

THE MAGICAL THEATRE PRESENTS

**DREAMING
DOWN
HEAVEN**

by
Gini Gentry

Book One - Fiction

Prologue

Gigi sighed, pulled off the black suede Marc Jacobs platform boots, and put them back in their box.

“I guess I won’t take them,” she said reluctantly to the bored salesgirl, who gave her the inimitable look of scorn that was obviously a job requirement at every Manhattan boutique.

Ignoring her, Gigi stuffed her aching feet back into her last-year’s spike heels with a sigh. Something was seriously off. It was unlike her to resist the temptation of a gorgeous pair of boots. The Gigi of a mere few months ago would, at this very moment, be riding a surge of adrenaline as she swept triumphantly toward the cash register, boots in hand—or possibly still on her feet. She would have told herself something bracing like, “So what if I’m facing the holidays alone? At least I’ll be looking fabulous. And I’d rather spend the money on boots than a stupid turkey dinner.”

So what was wrong? It wasn’t that she didn’t have the money; of course she didn’t! But she had a wallet full of credit cards. It was something worse: Shoe shopping was not making her feel better. Retail therapy had failed her!

Gigi heaved herself off the seat and trailed out of the store. She walked listlessly down the crowded West Village sidewalk, head bent against the brisk November wind. Occasionally she glanced up to peek into a shop window, but instead of admiring the sumptuous array of pre-holiday goods, she could see only her own reflection. To say the least, this did nothing to lighten her mood. Her thick brown hair, shaggy and neglected, was whipping around in the wind like a nest of snakes. The bedraggled black scarf wrapped several times around her neck nicely highlighted the dark circles under her eyes and accented her pasty face, delicately sprinkled with zits from a recent chocolate binge. All in all, she resembled nothing so much as a down-and-out Medusa.

It wasn’t exactly the look she’d been going for.

Gigi let out a gusty sigh that startled a toy poodle walking past. The dog strained at its leash, yapping wildly as its owner gave Gigi the stink-eye.

“Sorry for being so hideous I scared your dog,” she muttered under her breath, swallowing the tears of self-pity that threatened to rise.

She'd sincerely hoped a little shopping would pull her out of her slump. But clearly it was going to take a lot more than that. After all she'd been through, feeling better was going to involve a major life change. Like moving to a small tropical island, getting a job serving fruity cocktails at a beachside bar, and flirting with aging playboys. She could almost hear Jimmy Buffett playing in the background and smell the ocean breeze. A mysterious man with a Matthew McConaughey body and a Swiss bank account would rescue her from the clutches of a Hugh Hefner lookalike and whisk her away on his yacht...

"Urgh!" She slammed into something and stumbled backward, flailing wildly to retain balance in her unsteady shoes.

She managed to avoid a serious fall by grabbing a nearby parking meter. Heart pounding, she looked around furtively to see if anyone had noticed. Luckily the Manhattan sidewalk swarm had produced only a couple of quick stares. Everyone kept moving steadfastly, heads down against the chill wind.

Gigi took a deep breath to calm herself and peered at the offending object, a sandwich sign that proclaimed:

Eternity

Used and Rare Books

Come in and Browse! Comfortable Chairs. Free Hot Tea!

Sounded nice. Gigi pictured herself in a worn armchair with a cup of Earl Grey and a shabby old tome. It sounded like just the cure for her chilled bones and aching feet. She had no real desire to go home to her empty apartment yet, and besides maybe they carried travel books! Hadn't she just been thinking about traveling? She owed it to herself to go in.

Somewhat heartened, Gigi pushed open the door. A bell tinkled and warm stuffy air washed over her, ripe with the comforting scent of musty books.

"Good afternoon," said a sixtyish man behind the counter, peering at her over his bifocals. His eyes were a surprising bright blue, and his voice lilted with a crisp British accent. He wore a neat Harris Tweed blazer with elbow patches atop a sweater vest. Past

the counter, unruly rows of bookshelves spilled over with thick, ancient-looking volumes and worn paperbacks. Omigod, it was just like the bookshop in that movie with Hugh Grant, what was it called? *Notting Hill*. As if she'd stepped into Bonny Olde England for a moment, where every problem could be solved with a chipped mug of steaming tea. It was just what she needed.

"Hi!" Gigi replied gaily. "Where are your travel books?"

"Just there, past the fantasy section," said the bookish gentleman, pointing. "And please help yourself to tea. I just brewed a fresh pot." He indicated a table in the corner flanked by two comfortable-looking overstuffed armchairs. It was all just as she'd pictured it.

"Thank you," she said, and headed to the travel section. She'd just browse a little, get some ideas. Maybe this moving to an island notion was actually feasible. After all, what did she have to lose?

Gigi spent an enjoyable half hour collecting a stack of books to browse through. Most of them looked hopelessly outdated, but who cared? She was just getting ideas. She could hop on the Internet later and get current information. She lugged the books to the corner and plunked them down beside an armchair, then made herself a cup of tea with milk and sank into the chair with a contented sigh.

Immersed in imagined adventures in Bali, Thailand, and the Caribbean, Gigi was only vaguely aware of the bell over the door ringing and people coming and going. She sipped her tea as she worked her way through the stack of books, setting a couple of more recent ones aside for possible purchase. Finally she reached the bottom of the pile and looked at the last book, puzzled. She didn't remember selecting it. It had a faded, gold-embossed cover that had once been elegant. The title, in swirling script, read: *Dreaming Down Heaven*.

"Odd," Gigi thought. "It sounds like some kind of spiritual book, or maybe it's supposed to be in the fantasy section. I must have grabbed it by mistake."

She opened the book idly. The inside cover was inscribed with a handwritten note: "To my beloved student, December 10, 1972. May this book help you awaken to your magnificence. Love, M."

Gigi's heart skipped a beat. December 10, 1972—the day she was born! What a strange coincidence! Despite the familiar sinking in her stomach that accompanied thoughts about her looming thirty-fifth birthday, Gigi felt a stab of interest. What did *Dreaming Down Heaven* mean? And was the fact that it had been inscribed on her birthday some sort of sign?

The man behind the counter cleared his throat. “Sorry, miss, but I must close now. It’s after six.”

“Oh—is it really?” Gigi shot out of the seat. She’d been here for over two hours. It was really high time to go home and...and do what? Shoving the thought away, she grabbed the three travel books she’d selected and went to the counter.

“I’ll take these,” she said. “Thanks for letting me hang out for so long.”

“Absolutely no trouble,” said the man, smiling. “People do it all the time.”

He pointed to the book under her arm. “That one, too?”

Gigi realized she was still holding onto *Dreaming Down Heaven*. Suddenly she was unwilling to let it go.

“Yes, this one too,” she replied.

“Excellent choice,” said the man with a wink as he rang her up. But before Gigi could ask him what he meant, he hustled her out the door and locked it behind her.

Gigi wrapped her scarf around her neck and hurried down the street. She couldn’t wait to get home, open a bottle of wine, and find out what *Dreaming Down Heaven* was all about. Then she’d start planning her move to the tropics. After ordering in Chinese, of course.

Chapter One

Gigi opened her eyes—a more difficult task than it sounded since they were gritty with sand and each eyelid weighed at least ten pounds—and stared blearily at the bland white ceiling above her.

“That’s funny,” she thought. “I’m sure my bedroom ceiling is blue.”

Groaning, she heaved herself to a sitting position and beheld not her bedroom, but her living room—or what passed for a living room in this tiny Lower East Side walk-up with its slanted, scarred wood floor and windows that had been painted shut ages ago.

“I can’t believe I fell asleep out here again,” she thought, the familiar self-pity bubbling in her chest, threatening to produce leaky tears. Ever since she’d moved out of the spacious condo she and Keith had shared at 84th and Fifth Avenue, complete with a doorman and a view of Central Park, she’d been unable to sleep in her lonely bed. Instead she would lie on the sofa for hours, curled in a fetal position and reliving every moment of her life with Keith.

Especially the moment she swooped into their apartment with a cheerful, “Sweetie, I got done early, and I brought…” A sentence doomed never to be finished. Arms laden with bouquets of early daffodils and canvas tote bags filled with organic vegetables for ratatouille, Gigi stood rooted to the spot in the living room doorway, staring in disbelief at the scene in front of her.

She’d expected to find her husband lounging on the black leather sofa with his cowboy boots propped on the chrome-and-glass coffee table, strumming his guitar or reading *Rolling Stone* while sipping a beer—his usual position at the end of a long day at the recording studio. Instead, Keith lay on his back on the floor, jeans pulled down to his boots, beneath a naked, gyrating woman with purple-tipped blond hair and a Marilyn Manson tattoo on her ass. Classy. Through the fog that swept through her brain and rendered her speechless, Gigi dimly recognized the woman as the new backup singer in Keith’s band *Redeye*.

Her mind refused to accept the evidence in front of her eyes. Keith may have done a lot of things, especially with his band's increasing success, but one thing he'd always assured her of was his fidelity. Gigi had done everything she could to remain attractive to him. She knew groupies were always throwing themselves at him; she wasn't born yesterday.

That's why she went to the gym, neurotically watched what she ate, had her hair highlighted every six weeks, got regular manicures, and dressed with a classy yet sexy flair that none of those trailer trashy teen fans could hope to match. Not to mention that she cooked him fabulous gourmet meals, kept the condo sparkling, entertained his friends and associates at the drop of a hat, and treated him like a king. Oh, and she also worked full time (and often overtime) as executive director of TheaterKids, a nonprofit offering theater programs in inner city schools.

She'd perfected the art of being the ideal wife: undemanding, caring, independent yet nurturing. And, apparently, it hadn't been enough. Because here was her husband, moaning with pleasure, still unaware of her presence as his hands cupped the spike-haired slut's ass and he thrust himself into her enthusiastically.

The tote bags fell from Gigi's slack hands, root vegetables thudding to the ground and rolling everywhere. Keith froze, his eyes locking with Gigi's for an instant before he threw the naked tattooed wonder off him and stumbled to his feet, hastily pulling up his pants. He lurched toward her with a dazed look—a familiar gaze Gigi immediately identified as the result of a potent combination of marijuana and tequila. Nausea rose in her throat and she wondered wildly if she were going to throw up all over him.

Now, sitting on her shabby sofa and surveying the remains of last night's Chinese takeout decorating the coffee table, Gigi put her hands to her temples, willing herself to excise the memory of that horrible day. But it was hard to get rid of the stale vision of Keith trying to assume a nonchalant posture as she faced him with folded arms. Spoiled as always, he'd jutted out his square jaw while zipping up his jeans, saying petulantly in his husky voice, "Why are you home so early?"

At Gigi's look of scorn, he hastily added, "It's not what it seems."

Although she felt like bursting into tears, Gigi was damned if she'd let Keith and this bimbo see how much they'd hurt her. Fighting back the urge to puke, she tossed her

head with a snort of derision and turned her withering gaze to the singer, who frantically tugged her slinky silver tube dress over her head. With cool fury, Gigi noted the rolled-up dollar bill and razor blade on the coffee table.

“Well, I’m glad it isn’t what it seems,” she heard herself say. “Because it *seems* to be the end of a lousy marriage. What is it, really—a sound check?”

Keith searched for an answer, a belligerent expression taking over his face. Meanwhile, the girl bolted for the door, forgetting her purse—in which Gigi later discovered a large packet of white powder that she dumped in the toilet, and a wad of fifties that she took vicious pleasure in spending on a divorce lawyer.

“That’s all over now,” Gigi thought firmly, pressing her fingers to her throbbing temples. An empty bottle of Liar’s Dice Zinfandel on the floor next to a lipstick-stained wineglass explained only too well the pain in her head and the dry, furry taste in her mouth.

“Shit,” Gigi said aloud, getting up too fast, holding onto the arm of the sofa for support. Obviously she’d gotten into the wine cabinet again. One of the pleasures of being married to Keith had been having the money to build a really good wine collection. The collection had been among the few things she’d taken when she left, but instead of saving the coveted bottles as she had for so many years, she’d been treating herself.

She’d started slowly, savoring the wines and only allowing herself a glass every evening after work—her reward for making it through another miserable, Keithless, lonely, heartbroken day. But three weeks ago, she’d been sitting at her desk, staring at the mountain of unanswered correspondence she hadn’t had the energy to tackle, when her assistant buzzed through a call from their corporate sponsor. Gigi shoved the phone between her chin and shoulder and took up her silver letter opener, figuring she might as well multitask since these calls usually went on for a while. But a moment later, the opener fell to the cement floor with a clang as Gigi clutched the desk for support. TheaterKids had lost their funding, and her job had been cut—effective immediately.

Barefoot, Gigi tottered into the galley kitchen and opened the cabinet beneath the sink. She groaned, wincing as the sound vibrated through her pulsing head. Just as she’d suspected, she had drunk the very last bottle. After losing her job, she’d gone from a glass every evening to several, beginning in the late afternoon when she could no longer

pretend that it was just a weekend day and Keith was out of town. Aching with loneliness, she would carefully select a bottle and open it with a satisfying pop—the only sound she welcomed all day.

She could have gone out if she wanted; of course she had many casual friends in Manhattan. But she couldn't bear their sympathy, their pitying, curious looks and questions. She knew they were wondering if what they'd read in the tabloids was really what happened (it was) and she knew that some of them were actually excited at the thought that sexy, almost-famous Keith was now single.

Gross, all of it. The only person she really wanted to see was her best friend Stephanie. Stephanie would know how to make her see the comical side of this miserable existence, coax her to go out and meet some new men, and encourage her to apply for jobs.

But several months previously, Stephanie had disappeared from Manhattan into the Wild West, after having the nerve to elope with a man from Colorado she'd met online. She might as well have relocated to the moon. Although they talked on the phone some, Gigi missed Stephanie almost more than she missed Keith. To have lost both the people closest to her within months seemed unfair. Not to mention the job she loved, the only thing that had made her feel she was making a difference in this messed-up world.

Sensing another onslaught of debilitating self-pity, Gigi filled the coffee pot with tap water and rummaged around in the cupboards for her canister of beans to grind. With enough cream and sugar, her truck-driver-strong brew would surely revive her from this wine-induced stupor.

“Noooo!” she cried, her head throbbing. The box was empty. This was just too much. No more wine, no more coffee, and all she had to look forward to was another day of feeling sorry for herself, trying listlessly to read the classifieds in search of jobs. Not to mention that the holiday season was fast approaching, with Thanksgiving like doomsday marching ever closer to mock her in her solitary splendor. Fat lot she had to be thankful for, this year.

She slumped to the floor, leaning against the stove, and cradled her head between her knees. What had become of her? A few months ago she'd thought she had the perfect life. Granted, she was always tired, always pushing herself, always trying to be a better

wife, a more dedicated worker, a more charming hostess. But wasn't that just how life was when you lived in the greatest city on earth, working your way into the charmed circles of the rich and famous?

Clutching the counter to pull herself up, she decided to go to the Starbucks on the corner, treat herself to a caramel macchiato, and read the Sunday classifieds. Maybe she would even take a shower, blow-dry her hair, and pretend to be one of the living (instead of one the living dead). On second thought, though, that seemed like way too much effort. She'd just pull on a jacket over her Chinese-food-stained sweats and shove a knit hat on her greasy hair. Who did she have to impress, anyway?

Fifteen minutes later, she had settled into a brown plush chair in Starbucks' window with the thick Sunday paper. Sipping her vente macchiato, red pen in hand, she started plowing through the help wanted ads: *Administrative*—possibly, though nothing looked terribly interesting...*Food Service*—definitely not, she'd put in her time waitressing in college and vowed to polish shoes at Grand Central Station rather than ever have her rear pinched by another creepy old man...*Hospitality*—no...

Trudging through section after section of depressing-sounding jobs, Gigi felt her newfound resolve begin to fade. Why not just let her bank account run out until she was evicted and became one of those mysterious gap-toothed women who pushed a shopping cart and fed crumbs to pigeons? After so many weeks without a visit to the gym or the hair stylist, she was already beginning to look the part. Might as well go all the way.

Suddenly her eyes lit on an ad that bounced out at her as if in 3-D, pulsing strangely. She shook her head to clear it, but the letters still appeared to be swelling and contracting as if jumping out to get her attention. How was that possible? Was it a hologram of some kind, or some sort of subliminal advertising trick?

She readjusted her gaze, caught an unfortunate glimpse of herself in the window, and quickly looked back down. Now, the letters were glowing with what must be a trick of the light.

Wanted: Enthusiastic individual to oversee restoration of historic Magical Theatre in beautiful Blessings, Maine. Possible long-term management position.

Experience not necessary, must be willing to relocate. Phone calls only, 607-323-4545.

Gigi felt a twinge of excitement. The Magical Theatre! She had no idea what it was, but it sounded great. She pictured a mossy stone building with elaborate carvings adorning its façade, gilt paint peeling off columns in a dusty, velvet-seated auditorium. “I don’t have experience running a physical theater, but surely having been executive director for TheaterKids would qualify me for the position. And it says experience not required. Hmm. Willing to relocate?”

Gigi’s gaze strayed out the window. As she watched, couple after couple wandered past in relaxed Sunday mode, holding hands or with their arms wrapped around each other, laughing, carrying paper bags of groceries or takeout, their steamy breaths mingling in the chilly air.

“Everyone has someone except me,” she thought pathetically. Even people walking on their own looked like they were hurrying home to bring their lover eggs to make an omelet, or bagels and the newspaper to share in bed. Someone cared that they were gone, was waiting for them, wanted to enjoy a life together.

Quickly looking away, she realized that she had no real reason to stay in Manhattan. The thought of starting over in a new place—Blessings, Maine, wherever that was—far from the city’s driving energy, was suddenly quite appealing. Her sense of devastation, that loss of everything familiar that had anchored her to her life, she now realized was also a sort of freedom. She thought of the words from the Janis Joplin song, what was it, “Me and Bobby McGee”? “Freedom’s just another word for nothin’ left to lose.” Well...

“So call, already,” a throaty voice said in Gigi’s ear. She jumped and looked around furtively. The only person near her was an anorexic teenager, in pants that barely covered her rear end, wiping the next table. The voice certainly wasn’t *hers*. Was Gigi finally living up to her mother’s prediction that using aluminum-based deodorant would make her lose her mind?

“Nah, it’s just my intuition, telling me to do what I already know I should do,” she thought with a curious sense of excitement. “I’m going to call right now.”

She scabbled in her scuffed purse for her cell phone—making a mental note to get a new bag the minute she got a job since this one had definitely seen better days—and, before she could lose her resolve, punched in the number from the ad.

Chapter Two

The countryside sped by as Gigi leaned back in the squeaky train seat. She hadn't seen so many trees since her childhood in Maryland, and it made her realize just how long it had been since she'd ventured out of Manhattan. And now she was on her way to Blessings, Maine, to start a new life! Maya, the single-named (like Cher or Madonna) director of the Magical Theatre, had been unexpectedly warm and welcoming on the phone. Before she knew it Gigi had found herself pouring out the story of her life.

Maya was a wonderful listener, and seemed to really care—though why she should be concerned with a stranger's problems was a mystery to Gigi. They talked, or rather Gigi talked, for what seemed like hours. Then Maya had offered her the job, just like that, as well as accommodations in a rent-free "manager's suite" adjacent to the theater. Gigi had hardly been able to believe her good fortune.

They agreed she would start as soon as she could settle her affairs in the city, which Gigi had grimly reflected should not take long, since there was very little to settle. Ten days later here she was, heart pumping in anticipation and nervousness, on her way to see Godfreys, the driver Maya had told her would meet her at the station. Blessings had a population of 2,500 (Gigi had Googled it) and was a major tourist destination in the summer.

"But this time of year, my dear, you will find it very, shall we say, restful," Maya had said in her rich voice, her unidentifiable accent betraying inner amusement.

"Restful is perfect," Gigi had replied. Just perfect.

Breathing a deep sigh of relief and settling deeper into her uncomfortable seat, she allowed herself a small smile of contentment and anticipation. Which, unfortunately, the man sitting opposite her interpreted as an invitation to strike up a conversation.

Gigi wanted nothing more than to sit with her own thoughts, but on second glance the man wasn't bad-looking, and she remembered that she was a single woman again. So falling back on old habits, she tossed her freshly cut and dyed hair (with extra highlights

to cover the strands of wiry silver that kept rearing their pesky heads) and gave him her signature dazzling smile.

Being a modern woman with plenty of fashion magazines, models, and actresses for comparison, Gigi had, of course, never been happy with her looks: her eyelashes were short and stubby, her nose turned up just a little too much to be classic, her breasts were too small to be noteworthy, and her hips just a tad too wide to fit into those tiny hip-hugging jeans she'd love to be able to wear. However, one thing she always liked was her smile. Blessed with good orthodonture as a child, naturally white teeth, and full lips, she knew her smile was killer. Or at least it used to be. It had been eons since she'd tried out its effect on anyone of the opposite sex.

Apparently, it still worked. The man smiled back and leaned in closer. His blond hair was perfectly tousled, and his tiny, square, pink-tinted glasses gave him a European look, enhanced by his casual-yet-elegant silk T-shirt and sleek gray trousers. Gigi had to admit that she tended to go for more earthy men a tad rougher around the edges. Keith's studiously overgrown hair, perfectly broken-in designer jeans, and Italian boots had sent her over the moon when she'd met him. But this man was quite good-looking, and clearly friendly. Besides, she was just talking to him.

"Forgive me for staring, but your hair is *fabulous*," the man said. "Who does it?"

"Bobby D," Gigi said, suddenly feeling foolish. The pink glasses, asking about her hair...of course, he was gay! Had her gaydar really gotten so rusty? Despite embarrassment at her mistake, she was relieved. She felt far more comfortable talking to someone who didn't want to get in her pants.

"Oh, Bobby D. Of course! I should have spotted it," the man said. He leaned in closer, placing his hand on her knee in a confidential gesture. "Honey, I don't want to freak you out, but you have a piece of spinach or something in your teeth."

"Really?" Gigi responded, instantly humiliated. Here she'd flashed her 100-watt smile only to reveal a mouthful of salad!

"I'd better go to the bathroom and take care of it," Gigi said, trying to be civil, though she felt like strangling him. "Would you mind watching my stuff for a minute?"

"Sure, hon," he said with a conspiratorial wink.

Gigi walked down the aisle, stumbling as the train began to slow. They must be approaching the last stop before Blessings. Her heart pounding, she made her way through the nearly empty train car. Not many people were heading to Maine in early November, apparently, and she couldn't blame them.

Suddenly, she felt doubt wash over her like a chilly shower. What on earth was she doing? Could she really live in a tiny coastal town, so far from civilization? What did she know about the situation she was getting into? Was she destined to mess up her life yet again? Gratefully, she locked herself in the miniscule, reeking bathroom and felt tears threatening to destroy her eye makeup. Where was Steph when she needed her? What would she say now to make Gigi see the funny side of this? Giving up, Gigi gave in to yet another bout of self-pity, swiping at the tears that seeped unbidden from her eyes.

After what could have been five minutes or a half hour, she was thrown against the sink as the train began shuddering to a stop. Jolted back into the present, she heard the conductor's voice crackle over the intercom, "Bayville, Bayville. Next stop, Blessings."

Remembering why she was in the bathroom, Gigi grimaced into the mirror but couldn't see any sign of spinach in her teeth. Strange. Oh well. Maybe all the snot from her crying jag had washed it out. She really ought to go back to her seat, but she didn't want to face anyone just yet.

"Oh crap, I'll never be able to do this starting over thing," Gigi thought hopelessly. She'd been with Keith for so long, and before that had had a series of disastrous boyfriends whom she could hardly remember, and now she was—oh, horrors—she was turning thirty-five in two and a half weeks!

"I'm getting old," she muttered to her face dimly visible in the smudged mirror. "I'm alone, and no one wants me, and I've never lived as an adult on my own before, and I'm trusting in this job that could be a complete hoax. What the hell is the Magical Theatre anyway, and who is this Maya?"

Someone banged on the door. Gigi gulped and said in as normal a voice as she could, "I'll be right out." She stared at her reflection in the grainy mirror as the train slid into motion, gathering speed to take her to the mysterious town of Blessings. She would have to get herself together before meeting Maya. Her mascara was smudged and her lipstick all worn off, and she had left her purse at her seat.

An alarm went off in her head. Left her purse! What if that pink-bespectacled guy had taken it? Maybe telling her about the nonexistent spinach in her teeth had been a ploy to get her to leave so he could steal her things. The thought propelled her out into the corridor, muttering an apology to the glaring woman clutching a small child who was jumping up and down with her hand between her legs, and hastened back to her seat.

When she got there, her heart fell.

The shiny new Kate Spade bag she'd bought as a celebration of her new job was gone. Her ID, her credit cards, her makeup, the key to her storage unit—and ohmigod, her suitcase too—all gone! She looked around wildly, but the few people in the car were sleeping, listening to headphones, or reading magazines. No one looked up at her.

Where was Queenie? He must have gotten off at Bayville. She had to find the conductor and tell him what had happened! Just then an elderly woman coming down the aisle tripped and fell into Gigi, practically knocking her over. Gigi clutched at the seat back and tried to right the woman, who although tiny had a very strong grip on her arms.

“You tripped me!” the woman said accusingly, peering at Gigi with startlingly bright violet eyes.

“No I didn't, I'm sorry, I was just standing here...” Gigi said, flustered.

“You young people, you're all the same,” continued the woman in her raspy voice. “You gave me such a fright! You think it's funny to trip an old lady?”

“B-but I didn't...” Gigi stammered.

“Well, the least you can do is get out my heart pills for me,” said the woman, lowering herself into the seat opposite Gigi's and thrusting an embroidered bag into her hands.

“Um...” Gigi was floored by the woman's presumption. She had to go and find the conductor!

“Well, are you going to get them for me or not?” the woman snapped. “They're in the side pocket.”

Wordlessly, Gigi unzipped the side pocket and handed the woman a bottle of pills.

“Now I need some water,” said the woman. “I suppose it would be too much trouble to ask you to get a bottle from the concessions car. Young people today don't go

out of their way to help the elderly. Just wait until you get to be my age and see how you like it!”

“Of course I’ll go,” Gigi said hurriedly. She didn’t want the woman thinking she was an uncaring “youngster.” Sighing, she made her way down the aisle again, giving in to the knowledge that her bags were long gone. She’d just have to wait until she got to Blessings to file a police report. Luckily she had a couple of dollars in her pocket to buy the water.

Twenty minutes later the train screeched to a halt at Blessings.

“You’ll help me off the train, dear, won’t you?” asked the old woman, whose tone had grown friendlier after Gigi brought her the bottle of water, along with a packet of chocolate wafers. With a silent groan, Gigi took her bag and guided her out off train to the platform.

A commotion at the other end of the platform distracted her for a moment, and when she looked back, the woman had disappeared. Strange—where had she gone so suddenly? Perhaps she’d gone back into the train for something. Gigi considered looking for her, then realized Godfreys would be waiting.

She had no time to lose, so she made her way through the dingy station to the front entrance, feeling curiously light without her bags. She had no ID, no credit cards, no money, no photos, makeup, clothing, or books, nothing to define who she was. Somehow that thought cheered her, and she realized she really was starting over. She had left her old identity behind—it was probably being sold to an illegal Ukrainian stripper right now—and she could be whoever she wanted to be. Maybe Queenie had actually done her a favor by so unceremoniously freeing her of her personal history.

Suddenly exhilarated, she flung open the flyspecked station doors and waltzed into the foggy, dreary afternoon, deeply inhaling tangy salt air.

“Ms. Lenox?” came a crisp, British-accented voice as an older man emerged from a sleek roadster like the ones she’d seen in 1930s gangster movies. The man himself seemed to come from that era, with slicked-back silver hair, neatly trimmed moustache, and a yellow ascot tucked into a double-breasted black blazer.

“Yes, I’m Ms. Lenox. Please call me Gigi,” she replied, surprised at the formality of the car and driver.

Something about the man's British accent and white hair was familiar, but she couldn't place it.

The driver's expression softened and Gigi thought she saw the beginnings of a twinkle forming in his bright blue eyes. "I'm pleased to meet you, Gigi. I'm Godfreys. Maya sent me to transport you to the Magical Theatre." He paused to chuckle, as if he found the concept amusing. "Please come with me. Shall I fetch your bags?" He peered around her, scanning the misty light blanketing the platform.

"Umm, I don't have any bags," Gigi said. "Wait, I mean, I did, but now I don't, that man on the train, but it's okay...I'm starting over."

"Ah, I see," said Godfreys, nodding as if what she'd said made sense. "Very well. In we go, then." He held open the back door of the roadster for her and she clambered in, still clutching her coat around her. The maroon leather seat was smooth and bouncy.

She sat in a comfortable stupor during the short ride up the coast in the rapidly fading light. Soothed by the car's smooth progress, she idly watched the ocean waves lap against rocky shores that gradually gave way to a main street dotted with massive oak trees and quaint shops in beautifully preserved Victorian houses.

They turned down a gracious street lined with large brick and fieldstone buildings—public library, courthouse, the town hall—and the car slid to a stop in front of the grand façade of an old theater decorated with carvings of angels and gargoyles.

"It's exactly as I imagined it," Gigi thought. The marquee read, "The Magical Theatre. Closed for renovations. Reopening SOON."

Godfreys came around to hand her out of the car, then crooked his arm. She let him lead her to the gilded art deco-style doors. Something made her hesitate then; she had a sudden urge to run away, back to her safe cocoon in Manhattan, and curl up on her sofa. But it wasn't there anymore. This was her life now, and she must go ahead with it.

Sensing her hesitation, Godfreys looked down at her questioningly. She gave a small nod, and the theater door flew open as if it had been waiting for her. "Oh!" Gigi exclaimed, startled. She hadn't expected an automatic door in a theater so old. She peered into the murky depths but couldn't see anything.

"After you, my dear," said Godfreys, disengaging her arm. Gigi felt her breath come quicker as she stepped over the threshold into the dimness. Immediately a soft light

filled the room. She blinked and looked around her in awe. The light came from hundreds of gold sconces lining the walls, draped in crimson velvet. The deep blue ceiling was decorated with extraordinarily lifelike constellations that shimmered with their own cool light. The floor was an elaborate mosaic depicting fantastic scenes of jungles, mountains, oceans, and all manner of animals.

“Please, proceed, Miss Gigi,” Godfreys prodded gently from behind her. Gigi stepped into the room, craning her neck to look around. “You may have a seat and wait while I fetch Maya,” he instructed.

The only furniture in this strange room was a velvet sofa that matched the crimson drapes, strewn with invitingly puffy cushions. She sank into it gratefully, tucking her feet underneath her. In the cavernous silence, unmarred by outside sounds, she peered around curiously. Where was Maya going to come from? She saw no door leading to another part of the theater. This was the strangest building she’d ever been in. The animals seemed to be staring at her from the mosaic floor, their eyes glimmering in the candlelight.

“Ah, welcome, my beloved,” sang a rich, strangely accented voice, startling her. Where was the voice coming from? It seemed to fill the entire high-ceilinged room and echo through her body.

Gigi caught a swift movement from the corner of her eye and turned to behold a striking woman with warm café-au-lait skin and a mane of intricately beaded braids. The woman advanced majestically toward her, surrounded by fluttering yards of luminescent purple fabric. Gigi couldn’t make out her features in the dim light, but backlit from the glow that surrounded her, she seemed almost to have a halo.

She held out her braceleted arms in greeting. Fascinated, Gigi took a deep breath and realized this must be Maya, the director of the Magical Theatre. No wonder she’d appeared so dramatically. She probably had all sorts of magic tricks up her sleeve, and had prepared this show to demonstrate to Gigi what the theater was capable of.

“Gigi, my love, welcome,” said Maya, pulling her up and sweeping her into a rose-scented embrace. Gigi felt herself stiffen. She was not accustomed to hugging strangers—had never been a touchy-feely type. Almost against her will, she relaxed into Maya’s voluminous soft caress, and immediately felt a strong sense of well-being sweep through her.

Maya held Gigi at arm's length to study her.

"Mmm, yes," she murmured. "Much as I expected...yes...remedial training essential...must begin immediately."

Gigi shifted uncomfortably under Maya's scrutiny, trying to screw up the courage to ask Maya what she meant by "remedial training essential." Of course she needed training—the classified ad had specified that experience was not required, and she'd made it very clear during their phone interview that this was her first theatrical management position. But *remedial*? That would hardly be necessary.

"Well, no time to lose, my dear," Maya said briskly, releasing Gigi from her grasp before she could defend herself against the "remedial" comment. "Follow me," she added.

Turning around in a swirl of violet light, she made off swiftly across the room.

Gigi hurried behind Maya, but the woman was a whirlwind. Before Gigi could catch up, Maya seemed to disappear into the velvet-draped wall at the opposite end of the room. There must be a door there that she hadn't noticed before, hidden by the thick curtains. But when Gigi arrived, there was no opening to be seen. She snatched at the curtain, scrabbling for a gap, but there was none. Frantic, she kneeled and lifted the curtain from underneath, peering at the wall behind. It was smooth and dark. Where had Maya gone, and how did she expect Gigi to follow?

"Look beyond the obvious, my sweet," Maya's voice breathed in her ear. "Things are not always as they seem. Seek what is beyond the familiar."

Gigi whipped her head around, but Maya was not there. Her disembodied voice echoed endlessly in Gigi's mind. "Seek the truth...pierce the veil of the illusion..."

Around and around the voice echoed, causing Gigi to grow dizzy, and her sight to blur. Still kneeling, she felt the room spin around her. When she tried to stand, the floor lurched. She staggered to her feet, swaying, trying to focus on the curtain. There must be a way in, there must...

Godfreys appeared at her elbow, steadying her. "Can be a bit tricky around here until you get your sea legs," he murmured. Gigi tried to give him a smile but she felt like crying. What was this place, and why was she here? It was almost as though she was dreaming. But if it was a dream, why did it seem so real?

Godfreys' hand on her elbow, the soft velvet of the curtain in her fist...She realized her hand was grasping the velvet as if it were a lifesaver.

Suddenly she saw the image of a lifesaver in front of her. It grew larger and larger, and in the center was an opening that revealed a yawning black sky dotted with stars—a way through the curtain! Without thinking, Gigi dove through the opening and felt herself tumbling, spinning, falling through space, losing all sense of boundaries, time, and fixed reality.

Surrendering to her precipitous flight, the world as she knew it streamed from her, leaving a glittering vapor trail as she tumbled and flipped, then spread her arms and soared through endless black night.

Chapter Three

Gigi landed in a once-plush auditorium chair with a bone-jarring jolt, as if she'd been dropped from a great height. She stared around, disoriented, at a small, old-fashioned, dimly-lit playhouse that was half-filled with people of all ages, shapes, sizes, and colors. To her astonishment, while she watched, more people began filling the seats—not by walking down the threadbare red-carpeted aisle and pushing through rows, as Gigi would expect, but by dropping, as she must have, from above.

Where had she fallen from? She remembered flying through space, cavorting with stars and whirling with planets, dizzy with euphoria. But the memory was fading, even now. What the hell had that been about? Perhaps the Euro-queen on the train had dropped drugs in her water, and it had all been a giant hallucination. Or else it really was a dream.

Obviously, she couldn't have actually flown through space to get here—wherever *here* was. Flying was not her favorite activity to begin with. But when she looked up at what should have been the ceiling, she saw that the theater was open to the sky—a sky filled with multitudes of stars—more stars than she'd ever seen in her life. Galaxies upon galaxies spun and pulsed, and she could swear she heard them emitting a deep, comforting hum.

While she watched, spellbound, a star shot across the sky, growing brighter as it approached. “Ooh, I love falling stars!” she thought, then quickly noticed another, and another. They were coming very close. In fact, it looked like the stars were falling right into the auditorium! As they approached, however, they gained solidity and decreased speed, taking the form of humans. She realized with a shock that the people appearing in the seats were falling like stars from the endless sky.

Gigi's eyes widened in surprise as a star whizzed directly toward her. It began morphing into the shape of a person who was headed, apparently, for Gigi's lap.

Instinctively reverting to elementary-school emergency drills, she ducked and covered. A second later she felt a *thunk!* as the flying person landed in the adjoining seat.

Feeling foolish, Gigi righted herself, shook her hair off her face, and stared at her neighbor—a slender youngish woman who seemed utterly composed and not at all put out by her journey. With perfect calm, the woman set down the leather briefcase she was clutching and removed a polka-dotted makeup bag. Surveying herself critically in a compact, she whipped out a brush and ran it through her dark chin-length bob, slicked on shell-pink lip gloss, and checked her flawless eyeliner. After putting away the makeup bag, she smoothed her black pencil skirt over slim thighs and surveyed her surroundings with a satisfied smirk.

Finally the woman turned to an openmouthed Gigi and offered her a small nod and a tight-lipped smile. Gigi returned it weakly, too astounded to speak. Why didn't her neighbor seem discomposd by this bizarre situation?

Whatever! Gigi mentally shook herself. It was time to attempt to make sense of what was happening. "I appear to be at some sort of intimate theatrical event," she thought. "In space."

Stunning reasoning. Obviously she was not destined to become a detective. She had a sudden urge to laugh. What would Stephanie say about this? She'd nudge Gigi's arm and whisper something about how the trip through space was obviously hard on the hair. Automatically, Gigi's hand went up to smooth her tresses, and she noticed she was clutching a piece of paper. Huh? She brought the paper close to her eyes, to try and make out its small writing in the dim light.

The paper was folded like a program, and on the front in elaborately curlicued writing it said, *Remedial Angel Training: The Dreamtime Sessions*. What the heck was Remedial Angel Training? And dreamtime—well, that clarified things a little, even though she couldn't remember falling asleep. If this was all a dream, that would go a long way toward explaining the unexpected turn of events. But it certainly was the most lucid, tangible dream she'd ever had—space travel aside.

Darting a look at the woman next to her, Gigi noticed she had donned stylish rectangular reading glasses and intently perused her own program, nodding in agreement as she scanned it. She seemed to have some idea of what was going on, but much as Gigi longed to ask her for information, she wasn't going to reveal her own ignorance. She opened the program and read the fanciful print on the inside:

Eons ago, angelic beings of light celebrated each moment in a celestial playground of unending perfection.

“Oh no,” Gigi thought with rising panic. “Is this some New Age convention or something? Or maybe I’m dead? What is this stuff about angels?” Willing herself to remain calm, she resumed reading.

One particularly fine afternoon, a gathering of angels were arguing about the limits of knowledge, and they came to understand that they needed to expand their level of understanding. Who better to help them than their good friend Maya, Mistress of Illusion and director of heaven’s special effects department?

“Maya,” they said, “Would you create an illuminating game for us? We would like to expand our knowing and you’re just the person to make learning fun.”

Delighted, Maya agreed. She loved a challenge, and she immediately set out to develop an elaborate game of enchantment that would provide a forum for the angels’ learning. She dreamed a fantasy called life on earth and set it center stage in a fabulous playhouse that she named the Magical Theatre. She lost no time decorating the theater with her favorite creations: mangoes, panda bears, red-breasted newts, and rainbows.

Gigi wrinkled her brow, confused. The Magical Theatre! What?

From the crest of heaven the angels peeked eagerly down at the Magical Theatre, watching it fill up with oceans, mountains, and crimson sunsets. They couldn’t wait to get there.

“Is it ready?” they asked Maya when she emerged, radiant.

“It’s ready,” Maya said, “but you’re not. One more thing...” and she wove a magic spell around the eager angels with her golden wand. This spell was an integral part of the game, because it caused the angels to forget everything they knew about the perfection of the universe.

Next, using the illuminated tip of her wand, Maya infused each angel with a spark of the Divine Mystery before gleefully announcing, “Let the game begin!”

As the angels soared through Maya’s mists of illusion to participate in her game, her voice echoed throughout the galaxy. “Hear this essential fact, my dears—to break the spell of forgetfulness and awaken from the enchantment of the Magical Theatre, you must remember, and live, the truth of who you are!”

Gigi felt her lips take on an Elvis-like sneer. What was this, some kind of a joke? Maybe Maya wanted to see if she had a sense of humor.

As time passed, the initial group of angels was joined by curious multitude eager to participate in Maya's game. All the angels were certain they would be able to awaken from the enchantment by remembering that they were sparks of the Divine Mystery. Yet once on earth, the angels succumbed to the human illusion of imperfection, and very few of them were able to resist the spell of forgetfulness. Instead, they tried to fill the empty hole in their hearts from outward sources that only ended up strengthening their belief that they were less than perfect.

Finally, Maya realized that she had to do something to help the earthbound angels. She developed a remedial training course to help the angels who had demonstrated their readiness to awaken. Summoning them in their dreams, she taught them about the keystones they needed to master to cast off the spell of forgetfulness and step into their true natures.

You, Gigi, are one of the earthbound angels, and you're fortunate enough to have been offered the opportunity to attend this course and learn the steps necessary to awaken from the enchantment.

Startled to see her name on the program, Gigi crumpled it in her sweaty hand. What a crock! It had to be some sort of practical joke. Maybe she was on a reality show and any moment the cameramen would break into laughter, and the lights would come on. Remedial angel training, indeed!

Gigi looked around hopefully, but there was no camera crew to be seen, and no one jumped out to yell, "*Punk'd!*" Instead, all she could see were more and more flying stars turning into falling people.

"Okay, let's think about this rationally," Gigi said to herself sternly. "For argument's sake, let's say I really am an angel."

If so, the idea of her needing remedial *anything* was ridiculous. She'd always been a good student and had graduated from an Ivy League college. If she hadn't been so busy with all her extracurricular activities, she was sure she would have been near the top of her class. The word "remedial" had never been applied to her in any circumstance, and

she certainly wasn't going to stand for it now. She was going to have to ask her prissy-looking neighbor how to get out of here.

But maybe the woman wasn't that intelligent, if she was in remedial angel training too. Still, it was worth a try.

"Hi," Gigi said, clearing her throat. Her neighbor looked up with an annoyed expression.

Gigi plowed ahead. "I was just wondering, um, if you know how we can get out of this? I mean, I'm obviously in the wrong place, and I need to know who to talk to so I can be excused from the course." Realizing she hadn't introduced herself, Gigi stuck out her hand and said, "Oh, and I'm Gigi."

Reluctantly, her neighbor took her hand and gave it a quick shake, saying, "I'm Susan" before quickly withdrawing her hand and wiping it on her skirt.

This Susan was really starting to get on Gigi's nerves. Unable to stop herself, she said cheerfully, "It's great to be able to shake hands with people again since my contagious rash is almost gone."

Susan froze, then dived into her briefcase, and pulled out antiseptic gel, briskly rubbing it on her hands. Gigi watched with satisfaction.

"So, Susan, any idea how to ditch this remedial nightmare?" she asked, trying for a light tone.

Susan's raised one perfectly waxed eyebrow. "Clearly you have no idea where you are. You're here because you have been given a once-in-a-lifetime chance to take this course. Maya probably selected you because you had hit bottom, and were in need of serious help." She added something under her breath that Gigi was pretty sure was, "And boy, do you need it."

Losing patience, Gigi snapped, "Well, since this is remedial angel training, I guess *everyone* in here needs it. And not just in the social graces, either, though I hope she covers basic politeness."

Susan sniffed, crossed her arms over her expensive-looking raw silk jacket, and turned away, aquiline nose in the air.

“Smarty-pants,” Gigi muttered, wishing there were someone sitting on her other side, but that seat was empty. Perhaps the dreadlocked Rastafarian sitting in front of her would be able to help.

Before Gigi could tap the man on the shoulder, a screechy sound like the movement of rusty cables drew her attention to the stage. The small proscenium was framed by velvet curtains like the ones in the lobby of the Magical Theatre, but these were suspended in space with no visible means of support. Gilded columns rose from stage right and left, up and up until Gigi’s eye could no longer follow them.

An elaborate chandelier was being lowered on invisible cables from the nonexistent ceiling, causing the ghastly screeching noise. It finally reached its destination ten or twelve feet above the stage, whereupon the house lights dimmed and the theater was plunged into blackness.

Then, with silent splendor, the chandelier glowed to life, illuminated by thousands of tiny, swarming lights. Gigi squinted. The lights looked like fireflies, darting in and out of each other in a never-ending pattern.

The audience fell silent, except for a general rustling as everyone settled into their seats expectantly. Gigi held her breath, heart pounding. Although she had no idea what might be coming, she discovered that she was sweating in anticipation. The strangeness of her surroundings and her manner of arrival were no longer her primary concern. She was completely focused on the stage, waiting to see what was next.

The silence stretched on, and just when her inner New Yorker was about to give in to the urge to yell “Let’s get the show on the road!” Gigi heard a swooshing noise from above like the flapping of dozens of wings. She gaped, awestruck, as a golden chariot drawn by winged horses swept across the theater and landed on the stage, accompanied by a collective, “Oooohh!” from the audience.

Then with infinite grace, a figure unfolded from her seat in the chariot—a woman with a mass of swirling braids, cinnamon skin and robes that seemed alive, whipping around her as she grew taller, taller, floating out of the chariot and onto the stage. She snapped her fingers and the chariot disappeared in a puff of pink smoke.

“Welcome, my dear students,” said Maya.

So Gigi *had* followed Maya to the Magical Theatre after all! This must be it. But how could the theater in Blessings, Maine, be located in outer space? Remembering that this was apparently some sort of lucid dream, Gigi decided to stop trying to figure out the details. Instead she would simply wait for the moment when she could get Maya's attention and let her know she was in the wrong place. Maya would surely recognize that she was supposed to be training to manage the Magical Theatre, not be enrolled in a remedial angel course.

Maya's rich tones carried effortlessly through the small theater, sounding at once grand and intimate.

"You are probably feeling slightly confused, and I cannot blame you," Maya began. "I do apologize if your arrival here was a tad abrupt. But we really have no time to lose. You are all in great need of assistance with your awakening—and since there is only this moment, we may as well seize it!"

Gigi was startled to see a shrieking monkey hop across the stage, chasing an alarm clock running as fast as it could on spindly legs. The monkey caught the clock and grasped it in its long fingers, waving it in the air before leaping offstage.

Maya laughed delightedly. "Yes, seize the moment, my little band of strays! For you have lost touch with who you really are, and I am here to help you discover the truth."

"Are you gonna tell us who *you* are?" someone yelled from the balcony in a thick Brooklyn accent.

"Oh yes, thank you, Vinny. Timidity is certainly not one of your limitations, is it? Permit me to introduce myself. I am known as Maya, the Great Mistress of Illusion. As you no doubt read in your programs, I am the creator of the Magical Theatre—and I am here to guide you through a program of dreamtime remedial angel training." She beamed and dipped her head modestly, as if expecting applause.

A stir rippled through the theater. Emboldened by Vinny's question, Gigi seized the moment to raise her hand, certain once Maya recognized her she'd send her to wherever she was really supposed to be, to train for her new job. But Maya, either not seeing or ignoring her waving arm, continued.

“Yes, I designed the game of daily life you’ve been playing!” she declared, clapping her hands and causing a cascade of yellow smiley faces to bounce and twirl around her. “I am so happy to remind you that what you have thought of as reality until now is a world entirely of your own making, a ‘reality’ that you have created within the enchantment of the Magical Theatre.”

She held up her hand, as if to ward off the unspoken questions of the students. “We’ll answer all your queries, never fear. For now, I ask you only to access the farthest recesses of your mind to remember the eons you lived *before* you began your human experience. As angels, you existed without time or care, each love-filled moment flowing unimpeded into the next, across eternity.”

The word “eternity” reverberated, booming, around and around the theater. Gigi felt as if she’d encountered that word only recently in a very different circumstance, but she couldn’t remember where. Before she could place it, however, she was distracted by a brisk click-click-clicking next to her. Susan had taken her laptop out of her briefcase and was studiously typing away, recording Maya’s every word with immaculately manicured fingers.

Gigi rolled her eyes. “God, she’s too much. What does she think this is, the Harvard Business School?” She quickly sat on her own bitten, ragged nails and wished she’d thought to get a manicure before departing for Blessings, and also to bring at least a pad of paper and a pen. Annoying as Susan was, she found herself wishing she could be more like her. She really seemed to have it all together—one of those women who’d always had the ability to make Gigi feel instantly dowdy, insignificant, and stupid, no matter how good she’d been feeling a moment before.

Strangely, however, the seemingly practical Susan looked like she was buying this eternal life stuff. Her expression in the glowing light from the chandelier was eager and serious.

“I’ve really got to get out of woo-hoo-ville,” Gigi decided, suddenly desperate to escape. She tried to stand, but found herself stuck to her seat as if by a magnetic force. Reluctantly, she turned her eyes back to Maya.

“I know this will challenge your human notions of common sense, but you must hear it,” Maya said sternly, beaming her violet eyes straight at Gigi. Gigi suddenly felt

that she'd seen those eyes in someone else's face recently—but the moment passed as Maya continued, “You are each a spark of the Divine Mystery, cloaked in human form. Perfection is your birthright!”

Perfect? A spark of the Divine Mystery?

“Please, give me a break,” Gigi groaned, earning a glare from Susan. But against her will, a part of her found Maya's words appealing. It would be nice to be perfect. Then she wouldn't have so much to worry about.

“So Vinny's perfect? I guess that's why he's so conceited,” another Brooklynese voice shouted from the rear of the theater, causing a titter to ripple through the listeners.

Maya put her hands on her hips and shook her head at the culprit. “Yes, Vinny is perfect, and so are you, Tito—and I would think you'd know enough to keep your comments to yourself, seeing as this is your third trip through Remedial Angel Training.”

“Ah, bullseye!” Tito said, drawing more laughter. Gigi had to admire his spunk, but Susan sighed and shot a disdainful look in the direction of the balcony.

“Now, let's get on with the program, shall we?” Maya asked, an aura of indefinable power surrounding her. Her voice took on an echoing quality. “Although you don't remember it, each of you volunteered to undergo a spell of forgetfulness and enter the Magical Theatre in human form. That is how you arrived on earth.” She paused for dramatic effect.

It all sounded improbable to Gigi, especially the part about volunteering. She picked at her ragged nails as Maya continued, “You courageously chose to participate in the grand experiment of the Magical Theatre. You agreed to play the game of life on earth, knowing that the rules of the game required you to remember your essential perfection—in spite of all the forces on earth that would collaborate to convince you that you're deeply flawed.”

A murmuring swelled from the crowd and Maya held up her finger, shooting them a playfully stern look before continuing, “The key to breaking this spell is to rediscover and live the truth of your magnificence.”

Gigi reluctantly admitted to herself that it did sound nice to imagine that life on earth was only a game designed for her to discover her magnificence. If only it were true and not a fairy tale.

“Each of you were certain you’d be the one to withstand the enchantment, break the spell of forgetfulness, and star in your own production without a glimmer of stage fright. But your good intentions weren’t enough to keep you from giving in to the illusion, and you began to see life on earth as the only reality. You took it very seriously and developed all kinds of physical and emotional ailments in response to the stress it created. Worse, you became convinced that you were fundamentally flawed, and that to achieve happiness and completion you’d have to change. You began concocting a distorted image of perfection.

“Imagine the lunacy of searching for something outside yourselves to complete you,” Maya sighed. “My sweet souls, how could you believe you had to do that? How could you spend your whole lifetime in the Magical Theatre trying to be something other than what you are, when you already embody absolute perfection?”

Silence reigned in the theatre, even Vinny and Tito sobered by Maya’s words. Gigi was torn. It was obvious Maya was sincere, but it was really too much—Maya, talking about logic? As if any of this were logical! Her eyes roved the theater to see if anyone else had noticed the absurdity of Maya’s reasoning, but everyone seemed riveted. If others were skeptical, they weren’t showing it. Oh, well. She, for one, was not about to accept a load of crap about her own perfection. What a laugh! She used to be an angel—sure, and pigs had wings!

Suddenly, the stage was beset by a flurry of sound and motion that kicked up a cloud of dust. When the dust cleared, Gigi’s jaw dropped. Maya’s robes had been replaced by overalls and a plaid shirt, and she was surrounded by a flying gaggle of fat pink pigs with madly flapping angel wings, dipping and swirling around her. They snorted gently as they played an airborne game of “Ring Around the Rosy” with Maya in the center. Gigi couldn’t believe her eyes and ears. Flying pigs—It was as if Maya had read her mind. *Could* Maya perceive her thoughts? She slumped down guiltily in her seat.

Looking across the rows of students straight into Gigi’s eyes, Maya said steadily, “Be assured that your current nonsensical thinking is merely a result of the spell you’re under. It has led you to search in vain for the missing pieces you hope will create a new, flawless version of yourself. Mark this well, my dear students, and remember it: *What you long for already exists within you.* You won’t find it through relationships, success,

or riches. You were born a perfect expression of divine love. The wellspring of love, acceptance, and happiness you've been madly seeking is already inside you. You are its source!"

The word "source" echoed around and around the theater as the audience sat in rapt silence. With a shimmer of shifting light, Maya's garb changed back to her goddess robes, and she continued, "Miracles await you, beloveds, when you remember who you truly are."

"Well, how are we supposed to remember?" Gigi thought. "If we really are so perfect—which I doubt—how are we supposed to break the spell of forgetfulness? I mean, I must be under a really strong spell, because I feel about as imperfect as you can get."

Gigi's heart contracted unexpectedly in reaction to her thought, and a sudden sharp pain assailed her. It hurt to think of herself as massively imperfect. Tears sprang to her eyes and ran down her face, and she allowed herself the indulgence of a silent cry. Then, embarrassed, she darted her eyes around to see if Susan had noticed—but she was looking down at her computer screen, seemingly in deep contemplation.

Then, without warning, a parade of negative thoughts began marching through Gigi's mind, chanting words she had used many times to describe herself: "Dumb, wrong, bad, too much, not enough, too silly, too tall, too fat, too loud, unlovable, undeserving." The words cut into her now, and the pain in her heart increased. She placed her hand on her chest and breathed deeply, trying to soothe herself.

"I don't want to hurt myself anymore with this belief in my imperfection," she thought suddenly, surprising herself with her strength of conviction. A moment ago she'd been scoffing at the idea that she was perfect, yet now she wanted more than ever to believe it. But how could she get there?

As if in answer to her question, Maya said, "Here in the dreamtime, uninfluenced by the lure of the enchantment, I will reveal to you the secrets you once knew and are now buried deep in your soul. All you need to do is open the barriers in your minds and hearts. What have you got to lose?" She flung her arms wide, and Gigi felt a flood of love pouring over her.

Mesmerized, Gigi nodded yes, in sync with the others yearning for a chance to reconnect with their true natures.

“During this dreamtime course, I will share with you twelve keystones—the foundational principles that will release you from your slumber of forgetfulness and allow you to grow into awareness of your magnificence,” Maya continued. “Tonight we will explore the first keystone, and your homework will be to find a way to implement it. Then you’ll be ready for the second one, and so on. After you begin to absorb the first crucial keystones, you’ll be well on your way to awakening, and we will no longer need to meet so formally or have assigned homework. Depending on where your dreams take you, I’ll begin visiting you in different ways.”

Susan’s hand shot into the air.

“Yes, Susan?” Maya asked.

“So this course will take place completely during the dreamtime?”

“Yes. That is the time when I can most easily reach you, since you are out from under the direct influence of the spell of forgetfulness.”

“But how will we be able to remember what we learn when we wake up?”

Gigi had to admit that was a good question.

“Let us say your memory will be nudged,” Maya said. “You may not remember it all at once, but the way you’ve looked at the world will no longer make sense, so you will automatically seek the keystones as you need them. Of course, you will have to practice the lessons of the keystones until you master a new way of life. And I might have another little tool for you that you’ll mysteriously find when you wake up.” Her eyes twinkled at them.

Although Gigi was still unsure why she was here, her revelation about believing in her own imperfection had given her an inkling. She decided not to take this opportunity to alert Maya of her mistake. Clearly Maya knew Gigi was here, and it did seem she had some interesting points to make. Gigi settled back to enjoy the lecture as invisible lights began to bathe the stage in an ever-changing spectrum of color.

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