ to decide what kinda weddin’ we want to have, and whether or not we should wait any longer than this weekend to do it.” She breaks out in a peal of laughter. “One man here says we’re so goddamn old we shouldn’t even buy green bananas anymore. So why the hell should we wait to get married?”

“Maybe so you know for sure he’s not an axe murderer,” I say, grateful that Dan isn’t there.

“An axe murderer!” She explodes with laughter. “Now just who do you think you’re talkin’ to? Darlin’, I think I can tell a little bit more than that about people.”

“I don’t know. You’ve messed up at least five times before.” I don’t want to mention that she only stuck it out with my own father for the approximately twenty minutes it took for him to get her pregnant—and then he was gone for good.

She laughs in a mean way, and I hear her clicking her cigarette lighter. “Oh, you! You know as well as I do those were practice runs—sort of like your marriage to Lenny, sweetie. Harold’s been married a few times himself, so he knows the value of a little, uh, practice.”

Dan’s still not back, so I say, in a low voice, “What happened to his other wives? Have you checked?”

“Good God in heaven,” she says. “What’s with you tonight? You know me bettah than that. I wouldn’t do anything without the spirit guides. They’ve checked him out spiritually and psychically and emotionally, and they say he and I have just been waitin’ to meet each other in this plane. We’ve actually known each other in every previous lifetime since we were in Atlantis, and they think we were medieval scribes in love with each other during the Middle Ages.”

“Medieval scribes didn’t fall in love. There wasn’t the concept of romantic love until—”

“And then during, I don’t know, in the eighteenth century or so, I was a lady of the court—we already knew that, of course, that’s old news—and he was a duke who married me, over the objections of his family. That’s how Irv put it, but Marvin thinks there’s more to be said.”

“Oh, please.” She knows I can’t stand it when she starts going on about the spirit guides, Irv and Marvin, whom she has always talked about as though they were my know-it-all uncles. They hover around her and tell her everything she needs to know. All my life they’ve been tattling on me to Lucille.

“Well, you asked me,” she says. “But listen. I gotta tell you the best part, even though you’ll laugh. Marv says that in our last life, Harold’s exes were our cats.”

There’s a roar of laughter from the crowd, and she’s away from the phone for a minute, meowing and making catfight noises.

“So where are you?” I say when she comes back.

“I told you, didn’t I? I’m in a hotel in Palm Beach, by the pool. We’ve run out the young folks—they can’t keep up with us—and so it’s just me and Harold and all these people I’ve met here. I did some psychic readin’s last night, honey, and got a whole bunch of people, all retired salt of the earth types, who want to be friends. This is just the friendliest little community you ever saw—if you had good sense, you’d pack up those two little gals and move on down here. I showed your picture to the waiter, and he said you were ’bout the prettiest gal he’d seen. You could start over and get you some rich, good-lookin’ man to take care of you! Hell, the waiter himself could do it, with the money we’ve been showerin’ on him all night long.”

Dan comes back, bringing with him the bottle of wine from the kitchen. He points to my empty glass and lifts his eyebrows, and I nod, so he pours some for both of us and sits down again on the floor. He pushes his hair back one more time and grins at me, and I look down at his socks and feel that little whiff of sex from him again. But—how to explain this?—the air feels changed, damaged, by Lucille.

“Can I call you back some other time?” I say to her.

“Hell, no! I’m by the pool. Didn’t you hear me say that? Can’t you just take a minute off from your very important life to listen to me? Besides that, the guides have some messages they told me to give you.”

“No messages tonight.” God, please, no messages tonight. “I’ll call you tomorrow,” I say. “Promise.”

“Wait...message, message.” She starts clicking her damn Bic lighter, and then she goes into her trance voice, like a robot on crack. I squeeze my eyes closed. I cannot tell you how much I hate this. “Okay, here it is. Wait for it...wait...” There is a long silence. Then she says, heavily, “Lenny is not coming back to you, sweetheart. What? What? Oh. Okay, I’ll tell her. Honey, Marv and Irv are sayin’ he’s becoming quite a religious hotshot out there, and he’s stayin’ in Arizona.”

“Santa Fe.”

“Isn’t Santa Fe in Arizona? Well, whatever. Marv and Irv haven’t been on this plane in a long time. They forget where the cities are. But—wait! What? There’s more. He’s really touchin’ people’s lives out there and not comin’ back, but it’s okay because he was never really right for you, so you should release him. He’s gettin’ it together on a spiritual plane that’s far above what you can relate to.”

“Oh, please,” I say.

“You know, that’s a thing about you, isn’t it? You never seem to understand that some people aren’t meant to live in your humdrum, ordinary—”

“I never said that...”

“But he’s too large for marriage, sweetie. He needs to be out among the people.”

I roll my eyes, forget for a moment that Dan is sitting right there next to me sipping his wine politely. “Look, Lucille, with all due respect, the spirit guides don’t know anything about—”

“They know a shaman when they meet one, which is more than you do! They’re saying he had a callin’, a callin’ to go and live an unconventional life, touching people’s lives—”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Lucille! He touched their lives all right. Touched their lives—and their bodies, too, particularly if they were young, willing girls. Maybe I’m crazy, but I don’t think it’s much of a calling if all you want is to go out and screw every attractive young woman you see. Now you tell the spirit guides thank you very much, but to butt out of my life, and they can keep their observations to themselves. Maybe they could turn their attention to something more pressing in the world, like solving the situation in the Mideast or something. They’ve got a few shamans out there that could stand having somebody think about them.”

My eyes meet Dan’s, and I feel the color spreading across my cheeks. He smiles and raises his eyebrows. Shit, she got me again.

She sniffs and starts again in her injured voice, pronouncing each word very precisely. “The spirit guides just wanted me to tell you that the universe will reward you for releasin’ Lenny by

sendin' somebody who's just perfect for you. Lenny never was what you needed, darlin'. Release him."

"He is so released. Now goodbye, Lucille."

She hesitates. I hear her lighter clicking. "Sweetie, there's one more thing they're insistin' that I tell you. Fix yourself up. I know that pizzazz doesn't come naturally to you—"

"Lucille, I do just fine," I say.

"You're not even wearing mascara most days, are you?"

I don't answer. I couldn't find my tube of mascara if my life depended on it.

And, honey, would it kill you to exfoliate? And pluck your eyebrows and do something with your hair? Men are like children, sweetie. They want a playmate. Somebody cute."

"Okay," I say, "bye!"

"And tell that darling little Hope that her Glamorous Grandmother, G.G., loves her and that I know that she and I share the sight. And I'm comin' to see her soon! Tell her."

"I am officially hanging up now. Goodbye." My teeth are gritted. You and Hope do not share the sight. Hope is a regular girl, and you are screwed up beyond repair. That's what I'd say if Dan wasn't there.

I have the receiver halfway to its cradle when I hear her shout, "Darlin'—SLEEP WITH HIM! You need it!"