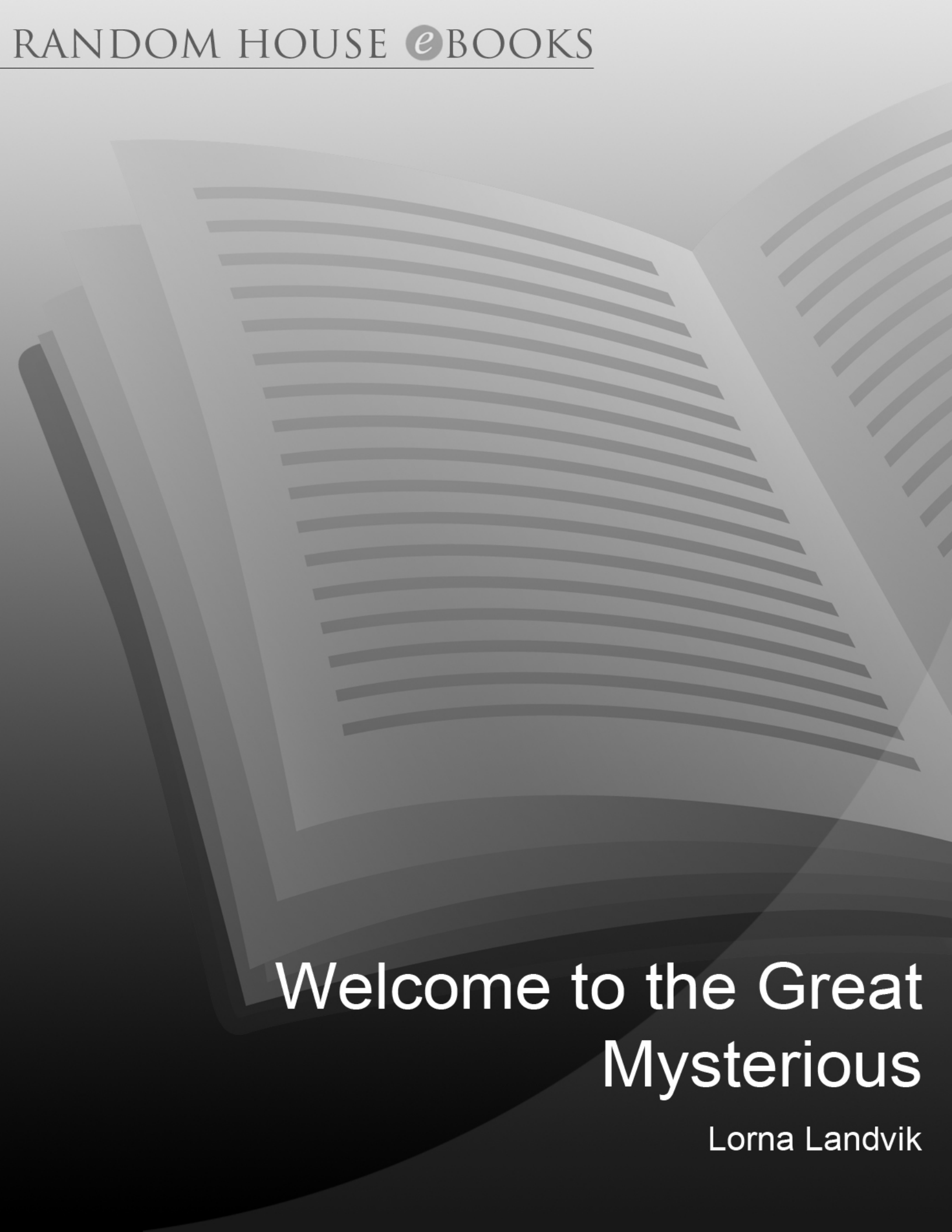


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Welcome to the Great Mysterious

Lorna Landvik

About the Book

Diva Geneva Jordan has performed for millions on stage, screen and television but her current leading role is in Minnesota. She has agreed to look after her thirteen-year-old nephew, a boy with Down's syndrome, while his parents take a long-overdue vacation. Though Geneva and her sister, Ann, are as different as night and day ('I being night, of course, dark and dramatic'), Geneva remembers she had a family before she had a star on her door. But so accustomed is she to playing the lead, finding herself a supporting actress in someone else's life is strange and unexplored territory.

Then the discovery of an old scrapbook that she and her sister created long ago starts her thinking of things beyond fame. For *The Great Mysterious* is a collection of thoughts and feelings dedicated to answering life's BIG questions - far outside the spotlight's glow ...

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Also by Lorna Landvik

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Welcome to the Great Mysterious

Lorna Landvik

*For my brothers,
Wendell and Lanny
and in memory of Greg*

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CHAPTER 1

ALL RIGHT, SO I'm a diva. There are worse things—a mass murderer, a bigot, a telephone solicitor.

I'm surprised my sister even uses the word as an insult. Why should I be offended by the truth? My dictionary defines *diva* as “a distinguished female singer.” I certainly am that. The word, however, is cross-referenced with *prima donna*, defined as “a temperamental person; a person who takes adulation and privileged treatment as a right and reacts with petulance to criticism or inconvenience.”

Well, I might ask, who likes criticism or inconvenience? And why shouldn't one take privileged treatment as a right? A little self-esteem is *not* a bad thing. Ann, for instance, could use a serious infusion of it.

Throughout my life I have heard the question, “Are you *really* twins?” It's an understandable query; Ann and I are as different as the proverbial night and day. Ann once elaborated on that analogy in an interview, describing me as being night—dark and dramatic, living among stars—and herself as light and plain and about as exciting as an afternoon nap.

We're fraternal twins, obviously, and don't share that spooky, ESPy you're-my-other-half thing identical twins do. Ann and I are more like sisters who could have been born years apart if Mom hadn't been such an industrious egg layer. We're very close and have shared everything from chicken pox to clothes to deep secrets, but when I look at Ann face-to-face, I don't see my mirror image. In fact, if I looked at Ann right now, what I'd see is a big pest.

For those of you who don't know me (where the hell have you been living, in a cave with no TV or cable access?) I am Geneva Jordan, star of stage, screen (unfortunately, my theatrical schedule hasn't allowed me to do hardly any of the movies I've been offered), and television (if you didn't see me accept my Tony award, I'm sure you've heard my voice singing the Aromati-Cat cat litter and Chef Mustachio Frozen Pizza jingles). Recently I just ended a year and a half's run in the title role of *Mona!*, a musical about DaVinci's mysterious model.

*She's a gal with a crazy half smile, she's Mona Lisa!
Oh, what I wouldn't do to get a piece a . . . that Mona Lisa!*

You'll have to trust me that the music is so catchy, the lyrics actually work.

My role as Mona Lisa brought me my second Tony, a cover story in *New York* magazine, and a relationship with Trevor Waite, my costar. My role as Mona Lisa and its resulting dividends, *especially* my relationship with Trevor Waite, is also what brought me close to mental and physical collapse. Which made my sister's request all the more preposterous.

"Please," she begged over the phone, changing her tack from insulter to supplicant. "Riley and I need this time together."

"I'm not arguing that, Ann. It's where I come in as baby-sitter that I'm objecting to."

"You're Rich's godmother."

"I'm aware of that, Ann. But godmother does not mean rescuer."

"Then what does it mean?"

I looked at my watch. I didn't have to be anywhere for another hour, but she didn't have to know that. "I have to run, Ann. I've got a hair appointment."

"What does it mean?"

"Listen, Ann, I don't—"

“Quit calling me Ann.”

“That’s your name, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but whenever you’re in one of your I’m-right-and-you’re-wrong modes, you overuse my name. Like a cranky old schoolmarm or something.”

“First I’m a diva and now I’m a cranky old schoolmarm. Nice talking to you too, *Ann*.”

I could hear her protests as I hung—okay, slammed—the receiver back in its cradle.

She called back immediately, not grasping the concept of a dramatic exit. I let my machine pick it up.

“Geneva,” she said, “please. I’m sorry. I don’t know where else to turn. Please pick up. . . . Please help me, Dee.”

Oh, that was low. *Dee* was a reference to the childhood nicknames bestowed on us by our Grandma Hjordis.

“It’s Tweedledee and Tweedledum!” she used to say in her Norwegian accent, “my favorite twin grandchildren in the world!”

We were her *only* twin grandchildren, but she made us feel that we couldn’t have been surpassed by quintuplets.

She lived next door to us, and her home was a cinnamon-roll-smelling haven for my sister and me, a place where she played endless games of Hangman and War with us and let us upend all her furniture cushions to make elaborate igloos (when we played Roald Amundsen discovering the South Pole) or wigwams (when we played Leif Eriksson discovering America). She had a canoe in the backyard that we’d pretend was the *Kon-Tiki*.

Grandma Hjordis was a Norwegian nationalist to the core and never let an opportunity pass to indoctrinate her granddaughters in the robust history of her homeland and its explorers.

“Try not to be afraid of new things,” she advised. “The world is more fun if you’re not a scaredy-cat.”

When she died suddenly, breaking our fourteen-year-old hearts, we buried her nicknames for us with her, and only

brought them out in moments of crisis.

I picked up the phone.

“All right,” I said, my voice a concentrate of exasperation. “You have a one-minute extension. Don’t think I’m saying yes. I’m just saying I’ll listen to you—for *one more minute*.”

“Okay,” said Ann eagerly, like a game show contestant heading for the bonus round. She took a deep breath. “You know how hard Riley works—my gosh, you don’t get to be chair of the English department without working hard—”

“You’re not telling me anything new, Ann.”

“Your interruptions don’t cut into my time, do they?”

I sighed. “Get to the point, Ann.”

“Okay, okay. Anyway, this is a chance for us to be together— alone—for the first time since Rich was born, Geneva. Thirteen years! And in Italy, Geneva—Italy!”

I sighed again. “Can’t Mom fly up?”

“You know her hip is still bothering her. And how can she leave Dad?”

After a lifetime of good health, our parents, now living in a retirement community in Arizona, had finally drawn the sorry-you-lose cards. Mom had had hip-replacement surgery the previous summer, and Dad was recuperating from a mild stroke that affected his balance and sometimes his memory. These old-age infirmities were certainly no fun for them. Still, didn’t they realize their problems were a big inconvenience for the rest of us? (Don’t sic AARP on me—I’m just joking.)

“All right, all right.”

“You mean all right as in you’ll do it?”

I laughed—inappropriately, I suppose. “God, no. I meant all right as in don’t talk anymore.”

“My minute’s up?” Sometimes my sister is far too literal for her own good.

“Ann, I’ll get back to you by the weekend, okay?”

“With an answer?”

“No, with an Olé and Lena joke.”

Ann ignored my sarcasm.

“Thanks, Geneva.”

“I haven’t said yes yet,” I reminded her.

“I know, but thanks anyway.”

I hung up quickly; her gratitude actually seemed to have heat, and my ear burned from it.

I grabbed my cashmere coat—one of the presents Trevor had given me that he hadn’t repossessed. When we had broken up, I threw my engagement ring at him, never thinking for a minute that the tightwad wouldn’t give it back.

I guess he wasn’t really cheap—he did spend a lot of money on me—but he often tainted the gift-giving experience by telling me what wildly expensive thing he was *going* to get me before presenting me with a less expensive substitute that somehow “said Geneva louder.” Cashmere said Geneva louder than mink. A picnic in Central Park said Geneva louder than lunch at the Four Seasons. Once we were browsing through a rare-book store, and the first edition of *Marjorie Morningstar* said Geneva louder than the first edition of *The Great Gatsby*.

“You’re so much more Marjorie than Daisy,” he had said, taking out his credit card to pay for the book, which conveniently happened to be about three hundred dollars less than the one I wanted. I suppose I sound ungrateful, but really, it hurt my feelings that everything that said Geneva was second-best.

Outside the air was brisk and everyone was moving in the usual out-of-my-way-or-I’ll-trample-you pace I love so well. Autumn in New York—my favorite time of year in the city. You can see why they wrote a song about it. On that day it was as if all of Manhattan was still in the back-to-school state of mind that had begun in September, busy and energized and full of big plans and bigger ideas. A person’s senses were cranked up: colors seemed sharper, noises louder, and smells from hot dog and pretzel vendors’ carts

positively aromatic. And yet in the midst of all this a slight melancholia seemed to filter through the city skies, making everything seem . . . I don't know, somehow *tender*.

A fan stopped me outside of Tiffany's.

"Geneva Jordan!" she said in that surprised tone that made me feel I was less a human than an apparition.

I fluttered my fingers in a wave, hoping that was enough for her. It wasn't.

"Will you sign my—" She looked at her armload of packages for something to write on. "My Tiffany's bag?"

"Only if I can keep what's inside."

She looked stricken for a moment, until I reassured her I was only joking.

I always have pens in my coat pockets; it speeds up the process. She handed me the bag, and for a minute I thought about running off with it and giving her a really good scare, but instead I politely asked her name.

"Beth," she said. "I read about you leaving *Mona!*, which, by the way, I loved you in. Not as much as I loved you in *Sunny Skies* or *The Wench of Wellsmore*, but still, those scenes between you and Trevor Waite—"

"How kind of you to say so," I said, capping my pen and giving her back her Tiffany's bag. "Now I must run—nice talking to you!"

I raced off as quickly as I could on my three-inch-heel boots. These fans will stand around and yak all day if you let them, telling you what they've liked about your career and what they haven't—as if you've been waiting all your professional life for their critique. Don't get me wrong—I'm not above my fans. I just like them a whole lot better when they stick to flattery.

"Miss Jordan!" said Wendy the receptionist, as if I'd caught her doing something she shouldn't have been doing. "We didn't expect you until two-thirty!"

"I had to get out of the house," I said, draping my coat over the faux leopard couch. "Can Benny take me early?"

“Of course I can, darling,” said Benny, picking up his cue far better than some actors I’ve worked with.

He rushed over to me, giving me a big smooch on the lips. “I just kicked Claudette Pehl out of my chair. I told her, ‘Darling, I don’t care if your hair’s still wet—I’ve got more important clients to attend to.’”

“Sure you did, Benny,” I said. Claudette Pehl was only *the* fashion model of the moment, all seventeen years and sixty-eight pounds of her.

“Coffee?” he asked, taking me by the hand and leading me into the salon, “with a dash of Bailey’s?”

“A *big* dash.”

Lou Reed was blasting through the salon’s sound system—at Hair by Benny, nothing was done in baby steps. Each chair was upholstered in some faux jungle animal skin and most often occupied by somebody recognizable. Polly York, the PBS news commentator, was getting foiled in Martin’s chair, and over in André’s, Gina Bell, the ice skater, was getting one of her signature pixie cuts.

After I changed into a cotton smock printed with tiger stripes (every smock matches its chair; kitschy, but what the hell, that was part of the fun of Benny’s) and got shampooed by one of those sullen girls whose mental health you can’t help but worry about, I sat down in Benny’s chair.

“Looking at you, the word *rough* comes to mind,” he said, handing me a mug that smelled more of booze than coffee.

“Oh, Benny, don’t mince words with me.” I took a sip of the enhanced coffee and made a face. “I said a dash, not half a bottle.”

Instead of making apologies and scurrying back to the coffee machine, Benny flicked the end of his comb against my shoulder blade.

“Shut up and drink it,” he said. “You know you could use it.”

I could and I did.

“Ahh,” I said after chugging it down. “Things are looking better already.”

I knew / was. Benny wasn't one of the top hair stylists in Manhattan by chance; he knew how to cut hair and, most important, how to make his clients look good while he did. The lighting was warm and mellow, fading out lines and wrinkles and large pores and everything else that conspired to make you look like the wicked stepmother when you still felt like Cinderella.

I looked great . . . for forty-eight. I could easily pass for forty, which I had been doing until my sister was interviewed by a feature writer for *The New York Times* and blabbed our real age—as if she hadn't been schooled enough on this particular topic. Still, looking forty isn't exactly a plus in show business, although it is easier to age in the theater than it is in the movies, where they start casting you as the mother in *Little Women* when you feel you'd be perfect for Jo.

I do have a lovely nose (my own, thank you very much), pretty teeth (mostly my own), and good hair (the natural waves are mine, the Red Flame color—Benny's marvelous idea and for ten years my signature—is not), but I'm called gorgeous primarily because I'm a star.

It's not undue humility (in my case, all humility would be undue) that makes me say that; I turn heads, first and foremost, because of who I am and not what I look like.

“Benny, what do you think about short hair?”

We both watched in the mirror as he held out a rippled strand of my hair.

“Not for you, darling. Your hair is so dramatic . . . so free. You'd look like a computer saleswoman with short hair. Or a drill sergeant.”

I laughed. Benny was one of the few people who wasn't afraid to tell me what he really thought.

“All right, then. Just take off the split ends.”

As Benny snipped and sniped in his jungle lair (his gossip was almost as good as his styling), I closed my eyes and tried to think of more excuses why I couldn't possibly help my sister out.

As they say, timing is everything, and this timing was bad. I hadn't left *Mona!* just for the fun of it. I wasn't burned out on the show yet; what had made me not renew my contract was a doublehitter—heartbreak and menopause, neither of which I'd admit to the world at large. My press release merely mentioned my gratitude for being with such a fine production and my wish to explore other creative avenues.

What I really needed time for was to practice my three R's—relax, replenish, and rattle my screaming hormones to the floor. I wanted to putter around the city, have late-afternoon teas at the Carlyle or the Pierre, see the shows I hadn't been able to see because of my own, and spend my free weekends at the various country homes friends had invited me to. I needed time to spoil myself rotten.

"Earth to Geneva," whispered Benny in my ear.

I opened my eyes, startled.

"Sorry I was boring you," he said with exaggerated nonchalance. "Believe me, there are plenty of women who'd *pay* to sit where you are and listen to me."

I laughed. "I do pay you, Benny, remember?"

Benny shrugged and with his fingers fanned out my hair. It was long and wavy—"hippie hair with an uptown attitude," as Benny described it. (I follow the Dick Clark secret of youth—never change your hairstyle.)

"So how does it feel to be an out-of-work actor?"

Tears welled up in my eyes.

"Geneva, darling! I didn't mean anything by that—I was only trying to be funny."

"It's not that," I said, waving my hand. "It's my sister."

In the mirror, I saw concern pinch the features of Benny's round face.

"She's not ill, is she?"

I shook my head. “Nothing like that. She and her husband have this opportunity through the college to go to Italy.”

“Hmm,” said Benny, checking to see if my ends were even. “I guess I’m not quite grasping the dilemma.”

“They want me to baby-sit!” I said, and seeing the ice skater look over at me with interest, I lowered my voice. “They’ve got a thirteen-year-old son they don’t want to take out of school. Richard—Rich, that’s his name. My godson.”

Benny poured something delicious-smelling onto his hands and massaged it into my scalp. “And you don’t want to baby-sit this Rich because . . .?”

“Because I’m on vacation!” I said, and again my raised voice made the snoopy skater with her stupid pixie cut look over. “Because my doctor says I’m overstressed and overworked and I need to take it easy!” I whispered. “And besides, I need to get over . . . things.”

“That cad,” said Benny. It was his Pavlovian response; whenever I mentioned anything that might directly or indirectly have to do with Trevor, he said, “That cad.” It was for this sort of thing that I tipped him so well.

“But doesn’t your sister live on a pond or something in Indianapolis?”

“A lake,” I said. “She lives on a lake outside Minneapolis.”

Benny shrugged; to the transplanted Australian, it was all the same.

“But mightn’t that be peaceful?” he suggested. “Sitting by the lake out in the middle of nowhere?”

“The lake’ll probably be frozen,” I said. “And even if it isn’t, I’d be sitting with a thirteen-year-old.”

“Right, the kid. He’s that bad, huh?”

My tears, which seemed to be on double overtime, welled up again.

“Oh, Benny!” I said, and then, in a move far more fluid than any double axel Gina Bell ever performed, I swiveled my chair, shielding myself and my tears from the prying eyes of that nosy little ice nymph.

That evening I lit a fire and repaired to my many-pillowed couch with a good bottle of champagne and an even better box of chocolates. I had left the show only three days earlier, and I still felt strange and out of sorts at eight o'clock. I could imagine the cast backstage, goosing each other under their elaborate costumes or doing any of a number of childish things a cast in a long-running show does while waiting for the curtain to go up. I always loved that time, listening to the excited hum of the audience and then the collective holding of breath as the orchestra began its overture. We were the elite of the Broadway stage, ready to go on, but not before we shared a bad joke or accused each other, in indignant whispers, of farting.

What I really missed were those preshow kisses Trevor Waite and I used to share before we broke up.

Something crackled and hissed in the fireplace, a perfect accompaniment to my mood. I took a big, sparkly gulp of champagne and reminded myself not to waste time thinking about Trevor.

My reminder did no good.

"How could I have been so blind?" My only excuse, and a lame one at that, was that his charm had obscured my vision.

Trevor's great you're-the-only-one-for-me charm was practiced on everyone, from Mrs Wang at the corner market, who always slipped a perfect peach or a basket of berries into our bag, all the while winking at Trevor, to the *New York Times* reviewer who wrote, "He's a modern version of Errol Flynn and Laurence Olivier. And then he opens his mouth and sings like Placido Domingo!"

When he focused those ice blue eyes on you, time didn't stop, but at least a couple of seconds were lost. 'When he smiled at you, you felt as if you were being given a present. But his biggest gift was his voice. God almighty, that upper-crust British accent (he adopted it as his own once he moved from Manchester to London) coupled with those

deep, rich tones—get me the smelling salts. I know it's a cliché to say someone has such a nice voice they could read the phone book and make it sound good—but he could, and did once, accepting my challenge.

“Bradshaw,” he read, after clearing his throat. “Amy, Arnold, Beverly, Bruce, Bryan.” Holding the splayed directory in one hand, he raised the other. “Continuing with the Bradshaws,” he intoned, “we have C. L., D. R., David, Doris, Douglas, and Grant. Harold, I. J., Jody, Julie, and Lloyd.”

He read to me from other sources more poetic than the phone book, and I think that was what I missed most about him—it's tough to beat the romanticism of an English actor with a beautiful voice reading you Shakespeare on a rainy New York afternoon.

Along with our love of listening to his voice, we shared a lot—the excitement of mounting a new show, laughs, a fondness for Thai food and Alfred Hitchcock movies and late-night walks. Both actors, we understood each other and the crazy world we'd chosen to make our living in. More than anything though, we had that strong chemical charge—he was oxygen, I was hydrogen, and when we were together, sparks of some kind always flew.

I was initially so enamored of Trevor that I was willing to overlook the flirtation he shared with one of the chorus girls. By nature, performers tend to be flirts, but the flirtation escalated until I was certain he was having an affair (when I confronted them once after a show, he vehemently denied the charge; she only smiled). Seeing as I knew how to be fairly charming myself, his charm became more obvious to me, and I saw how he most often poured it on to get something in return. When he directed this charm at the new understudy of the second female lead, I finally had to face the fact that what he wanted in return at this point in his life was more women, *younger* women.

A sob I didn't even know was gathering jumped out of my throat, and I realized that darkness—not a darkness of light but a scarier, deeper one—had crawled into my arms.

I have always been a night owl, even as a little girl. Ann was one of those people who could fall asleep half a minute after she crawled into bed, leaving me to amuse myself, which I did happily—making up songs, imagining myself in various scenarios with classmates and boys I liked, practicing my imitations of TV and movie stars. But one night—I think I was about nine—my imagination was overtaken by a loneliness of such depth that my child's brain wondered if this was what it was to go crazy.

"Ann! Ann!" I had whispered, rocking her shoulder. "Ann!"

"What is it?" she had asked, sitting up, her eyes wild.

"Ann, *I'm so lonely!*"

My sister squinted at me, trying to gauge whether or not I was joking. Determining that I was not, she asked, "Why, Dee? I'm right here."

"Oh, Dum," I said, pressing my body next to hers. "Just hold me."

I couldn't articulate the feeling then, nor did it matter that I couldn't, as Ann fell immediately back asleep (the traitor).

The next night it came back again.

"Ann! Ann!" I said, shaking her shoulders as though it were part of a CPR maneuver. "My loneliness is back!"

My sister wasn't too impressed, advising me, before she rolled over, to "just tell it to go away."

I did, and it obeyed, but not permanently. It wasn't an every-night fixture, but each and every time it came, the loneliness was so deep and encompassing, I feared I wouldn't be able to get out of it. My coping mechanisms ranged from denial ("You don't exist, I feel swell") to bullying ("I'm stronger than you!") to submission ("Okay, I've given in to you, now will you leave?"). In an acting class I once took, our teacher urged us all to soften our debilitating emotions by naming them.

“Give them incongruous names that blunt their power,” she advised in her perfect diction. “Call anger Fred, anxiety Myrtle, fear Lulu.” I named my loneliness Petunia, and at first I think it did help to blunt its power, but after a while I realized it was still loneliness, only with a silly name.

I was never happy to experience it, but at least on this night it diverted my attention from Ann and her request. Petunia taunted and harassed me, but finally I was all cried out, and the time came to deal with my latest problem. That stupid saying “When life hands you a lemon, make lemonade” came into my head, but I’ll be damned if I knew the recipe.

First of all: I am not a bad person. Maybe I’m a little self-centered, a little flamboyant, but if that were a crime, everyone in show biz would be doing hard time. I like the idea of helping people, and I’m sure if I had more time, I’d put the idea into practice. I like to think that I give so much while I’m onstage that offstage I can slack off a little.

But my damn conscience was suddenly a parrot who couldn’t shut up: *She’s your twin sister, she’s your twin sister, she’s your twin sister.*

She had certainly done big favors for me. Reliable, responsible Ann, with her steady teaching job right out of college, had always bankrolled my big dreams. She’s the one who paid my bus fare to New York after I had spent all my money on clothes; she’s the one who’d enclosed a five or a ten in her weekly letters to me, the one who’d helped me out with rent at least a dozen times. Because Ann was so free with her money, I thought teachers earned great salaries; it wasn’t until my first Broadway play that I learned differently.

I had heard her arguing with my mother in my tiny kitchen. I couldn’t exactly hear their words, but the volume was loud enough to wake me. Apparently they were not aware of the gravity of this sin.

“Do you realize,” I asked in my best wounded and weary voice, “that I need rest for my voice?”

Ann, who could always be cowed by the demands of her show-biz sister, pressed her lips together and bowed her head. My mother, however, was not taking the bait.

“Well, good heavens, it’s not as if you didn’t sleep the better part of the day away.”

“Which isn’t that inappropriate when one considers I didn’t get in until five a.m.,” I said.

“And whose fault is that? My gosh, look at your father—he was out the door by eight.” She looked at her watch. “In fact, I’m supposed to meet him at Macy’s at noon.”

Touching my temple to let them know I had a splitting headache but would bear it stoically, I went to the coffeepot (in some households it’s the TV that’s always on; in the Jordans’, it’s the coffeepot).

“What were you arguing about, anyway?” I asked once I had downed a cup of caffeine restorative.

“Nothing,” said Ann in an abrupt, case-closed manner.

“Good gravy,” scoffed Mother. She leveled her gaze at Ann. “Two minutes ago your whole life was collapsing.”

“Your life’s collapsing?” I asked my sister, who more than anyone I knew had the sturdiest, most impenetrable life—a veritable bunker of a life.

“No, my life’s not collapsing,” said Ann quietly.

Mother sighed. “It’s just that she doesn’t have money for airfare home *or* next month’s rent.”

“You don’t have money for airfare or next month’s rent?” I repeated like some idiot.

Ann wiped her nose with a napkin and began clearing the table. Mom fished a tube of lipstick out of her purse and added more unneeded color to her lips.

“You’ll never get it out of Little Miss Proud, so I’ll tell you.” She gummed a paper napkin, leaving a fossil-like coral imprint on it. “Ann borrowed money to get here to see your show and now she needs to borrow money to get home, if

her landlord hasn't already rented out her apartment to someone who pays her rent on time."

If I had been the twin whose secret had been divulged to the other by our mother, you can bet I would have stormed out of the room or flung something breakable against the wall. Ann, however, washed out her coffee cup. She could have armed herself with the sprayer hose and given Mother a well-deserved blast, but my sister, unlike me, was above that sort of thing.

"Ann," I said, putting my arms around her, "do you need money? If you need money, you come to me. You know that."

"But you're a poor starving artist," said Ann.

"Not anymore. I'm the star of a Broadway hit."

It was true; the reviews had been raves, and it looked like the days of slinging hash and temping in insurance offices were over.

"Oh, Geneva," said Ann. "I'm so glad." And then she laid her head against my shoulder and sobbed.

"Ann," I said softly when she calmed down a bit, "when did you start having money problems?"

"Since *you've* had them," said my mother. "Ann's money problems can be directly linked to yours. When you needed money, Ann was there to make the loan, knowing she'd probably never get paid back."

Being four minutes older than me, Ann has always taken her position as the elder seriously. She is very protective.

"Mother," she said, her voice so calm that I knew a big storm was coming, "it's a dangerous policy not to know what you're talking about."

"I know how many loans your father and I made to Geneva. And I know that she'd probably turn to you for money after we cut her off." Here she gave me a pointed look and added, "We had to, Geneva—it was for your own good." She looked back at Ann. "Now, I only mention it because Geneva herself has admitted—"

“You only mention it because you want to cause trouble,” said Ann. “What I do with my money is my business. I’m sorry I made it yours by asking for a loan. It’s something I’ll never do again, for destitution couldn’t be worse than your righteous offense.”

“That’s right,” I said, mimicking my sister the English teacher. “Destitution couldn’t be worse than your righteous offense.”

Mom sighed; she had long ago learned that the firepower of allied twin daughters would eventually mow her down.

“I’m going to meet your father,” she said, anchoring under her arm the pebble-grained purse that never left her side.

We offered no resistance, and after she left, I got the whole miserable story from Ann.

Over the years I wasn’t the only one to have benefited from her beneficence; she’d been helping out with groceries for an elderly neighbor, paying the occasional electric and heating bill for a friend who was a single mother, and buying any number of supplies that students couldn’t afford or tickets to plays (“It makes language come alive for these kids”) or Modern Library novels or poetry compilations (“Some of these kids have never had a book of their own”).

“I was able to get by for years,” she said, shaking her head, “but then I guess . . . then I guess things just got a little out of control. I was having to borrow from my credit cards, and the debt just seemed to pile up.”

My sister wasn’t the only one shaking her head.

“Oh, Ann,” I said. “When are you going to learn that to take care of others you have to first take care of yourself?”

I’m a big fan of the kind of philosophy that encourages the idea of me first.

“Oh, Gen,” said Ann, and her voice was weighted with resignation, “what about those people who need help taking care of themselves?”

I got my purse (unlike my mother’s, mine isn’t a permanent accessory) and took out my checkbook.

“How much do you need?” I asked, writing her name on the pay-to-the-order-of line.

She thought for a moment and then told me, and I wrote it out for twice the amount.

Ann didn't gush, but her gratitude was evident.

“Thank you, Geneva,” she said, kissing my cheek.

“Now don't cash it and dole it out to panhandlers at the airport.”

“Not even the Hare Krishnas?” she said, laughing, even as tears glistened in her eyes.

“Especially not the Hare Krishnas,” I said. “I will not have you supporting people whose religion requires them to do such ungodly things to their hair.”

CHAPTER 2

I WAS MARRIED once, at what now seems the impossibly young age of twenty-four, after a whirlwind courtship. Although I have heard of successful marriages that come after whirlwind courtships, I personally do not recommend them. Take a little time to know the person you vow to love, honor, and cherish—or at least take longer than forty-eight hours, which is how long I'd known Jean-Paul before I said "I do." Fourteen months later he said *adieu*.

He was French in the Frenchiest sense, charming, dashing, and effortlessly stylish, and equipped with a palate sophisticated enough to tell a great bottle of wine from a really good one as well as an aged, pungent cheese from a rotten one. He was directing Genet's *The Maids* off-Broadway, which was so existential, I got a headache every time I watched it. Of course, I never confessed this to Jean-Paul, who was of the mind that Americans were *enfants* when it came to theater: "Zey want to be spoon-fed strained comedy and musical pabulum! And always, of course, ze 'appy ending!"

Apparently he was no fan of "ze 'appy ending" when it came to our marriage either, and I came to the ego-busting realization that it was not me he had wanted but the green card his marriage to an American citizen gave him.

C'est la vie, as I wrote to my sister. But blithe as I managed to appear on the outside, I was *shattered*; I had truly thought Jean-Paul and I were going to have a lifelong collaboration onstage and off. He was going to direct me in Moliere and Hugo adaptations, and I would produce for him

two adorable children who would call me Maman, accent on the second syllable.

The ax that split my marriage apart fell one morning after I'd asked Jean-Paul to pass me the cream and he told me he wanted a divorce.

"Okay, okay, keep the cream," I joked back, folding the Arts section of the paper to read the latest reviews.

Jean-Paul pushed aside the paper. "Geneva, I am not keeding." He cupped his hands around my face, a gesture he often used when he wanted my full attention. "I 'ave just . . . ah, *zut!* How shall I say? For me, I do not think eet is good to be married."

I remembered my mouth going completely dry as I stared into my husband's needing-a-shave face, clinging to the hope that this was all an unfunny joke (after all, Jean-Paul *was* French and humor wasn't his strong point), but if hope was my lifeline, it was a rotting, unraveling rope.

"Why . . . what?" was all I managed to say.

"I . . . I weesh I could explain eet . . . I do love you, Geneva, you know that. Eet's just that I don't want to be married to you anymore."

I'm ashamed to say that at this point I began to grovel.

"Whatever is bothering you, Jean-Paul, I can change! I can learn how to cook—I know it's important to you that I learn how to cook—and I don't have to spend so much time at the theater, and I . . . Jean-Paul, I don't understand. Please stay married to me!"

"Oh, no, no, Geneva, please don't cry," he said, wiping my tears away with his fingertips. "I 'ate eet when you cry."

"Whayl, I 'ate eet whayn you tell me you whant a dee-voorce!"

Jean-Paul stepped back—he always took offense when I lapsed into his accent, even though it was just the natural reaction of a mimic and I didn't mean anything by it.

"Now ees not ze time to mock me!"

"Now ees not ze time to dee-voorce me!"

He stood by the sink, his compact body tensed, and the position he stood in reminded me of a Greco-Roman wrestler ready to take down his opponent. I began to laugh. My emotional barometer was registering shock, anger, and pain, but this laughter was so unexpected that it made me laugh even more.

The look on Jean-Paul's face was one of betrayal." 'Ow can you laugh at a time like thees?" he shouted, and charged out of the kitchen, but not before batting off the stove top the frying pan in which he'd made us omelets just a half hour earlier.

It still makes my mouth grow dry and my heart pound to think of that day—he started packing as soon as he left the kitchen—and I don't even want to describe the wreck I was, pleading, begging, sobbing. I believe at one point I was actually hanging on to his leg as he tried to walk to the door.

I was so young, so trusting, so certain that the stories he told me of growing up in Burgundy ("My family 'as farmed that area for over seex 'undred years") and the moment he knew he wanted to work in the theater ("Eet was nothing so fancy as seeing ze Folies Bergere on a trip to Paris—eet was seeing my grandfather dancing in ze barn for an audience of cows") were stories I would memorize and eventually tell to our grandchildren, the way he'd be able to relate stories of my childhood.

We hadn't even been married long enough for his bad habits to annoy me—I still thought his nonchalance toward deodorant was sort of, well, *zesty*, and why shouldn't matchbook covers be used to clean teeth at the dinner table? I was so in love. Jean-Paul liked to have his first cup of morning coffee by himself, and while he was puttering in the kitchen I would roll to his side of the bed and just inhale; I'd doodle "Mme Jean-Paul Gatien" all over the margins of my script; so in love I actually *liked* ironing his shirts, folding his laundry. I was still naively thinking we were yet in our

honeymoon stage, so when Jean-Paul left, I feared my sanity might be a casualty as well as my heart.

A week later I heard that he was living with his old French girlfriend, a magazine stylist, and then I ran into Jean-Paul's best friend, who told me that *les deux amants* had never stopped seeing each other, even while we were married. The realization that Jean-Paul had never loved me was even a bigger betrayal than his leaving the marriage. Who knows—maybe mine had been more infatuation than love, maybe we would have had children, maybe we would have grown apart (certainly most of my contemporaries who married young had), but Jean-Paul was a thief who took away my chance to experience those maybes. Even worse, he was a thief who stole something innately precious: my confidence that I was a person worthy of love. Now, you have to understand that confidence has always been my high-flying flag, but the fabric of that confidence was shredded by Jean-Paul's behavior. The pieces that remained were enough to convince me I was a spectacular actor and singer, but as far as my love life was concerned, any belief that of course I deserved love was gone.

Petunia thought she had an unrestricted visiting pass during that first year, descending upon me night after night, and it was only the show I had just been cast in that saved me—for months I focused on nothing but my professional life, since paying the slightest bit of attention to my personal life would have been deadly.

I've had several other marriage proposals since, but I only have to be burned once to know when to sidestep a blaze.

"Don't let past unhappiness imperil future happiness," counseled my sister after I told her I had broken up yet again with a man who wanted to marry me.

"What, did you just open a fortune cookie or something?" I asked. "Come on, Ann, you're an English teacher. Who lets you get away with saying stuff like that?"

“All right,” she said. “Let me say it in the vernacular you can better understand: Just because Jean-Paul was a shit doesn’t mean every other man is going to be.”

“Ann, you said *shit*. I’m telling Mom.”

Ann laughed. Ours was the kind of mother who believed soap was the best way to expunge foul language out of a mouth. Of course, I, as the more “expressive” twin, was the only one who had experienced this procedure. Several times.

“Come on, Geneva, why’d you say no this time?”

“Can you relate to the words ‘abject fear’?”

“Yeah, but did you love him?”

“I thought I did, but I guess I didn’t. Because real love would get me over the fear, right?”

“Maybe regular fear. I don’t know about the *abject* kind.”

We laughed, and then Ann said, “Oh, shoot. I’ve got to run. Riley’s home.”

“So?” Other than my sister, there weren’t many people to whom I could confess my abject fear. It has always been my temperament to put on a happy face and to make jokes (regarding Jean-Paul, I used the line about my having failed French more times than I can count), but Ann knew how much I hurt and always offered a shoulder—even if it was over the telephone wires—to cry on. So I did not want what was shaping up as a nice chatty pep talk and counseling session to end just because of the appearance of her husband.

“So I’m *ovulating*,” she said with an uncharacteristic giggle. “See ya.”

This telephone conversation occurred when Ann and Riley, hopeful parents, were still in the at-least-we’re-having-fun-trying stage. Later there would be depression and appointments with specialists. Finally, a week before they were going to meet with an adoption agency, Ann found out she was pregnant.

“The rabbit finally died!” she cried gleefully over the phone, and I, gleeful for her, just cried.

The only time I ever missed a performance was when I flew out to help Ann deliver her baby. Riley was an excited, supportive, loving husband, but also one for whom the slightest suggestion of blood sent him falling backward into unconsciousness.

I was enlisted as relief coach, the one who would assist from the sidelines until the inevitable time when the queasy Riley would have to be benched. By the time Ann was dilated to eight centimeters, he was already woozy.

“God help me!”

Up to now, Ann had been fairly stoic, issuing the occasional soft moan, but this plea was said with the passion of an actress auditioning for Joan of Arc.

“She’s in transition,” explained the nurse.

“What does that mean?”

“It means batten the hatches.”

Ann screamed words that, considering their source, shocked me, and most of them were directed at Riley, who sat on a chair in the corner, looking as miserable as any man would whose own wife had just damned him to hell.

“I never knew things got so . . . violent,” I said as my sister screamed.

“That’s nothing,” said the nurse. “I had one laboring mother who told her husband that if he ever touched her again, she’d take a chain saw to him.”

The doctor, like a famous actor making a scene-stealing cameo, came in when Ann was pushing.

“There you go,” he said soothingly, “you’re doing great. Just one more big push.”

Ann hollered from some deep place—really, with all my voice training, I’ve never been able to make a noise that powerful—and out slid the baby.

Seeing it was a boy, I said, “Little Richard!”