

CHAPTER 1

October

Leonard told me that it was his mother's fault, a result of the fact that she smoked throughout her pregnancy with him, that he would grow to a mere five feet six inches. Since I never saw a picture of her, I never knew if it was also her fault, although hardly preventable, that no woman on the streets of New York would ever turn her head if he walked by.

He had married a beautiful woman, his high school sweetheart, and considered their union as one of "Beauty and the Beast". He had all the trappings of the little man, the Napoleon, who was to succeed grandly and existed to control those around him.

His wife had died after twenty-four years of marriage, although her cancer allowed her to linger for the final eighteen torturous months. But Leonard was not one to linger over anybody. Two months after her death he was reading the personal ads in *New York* magazine. It was there that he found mine.

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Beautiful lawyer, 40 year old winsome widow in Ct. with two kids looking for love and laughter with a kind, professional man. Photo available.

Over the course of three weeks, I received forty letters in response to my ad. I threw away thirty-nine. The man who sent a picture of himself in a Speedo bathing suit with his muscular hairy chest bursting left nothing to my imagination. Several women failed to realize that a beautiful widow is a woman and sent me pictures of their cleavage. And, of course, the man incarcerated in Alabama who read *New York* magazine and sent a salacious letter was not what I had in mind when I placed the ad. Leonard's letter arrived last, just when I had nearly given up all hope that a widow living in a small town in central Connecticut could ever find her next love.

The envelope was marked with the insignia from the Ritz Carlton Hotel.

Dear Young Widow in Ct.

I read your ad on the plane going to a business meeting in Arizona. I am a young 50-year-old widower who lives in New Jersey. I am a very personable, warm, kind, very intelligent, loyal, romantic, energetic, very athletic, emotionally and financially secure person with a great sense of humor and a high degree of integrity. Women generally describe me as 'very cute'.

I love kids and enjoy family, friends, travel, sports, music, and theater. I have never responded to an ad before but I was struck by your being a widow and a lawyer (describing yourself as beautiful also helped). I am a real estate investment banker with a large U.S. based company. I have three great children, a son who is in

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medical school, a daughter who is a teacher and a son at Cornell.

I am interested in meeting a person who is refined, very sweet, warm, intelligent, articulate and very attractive – a woman who I can admire and who is comfortable in jeans or black tie.

While you will meet men who are better looking (and who have better handwriting) you will not meet anyone who is more personable, or a nicer, higher quality person.

Since I have not responded to ads I do not have stock pictures to send. I therefore am sending a passport photo type picture I had taken – which honestly does not do me justice even though I do not claim to be Robert Redford.

If my letter merits your interest call me at the following number. The best time to reach me is between 9 p.m. and 11:30 p.m. during the week – anytime on the weekends (although I frequently travel to watch my son play college football). I am an early riser so you may call me after 6:30 a.m. – if I do not answer I am either traveling on business or out jogging.

I am a non-smoker. I hope to hear from you.

Sincerely,

Leonard

The picture had fallen out of the envelope and fluttered to the ground. As I picked it up, one look at the black and white photo revealed a man who could have claimed to resemble a version of Anthony Hopkins but might have been flattered to have his name merely mentioned in the same sentence as Robert Redford. Yet, I was determined to

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press on because I had two precious children who needed me to do just that. After all, cancer had made me a widow at the age of thirty-five and it had been a long uphill climb since then.

Cancer ended Jake's life; along the way it had ravaged mine. The fifteen months of Jake's illness I had spent caring for him, having abandoned all other roles, and then I had lost that job too.

When I thought of Jake, I could only envision him sick, his body devastated. It was at least a year before I could picture his thick black hair, straight aquiline nose, large brown eyes, and full lips smiling. And then one night I had a wonderful dream of making love to a healthy Jake.

Jake seemed like an island of tranquility in this world when I met him, and once I landed on that island I couldn't imagine life anywhere else. Jake and I were married the following May, for better or for worse. Our marriage lasted twelve years, deprived of the next forty years we craved.

I called Leonard at 9:30 the night I received his letter.

"Hi, this is the winsome widow in Connecticut you wrote to."

The phone went quiet.

"Oh, hi. So you got my letter," he finally said.

"Yes. I really liked it. My name is Kate."

"I liked your ad. You said you're a lawyer. What area do you practice in? Oh, and you can call me Len."

"Healthcare. I'm a healthcare lawyer."

"And your kids, how old are they?"

"Chloe is fifteen and Ben is twelve. They're genuinely great kids," I promised.

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“Mine are great too. I’m very close to them. Very close.”

“How old are yours?” I asked.

“Jennifer is twenty-six, Dale is twenty-four and Peter is twenty-one.”

My mind wandered. Why had he answered a personal ad if he was truly the man he portrayed in his letter? Countless people told me not to bother with personal ads, usually considered mating grounds for the desperate with nowhere else to turn. New York men portrayed as gobbled up like turkey at Thanksgiving within minutes of exiting a marriage by hordes of starving women. None of this would stop me. I wanted to know the man described in that letter.

“When did your husband die?” he asked using the softened tone I had learned to expect whenever anyone inquired about Jake’s death.

“Five years ago.”

I looked up at the white stucco ceiling and then at the equally white walls, as they seemed to close in around the bed that I was laying on, the bed that Jake and I used to share. The phone became a tape recorder as I repeated, for what seemed like the hundredth time, a quick rundown of my past. The same speech that I had delivered numerous times to strangers with whom I ventured out on dates, to see if they could be my match.

“After Jake’s death I had to take the Bar because I needed to get a job. My kids were so young at the time. I had graduated from law school eight years earlier and for those eight years I never opened a law book.”

The sigh that Len emitted felt so predictable it led to me releasing one of my own.

“That must have been difficult,” he replied.

I figured “No shit,” would lessen my chances of ever meeting him, so I continued on with my speech. I breathed in.

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“I’ve dated a lot but I don’t know. This one guy, a lawyer, I dated for two months turned out not to be such a nice guy and the guy after that was too weak. What I’m honestly looking for is what I had with my husband. I wan—need to have that again.”

Len remained silent. I took the time to count the pictures on my walls. What was he thinking? Had he hung up the phone?

“Listen,” he said, “we should meet. You live in Connecticut, right? We should meet somewhere halfway.”

Breathe out. Other men from New York, blind dates through friends, had told me that we should meet the next time I came to town. New York talk for “see you...maybe.”

Len and I made plans to meet the following week at a restaurant that I found in the Connecticut edition of *Zagat*. After we hung up, I lay in the comfort of my dark room in the loving arms of my bed. Listening to the silence of the night in my small town, I read his letter over and over again, not quite believing my good fortune.

On the Wednesday night that followed, wearing my lucky Donna Karan navy blue boucle suit with navy heels, I pulled into the gravel parking lot of the restaurant. I had last worn the suit to interview for my current job. Quickly remembering to check my hair in the mirror at roughly the same time that I found a parking space, I nearly caused an accident in the midst of this sudden impulse.

A few seconds later, with the car in a safe position, the mirror reflected the sophisticated New Yorker that I used to be and was now desperately trying to portray. I smiled in relief. Len was not about to meet a woman cloistered in Connecticut after the death of her husband.

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The walk toward the restaurant seemed to take an eternity. A man passed by me and in the dark of the parking lot I could see only that he appeared tall, good looking. It probably wasn't him. The restaurant's small wooden façade stood as the marker of a land far away, and a land into which I was not eager to venture.

With every step that I took, the dread that I felt about meeting Len increased. My expectations were high and for that one moment, I simply did not feel like I had the guts to go through with it. There have been many times in my life where the bad events and feelings lost their foul veneer. This could be one of them. Being single was not as bad as they say.

He was pacing around the small alcove of the restaurant when I walked through the door. I timed myself to be five minutes late—I just didn't know that Len did not expect to be kept waiting. Ever. His movements were abrupt, his impatience directing his steps. His back faced me as I walked over to introduce myself.

He turned around and under the dim lights of the old restaurant we sized each other up. Anthony Hopkins must have been free for the evening because he seemed to be standing there next to me with the stature of a lion. His piercing eyes revealing an icy stare through the frigid blue color. He had a full head of brownish hair, thinnish lips, and a strong face. He might not have been as good looking as Anthony Hopkins by any means or even considered handsome in the classical Robert Redford mode, yet he was very masculine.

But a closer inspection led me to the discovery that I was looking down at this man who seemed to be sporting a decent sized belly. Granted, I stood only at five-feet-five-inches, but I had chosen a pair of three-inch heels. It would be a long night twisting my ankles to appear shorter.

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“Kate?”

“Len, hi,” I answered back, half wondering what he thought of my appearance and how to inconspicuously walk on my ankles without tripping.

“Nice to meet you,” he said. “Let’s go in.”

Following Len in, I wondered if I would ever be able to sleep with him.

One look around the restaurant revealed what physically at least looked to be a hidden gem of southern Connecticut. Old wooden walls lit up by the glow of candlelight, skylights glistening with the images of lustrous stars above us, and simple white linen created a romantic setting. We were seated in a quiet corner of the restaurant.

Len seemed agitated as he fidgeted with his glasses in his hand. He wore a suit that would generously be described as not-quite navy and sheen. Not quite the outfit I envisioned for a partner at a major New York investment bank.

We sat in the wooden spindle chairs and looked at each other. After our phone conversation the past week, I felt that I knew a modest amount of information about this man, and yet I knew nothing. We were so far along in our lives that our histories could be conveniently revised. If I told him at that moment that I once played violin for The New York Philharmonic, he would have no choice but to believe me.

“How was your ride here? Any traffic out of New York?” I said.

“No, no traffic.”

Len put on his dark brown glasses and picked up his menu. He wore the glasses low on his nose and peered at me over the top of the menu.

“Do you know what you want?” he asked.

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Quick with the waiter, Len took off the glasses and looked at me.

“Where are your kids tonight?”

“I’m really lucky. The town I live in is very close knit. My kids spend a lot of time at their friends’ houses and their friends camp out at ours. And I have au pair from Germany, Myra. She’s just wonderful. Young enough to be playful but extremely responsible with them,” I said.

“My wife Judy stayed home with my children. I could work as much as I wanted.”

Len looked unconcerned how I might react to his words.

“Guess I don’t have that luxury. But having grown up in New York, I now get what a gift living in a small town has been to my kids and to me.”

I sat there counting my blessings to not be on a date with another bitter divorced man. But I intended to be serious, and ask him lots of questions. After having gone on so many dates, I became determined to unearth as much as I could the first night and sniff out the defects quickly.

“Do you like your work?” I asked.

“Absolutely. Everything about it including my company, Duke Heller, and a very large corner office on Wall Street.”

“You’re a lucky man.”

And then he blurted out, “I’m the safest partner in the company.”

Were all the other partners stealing the clients’ money?

“One of our partners has had affairs with some secretaries and junior women,” he continued, “Not me. No one could ever accuse me of that. I’m the safest partner.”

“You’re the safest partner? What an interesting way to look at your colleagues.”

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Len now sat stiffly in his chair. He appeared in complete control as if anything short of this would be evidence to me of some inherent weakness.

“You wouldn’t believe the things I do because of the people I meet through work. Opening night at the theatre, dinners with movie stars at the next table, travel around the world. I went to the Grammys last year,” he said.

I imagined being swept out of the restaurant, out of the awkwardness of blind dates and Connecticut suburbia and launched directly onto the red carpet in between the shadows of Mariah Carey and Kenny G. My life as I knew it would be far, far away.

Interrupted by the arrival of our dinner. Len went back to his stories and I pushed the food around my plate. The meal tasted mediocre at best but neither of us seemed to care. We both knew our way around the world class restaurants in New York. The night was not about being dazzled by the cuisine, but by the company.

The conversation was flowing easily but neither of us flirted and for the moment I felt hardly any chemistry for Len. One friend had advised me to put on my game face when out to dinner with a man but I had no intention of playing with this man – yet.

All too soon, the waiter arrived with the check. Len put on his glasses again, peered at the bill and calculated the tip.

“Let’s go,” he said.

We walked out to my car, a white Volvo sedan, and stood next to it in the cold night air, under a sky filled with glimmering stars and black landscape.

“I’ll call you, if you don’t mind?” he asked.

The night seemed a pleasant success. He wasn’t quite what I had pictured after reading his letter but for the first time in many dates I didn’t think being alone felt less painful

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than being with a man. There were possibilities here. The very handsome men I'd encountered since Jake hadn't looked so good when I got to know their character. So for once, a man's looks were going on the back burner in my priorities.

"I'd like that."

I stood still, bending awkwardly downward, hoping that a good night kiss was on its way. No luck. As he walked away toward his Mercedes, I wondered what Len thought of our evening. I would have to wait and see if he would call.

Len drove away and I sat motionless in my car. The stalemate between the punishing details of the past and the possibilities of my future constantly filled my head. The familiarity of the past often won after an evening with another new man provoked new fears. As the memories settled into the car, I surrendered to reliving them once again.

The first time I noticed Jake, in my freshman year of college, he was walking across the college green. One look at his handsome face, six foot five, two hundred twenty-five pound body and unassuming walk and it was love at first sight. But the thought didn't last long when I noticed his girlfriend, a beautiful tall Swedish blonde, by his side.

"Forget it," I thought and kept going.

Four years later Jake happened into the bar in Harvard Square where I was waitressing for the summer and strode right over to me.

"You went to Brown, didn't you? I remember seeing you on campus," he said.

He stuck to me like glue that night as I worked.

"Here's my phone number, give me a call," he said as he headed to the door around midnight.

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I looked at the slip of paper and knew it wasn't in me to phone a guy.

Ten minutes later Jake reappeared in the bar.

"I walked around the block and realized you wouldn't call. Please give me your number," he said.

Our first date was on a Friday night in August of 1975. I had just graduated from college. Jake, now a fourth year medical student, picked me up in his decrepit 1965 Buick. We sat in a local restaurant, and then my apartment, talking until four in the morning. By Sunday night, our second date, we had decided to live together.

It felt so easy to fall in love with Jake. His gentle, soft-spoken manner was disarmingly at odds with his large body, a big teddy bear of a man, and rugged good looks. Having grown up with very little money, he loved to tell stories about his dogged transition from a blue-collar future to what he called the halls of the Mecca of medicine.

During the three months after Jake died, I went to his grave at least once a day and begged him to come back. For six months I cried myself to sleep. Sometimes as I shut my eyes, I thought of Jake trying not to close his for the last time. I opened my eyes and shut them, over and over again.

Each night at eight I crawled into bed, as soon as my children, seven-year-old Chloe and four-year-old Ben, were asleep. Not able to face evenings without Jake, sleep was my escape. But it was nightmarish that they might feel they had lost both parents.

Bedtime was often hell for Chloe and Ben. After we finished our nightly ritual of reading before trying to sleep, Jake's absence took hold.

"How could there be a God? How could He take Daddy away?" Chloe screamed one night. "Daddy was so good. I want him back. What if you die and I have no parents?"

I hugged her tightly and after she calmed down a bit, I repeated to her the words that Rabbi Shapiro had said to me shortly after Jake died.

“You will never know if there is a God, you will never know why Daddy died. But tomorrow morning you will get out of bed and have a wonderful day because that is what Daddy would want you to do.”

Chloe seemed to find consolation in these words. She put her head down on the colorful Strawberry Shortcake pillowcase and fell asleep quickly. Then alone in my room, I cried wondering how long I’d have the strength to comfort my children.

Ben was full of fear. He cried for his Daddy but also for himself.

“I’m scared of dying. What if there is no after-life?” my precocious four-year-old son asked one evening.

Ben became hysterical one night missing his Daddy. For the first time I consoled him with a new message.

“One day I will remarry and you will have a father again.”

“When? How soon?”

“Well, first I’ll have to find someone to love, and he’ll have to love me too.”

Chloe, sitting on her brother’s bed listening, rolled her eyes up as if that could never happen.

“Do it while I’m still young,” Ben said.

After school one afternoon, while emptying Chloe’s backpack, I found a paper on which the teacher asked her students to make a list of wishes. Chloe had two: I wish I had a father, I wish I won’t die young. My children lost their innocence so early in their lives. Only time would put enough distance between Jake’s death and a life for Chloe and Ben and me. I had to pay my dues in time, to serve time in a grief cell.

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As the months went on, I stopped going to the cemetery so often. The grave was covered with snow and I wondered if Jake felt cold. But he was buried near the main street of my small town and I drove past there several times a day. His arms seemed to reach out to me as I drove past begging me to visit. I began to resist.

I found a therapist and lived for that one hour a week appointment. And then I tried a widow's support group for a while. It was easy to identify with these women and the experience felt beneficial for a short time. But it appeared most useful in showing me what I didn't want to be – a professional widow.

At Christmas time an invitation arrived for a party for many of the doctors from the hospital where Jake had worked. Walking into a large room where couples stood laughing, holding hands, and sharing stories of their latest vacation or purchases, I floated around, trying to fit in but regretted accepting the invitation.

There were days when I even expected Jake to show up, to ring the doorbell or call on the phone. Maybe God would give him a special dispensation to make one call or Jake would just sneak one in. I felt desperate for that one contact. Jake's eyes gazing at me. Just one more long embrace in his arms. But I knew if I found myself one day thinking Jake was back, alive, I'd have lost my sanity. The price tag was too high. Chloe and Ben needed me.

We began to travel. To pay for our trip to St. Lucia, I sold Jake's car. Terrified of going on this trip, I dreaded feeling alone once we were there, but when we arrived, I was lulled at first by the beauty of the island and the Caribbean. It felt wonderful to be thousands of miles away from my nightmare, but how foolish of me to think my suitcase of memories had not traveled with us.

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This trip meant a break with the past and, Lord knows, I might even have fun, but I felt so jealous of the couples there. They couldn't possibly have a past like mine, not with the abandon with which they seemed to enjoy themselves. Each evening at dinner I watched as the couples around me appeared to relish each other while I sank into my chair with envy.

Chloe, Ben and I also learned to cope with the fact that one adult and two children on vacation are a family.

"I asked your son where his father was, and he told me your husband is in Africa hunting wild animals," one woman informed me.

Ben was in the room.

"She asked me where my Dad was. I just wanted her to leave me alone. If I told her the truth she would have asked me a thousand questions."

"But you don't really believe that's where Daddy is, do you?"

"No!"

The first anniversary of Jake's death approached, a whole year without Jake's love permeating everything I did. Now determined to build a core of strength within so that no matter how low I might sink, no matter how much I missed Jake, I knew I would make it. What went down, must come up.

Laying in bed that night, while staring at the holes in the wall that had been made to hold intravenous lines for Jake, I decided to plug them and reclaim my bedroom. With the wall painted and a new pink flowered duvet, the room appeared revived and the chains of cancer removed at last.

It took me a year and a half to take Jake's clothes out of my closet, and then I kissed and hugged his shirts goodbye. It

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took me two years to take off my wedding ring. First I put it on my other hand and then began practicing taking it on and off. I even put Jake's desk in the basement and threw away his radiology journals.

Breaking out of my shell felt terrifying and fear pervaded every step of learning to live all over again. I created a comfortable place for myself where I wasn't crying myself to sleep anymore, but it was such a cold place. Living in a world with tunnel vision, taking care of two young children, I denied myself the many experiences and pleasures the couples around me seemed to enjoy.

Secure in my widow's walk I took no risks. I did not date. When any man showed interest in me, I only was reminded I had lost my match. Not running away from a marriage lost in divorce, I was not consumed with anger at an ex-spouse. But I feared spending the next forty years alone. No men, no sex, no love.

And yet the kids' energy and resilience pulled me into their world. Chloe and Ben would lead the way back into life. I would lose them if I didn't make a life for them; they had suffered enough.

"Is Daddy in the same heaven as Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig?" Ben asked after Little League one day.

"Sure he is."

"Then he must be very happy."

"I never thought of it that way. I bet he is."

For two years after Jake died we lived on money he had left us and I felt grateful for that time to be with Chloe and Ben. Now I needed a job and money and passing the Bar that summer removed one major hurdle in the way.

A friend suggested I call the law department of a large insurance company in central Connecticut. He said the

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General Counsel at the company, a woman, was paving the way for female lawyers. Since Ben would be starting first grade in the fall and I desperately wanted to be there to put him on the bus in the morning and when he arrived home, I asked about a part-time job.

"The only part-time jobs we have are obtained through a temp agency," the woman informed me.

"Why?"

"Well, that is how we've always done it. It is essentially the policy of our department," she responded.

"Why?"

An hour later, after we had discussed over and over again the logic of how "we've always done it", she caved and offered me an interview. I was hired immediately after the meeting.

My friends repeatedly assured me the sun would sneak into my hobbled world again. I no longer doubted them as a certain lightness returned when the denial and anger died.

Then, no longer feeling sorry for Jake but for myself, I wanted to live again. It was not the highs that I craved, but the lows I feared. Just feeling okay sufficed.

Re-entering the world of my neighbors, my friends, no longer did I draw them into the darkness of my life. It was time to live in the compelling light of theirs and move forward. I started the car and headed home aching for Len to call again.