

A stylized black and white illustration of a woman in profile, reaching up with her right hand towards a red apple hanging from a leafy branch. The woman's silhouette is solid black, and the branches and leaves are also black, creating a high-contrast, graphic effect. The apple is a solid red color, standing out against the white background.

# HARD TO GET

20-SOMETHING  
WOMEN  
AND THE PARADOX OF  
SEXUAL FREEDOM

**LESLIE C. BELL**

"An important book for women  
—and men."

ARLIE HOCHSCHILD

# Hard to Get

*Twenty-Something Women and  
the Paradox of Sexual Freedom*

Leslie C. Bell



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"While popular portrayals of women and sex are glossy, voyeuristic, simplified, unemotional, or trite, *Hard to Get* offers rarely heard detailed stories told with emotional resonance and connection to women's full lives and selves. Bell has made a superb contribution to our understanding about how women navigate sexuality in young adulthood in an era when they no longer must be married, and thus she has enlightened our understanding of women's social, sexual, and psychological lives."

—Karin A. Martin, author of *Puberty, Sexuality, and the Self: Boys and Girls at Adolescence*

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—Daphne de Marneffe, author of *Maternal Desire: On Children, Love, and the Inner Life*

**Hard to Get**

*For Alex*

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## CHAPTER ONE

# The Paradox of Sexual Freedom

Excited yet embarrassed, Claudia, a twenty-eight-year-old postdoctoral researcher, told me about a one-night stand she'd had the night before our interview. I listened as she described the encounter: the fun of flirting with the man at a concert, the excitement and nervousness when it was still unclear what would happen, and the pleasure of being touched by someone she found so attractive. But I noticed that her pleasure gave way to worry that her strong sexual desires might get her into trouble. "I wish I weren't so horny, so I didn't need to go out and get it so much. I wish I could take a pill to kill my desire," she confided. Claudia felt some shame about her sexual desires and feared others might label her a "ho" for acting on them. She imagined that her Mexican Catholic family would be horrified if they knew about the number of sexual partners she'd had, that they would be devastated and disappointed that their daughter had not become the woman they raised her to be: a good girl who would marry her first boyfriend.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the strength of her sexual desires sometimes frightened her, and she

feared that men might find them overwhelming. Claudia also worried that being in a relationship would mean a loss of her identity, as she had witnessed her mother sacrifice her own dreams and adventurous spirit to be a wife and parent. Consequently, Claudia had not settled down, and she felt baffled at how difficult it had been to develop successful relationships with men. She had doggedly pursued her career goals as an academic and felt accomplished in that arena, but wondered why she hadn't had as much success in relationships.

At every turn and from every angle, Claudia was uncomfortable with the dimensions of her sexuality. Claudia, like many twenty-something women, was not playing hard to get. But good sex and relationships were proving elusive.

This is not the outcome Claudia's feminist foremothers dreamed of for her. Today's young women are supposed to be liberated from old edicts about sex and love. Their twenties ought to be a decade of freedom and exploration. But in interviews and in my psychotherapy practice with young women, I have found them to be more confused than ever about not only *how* to get what they want, but *what* they want.

Did Claudia want a relationship? Maybe, but not too serious a relationship; she didn't want to be held back from pursuing her goals. Did she want casual sex? Maybe, but only if she could feel safe enough. Did she want to have regular orgasms? Yes, but she was afraid of losing too much control.

In this book, I explore what is going on with highly educated twenty-something women when they're not busy advancing their careers and professional lives in the twenty-first century. Freed from economic, social, and biological pressure to marry and reproduce in their twenties, I explore what's happening in their love and sex lives. A glance at young women in the media—

see, for example, Natalie Portman's portrayal of the emotionally detached and high-achieving Emma in the 2011 film *No Strings Attached*, stories of twenty-something women outearning men, and reports of women outnumbering men on college campuses—might lead one to think that they're happily playing the field, sowing their wild oats, loving their independence and freedom, and building their careers before they settle down in their thirties.<sup>2</sup> But this new developmental period is more complicated than simplified media representations would have us believe.<sup>3</sup> Marriage and motherhood used to mark the transition to adulthood for women—highly educated or not. No longer is this the case. The black box of the twenties for contemporary women, the beneficiaries of so many gains for women in education, work, and sex, needs to be opened.

Young women who are college-educated and childless are part of a new generation that has a longer time for self-exploration than did earlier generations of women. For many women, the twenties are no longer a time principally devoted to either partnership or children. They have more freedom than women a few generations ago would have imagined possible. This period would seem to be ripe with possibilities for sexual and relationship satisfaction.<sup>4</sup>

I take a look at this new in-between period of early adulthood for twenty-somethings and how it offers women a mixed bag: opportunities, to be sure, but also retrograde messages about their identities as sexual beings, partners, and future mothers. And while they have plenty of training in how to be successful and in control of their careers, young women have little help or training, apart from the self-help aisle in their local bookstore, in how to manage these freedoms, mixed messages, and their own desires to get what they want from sex and love.

The absence of such useful training, combined with the new freedoms and mixed messages that characterize their twenties, contribute to a paradox of sexual freedom.<sup>5</sup> Young women may appear to have more choices than ever before, but the opening up of cultural notions of what is acceptable for women generates great confusion, uncertainty, and anxiety. Some women then find shelter in the process of splitting—a defense that involves seeing the world in black-and-white terms—to resolve the internal conflicts they feel about their desires. Through the series of case studies in the chapters that follow, I tease out various strands of the internal conflicts that some women feel as they attempt to navigate early adulthood without, in many cases, being conscious of their panoply of mixed desires and motivations.

#### THE PARADOX OF SEXUAL FREEDOM

This in-between period of early adulthood provides a window into the social, cultural, and economic changes that have been afoot for the past five decades.<sup>6</sup> And twenty-something women bear the imprint of those changes. For these resourceful women, sex and relationships really can occur independent of marriage and reproduction in their twenties. The current average age of first sexual intercourse for girls is seventeen, leaving ten years of sexual and relationship activity before the current average age of marriage at twenty-seven. These women don't think twice about cohabiting with a partner, or about delaying marriage until their own careers are on track.

In formulating this study, I thought that these women would describe this time in their lives as one in which they were relatively free from social restrictions and proscriptions on sexual-



ity and relationships, but through my research and my psychotherapy practice, I discovered a different story. Instead of feeling free, twenty-something women are weighed down by vying cultural notions about the kind of sex and relationships they should be having in their twenties. Be assertive, but not aggressive. Be feminine, but not too passive. Be sexually adventurous, but don't alienate men with your sexual prowess. Be honest and open, but don't overwhelm someone with too much personal information. They are taught to seek out a companionate relationship of equals. But at the same time they are instructed by increasingly popular arguments from the burgeoning field of evolutionary psychology about irreconcilable differences between men and women. Meanwhile, they spend their twenties hearing gloomy forecasts about their chances of marriage if they don't marry before thirty, and their chances of conceiving a baby if they don't get pregnant before thirty-five. Given the discordant nature of these prescriptions, it's no wonder that the women I interviewed and counsel struggle to square these contradictory messages with their own individual experiences.

With relationships, women hear that they ought to use their twenties to "live it up" and not necessarily to be serious about relationships. Indeed, they ought not care very much about relationships, and shouldn't be devastated when relationships don't work out. Hearing advice across the self-help spectrum—from *The Rules*, which admonishes them to pretend to be independent to get into a relationship, to *He's Just Not That into You*, which entreats them to stop being so needy and get on with their lives after a breakup—young women often struggle to admit that they need anyone, but it's particularly difficult to say that they need a man. At the same time, they are enjoined to remember that partnership and marriage are just around the