

THE RED CLOAK

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CHAPTER 1

Leeza Hamilton took a deep breath to clear her mind before going on stage. Too many things were trying to pressure her. She couldn't be thinking of any of them now; she had to be ready for her performance. Now was the time to fill her mind with positive thoughts.

She loved her job. She loved to perform. She loved her life. She had a wonderful man in her life. She had enough money so that it wasn't a worry for her, not even to worry about the ones who were trying to steal it from her. She had been given an opportunity to do what she loved to do, and she was doing it. She could do whatever she wanted to do, whenever she wanted to do it. She had millions of fans who loved her, who adored her, who wanted to be her. Her name was a household word.

She tuned in to the activity on stage. The previous act was finished and she was being introduced. She put on her wide smile, her stage smile, and let the feelings of power and joy propel her as she ran energetically onto the stage.

She was greeted by a roar of cheering as she grabbed the microphone – she didn't like using the headset mic. A microphone in her hand felt like a power tool, charging her and boosting her level of energy to its highest possible point. She was in charge of the performance now. She drew more and more force from the audience as she sang, hitting the high notes and extending the low notes. She could feel all eyes upon her; she could feel someone praying for her.

Where did that come from? No, she couldn't let herself be distracted! She had to concentrate. Everyone, from Jack-boy, her manager, to Chad Manager, her boyfriend, to the thousands of people in the audience tonight, expected perfection from her. Had she ever treated them to anything less than perfect? No, she had not, and she wasn't about to start now.

She finished her first song and drank in the applause and adoration. She was exhilarated! She loved nothing more than the feeling she got from the audience when she was on stage, when they showed her how much they loved her.

“Ham! Ham! Ham! Ham! Ham! Ham! Ham! Ham! Ham! Ham!!!” the audience shouted. She preferred when they shouted “Leeza” instead of “Ham,” but she knew they were cheering for her with love, and they were not making sport of her.

“How are we doing tonight?” she asked the audience. She was answered by another roar of the crowd as she again gave them her wide stage smile. She could feel a rush of air on her molars. Yes, this was her wide smile. She was giving her best to her fans.

“Now it’s time for one of my new songs. I don’t know if you have heard this one yet, but it’s coming to radio stations all over the country. Listen to the words – but get the meaning from my feelings.” She waited for the music to start, and she caught the beat. She began to dance, further exciting the crowd. She began to sing.

“The words don’t have a meaning
So listen to my feelings.
The words don’t have a meaning
When you’re talking about my heart.

You say that you’ll come by today
I hear every word you say
You make a promise then walk away
Well, I don’t believe you anyway.

The words don’t have a meaning
So listen to my feelings.
The words don’t have a meaning
When you’re talking about my heart.”

As she sang, she floated up into the air, outside her body, and observed herself performing while she watched from the highest pillar in the stadium, just below the clouds. She was entranced as she noted the beauty of her own movements, the perfection of her pitch, the quality of her voice pronouncing the words of the song. Her enunciation was excellent! Her dance moves were inventive, graceful, awe-inspiring. She had not seen such a performer as herself. She was amazed, as she seemed to be viewing a video of herself and the band in their greatest performance ever.

She automatically ran through the songs, one after another, without any variation, without any personal input. As the final song came to a close, she

returned to her body like a genie returning to a bottle – slowly but precisely to the exact spot she left nearly 90 minutes ago. She again felt the rush of the crowd – she again could feel herself in her own body. She took a graceful bow before the audience as they cheered, louder and louder. This was what she loved! This was why she was alive, so she could receive this type of love from thousands of fans at one time! She gave her all to them, wrote songs they memorized and repeated, and they responded in love, in great numbers and with great force!

The concert ended and Leeza was ushered backstage. She went into her dressing room amid cheers and praises and flopped down in the chair in front of the mirror. She noticed that her face was covered with perspiration, her hair drenched. She didn't look as good in the mirror as she had from outside her body... she looked stressed, tired, worn. She recalled, not so long ago, when she would return to her dressing room super-charged, looking great, and ready to go to the party.

What was the point of her life? Was it merely to get a high from an adoring crowd, which quickly faded? The thrill she had received this evening had already dissolved. She glanced at the stack of this month's magazines on the table beside her, all of which featured her face on the cover. Wasn't this all she ever wanted? Was this all there was to life? She had attained her life goal at a young age... now what?

"Leeza, you were excellent, as usual," her manager, Jack-boy, said as he entered her dressing room without knocking.

"Jack, please knock!" she insisted.

"Knock, knock, Baby," he said. Jack-boy never took her seriously. "Wonderful show tonight. Sold out! Besides an excellent performance – have you ever been better? – an excellent total."

He always said that, 'an excellent total.' That phrase had lost its meaning with her.

"Let's do a free concert in the park," she suggested.

"Yeah, right," he laughed. "Are you crazy? Do you know how much moolah you'd be throwing away if you did a free concert?"

She hated it when he said 'moolah.'

“Why is it always about the money?” “Oh, come on, Baby, don’t go all hippie on me,” he begged. “You have a huge staff to pay, you have a huge household to keep running, you need lots of moolah to maintain your daily lifestyle. You know that.” He examined his face in the mirror.

“A concert in the park would be fun.”

“A free concert in the park would be stupid.” He scratched his head, and the sound of his fingertips against his scalp grated down her spine. Why was it so loud? Was he intentionally trying to bother her?

“Can you go now? I need to be alone.”

“Come on, time for the party!”

“I don’t want to go. I just want to be alone for awhile.”

“Come on! You can be alone any other time! You are expected at the party! But get a shower first, you want to look your best.”

“Are you saying I don’t look my best?” Leeza frowned.

“I’m just saying you look like you need a shower.”

“Thanks.” She frowned at herself in the mirror.

“What’s a manager for? Hey, where’s Chad?” Jack-boy asked.

“Who knows?”

“Well, I don’t know, that’s why I asked you. Isn’t he going to the party with you?”

“He said he’d be there, I don’t know if he’s here.”

“Well, your limo is ready when you are. You gonna sign autographs tonight?” He looked in the mirror and groomed his hair.

“I have to, don’t I? Yeah, I don’t want to let down the fans in my own hometown.” Leeza smiled.

“That’s a good one! ‘Hollywood – my own hometown.’ Hey, that could be the title of your next album.”

“Hey! I live here. It’s my hometown.”

“Yeah, right, small town girl from Hollywood. Get changed, and let’s get going.”

“As soon as you get going, I’m going to shower and change.”

“Okay, okay, do you need any help?” He headed for the door.

“Your assistants are just outside, waiting for you to call on them.”

“I can shower and change by myself! But you can send Nita to get me a Starbucks. She knows which one to get.”

“Ahhh, coffee of the week, eh? Sure, yeah, anything you want.”

“Well, go! I want that coffee!” She pointed to the door.

“I’m gone!”

“I still see you!”

“I’m outta here,” he said, slipping out of the dressing room. Leeza could hear the crowd of people outside her dressing room door as Jack-boy held them back, away from her. She got up from the chair and locked the door. She didn’t need any help and she didn’t need any interruptions.

Normally, she would have at least one assistant, probably Nita; she was her favorite, in her dressing room with her after a show. Leeza would be full of conversation and Nita would always respond appropriately, letting Leeza talk all she wanted, encouraging her, helping her, setting out her party attire, cleaning up after her. Tonight, Leeza didn’t feel like talking. Her life was so wonderful, yet she felt so empty. Even Karman’s constant flattery wasn’t what she needed tonight. She needed a chunk of meaning, right now! It didn’t have to last forever, she didn’t have to be full of it, she just needed something to tell her she was important, her life did have meaning, she was more than a poster on a wall or a voice on a best-selling record or a face that sold magazines. She looked up at the ceiling.

“God, are you there?” she asked aloud. She slightly chuckled to herself. If He were there, was she expecting an answer from Him? She had never before called on Him, why would He be there for her? Wait; a long time ago, she had called on Him, years ago, as a teenager... she had asked Him for this, for this lifestyle, for this success. Was He the One who had given it to her, or had she done it herself? Maybe He did answer prayers.

“God?” she began again. “I know you are there. Does my life have a meaning? What’s it all about? I have a lot, I mean, You have given me a lot... but I need more. Not more stuff, not more money, not more friends, but something else, something deeper. I need meaning in my life, meaning to my life, do you know what I mean?”

Of course He knew what she meant. He knew everything!

She threw her wet clothes on the floor and got in the shower. As she let the hot water relieve some of her tension, she began to feel better. She decided not to wash her hair – that would add another hour while she waited for Karman or Kelly to fix her hair. Well, it was all wet anyway, she needed to wash it, her scalp would start itching and stinking if she let this sweat sit in it any longer. She wasn't into wigs – maybe she could wear one of her high-fashion scarves.

She got out of the shower – she was burning up! – and looked through the outfits she had hanging in the closet. Each one made her look good – but tonight she didn't want to look too hot. She just wanted to look stylish, yet subtle. Did any of her clothes say that? Oh, yes, here was a gray flannel outfit she had never worn, sexy yet unobtrusive. She got dressed without any assistance and then unlocked the door. She opened it just the tiniest crack.

“Karman!” she called, then she shut the door. In an instant, Karman was inside the dressing room with her.

“Leeza, you were fabulous tonight!” Karman said.

“Thanks, Karma,” Leeza said, sitting in the chair in front of the mirror. “Do my hair – but just for a scarf, not all that.”

“Okay... um... it's Karman, not Karma,” she said tentatively.

“Yeah, I know, but what do you think about Karma?”

“You mean as a name, or as... karma?”

“Either one, what do you think?”

“I never thought about it.” She gently pulled Leeza's hair into place.

“Well, think about it! You have a brain, don't you?”

“Leeza, you're so funny! Of course I have a brain! Everyone has a brain. I mean, how could I live without a brain?” she asked, as she combed the tangles from Leeza's hair.

“So... what's the meaning of life?” Leeza might as well ask. Maybe someone knew the answer, maybe even simple Karman.

“The meaning of life...” Karman said thoughtfully. “That's a good one. I give up. What is the meaning of life?”

“It's not a joke. I want your opinion, your take on this.”

“The meaning of life...” “Yeah, the meaning of life. Why are we here? What are we doing? What is the importance of our lives?”

“Well, it’s different for you and me. For you, it’s to make millions of people happy. For me, it’s to make you happy.”

“I don’t mean the meaning of our jobs, I mean the meaning of our lives.”

“Aren’t we defined by what we do? Or who we are?”

Leeza didn’t know how to answer that. She knew what she did, but she didn’t know who she was, besides just being the famous Leeza Hamilton. What was the meaning of that?