

Chapter One

HE SAID WHAT?



I'm dreaming away, wishing that heroes,
they truly exist.

—"Oops, I Did It Again," Britney Spears

Recently, an astrologer read my birth chart. She told me that according to the planets in my fourth house, having children in my life was necessary for my emotional growth—it was “my soul’s requirement.” Where was this sage observation when I first met my boyfriend’s two kids? Had I known that the planets were conspiring to save my soul . . . well, it might’ve saved me years of aggravation and tears.

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And then the bitch went on to tell me that she saw *three* kids in my house.

She couldn't leave well enough alone, could she?



“You’re not very maternal,” my boyfriend Julian said as we backed out of his ex-wife Marie’s driveway.

We had just dropped off Nicole (fourteen) and Tyler (nine) after our scheduled weekend with them. I suppose my goodbye wave from the car could’ve been interpreted as impersonal, and the truth was that I didn’t mind being free of them. It was in my genes. Alpert family lore has it that on more than one occasion, when my brother and I were visiting my grandparents and my grandmother was fed up with her mob of grandchildren running amok, she had put our coats on and instructed us to go tell our parents that it was time to leave while announcing, “Glad to see them come, and glad to see them go.”

Julian’s remark may have been casual, but what I heard was, *You’re an unfeminine and unfeeling woman who loathes chubby babies*. It was as if he was insinuating that I was less of a woman—like I was female-light.

Maybe the next time we have Nicole and Tyler, I’ll whip out a boob and breastfeed them, I thought. *Would that be maternal enough for you?* I thought about Ricky, and how I used to spend a fortune getting his anal glands expressed, and how maternal and nurturing I was when I got up close and personal with his tiny bits and watched—more

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intimate than with most boyfriends!—because it was what the job required.

So what if Ricky was my dog.

We turned onto the parkway in awkward silence. How could Julian compare me to Marie—the biological mother? It was like saying Tequila and Milk tasted the same because they were both liquids—and that they have similar side effects. I had never aspired to be a mother. I yearned for fame, a career in showbiz, an office with a paper shredder. Kissing and hugging Nicole and Tyler had never felt automatic, and I didn't know if it ever would.

“All I'm saying is that you don't seem very natural around kids,” he continued.

Why was he still talking? Where his last insensitive remark had hit a nerve, this little nugget cut an artery. It was the first time the words “maternal” or “natural” had come up since we'd started dating two years earlier, and frankly, it surprised me. After all the times I'd driven down to his divorced-dad pad in suburban New Jersey (shag carpet, weight bench, denim couch, suede massage chair) to spend time with his kids, and he comes at me with these accusations? For crying out loud, I was rearranging my kid-free lifestyle to accommodate Nicole and Tyler as fast as I could.

My child-free-ness was less a choice and more like eye color—it just was. There weren't any real discussions with family or friends, because everyone knew how I felt, and they'd accepted it. Moving on. The only clock that was ticking was my show-business clock, reminding me that

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my days playing an ingenue were numbered and I'd better hop to it. A pertinent aside: all the women in the television shows of my youth—*Wonder Woman*, *The Bionic Woman*, *Charlie's Angels*, and *I Dream of Jeannie*—never had kids.

Pulling into Julian's driveway, I was aware he thought that because I had a vagina, anything kid-related should come naturally to me. Unfortunately, on rare occasions, my vagina just isn't enough, and it was possible this was one of those occasions. Of course, I *was* spectacularly unprepared, and I had no idea what I had gotten myself into—but I wasn't going to tell Julian that. I was crazy about him, and I was willing to live in his world rather than live without him in mine. Truth be told, I did question how (or if) I would (or could) like or love someone else's kids. I hoped Julian was right about my vagina because I too was counting on its magic to show me the way.

Chapter Two

PLEASED TO MEET ME



**Do your laundry and your cooking too. What more
for a woman could a man like me do?**

—“Crackin’ Up,” Bo Diddley

I’d be lying if I said that *nothing* about having kids intrigued me. When I was twelve, I used to improvise labor scenes at night in my bedroom. I called it my “Pregnancy Period,” not unlike Picasso’s Blue Period, only without the paint and artistry. I thought pregnancy was sexy. Whenever I was bloated, belly distended until it looked like I was carrying twins, I’d stare at myself in front of a

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full-length mirror and think, *There, that's the ultimate expression of a woman's femininity*. Even if that expression was due to gas.

My inspiration for these fantasies came from hours of watching medical procedurals and made-for-TV movies. Pregnant women on television always had hot partners, and they were paid special attention, like how they were given the last seat on a crowded bus or subway or were helped with putting their luggage in the overhead compartment on an airplane.

My parents were barely out of diapers themselves when they had my older brother and me. He was a hyperactive kid, high-strung and prone to tantrums, so the majority of their time was spent making sure he wasn't mowing down the neighborhood kids with his Big Wheel. Attention was often in short supply, so I'd escape into fantasy and my imagination.

Marcus Welby, M.D., starring a very young and handsome James Brolin, was on heavy rotation. Jan-Michael Vincent, from the movie *Buster and Billie*, always played my sexy boyfriend. (It didn't matter that this was crossover casting—it was my fantasy.) A typical scene consisted of me lying in a hospital bed and going into labor. I simulated screams and panting, avoiding actual sounds because my brother's bedroom was next door. He already found ample reasons to bully me, not the least of which was my music, which I listened to on a yellow Toot-A-Loop radio that I wore as a bracelet. My AM radio stations played my favorites, like the 5th Dimension's "Up, Up and Away" and Debby Boone's "You Light Up My Life."

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When I was close to delivering, I'd grab hold of my ankles, lift my legs in the air, and spread-eagle as if my feet were in stirrups. Sometimes there'd be a medical emergency—*Mr. Doctor, I think something's wrong. I can't feel my toes.* The room shifts into high gear as the scene unfolds. Various medical professionals pace the room. My handsome doctor whispers to a nurse, loud enough for me to hear, that the baby is breech. It's frenetic, with a flurry of activity around my vagina. A different nurse dabs my sweaty brow and tells me to relax. Easy for her to say. They are able to turn the baby around, but there's a knot in the umbilical cord. I theatrically mouth, *Oh, God, no. Don't let it die.* Handsome James Brolin looks up from between my legs and assures me that it was a false alarm.

After ten minutes, I would usually get bored with all the complications and force the baby out. After being cleaned and suctioned, he or she (healthy, thank you, Jesus) would be placed on my double-D breasts, at which point I would immediately forget about the baby, pull the pillow out from under my pajama top, and make out with it, pretending it was Jan-Michael.

My reenactments went on for a couple of years until I lost interest in anything having to do with babies, including pregnancy, and went straight to making out with my pillow.

Along with my "it just was" child-free-ness, I suppose you could also make a case that watching my mom put aside her own creative desires to raise us made an impression on me.

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For several years, she was a schoolteacher, putting my dad through law school. She was also an artist: a ceramist, photographer, knitter, and needlepointer. She'd sit for hours, knitting a blanket, needlepointing a canvas the size of a movie screen, or creating some hippy patchwork for the back of my jean jacket. For a brief period of time, she and my dad developed photos in a makeshift darkroom in the basement. It was like living in an artist colony.

When my dad could afford it, she retired from education and became a stay-at-home mom. This meant the washing machine ran nonstop. How dirty could we have gotten to justify her relentless laundering? My brother and I were in school, and my dad didn't work in the coal mines. I viewed laundry as a demeaning and stereotypically motherly chore, and I wanted no part of it. It used to depress me to watch my mom stand in front of the machine, pouring liquids and tearing off dryer sheets. It was a doomed existence, full of failed dreams, detergent, and fabric softener. My tiny brain couldn't understand why she consciously chose to fluff and fold rather than pursue fame. My mother has always seemed to me the most creative person I know with the least amount of self-esteem.

When I was in my early teens, my mom told me that she had always wanted to be a mother, followed by, "I wanted to get married and have kids so I could move out of my parents' apartment." And then: "I knew I wanted two kids. I just didn't think I'd have them sixteen months apart. It was good. I got it over with."

But I didn't want a life full of things that I had to "get over with," which might be why, growing up, I never spoke

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about marriage or babies—I recoiled at the mere mention of the words. They were also too girlie-girl for me.



This is as good a time as any to tell you that I was pregnant once when I was married—and that I was married once. I said “I do” when I didn’t, because I couldn’t say “no.” The word had some sort of poisonous effect on me, and I seemed to go out of my way to avoid it. I didn’t think I had a choice. The thought of hurting my soon-to-be husband’s feelings pained me, so I put my skills to good use and produced a wedding: playing a role that I didn’t audition for in someone else’s movie.

Our relationship wasn’t especially romantic or passionate, but we were loyal to one another, and he loved me unconditionally. We shared professional dreams, and we were each other’s cheerleaders. I was attracted to his vast talents as a musician, and I would fantasize about being the next Paul and Linda, John and Yoko, Donny and Marie. But I wanted (and needed) more than the microphones and drum lessons. I wanted to be in love, and I wanted to stop lying about my feelings.

And then I got pregnant.

We were in our thirties, and neither of us had a desire to parent—not to mention that my guilt, shame, and selfishness were making me physically ill. I’d taken to crying silently in bed at night, while my husband slept beside me.

I went to my gynecologist’s office for a consultation, and although I respected his professional obligation to ask

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me if I had thought my decision through, my mind had been made up as soon as I saw the blue line on the stick. Simple. Easy. When I got up to leave, I added something like, “Yeah, and my husband agreed to pay for half of it,” like I was on an episode of *16 and Pregnant*. My doctor stared at me as if to say, *If this is your sense of humor, then this is probably for the best.*

My husband and I took a trip to Italy five months later, as I searched for something that might make me fall in love with him. And then one night, in Venice, I snapped. While gasping for air, I told him that I didn’t want to be married anymore and that I was sorry. We cried in each other’s arms, and I let the relief of the truth wash over me.



I’d spent nearly two decades in LA following my aspirations in show business. And with every job that I had—including anime translator, chimpanzee wrangler, and comedy traffic-school instructor—I was convinced that I was about to be catapulted into celebritydom. For a short time I worked as a screenwriter, and I even had a meeting with Courtney Love during her Golden Globe year at her house in the Hollywood Hills. I remember Ms. Love was effusive and gracious, asking a wide range of questions: “Did you know this used to be Ellen’s house?” “Do you like the Stickley chairs in the parlor?” “Have you read Proust?” Then, before I had a chance to recall what Proust had written, Courtney moved on to the virtues of anal bleaching,

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insisting that Pink Cheeks on Ventura Boulevard was the place to go.

In the end, the experience was just another in a long list of pitches, promises, and potential. And after nearly twenty years of the almos, not quites, and so closes, the only thing I had to show for myself was a stack of glossy (and matte) headshots tucked in the back of my desk drawer. I couldn't even call myself a has-been, because that implied that I *had been*—and I hadn't.

So, four years after my divorce, I closed the drawer and moved to Prague to teach English, even though English was as foreign to me as it was to the Czechs. And when that didn't work out, I headed back home to New York.