

The Never Never Sisters

Prologue

The first thing I do is offer them candy. I keep a jar of it, well-stocked, right there on the coffee table.

In my experience, people are one hundred percent less likely to tell a lie with a Hershey's Kiss tucked into the side of their mouth. So while they're unwrapping their chocolate or caramel or whatever, I lob the easy questions at them: How long have they been together? Do they have any kids?

And then, once they've relaxed a little, settled into the beige couch across from my blue chair, I probe: What do they want out of our meeting? If I sense from one of them a certain reticence, as I did that Tuesday morning, I repeat the question.

I've found it helpful, when pressing for the truth, to lean forward and hold eye contact. So I employed this method as I posed the question once more to both Scott Jacoby and his wife, Helene.

"What. Do. *You*. Want?"

Helene—a tiny feminine woman with the brash voice of a New York City traffic cop—stared back at me with an electric gaze. "To save our marriage."

I'm not sure how I developed this particular niche, but usually the couples who I meet with in counseling sessions aren't in need of mere tune-ups. No one asks me for tips on how to stoke an already ignited passion or to help mediate a dispute so that both parties feel sufficiently heard. My clients come to me in full-on crisis mode, swinging from the broken rope bridge of their marriage—the point at which they'll either let go into free fall or scramble to safety.

Scott was still silent, his arms crossed over his navy suit jacket. I hadn't yet determined whether he was annoyed at having to leave work in the middle of the day or if his body language was a symptom of greater marital fatigue.

He stared across the room in the direction of the photo I'd hung on the wall. It was a picture from my wedding two years before, not that my clients could tell this, because it was of our midsections and taken from the back: my white silk veil, the dark block of my husband Dave's tux, our interlocking forearms. I hoped it was generic enough that people would see in it their own happier times, but Scott's unfocused eyes indicated that he wasn't envisioning anything so hopeful.

“What do *you* really want, Scott?”

Waiting for his response, Helene leaned so far forward in her chair that she appeared to be praying. I've seen a lot of heartache in my office, but it took my breath away—those troubled eyes in the middle of that frozen, perfectly made-up face.

“Scott?” My voice was as gentle as it could be.

Finally, Scott sighed, then rubbed his cheek with his right hand. “I don't know what I want.”

“Okay.” I took care to sound appropriately neutral. “Take some time. Try to think about it.” I pushed the candy jar toward him. It should be said that I buy only the good stuff: Hershey's Kisses, Werther's, Reese's Minis—none of those nubby little mints or hard candies with wrappers in the image of strawberries to help you associate the flavor.

Although I know better than to take it personally whether my clients' marriages work or not . . . I can't help myself. I take it all very personally.

Dave had pointed out the irony of this when I came home one day and declared I was a failure. (I was right on that count; the Guinets did not make it.) “You ask them what they want, right?”

“Yes.” He’d left out the second part, the “why,” so I reminded him. “It’s like an oral contract. They commit to wanting the marriage to work in that initial moment and it’s helpful later, when things get tough.”

“But if you keep having to remind them what they want, how do you know it’s still truly what they want?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” I had said. “It’s a very intimate environment in my office.” I didn’t have a good response right then, but two days later, when I heard his key in the lock, I met him at the door with a spatula. “Listen,” I said.

He’d stepped back, out of the range of the spatula, which had dripped marinara sauce in a large splotch in the entry hall. “Listening.”

“If people come to me, they want to protect their marriages. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to help them—okay?”

He’d leaned down and kissed my head. “Okay.”

As I explained to Helene and Scott how we could proceed, that was the undercurrent I tried to convey: that I respected their step toward protecting the sacred and that I would help them as best I could.

I will always remember that—the three of us sitting in the office, clustered around the candy jar, as we pledged to resuscitate their marriage, me just the tiniest bit smug, totally oblivious to the fact that at that exact moment, my own marriage had begun to fall apart.

July

Chapter One

Although it was only three o'clock in the afternoon when the Jacobys left my office, I was done for the day. I really wanted Helene and Scott to hire me. I respected their marriage, yes, but I was also salivating at the thought of an additional Tuesday or Thursday session.

Dave had had a brutal few months at the office: seven-day workweeks and late nights. The summer was not unfolding as we'd planned back in February, when we'd optimistically rented a house in Quogue that we'd seen online. Quogue was not one of the scene-y Hamptons towns, and the house itself was just what we could afford—modest and far from the beach, but it looked adorable. Three tiny bedrooms upstairs, a bright yellow kitchen with big white-knobbed fifties-style appliances and a sweeping tree with a rope hammock in the front yard. Dave had been too busy with work, so my mom had helped me narrow down the search. “Charming,” we'd both proclaimed at first sight of the Quogue cottage. “That's it!”

Even though my calendar had *Quogue* written across each weekend (as well as the last two weeks in August), we'd had yet to see it in person. All our friends were already out there, and Dave had pushed me to go alone—*someone* should enjoy it, he said—but he hadn't had a single day off since Memorial Day, and it would've felt disloyal. I didn't want to resent his work schedule; I wanted to fill mine, but it was difficult to drum up clients in the summer months on the emptied-out Upper East Side.

I puzzled over this as I walked the five blocks home from my office, that instead of using my free time productively, the opposite was happening: the less I worked, the less I did. I should have been catching up on billing. I should have been focusing on business development: talks, articles, blogs. By Sixty-eighth Street, I'd resolved to contact my master's program administrators to see whether they

knew of any volunteer opportunities. By Seventy-second Street, I realized that I should not be passively waiting for opportunities; I should create one. How hard could it be to write a grant proposal? I would single-handedly bring marriage counseling to an underserved neighborhood. Maybe Mott Haven? By the time I reached my block, Seventy-sixth street, I was imagining being notified of the award I'd receive for my dedication in having started All Hearts, which is what I'd name it. Or For All Hearts.

I was picturing myself approaching a podium in that navy sheath I'd seen online when I pushed open the door to my apartment and was stopped short by the inside chain. I stepped backward to make sure that I'd gotten off on the right floor, because all the hallways in my building were identical, but our neighbor Jake Driver's kindergarten scrawl, *Welcam*, Scotch-taped on the door across the hall, was confirmation: I had made it home.

"Hello?" I called in the sliver of space between the door and the entryway. I could only see the wall, but I heard the TV, the sound of it being switched off and, eventually, the shuffling of feet down the hall and then the pushing closed of the door, a breeze puffing in my face and the rattling of the chain.

Then the door opened and there, at three twenty in the afternoon—or, as he would call it on any other day, "lunchtime"—was my husband, Dave, his face streaked with tears.

Chapter Two

He spoke first. “You’re home this early every day?”

I reached out slowly, put my keys on the entry table. “On Tuesdays, yes.”

“Wow. No wonder you have so much time to work out.” He turned and walked away from me, back into the living room.

I followed him. “Dave?”

He had slumped down on the couch. “What?”

I controlled my stream of questions—why was he home and, more important, acting like a total asshole?—and sat down next to him. “Did something happen?”

He held up a palm, like a celebrity deflecting paparazzi. “No quack talk, please.”

“No, of course not.” *Quack talk?*

“I really don’t want to get into it.”

“Did you get fired?”

“No!”

“You’re crying?”

“I was.”

“Is someone . . . hurt?”

“No.” He slouched down farther. “Not physically. I’m not getting into it.”

I stood up. “Okay.” I could tell that his diffidence was an act; he was watching me, curious about what I’d do next. If I’d said what I really wanted to say, we would’ve started fighting, so I worked hard, very hard, to raise and lift my shoulders in a shrug. “Just tell me when you’re ready to talk.”

What now? I walked back down the entry hall and picked up the bag I'd left in the corner of the hall. My hands shaking, I unpacked my wallet and sunglasses and placed them on random shelves in the entry hall closet. How serious could it be if no one was hurt? Maybe something happening with one of his clients or fallout from an office power play? Eventually, Dave shuffled back down the hall.

"I was suspended from work," he said. "For two weeks. They wouldn't tell me why. I didn't do anything wrong, and I don't want to talk about it yet."

"Okay." It may sound callous, but I felt instant relief. Dave's law firm was a notorious hotbed of internal politics, and being temporarily ousted for a mysterious nonreason seemed in line with the other horror stories I'd heard from Duane Covington, like getting summoned back from your vacation when you were standing in line to board a plane to Europe, like being bullied into signing over to a more powerful partner the client you'd worked so hard to land, like pretending you hadn't billed as much as you had so that same partner could take credit for your work. A suspension explained Dave's reaction (he was a workaholic and would be understandably freaked-out by this) yet was easily remediable. He didn't need to stay with Duane Covington; his clients would follow him anywhere. I waited for Dave to tell me more, but all he did was stand in the hallway with a spaced-out expression that was disturbingly similar to Scott Jacoby's.

"Can we rehash it tomorrow?"

"Of course." I put down my bag. This was a work issue, separate from us, and the best I could do was avoid a major fight by stepping back and listening. Everyone craves being understood. We need it; we work for it; we exhaust our vocabularies to make sure we've properly communicated our viewpoints. But we don't put in one-eighth of that effort trying to understand others. I swear it's physiological, because even knowing this, I'd felt it myself thirty seconds before—an ember in the pit of my stomach driving me to push back at Dave's adolescent sulk.

"I'm sorry for being a dick."

I waved my hand, magnanimous and a little proud of myself for my measured reactions. It wasn't

ever easy.

“I’m going to set up an office in the guest room.”

“Yeah?” One of the summer projects on which I was already behind was renovating the guest room. Ian, our decorator, and I had a big meeting planned for the following week, and by then I was supposed to have cleared out everything Ian had tagged during our last meeting. “Creating the canvas,” he’d called it, because Ian was a person who said such things without irony. “You’re not going to work in the office alcove?”

“That’s not really an office. It’s more like a desk in the kitchen.”

“Oh.”

“I think I’ll need more space.”

“Fair point.” Dave and I were a little out of our league with Ian; we’d have never been able to command an audience with him if he hadn’t just completed a huge job for my parents. I was already on thin ice; last month Ian had not at all been happy when I changed my mind about the window shade fabric. He and I had only just recently reestablished our delicate rapport—a sensai-protégé dynamic that worked best when Ian spouted wisdom and rattled off designer names and I listened, wide-eyed, trying to think of good questions to ask that would prove I’d been paying attention.

I couldn’t imagine how long I’d pay the price if I canceled next week’s meeting. Nor, I realized, could I explain to Dave that my decorator anxiety meant no home office for him.

“There’s a lot of crap in here.” Dave had walked to the door of the office. “And what’s all this tape everywhere?” He ripped off a long piece from a lampshade and held it up for my inspection.

“It’s for the renovation.” I opened the closet to a solid wall of boxes that we’d stacked up to the ceiling when we first moved in three years before. Honestly, I’d forgotten they were there. The mess was apparently the last straw for Dave, who slid down along the wall until he was sitting in a heap on the floor.

“Don’t worry. I’ll get rid of all of it. I’ll move the boxes to the bedroom and we can put the

renovation piles in here.” Right at my eye level was a box labeled in my mom’s slanted handwriting: *Paige, Childhood*. Seeing it, I felt a fresh, perhaps overly dramatic, wave of urgency. Like many therapists, I had a keen awareness of the unhealthy family dynamics that I would not pass down to the next generation. There would be no secret-filled box for me and Dave.

“Dave,” I said, “we have to air the ugly things.”

He saw me looking at the box and nodded, realizing what I was thinking. “It’s not like that,” he said. “I’m just tired.”

So I helped him plug in the cords, clear off the desk and shove into the closet anything that might distract him from his work. After a half an hour of item shuffling, we surveyed the room. “This looks good,” I said, although it didn’t.

“Yeah. Well.” He sat down gingerly, fidgeting around before extending his arms like a virtuoso pianist. “I should probably get some work done.” And then, before I was out the door, he started typing, his fingers scrambling in constant motion across the keyboard as though they were being chased.