

FOR THREE GENERATIONS OF REMARKABLE WOMEN,
ACTING WAS THEIR PASSION... AND THEIR OBSESSION

THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS



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BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *A GRAND PASSION*

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KINDNESS
OF
STRANGERS



MARY MACKAY



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PLAYA AZUL, MEXICO

1976

The helicopter crawled slowly across the great red dish of the setting sun. Everything was blood-colored—the waves, the clouds, the foam—nothing looked real, or normal, or solid. The helicopter labored on, buzzing and bucking slightly, grinding its way from the fiery rim of the sun to its more fiery center, and then, suddenly, just as it was laboring out the other side, its motor coughed, skipped, and gave out. It fell of course, not as a pelican dives or as ocean things fall back into the sea, but as man-made things fall—violently, crazily, as if felled by the fist of some vengeful god. Yet before that fist could strike again, suddenly and miraculously, the motor coughed back into life, the blades started to revolve, and the crippled shell of metal with its precious human cargo climbed back into the sky.

Inside there was terror and confusion. Mandy was shaking so hard she couldn't think. The whole cabin was a mess from the sudden plunge, and if they hadn't all been buckled into their seats, they would have been part of it. For a second no one could move or speak. Mayumi sobbed softly, hands over her face. Kevin was bleeding from a cut that ran all the way across his forehead, but they were all alive and no one seemed seriously injured and it was a miracle.

Ted threw back his head and laughed. His pale blue eyes

sparkled, and he looked drunk with relief. Mandy opened her mouth to say something to him, but no sound came out. She leaned forward to hug him, to kiss him, to celebrate their reprieve, and the tips of her fingers had just touched his shoulders when the motor stopped again for the second and final time. . . .

Fire blossomed out of the cockpit, exploding, consuming, taking on a life of its own. The smell of burning things poisoned the air and black smoke gagged them. Oil and gasoline exploded; the sick-sweet smell of burning flesh and metal filled their nostrils. The fire had a taste of its own, bitter as all the things each of them had left undone.

*Fire—that had tongues but no voice.
And they fell . . . and they fell . . .*

Viola Kessler woke with a start, sat bolt upright, and clutched at the arm of her seat. Her heart was beating wildly, and for a few seconds she didn't know where she was or who she was, only that she was a nameless, frightened old woman, lost somewhere on the edge of sleep.

She looked down the long, dark aisle at the tiny pools of light that fell over the orange seats, at the black portholes, at the stewardess standing nonchalantly near the rest-room door, whispering in rustling Spanish to a slim, prosperous Mexican who looked as if he might be a Pemex engineer from one of the big refineries near Villa Hermosa.

Her memory came back. Of course. She was on a plane, heading across the Caribbean to Playa Azul, Mexico, to visit her granddaughter, Mandy, who was making a movie. The plane was beginning its descent. No doubt the change in altitude had startled her out of her nap.

She closed her eyes again and tried to remember her dream, or rather nightmare, but as usual she couldn't. It had been something about fire, but what exactly? Opening her eyes, she drummed her fingertips impatiently on the plastic knobs that controlled the air and overhead light. It was annoying not to be able to remember. You'd think that after over sixty years of having the same recurrent dreams, she would have been able to remember at least one of them, but she never could. Whenever she dreamed of fire there was

always a veil that shut her off from the content. All she knew was that she always woke with her heart beating a mile a minute. Not that she didn't have any number of perfectly good, completely rational reasons for being afraid of fire. After all, thanks to the Fascists, she had had two theaters burned out from under her, one in London and one in Berlin. She had lived through the Blitz. She had lost people she loved to fire, and nearly died from it herself. Joseph had burned to death and so had her mother.

She put her mother quickly out of her mind. She wouldn't think of Mama's death. For over sixty years she had been running from the memory of that first fire, and she didn't intend to start analyzing it this late in life. Leave psychoanalysis to the younger generation. Her phobias were part of her, and she was more or less resigned to them, and besides they probably made her a better actress. After all, what was art without neurosis?

Joseph was another matter. After all these years, the thought of him still brought a twinge of pain, but it was a bearable twinge. His face floated out of the past: curly black hair hanging in a shock over his forehead, hazel-brown eyes, a square chin and stubborn mouth. She felt the stirrings of old lusts. Joseph had been such a brilliant playwright, and such a wonderful lover, and she'd been so crazy about him. He had taught her most of what she knew about acting; nothing in her life had ever matched up to those years they'd spent together in Berlin.

That was the trouble with a good memory. It made you a fast study, but it played hell with your life. Normal people probably couldn't even remember ten lines of Shakespeare, much less the minute details of something that happened half a century ago. When you were old you were better off thinking about the good parts of life: like the command performance she had once given for the Prince of Wales or that honeymoon in the South of France with her second husband, Richard, when they had made love so passionately that they could barely stagger down to dinner in the evenings.

She yawned and stretched. Now those, she thought with a grin, were memories worth having. Brushing a strand of hair off her forehead, she picked up the open script that lay on the seat beside her, turned on the overhead light, and resolutely set about learning her lines. The script was a dog-eared copy

of *A Long Day's Journey Into Night* that had accompanied her all the way from London—O'Neill's last play and in her opinion his best. In six weeks she was opening at the Carlyle Theater in the role of Mary Tyrone, the drug-addicted mother. Of course at seventy-five she should have looked far too old for the part, but the pleasant fact was that she didn't. Her high cheekbones, smooth skin, and large brown eyes made her look like a much younger woman, and given the right makeup, a little bit of color in her hair, and suitably low-key lighting, she could still give Hepburn a run for the money.

She turned the page, read for a few minutes, frowned, nibbled at the tip of her pencil, and then threw the script back down on the seat impatiently and picked up a magazine. Mandy's face looked back from the Cinema section of *Time*, surrounded by her friends, the whole pack of kids airbrushed to a glossy perfection. She inspected Mandy's face, seeing it with secret grandmotherly pride, as she always did, as a younger version of her own: the same unruly blond hair (hers was gray of course by now, but it had once been blond as flax), the same small determined chin and turned-up nose that had been the despair of Viola's youth and which now, by a miracle of genetics she couldn't begin to comprehend, were Mandy's trademarks.

She was just beginning to reread the article when the seat-belt signs suddenly blinked on. Viola put away the copy of *Time*, obediently fastened her belt, and turned her mind to Mandy, who would be waiting for her at the airport in Playa Azul. Mandy had been on location in Mexico for the past seven weeks, shooting the movie *Atlantis*, built around a group of five young actors whom the press had recently taken to calling "The Lang Gang." The Lang Gang had already made one successful film together and were generally considered to be the hottest group to hit the screen in decades, whatever that meant.

Still Mandy was good; there was no doubt about it. *Variety* had singled out her performance in *The Plunge*, calling it "brilliant," but of course Mandy would turn in a brilliant performance. She came from three generations of great actresses. "Brilliant" huh? How about radiant, electrifying, the best young actress since Evelyn Nesbit?

She chuckled at her own prejudice. Ostensibly she was

flying to Playa Azul to take a vacation and add some new seashells to the collection on her coffee table, but the truth was, she would have cheerfully paddled across the Atlantic in a canoe to pay Mandy a visit. If there was one secret and quiet passion left in Viola's life beside acting, it was her granddaughter.

Outside, the earth was rushing up to meet the wheels of the plane. She saw the lights bordering the runway, a shadowy fringe of palm trees, and in the distance the yellowish glow of Playa Azul. Settling back, she closed her eyes and tried to think of something else. She never particularly liked landings and takeoffs, having once read that most airplane mishaps took place at such moments, and she had even been known to surreptitiously mumble a prayer to herself if things got too bumpy. On this occasion she tranquilized herself by contemplating the question: why was Mandy wasting herself in film when she could have been acting on the stage? The beauty of this question was that it was impossible to answer, and thus a perfect way of forgetting that you were plunging toward the earth at some three hundred miles an hour encased in a nine-ton metal cage.

The wheels made contact with the runway and the plane taxied to a halt. Viola relaxed, opened her eyes, and looked out the window. How odd, she thought. Two Mexican soldiers were hurrying toward the plane accompanied by a tall woman in a pair of baggy white shorts and a straw sombrero whom she realized with a start was none other than Jane Crews, the director of *Atlantis*.

"Your coat, señora."

"Thank you." Viola held it in her lap as the air-conditioning hissed to a stop. There was a moment of silence in which she considered half a dozen possibilities for Crews' mysterious appearance with the soldiers, none of them good. The plane began to empty. Getting to her feet, she threw her coat over her arm and hurried toward the hatch. By the time she got down the steps, Crews was waiting for her, flanked by the soldiers. She looked grim and awkward.

"Hello, Miss Kessler," she said solemnly, reaching out to grasp Viola's hand. She was a tall, rather intimidating woman in her mid-forties, with short brown hair, a sharp nose, and a way of standing with her feet apart that always made her look as if she were on the verge of issuing marching orders to an

invisible army. Pressing her lips together firmly, she pushed her gold-rimmed glasses up on her nose and frowned. "I hate like hell to tell you this," she said bluntly, "but your granddaughter may be in some trouble." Tact, Viola remembered, had never been Jane Crews' strong point.

"What kind of trouble?" Viola put her flight bag down on the ground, not able—or rather not wanting—to understand the implications of Crews' peculiar greeting. Around her she could smell the balmy odor of a tropical night. The air was damp and thick, so full of suspended drops of water that her cotton slip was already clinging to her legs.

Crews cleared her throat. "We've been shooting for the last few weeks on a small uninhabited island about sixty miles southeast of here. I was having everyone—cast, crew, the works—ferried out to that godforsaken hunk of coral by helicopter, which was probably a mistake in retrospect, only there was nowhere to land a plane and it was too long a boat ride, not to mention that we had maybe ten tons of gear." Crews gasped for breath and plunged ahead. "Anyway, the airlift was going fine until this afternoon. We quit around three-thirty, four at the latest, and I headed straight back to Playa Azul with the footage to put it on the 5:20 flight to L.A. The second copter came in about an hour after I did. The third copter—well, the long and short of it, Miss Kessler, is that the third copter hasn't shown up yet."

"Just how late is it?" Viola demanded.

Crews inspected her watch. "As of ten minutes ago it was two, maybe three hours overdue, and it doesn't take three hours to go sixty miles."

Viola felt a wave of panic that left her sick. "Who was on the third helicopter?" she asked in as calm a voice as she could manage. Let it have been the crew on that downed helicopter: gaffers, electricians, grips, anyone but Mandy.

"All of them," Crews informed her grimly. "The whole gang—Kevin, Peter, Mayumi, Ted and"—she paused—"Mandy, too, I'm afraid. I had these copters checked and rechecked. I never imagined that there'd be any problem and . . ." She stopped painfully in mid-sentence as Viola exploded with questions.

"Why did you leave Mandy behind? Why didn't you take her with you?" Viola knew it was an unreasonable question, but she couldn't control her fear. She imagined a helicopter

on fire, falling out of the sky, its blades freezing against the sunset. She saw flames blossoming from the windows, an explosion, Mandy burned as Joseph had been burned, Mandy terrified and dying, and all her love not able to save Mandy or put out a single flame. Stop it! she told herself sharply. Don't even think such thoughts. But the old terror of fire rose up in her throat, nearly choking her. She felt her hands tremble and her mouth go dry. Taking a deep breath, she willed her heart to stop pounding. Mandy couldn't have been killed in such a horrible, senseless way, and yelling at Crews wasn't going to make her come back any sooner. Digging her nails into the palms of her hands, she squared her shoulders and forced herself to ask in a calm, practical tone, "If they did go down, where would they be?"

"The currents are bad around here," Crews said somberly, "so they could be almost anywhere. I've had my two copters flying between the mainland and the island since around six-thirty, but it's dark now, and so far we haven't found a trace of them."

"Have you called Hermann and Kathe?" Viola picked up her shoulder bag and set it down again. The inside of her mouth tasted like copper and her brain buzzed with a thousand plans. She tried not to think how Kathe was going to take this news. Kathe was more terrified of flying than Viola was of fire, and the very idea of Mandy being in a helicopter accident would be a nightmare for her.

"I tried about half an hour ago, but I couldn't get through. Their service said they were off camping in Wyoming. We've called the relatives of the others. The Mexican government's flying in a search team from Vera Cruz. So far we've managed to keep the fact that a planeload of film stars is missing out of the news, but who knows how long that can last." Crews paced back and forth. There was sweat on her forehead and her jaw was set. "Damn it, if this had happened during the day we could have found them in no time, but the Mexicans just aren't set up for night searches. Dope runners and smugglers, yes; they're experts on that around here, but searching for wreckage in the dark in over hundreds of square miles of ocean—forget it."

"Maybe they made an emergency landing." She wanted to beat her fists against the side of the plane. She wanted to grab Crews by the collar of her Hawaiian shirt and shake

her until she admitted that this was all some kind of terrible joke.

Crews shook her head. "I've thought of that, but it doesn't seem too likely. There aren't many of those damn islands anywhere within a reasonable range of here, and they're pretty barren, and a helicopter on one of them would be a cinch to spot, even at night. Still I suppose there's a vague possibility." Crews swung her arms awkwardly and bit her lower lip thoughtfully. "Well, hell yes, I suppose they *could* have set down by some rocks and more or less blended in. There's no moon tonight, and they'd be hard to see if they were in the shadows, and if the radio was broken, there'd be no way they could contact us."

"You haven't found any sign of a crash?"

"Not even an oil slick."

"Well, there you have it," she said sharply. "An emergency landing." Viola felt the hollow desperation of her own words, but Crews seemed encouraged, or at least she pretended to be for Viola's sake. Shouldering Viola's flight bag, she escorted her to the baggage claim, brushed aside the customs officials, retrieved Viola's luggage from a large, battered cart, commandeered a rust-pocked taxi, and heaved everything into the trunk.

"You're staying at Las Tres Palmas across the bay. Nice place, not first-class, but nothing is in this town." Crews squared her shoulders. She was the director again, in control. "Try to get some sleep, Miss Kessler, and if anything turns up, I'll call you right away."

She paused and they looked at each other for a moment, and Viola felt the last bit of hope drain out of her. Mandy, she thought, am I being punished for the sin of taking too much pride in you, for thinking of you as my own younger self? She felt another irrational burst of anger, as if Mandy were being a disobedient child, hiding herself on purpose to worry all of them.

Shaking Crews' hand for a second time, she climbed into the stuffy cab, feeling the age in her bones, the terrible fatigue of impotence and fear.

It seemed like a long ride to Las Tres Palmas, although in reality it was probably less than ten kilometers. They drove through the center of town down a cobblestone street, past a market and plaza. On any other occasion she would have

been fascinated by the small stands selling papayas and mangoes, the trucks strung with red and green lights, the lacy iron bandstand overgrown with bougainvillea, but this particular night she saw none of the quaintness of Playa Azul. Closing her eyes, she leaned against the back of the seat. She hated waiting; she hated not knowing; she hated not being able to do anything useful. The image of the burning helicopter obsessed her. It drove her crazy to sit back like an old lady while Mandy was in trouble.

She fought to put her anxiety about Mandy into some kind of reasonable perspective, but it kept coming back, making her feel ill. Opening her eyes, she looked out the open window of the cab at the dark sweep of the ocean that lay just beyond the edge of the headlights. A spitting sort of rain was beginning to fall, and there was obviously nothing anyone could do until morning except keep searching and monitoring the shortwave bands in case a fishing boat picked them up.

She stared at the back of the driver's head and then out at the Gulf again. At night the water would be pitch black, full of sharks maybe. All at once her courage gave out, and she began to cry uncontrollably in great, gulping sobs. Mandy, she thought, Mandy darling, where are you? She hid her face in her hands. Mandy, sweetheart, don't be dead, please don't be dead. Because without you, I won't want to live either; because without you . . .

The cab driver looked at her in the rearview mirror. "You okay, señora?" he asked in a concerned voice.

"Yes." She bit her lower lip and proudly forced herself to stop crying. "Yes, thank you." She blew her nose, and wiped her eyes, but she knew if she looked out at the ocean, she would start again. What could she do to distract herself?

Opening her purse, she began searching through the contents. Finally, in a corner of an inside pocket she found what she had been looking for: a small pearl button backed with gold. She held the button in the palm of her hand, feeling its cool circumference. On the surface it wasn't much, but she had carried it with her for over sixty years now. She touched the iridescent bit of pearl with the tip of one finger. Half good-luck charm, half talisman, it had accompanied her all over the world, gone onstage with her every time she'd performed in the last half century.

Shutting her eyes, she closed her fist around the button and tried to remember a time—over sixty years ago—when everyone she loved in the world had been safe, happy, and alive, but in her grief over Mandy she had forgotten an elemental truth: memory is never merely a distraction.

Memory is a fire storm that sucks everything to its center.



B O O K

O N E



F I R E



1

NEW YORK

1912

It was Christmas Eve, vaudeville was in its heyday, and the stage of the Dionysia Theater at Forty-third and Sixth Avenue looked as if all the animals in Noah's ark had escaped to celebrate the occasion: camels with green wreaths draped around their necks lolled and chewed their cud indifferently under the hot lights; ostriches paraded their finery, reaching up long, naked necks to nip the tails of the six rare pink Amazonian cockatoos—insured by Lloyd's of London, it was rumored, for a thousand dollars each; kangaroos in red and gold boxing gloves tugged at the ropes that restrained them, threatening to plunge into the audience at any minute; in the great tank that stretched 120 feet from one side of the stage to the other, swans and pink flamingos swam beak to cheek with 115 of the most beautiful chorus girls in New York, the latter decked out in filmy pseudo-Egyptian costumes that would give the critics something to fulminate about in tomorrow's reviews.

"Nothing could be neatah than to imitate Aidah." Annie Bern—the great, the inestimable, the very, very funny Yiddish comedienne—was singing a parody of Verdi in an accent that was pure Bronx, and the audience was lapping it up, even though most of them had never gotten any closer to opera than the outside of the Met.