Welcome to the Great Mysterious

Lorna Landvik

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.

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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 babysitter 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-andyou'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.

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She lived next door to us, and her home was a cinnamonroll- 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 sorryyou- 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 oldage 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.)

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