
Wildside
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A Wilder Name
Laura Leone

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Author's Note

All the characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

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A Wilder Name

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SECOND EDITION

For Catherine, Magda,
and Samantha

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One

"Excuse me," said a pleasant masculine voice.

Nina looked up into a pair of warm brown eyes, which took in her appearance with frank admiration.

"Yes?"

"I'm looking for Nina G ... Guh-na ... um..." The man consulted the slip of paper in his hand.

"Gnagnarelli," she supplied.

"Come again?"

"Gnagnarelli. Nya-nya-*rel*-li," she said pronouncing it distinctly.

"Right, that must be it. Do you know where she is?"

"I'm Nina Gnagnarelli," she replied, smiling up at him. He was clearly not an opera lover or he would have known her, she thought, smoothing her black satin evening gown.

"Good. I'm presenting the jazz award with you tonight."

“Oh, but I thought Louis Evans—”

“Yeah, I know. But he just phoned to say his flight was delayed by fog in London. He’s only just reached Kennedy Airport, so he won’t be here in time. I was the first person they found hanging around backstage, so they asked me to do it. And like the good-natured guy I am, I said yes.” He grinned affably at her. It was a strong, attractive face, framed by longish wavy brown hair. His smile showed even white teeth and made those warm dark eyes glitter. He was tall, strongly built with wide shoulders tapering down to narrow hips.

She realized she’d been staring and that he’d noticed and was enjoying it. She blushed, and then felt annoyed with herself; staring and blushing were two gauche habits she thought she had conquered long ago.

“You have the advantage of me,” she said politely.

“I do?” He sounded amused.

“I mean,” she said clearly, “you know who I am, but I don’t know who you are.”

“Sorry, I guess I just get used to people knowing who I am. I’m Luke Swain.” He extended a strong, tanned hand. She placed her small, well-manicured hand in his, thinking that somehow the statement hadn’t sounded like an immodest boast, just a habit.

“I’m pleased to meet you,” Nina said formally.

“Are you?” he asked. Her blue eyes flashed up to meet candid eyes, which sparkled with amusement. Was he laughing at her?

At that moment, one of the dozens of stagehands Nina had watched dash around with great purpose rushed up to tell them that they were slotted to appear several minutes after the next commercial break. She was amazed that the chaos behind the scenes didn’t extend to the music awards presenters appearing live on national television. As the stagehand rushed away again, Nina noticed a famous female vocalist nervously chain-smoking a few feet away from her.

She returned her gaze to Luke Swain, and then realized she was still holding his hand. She jerked her hand away and spoke quickly to cover her embarrassment.

“And what do you do, Mr. Swain?”

“I’m a pop singer. And you, Miss Nan ... gan...”

“Nya-nya-*rel*-li.”

“Don’t you get tired of that?”

“Extremely.”

“Why didn’t you change it?”

“I guess I figured if it was good enough for my father, it was good enough for me. Anyhow, I thought it would stand out in the cast listing. I’m an opera singer.”

“Opera?” He raised one eyebrow. Just one. She hated people who could do that. “What are you doing presenting a jazz award?”

“Mmm, I love jazz,” she replied. “And my favorite musician has been nominated. I suppose presenters are supposed to be impartial, but I can’t help hoping Jesse Harmon wins. He deserves it. And,” she added with a smile, “if he wins, I’ll get to meet him.”

“You like the saxophone, I take it?”

“I *love* the sax. It’s the only instrument more beautiful than the human voice. It sings like nothing else. Especially when Jesse Harmon plays. What about you, Mr. Swain? What’s your favorite instrument?”

“Won’t you call me Luke so I can call you Nina? Be merciful,” he said with a grin.

“Luke,” she amended.

“The guitar is the instrument I’m most familiar with. I guess the trumpet is the one I most enjoy listening to.”

They engaged in an animated argument about the merits of each brass instrument until they were called to go onstage. As was customary, Nina slipped her arm through his before they walked into the lights. She haughtily ignored the laughing glance Luke tossed her. He seemed to know that touching him flustered her.

“And now, to present the next award,” boomed a hearty voice over the loudspeaker, “Luke Swain and Nina Ganagarelli.” Nina’s jaw tightened as she clenched her teeth.

The audience’s reception was enthusiastic as she and Luke walked toward the podium. She assumed it was mostly meant for him. She was widely recognized within the opera world, but not well known outside of it—not yet. Besides, she thought loftily, opera lovers were usually too refined to make some of the noises she was hearing.

“Good evening,” Luke said as they reached the microphone. “Allow me to introduce you to Nina Gnagnarelli.”

He had pronounced her name impeccably. She shot him a grateful look before they began reading their cue cards.

Finally, Luke opened the envelope saying, “And the winner is...” He peered at the name inside and then, with a grin, he handed the envelope to Nina so she could announce the name.

Her smile was broader than his as she announced enthusiastically, “Jesse Harmon!” Everyone, including Nina and Luke, applauded as the seasoned old musician clambered onstage to accept the award. Nina tried to shake his hand, but he hugged her and to her surprise hugged Luke, as well. He made a brief speech, explained his shyness of audiences unless he had his horn with him, and walked into the wings with Luke and Nina.

As soon as they were backstage, the old man clapped Luke on the shoulder. “Luke, man, where the hell have you been? I ain’t seen you for a coon’s age!”

“Coon’s age?” Luke repeated incredulously. “Are you making fun of this poor country boy, or are you just getting quaint in your old age?”

Nina looked from one man to the other in astonishment. “You *know* him?” she almost shrieked, forgetting her usual elegant manners. A stagehand shushed her. “Why didn’t you say so?” she demanded in a lower voice.

“I didn’t want you to think I was bragging,” Luke said innocently. “Jesse, this is Nina Gnagnarelli, the opera singer. Don’t bother trying to get your mouth around the last name—”

“Of course I’ve heard of you, Miss Gnagnarelli,” said Jesse, pronouncing her name perfectly. He raised her delicate hand to his lips. “I am an admirer. You’re surely someday gonna be one of the greatest sopranos in the whole world.”

“Look, why don’t I just leave you two here to stroke each other’s egos? A few minutes ago she was babbling on in rapture about you and your horn.” Luke tried to sound annoyed, but his eyes were dancing with enjoyment.

“I never babble,” corrected Nina, and although she was only five foot three and he was at least six feet tall, she gave the impression of looking down her nose at him.

“Don’t mind him, honey,” said Jesse. “He’s just miffed ‘cause he’s used to all the girls drooling over him. But tonight’s my night, buddy!”

“It certainly is,” said Nina warmly. “And you deserve it, Jesse. I may be among the best someday, but you are the best now. Nobody can play the sax like you. You make it sing to me.”

“Whoowhee! You sure know how to flatter an old man” Jesse laughed. “Just you be sure that you’re retired by the time you’re as old as me. It’s a crazy life, ain’t it, though.”

They chatted easily for a while about the music business—the long hours, the late nights, the lonely tours—before Jesse finally said, “Look, my wife and kids and a few friends are out in the audience. We were thinkin’ of goin’ to a little place I know down in the Village as soon as this is over. Nothing fancy. Just a place I go to jam with old friends on special occasions. Why don’t you join us?”

Nina’s eyes glowed like a child’s. “Oh, I’d love to!” she agreed.

“Mind if I come along?” asked Luke dryly.

“Who asked you, man?” Jesse laughed, slapping Luke on the back. Luke’s eyes widened, then rolled heavenward.

They all arranged to meet after the program was over. There was to be a finale, very crass in Nina’s opinion, in which all the presenters and award winners sang together onstage while the cameras picked out as many famous faces as they could.

In the good-natured confusion that followed the end of the program, Luke watched several men try to make Nina’s acquaintance. His eyes took in her petite, well-proportioned figure, creamy skin, and blue eyes so rich in color they were almost violet. Her shiny, midnight black hair only emphasized her well-shaped nose, dramatic cheekbones and long, slender neck. He could understand why she hadn’t gone unnoticed in this crowd.

Despite the obvious interest of one or two attractive men, Nina was in a hurry to leave; an invitation from the aging and happily married Jesse Harmon was by far the most exciting prospect of the evening.

As soon as she could, Nina collected her belongings and then stepped into a powder room to check her appearance.

Nina’s ex-husband Philippe had taught her how best to finish the work nature had begun. The result was an elegant woman with the sort of classic appearance that never goes out of style. Her unruly hair was styled by the best—though not the most expensive—hairstylist in New York, and a regular monthly

appointment kept it in exactly the right shape, a simple elegant style which came just to her shoulders, framing her face and contrasting with the milky whiteness of her skin.

She had become an expert at applying makeup to highlight her best features while making it appear that she was scarcely wearing makeup at all. Every piece of her wardrobe was carefully selected to suit her size and coloring, and to last for years. Her shoes were Italian, her perfume was French and her small supply of jewelry was genuine and utterly tasteful. An attractive appearance was important in show business, and with the single-minded dedication to her career which had characterized most of her life, Nina cultivated her assets.

She made a few minor repairs to her hair and face—she'd been enthusiastically hugged by a dozen people she'd never met in her life—and donned her wrap. She wore a simple black evening gown and a pearl necklace. They had tried to put some glitzy costume jewelry on her when she'd arrived at the ceremony, but she had adamantly refused. Amidst all the sequins and rhinestones she saw around her, she felt sure a style of classic simplicity would stand out. She shrugged. It was one of her first TV appearances, and if she had made a mistake, she would learn from it.

Nina smoothed the gown over her flat stomach. She was excited. Her eyes glowed as if with a secret, and her cheeks had a rosy color she hadn't brushed on. A face flashed in her mind's eye, but instead of Jesse's wizened grin, it was Luke Swain's warm, laughing eyes she pictured looking down at her. She frowned as she made her way outside.

"You are going out to enjoy the company of a great musician," she reminded herself sternly. "You are not going to flirt with some hotshot rock singer."

* * * *

Luke was the first person she saw, and his words were not encouraging.

"What the hell are you wearing?"

"It's mink," said Nina, looking down at her furry black wrap.

"Mink? Mink! And what are you carrying?" He grabbed her small purse.

"It's crocodile skin," she said, struggling to maintain her hold on it. "What on earth is the matter with you?"

"I don't mind people wearing animal hide for practical purposes; leather shoes, for instance—"

"Oh, that's very magnanimous of you—"

"But I cannot understand this sort of thing! The slaughter of helpless, harmless animals simply to feed human vanity."

"Helpless? How many harmless crocodiles do you know? And minks, I'll have you know, are vile, nasty little creatures."

"So you feel all right about killing them to wear around your shoulders?"

"I didn't kill them!" she shouted. Remembering herself, she tried to speak more calmly. "And I'm not responsible for someone else killing them. These things were long dead when I bought them, and if I hadn't bought them, someone else would have."

"If people would stop buying these ... ghoulish fashion accessories, this kind of wasteful slaughter of

animal life for strictly cosmetic purposes would cease,” he retorted. “There are perfectly good fakes available, just as attractive as—”

“I *never* wear fakes. Of anything,” Nina said icily.

Luke’s eyes narrowed. There was no warmth in them now. He started to speak, but was interrupted by the arrival of Jesse and the rest of the group.

The party consisted of Jesse and his wife, Rebecca, their son and daughter and their spouses, Nina, Luke, and several other people whose names Nina couldn’t keep straight. Everyone was very friendly, but she was irked that they seemed to think she and Luke were “together.”

Admittedly, she probably wouldn’t even be here if it weren’t for him, but she scarcely knew the man and was beginning to dislike him. Intensely.

The group piled into two separate cabs. Nina and Luke were in the same cab, but she coolly ignored him. She became even more irked when, instead of noticing her snub, he became absorbed in a conversation with a middle-aged woman. A conversation which, as far as Nina could tell, had something to do with a mutual friend whose adventures sounded highly irresponsible to her. The rest of them were laughing as if he were some great hero. Jesse was in the other taxi and feeling like the odd man out, Nina stared moodily out the window all the way to Greenwich Village.

The jazz club, Rootie’s, was in a cellar underneath a new wave boutique. Although fair-sized, it was packed with people, all hot and perspiring and obviously having a good time. Because their group was with Jesse Harmon, there was a table ready and waiting for them. It took them some time to reach it, however, since their progress was slowed by dozens of people warmly congratulating Jesse. A few people seemed to recognize Luke, and one young woman—obviously not a personal acquaintance—started screaming, “Ohmigawd! It’s Luke Swain! You’re Luke Swain! He’s Luke Swain!” She was reaching out to him, touching him as though he was a miracle healer, before her date finally got hold of her. He grinned and shouted, “Great music, Luke!” and propelled the girl away.

“Thanks,” said Luke feebly.

Jesse laughed, enjoying it immensely. “Even on my home turf, this no-account Kansas boy has to steal the action!” he shouted. Everyone was shouting. The music was very loud.

When they finally reached their table, Nina was pleased and flattered that Jesse insisted she sit next to him. He called her “the guest of honor of the guest of honor.” Luke sat down on her other side, returning her icy stare with a wicked grin. A waitress came to take their order. Everyone else in the party wanted beer.

“Brandy Alexander, please,” said Nina.

“You must be joking, girl,” said the waitress.

Nina wasn’t quite sure how to respond to that.

Jesse laughed. “They don’t do fancy stuff here, Nina.”

“Oh.”

“Bring her a beer,” Luke told the waitress. Nina’s eyes met his. There was a challenge in them she didn’t understand but wasn’t going to back away from.

The waitress came back with a tray of beer bottles which she plunked unceremoniously on the table. "Enjoy," she said and turned to go.

"May I have a glass?" Nina requested, trying to be heard above the music.

"A glass?"

"Yes." Nina was determined not to get irritable.

"Can you bring my friend a glass, honey?" chipped in Jesse.

The waitress smiled at Jesse and looked back at Nina "Honey, I'm waiting on all these tables by myself. I'll bring you a glass when I get a chance." She wasn't unpleasant, just unconcerned. Nina looked at her bottle.

"Was drinking out of the bottle good enough for your father, Nina?" asked Luke. No one else had heard. He hadn't meant them to.

He was trying to imply she was a snob and daring her to prove him wrong, she realized angrily. Her eyes flashed with violet light as they met his. She raised her bottle resolutely.

"Here's to Jesse!" she toasted and tipped the bottle to her lips, swallowing well over half of it before she put it back on the table. She looked defiantly at Luke. His eyes were lit with amusement and approval and something she couldn't identify. Very pointedly and ostentatiously, she turned her back on him. She could have sworn she heard him chuckle.

"Whoowhee! Who taught this little girl to swig beer like that?" shouted Jesse, clapping her on the shoulder.

That must mean I've arrived, she thought wryly.

They were finishing their second round when the band and the other customers unanimously decided that Jesse had been drinking for long enough and ought to get up and do his stuff.

The old man picked up his horn as tenderly as a lover and mounted the stage. He spoke briefly, welcoming and thanking everyone, introducing Luke, Nina, and his family, then introducing some of the friends who had joined him onstage with their instruments.

What followed was magic. The man was a master of his art, playing and performing with a passion and skill that Nina admired both as a professional and as a fan. The saxophone came to life in his hands, pouring dark fire into the room; no foot was still, no heart was untouched. The entire band was excellent—but tonight was Jesse's night, and they had all come to hear the sax.

The musicians jammed for about an hour, mostly fast, wild music. Nina wondered how a man Jesse's age could expend that much energy. Dozens of people jumped up to dance wherever there was enough room. They finished the session with a mournful, bluesy tune. Jesse's eyes were closed tight with concentration. The saxophone wailed like a lover in pain. Nina sat transfixed, hypnotized by musical genius. When Jesse finally protested that he needed a break and left the stage to go greet more friends, Nina relaxed. Her body sagged; she'd been so entranced, she hadn't realized until then how rigidly erect she had been holding herself while he had been playing.

She turned her head slightly and saw a long, tan hand resting beside her small white one. The music had stopped, and suddenly Luke's presence filled her mind again.

“You weren’t kidding when you said you loved the sax, were you?” he said softly. Their eyes met for a brief moment of understanding; however different their styles, they were both musicians and both appreciated such artistry.

Then Nina remembered she didn’t like him. “Another beer, Mr. Swain?” she inquired archly before turning her back on him and entering into a cheerful discussion with Jesse’s friendly wife, Rebecca. But she knew he was there.

The evening went on. It was turning out to be quite a success for Nina. Jesse, whom she had dreamed of meeting only hours before, was treating her like a surrogate daughter. Since her beer-swiggling demonstration, the rest of the group were treating her like one of the family. She was enjoying Rebecca’s warm and humorous conversation although they had to shout to be heard above the regular band, which was playing once more. Later on, Jesse and his friends jammed again.

After it was over, Nina was feeling drained and tired. It had been a wonderful evening so far. Why did she feel so dissatisfied? She saw Luke dancing with Jesse’s daughter and tried to ignore the thoughts that flashed through her mind.

It was a slow number, and he held the woman in his arms at a properly respectful distance. He moved gracefully, smoothly, like a panther. Nina had noticed that before. She looked away before he caught her staring at him. Those eyes saw too much, she decided.

Nina was lost in thought, listening to the music when a warm hand touched her shoulder. Jesse was there before her, smiling into her dreaming face.

“You sure look far away. Come and dance with an old man. My own wife’s turned me down!”

“So I’m second fiddle?” Nina smiled and let Jesse lead her to the crowded dance floor. He held her lightly and they shuffled about in a jazzy two-step, with Jesse occasionally adding embellishments.

“I’m so glad you invited me along this evening,” she shouted near his ear. “I’ll never forget the way you played tonight, not as long as I live.”

“I’m glad you came,” he answered. “Those words mean something coming from you, Nina. I saw you in *Il Pirata* last year. And I saw you sing half a dozen times the year before that. In fact, I can remember seeing you when you used to work out in San Francisco. You were singing Glauce in *Medea*. It was your first solo role. You were just a young thing, but I never saw so much courage onstage. You were born to sing, Nina.”

Nina’s eyes filled with tears and her throat felt tight with pride and gratitude. There was no need to say anything. He knew how much his words meant to her. He gave her a fatherly squeeze before knocking her off-balance with more improvised steps. Nina stumbled and rolled her eyes at him. He chuckled. Their mood had lightened, but they were bound now by an open respect and affection.

When they sat down again, Rebecca joined them for another beer and a chat.

“So how long have you known Luke, Nina?”

“I *don’t* know him,” said Nina emphatically. “We just met at the show tonight.”

“Whoowheel!” That was Jesse. “The way that boy’s been giving the evil eye to every man who talks to you, I thought there must be something between you two.”

“No.” Nina grimaced uncomfortably. “He’s probably giving those evil looks to me. To tell the truth, we

didn't exactly hit it off this evening."

"Well, he's hardly taken his eyes off you all night, honey. I thought he was gonna sprain something trying to keep an eye on us on the dance floor. And me an old, married man," Jesse chuckled.

"Don't you mind this old fool, Nina," admonished Rebecca. "And don't you mind Luke's manners, either. He just likes to say exactly what he thinks and do exactly as he pleases without prettyin' it up with manners. But he's got a heart as big as all outdoors. He's a real nice boy, all right."

"Are you a fan?" asked Jesse.

"Fan? No. I'd never even heard of him before we met. I take it he's very popular."

"Sure enough is, and has been for a few years, now. He's worked damn hard for it, too. All that hype the press prints about pretty girls and wild parties and fast cars—it's a load of hog slop. You know what the music business is really like: rehearse, perform, rehearse, record, rehearse, interview, tour, perform, rehearse, rehearse. And when you figure he writes all his own stuff, where is he gonna get time to be a playboy? Half of what you read about rock stars is lies. And the other half is probably stretching the truth."

"I've never read anything about him," Nina stressed. "I've never even heard his music."

"Well, you should, honey. I don't like to tell him, because he's too cocky, anyhow, but he's damned good. If he would just keep politics out of his songs and stop shootin' his mouth off..."

At this interesting point in the conversation the "real nice boy" came back to their table.

"Tired already, Jesse? It's only three o'clock in the morning," Luke teased.

"Watch your lip, boy," scolded Jesse. "Miss Gnagnarelli here has got much better manners than you, son"

"So I've noticed," said Luke dryly. He turned his attention to Nina, holding his hand out formally to her. "Do you dance?"

His tone was polite, but the impertinence in his eyes was intolerable to Nina. He knew very well that she danced! Rising to the bait, Nina placed her hand in his and stood up, saying confidently, "I do everything, Mr. Swain." His right eyebrow arched and his eyes widened. He led her to the dance floor, leaving Jesse chuckling behind them.

Nina held herself rigidly in Luke's arms, her left hand gripping his shoulder with about as much tenderness as she would have shown to a rolling pin. She gazed at an invisible spot somewhere past his shoulder. They danced in silence for several minutes.

"To ignore a man sitting next to you is easy enough, but to ignore a man when you're in his arms is a fine art. I congratulate you." He sounded amused.

"Some men," said Nina pointedly, "deserve to be ignored."

"Ouch! "

"Some men," continued Nina, warming to her subject, "have the charm of a puff adder and the manners of an ox."

His right eyebrow shot up.

“Can’t you raise both eyebrows like a normal person?” Nina snapped irritably.

Luke laughed outright at her open burst of temper. “Actually, no, I can’t. I fell off my bike as a kid and gashed the left side of my face. Evidently there was some slight nerve damage that never healed.”

“I’m sorry,” said Nina contritely, “That was rude of me.”

“I prefer a straightforward question to polite chitchat,” Luke said easily. “Even when it’s asked with all the charm of a puff adder.” Their eyes met. She clenched her teeth so she wouldn’t smile. “Besides, it’s one of my trademarks. The press says it gives me a look of lazy sensuality. What do you think?” He leered at her melodramatically. Nina burst out laughing. “So much for my technique,” he sighed.

Nina settled more comfortably in his arms, enjoying herself now. They swayed easily to the music, their bodies moving gracefully together. Luke was much taller than Nina, so it was easy to avoid his eyes as she wrestled with her thoughts.

She was intensely aware of his body so close to hers she could feel his warmth. The muscles under her hand were strong and firm; she sternly stifled a sudden desire to run her hand along his arm to learn its shape and texture. The hand that held hers was long and well shaped, strong and a little rough the way musicians’ hands sometimes were.

He had removed the tie of his formal evening attire—she had sensed immediately that this was quite unlike the way he normally dressed—and unbuttoned the top two buttons of his white shirt. Her gaze traveled up the strong column of his throat to examine his hair. It was a dark, shining brown color. In front, it was cut at what Nina considered a reasonable length, waving lightly around his face, but in the back it grew well past his collar. She hadn’t liked it at the beginning of the evening, having rather conservative tastes, but now she decided that it suited him. Her gaze traveled to his face, taking in the dark arched brows and long lashes before her eyes met his with a suddenness that startled her. She realized he’d been studying her, as well. Confident of her physical attributes as a performer, Nina suddenly felt shy as a woman. She lowered her eyes in confusion, veiling them with her thick, black lashes.

The music ended and they went back to their table without speaking.

“I hope you were nice to this little girl,” chided Jesse.

“I was a perfect gentleman,” Luke assured him. Nina looked at the ceiling.

“Jesse,” she said finally, “this has been a wonderful night for me, but I’ve been shouting for hours and I’ve got to stop or my voice coach will lock me in a room by myself for six weeks. I’m going home now.”

Jesse and Rebecca and their friends expressed regret that she was quitting early—they didn’t plan to leave till breakfast time.

“When can I hear you sing?” Jesse asked.

“I’m in *Il Turco in Italia* now. We’re opening *Rigoletto* in a few weeks; I’ll get you some complementary tickets to that, okay?”

“You promised, now. I’ll be in touch. Take care.”

When she tried to say good-night to Luke he interrupted smoothly, “I’m leaving now, too. TV interview tomorrow. Why don’t we share a cab?”

“You be sure you go straight home, son,” scolded Jesse.

“I will,” Luke promised. “After all, I need my beauty sleep if I’m going to dazzle millions tomorrow with my lazy sensuality.”

Jesse looked at him appraisingly. “You’d better leave right away, in that case.”

Nina put on her mink—without Luke’s help—and they walked to the door. She did a dramatic double take when he actually held the door for her. They stepped out into the crisp October night and Luke hailed a cab.

When it pulled to a stop in front of them, he opened the door for Nina and climbed in after her. She gave her East Eighties address to the driver. They zoomed off with that abruptness of which New York cabbies were the masters.

Nina made a commendable effort to chat politely with Luke. However, within moments, he once again proved himself devoid of normal social skills and incapable of civility.

“Look, why don’t you just come right out and say that you think rock music is rubbish?” he prodded after she had tactfully admitted that it wasn’t particularly to her taste.

“Why should I have to?” she countered.

“We’re musicians, not diplomats. I’m interested in your opinion, this is not a cocktail party, there are no reporters around. Why not just plainly say what you think? Are you afraid I’ll be offended?”

“I don’t want to be rude—not even to you. And most musicians wouldn’t sit here and insist I openly insult them!”

“I won’t be insulted. But how can we have an intelligent, honest, interesting conversation if you beat around the bush, if you use silly phrases designed to obscure rather than to reveal your opinions?”

“It’s not enough that you hate my outfit, now you’re criticizing the way I speak?” Nina finally lost all patience with him.

After arguing heatedly all the way from Greenwich Village to the Upper East Side, Nina decided she’d had enough.

The cab stopped for a red light two blocks from her apartment. In a raging temper Nina opened the car door and stepped out into the street.

“I’m getting out here!” she shouted. “I’m not putting up with another minute of this abuse!”

“Hey, lady, what about my fare?” the driver demanded.

“Here!” Nina snapped, pulling a few dollars out of her crocodile skin purse.

“That’s not enough,” protested the driver.

“I’ll pay it,” snapped Luke.

“Shut up!” shrieked Nina, beside herself.

“What?” hollered the cabby.

“Not you!”

“Nina, get back in the cab!”

“No!”

“You’re being unreasonable.”

“Mr. Swain. You have insulted my wardrobe, my drinking habits, my opinions—”

“What opinions?”

“My intelligence, my integrity and my manners. You are the rudest man I have ever met and the most boorish clod I have had to spend an evening with since I was seventeen years old. Is *that* direct enough for you? And *don’t* follow me down the street!” she added as he got out of the cab.

“Nina, it’s four o’clock in the morning. I can’t let you walk home alone.”

“If I am mugged, it will at least be some small consolation to you, Mr. Swain, since they will doubtless take both my coat and my purse!”

And with that parting shot she turned and marched off, leaving Luke fuming in the middle of the street while the taxi driver reminded him that the meter was still running.

Two

“Hi! Sorry I’m late—couldn’t find a cab and traffic was awful,” said Nina breathlessly as she entered the familiar rehearsal room.

“It’s all right. It doesn’t happen often,” responded Elena in her richly accented voice. Elena had been Nina’s first voice teacher at Juilliard in New York, and although Nina was a fast-rising star in the opera world, she still worked privately with Elena as often as she could.

In the initial years of their relationship, when Nina had been a young girl with almost no training, Elena had served as a teacher and guide for her work and as a surrogate mother figure to advise her about the world she would soon be entering—a world Nina’s own mother knew nothing about and couldn’t help her with. During the years Nina had spent in San Francisco and the tours that followed, she had kept in touch with Elena. And now that Nina had returned to New York, Elena was again a stable and reliable foundation in her hectic life. At twenty-nine, Nina considered herself a skilled artist and a sophisticated woman, and Elena was now mostly a second ear in the rehearsal room as well as a valued friend.

“I’m sorry I canceled our rehearsal the other day,” Nina said. “My voice was just so raw and tired I decided to rest it.”

“What were you doing with it?”

“Shouting with it. Mostly at a boor. Oh, never mind. Did you catch the music awards on TV?”

“Yes, yes. I’m rather astonished at what can pass for music these days. But your hero won an award, I see.”

“Jesse? Yes.” Nina told Elena about her evening with Jesse and the gang, carefully editing her comments about Luke Swain.

“Well, you must introduce me sometime. He is indeed a great musician. By the way—your outfit that night...”

“Yes?”

“A bit too simple. What looks elegant in a nightclub can look positively austere on television. You need a few big ruffles or sequins and some diamonds, I think.”

“I’ll remember that, thanks.” Nina always absorbed criticism about any aspect of her profession and tried to learn from it. She seldom repeated a mistake. “Let’s get to work.”

Elena sat at the piano while Nina stood nearby. They went through a familiar routine of Nina’s warming up while Elena played, then Elena guided Nina through vocal exercises of increasing difficulty, listening, nodding, occasionally giving advice: relax your shoulders, get your tongue out of the way, stop chewing the note. Nina worked for an hour on a piece from *Rigoletto* that she didn’t feel comfortable with, then finished by discussing possible arias with Elena for a benefit she had been asked to sing in.

Nina left the studio humming, walking down the busy street with that lift that a good singing workout always gave her.

Nina had entered the music business because she loved to sing—she was born to sing, as Jesse had put it. She enjoyed life in general, but nothing gave her as much satisfaction as those perfect, focused moments when the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of her being joined together and soared high above the common bonds of earth and daily life. She had never found those moments anywhere but in singing.

Nothing else in life equaled that. Certainly not falling in love with Philippe, she thought with a grimace. Undoubtedly there had been romance, pleasure, and pain with him. But there had never been any all-consuming moment when she thought, “Ah, yes, this is why we’re here, and it’s all worth it for a moment like this.” She enjoyed sex, but found it a transitory physical experience similar to hunger and eating. The desire came and was gratified, or not, depending on circumstances; it required little of her mind or soul. She enjoyed the love of her family, the daily pleasures of life, beautiful objects, and fine food. But there was an endless yearning in herself she didn’t understand, a searching, fathomless need for fulfillment which had always driven her to those hard-won magical moments when she lived, if only for the length of a song, the strongest passions of life and expressed them from the well of her soul.

“You’re thinking very deep thoughts today,” Nina said to her reflection in a shop window. A familiar pair of brown eyes looked back at her. Her heart jumped for a moment, then she laughed at herself—it was a poster.

She peered into the window. It was a music shop. Luke must be as popular as Jesse had said. Half of the display window was devoted to his album, including the poster, which was a blowup of the album cover. It showed Luke against a background of rural poverty—a broken-down shanty, a junk heap, laundry hanging on the line. He was wearing faded jeans and an old sweatshirt. His face was unshaven, and there was a burning, driven look in his eyes. The title of the album was *A Wilder Name*.

Nina stared in fascination at the dreary, tumbledown, almost oppressive background before shifting her gaze back to Luke’s burning eyes. What did he see that she didn’t? What did he mean, a wilder name?

She was on the verge of going into the shop to buy the album when she reminded herself of all the reasons why she shouldn’t. It was rock and she didn’t listen to rock. She hated Luke Swain and she didn’t want to help his album sales. She would never see him again and had no interest in learning more about his music or his opinions. She hailed a cab and went home.

Nina's home was a small one-bedroom apartment on the ninth floor of a well-kept building in the East Eighties near Lexington Avenue. She couldn't see Central Park from her apartment—there were too many buildings in the way—but at least it was within walking distance. The apartment itself was tastefully and elegantly decorated in a style, which was feminine without being fussy. Nina preferred modern furniture, simple clean lines, and light colors. She had a strong liking for Oriental objects—rugs, vases, paintings, bonsai—and the apartment usually showed evidence of her skill in Japanese flower arrangements, a hobby she had picked up in San Francisco. The style was rounded out by a few modern expressionist paintings. She had devoted a lot of money and energy to making this apartment just right when she had settled in New York, and it was a haven to her. There was a piano in the far corner by the window, with stacks of opera scores on it, as well as an elaborate stereo system.

The phone was ringing as she entered.

"Hello," she said into the receiver.

"Hello, this is Luke."

She was too surprised to speak. Was he psychic? Had he called to yell at her for not buying his album?

"Luke Swain..." he said hesitantly.

"Yes, I know who you are. How did you get my number?"

"You're the only Nina Gnagnarelli in the book."

"Oh, yes. What do you want?" she said ungraciously.

"I was kind of rude the other evening—"

"Yes, you were."

"And I'd like to make it up to you."

"Is this an apology?"

"I'd rather apologize in person. Will you have dinner with me?"

"You must be kidding."

"Look, we got off to a bad start, but I don't always have the manners of an ox. Sometimes I'm good company."

"Really, I don't think—"

"My treat."

"I'm afraid—"

"You can pick the restaurant."

"Honestly, I don't think ... I can?"

"Yes."

She was silent for a moment, thinking. Then a wicked grin spread across her face. She would teach this hotshot a lesson that would knock him on his ear.

“Well, all right. I’d love to,” she said sweetly, too sweetly.

“You would?” He sounded suspicious.

“Of course. How about Thursday night?”

“No, I can’t—I’ve got a date. How about Tuesday?”

“No, I can’t—I’m performing. How about Wednesday?”

“No, we’re rehearsing. How about Friday?”

She looked at her calendar. “Yes, Friday’s fine.” She gave him the name and address of the restaurant, and they agreed to meet there at 8:00 p.m. He gave her his phone number in case a conflict arose, since his number was, of course, unlisted.

“Until Friday, then,” he said and hung up.

Nina put down the phone, her eyes glittering. Luke Swain didn’t know it, but he had just agreed to buy her dinner at perhaps the most expensive restaurant in New York. It was certainly the most elegant. She could hardly wait.

* * * *

Luke was waiting for Nina on the sidewalk when she arrived. Like many of the best places in New York, Les Précieuses had a modest doorway, which gave no hint of its plush interior. Nina inwardly gloated over leading the lamb to slaughter as Luke helped her out of the cab.

He was obviously on his best behavior tonight; although his eyes narrowed slightly at the sight of her pearl gray chinchilla coat, his only comment was a pleasant, “Hello.”

Nina looked at him critically. He was wearing a dark shirt and trousers with a tan jacket, all cut in a modern streamlined style. He had shaved, his hair was neatly brushed, even his shoes were polished. He looked good. His fans would have probably melted into little puddles on the sidewalk.

“Not bad,” said Nina, “but I think you’ll need this.” She pulled a black silk tie out of her purse.

“A tie?” he said blankly.

“Yes, they require one here.” He was turning it over in his hands as if it were some rare artifact. “Of course, they have a selection inside for gentlemen who forget to wear their own. But this one *is* silk. And I’m prepared to give it to you if you don’t own one,” she said magnanimously.

“That’s ... very generous, Nina. I’ll treasure it always.” He began putting on the tie, his gaze holding hers, picking up the gauntlet she’d thrown down. His long, deft fingers quickly completed the task. “Satisfied?”

Nina reached up. Smiling maliciously, she pulled the knot a little tighter. “It looks wonderful.”

“It feels like a noose.”

Luke’s eyes widened as they entered the restaurant. There was no mistaking the plush carpet, the French antiques, the impeccably dressed waiters; Les Précieuses was haute cuisine at its most elegant, with prices to match.

“Ah, Madame Gnagnarelli. Mais ça fait bien longtemps qu’on ne vous voit pas. Quel grand

plaisir!” the head waiter greeted Nina.

She gave him her hand, which he bowed over gallantly, and responded in French, “Yes, it’s been months, Henri. I’m so glad to be back. I hope you’ve given us a good table.”

“*Mais bien sur, madame.* The very best. If you will follow me,” he answered, leading the way.

“Come here often?” Luke asked suspiciously.

“Oh, now and again.”

They followed Henri to a semiprivate alcove with soft lighting, far from the door. Nina gave her coat to a waiter and was gratified to see Luke’s eyes warm to her appearance. She had dressed with some care—strictly for her self-esteem and not for her escort, she reminded herself. Her dress was a dark crimson blend of silk and wool which exposed the hollows of her neck and the beginning swell of her breasts before tapering down to a tight bodice and narrow skirt. The color contrasted sharply with her black hair, which was drawn back into a sleek chignon. Her jewelry was simple-white gold set with tiny rubies. She saw Luke’s eyes take it all in with admiration before their gazes locked; there was a message in his look that sent an unaccustomed panic through her. She lowered her eyes quickly.

Their waiter appeared as if on cue. As various other men bustled about, filling her water glass and offering her bread, Nina took command of herself once more.

She chatted gaily in French with their waiter, while Luke glumly studied the prices on the menu. They ordered their various courses, then someone handed the wine list to Luke while Nina looked at him with wide-eyed innocence.

Torn between irritation and amusement, Luke handed the list to Nina. “Perhaps you’d like to choose,” he said. “As you’ve probably guessed, French wine isn’t my specialty.”

Well, at least he doesn’t suffer from an overbearing ego, she thought. She’d seen many men struggle with wine lists and make bad choices rather than simply admit to their date that they didn’t know much about expensive wines. Already knowing what she wanted, Nina handed the list back to the wine steward and told him her choice.

“I hope you like very dry white,” she said to Luke as the bottle was brought to their table.

“Actually, I prefer red, but I’m sure I’ll enjoy this,” he answered pleasantly. He stopped the steward from pouring a bit of wine into his glass. “Let the lady decide,” he said, gesturing toward Nina.

The wine was excellent—Nina’s favorite, in fact. When they were left alone again, Luke was looking at her with frank amusement.

“Well, I guess I set my own trap,” he said.

“You’re a very good sport,” Nina said with a laugh.

“I suppose this is suitable revenge for our last meeting.”

“The food is great, though. If nothing else, you’ll enjoy your meal.”

“I expect to enjoy the company, Nina.”

The polite words were expressed with a frankness that robbed her of a witty reply, so she turned her attention to her wine. The food was as excellent as she had promised. Under the influence of good food

and good wine, Nina began to chat easily with Luke and soon forgot she'd had any trouble speaking to him.

"Where did you learn to swig beer like a sailor?" Luke asked.

Nina laughed. "I have four older brothers. I was such a tomboy!" Luke's right brow arched in disbelief. "I was! I played football and baseball with them, went camping with them, fought the other neighborhood boys with them, and watched Sunday afternoon football on TV with them, swigging beer and shouting at the screen. I wanted to be as good as they were at everything—drinking, fighting, playing..."

"When did you—er—feminize?"

"When I found something I was good at that they weren't. Singing. It gave me more pleasure than anything else, it gave other people pleasure, and nobody I knew did it as well as I did.

"I sang at church all through my childhood, but when I was fifteen and started to look like a woman, I started singing all around Brooklyn—parties, clubs, weddings, dances—"

"Brooklyn? You're from Brooklyn? You of the finishing school accent, the French wine, and the Italian shoes?" Luke asked incredulously.

"Yes, me." Nina fixed him with a hard look. "I've never tried to hide what I was or where I came from, Luke. I was an Italian-American girl from a working-class Brooklyn family. My father is a carpenter. I love my family. My manners and my tastes are different now, but *I'm* what I always was."

"All right, so you learned you could sing—what next?"

"I knew I wanted to sing forever. I guess I just fell naturally into opera. Our whole family loved it, anyhow. But for me, it's the music that uses a singer the most, that lets her express the most. Jazz comes close, but I wanted to sing opera. The music teacher at our high school gave me free lessons since we didn't have much money—I helped keep the room tidy, that sort of thing. Nothing really, considering all he did for me. I finished high school a year early and got into Juilliard on scholarship."

Nina went on to tell Luke about Elena, her mentor, and the joy and fear of those demanding years of training.

"I could have gone on to a masters' program when it was over, but I didn't have any money. And I wanted to perform, not just hear stories about what it would be like if I got work someday. So when I was offered a job in San Francisco, I jumped at it. And so began the road to fame and fortune."

"Is there fame and fortune in opera?"

"For some. The big stars get paid a lot to appear, though I suppose not as much as a rock star does. There are TV appearances, concerts, album sales, and now they're making opera movies.

"As with pop music, fame and fortune are part of the package of success for us. I want those things, of course. But more than that, more than anything, I want someday to have a choice about what I sing. To choose my own roles, to be able to turn down roles that don't interest me.

"I've worked hard. And I'm good. I'm doing well for someone my age. I make good money, I sing with good companies, I work with brilliant artists. But I do what I'm offered, I can't risk turning down a role I know I'll be able to sing well; I still might not be offered something in its place. I have to keep building my reputation and my repertoire, working toward a day when managements will want me as much as I want to work."

“It will come. I believe in you,” Luke said seriously.

“Why?” she asked curiously. “You don’t know opera. You don’t even know me.”

“Because I see in you the courage that it takes to walk that far alone. The greater the fame and the greater the rewards, the greater the risk and the lonelier the limelight.”

He would know, she thought. He’s probably already richer and more famous than I’ll ever be. “I saw your album the other day,” she said suddenly. “Didn’t buy it.”

“I wish you had. I’ll need the income to help pay for this meal.”

She laughed. “Are you really from Kansas? Is your name really Luke Swain?”

“Yes and yes. Lucas Bartholomew Swain. I grew up in a wheat field in the heart of Kansas.”

“Bartholomew?”

“Shh, it’s a secret,” he told her sternly.

A waiter put a Grand Marnier soufflé in front of Nina, which she dug into with gusto. Luke eyed the quivering froth placed before him with some trepidation.

“Your parents are really farmers? How do they feel about you being a rock star?”

“They’re proud of me when I sing at civil rights rallies and Save-A-Whale benefits. I think they’re embarrassed when I sing sexy songs, and they’re downright mortified when I appear in gossip columns.”

“How did you get started?”

“I taught myself to play the guitar as a kid, listening to the radio. You’ve heard of the Beatles?”

“Of *course* I’ve heard of the Beatles.”

“Just checking. In high school I formed a band with some friends, started writing my own songs. My folks were pretty well resigned to my not wanting to be a farmer, but they thought I was crazy to drop out of college and go on the road with my guitar when I was nineteen.

“I had a small band. We played a lot of college towns and gradually worked our way up the ladder. We got our first recording contract three years later, but the album never did well.”

“What was it called?”

“*On the Plains*. You won’t have heard of it. After that, things got rougher. A couple of people left the band, our agent dropped us like a hot rock. It was the usual story. Endless rounds of touring, long rides in a freezing cold, broken-down van, lonely motel rooms, gigs falling through, no social life because we were always on the road, musicians dropping out when it got to be too rough for them—”

“How could you stand it? What kept you going?”

“Oddly enough, I loved it. I wanted to write and play music, and that’s exactly what I was doing. Not many people are that lucky in life. I wasn’t successful, but most of the time I was able to eat. I could believe my big break would come when I was ready for it, because I believed in my talent. I was young and full of energy. And I always reminded myself, during those long trips and lonely nights, that I could be stuck behind the wheel of a tractor or sitting in a stuffy office somewhere. So I was happy enough.

“Then one day a manager, Kate Hammer, saw us. She began managing us, and suddenly we got better gigs, better money, even a better van. A year later, she landed us a big recording contract and pushed for the record company to really back the album with publicity and promotion. The album was called *At Least It's with a Smile*, and—”

“Wait a minute. *At Least It's with a Smile*? I've heard that! I loved that song.”

“And I thought you never listened to rock,” he chided her.

“I don't. But I could hardly help hearing that song. They played it everywhere that year—restaurants, shops, the radio. I loved it. It was so much the way I felt when I was touring, leaving people behind, just living in my work ... But I didn't know that was you!”

He laughed. “Well, luckily everyone else knew. Before long, I was on TV, on the radio, playing live to thousands of people, giving interviews, getting incredible offers, being lauded as an overnight success. Overnight success! I was twenty-eight. I'd been on the road for nine long years, and suddenly I was discovered, as if I'd picked up a guitar for the first time that morning.”

“And the rest is history?”

“No, the rest is a lot of hard work.” They were drinking their coffee now. “I toured for a while. Then wrote another album, rehearsed, recorded it, and toured to promote it. And then another and then another.”

“So why aren't you out touring to promote your new album?”

“I've *been* touring. And I'll go out west for more concerts in a while.”

“We must be crazy.” Their eyes met and they laughed. Neither of them would do anything else.

When the bill came Luke's eyes nearly popped. “I think I'll have to go record another album,” he groaned.

“It was your idea to buy me dinner at a restaurant of my choice,” Nina reminded him evilly.

“Next time I want to apologize, I'll *cook* you dinner.”

“You cook?”

“I do everything, Miss Gnagnarelli.”

Luke paid their bill and helped her into her coat. “Did you wear this foul thing just to annoy me?” he asked.

Nina laughed ruefully. “Partly, yes,” she admitted. “But I also think it's beautiful. Be honest, it is, isn't it?”

His gaze was like a caress, and a slow smile spread across his face. “You look beautiful,” he said simply.

Nina glanced about for a taxi. Luke suggested they walk. It was a beautiful night, crisp and windy, invigorating without being too cold. Nina agreed. Her hand slipped naturally into his. They walked up Fifth Avenue, on the far side of the street from the park.

“So what does it mean: *A Wilder Name*?”

“Buy the album and find out.”

“And if I don’t like it?”

“I’ll give you a refund. You’re just vicious enough to ask for one.”

“I’ll bet you’re sorry I wasn’t mugged the other night.”

“God, no. I hate to think of where we would have eaten tonight if you *had* been mugged.”

“How did your date go last night?”

“All right.”

“Anyone I know?”

“Aside from a sax player, who do we know in common?”

They walked in silence for a while.

“Where did it all come from?” Luke asked.

“All what?”

“The Italian shoes, the tailored clothes, the manners, the accent.”

“Oh, different places. I learned languages studying singing and working with Europeans. Other things I learned through exposure. Opera is by and large an elegant world. But to be honest, my husband taught me a lot and gave me the desire to learn more.”

“Your husband?” He stopped so fast Nina stumbled.

“My ex-husband, I should say. We were divorced three years ago.”

They continued walking.

“When were you married?”

“When I was twenty-two, in San Francisco. I met him soon after I began work. His name was Philippe Garnier. He came from a wealthy French family that put a lot of money into opera and were, consequentially, very influential.”

“Go on,” Luke said.

“He was thirty-seven, very suave, very handsome in a continental way. I thought I was in love with him, which is perhaps the same thing as love.”

“Do you really think so?”

“I don’t know anymore. Anyhow, he swept me off my feet. Which wasn’t hard to do with a girl who’d never been anywhere else but New York and had always been too busy working to have much to do with men. We were married about six months later.

“His family didn’t like my background but were happy he’d married someone they all believed would be a star someday. He set about molding me, and I—” she laughed without humor “—I was very malleable. He taught me how to dress, how to do my face, how to do my hair, what books to read, what wine to

drink. He taught me elegant manners and elegant French. He encouraged me to drop what was left of my Brooklyn accent. I learned about art and antiques, haute cuisine and haut monde, foreign films and Indian handicrafts.

“He helped my career as well. When he wasn’t busy educating me, he was encouraging my devotion to my work. He never once complained about my being away on tour, working long hours, often being too exhausted to pay any attention to him. He became my manager and used his influence to get me leading roles, to get me seen by important people, to get me jobs with great directors. I felt lucky. If I was good enough for the roles, and I was, I was glad not to have to struggle for years for an opportunity.

“And it was a good deal from his point of view, as well. I was exactly what he wanted in a wife—someone he could play Pygmalion to”

“What happened?” Luke asked.

“Oh, many things. I stopped being his Galatea, for one thing. He opened up a whole new world of knowledge and experiences for me, but once I got the basic grasp of things, I began to think for myself and he didn’t like that at all.

“I learned to differentiate between elegant manners and pure snobbery, between people who were discreet and people who were boring, between people who cared and people who didn’t. I was interested in developing my own taste rather than following what was à la mode. I realized that some simple, plain, common things are among the greatest pleasures in life—like swigging beer with my brothers while we watch the Super Bowl. Mostly I realized that I didn’t love Philippe, and that for all his sophistication he was a rather shallow and silly man.”

“Is that when you split up?”

“No. We kept some sort of partnership going. My career, our house. I wasn’t sure what to do.

“Then I flew home from Italy one day and found out that the reason he never minded my being on tour so often was that he had plenty of company while I was away. I walked into my house to find a blond woman wearing my bathrobe, drinking my wine, sitting in my favorite chair while my husband was running a bath for her. With *my* bath salts. I left him that day.”

Luke let out a low whistle.

“I filed a charge of adultery in the divorce suit. Everyone was only too pleased to name half a dozen other women he’d been openly involved with during our marriage. I tried to keep a low profile, but it wasn’t easy. So I left San Francisco at the end of the season and came home to New York. Luckily I got work right away.”

“How did your family react to all this?”

“Oh, they were upset when I married him.” She laughed briefly. “My father couldn’t *stand* him. But they accepted the marriage and backed me up. Then they were upset about the divorce, but stood by me one hundred percent. I think they’re glad he’s out of my life for good.”

“Do you—I mean—how do you—”

“I’m glad he’s out of my life. He wasn’t a monster. He was just a weak, silly man with a lot of money and fancy habits. I was young enough and naïve enough to take him for something more.

“Everything just fell apart bit by bit. I thought he was a man of taste and opinion; he wasn’t. I thought he

was intelligent; he wasn't. I thought he loved me; he didn't. I thought we were at least partners, that I could at least trust him; he betrayed me.

"I'll never forget the humiliation of finding another woman filling my place as easily as if I were a corkscrew that had gone missing. All the lies he must have told me, which I believed because it never occurred to me he'd have a reason to lie to me..."

She shrugged, frowning. She'd lost all feeling for Philippe years ago, but the sense of betrayal, of wounded trust still burned in her. Luke seemed to sense it. He squeezed her hand and pulled her a little closer to him. They walked for a while in silence.

They stopped when they reached Nina's street about ten minutes later. Reluctant to end the evening, Luke tried to pick out constellations in the sky for Nina, piecing them together despite the pollution, cloud cover, and reflection of the city's lights.

"Did you really do this on dates as a boy?" Nina asked doubtfully.

"Well, it wasn't such hard work then, because we could actually see the stars in Kansas." He looked down at her.

Nina grumbled, staring up at the shifting velvet sky. A breeze whipped down the avenue, brushing a gleaming black curl across her forehead. She tilted her head to one side. "I think I see Polaris..."

Luke had gone very still. The pressure of his hand against hers changed subtly, his fingers lightly tracing the fine bones of her hand, his callused thumb exploring the shape of her palm.

Suddenly, in the middle of an empty street, she couldn't seem to get any air. She kept her gaze fixed on the stars while her breath came in shallow bursts and her stomach seemed to be dropping.

"Nina..." His voice was husky, his breath gently fanned her cheek.

She kept her eyes obstinately fixed on a star. She did not want to take responsibility for this. She stood immobile, frozen in indecision. Why didn't he do something?

"Nina." His whisper was insistent.

She turned to look at him, and the fire in his eyes melted her within a second. A low sound escaped her throat and a primitive force propelled her toward him with an urgency she couldn't deny.

Her lips met his. His mouth was warm and sweet, feeding her, drinking from her, filling her with a hunger for more. Her hands touched his face, stroked his hair, grabbed his shoulders trying to pull herself closer, closer to his sheltering warmth.

Her eyes were closed and she was spinning dizzily, aware only of the muscular arms wrapped around her, the strong hand stroking her back, the firm, caressing lips.

His mouth left hers to explore her features with soft, hot kisses. He kissed the wing of her brow, her temple, lightly traced a path down the strong line of her cheekbone, tenderly kissed the point of her chin.

Luke buried his face in Nina's hair, whispering her name, aroused by the restless touch of her hands along his back and shoulders. She wildly pressed herself closer to him, not caring what it might lead to.

With a stifled groan, Luke traced hot, sultry kisses along her neck, breathing in the sweet scent of her flesh.

It had been there between them since they'd met, this awareness, this wanting, but she had tried to ignore it. Now it was igniting in leaping flames, blazing out of control inside her.

Luke's mouth was on hers again, insistent, demanding. His tongue slipped between her teeth, and she met it with her own, tasting, teasing, mating—a car horn beeped loudly, and they jumped apart like guilty teenagers.

Luke was the first to recover himself. "Caught kissing by starlight," he said wryly.

Nina was staring at him, breathing heavily, aghast at what she had done. He was a virtual stranger, a man she professed to dislike, and in the middle of a public street she had thrown herself at him like—like a teenaged groupie.

Her horror must have been evident in her face, because Luke said gently, "We got more than we bargained for, didn't we? It's all right, Nina. Come on, I'll walk you to your door."

They walked the remaining two blocks in silence, not touching. Nina stared at the sidewalk, trying to sort through her chaotic thoughts. Luke seemed lost in thought, as well, frowning at the sky.

When they reached her building the doorman recognized her and opened the door.

"Good night, Nina," said Luke. He leaned forward and planted a brotherly kiss on her cheek. It comforted her, which confused her even more, since only moments before his kisses had held her enthralled with passion.

She opened her mouth to speak a polite phrase of thanks and found to her astonishment that she couldn't think of one.

"Don't ask me up for coffee," Luke said. He laughed uneasily. "I don't think I could afford it." And with that, he walked off into the night.

Nina stumbled into her building to spend a long, sleepless night of tossing and turning.

Three

Two days later, on Sunday afternoon, Nina was reluctantly dialing Luke's telephone number. She waited impatiently and was about to hang up after the eighth ring when someone finally answered.

"Hello." It was a woman's voice, feminine and attractive. Nina felt an inexplicable wave of hurt wash over her.

"Hello, may I speak to Luke?"

"Sure you can. But I warn you, he's in a lousy mood."

Nina heard noise in the background, evidently Luke and the woman arguing. Finally he came to the phone.

"Hello?" he said aggressively.

"Hello, Luke. This is Nina."

There was a long pause. "Nina..."

“I hope I didn’t interrupt anything,” she said stiffly.

“No.”

“If you’re entertaining...”

“No, I’m not.”

She was finding this even harder than she had expected, and he was not helping.

Her two eldest nieces, standing on either side of her in her mother’s sitting room, began urging her to get to the point. She heard her mother shriek in the kitchen. A second later their dog came racing through the sitting room with a pork roast clenched in his enormous jaws, while her mother, two of her brothers, and a host of small children came tearing in after it, all shouting and waving their arms.

“Oh, God,” said Nina.

“Bad dog! Bad dog!” shouted Nina’s mother.

“The concert, Nina. Ask him about the concert,” nagged Nina’s nieces.

“Let him have it, Mom. We can’t eat it now, anyway,” advised Nina’s brother Mark, trying to stop their mother from crawling under a table in pursuit of the dog.

“What the hell is going on there? Where are you?” shouted Luke on the telephone.

“I’m at my parents’ house in Brooklyn. Just a typical Sunday dinner with the Gnagnarellis,” she shouted back.

“I’m beginning to understand what drew you to your ex-husband,” Luke commented, as the dog started barking and the youngest child burst into tears.

“Ask him, Nina!”

“Ask me what?” asked Luke.

“Bad dog! What will we eat?” cried Nina’s mother.

“Mom, it’s okay. I’ll go get a pizza. Matt, get the dog out of here,” said Mark to his younger brother.

“Ask him, Nina!”

“All right, all of you, be quiet!” Nina used a tone usually reserved for her most dramatic moments on stage. It actually had some effect. The family quieted down. “Thank you,” she said in her usual cool, cultured voice.

“Under control?” Luke asked. She could hear the smile in his voice.

“More or less. They’re all just shouting quietly now.”

“Why did you call?”

“Well, my niece Maria is having her fourteenth birthday this coming week,” Maria bobbed her head enthusiastically, “and she and her sister ... Well, Luke, they saw me on TV with you. They’d like to see you sing, so I tried to get tickets for the benefit concert you’re singing at next weekend on Long Island, but it’s sold out. And we thought, since I’d met you, perhaps...” She trailed off. How were her brother

Michael's daughters to know that the evening she'd met Luke she'd abandoned him in the middle of the street after a shouting match? Nina was far too embarrassed about the conclusion of their most recent meeting to even mention it.

He had evidently decided to spare her further humiliation. "You want help? I'll get you some VIP passes. Is three enough?"

"Yes. That's fine. Thanks very much, Luke," Nina said, relieved.

"My pleasure. Bring your nieces backstage when I'm done, okay?"

"They'd love that."

"Good." He explained to her where to pick up the passes and how to get backstage. "I'll see you next Saturday. And Nina? The woman who answered my phone..."

"Yes?" she heard herself ask, hating herself for needing to know.

"That's my agent, Kate Hammer. Strictly business."

"Oh."

"All you have to do is ask, Nina," he said gently.

"I—I'm sorry, Luke. It's none of my business."

"Until Saturday, then. Goodbye, Nina."

Nina put down the receiver. As usual, he'd confused her. She was embarrassed he'd sensed her desire to know who the woman was. She was grateful he'd volunteered the information. She was relieved he hadn't mentioned the evening they'd spent together, yet felt perversely annoyed with him at the same time for not saying anything about it. However, this was not a good moment for reflection. She gently shoved away her hovering nieces.

"We've got three VIP tickets, and he's invited us to go backstage when he's done singing."

The girls jumped up and down, squealing with delight, hugged Nina, and jumped up and down again.

Michael's wife, Nancy, came into the room. "I take it you got the tickets?"

Her two daughters rushed up to tell her the good news, then ran out into the yard to tell their father.

"Thanks, Nina," said Nancy. "We'd have loved to have taken them ourselves. Luke Swain is terrific. But they can hardly go to a rock concert with their parents, can they?"

"Going with their aunt is probably just as square," said Nina dryly. "But it may be interesting for me. I've never been to a rock concert."

"Who knows, you may even like it."

"I doubt it."

"What'll you have on your pizza? Mark's taking orders' now," Nancy said with a grin.

"We're having pizza? Thank God—I don't think I could have faced roast pork again."

Over dinner, Nina's father was full of praise and approbation.

"A benefit concert to fight world hunger? I'm glad to see you girls taking an interest in something important. Change is brought about by people rallying together to express their viewpoint until the government has to listen."

"Pop," Nina interrupted, "I don't think they're taking a political stand. I think they just want to hear some music."

Stefano Gnagnarelli was a little disappointed when his granddaughters agreed with Nina. He was, however, an essentially optimistic person: "Still, in the middle of all that so-called music, they're bound to learn something. Whether you're for or against something, it's important to take a stand and to know why you've taken it."

"So-called music?" echoed Joe, the youngest of the four sons. He was a year older than Nina. "Pop, we've been over this before—"

"And I still say that a lot of guitars and drums and long-haired people screaming about sex does not qualify as music. Nina agrees with me, don't you Nina?"

Nina was laughing.

Joe wasn't about to give up that easily. "Pop, I agree that a lot of guitars and drums and long-haired people screaming about sex does not qualify as music, but—"

"Then we're in complete agreement, and for once we can have a peaceful family supper," interrupted Stefano.

Nina laughed harder, and Joe turned purple with irritation.

The whole family jumped in then, everyone shouting, everyone emphatically expressing the *right* viewpoint if everyone else would just *listen* for a minute. Soon the dog was running around the table, barking merrily. Everything was complete: A typical Sunday with the Gnagnarellis, Nina thought.

Holding her head in her hands, she remembered Luke's words. Yes, she had been irresistibly drawn to Philippe's quiet, elegant ways in direct contrast to her own background. She enjoyed her new life-style and would never return to a life in which she didn't know elegance, culture, and refinement. But, she thought, looking around at her lively, enthusiastic family, she had also missed their way of life when living with Philippe.

"Joseph! Joseph!" Stefano shouted into Nina's ear. "You're giving Nina a headache!"

"I'm not the one giving it to her! If you'd stop shouting your ignorant, underdeveloped, narrow-minded opinions into her ear—"

"If good taste is narrow-minded—"

"Yours certainly is!"

"You're all doing this," Nina said quietly, "because you know I'm not allowed to shout."

"Nina, tell this opinionated young idiot—"

"Grandpa, don't say that—"

“Mom, we’re still going to the concert with Nina, aren’t we?”

“Dad, the dog took my pizza!”

“How hungry can he *be*? Are you sure you didn’t just drop it?”

Nina sighed and concentrated on her food. It was a good ten minutes before conversation reached a normal pitch.

“So Nina’s taking you to this concert?” Stefano politely asked Maria and her sister Angela, as though the previous conversation had never happened.

“Yeah, Grandpa. She said we can stay the night at her apartment in the city and maybe do something the next day.”

“So, Nina, do a want go to a rock ‘n’ roll concert?”

“I don’t mind taking the girls, Pop,” Nina hedged. “And I can introduce them to Luke Swain, which will be nice for them.”

“I’ve heard of Luke Swain, Stef,” said Nina’s mother. “He’s supposed to be very intelligent, very outspoken. You should be glad the girls want to hear his music.”

“Yeah, Pop,” agreed Michael. “It’s very good. It’s not for teenyboppers.” His daughters glared at him.

“Yeah, Michael and I listen to it, too,” agreed Nancy.

“He’s gorgeous,” chipped in Mark’s pregnant wife. Nina wished they would all change the subject.

“I have every one of his albums,” said Maria proudly.

“You do?” Nina’s attention was caught. “Maria, do you think I could borrow them for a week?” Maria’s expression was as negative as if Nina had asked to borrow both her kidneys for a week. “Never mind,” Nina sighed. Perhaps she would buy one or two, after all.

After their disastrous first meeting, Nina hadn’t thought she’d ever see Luke Swain again. And after the unexpected turn of their second meeting, she had promised herself she would stay away from him. Yet she had just agreed to walk into the lion’s den. It’s the last time, she told herself. The last time, she repeated, digging into her zabaglione.

* * * *

As it turned out, Nina’s week was too hectic for her to worry about the following weekend, let alone buy records.

With the opening night of *Rigoletto* less than three weeks away, Nina’s time and concentration were absorbed by the production. She felt that singing Gilda in New York could be the biggest step in her career, to date, if she could unlock the heart of the character. Her singing was going well. She had an excellent rapport with Giorgio Bellanti who was singing Rigoletto, and they both worked well with the director. But the basic quality of the woman, the passions, which surged in her and changed her, were still eluding Nina. And it was not enough to simply stand up and sing well.

Not given to panic, Nina simply tripled her concentration, canceled all social engagements and gave every ounce of her strength to trying to make Gilda come to life.

Consequently, she was already very tired and rather ill-tempered when Saturday night arrived. She was

not in the mood to see her first rock concert. But she couldn't disappoint her nieces who'd been counting on it all week. She met Maria and Angela coming into the city on a train from their home in Westchester County, and the three of them boarded the train out to Long Island.

They found the stadium easily, by following everyone else—there seemed to be no one who wasn't going to this concert. Once at the stadium, Nina spent some time finding the correct window for their tickets. She kept the girls close to her as she wandered around. Who could say what kind of people were lurking about?

Tickets in hand, Nina then gave in and bought her nieces outrageously priced program books with “full color pictures,” root beer, popcorn, and three T-shirts: one with a picture of Luke gazing at the viewer with “lazy sensuality,” one with a picture of a striking blond woman known as Gingie, and one with the slogan Fight Famine.

“That’s for you to wear in front of Grandpa,” Nina explained.

Having nearly cleaned out Nina’s wallet, the girls finally agreed to take their seats. They were indeed VIP seats, Nina noticed—close to the stage, comfortable, and relatively clean.

“We must be late,” she shouted above the music.

“No,” said Angela. “That’s just some warm-up band onstage. They’re here to play while people come in”

Glancing at Maria’s program book, Nina thought it looked like an impressive lineup although she only knew a few of the names. There were rock singers, comedians, television and film personalities, a couple of young politicians, and a writer. Since the evening could continue interminably, Nina and the girls had agreed they would go backstage after Luke sang (he was tenth on the list) and then go home.

The evening began officially with a passionate and perhaps intentionally naïve speech from a young politician. A rock band followed him. Nina began to get a headache. As far as she could tell, it actually *did* seem to be a lot of guitars and drums and long-haired people screaming about sex. Joe would have a fit if he knew, she thought wryly. Her nieces, however, were enthralled. Nina knew better than to spoil their fun by criticizing, but she thought the lead singer should at least put a shirt on under his vest, shave, cut his hair and, above all, articulate clearly. She was bored.

Several more acts followed, including a comedian who seemed to be very good but whose act was involved in the week’s current events, which Nina didn’t recognize since she’d been wrapped up in *Rigoletto*. She felt a bit lost.

There was one musical act she quite enjoyed—that almost made her sorry, since she had been looking forward to telling Luke what total dreck pop music was. It was a folksinger she’d heard before and had always liked. His gentle, rippling music was a welcome respite. There were other acts she recognized as good, a few that she even enjoyed to a certain extent. Some of the vocal work was excellent, although she could tell by the way they were using their voices that many of the singers wouldn’t be as good ten years down the road.

She liked it more than she had expected to, but rock music just wasn’t her thing. Her nieces, like most of the audience, were lost in the music, jumping up and down, singing along. The beat was naturally enticing. But the music didn’t reach out and wrap itself around her the way jazz or opera did.

Finally, it was time for Luke to perform. There was an enormous roar from the crowd as he came onstage and slung his guitar over his head. He smiled, waved to the crowd, then peered in Nina’s

direction. Their eyes locked across the heads of a hundred people.

“Glad you could make it,” he said into his microphone, looking directly at Nina. Nina’s cheeks turned red, and she looked down.

The audience cheerfully returned his greeting. She could hear people shouting, “Hi, Luke!” and “Luke, Luke, hey, Luke!”

When she looked up, his eyes were still on her as he tuned his guitar.

“Nina, he’s looking at you!” said Angela excitedly.

“No, he’s not,” snapped Nina, embarrassed beyond reason.

“He is, he is. Oh, wave to him, Nina, wave to him!”

“No.”

Angela and Maria waved at him, and suddenly a stranger sitting behind Nina said, “Go on, honey, wave to him!”

Seeing a couple of other people starting to stare at them, Nina finally glared straight at Luke and waved briefly. He laughed, then turned his attention to the band, checking that they were ready to play.

“I think you know this one,” he said into the microphone. As he plucked out a few notes, the crowd cheered again.

Luke began singing a heart-wrenching ballad of poverty, hunger and despair in a clear, warm voice. Nina could hear his passionate caring for the world around him, his sorrow, his anger, his burning need to encourage change. Evidently the audience did know the song, because virtually everyone joined in, thousands and thousands of people singing in unison with Luke, all of them giving voice to the song he’d created, touched by it, moved by it, believing in it. Nina felt pride for Luke swell inside her like a living force, although she knew she had no right to feel proud of his achievement.

When it was over, Luke and the band paused to acknowledge the wild cheering then smoothly jumped into a more mainstream rock song about an interesting evening spent with a girl named Rapunzel.

He was good, Nina thought—though at the moment he was, to a certain extent, a long-haired person screaming about sex. His songs were musical and drew strongly from jazz and his country roots. She had known the lyrics would be good; anyone who talked as much as he did was bound to be good at self-expression just from sheer practice. Although his voice wasn’t classical material, it was versatile, expressive, warm and—sexy. He performed with energy, moving around the stage gracefully, drawing the audience in, making them an integral part of the performance.

Nina was enjoying herself.

Next he sang the title song from his latest album. Nina was intrigued and listened closely to *A Wilder Name*, played to a driving, insistent beat. It answered some of the questions she had asked herself when looking at the album cover through the shop window. But it was a demanding, persistent song, raising other questions about honesty and personal courage, urging the listeners to deny convention and take “a wilder name.”

When it was over, Nina was so lost in thought she forgot to applaud. She knew she’d have to hear that song again.

“This last one,” Luke announced, “is new. We won’t be recording it for a while yet. It’s still pretty rough, but it’s for a friend in the audience and I wanted you to hear it tonight. It’s called *Once Bit is Twice Shy*.”

The band broke into an old-fashioned boppy rock tune with a piano and a saxophone taking prominence. He knew she loved the sax. Nina sank low in her chair, overwhelmed by a chaotic mixture of feelings.

The song was playful and a little camp, making good use of vocal harmonies. Mercifully, Luke never once looked at her as he sang.

“I know that once bit is twice shy

But that’s no reason why you can’t try

With me.

Baby don’t beware, ‘cause I’m a teddy bear,

Won’t you give your tender lovin’ care

To me?”

Nina’s jaw dropped and she couldn’t decide how she felt, let alone form a coherent thought.

“My bark is mean, but I never bite,

I never scratch though I love to fight,

I want you more than a fresh soup bone,

Come on baby, please take me home!”

Was he propositioning her in front of thousands of people? She had to laugh at the audacity of it. It was like him.

When the song ended, the audience applauded wildly, and Luke finally looked directly at Nina who was smiling broadly and willing to admit that she’d enjoyed it. He grinned back.

He spoke briefly into the microphone and left the stage, to be replaced by a comedian.

Nina’s nieces were looking at her slyly and whispering to each other.

“Do you want to go backstage now?” she interrupted.

“No, can we see the singer after this, then go backstage? Will he still be there, Nina?”

“I should think so.”

The singer wasn’t particularly good in Nina’s opinion, but her hair—a creation of various shades of orange and purple which stood up on end—was fascinating.

After about twenty minutes Nina guided the girls backstage. She presented her VIP passes and gave her name. Someone immediately said “Oh, right,” and guided her through a throng of singers, musicians, make-up men, stagehands, reporters, TV cameras, and hangers-on all milling about behind the scenes. They found Luke doing a live radio interview. He jumped up when he saw Nina.

“That’s all for now, Mariella,” he said.

“Thanks, Luke,” said the woman as they shook hands.

He pushed his way through the crowd until he reached Nina.

“I was beginning to think you weren’t coming.”

“We were enthralled by a woman with extraordinary hair.”

They smiled at each other. Nina suddenly felt as shy as a homely schoolgirl. Nothing in her life had taught her what to say to a man who had just written a song for her and sung it in front of thousands of people. And here, more than anywhere, he was in his milieu, just as she was hopelessly out of hers.

“More than a fresh soup bone?” she asked archly. Luke laughed, pleased.

Their eyes locked. They spoke together:

“I—”

“Did you—”

They laughed easily now, silently acknowledging together that he had put her on the spot. More comfortable now, she held off commenting by introducing him to her nieces.

“Luke, this is Angela and this is Maria.”

He shook their hands and then leaned down. “Happy birthday, Maria,” he said and kissed her chastely on the cheek. Maria’s jaw dropped and her eyes were saucer-wide with adoration as she stared up at him. Nina could see Maria would treasure that kiss until she was old and gray.

“Now that’s what I call a good-looking family,” said Luke, surveying the three petite, black-haired females before him. “Are you staying for the whole show?”

“No, we’re leaving after this,” said Nina. “I don’t want to travel back too late on the trains.”

“Why didn’t you come by car?”

“I can’t drive.”

“You can’t drive?” he repeated incredulously.

“No, I can’t. Honestly, Luke, I’ve lived in New York most of my life. In San Francisco I used public transportation or Philippe’s chauffeur-driven car. When would I have learned to drive?”

“A woman who doesn’t drive because she uses the subway or gets chauffeured in a Rolls-Royce. Your aunt is a strange woman,” he told the girls.

“She’s not so bad,” said Angela, avidly watching the interplay between her aunt and her idol.

“No, not so bad,” Luke murmured. His look, made Nina feel hot. She had a sudden vision of the two of them locked in each other’s arms, mouths melding, tongues touching ... She looked away from those hypnotic eyes.

“If you two can’t see the rest of the show, then surely you want to meet Gingie,” Luke said to Angela and Maria, noticing the T-shirts they’d bought.

“Oh, yes! Yes! Yes!” they squealed happily.

Luke took each of them by the hand. “Come along,” he said to Nina over his shoulder. She followed, noticing for the first time that many of the flashes she’d been seeing were coming from cameras pointed at Luke. She fervently hoped that she and her nieces wouldn’t appear in any photographs with Luke in those horrible gossip magazines one saw at the supermarket.

When they reached Gingie’s dressing room Luke knocked and called out. She came promptly. They seemed to be good friends.

“How’d it go?” Gingie asked Luke.

“Okay. I want you to meet my friends. This is Angela, this is Maria, and this is their Aunt Nina.”

Gingie shook hands all around. “Are you enjoying the concert?” she asked. As Gingie chatted with the girls, Nina sized her up. She was a tall woman, but the kind of tall woman who made Nina feel positively short as opposed to petite. She carried herself well and dressed to flatter her height. Her blond hair was pale and short—it suited her striking features, emphasizing their strong beauty. Her manner with the girls was friendly without being patronizing. Nina liked her.

“I’m sorry we won’t be able to watch you,” Nina said sincerely.

“Oh, that’s all right. They’re already behind schedule. From the looks of things, I won’t go on for at least two more hours. I wish I could go back to the city with you now. But, what the hell, it’s for a good cause, right?” Gingie signed the girls’ program books and said goodbye to them all.

As Luke was guiding them toward the door he spoke to Nina. “Look, I can just as well leave now. I’m all done for the night. Why don’t I drive you back to the city?”

“Are you sure?”

“Sure, let me just tell the guys.”

“Well, only if it’s no trouble...”

“Ever-polite Nina,” he said mockingly.

He stuck his head inside his dressing room doorway.

“Robin, I’m leaving now so—”

“What?” came the astonished reply.

“I’m driving a friend home. Look, I want to go now. I’m beat.”

“Sure man, but what about—”

“Never mind that. You don’t need me.”

“Luke, what’s got into—”

Luke entered the room. From the hall Nina could hear the two men’s voices hashing over a disagreement. Finally Luke reappeared.

“No problems?” Nina asked brightly. His look was sheepish, but he didn’t respond. He shrugged into a

denim jacket and took her hand.

Looking her up and down he remarked, "I have some objections to your outfit, but it suits you."

She had chosen the only outfit she owned which she thought her nieces would find "cool" enough—she didn't want to embarrass them. She wore a tan leather jumpsuit, tan gloves, and matching boots. The severity was relieved by a silver metallic belt at her waist and some heavy silver jewelry. She had actually forgotten that wearing excessive leather might annoy him.

"If you don't like it, tough."

"Oh, I like it well enough," he replied, eyeing the way the material clung to her body.

"How do we get out of here?" she asked.

"I'm parked in a security area over there. Let's hope it's still secure," was his reply.

"What does that mean?"

"Well, sometimes fans who couldn't get into the concert can get a bit out of hand, a bit excited, a bit over-enthusiastic—"

"You mean they act like hooligans."

"Well, yes."

They stepped out the door and started walking toward the parked cars. First there was the flash of a camera and then a shout.

"Who's that?"

"Is it Gingie?"

"No, it's Luke Swain!"

"Luke! Luke!"

"Oh no," said Luke. He sounded more depressed than worried. None of the stars had been expected to leave this early. Consequently, Luke, Nina, and her nieces became the sole focus of attention for a lot of bored fans who'd been waiting outside for a few hours.

Nina would never forget what happened next. Hundreds of people rushed forward, many slipping under the barricades and past security guards to reach them. She pushed her nieces behind her with one hand and gripped Luke tightly with the other, hoping he would know how to handle it.

As the fans mobbed him he was trying to shield Nina and the girls while simultaneously shouting, "All right, back off! Security! Get these girls out of here!" It had happened too fast for Nina and the girls to run back to the building.

People piled into the crush. Nina had let go her hold of Luke since he seemed to be the center of the storm. When she lost her hold of Maria and Angela she panicked. She couldn't even see her nieces through the throng of bodies.

"Maria!" she shouted.

“Who’s she?” asked someone, looking at Nina.

“She’s with him!”

Suddenly people were pulling at Nina’s hair, tugging at her clothes. Someone grabbed her belt.

“Don’t do that!” she snapped.

But finding her nieces in the midst of this insanity was more important than protecting her clothes. As she pushed her way through a solid wall of girls all squealing Luke’s name, she felt her belt and jewelry being removed, her sleeve ripped off, her neckline torn and one of her boots yanked off. Someone jumping up and down accidentally hit her in the face so hard she saw stars. That girl actually apologized and helped her sit down on the pavement.

“Maria! Angela!”

She heard police whistles and deep masculine voices. Someone shoving their way through the crowd fell on top of her. Nina was too enraged to lose consciousness. When she hauled herself to her feet, the mêlée seemed to be breaking up as fast as it had begun, with policemen dragging people away and placing them behind the barricades.

“Nina, are you all right?” It was Angela’s voice.

Nina grabbed her by the shoulders. “Yes, yes. Are you all right, honey?” Angela was streaked with mud and axle grease and she was missing buttons, clothes, hair ribbons, and all her souvenirs.

“Yeah! Isn’t this neat?” She grinned in exultation.

Someone else knocked Nina over. She stayed on the ground this time, completely defeated by the follies of pop culture.

She was still sitting there fuming minutes later when Luke came over to her, followed by Angela and Maria. The glee on their faces and their attitude of having been “blooded” fed her fury and completely counteracted the concern on Luke’s face.

“Nina, are you hurt? Are you okay?” He knelt down beside her.

“I’m fine. Does this happen to you often?” Her voice was like ice.

“It hasn’t happened to me for a while,” he said tiredly.

“Gosh, someone even stole your boot, Nina!” exclaimed Maria.

Unforgivably, Luke started to laugh. Angela and Maria joined him.

“What’s so damned funny?”

“Oh, come on, Nina. You have to laugh. I mean, look at us all.” He’d gotten the worst of it by far: His jeans and the remaining half of his shirt were torn, disheveled, and mud-and-grease-stained. “I know you’re shaken up,” he said, “but it’s no big deal. It happens to rock stars all the time.”

“I’m not a rock star,” Nina snarled, jumping to her feet. “And if I wanted to be mauled, robbed, and hit on the head, I could walk through the Bowery after dark! Why the hell did you offer to drive us home if you knew this sort of thing was going to happen?”

“I didn’t know,” he began angrily.

“Well, if it happens ‘all the time’ to rock stars, you bloody well should have known!”

“I didn’t think—”

“Obviously!”

“Nina, don’t get upset,” said Maria.

“Everyone’s okay, Nina,” chimed in Angela.

Their defection to his side was too much. Enraged, Nina whirled on them both, “You keep out of this! How am I going to explain this to your father?”

“I’ll explain it,” said Luke placatingly.

“Mind your own business!” snapped Nina, beside herself.

“Nina, for God’s sake, nobody meant any harm! They just wanted—”

“To grab my clothes, jewelry, and hair because I happened to be leaving with you. If you like that sort of brutal, mindless, vulgar idolatry that’s your business. I don’t!”

He seemed to be counting to ten. Finally, he said, “Come on. I’ll drive you home.”

Not wishing to travel by train missing one boot and half her clothes, Nina agreed only because she had no other way of getting home. But the ride took place in charged silence. By the time they reached her apartment, Nina couldn’t stand the tension.

She hustled the girls out of the car and sent them into the building, then looked at Luke who stood pensively on the sidewalk, hands in his pockets, jacketless in the chilly October night.

“We can’t talk now,” he said quietly. “I’ll call you—”

“No, don’t,” Nina interrupted.

He looked at her.

“I’m calm now. I—I lost my temper before. I seem to do that around you.”

“So I noticed,” he said dryly.

“Look, Luke. I can’t handle that kind of thing. I don’t like it, I don’t want it, I’ve worked hard to get away from it.”

“It doesn’t—”

“I’m not cut out to get involved with a rock star, Luke. I don’t want to see you again.”

“Is it just because of what happened tonight?”

“What else could it be?”

“What else, indeed?” He studied her speculatively, his dark eyes giving nothing away.

“Goodbye, Mr. Swain,” she said softly and turned to go inside.

Not many people would have recognized the ultra-elegant Nina Gnagnarelli in the disheveled figure that limped into her building that night.

Luke stood in the street staring at the empty lobby long after Nina had gone inside.

Four

The opening night of *Rigoletto* was a triumph. It was also a great professional success for Nina. In those final days of rehearsal she had tapped a depth of fury and sorrow she hadn’t known existed in herself.

If she regretted telling Luke Swain she wouldn’t see him again, she successfully ignored the feeling during those final, intense days of rehearsals and fittings.

She received flowers, telegrams, telexes, cards, handshakes, hugs, congratulations, and champagne. Friends, family, fellow professionals, famous faces, and influential figures dropped by her dressing room to wish her well, and a host of reporters was waiting as she and other singers left the opera house.

The opening night party was a gala champagne affair. This, she thought, looking around at the elegant surroundings and happy guests, was where she belonged. It was the antithesis of Luke’s world of badly dressed, rebellious performers and mass hysteria. Regrets were a waste of time.

“You look distracted,” said Elena.

“Just thinking,” said Nina.

“Have some caviar.”

“Excuse me,” said Giorgio Bellanti in heavily accented English. “I want this wonderful girl to meet some friends.” Nina smiled affectionately at his description of her as he dragged her away.

* * * *

Nina felt exhausted and depressed during the following days, not an unusual reaction for her. It was a natural comedown after the intensity of rehearsal and the high of opening night. She felt a bit out of sorts when her depression didn’t ease off with the exhaustion. What on earth was the matter with her?

She lay in bed and closed her eyes.

He was there, waiting for her. He had been waiting in other quiet moments recently. Rich brown eyes stared into her very soul, a warm, firm mouth touched hers—

“Get out of my mind!” she gasped.

They lived worlds apart, and she wanted no part of his. He was argumentative, ill-mannered and probably the only person in the world as opinionated as her father and siblings. They brought out the worst in each other. She had all but given up blushing, staring, stammering, and shrieking until she met him.

For the first time, she saw the suspicion of something else in herself—something he had hinted at when she’d said goodbye to him: a source of vulnerability that he was tapping in her. The cool, worldly, sophisticated woman whom she had so carefully cultivated seemed to desert Nina every time Luke was around, leaving a vulnerable girl in her place. It was as if he had uncovered a part of her she had never

developed, hadn't known existed.

She picked up the telephone and called her mother to tell her she'd be over for Sunday dinner. *That ought to keep your wandering imagination in line*, she told herself.

She sang *Rigoletto* again the following week. Jesse Harmon had asked her for five tickets to the performance, so she had pulled a few strings to get the best seats. She was looking forward to seeing Jesse. She had agreed to go out on the town with him afterward, but she sincerely hoped he wouldn't mention Luke.

She sang again that night from an unleashed, even unpredictable well of passion and sorrow that enthralled her audience. Giorgio was, of course, the international superstar they had all come to see, but he beamed like a proud father when she stepped forward for her applause.

Jesse and Rebecca stuck their heads through her dressing room doorway as she was accepting congratulations from various well-wishers and a few friends.

"Jesse!" She was genuinely pleased to see his friendly, wrinkled face.

"Whoowhee!" He came forward and gave her a hug that knocked the air out of her lungs. "You are something else."

"You were extraordinary," beamed Rebecca.

"I think," said Jesse conspiratorially, "that you've even converted the heathen."

"Hmm?"

"We brought company." He winked.

She looked toward the door and saw Luke. Their eyes met. Nina forgot everyone else in the room. She watched like a trapped rabbit as he glided toward her.

She hadn't seen him for three weeks. But she hadn't forgotten the way his waving hair framed his face, the way one brow drooped slightly, the dazzling contrast of his white teeth in that dark visage when he smiled. He was dressed in elegant evening clothes. He looked devastating. His eyes were appreciative, a little awed as they took in her dramatic appearance in full costume and makeup.

"Congratulations," he said softly. "You were incredible. I've never seen anything like you."

She was lost in his eyes, eyes that were glowing, impressed, and warm for her. She heard herself thank him.

Luke gave Nina a single white rose. "It reminded me of you," he teased. "Beautiful, delicate ... thorny."

That broke the spell. "Thank you," she said crisply. She turned to Jesse. "Who else came with you?"

"My drummer and his girlfriend," Luke answered her question. He introduced a pleasant looking blond man. "Nina, this is Robin Good. He's been with me almost from the beginning."

"Robin Good?" she repeated. "You must have even more trouble with your name than I do."

He shrugged good-naturedly. "It goes with the job." Robin introduced Nina to his companion, a friendly woman in her late twenties.

“Giorgio asked me to apologize for not being able to meet you, Jesse. He’s got to leave right away.”

“What’s he like to work with?”

“Fantastic,” she said. “He’s the most gifted and sensitive singer I’ve ever worked with. And generous. There can be a lot of nasty competition onstage. I’ve seen selfish stars belittle everyone at rehearsals and try to upstage them at performances. But not Giorgio; he encourages everyone and gives everyone their moment onstage.”

“He sings like a lion.”

“Look, I’ve got to change and clean up. The wardrobe mistress keeps peering at me through the door.” Nina gestured to her costume. Her hair was largely covered by a long black fall which Luke seemed to find fascinating.

“We’ll wait outside,” said Jesse. Everyone left the room. Nina was irked that Luke made no attempt to get a moment alone with her.

Well, that’s fine with me, she thought, removing her costume and handing it to the wardrobe mistress with a few words of thanks. She removed most of her makeup and shook out her hair.

Naked, Nina stepped into the small shower cubicle in the corner of her dressing room to wash away the dirt, perspiration, and tension of the evening in the steaming hot water.

When she was done she dried off briskly, wrapped herself in the towel, wiped off part of the steamy full-length mirror and began blow-drying her curly hair into its usual smooth style. She stood facing the big mirror, her back to the door, concentrating on her task, the noise of the hair dryer blocking out all other sounds.

The door opened behind her. Her eyes met Luke’s in the mirror.

“I knocked,” he said.

He closed the door behind him and leaned against it, taking in her near-nakedness.

She continued to stare at his reflection in the mirror. His eyes locked with hers. She couldn’t breathe. She switched off the hair dryer and lowered her arm. She couldn’t speak. An intense, waiting silence filled the room.

“Are you sorry I came tonight?” he asked softly.

She shook her head.

If only he would move, she thought. But he didn’t, and the spell grew stronger. His gaze burned through the thin cotton towel. Desire flowed between them like a living bond. A sense of danger coursed through Nina. The air was heady with the scent of a hundred flowers and misty from her shower. The dressing room was no longer a familiar, workday place. The steamy mirror obscured most of the room from her view; she could see only herself, half-naked and tense, surrounded by wildly colorful flowers, locked in silent communication with this dark stranger.

Luke moved toward her slowly, stalking her like some cunning jungle beast. The hair dryer slipped from her hand like a forgotten weapon. Hypnotized, she watched his approach. He stood so close behind her she could feel the warmth of his body, smell his clean male scent.

“You have beautiful shoulders,” he whispered. He caressed one lightly. Nina shuddered.

Their eyes met again in the mirror, passionate and surprised. Luke studied her expression for a minute, then deliberately lowered his head.

His lips touched the soft skin of her shoulder. Nina’s breath came out in a rush. She saw the image of his dark head bent over her shoulder, felt the burning heat of his mouth on her flesh, heard the soft, senseless words he was whispering to her as he boldly kissed her neck, nuzzled her hair, nibbled on her earlobe.

Her breathing was ragged. She moaned softly, helplessly. This is madness, she thought, I’ve got to stop it. But passion was stronger than reason, and she leaned back against him as her knees gave way. His arms came around her swiftly, like a predator enfolding its prey.

His tanned hands ran up and down her arms, caressing, gently kneading. His teasing fingers lightly traced the towel where it covered the full swell of her soft, white breasts. Her flesh burned beneath the cloth. She moaned in frustration at the slight barrier, wanting to feel his touch against her skin. She was dizzy with rapture, wanting it to go on and on, wanting to lose herself in him and become a part of him.

“Nina, lovely Nina,” he murmured. His desires were as raging as her own as he slipped his hand through the folds of the towel to stroke and caress the silky skin of her waist and stomach.

Luke was kissing her, tasting her, whispering feverish words of desire. He touched her lightly, roughly, longingly. Nina tilted her head back and watched her own seduction in the misty mirror, arching her back sensuously as she reached up behind her to stroke his hair and grip his strong shoulders.

His warm knowing hand stroked her stomach, moving down over her abdomen, down, down ... Nina caught her breath fiercely. She was wild, entranced.

“I want you,” he whispered unsteadily.

She was there for him, pliable, vulnerable...

“No!”

The word burst from her lips with a force that stunned her as she shoved at Luke’s arms and whirled away from him, clutching the towel protectively.

They stared at each other in mutual surprise. For several moments only the sounds of their heavy breathing broke the stunned silence.

Then: “No?”

“No.”

She was near tears now. She felt confused and frightened. It had happened so fast, so unexpectedly. One minute she’d been drying her hair—and the next she was offering her body to this man. What was he doing to her?

Seeing the distraught expression on Nina’s face, Luke relented. Taking a long, steadying breath, he forced an iron control on his aroused senses.

“Okay.” He started to leave. “I almost forgot,” he said ruefully. “Jesse sent me to ask where you’d rather go tonight. I suspect you don’t particularly care right now?”

Nina shook her head feebly.

“I’ll tell him you’re leaving it up to him. He’ll like that.”

She nodded dumbly.

Luke paused at the door. His eyes were gentle, the fiery passion of a moment ago firmly under control. “Nina, will you be all right?”

She nodded. He left.

Alone, at last, Nina looked at herself in the mirror. She saw a small, frightened girl. There was no trace of the voluptuous woman who had abandoned herself to passion for a brief moment.

Tears of confusion and frustration spilled down her cheeks. She was not a Brooklyn schoolgirl, she was an experienced woman! When she and Philippe stopped sleeping together, it was because she had stopped respecting him, not because she didn’t enjoy sex. But she had never been this ... wild and uncontrolled. Not with Philippe, not with the few men she’d dated since her divorce. She was frightened by these sudden surges of compulsive passion for a man she hardly knew.

She had seen girls and young women run mad in an effort to get near Luke, to touch him. She had been repulsed by it at the time, but was she proving to be any different? Was there something about him that inspired this wanton reaction in women?

The brief scene had left her shaken and unsure of herself. Partly to hide her emotional turmoil and partly to show Luke Swain just who he was dealing with, Nina outdid herself in preparing her appearance.

As she met the others, she knew that there was panic in her heart, but their reaction made it clear that in appearance she was elegant, womanly, chic, and sexy.

Jesse let out a loud whoop of approval. Robin looked stunned. Luke’s eyes sparkled with warm appreciation but he spoiled it by saying, “What? No dead animals tonight? What’s the occasion?” Nina loftily ignored him.

Jesse never liked to go to the “usual” places. They went to a sedate jazz club on the Upper West Side. The proprietor was, of course, an old friend of Jesse’s. They were given the best table and the best service.

Once her nerves had calmed, Nina found she was famished. She attacked everything put in front of her with such dedication that Jesse finally remarked on it with pleasure.

“I like a woman that likes her food. There’s nothin’ more boring than eating a meal with some skinny girl that just plays with her food and whines about watching her weight.”

“Opera singers don’t have to be skinny,” Nina pointed out. “Anyhow, I get plenty of exercise: ballet, swimming, playing football with my family.”

After she’d eaten, Nina was able to enjoy the conversation more. Luke was avoiding any reminder of their private scene in her dressing room. His smile was friendly but impersonal, his eyes were sparkling but gave nothing away. He made no attempt to touch her, didn’t even ask her to dance after she’d danced with Jesse and Robin. He asked her about opera, her previous roles, her training, her favorite places in Europe—in short, about everything except herself.

“What role do you most want to sing?” he asked.

“Medea,” she answered promptly.

“Medea? The Greek woman who murders her children?” He looked wary.

“Yes.”

“Ah, now that’s fascinating,” said Robin with relish. “The real moral question there, of course, is—”

“I can’t stand this tonight,” interrupted Luke. “You don’t know what you’ve let yourself in for, Nina. Rebecca, won’t you have mercy and dance with me?”

Luke and Rebecca got up and went to the dance floor, chatting companionably. Jesse was already dancing with Robin’s date.

“It’s all right,” Robin grinned. “Luke’s got to listen to me all those lonely days and nights on the road.”

“I don’t understand,” said Nina.

“I’m working on my MA in philosophy.”

“You are? The drummer of one of the most successful rock bands in America?”

“I was an aimless student in Iowa when I met Luke passing through. I could see he needed a good drummer, so I dropped out and kicked in with him. He’d only been on the road about a year.

“Eventually, after I became interested in philosophy. I wanted to get back to studying, but I didn’t want to leave the band. So I did a bit here, a bit there. Finally, after ages, I got my first degree. Now I’m working on my master’s.”

“Where does it all lead to?” Nina asked.

“Well, at the rate I’m going, I ought to get my PhD, about the time I’m ready to retire from show business. I can find myself some quiet little university town and settle down to the good life.”

“You don’t want to play forever?”

“Not like this. Don’t get me wrong—I love it, it’s a great life. But it’s a crazy one. I’ll be ready for some peace and quiet in another ten or fifteen years.

“Luke’s the genius behind the whole thing. He can always just retire to writing songs and making the occasional appearance. But I’ve got to think about my future.”

Nina smiled, liking this easygoing, gentle man.

“Do you know Luke well?” Robin asked tactfully. He was clearly curious but too polite to pry.

“Hasn’t he told you that?”

“No.”

“To be honest, I hardly know him. I think this is the fourth time we’ve ever met. Our meetings just tend to be stormy. He hasn’t mentioned me?”

“Not exactly. Some things you can’t get the guy to shut up about, no matter what you say to him—”

“I’ve noticed,” Nina agreed dryly.

“On the other hand, when he won’t talk about a thing, you’re not sure if it’s because he doesn’t care or

because he cares too much. Usually he's straightforward, but he can be a cagey bastard."

"I see."

"I only wondered why he's been so moody the past few weeks. I mean, more so than usual." He paused. "*Once Bit Is Twice Shy*—that was you, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"He worked us all to a frazzle to get that ready in time for the concert. Since that night he won't touch it. And our producer is interested in it. Not that it matters—Luke does what he wants to do."

Nina stared at the centerpiece, trying to sort out her thoughts.

"I'm sorry, Nina. It's none of my business."

"It's okay, Robin, I know you're only asking because you care about him. But I haven't got any answers. Not tonight." Answers? She was probably the most bewildered person in the room.

"Okay."

Nina smiled at him. "Talk to me about Medea. I hope to need the information someday."

They were still engrossed in conversation when the rest of the group returned to their table.

"If you haven't figured out what he's saying, don't worry," Luke advised Nina. "It sometimes takes me weeks to plow through the rhetoric and realize that what he's really saying is that lying, killing, and infidelity aren't very nice."

Robin laughed and gave up lecturing for the evening after extracting a promise from Luke to do the same.

A couple of young women came over to their table to ask for Luke's autograph.

"That reminds me," Jesse said, once they were alone again, "I heard you tried to sneak out of that benefit concert early a few weeks back and got stormed by your fans. Is that right?"

Luke glanced apprehensively at Nina.

"He was leaving early to drive me and my nieces back to the city," Nina explained.

"You were there? Did you get hurt?"

Nina and Luke looked at each other. Her lips twitched and they both started to laugh. The incident finally assumed its proper perspective in her mind, and she was able to laugh at herself as she and Luke told the others what had happened.

"I must have looked like a madwoman," she admitted, "with my clothes in shreds, my hair standing on end, limping around in one boot, and raving at Luke."

"Never a dull moment," Luke said wryly.

Jesse told a similar story about being mistaken for a popular jazz singer about twenty years back.

"But when these girls realized their mistake, they began throwing my clothes and keys and wallet back at me as if it was all my fault!"

“Well, I think it sounds as if Nina still owes Luke one,” said Rebecca.

“Oh, she got her jabs in before that. I kindly offered to take her to dinner, and she took me to the cleaners.” He told them about struggling with the French menu, the imposing wine list, and the dress code at Les Précieuses.

Rebecca laughed. “You sure got this Kansas boy good that time, Nina.”

“Well, at least he knew which fork to use.”

“I think I owe Nina one,” said Luke.

“What do you mean?” she asked uneasily.

“This time you buy me lunch. I pick the restaurant.”

“It seems only fair,” agreed Jesse.

“Mind your own business,” said Rebecca.

Nina’s gaze locked with Luke’s. It was another challenge. If she were smart, she’d back down.

“How about Thursday?” she said.

“No, I’m meeting Kate. How about Friday?”

“No, I’m singing that night, and I just know I’ll spend the afternoon shouting at you. How about Wednesday?”

“Wednesday it is.” He gave her the West Side address of the restaurant.

Nina took a taxi home alone, since she was the only one in the group who lived on the Upper East Side.

She sat in front of the mirror in her bedroom and removed her make-up. She looked at her reflection with exasperation. She must be crazy. She could easily have backed out of having lunch with him.

She might sometimes be lacking in self-awareness, but never in honesty.

“Admit it. You want to see him again.”

The curly haired. woman in the mirror nodded in agreement.

“Until Wednesday, then,” whispered Nina.

Five

“Dig in,” urged Luke wickedly. “It’s all good, whole meal, organic, macrobiotic home cooking. No artificial ingredients or preservatives.”

“I *like* preservatives,” said Nina glumly poking at her food. She caught the laughter in his eyes. “Suitable revenge?”

“I’m having a great time,” he agreed.

They were sitting in a crowded, below-stairs vegetarian eatery called Raw Deal. The customers, perched

on unstable stools, were packed in elbow to elbow. Nina was seated in front of the ladies' restroom and had to stand up every few minutes so someone could enter or exit that room. Raw Deal was a colorfully decorated place with ferns hanging overhead. Posters covered the walls advocating various causes and philosophies: pro-veganism, anti-vivisectionism, Eastern mysticism, and holistic health.

In the course of a fairly active and sophisticated life, Nina had never seen anything like it. She studied the walls in fascination for a while. Then she grew uncomfortable as she realized that several of the patrons were studying her calfskin accessories with extreme distaste.

"I wish I hadn't worn this outfit," she said uncomfortably. Luke arched his right brow. "Well, I felt compelled to. I didn't want you to think I was giving in to your grass roots sense of fashion." She eyed his faded blue jeans and wool sweater critically.

"Have some goat's milk," he advised. "It'll make you feel better."

"Can I have some apricot crumble now?" she asked plaintively.

"Finish your greens first."

"I hate you for this."

"Ah, Nina, I will long cherish the memory of this meal."

Nina was reluctantly raising a forkful of food to her mouth when she noticed a familiar voice flowing from the speakers overhead:

"Is the life you lead too tame?

Will you take a wilder name?"

"I bought it."

He knew she meant the album. "Good."

She paused, groping for words. "You don't like ... complacency, do you?"

"No."

"I think ... you don't necessarily want us all to agree with you. You just want us to notice things and think about them."

"That's what it's all about, Nina: thinking, caring, helping. We're not alive if we tune out the world. We don't matter if things don't matter to us. No one will ever touch us if we don't reach out." He grinned suddenly. "Of course, I'm liable to insist someone's wrong if he *doesn't* agree with me, but that's just because I'm stubborn."

"Try ornery and opinionated."

"At least if you ever compliment me I'll know you mean it."

"Your work is good." He looked at her. She went on, a little embarrassed. "Your songs are musical, your lyrics are clever and sincere. I ... I like listening to you sing."

"Thank you, Nina. That means a lot to me, coming from you." He took her hand in his and kissed it lingeringly. Their eyes held. Nina's cheeks started to burn. "Now finish your vegetables or it's no

dessert,” he admonished.

After a few unhappy mouthfuls, Nina said, “Gee, Luke. We’ve been here a whole half hour and no one’s mobbed us yet. Maybe your popularity is slipping.”

“Maybe it’s because you’re such a pariah in that outfit.” She glared at him. “After bringing a woman dressed like you in here, I may not even be allowed to come back,” he confided.

“That might not be such a bad thing,” Nina concluded, shoving away her plateful of food.

“Had enough?”

Nina’s deadpan expression answered his question.

“Would you care for something else? A soya milk shake? Some carob coffee?” he asked solicitously. “I know! How about some red bean pudding?”

Nina went a trifle pale. “All right, you’ve had your revenge, now fair’s fair. You can’t make me eat something like that,” she insisted weakly.

Luke’s eyes danced. “Maybe you’d like to leave now?”

Nina bolted for the door while Luke paid the bill.

“I want ice cream,” she said as soon as they were out on the street together. “And hot fudge. And nuts. I want gooey, sugary food that’s bad for me and full of preservatives and additives. You owe me that much.”

Luke laughed and took her to a popular ice cream parlor where the customer could get any three ingredients mixed into the ice cream before sauce was poured over it.

“Are you really going to eat that mess?” asked Luke, eyeing the lumpy, chocolate-covered, candy-stuffed dish placed before Nina. He had ordered a chocolate malt.

“Yes!” she said and dug in with relish.

“You’re going to be a fat opera singer someday,” he said, laughing.

“Voluptuous, maybe. Fat, never. Anyhow, I get—”

“—plenty of exercise. Yes, I know.”

Nina finished her ice cream and then polished off what was left of Luke’s malt. His eyes widened in amazement when she reached for a few chocolate mints.

“I’m famished after that meal,” she explained.

“Did Philippe ever find your appetite—uh—unrefined?” he asked curiously.

“Not as long as I stayed svelte and beautiful,” she said lightly. “Anyhow, in the midst of those fancy five-course meals he couldn’t keep track of how much I was packing away.” She grinned. “And when I first met him, I did pack it away. He’d buy me dinner on Wednesday, and I was so broke I just wouldn’t eat until he bought me dinner again on Friday.”

“I remember doing things like that,” Luke said. “I started out singing in college cafés, Meals were

included, so I ate as much as I could hold. I couldn't afford to eat between gigs in those days."

They had coffee, chatting companionably about their salad days, then left the ice cream parlor and strolled aimlessly down the street, both aware that a lot was being left unsaid between them.

They paused in front of shop windows, feigning interest in pop art, punk jewelry, rare books, and Indonesian antiques. Nina's mind was not on window-shopping, and she suspected Luke's wasn't either. His face wore that introspective, brooding expression she'd already come to recognize: He was thinking, probably about her.

He seemed to have been enjoying himself. It was he, after all, who'd come to see her at the opera and invited her out to lunch. What would he do now? Had he satisfied his curiosity about the Brooklyn girl turned opera star? Or would he still want to know more?

Nina wondered what she herself wanted. She was undeniably attracted to him, dangerously drawn to him. Concentration was an essential discipline in her profession, and there was nothing she couldn't force out of her mind when she was working—until Luke Swain entered her life. Those dark eyes, that drooping brow, and that teasing smile haunted her even in the rehearsal room now, and that worried her. That worried her enormously.

Nothing, not even her scandalous divorce, had ever distracted her from her work before. And yet how many times lately, when working with Elena or singing with Giorgio Bellanti, had she drifted away to those burning, shattering moments she and Luke had shared in her dressing room? Too many times to count, she thought disgustedly. She was mooning over him like a lovesick groupie and it had to stop.

And now, amazingly enough, she was discovering she rather liked Luke. Liked him a lot, in fact. He was infuriating, opinionated, volatile, and just plain stubborn; but he was also honest, generous, caring, intelligent, talented, dedicated, and more than willing to laugh at himself. She admired his courage, too: the courage that had seen him through ten long, hard years on the road to success; the courage that inspired him to put his heart and soul into his songs and then perform them before thousands of people; the courage that had led him ask Nina Gnagnarelli to see him again after she'd walked away from him.

"You can't *still* be hungry?" Luke said incredulously.

"What?" Nina nearly jumped out of her skin when he interrupted her thoughts.

"Take it easy. I don't mind, I'll buy you some," he said placatingly.

Nina followed his glance and realized that for some time now she had been staring in rapt attention at a shop window full of homemade chocolates.

"Oh," she said, coming back to earth, "no, no. Just ... um ... admiring..."

"Want to take a walk in the park?" he suggested.

"Yes," she said instantly, wanting to spend more time with him.

He held out his hand and she took it, wanting to touch him, glad for the feel of his warm grip on her hand. He pulled her a little closer, and she became intensely aware of him, of his height, of his hard shoulders and straight back, his narrow hips and strong legs, of the aura of mingled strength and daring that surrounded him.

They would walk together for a while in the park, almost like lovers, then they'd go their separate ways. Really, they would have to, Nina realized. After all, it was surprising they'd even gotten to know each

other this well, and it wasn't likely to continue. They had nothing in common, they argued constantly, they traveled completely separate paths in life and they were both very busy people.

She couldn't continue to see someone just because of a distracting passion she felt for him. And if Luke had intended to explore that passion a little further, she would just have to explain that she didn't get involved in strictly sexual relationships.

With everything firmly settled to her satisfaction, Nina felt—just miserable. The feeling got worse as they walked along, surrounding her like a dark cloud.

"What's wrong?" Luke asked.

"Nothing"

"You look unhappy."

"Nothing's wrong."

"Is it something to do with me?" he prodded.

"Read my lips: nothing's wrong," she said tersely.

"Because if it is something to do with me, I think we should talk about it. I prefer things to be out in the open."

Nina was beginning to get irritated. "Oh, you do?"

"Yes, I do."

"Has it occurred to you that *I* might prefer to keep things to myself till I've thought them through? That I *don't* like to blurt out the first thing that comes to mind? Or do we have to do everything the way *you* prefer to do it?"

"So there *is* something wrong," he pounced.

The look Nina gave him could have scorched the earth. To her surprise, Luke actually looked sheepish and backed down.

"Okay, I'm sorry. You're right." He took a deep breath. "I guess I'm a little tense. I was being pushy and, no, we don't have to do everything my way."

It wasn't the first time he'd apologized to her. He was indeed a difficult man, but at least he was also ready to admit when he was being unreasonable. Sometimes, anyhow.

"Look, let's sit down for a while and talk," Luke said, gesturing to an empty park bench.

As they approached it, Nina wrinkled her nose in distaste. It was quite dirty, and she didn't want to sit on it in her pale wool dress. Though usually devoid of gallant gestures, Luke dramatically laid his denim jacket down on the bench for her to sit on.

"Just like Sir Walter Raleigh," he said.

"Your hair is about the right length, too," Nina said dryly.

"You exaggerate. And I wouldn't be caught dead in a doublet and hose."

Nina laughed as she tried to picture Luke dressed as an Elizabethan aristocrat. She herself had worn costumes on stage from many eras, but Luke was very definitely twentieth century.

Luke sat down next to Nina, close enough to create a sense of intimacy which both warmed and unnerved her. His hand came up to softly stroke her cheek, then gently brushed a black curl away from her face. His expression was whimsical as he said, "I honestly never imagined myself with someone like you."

"You've been a shock to my system, too," Nina admitted.

Luke looked up as a young couple walked by, squabbling noisily about his shabby clothing, reckless friends, and bad manners and her expensive tastes, stuffy friends, and superiority complex.

After they passed by, Luke grinned at Nina and said, "That could almost be us."

"I never use language like that"

"You probably will when you get angry enough at me."

"I don't ... expect to get angry at you again," Nina said carefully.

"Oh, come on, Nina. I'm an optimist, but that's just plain unrealistic. Look how many times we've argued just since we met." Luke was amused. "You'll keep getting angry at me. Let's just work on getting better at making up."

Nina looked at him uncertainly. "Do you really think we'll get to know each other that well?"

"Of course, I do." Luke studied her carefully. "Do you really think I swallowed my pride and went to the opera and asked you to see me again just because I wanted to watch you pick at your cauliflower stew in Raw Deal today?"

"Well, no, I guess that does sound unlikely."

"I want to know you better," he said firmly.

"But, Luke ... we're worlds apart. We're oil and water. We're like that old song about the two people who pronounce 'tomato' differently."

"Do you want to call the whole thing off?"

"I ... thought so," Nina said hesitantly, falling helplessly into his dark yearning gaze. She shifted so that she wasn't looking at him. Those demanding eyes made thinking impossible.

"Maybe I thought so, too, a few weeks back. Now I think it's a bit too late for that, don't you?"

"Nothing's—I mean—we're not—"

"Are you so sure nothing's happened yet, Nina? Is your cool façade as secure as it was the night we met? No weak spots? You don't think about me when I'm not around?"

Her eyes flew back up to his face, giving her away. Luke's right brow lifted.

"I was hoping so," he said softly, "because I think about you constantly, day and night. Especially night." His voice had dropped to a husky purr, making her breath grow rapid and her skin tingle.

“What do you think we’ll get out of this?” she asked nervously.

“I don’t know yet. But life is most exciting when you don’t know where you’re going.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then that’s something else we can argue about,” he said, pulling her closer. “Later,” he added in a whisper.

He sought her lips with his own, letting his mouth hover just a breath away from hers. He moved his hands over her like a sorcerer, easing her tension with sure knowledge of her needs, massaging her neck, cradling her shoulders, caressing her hair. His mouth brushed gently, tantalizingly, over her lips and cheeks with light feathery kisses, as teasing as the wisps of a half-remembered dream.

A sigh of longing escaped Nina’s lips, longing for him, for his touch, for his passion. It was an admission that his specter haunted her days and nights, too, that she’d been glad to see him at the opera, that she hadn’t wanted today to be the end for them, either.

His mouth took hers then, hungrily, greedily. She instantly forgave herself for her distraction at work and her sleepless nights. Who could taste the sweetness of his kiss and not long for more? Nina burrowed against him, feeling almost sorry for herself; nothing would ever be the same after Luke.

Long, spinning, swirling moments of hot pleasure and growing desire were interrupted when Nina felt Luke pull away from her gently.

“We’ve got to stop,” he whispered shakily.

“Huh?” she said inelegantly.

“We’re in the middle of Central Park,” he reminded her.

Nina’s eyes popped open. “Oh, yeah. “

He looked down at her in tender amusement. “What would Miss Manners say?”

“She’d say I was getting mixed up with the wrong sort of man.”

“Are you ready to get mixed up with me, Nina?” he asked seriously.

She returned his look for a long moment before she said, “No. But I think ... it’s too late to turn back now.”

It probably wasn’t the most enthusiastic declaration he’d ever received from a woman, but Luke seemed satisfied.

He walked her home, since it was a beautiful day and neither of them was quite ready to end it.

Outside her building he said, “Aren’t you going to ask me up?”

“No,” she said firmly.

“Why not? Afraid of what might happen?” he teased her.

“Yes. I’m sure you’ll hate my apartment, and I’m afraid we’ll fight about it, and I’m just not up to another argument right now. I need to get in training for this.”

Nina agreed to meet him again in two days, after each of them shifted their busy schedules to find a day they both had free. She and Luke agreed to eschew restaurants for a while. Instead, an artist Nina admired was holding an art exhibition on Sunday, which she invited Luke to.

"You don't have to wear a tie," Nina assured him, "but if you could dress a bit more ... uh ... a bit less..."

Luke rolled his eyes. "I'll see what I can find in my closet."

He was about to kiss her goodbye when one of Nina's neighbors, coming home from work, recognized him and just *had* to shake his hand and get his autograph.

The woman stood chatting with them in the lobby for several minutes. Nina finally realized the woman wasn't going anywhere until Luke left. Since Nina felt uncomfortable about kissing Luke in front of her neighbor, she just said a friendly goodbye to him and watched him walk out of the building. She felt slightly annoyed that her last few moments with Luke Swain, the man, had been invaded because he was also Luke Swain, the rock star.

Even more annoying was her neighbor who didn't stop asking questions about Luke until Nina got off the elevator at the ninth floor and shut her apartment door behind her.

She sank into a comfortable chair in her living room and rubbed her forehead. Finally, she sighed. She'd better get used to this sort of thing, she decided. This was only the beginning.

Six

"This is the end," Nina said emphatically. "Really. I mean it. Don't even walk to the end of the block with me."

"What's wrong?" Luke ignored her order and walked down the street with her, his long legs easily keeping pace with her furious strides.

"What's wrong?" she echoed incredulously, whirling to face him. "How could you? How *could* you embarrass me like that? An exclusive, invitation-only, first-day exhibition of an artist I've always admired, and you were my guest. How could you be so rude?"

"I wasn't rude," Luke said patiently.

"You were completely tactless!"

"Tactless? The guy asked me what I thought. If he doesn't want to know, he shouldn't ask."

"Has it ever occurred to you that not everyone wants to hear the brutal unvarnished truth from your lips?" she flared.

"Yes, it has, and that's why I've never told my mother what it's *really* like to be a rock star. But that guy is an artist, Nina. If he puts his feelings on canvas and hangs them up on the wall, he's got no business expecting other people to hide theirs. Particularly not when he *asks* for an opinion."

"You didn't need to *hide* your feelings," Nina countered. "You could just have expressed them a little less offensively."

"He wasn't offended," Luke insisted. "Why do you think we talked for twenty minutes?"

“Because you love to talk!”

“I won’t deny that, but it was because we were having an interesting conversation. I don’t like his work and he admitted he hates my music, but it doesn’t mean we can’t exchange ideas. Diverse tastes and personal respect are not mutually exclusive.”

Nina took a long, deep, steadying breath. He was right about that, at least. Her own noisy, opinionated family was certainly proof. “Okay, I accept your explanation. But surely you can see how embarrassing it was for me, with the two of you arguing so noisily and everyone staring at us.”

Luke also took a deep breath. They always managed to wind each other up like this. “Nina, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to embarrass you. Next time we go out I’ll try to remember that you don’t like to attract attention.”

“Next time?” Nina said doubtfully.

Luke gave her a hard look. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t think this is going to work, Luke,” she said carefully.

“We knew it wouldn’t be easy, Nina. I thought we had agreed it was worth the effort.” He spoke carefully, too. They both knew they were walking on thin ice.

“Maybe we were wrong.”

Luke studied her with speculative eyes for a long moment before saying, “I don’t think so. If you want to end it neatly before it’s begun, you’ll get no help from me. I won’t let you slip away easily with trite regrets and a polite handshake. I want you too much for that.”

Nina’s cheeks reddened at the bluntness of his words. “Are you going to make a scene?” she said as scathingly as she could.

Luke tried to control his temper. “No. As boorish and uncouth as I may be, Miss Gnagnarelli, I don’t conduct my private life on the streets of Manhattan.” He looked at her with steely determination. “But I’m not giving up as easily as you seem to want to.” He took her hand in a tight grip and dragged her down the street. “Come on.”

“What are you doing?”

“We’re going home to talk about this.”

“Home?” she said in alarm.

“We can’t talk here.”

“I’m not going home with you,” Nina insisted angrily. “We have nothing more to talk about.”

“No?” He grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her roughly to his chest, looking as if he’d like to shake her till her teeth rattled. “Do you really think we can walk away from this that easily, just because it’s a little messy?”

“Yes,” she hissed furiously. She could feel the hard muscles of his thighs and belly pressing against her through their clothes. She braced her hands against his chest and looked up into the face that filled her thoughts and dreams. Something hot and frightening flooded her veins, filling her with excitement. It was all too unfamiliar and threatening, this stormy desire, this angry longing. She rebelled against it. She didn’t

want him to turn her life upside down. “I don’t want to see you again, and this time I won’t let you talk me out of it!”

He maintained his grip on her arms. They were both furious now. His whisper was harsh and burning as he said, “Do you remember wanting me as much as I wanted you, Nina? Do you remember the way you held me in the park? The way I touched you in your dressing room that night?”

“Stop it!” she cried, twisting away from him.

They stared at each other in consternation. How had it happened? They’d started out to have a pleasant afternoon together, and now they were at each other’s throats. The violent passions between them were becoming too strong to suppress. They became conscious of curious stares. Nina felt mortified. She was actually brawling with him in the middle of the street. Luke looked equally dismayed.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said. He grabbed her wrist and dragged her so fast she had to do a little hopping step to keep up with him.

Nina was going home with a furiously angry man who had just expressed his desire for her. She questioned the wisdom of this. However, Luke seemed far more interested in hurling abuse at her than in taking her to bed. She was apprehensive, but not frightened. Instinct told her that whatever else happened, Luke would never take her against her will.

He seemed to calm down a bit by the time they reached his corner. He let go of Nina and ran a hand through his hair, rumpling the dark waves as they waited for the light to change. It was a long light, and they waited without speaking.

“I say, aren’t you Nina Gnagnarelli?” asked a crisp, English voice. Nina turned to see a tall man with smooth blond hair and pale blue eyes looking at her with polite appreciation.

“Yes.”

“How do you do?” He reached out, shook her hand briefly and explained that he was a big fan of hers. “I caught you in *Il Turco in Italia* a few weeks ago. May I say that besides possessing a magnificently beautiful voice, you are a comic genius”

“Thank you,” Nina said warmly. Aware of Luke radiating quiet fury nearby, she turned the full force of her charm on the Englishman. “You have a honeyed tongue.” She gave him her most dazzling smile.

“Not at all. The praise is only sincere.”

They were walking along Luke’s street now, Nina chatting gaily with the stranger while Luke brooded. He stopped in front of his apartment building, waiting for Nina to finish the conversation. After several minutes, Luke lost his patience completely.

“We’re going inside now,” Luke announced brusquely.

Nina looked at Luke as if he were a sulky child.

“I’m afraid this is where we part,” she told the Englishman. He started to tell her what a pleasure it had been to meet her, and that wound up taking as much time as their chat.

“That does it,” Luke said at last, yanking Nina’s hand as he turned to go inside. “I’m in no mood for this.”

“I say, that’s not—” the Englishman began.

“Mind your own business,” snapped Luke.

“Now see here—”

“One more word out of you, and I’ll flatten you,” Luke warned coldly.

Seeing that the Englishman was about to nobly pursue a damsel in distress, Nina tried to reassure him as Luke hauled her past an astonished doorman.

“It’s okay,” she called. “He’s just not used to polite society. He’s quite harmless, really.”

Luke didn’t look at her or speak to her until they were safely inside his apartment.

“Do you know,” he said tiredly, “I haven’t threatened to hit anyone in ... years. You really know how to bring out the worst in me. You did that on purpose, didn’t you?” Anger and amusement were both evident in his expression.

“I just wanted you to see how a gentleman operates.”

“Do you really want me to behave like that, Nina?” Luke asked doubtfully.

“No,” she said after a pause. It was true, she didn’t. Everything about Luke was genuine. And magnetic. He didn’t need polite chatter and schooled manners. He exuded friendly warmth, good humor and, above all, masculine sex appeal. He didn’t need window dressing.

“Then what do you want, Nina?”

“I would just like you to be a little ... easier.”

“I’d like *you* to be a little easier. But I don’t think either of us can be.”

Nina had no answer to that.

After an uncomfortable silence, Luke said, “Look, I’m going to make a pot of coffee, and then we’ll sit comfortably and talk like civilized adults. Can I count on you not to bolt for the door while I’m in the kitchen?”

That made her angry again. “I’m not a coward, Luke.”

His look was appraising as he said, “No, I know you’re not. I’ll only be a minute.”

While he was gone, Nina had a chance to notice her surroundings for the first time. His apartment was located in an old building with vast rooms and big windows overlooking the park. The furniture was all comfortable and solid, made of walnut or mahogany. He had overflowing bookcases everywhere, beautiful Indian handicrafts, and handembroidered pillows—those must have come from his mother. There were many paintings and drawings on the walls, which Nina studied with a well-trained eye. Despite the episode at the exhibition today, his taste in art was rather good if surprisingly traditional.

Nothing technically matched, but everything worked together. It was a welcoming place. As with her own apartment, his preoccupation with music was evident in stereo equipment, guitars and a piano, stacks of music, albums, tapes, and other paraphernalia.

The *coup de grâce*, in Nina’s opinion, was the carpet, thick and soft and springy. She kicked off her

shoes to enjoy its texture beneath her stocking feet.

Luke came back into the room with a well-laden tray which he plunked down on the coffee table. Nina came to sit near him while he poured the coffee.

“How do you take your coffee?” he asked.

“Cream and sugar.”

“And I take mine black,” he said dryly. Their eyes met, and a soft smile of amusement passed between them. Was there anything they did alike?

Nina stirred her coffee and studied Luke from under her lashes. He was calm and relaxed again. Although his temper was quick to flare, it was also quick to subside. And despite his rather frank way of expressing himself, he really was honest and fair; he also genuinely wanted to hear the truth from others, whether or not it was pleasant. Nina admitted to herself that she respected him for that. The question was, could she deal with this human whirlwind on a regular basis?

He had dressed rather nicely for the exhibition today. Now, in the privacy of his apartment, he had flung off the sports jacket, unbuttoned the top of his shirt and kicked off his shoes. He ran his hand through his hair, rumpling the long dark waves. He sat back in his easy chair looking more comfortable, looking a bit wilder, looking like the Luke she was coming to know.

Luke’s eyes met Nina’s again, his expression soft and wistful now. “I haven’t said how beautiful you look today. You always look beautiful. I’m looking forward to seeing you first thing in the morning to find out if you always look this good, or if you’re human like the rest of us.”

Nina shifted nervously. “I’m human, take my word for it.”

“I’d rather find out for myself. I’ll enjoy it more,” he said softly.

Nina’s mouth went dry, and she was at a loss for words. She was smitten with an image of Luke first thing in the morning, warm and relaxed, sleepy and affectionate. It made her ache. She wanted to cross the space between them, slide onto his lap, and let his strong, sheltering arms enfold her. He woke liquid fire in her veins when he touched her. He would be the answer to the hungry nights and restless days that had tormented her since meeting him.

“I can’t sleep with someone I can’t even ... have a civilized conversation with,” she said uncertainly.

“Of course you can,” he said in amusement. “Civilized conversation is for casual acquaintances, Nina. I want honesty from you. And I think I’ve made it clear that I want to be much more than a casual acquaintance.”

His dark eyes burned into her, making her feel vulnerable and self-conscious. She stood up quickly and walked to the window. As she looked out at the fiery November colors on the trees in the park, she heard Luke come up softly behind her. He slid his arms around her waist and nuzzled her hair. Nina felt herself sinking into the luxuriance of his embrace, the hot excitement of his touch, the lushness of his passion.

“You’re pushing me,” she accused shakily.

“I know,” he admitted softly. He turned her to face him. “You’re confused, we’re on my home turf, and I’m pressing my advantage unfairly.” He kissed her, a soft kiss full of restrained passion and veiled promises.

“This isn’t fair,” Nina said weakly when he pressed her head against his shoulder.

“True,” he said ruefully, “but it’s working.” He kissed her hair and rubbed her back with knowing hands. “Listen to me.”

“I’m listening”

“I can handle criticism, fights, and conflict. I’m willing to compromise, and I’m going to try hard to be someone you can get along with. But there’s one thing I can’t handle.” He gripped her shoulders and held her away from him. His eyes had that determined look again.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“I can’t handle your threatening to walk out every time things get rough. I can’t walk away from you, Nina; but if you can’t commit yourself to really trying with me, then please, please, walk away from me now for good. Or else, make a decision to stick with me. It’s driving me crazy. Every time I see you, I wonder if it’s going to be the last time.”

It was true, she realized. She was afraid, so she kept trying to find a way out. It was unfair, considering how honest he’d always been about his attraction to her. And it was cowardly, considering how attracted she was to him.

“It’s just that I find you so provoking,” she said helplessly.

“You find me scary.”

“Maybe.”

“It’s okay. I’m scared, too. We could both get hurt.”

“I’ve been hurt before, Luke. I don’t want to go through something like that again,” Nina said with a tight throat.

“So what’s your solution? To live up on a pedestal where no one can reach you?” he challenged.

“I’m not like that!”

“No, you’re not. That’s why I want you down here on the ground with me. We may never find much in common, but we won’t know until we try. And what does that matter, anyhow? I care about you, I respect you, I have fun when I’m with you, and,” he added, pulling her closer and brushing his lips across hers, “there is this. All in all, I’d say we’ve got a lot to work with.”

Nina closed her eyes and raised her face for another kiss, another sweet moment to soften the truth of his words.

“Look at me, Nina,” he commanded. She did. His eyes were almost hard. “I’m not going to sweep you off your feet so you can claim later that this is all my fault. This is too important to me, Nina. You’re an adult. You have to make your own decisions. You already know what I want.” He kissed her forehead softly and moved away from her.

Nina’s bemused gaze followed him as he gathered up the coffee things and took them back into the kitchen.

She *had* wanted him to make things easy for her, she thought, to free her of accepting the responsibility of her choices in this case. Of course he wouldn’t. She should have known that. He was an honest and

demanding man who would accept no feeble half measures in a relationship.

So what did she want? She knew in her heart that she needed to decide today, before she left the apartment. Their feelings for each other were snowballing too fast for them to keep drifting through occasional dates while she tried to make up her mind.

She was frightened. He made her vulnerable, he kept her off balance, he could hurt her horribly if she let him get closer.

She looked at the door. If she walked out now there would be no more shouting matches, no more fury, no more of this confused fear. And all the possibilities she was beginning to glimpse in herself would be gone, too. She'd regret it forever. She had to know what was waiting for her with him.

Luke came back into the room after a few minutes. She saw his wary expression and realized that, having made his stand, he was worried about the outcome. He'd already said he was scared, too. She was glad she wasn't the only one.

He looked at her.

"Okay," she said simply.

"Okay?" he said warily.

"I mean, okay, I won't talk about not seeing you anymore. I'll try to be more flexible. I'm ... in for the whole ride."

His whole body relaxed, his expression softened, and his eyes gleamed. For the first time she realized just how tense he'd been all day.

"I'm ... glad," he said with a slight catch in his voice. Then he added with teasing smugness, "I knew you'd see it my way."

Nina rolled her eyes. They smiled at each other. They were physically separated by the width of the room, yet emotionally they were the closest they'd ever been. Intimacy and affection flowed between them.

"What now?" Nina asked breathlessly.

His dark eyes traveled over her body with that peculiar combination of tenderness and insolence that was so much a part of his personality. "We could ... celebrate," he suggested softly.

He moved toward her slowly, like a man in a dream. A smoldering fire was growing within those depthless eyes as they met and held Nina's. He came so close to her she could feel his body heat, but still he did not touch her.

"Celebrate?" she whispered, backing away from him. She wasn't sure she was ready for this.

He nodded. A slow, lazy smile spread across his face. "I know an age-old ritual, just perfect for the occasion." He reached out and captured both her hands in his.

"Maybe ... we could just open a bottle of champagne instead," she suggested weakly.

"I hate champagne," he murmured. He pulled her against him suddenly and lightly flicked his tongue across her soft lips. "And what I've got in mind tastes much better."

“Oh, my,” Nina said. She had *meant* to say that she wasn’t ready for this and thought they should stop while they could, but somehow the words wouldn’t come out of her mouth.

She felt his hands on the zipper of her dress, felt him slide it down slowly and pull the wool away from her soft shoulders. She heard a whimper of desire come from her throat as the dress slid down her body and she stood before him in her lacy full slip.

His eyes met hers, and he paused. His passionate expression was clouded by concern. His voice was husky when he spoke. “I don’t want to do anything you’re not ready for yet. We can stop now, if you’re not sure.”

She looked at his strong face, so full of courage and integrity. Everything lived on the surface with him, his passion and his doubt so easy to see. What was there to be afraid of? She wanted to know him as well as she could. This was simply another beginning.

“Do you want me to take you home?” he asked softly.

Full of new confidence and certainty, Nina shook her head.

“Nina...”

“Put your hands on me,” she invited softly. She longed for his touch.

For once he agreed without argument. Luke pulled her against him and his hands slid slowly up the soft material of her slip, over her smooth bottom, up her slender back, around her shoulders, over her breasts, moving down her narrow waist to the full contours of her hips.

“God, you feel good,” he said huskily.

“It’s pure silk.”

“I didn’t mean that.”

His hands moved up to touch the delicate, classical contours of her face in wonder, gently stroking her cheekbones, tracing the full shape of her lips, following the line of her chin and jaw.

Nina was no less curious about him. Her slender hands slowly traced his eyebrows, the strong bones of his face, the firm column of his neck. He tenderly kissed the palm she pressed against his cheek.

Nothing in Nina’s life had prepared her for the depth of her desire for him. With an incoherent cry she threw her arms around his neck, pressing her mouth to his mouth, her body to his body. Their passion turned fierce and hungry. The pent-up frustration of waiting and wanting was unleashed between them now, and they clung to each other savagely, neither asking nor giving gentleness.

Luke’s lips forced Nina’s apart. His mouth was hot, insistent, demanding. Their tongues joined in a wild dance of mating, a delicious prelude of things to come. His hands were everywhere, stroking her hair, touching her face, restlessly moving over her back, pressing her hips closer to his.

Impatiently, Luke peeled off Nina’s slip and stockings. She stood naked before him, surprised at her own boldness. She drew astonishing pleasure from the admiration she saw in his eyes, and the body she had cultivated for her work took on a new and thrilling meaning as a vessel for her lover’s pleasure.

“My God, you’re beautiful,” he murmured in wonder, as his gaze traveled over her full pink-tipped breasts, her flat belly, and the patch of silky dark hair at the exciting V where her firm thighs came

together. “Absolutely beautiful. Nina, Nina ... take my shirt off.”

With frantic, trembling fingers she helped him unbutton his shirt and shrug it off. She buried her face against his chest, intoxicated by his male scent, the smooth hard feel of his shoulders, the strong muscular frame pressing against her.

Arms wrapped around each other, bodies straining together as they hungrily kissed and caressed each other, they sank slowly onto the soft, plush carpet.

They rolled over a few times until they bumped into something and then rolled the other way, never once pausing in the fevered kisses they exchanged.

Finally, flat on her back, dizzy and drugged with passion, Nina pulled her mouth away and sought Luke’s eyes with her own. The passion and the promise in his look started a slow burning fire in the pit of her stomach. She shifted slightly, and as if he knew her body better than she, his hand moved down to massage the ache.

“Better?” he asked.

“No, that just makes it worse.” She sighed.

“Want me to stop?” he teased.

“No,” she said firmly.

He did though, moving his hand up to massage her breasts, shifting himself away from her slightly so he could watch.

Nina sighed deeply and the ache grew as Luke explored the soft, white mounds of her breasts, learning their shape, stroking and squeezing, teasing the nipples into rosy peaks. She watched him watch her body, taking fierce pleasure in his pleasure in her.

He lowered his dark head to taste her firm flesh, wreaking havoc with Nina’s senses. His hot lips scorched her skin. His teasing tongue stroked and enticed a taut nipple before he took it into his mouth. His gentle sucking and nibbling drove Nina wild. She arched her back, moaning uncontrollably. She pressed his head closer, closer as her hands stroked his thick, dark hair, feeling it curl sensuously around her fingers. Her hands moved restlessly, searchingly over his shoulders, exploring the strong, rippling muscles of his back, the flexing biceps of his arms, touching his strong hands as they moved with sureness over her writhing body.

Nina pushed herself away from him a bit and fumbled with his belt buckle. He watched her for a moment, kissing her hair, stroking her back.

Finally he said, “Want help?”

She threw up her hands in exasperation. Luke took off his belt, tossed it across the room, and unfastened his jeans.

“Can you manage the rest?” he asked huskily.

He lay back on his elbows and watched Nina tug off his jeans. Her eyes widened slightly at one point, but she didn’t stop until the task was complete.

He was magnificent, as she had known he would be—long and lean, strong and smoothly muscled.

“No tan line?” she asked pointedly.

“Private beach,” he said, grinning.

“Whose beach?” she asked suspiciously.

“Nina, this isn’t the time to talk about my past.”

With a slow, delicious smile Nina slid up the length of his body, enjoying the luxurious feeling of his strong thighs against her belly, his hard stomach against her breasts.

When they met face-to-face she kissed him with a slow, lingering passion. She could feel the hot evidence of his desire pressing against her thighs as they gazed into each other’s eyes. She moved against him provocatively. Luke caught his breath. His hands moved restlessly on her.

Nina slid down his body again, exploring him as he had explored her, tasting, touching, teasing until, with a stifled groan, he dragged her up, rolled her over, and lay on top of her.

Her playfulness was gone in an instant.

“Please, please, now,” Nina sobbed with passion as he kissed her breasts.

Nina held her breath as Luke slowly, gently joined their bodies, savoring the warm delight, drawing out the first moment of their union.

They rocked together, slowly at first, their bodies moving as one, limbs intertwining, lips and tongues caressing.

Soon a primitive force as old as time swept through Nina, urging her on, and she writhed fiercely against Luke. Nina lost all conscious awareness of herself. She knew only her undeniable urge to mate with this man.

Nina moaned, clinging to Luke as wave after wave of shattering pleasure tore through her. It was incredible. And she knew by the way he clung to her and groaned her name that he felt it, too. There was nothing else like it on earth. This is why we’re here, she thought.

Nina lay quietly in Luke’s arms for some time afterward. He seemed to feel as spent and exhausted as she felt. After what seemed an eternity, Luke shifted slightly, then moved down her body, kissing her neck, her full breasts, the smooth skin of her ribs. He lay with his head on her stomach and held her hands.

“Oh, Nina,” he said with a sigh, “that was incredible.”

She squeezed his hands in response. Nina stared at the ceiling, somewhat stunned. She had previously only made love at night and never anywhere but in bed.

“Do you want a blanket?” she asked softly.

“Are you cold?” he asked lazily.

“No...”

Luke raised his head to look at her questioningly. Her cheeks reddened. Luke moved up to look down into her face. He was amused.

“Do you expect me to believe after that, you shameless woman, that you want sex to be tidy and elegant, too?”

She blushed, but she was able to laugh at herself. “No,” she agreed. “I’ve just never made love on the floor in the middle of the day before. It’s a bit new to me.”

“Are you sorry?” he asked gently.

“No.” It was the truth. Nina stretched luxuriously, enjoying the warmth of being between Luke and the rug, “No,” she said more forcefully and laughed brightly.

* * * *

When Nina left his apartment the next morning, she was limp with exhaustion and glowing with happiness.

Elena had noticed the difference in her the moment she walked in the door. Nina finally felt able to tell her old friend about Luke. Elena’s own love affairs were notorious.

“I’m glad to hear it. You cannot feed your soul on art alone,” Elena said. “So what’s he like, this beautiful rock star?”

“He’s ... he’s ... oh, he’s impossible. He’s incredible. I’m losing my mind. He hates my wardrobe.”

It was not a very helpful description, but it was the best Nina could do.

Luke spent that night at Nina’s, grumbling about the decor of her apartment until she turned his attention to more important things.

On Friday night he came to see her in *Il Turco in Italia* and took her to dinner afterward.

“I couldn’t follow the plot, but you were terrific,” he said, kissing her hand.

As long as he respected her work, she was learning not to mind that he didn’t like opera.

He had given her two dozen white roses.

“Oh, Luke, they’re beautiful.”

“They were hard to find but, like you, they were worth the effort. I *can* be a gentleman.”

“Only sometimes.”

They painted the town that night. In Nina’s mind it was a mistake, since that was when the press first caught on. They were photographed coming out of Rootie’s. Luke got rid of the reporter, but Nina had an uneasy feeling that that wouldn’t be the end of it.

It was on Saturday afternoon, as they were lying companionably together on his couch, that he broke the news to her.

“I’ve been putting off telling you,” he began.

“What?”

“I’m going away for a while.”

“When? Where?”

“Day after tomorrow. Detroit, Chicago, Cincinnati.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“About ten days.”

“Oh.” She laid her head on his shoulder. He kissed her hair. “Well, it’s only ten days,” she said after a while.

“I wish it wasn’t so soon.”

“It’ll be all right.”

“I just don’t want to leave you so soon after we’ve just started—”

“Yes?” she asked archly.

“Getting to know each other better,” he said loftily.

“My, my, aren’t we euphemistic today?” she teased. Luke pinched Nina, which was a thing no man had ever done.

“I’ll be thinking about you,” he said.

“Don’t worry about me, Luke. I’ve got plenty to do while you’re away. It’ll be the first peace and quiet I’ve had since we met.”

“Will you feed my fish while I’m gone?”

“Fish? I figured you for a dog lover.”

“I am, but can you see me walking a dog in Central Park, carrying an umbrella in one and an old newspaper in the other?”

“No, I see your point. Okay, I’ll feed your fish. I’ll leave a light burning in the window. Everything will be fine. Are you always this jumpy before you go away?”

“Not until I met you.”

She kissed him.

“Stop trying to distract me,” he said.

She kissed him again.

“Don’t stop,” he whispered.

Seven

“Have you seen this?” Nina demanded, throwing a pile of magazines and papers on Elena’s piano lid.

“Is the Prince of Wales in communication with extraterrestrials?” Elena read aloud. “Nina, I can’t believe you read such trash.”

“Not that. This!” Nina pointed to a picture of herself and Luke outside Rootie’s. The caption read:

Luke's New Lady Love—How Long Will It Last? “And this! And that!”

One magazine had printed a photo of them together at the awards ceremony where they'd met. This was accompanied by a coy article in which “sources” revealed their unfolding love story. Another magazine simply ran an old photograph of Nina with her vital statistics—including her astrological sign.

“Where did you find these?” asked Elena.

“At the supermarket!” Nina shrieked.

“Does he know yet?”

“I don't know. He's still out of town. I suppose he'll call me today or tomorrow. Ooooh, and then I'll give him a piece of my mind!”

“Nina, be reasonable. How could he—”

“He must have known. This must happen to him all the time. But he didn't tell me because he knew I wouldn't like it. Wait till I get my hands on him!” she raged.

It was one thing to appear in the papers because she had sung well or had sung badly or had refused to sing at all. It was quite another thing to be smeared across the pages of the scandal sheets and gossip rags where half-witted writers with nothing better to do used slick, coy language to speculate about her private life. She was infuriated when she realized that every person who bought milk and eggs this week would see those headlines.

“Nina, did you really say, ‘He makes me happier than any European lover I've ever had’?”

“No!” Nina howled. “I didn't say any of it! That's the point. None of it's true.”

Elena seemed fascinated. “They describe you as a ‘lush Italian beauty.’ Someone should tell them you're American.”

It was too much.

Elena tried to calm and comfort her, but she would have none of it. After thirty minutes of refusing to listen to her friend reasonably, Nina stormed into the street and headed home.

There was a reporter waiting outside her building.

“Miss Gaggarelli,” he called.

“It's Gnagnarelli, you bloody idiot. Nya-nya-*rel*-li. And if you come near me I'll scream for a policeman!”

She went inside. Luke telephoned two hours later.

“Nina? I've just seen the papers. Are you okay?” He sounded worried. As well he might, she fumed.

“Yes, I'm fine. I've barricaded the door. I'm changing my name. I'm dying my hair. I'm dropping out of public life. And I don't ever want to see you again!”

“Nina—”

“You *knew* this would happen, didn't you? But you also knew you'd be safely in Cleveland—”

“Chicago.”

“—*wherever*—when it happened! I went through this kind of foul, tawdry, seedy slime when I divorced a French playboy, and I won’t go through it again!”

“Nina, get a hold of yourself.”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing. I must have been crazy to get involved with you!”

They were both silent. Her head was pounding. Suddenly she wished he were there with her.

“Oh, Luke...” she said miserably.

“I’ll be home in four days,” he promised. “We’ll work it out.”

“I ... okay,” she said feebly.

They talked for another half hour. She was still cradling the phone when he finally hung up.

The next four days were hectic. She had to unplug her phone—the only Nina Gnagnarelli in the book was suddenly getting phone calls from all sorts of people. She made arrangements for an unlisted number.

Someone in Chicago had got hold of Luke’s hotel bill. Three itemized long-distance telephone calls to her apartment confirmed the rumors. Scandal reporters followed her in and out of the opera house—the uncultured slobs couldn’t be bothered to buy tickets though, she noticed. Her picture was taken at odd moments of the day: in the grocery store, hailing a taxi, at the beauty parlor and, of course, going to Luke’s to feed his damned fish.

One young man with a pleasant, naïve face seemed to have taken up permanent residence on her sidewalk.

“Why are you doing this to me?” she pleaded.

“Nothing personal. It’s my job,” he said and took her picture.

Nina smashed his camera.

* * * *

Luke came straight to her apartment when he got back to New York. She threw herself into his arms, needing his strength and comfort.

“Hi,” she said inadequately.

He wrapped his arms tightly around her and held her for a while.

“Will you believe me when I say it will all die down in a few days? They bite something new, they chew on it for a week or two, then they drop it.”

“And I’ll never appear in those papers again?”

“I didn’t say that, Nina. That’s part of my life now, and it affects anyone who’s close to me. I can’t change that.”

“At least you’re honest,” she said unhappily. She moved away from him, running her hands through her

hair.

“I didn’t realize it would bother you this much. Was your divorce that messy?”

“You didn’t know?” He shook his head. “It was a disaster. Our lives were smeared all over the gossip columns. Even our sex life—or rather my lack of one and Philippe’s extravagant one. He was the oversexed French Romeo and I was the frigid workaholic he’d married. It was ... horrible.” She shivered with the memory of it.

Luke took her in his arms again and pillowed her head on his broad chest. “I didn’t realize,” he murmured.

Luke looked as tired as she felt. The strain of the past few days was beginning to tell.

“Look, you’re not singing again till next week,” Luke said. “Why don’t we go away together? Jesse has a country cabin upstate we could use for a few days. If we left tomorrow morning we could be there by lunchtime.”

Nina agreed readily. She had to get away. And it would be good for their relationship. She realized how little time they’d spent alone together.

She also realized how much she had missed him, and the cares of the moment were forgotten as she demonstrated it to him.

* * * *

Jesse had been happy to let them use his cabin for a few days, though he loudly wondered what a fine lady like Nina saw in a country bumpkin like Luke.

They left town early after a slight altercation on her sidewalk.

“If you hit reporters,” Luke explained in exasperation as he drove, “it only encourages them to print more about you.

“He insulted me.”

The drive north was beautiful. Autumn lingered on, and the trees were still glorious with golden leaves. They stopped at a small general store for supplies, then drove straight to the cabin.

“Oh, Luke, this is wonderful,” Nina exclaimed as they pulled into a private, sunlit valley. Jesse’s cabin, simple and sturdy, was nestled in the middle.

They unpacked their groceries in the small kitchen. Nina dusted the furniture and laid out the bed—“That’s the important part,” Luke had said—while he went about turning on the water, the heat, and the electricity.

After lunch they took a long walk hand in hand. The fresh air and tranquility were exactly what Nina had needed. She felt her normal strength of spirit return as contentment flooded her body.

That night Luke courted her on the porch swing like a country schoolboy.

“You’re prettier than a speckled pup,” he said in a heavy Midwestern accent.

“You couldn’t have gotten many girls with lines like that.”

“I’m making up for it now.”

“We could try stargazing,” she teased, firmly removing his hand from her thigh.

“I see all the stars I need to in those twinkling violet eyes,” he said extravagantly.

“That’s awful,” she groaned.

“I do better with a guitar,” he admitted.

“Oh, bring it out now, Luke. Serenade me.”

“You’re crazy. It’s freezing out here.”

“Please,” she pleaded. “You always play to thousands, Luke. Couldn’t you play just for me tonight?”

“Of course,” he whispered, brushing his lips across hers. “But let’s go inside.”

Nina built a blazing fire in the big old fireplace while Luke sang to her.

“Where’d a city girl like you learn to build fires?”

“My dad loves camping,” she explained. “I was too small to chop firewood and too smart to dig the outhouse, so I made the fires.”

Luke sang her some of his own songs, some of his favorite songs by other people, and some folk songs that she told him she liked. With some effort they discovered songs they both knew and could sing together. The pleasure they found in that forged a new bond between them.

“You sing like an angel,” he said, stroking her hair. “You make me feel inadequate.”

“Not inadequate, I hope,” she said suggestively. Her hand found its way inside his shirt.

His eyes glittered. “Want to fool around?”

“Now that’s a good line,” Nina said, as Luke drew her closer.

* * * *

Nina woke up before Luke the next morning. She showered and washed her hair while he slept.

Wrapped in a towel, she kissed him awake. Luke was interested in pursuing the matter, but Nina resisted.

“Go make breakfast,” she ordered. “I’m starving. Must be all this fresh air.”

“Or all the exercise we got last night,” he added wickedly.

She was fully dressed and blow-drying her hair when he came into the room with her orange juice. She was taming the damp curly mass when he took the blow dryer away from her and rumbled her hair.

“Hey!”

“Can’t you just leave it? There’s no one here to see you but me, and I already know you’re not perfect.”

“But I like it to be smooth.”

He ran both hands through her hair and jumped on top of her as she fell back onto the bed. Soon they were rolling around, tickling and undressing each other, breakfast forgotten for the moment.

Nina's hair was wild and curly for the rest of the weekend.

That night when Nina asked for dinner, Luke told her it was her turn to cook. He'd cooked all of their other meals.

"But I can't cook."

"You can't cook?" he asked incredulously.

"Honestly; Luke. My mom cooked when I lived at home, and Philippe had a French chef in the house. When would I have learned to cook?"

"But you live alone now. What do you eat?"

"Salads, mostly. Or carry-outs. And, of course," she added hopefully, "gentlemen take me out."

"We're not going out for dinner."

"Oh, come on, Luke. It will be fun. I'll buy," she added.

"Nina, trust me. It's not a good idea in a small town like this."

"Don't be so melodramatic. There must be one decent place to eat in this whole town."

"That's not what I meant. The problem—"

"Get your car keys," she insisted, putting on her jacket.

"You'll be sorry," he warned.

They chose a small, quiet restaurant with home cooking, linen tablecloths, and romantic candlelight. Jazz music played softly in the background.

"This is just like an old movie," Nina said cheerfully. "Stop looking so glum, Luke. What are you worried about?"

It didn't take long for her to find out.

Nina and Luke were sitting with their heads close together, holding hands and talking softly like lovers. This time was special, private, their vacation from the pressure of their real lives. Tonight they were just another couple enjoying a romantic dinner together.

"Aren't you Luke Swain?"

Luke looked up. A young couple who had been eating at the next table stopped by Luke's table on their way out. Luke looked at Nina, who looked back at him. She was vaguely annoyed to have their intimacy disrupted like this, but sometimes it was inevitable. She smiled reassuringly at him.

"Yes, I am," Luke admitted.

"I knew it!" said the young woman excitedly. "Oh, please, Luke, could we have your autograph?" She dug through her purse for a pen and a piece of paper.

"Sure," Luke said politely.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt your dinner, but this is just such a thrill for us! I have every one of your albums.

I think *A Wilder Name* is the best album of the decade!”

“Thank you,” Luke answered with a smile. He handed the autographed slip of paper back to her. She pressed it against her chest and continued to stare raptly at him.

“Well, thanks a lot, Luke. This has been just great!” said the young man, at last. He and the woman said goodbye and left.

Luke looked apprehensively at Nina.

“It’s okay,” she said, slightly amused at his attitude. Was she really such an ogre around him? “Really. So you were recognized. So what? It’s bound to happen. They were perfectly polite. Anyhow, I got recognized on the street that day we were walking back to your apartment, so I can hardly complain, can I?”

“You may find this a little different,” Luke warned.

“Are we going to be ripped to shreds like we were the night of that concert?” Nina couldn’t believe that, not in this discreet restaurant.

“No ... But I get a lot of exposure. I get recognized a lot. And ... these aren’t opera fans.”

“Well, that’s not—”

“Luke Swain? Luke Swain! Tell me, tell me, really, really, you’re *Luke Swain*?”

“Yes,” Luke said glumly to a pretty girl who had been working at the bar only a few moments ago.

“Luke Swain! I knew it!” said their waiter, coming back to their table.

By now they had attracted the attention of virtually everyone in the restaurant. Soon everyone was finding a reason to walk by their table while they tried in vain to enjoy their meal and each other’s company. The bolder ones asked for autographs or tried to draw Luke into conversation. Others just stared avidly. Nina’s appetite was spoiled, a rare event in itself.

More and more people started piling through the door. Their quiet, romantic little restaurant began to seem like a football stadium as the noise level rose. Evidently the whole town had been informed that Luke Swain was dining there.

Men and women of all ages crowded into the restaurant to wait for a table.

Nina finally gave up the effort and pushed her plate away from her. She looked at Luke, who didn’t appear to have taken a single bite of his dinner. The evening had gone haywire in a matter of twenty minutes, and all because she was with a rock idol.

The proprietor came over to their table to apologize for all the commotion. “But then, I guess you’re used to it,” he added.

“Yes, I am,” said Luke resignedly.

“The meal’s on the house, I insist.”

“Really, that’s not necessary,” said Luke.

“Please, it’s my pleasure. After all, it’s not often we get a celebrity like you here. And who’s the lady?”

Nina sought Luke's eyes, willing him to understand her silent message. She most definitely did not want her name associated with all of this tonight.

"The lady," said Luke slowly, "is a foreign diplomat who wanted ... to see some of our beautiful American countryside. I'm sure you appreciate the need for discretion."

"Oh, sure. Absolutely. My lips are sealed."

The proprietor left their table. Though they were the subject of avid stares and much whispering, no one else approached them for a few moments.

"Alone at last," Luke said faintly.

"Just don't say, 'I told you so.'"

"I thought you were hungry," he chided, looking at her full plate.

"It's hard to eat like this. How do zoo animals stand it? Or rock stars, for that matter?"

"Hey! It's Luke Swain! Come on!" someone outside shouted.

Nina groaned. Luke threw some money on the table for a tip. "Let's get out of here." He grabbed Nina's hand, dashed out to his car and drove away so fast no one had time to follow.

"Satisfied?" he growled at Nina.

"How was I to know?"

"How indeed?" He sighed. "Come here." She moved closer and he put his arm around her.

"I'm still hungry," she said after a few minutes of peaceful silence.

"I might have known. We'll get a take-out pizza. *You* go inside for it."

"Okay," she agreed, nuzzling his neck.

"Stop that. Do you want to cause an accident?"

She ran her hand teasingly up his thigh. The car screeched to a halt. Luke kissed Nina thoroughly and then pushed her to the far side of the car.

"Stay there, where I can keep an eye on you."

The days passed too swiftly for Nina. The valley became a small paradise, a latter-day Eden. Every afternoon she and Luke would go to separate rooms for a while. He would work on his guitar or scribble lyrics while she vocalized and sang using a small electric keyboard for guidance. Staying on top of a highly competitive profession meant there were some things neither of them could take a vacation from. Luke didn't seem to mind any more than she did. It meant a lot to Nina that he loved what he did and enjoyed the harmonious moments in the little cabin as much as she did.

Nina was happy that they spent all of the rest of their time together, walking, talking, eating, sleeping, making love. They made love in the big four-poster bed, on the bearskin rug before the fireplace, in the bathtub, and once, giggling like children, on the porch swing. She learned to be completely comfortable and at ease with Luke and discovered, much to her surprise, that they actually could live in peace together, that whole days could pass by without fights or arguments, with nothing to mar their rich

enjoyment of each other.

Without the daily conflict of their diverse lifestyles, Nina was getting to know the essence of the man: the warm strength that grew out of his belief that life was basically rewarding and worthwhile; his passionate commitment to justice in the largest and smallest issues of life; the humor that let him laugh at himself; the pain and anger he felt over cruelty and neglect; his unconditional commitment to loved ones; the loneliness which had found an outlet only in his music.

Nina lay back on the hammock strung between two old trees behind the cabin and gazed up at the crisp blue sky. Luke was still playing his guitar inside. The wind stirred the trees overhead, and a few leaves fluttered down to fall on Nina. Nights were cold now, but the sun was still burning bright enough to warm the days. She took off her jacket and lay in Luke's thick flannel shirt, eyes closed, feeling the sun beating down on her.

The hammock rocked a bit, and a smile curved Nina's lips. They had made love in the hammock the day before, a perilous adventure that had resulted in lumps, bumps, bruises, and Luke's howling that he needed to be hospitalized. She had entirely disproved that claim, however...

"Daydreaming?"

Her eyes flew open. He was smiling down at her. The warmth in his eyes melted her. Had she once thought to walk away from this man without a backward glance?

She reached out to him. "Join me," she invited.

"Oh, no."

"We'll just lie here," she promised.

"That's what you said yesterday."

"As I recall, I was not solely responsible for what happened yesterday."

They grinned at each other, remembering. He hauled her out of the hammock.

"All the same, I'm never going near that thing again."

Nina slipped her hand into his and they walked through the woods for a time in companionable silence.

"Did you know when you started your career that your life would be like this?" Nina asked after a while.

"Like what?"

"Mobbed by fans, hounded by photographers, pursued by groupies."

"Well, I knew that that's what happened to the most successful people. I didn't know I would become one of them, but I intended to try."

"But how can you stand it?"

"Because of the rewards. Do you have any idea how gratifying it is to write and record an album and then sell a million copies of it? To know that a million strangers like your songs well enough to play them at home? Or to sing something you've written in front of thousands of people and to hear them singing with you, to know that it has meaning for them, too? That's success. That's affirmation of doing something worthwhile.

“Something like that must have happened to you, Nina. When people walk up to you on the street to tell you how much they enjoy your work, how you’ve moved or inspired them, it must make a difference.”

“Of course it does,” she admitted. “But until I met you, no one attacked me in public, interrupted my meals, or followed me to the grocery store with a camera. To appreciate a performer is one thing; to totally disrupt his personal life—and that of his close friends—is something else.”

“I agree. But I knew it would be like this. It’s part of my job, it goes with the territory. And fighting it would only make me more noticeable. It seems the people who attract the most attention are those who are rude to their fans and uncooperative with the media.”

“You might attract less attention if you weren’t so vocal about your opinions,” Nina pointed out.

“Not significantly less attention. And I wouldn’t be myself if I did that, either. Besides, we’ve already established that *I’m* not the one who minds attracting attention.”

Nina glumly kicked a pine cone out of her path. “I find all this very difficult,” she said with a sigh.

“Yet you chose a career onstage and in the public eye.”

“I chose to *sing*,” she corrected. “And except for my divorce, there’s never been anything I couldn’t handle. Interviewers ask me about my work, my training, and my plans. If there are any personal questions, they’re limited and inoffensive. It’s a different world from pop music, Luke. We’re not as popular or as famous, and hardly anyone cares about our personal lives as long as we do our jobs well.”

“Why was there so much interest in your divorce?” he asked curiously.

“Because, in his own way, Philippe was a pop star by virtue of being blue-blooded and rich. He was well known in Paris, Monte Carlo, Milan, Beverly Hills, and San Francisco. He was the essence of glamour and notoriety in certain circles. And our divorce was sordid enough to make good copy,” she added distastefully:

They stopped in a grassy clearing, and Luke pulled her down to sit in a patch of sun. Nina brooded for a while, and Luke realized she was unhappy about the latest turn of events, knowing there would be more to come.

“Does all this mean,” she asked at last, “that we can’t even go out in public like a normal couple?”

“No, it doesn’t,” Luke said firmly. “But in small towns and even small cities that don’t see many celebrities, we’re always likely to have experiences like we had in this town. Honestly, that’s why I love New York so much. Except for the usual photographers and fanatics, people hardly ever bother me there. New Yorkers have seen it all. Famous faces are no big deal to them. I can walk on the street, eat in public, go shopping—it’s great!”

“It must be a cherished freedom,” Nina said pensively as she lay back in the grass and looked at the sky.

Luke searched for the right words to reassure her.

“There are other things I cherish, too, Nina. My friends, my family, my work, and, now, you. I want to be with you. There are some things I can change, but there are others I have no control over.”

Their eyes met, and there was a reluctance in hers that disturbed him. Nina had built her own life and her own career, and she didn’t think she could adjust to the hazards of his, particularly not when she found them so distasteful. But something stronger than their differences, stronger than her doubts, was pulling

her into those depthless brown eyes.

Then his eyes trailed over her body, stretched out in the grass. Her skin grew warm and she could feel desire flowing through her gently, subtly gathering force, sweetening with anticipation.

“There’s probably more I should know about your lifestyle, isn’t there?” The breathless sound of her voice gave her away. She saw his eyes darken and his left brow droop lazily.

“There’s more I should know about yours, too,” he said softly. “I want to know everything about you.” His hand brushed her hair away from her face and lightly traced her cheek, her chin, and the smooth column of her throat.

Nina gently took Luke’s hand and drew it up under the loose flannel shirt until it rested on her full, soft breast. It was an exquisitely tender moment between them. They both were still, caressing each other with only their eyes.

Finally Luke began unbuttoning Nina’s shirt.

“I’ve never made love in the grass,” she murmured, watching him from beneath her lashes.

“There’s a first time for everything,” Luke answered huskily, bending to kiss her soft lips.

Eight

“Thanksgiving is on Thursday,” Luke said.

Nina was washing dishes in her apartment. They had returned to the city from Jesse’s cabin that night, and since she couldn’t cook, Luke made her do the dirty work. He dried the dishes and put them away. He still didn’t know where most of them went, and she had to keep pointing to various cabinets with her bright pink gloves while she worked.

“Yes, I know,” she answered uneasily. There was already a challenge in his voice and he had only just introduced the subject. She had a feeling she knew what he wanted, and she didn’t think she was ready for it yet.

“What are you going to do, Nina?”

“When I’m in New York I always go to my Mom’s house. Are you going to fly out to Kansas?”

“No. You know I’m appearing on live TV Friday.”

“Oh, I’d forgotten. That goes over the fridge, Luke”

Nina washed dishes in silence, aware of Luke waiting for the obvious suggestion.

“Well?” he said at last.

“Well, what?” she said uncomfortably.

“Nina, is the thought of introducing me to your family so awful? You’re going to have to do it sooner or later.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why?”

“Well, you’re ... we’re ... I mean...”

Luke’s eyes narrowed. A dangerous tension entered the room. “What? Are you afraid they won’t like me?”

“No.”

“Are you afraid I won’t like them?”

“No...”

“Then what, Nina?”

She shifted nervously, unable to voice an answer.

“Were you planning to keep me locked in the bedroom for your private use, Nina?” Her eyes flashed up to meet his angry scowl. He spoke loudly over her incoherent denial. “Are you planning to have your fill of me and then dump me when you get bored? Am I just a fling you don’t want anybody to know about?”

“No! Stop it!”

He grabbed her roughly by the shoulders. Her gloved hands balled into fists and she pushed against his chest. They glared at each other in angry silence for a moment.

“Look, I’ll have Thanksgiving with you at your—” she began.

“I don’t give a damn where you eat your turkey on Thursday!” he snapped.

“Why are you doing this?”

He let go of her and moved away, running a hand through his hair. He noticed her glance at the door.

“You can’t go home, Nina, you *are* home. That’s why I wanted to talk here—so you couldn’t walk out.”

“What does it matter if you meet my family?” she pleaded.

“It’s not a question of meeting your family.” He sighed deeply and tried to explain. “Sooner or later you’ve got to jump in with both feet, Nina. This isn’t just a casual affair or a crazy fling, and I won’t go along with pretending it is. We may come from different worlds in every respect, this may be entirely unexpected and unlooked for, but there’s something special between us. It may blow up in our faces but I’m not going to let it fall apart because we just didn’t try “

“Are you giving me an ultimatum?”

“Yes. I don’t mean I have to meet your family Thursday. I mean you have to acknowledge that I’m part of your life and that you’re part of mine now. I love being in bed with you, Nina, but we’ve each got a whole life outside of the bedroom, a life of friends, family, work, principles. And if you try to play it safe and shut me out of the rest of your life and stay out of mine, what might have been something incredible will wind up being just a casual affair, after all. And I’m not sticking around for that, Nina. That’s not what I want with you.”

Nina sank into a chair, staring at the floor. She didn't want a casual fling, either, but she wasn't ready to jump in with both feet yet. They had made their own little world in Jesse's cabin; but neither of them could stay in that paradise for long. They both needed their work too much, loved their careers too much. But their lifestyles, their friends, their habits were so diverse, how long would they last in the real world? Would she be left picking up the pieces alone in a few months' time?

"I..." She noticed the incongruity of the soapy pink rubber gloves on her hands. She studied them as if she'd never seen them before. Luke came over to where she sat. He crouched before her and gently pulled them off as he spoke.

"All right. You're confused. You need time to think. Maybe we both need a quiet night. I'm going home now. Think about what I've said, Nina. You know where to find me if you want to talk." He kissed her forehead lightly. She was still sitting in the same position when he left.

After a few minutes, Nina leaned back in her chair and sighed heavily. She had the ball now—what was she going to do with it?

She had known from the minute she first stepped into his arms she would come to this, but she had avoided thinking about it. He hadn't made it easy for her at the beginning, and he wouldn't make it easy for her now. If she wanted him she'd have to leave the shallows and swim in deep water.

He had said it could blow up in their faces. Could she bear the pain of opening her life to him and then losing him? For the first time she was beginning to understand the real reason she had emerged from a broken marriage with her pride ravaged but her heart intact—her heart had never really been at risk with Philippe. Had she instinctively sought a man who wouldn't challenge the protective barriers of emotional self-sufficiency she lived behind? A man who was quite content to wallow in the shallows for the duration of their marriage?

Looking back over the years, Nina could see the pattern forming. She loved her family, loved them openly and generously. But she had always held a large part of herself in reserve from them. Since she was the different child, the "artistic" one, they had always accepted that. Her relationships with men after Philippe might have been interesting or amusing, but they were essentially undemanding. Good friends had invited her to share herself, but she had always held back. She had always been offered love, friendship, and companionship, and yet she had been lonely her whole life.

She had thrown the fiery, passionate, needy core of herself into her singing and had nurtured her spirit there. Perhaps that had never really been enough, because now this long-haired, dungaree-wearing rock star was giving her a tantalizing glimpse of what was waiting for her if she dared risk reaching for it.

The first time they made love she had experienced not just a fusion of body and spirit, but a fusion with another human being more powerful, more consuming than she had dreamed possible. The most amazing part was that it kept getting better, growing stronger every time he touched her.

He angered her, frustrated her, amused her; he made her incoherent with rage, limp with contentment, giddy with joy, wild with passion, tearful with confusion. But she was always alive with him. She was never bored. She could never drift away as she chatted with him, thinking about other things while she made appropriate responses. Something about him inspired her complete participation, whether they made love, fought, talked, watched the sunset, or washed the dishes. Something about him made every moment vivid and important and full.

She knew what he wanted: commitment. In terms of a relationship, what he was asking for was totally outside of her experience. The fear welled up in her that it might be totally beyond her capabilities.

Nina stood on the brink. Was she ready to try? Maybe not, but she *had* to. It was worth it. *He* was worth it. She didn't know if she'd succeed, but the alternative—walking away from him—was now unthinkable. There was too much promise burning in his eyes.

Having reached her decision, Nina took a long hot bath and then called her parents.

“Mom? Can I bring a guest for Thanksgiving dinner?”

“Oh, Nina, are you bringing *him*?”

“Yes, Mom.”

Nina's father got on the phone.

“Well, it's about time,” he said. “Everyone who buys milk and eggs can see in bold headlines who my daughter's boyfriend is, and I haven't even met the man yet.”

Nina grimaced at the word “boyfriend.” On the other hand, she could hardly introduce Luke to her parents as her “lover.” Her mother wrestled the phone back from her father.

“I'll try to keep Pop from telling everyone in the neighborhood that your young man will be here for dinner, dear.”

“Young man?” Nina repeated. The euphemisms would be overflowing by Thursday.

“Your father, in his subtle fashion, has asked me to assure you that he won't say anything to embarrass the boy.”

“Yes, well, the boy can look after himself. In fact, Pop may meet his match. See you Thursday, Mom.”

“Goodbye, dear.”

Nina went to bed without calling Luke. She didn't think she could face that yet. She still felt raw from their confrontation. Although she had decided she wanted what he did, she wasn't sure how to express it to him. She lay in bed tossing and turning for hours. Finally she decided to call him. Perhaps doing it now was better than lying awake all night worrying about it.

He answered on the fourth ring; there was a phone next to his bed. His initial comments into the receiver were fairly unintelligible and highly profane.

“It's me,” Nina said.

“Me who?” he snarled.

“Nina. Who else calls you in the middle of the night?”

“Don't start with me,” he warned. “What the hell time is it?”

She glanced at her clock. Three o'clock in the morning. Serves him right, she thought. She had been lying awake half the night worrying about their relationship while he was sleeping the sleep of the just. She felt excessively annoyed with him.

“It's three o'clock in the morning. I see you had no trouble falling asleep.”

“I did. I took some godawful homeopathic sleeping remedy Kate gave me on the last tour. I'm kind of

groggy.”

“Oh.”

“What do you want?” he asked ungraciously.

“Luke...” What on earth was she supposed to say? Just this once couldn’t he make something easy for her? There was a long pause. Then he said what she needed to hear.

“Nina ... honey,” he had never called her that before. “Are you okay? Do you want me to come over?”

She smiled warmly and held the receiver with both hands. Suddenly he was the Luke she knew and could talk to. She could picture him clearly, naked beneath the quilt on his big bed, hair tousled, left brow drooping slightly, eyes drowsy. She wanted to hug him.

“Luke, what are you doing for dinner Thursday?”

* * * *

Nina managed to arrange to spend some time with Luke that busy week, including a lunch date during which she discovered to her horror that Luke didn’t like football.

“You don’t like football?” Nina asked incredulously. “You’ve never said so before.”

“You’ve never asked me.”

“How could you not like football? What sort of a person are you?”

“I like basketball,” he said in a conciliatory tone.

“That’s not good enough.”

They were having lunch at a little Italian place Nina knew. Their return to New York had brought with it the pressures of their careers. Luke had begun work on the video of *A Wilder Name* and was trying to organize a recording of *Once Bit Is Twice Shy*; Nina was performing, beginning preliminary work on a new role, discussing a possible recording contract, and beginning initial discussions about roles for the following year.

Nina and Luke both looked healthy and well-rested. Her time alone with Luke had strengthened their tenuous emotional bonds; what had begun with fascination and passion was now developing into a rich and full exploration of each other. And Nina had found respect, enjoyment, admiration, friendship, and companionship. She only hoped Luke’s feelings mirrored hers. For the first time in her life, she had found something in another person that was as absorbing as her music. For the first time, something was feeding the spiritual hunger that she had sought to assuage with art. Her delight in Luke was endless.

Usually.

At the moment Nina was looking at Luke like a suspect piece of meat.

“I’m not sure I can continue sharing my breakfast cereal with someone who doesn’t like football,” she said.

“You *don’t* share your breakfast cereal with me. There was nothing left to eat when I got up this morning.”

“Never mind that, I’m feeding you now, aren’t I? But what am I supposed to do with these tickets?”

As a token of her esteem she had, at great cost and personal effort, acquired two tickets to Saturday's game and proudly presented them to Luke over lunch.

"Sell them."

"You're crazy! Do you have any idea what I went through to get these tickets? I'd rather sell my virtue."

"It's a bit late for that," he teased.

"Well, you can sit home with the TV on Saturday for all I care. I'll take Matthew."

"Who's Matthew?"

"Brother number three, in between Mark and Joe. He's my favorite brother. He played piano for me when I sang as a girl. He taught me to play football and fight dirty with the neighborhood boys. When I got older he lied about my age to get me work singing in bars and clubs and made it clear that anyone who bothered me would have to deal with him. He's the quiet one, which isn't really saying much in my family. It just means he shouts less than the others."

"He'll be at your house for Thanksgiving?"

"Yes. He's coming down from Vermont where he and his girlfriend live the good life. He builds log cabins. She makes cheese. And he'll check you over pretty thoroughly to make sure you're worthy of his little sister."

"Worthy of you? If he only knew the things I've had to put up with in the short time I've known you."

"Now, now, a gentleman never tells."

"As you've pointed out on more than one occasion, I'm no gentleman."

* * * *

It occurred to Nina that it was only about six weeks since they had first met. The time they had actually spent together probably amounted to about two weeks. She needed at least twice that long to learn a role, to get to know an operatic character. He might have denied any intention of sweeping her off her feet, but that's exactly what he seemed to be doing, she thought wryly. Still, he was impetuous by nature; perhaps he always moved this fast. That thought made her suddenly uncomfortable and she pushed it forcibly out of her mind.

They were late arriving at her parents' house. Nina had wanted to go by subway since it was the route she knew. Luke thought going by car would be faster, easier, and cleaner. However, Luke didn't know Brooklyn, and Nina, never having driven there, was fairly useless as a navigator. They wound up getting horribly lost for over an hour.

"I'm sorry we're late," Luke apologized charmingly to Nina's mother, Julia. "Nina insisted on taking me on a tour of the borough."

"She's a great singer, but she has no sense of direction," agreed Julia.

"You look great, Mom. What's the occasion?" Nina teased. She hadn't seen her mother so dressed up since her first opening night in New York.

Maria and Angela came running out into the hall, squealing enthusiastically. They grabbed Luke's hands and dragged him into the sitting room to introduce their friend to the rest of the Gnagnarellis. Nina trailed

along, enjoying the spectacle of Luke kissing wet babies, returning her father's bone-crushing handshake without batting an eyelash, flirting with the goggle-eyed wives and girlfriends of her brothers, and trying to keep track of the names of those four male siblings. Even the dog got into the act, following him adoringly around the room.

Her family was loud but well-behaved before dinner, keeping conversation light. When Nina's mother came into the room to ask Michael's wife for help in the kitchen, Luke astonished them all—except Nina—by insisting on being the one to help Julia.

Over dinner it was clear that Luke and Julia had struck up a quick and easy friendship while making gravy and cooking sweet potatoes.

"Luke says you told him I never taught you to cook, Nina," Julia scolded, as Stefano carved the turkey. "The truth, Luke, is that when I tried to teach her she refused. She said she'd be a famous star and marry a rich man who could take her out every night, so why bother learning to cook?"

"Mom!"

Luke laughed. He could see by Nina's appalled face that she had indeed said that as a girl. "It sounds just like her. And what's the result? All she can make is reservations."

"All of our boys learned, but Nina can be very stubborn."

"I know," Luke agreed dryly. "But she'll have to learn now. I'm not rich enough to take her out every night to the kind of restaurants she likes."

Angela cut in swiftly, "Are you going to marry—"

"That's enough, Angela," said Stefano. "All right, who wants light meat, who wants dark?"

Nina's cheeks were red. She didn't risk a glance at Luke. She had dreaded someone asking probing questions. He was the first man she had brought home since Philippe, years ago. She knew this was open to misinterpretation. She was relieved that no one had assumed he was "the new fiancé." Marriage? They couldn't even agree on which radio station to listen to.

"I'll go get the muffins," said Nina's mother, getting up.

"Julia, dear," chided Stefano. "The kitchen is the other way."

"I just—"

"We agreed we'd all wait and watch it together, dear."

"Yeah, Mom, no fair," agreed Mark.

Julia shuffled into the kitchen grumbling.

"What's that all about?" asked Luke

"Football," answered Nina.

"We're recording the game right now on that machine Nina bought us," explained Stefano.

"And the TV set Michael bought them," added Nina.

“We agreed we’d all eat at the table like civilized people this year and watch the game tonight without peeking at the results. So it’ll be just like watching it live.”

“Luke doesn’t like football,” said Nina mischievously. That sorely affected his popularity with the Gnagnarellis, and it took him at least ten minutes to regain his halo.

It was about halfway through the meal that Nina’s family forgot their resolution to be polite hosts and the conversation began in earnest. It started with Joe and Stefano arguing over something that had happened in Washington that week. Everyone had an opinion, of course, and soon the usual full-scale vocal war was going on over the dinner table.

“But everyone knows politicians are mean,” insisted Angela.

“That’s a very cynical view for a girl your age to take. I can see you’ve been talking to Joseph,” said Stefano.

“Mark! You can’t possibly mean that!” Michael was shouting.

“Grandma! Grandpa gave me the neck! I can’t eat this! Look at it!” The dog took an unattractive piece of turkey from one of Nina’s nephews as he waved it around.

“Of course, I mean it!” shouted Mark. “If you’d read something besides your medical journals you’d know—”

“And *another* thing—”

“But I *never* said—”

“How can you *possibly* agree—”

Luke watched in astonishment. Nina grinned at him wickedly from across the table. He was in her usual chair, caught between Joe and her father.

“Luke, will you tell this opinionated young—”

“Luke, you’re supposed to be committed to—”

Drawn into the conversation by force, Luke was soon absorbed in an hour of loud political, moral, and social debate, shouting along with all the Gnagnarellis. Nina sighed and concentrated on her food. She had known it would only be a matter of time—this was his cup of tea.

Her “young man” was an unparalleled success. Her family didn’t all agree with his opinions, but they respected anyone who could so surely and loudly state them. Her father thought he showed good sense, even if he was a long-haired person who played loud music and screamed about sex for a living. Joe thought Luke sat on the fence too much, but then Joe was opinionated enough to drive a saint to drink. Nina’s mother thought he was a lovely and warmhearted boy who obviously adored Nina.

“You’re not at all like that article I read at the grocery store said you would be,” Julia said over coffee.

“What did it say I was like?”

“That you were arrogant—”

“He’s that all right,” said Nina.

“Hot-tempered—”

“Check,” said Nina.

“Unpredictable—”

“Ditto,” said Nina.

“Impetuous—”

“Did a personal friend write this article?” Nina asked Luke.

“And a ladies’ man. Dozens of girlfriends. Irresistible to women,” Julia finished with a sly look at Nina.

“Are you sure they meant Luke?” Nina asked.

“Yes. And it listed the women, too. You were at the end of the list, Nina. The others—”

“Mom, don’t tell me you read that tripe?” said Michael. “It should be banned.”

“Banned? Did you say banned?” exclaimed Mark. “Michael, don’t you know—”

The shouting was still going on an hour later when Nina was reluctantly scrubbing pans in her mother’s kitchen while Matthew dried them. They were alone, enjoying the relative peace and quiet. Matthew wasn’t saying much, but then that was like him. He had been friendly to Luke all through dinner, but Nina had known by the look in his eyes that he was studying Luke carefully. She didn’t ask what he thought. When he knew he would tell her.

“I’ve got two tickets to Saturday’s game. Want to go?” she asked.

Matthew lived in Vermont, so it was a long trip for him to come back down to New York in two days time.

“You’re kidding! Little sister, I’ll take you to eat afterward any place you want.”

She smiled a private smile, remembering when Luke had made a similar offer.

When they were done with the dishes Matthew spoke to his girlfriend. She agreed they would simply stay with Nina’s parents until Saturday and drive home Saturday night.

Luke cornered Nina as the family was settling down to watch the football game.

“Can we go now?”

“But I want to watch the game.”

“Please, Nina. You can borrow the cassette from them next week. I don’t want to sit through three hours of football. Anyhow, I have an incredible headache.”

“I can believe that,” she said, giggling. “Okay. Let’s say goodbye.”

Maria and Angela protested as loudly as if Luke were going off to Siberia. Nina’s mother looked as young as Nina when Luke kissed her on the cheek.

“Hope we’ll see you again, son,” said Nina’s father, giving Luke a friendly slap on the back.

Nina sat close to Luke with her head on his shoulder as they drove back to Manhattan.

“Are they always so ... like that?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“I can see what motivated you to bury yourself in your music.”

“Didn’t you like them?”

“Oh, I liked them a lot. They’re just a little bit exhausting.”

“So are you,” she pointed out evilly. “You fit in like you were born among them.”

“But there’s only one of me,” he said easily. “And you know how to shut me up, don’t you?” There was a naughty silence. “Stop that or I’ll drive into a telephone pole.” Nina obeyed.

“What’s your family like?” she asked curiously.

“Quieter than yours.”

“Most people’s are. What else?”

“Similar to yours in some ways. They work hard, they hold strong opinions, they like to argue. They’re very wrapped up in farming and local country life. My mom is very open and friendly. My dad is hard to get to know, but he’s a warm man. My sister is funny and strong and beautiful. She works as a midwife.”

“What was it like growing up for you?”

He thought about that for a while before answering.

“My folks were great about letting me go my own way. Of course, if I got into trouble, I had to get myself out. It taught me early to be independent. I had a pretty normal boyhood, I guess. It was as a teenager that I started to feel closed in and claustrophobic. I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life in one place doing the same old thing. I was dying to know what was beyond the wheat fields, how other people lived, what they thought. And then there was my guitar. Believe it or not, I was shy in those days, and writing songs was the only way I could express anything. Playing in the band was the only time I really felt a part of it all.”

“And now?”

“Now, as you have often pointed out, I have no trouble expressing myself. And feeling like a part of things depends largely on your attitude to life. And the music, the music is how I give out and give back what life gives me, good and bad.”

“But why rock music?”

“Because despite what you and your fellow artistes may think, rock music is one of the great twentieth-century art forms. It has the ability to transcend the artificial barriers of language and nationality and speak instinctively to the whole world in a way that other kinds of music have never quite done. It communicates on a much more basic and fundamental level than any culture’s classical music. It’s aggressive. It’s sexy. It beats on some primal pulse. Its rhythm evokes an intuitive and emotional response. And,” he added grinning, “on a less pompous note, I like it.”

“I ... I’ll try it, Luke.”

They rode for a while in companionable silence. Since her decision to jump in with both feet, as Luke had put it, he had been—for him—undemanding and easygoing with her. He must realize how difficult this was going to be for her. And for him? He always went ahead with such confidence and sureness she tended to forget that he was a human being like her with fears, hurts, and vulnerabilities. Presumably the long hard years of his early career had taught him to have confidence in his strength and personal worth. She wondered what he had been like in the early years, young, poor, unknown, and unrecognized. Had he always possessed this strong magnetism? Had he been so sure of his needs and wants even then?

She snuggled closer to him.

“Cold?” he asked.

“No,” she said huskily.

Luke drove dangerously fast the rest of the way home.

* * * *

The football game was fantastic. Matthew cheered loud enough for both of them, since Nina wasn’t supposed to scream. But she ate and drank and jumped up and down to her heart’s content. How could she have given up football during her marriage? She must have been crazy. Luke might argue about whether or not football was exciting, but he would never try to insist she not go to a game just because he didn’t want to go.

“What do you want to eat?” Matthew asked later as they were leaving.

“Pizza, pizza, pizza!” she cried, jumping up and down like their nieces.

“You’re very happy lately,” Matthew remarked later over a pizza piled high with every ingredient on the menu. “Is it because of Luke?”

“I guess so, Matt. Everything’s been going well this year, but he’s the only thing that’s different.”

“Him and *Rigoletto*.”

“Yes, and *Rigoletto*.” Nina’s triumphant appearance as Gilda was sparking a lot of interest in her career. She was beginning to hear of some exciting possibilities for the future. “I’m trying to keep a clear head. It’s times like this that I almost miss Philippe. He had good instincts where my career was concerned.”

“What about Luke?”

“He doesn’t know anything about opera. He knows a lot about ambition, though. He encourages me, but I’m sure he would back away from giving me advice. He lectures me a lot, but he never pontificates.”

“You’re in deep with him?”

“Getting there. It’s very ... hard.”

“How long have you known him?”

“Not long. We actually met at that music awards ceremony on TV. But I’ve only been involved with him for a few weeks. And, in fact, he went away for ten days right after I started seeing him regularly.”

“He’s a nice guy, Nina. And smart. I’ve never seen anyone change Joe’s mind before.” There was a pause.

“You didn’t like him?” Nina asked hesitantly.

“No, no, I liked him a lot.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t mean to sound like an old lady, Nina, but he’s probably led a very different kind of life—”

“I know that.”

“I mean as regards women.”

“Oh.”

“Even Mom fell for him, did you notice? It’s a good thing Pop was too busy arguing to notice or he might have been jealous.

“I just mean, a guy like that, leading the life of a rock star ... I just don’t want to see you go through what you went through with Philippe.”

“Luke’s always been honest with me, Matt. Whatever happens, I don’t think ‘cheating’ will be involved.”

“I hope you’re right, kid. I’m probably worrying about nothing. Anyhow, he’s obviously crazy about you. I lost track of how many times he looked at you while I was glowering at him.”

They changed the subject and talked easily over the rest of their meal. Afterward Matthew gave her a burly bearhug and they said goodbye. Nina went home.

He’d given her food for thought. There were a lot of women in Luke’s past, obviously, but what about his future? Had she usurped someone? Would someone usurp her? She remembered the humiliation and the hurt of feeling expendable at the end of her marriage. No one was going to destroy her self-worth like that again.

If Luke was puzzled over her coldness that evening, he let it pass without comment. He didn’t spend the night, however. She got the message loud and clear. If she wanted to tell him what was bugging her, she could. If not, he wasn’t going to let her pick a fight with him over something inconsequential.

He was right; they argued enough as it was. Her normal mood was restored the next morning, so she went over to his apartment eager to see him.

An attractive, middle-aged blond woman opened the door.

“One look at you tells me you must be Nina,” she said. She took Nina’s small hand in a crushing handshake and drew her inside. “Luke said you looked like a human incarnation of Saks Fifth Avenue.”

“Oh,” Nina answered, somewhat bewildered.

“I’m Kate.”

“Oh, *you’re* Kate. I’m pleased to—”

“Kate!” Luke hollered impatiently. “This conversation isn’t over yet.” He stormed into the hallway. “Can’t you—oh, Nina. What are you doing here?”

“Good morning!” she said brightly.

“Maybe you can talk some sense into him,” Kate said.

“You leave her out of this, dammit!”

“Nina, surely you understand—”

“Don’t push it, Kate.”

“What’s going on?” Nina asked.

“Luke’s expected—”

“We’ll talk about it tomorrow, Kate.”

“But—”

“Don’t you have anything better to do than ruin my Sunday?”

“*You called me,*” Kate reminded him.

“What on earth is the matter with you?” Nina demanded. “This woman isn’t even wearing leather.”

“He’s always like this before his first cup of coffee. Haven’t you noticed?” Kate asked conversationally.

“He shouts at me so much I never thought coffee had anything to do with it.”

“True,” admitted Kate. “If only his fans knew what a pain in the—”

“All right, that’s enough. I can’t take both of you at once. One of you please go away. Not you,” he added, hauling Nina into the living room. “Goodbye, Kate. We’ll talk later,” he added and closed the door.

“What was that all about?” Nina demanded breathlessly a few moments later, after his enthusiastic greeting.

“Business. Boring, tedious business. I’ll tell you later.”

“Why not now?”

“Because now,” he said, scooping her up into his arms and heading toward the bedroom, “I’m going to show you how much I missed you last night.”

And so he did. In the magic of his embrace Nina forgot about his dispute with Kate, forgot her plans for the day, would have even forgotten her own name if he hadn’t whispered it over and over in the splendor of the moment.

Nine

“I think you’re being unnecessarily negative,” said Luke.

Nina looked at him skeptically.

“Maybe it’ll wind up being the best evening of your life,” he continued.

Nina’s lip curled slightly.

“Nina, if I didn’t know you better, I’d think you were sneering at me,” he chided.

Nina looked vexed.

“Really. You’ll have a good time,” he insisted.

Nina sighed heavily, sensing that this was one argument he was determined to win. Nevertheless, she intended to go down fighting.

“You think I’ll have a good time?” she asked mildly.

“Yes.”

“At an anniversary party thrown by your record company. A party full of rock stars and rock fans, rock promoters and rock managers, rock musicians and rock reviewers. A party where they will play loud rock music and serve domestic champagne. A party full of women taller than me and men thinner than me, all of whom will have longer hair than I do.”

“Well...”

“And you are convinced that I, an opera singer hopelessly out of my milieu and frankly disenchanted with rock music, will have the time of my life? Is that your interpretation of the situation, Luke?” She raised her delicate black brows inquisitively and watched him squirm a bit.

“Well, perhaps ‘the best evening of your life’ is a slight exaggeration,” he admitted.

“Give me one good reason why I should go.” She was pretty sure he had prepared several good reasons.

“I’ll give you *several* good reasons,” he said confidently. “One, it’s part of our agreement to make an effort to get involved in each other’s daily lives.”

“Well ... that’s a fair point,” she admitted.

“Two, it’s awkward to go to these things without a date, and there’s no one but you I want to take.” He frowned at her and added, “Don’t look so smug”

“Sorry.”

“And three...”

“Yes?”

His dark eyes grew soft and soulful as he gazed at her. That look produced what Nina was beginning to think of as Luke’s “silly putty” effect on her; she would do anything for him when he looked at her like that.

“Three ... it would mean a lot to me if you’d go with me, Nina. I really want you to,” he said huskily.

“Well, why didn’t you say so in the first place?” she asked gently. “Of course, I’ll go.”

He pulled her into his arms and rested his forehead against hers.

“You don’t mind?” he asked softly against her lips.

She kissed him back. “If it’s important to you, I want to do it.”

He nuzzled her hair and kissed her neck. “You’re sure you want to go?”

“Uh-huh,” Nina said dreamily as his hands explored her back.

“Because I don’t want to force you or anything,” he purred against her ear.

Nina pushed him away and scowled at him. “All right, you’ve won, but don’t milk it, Luke.”

He grinned wickedly at her, then kissed her, a long, slow, languorous kiss that stole her breath and consumed her body.

“You’re so exasperating,” she whispered breathlessly as he trailed kisses over her face.

“That’s true,” he admitted. “But you don’t let me get away with much. And it *will* mean a lot to me, Nina.”

“Okay,” she said simply, resting her head against his shoulder. What a wonderful, warm, secure feeling it was to be wrapped in his arms like this. She couldn’t imagine how she had gotten along without it for so long. Luke was always hugging her, holding her hand, kissing her forehead, stroking her hair, physically reassuring her. She had never known anyone so naturally affectionate before, and she found she loved it, was practically becoming addicted to it.

“I thought we could have dinner first with Gingie and her date and then all go together,” Luke said after a while. “That way you two can get to know each other, and you’ll have someone to talk to at the party.”

“Whatever you say,” Nina murmured placidly. She had already given in, might as well let him enjoy it. Anyhow, she wanted to meet Gingie. She hadn’t seen her since the night of the concert to fight famine, but she knew the blond singer was one of Luke’s closest friends.

“It’ll be fun,” Luke assured her. “You’ll like Gingie. You’re a lot like her in some ways—smart, ambitious, classy. Of course, she dresses better than you do.”

Nina glared at him. “If I *don’t* have a good time, next week I’m going to drag you to see a string quartet.”

Luke looked alarmed. “Oh, Nina, no. Maybe we could—”

“And you’ll have to wear a suit and tie.” That reminded her of another question. “What should I wear to this gala event?”

This casual question sparked off one of their most exhausting adventures together: a shopping trip. Luke decided he wanted to buy her something outrageous for the party.

“So you’ll look like a rock star’s girlfriend,” he explained evilly.

Nina grimaced.

They scoured the mod and new wave boutiques of Greenwich Village. It was an eye-opening experience for Nina who, since her marriage, had always worn clothes either made especially for her or else classic

styles from the most elegant stores in Europe and America.

“That looks nice,” said Luke as Nina came out of a cramped dressing room.

“I feel flammable,” she said uncomfortably. She was wearing a bizarre concoction of fringe, lace, feathers, and beads, which managed to be voluminous and very revealing at the same time.

“It’s funky,” Luke said.

“But it’s not me.”

“No, no, I guess it’s not,” he agreed. “But we’re going in the right direction,” he added with a look at her bare stomach and exposed shoulders.

Three hours later they settled on a clingy, metallic outfit with matching gloves and boots. Once again, although her hands and knees were covered, other parts of Nina were conspicuously bare.

“I hope you don’t catch cold,” Luke said.

“I could get arrested. I looked distinctly violent in this thing.”

“You look great.” He kissed her. Nina squirmed uncomfortably. He had been recognized. The shop girls were watching them avidly while Luke’s own voice blared out over the speakers with a song from *A Wilder Name*.

“Stop squirming,” Luke teased her.

“I want to get out of this dress.”

“Want help?”

“You go pay for it,” she said archly.

They left the boutique with their purchase, leaving the shop girls to moon over Luke Swain, the rock idol.

“Now it’s my turn,” said Nina maliciously. “Come along, Luke.”

“Oh, no, Nina, I don’t think—”

“I do.” She hailed a cab. “Saks Fifth Avenue,” she said to the driver.

They argued all the way there.

“I have plenty of clothes,” Luke said stubbornly.

“So do I, but you just took me shopping for hours.”

“Nina, I don’t want—”

“My treat. It won’t kill you to own one nice, well-tailored, classically styled outfit. Especially if I’m paying for it.”

She dragged him into the store under protest. His reaction to her suggestion of buying a raincoat was not encouraging.

“I don’t need one; I own an umbrella,” he said with the air of someone voicing an obvious, inarguable fact.

“This is a question of fashion, not rain.”

“I feel constrained in those things. They’re long.” He seemed to consider that a sufficient explanation.

Nina relented. She obviously wasn’t going to get him to change his mind, and the salesmen were beginning to get annoyed at Luke’s disparaging comments about their wares.

He wouldn’t consider buying a suit. It was obviously still too early to try to talk to him about a leather coat—she would need time to subtly adjust him to the idea. He insisted he had no use for a tie, and she had given him one on their first date, anyhow. They didn’t see any shoes he liked. The situation looked more promising in the trousers department until he insisted she come into the dressing room to help him out of his jeans.

“I’ve gotten so used to you taking them off for me, I think I’ve forgotten how to do it,” he explained with wide-eyed innocence. Nina trod heavily on his instep and dragged him away from interested eyes as fast as she could.

They finally reached a pleasing compromise. Nina bought him an expensive cashmere sweater in a creamy, off-white color that complemented his dark good looks.

“I think they overcharged you, though,” he said dubiously.

“Luke, for God’s sake,” Nina said in exasperation. “It’s excellent quality, it will last for years, it won’t go out of style and,” she added viciously, “no helpless little cashmeres died to make it.”

“Yes, darling,” he said obediently. “It’s wonderful. I adore it. Thank you.”

That night Nina hung her funky new outfit in her closet. It looked quite out of place amidst her wardrobe. She hoped she’d have the nerve to actually wear it the night of the party. She smiled wryly. A month ago she would have been appalled at the idea of wearing such an outlandish costume in public.

Luke was certainly loosening her up, she reflected—in many ways. She still had panic-stricken moments when she was alone; she had, after all, let a man sweep her off her feet once before and had lived to regret it deeply. Although she was an older and hopefully wiser woman, once bitten really was twice shy. Luke had been remarkably accurate with that song, considering how little he’d known her when he wrote it. But Luke, as she was discovering, knew quite a lot about human nature.

And now Luke was sweeping her off her feet, daily testing and trying her, pushing her forward step by step, sometimes against her will and better judgment. Nina was still afraid of falling and getting hurt.

She passed the days in a state of constant emotional upheaval as she and Luke tried to adjust to each other’s lifestyles. Luckily, they shared a strong love of jazz and a liking for folk music. This was an important bond between them since, although each liked and respected the other’s work, Luke was having as much trouble adjusting to opera as Nina was having adjusting to rock music.

* * * *

“But it’s all in foreign languages,” he complained when they went to the opera. “How am I supposed to be enthralled if I can’t even understand what they’re saying?”

“I’ll translate.” She did.

“*That’s* what they’re saying? What a load of rubbish. I liked it better when I couldn’t understand them.”

Nina sighed. Her introduction to rock was not much more promising.

“What are they saying? How am I supposed to be enthralled by their song if they mumble all the words?”

Luke told her what they were saying.

“What a load of rubbish,” she said.

As a compromise, they tried some rock classics.

“What do I care about this person’s obsession with his purple suede shoes?”

“Blue. And it’s got a great beat,” Luke insisted.

“I find it ironic that you of all people should enjoy a song about animal hide.”

There were other disagreements, too. She didn’t like a few of his wilder friends; he didn’t like a few of her more conservative ones. He was willing to talk to all the odd strangers who approached him in New York, particularly in the park; she was appalled and a little frightened. He liked socially relevant and thought-provoking books and movies; she preferred classics and escapism. He liked simple restaurants with wholesome food; she liked elegant dining with exotic cuisine.

“What the hell is this?” he asked, poking at the sashimi on his plate in Nina’s favorite Japanese restaurant.

“It’s raw octopus. Just taste it.”

He did.

“I’m glad *you’re* paying for this stuff,” he said at last.

One restaurant they could both agree on was Les Précieuses.

“I think I’m getting the hang of this,” Luke said cheerfully as they dined there nostalgically one evening. “I just sit here while people put my napkin on my lap, fill my glass, slice my food, and give me silverware.”

“It’s better than that place you took me to with crayons and paper tablecloths.”

“Hey, I *love* that place.”

When the bill came, Luke said only, “Ah, well, forewarned is forearmed. Serves me right for getting mixed up with an expensive girl like you.”

After another culinary adventure at Raw Deal, Nina decided to bring up a subject of some disagreement between them.

As they walked home, she said, “I don’t suppose it’s occurred to you once this afternoon, has it, to hold open a door for me, to pull out a chair for me, to take my arm as we cross the street?”

He frowned at her. “Why? You’ve got two arms and two legs. Pull out your own chair.”

“Obviously, I am physically capable of such things. That’s not the point. The point is, they are social amenities that I appreciate,” she said in exasperation.

“Look, Nina, that sort of thing has its place at Les Précieuses, but don’t you think I’d look pretty silly standing halfway inside the ladies’ room at Raw Deal holding a stool for you? And you’ve been successfully crossing the street without my help your whole life.”

“Look at it this way,” she wheedled, trying a new approach, “it’s such a small thing, it would take so little effort on your part, and I would appreciate it so much.”

“I am *not* going to be taken in by that sweet, wide-eyed look, Nina,” said Luke with a distinct lack of conviction.

They finally agreed that Luke would exercise gentlemanly manners when the occasion warranted it, particularly when they dressed up and went out. And the rest of the time, Nina could pull out her own chair.

Since the frequent arguing—and shouting—was beginning to take its toll on Nina’s voice, she found another method of venting her wrath at Luke. She threw unbreakable objects at him.

“That’s it,” he said one night as they returned to her apartment. “No more of these arty foreign films.”

A pillow sailed past his head.

“You can’t mean to tell me you liked that dreck?” he asked. Nina nodded.

“Oh, come on, Nina. Melodramatic, self-indulgent—”

She threw a few balls of yarn at him.

“And the bit where the guy ‘nobly’ sacrifices the girl. How do you suppose *she* felt about it?”

She threw a bedroom slipper at him as he lay down on the couch.

“I think all that raw fish you eat must have addled your brain,” he said.

Nina jumped on top of him and clobbered him with a couch cushion. Then she resorted to her second, more effective way of dealing with him. Luke cooperated nobly.

The rewards were there, too. He was teaching her to cook and drive, but on a deeper level he was opening her eyes to many things. She became aware of the world around her, of social injustice, of neglect and cruelty, of poverty and alienation, of so many of the things that had moved Luke to tell the world about them in his songs. But he also opened her eyes to beautiful things: the kindness one stranger may show another; the way a young child or animal will discover for the first time each day things the adult has long taken for granted; the courage of ordinary, daily life.

A closeness was growing between them that made all the arguments and obstacles seem worth the effort. He seemed to have an uncanny knowledge of her, often knowing what she thought or wanted before she spoke aloud. His thoughts were still largely a mystery to her, but she was definitely learning his tastes and character traits and habits. She often knew what his reactions to people and events would be.

Of course, he frequently surprised her.

She met him one day coming out of the studio where he was working on a video. He was exhausted and irritable.

“Hi,” he said and kissed her briefly.

Hand in hand they started to walk away. Someone took their picture. A reporter came running up to them.

“Miss Gaggnerelli—”

“Gnagnarelli. Nya-nya-*rel*-li. Can’t you people get it right?”

“Is it true you were married to the wealthy French playboy Philippe Garnier?”

Nina stopped dead in her tracks. She had hoped the press wouldn’t dig up the details of her divorce. It had been more than three years ago.

“Get lost,” snapped Luke, pulling Nina closer as he walked.

“Come on, Nina,” said the reporter with sly familiarity. “Is it true you were penniless when he married you? That he made you a star?”

“Go away!” she gasped.

“How did you feel when you found your husband in bed with another woman?”

“Back off,” said Luke belligerently.

“Did you know about the other women, Nina? Did you care, or did you marry him for his money?”

Nina started to cry. Luke had never actually seen her cry. Something inside him snapped. He grabbed the reporter’s shirt, intending to beat the man to within an inch of his life. By the time Luke came to his senses someone had taken photographs of the whole thing.

“Come on,” Luke grabbed Nina’s hand and hailed a cab. It was a short drive to his apartment. Nina had stopped crying by the time they were inside.

“My hero.” She laughed tearfully against his chest as he held her.

“I’m sorry, honey,” he whispered against her hair.

“I know it’s not your fault. But I think I once heard a wise man say, ‘If you hit reporters, it only encourages them to print more about you.’”

“I’ll see if there’s anything I can do to keep it out of print.”

He spent the rest of the evening on the telephone to Kate, his lawyers, and a few influential friends.

There was a published photo two days later of Luke standing next to the distraught reporter. Luke’s fists were balled and he wore a scowl on his face. The article was fairly mild, saying only that the “arrogant and unpredictable rock star” had lost his temper and threatened to beat up a reporter for asking Nina probing questions about her divorce. It could have been worse.

Another printed story, however, amused them enormously. Luke’s name appeared in a short paragraph below the caption *The Spy Who Loved Me?*

“What now?” Luke asked as Nina showed it to him with a broad grin.

Luke Swain, the columnist informed enthralled readers, had been spotted at a small, romantic, candlelit restaurant in an obscure town upstate. With him, apparently, was a beautiful foreign woman who chose

to keep her identity a secret. “Sources” revealed that the sensual purr of her husky voice—

“Husky voice?” Luke said. “You’re a soprano.”

“Read on. It gets better.”

The sensual purr of her husky voice revealed a thick Slavic accent. Was she a diplomat, as Luke claimed? Or was she really a spy? A defector even? What were Luke Swain and this mystery woman doing so far off the beaten path? Enjoying a little comradeerie?

“I think we should frame it,” said Nina.

“I think we should debrief the columnist,” Luke said.

“No, don’t. At least it takes attention off me.”

“If you say so.” He scanned the article again and chuckled. “This is priceless. Let’s just hope it doesn’t get me put on a government list somewhere.”

“Oh, I’d defend you, Luke,” said Nina, slipping her arms around his neck.

“You would?” he asked lazily, putting his hands on her waist and pulling her closer.

“Yes. I’d tell them that woman wasn’t an East European spy.”

“No?”

“No,” she breathed against his lips.

“Who could she be then?”

“I’d tell them that you’re making friends with extraterrestrials.”

“That’ll make all the difference, I’m sure,” he said dryly.

“I just want to support responsible journalism.”

“It’s good to know I can count on you.”

“Anytime.”

“Then come here,” he whispered, pressing the length of his body against hers, blatantly showing her he was interested in something far more exciting than international spies or visitors from outer space.

Despite their differences and the difficulties involved in their relationship, it seemed Luke had been right. There was something special between them, something worth trying for.

Or so Nina thought until the night of the party.

Ten

There were teeth marks on Luke’s shoulder and scratches on his back.

“Gosh, did I do that?” Nina asked in sleepy astonishment.

“There was no one else here,” Luke teased.

She traced the small, even teeth marks lightly with her fingers.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized. “But it serves you right for teasing me so. I thought I would go crazy.”

They grinned deliciously at each other, their eyes glowing with the memory. Luke’s bedroom was still heavy with their mingled scent.

“It’s okay,” he said. “When I was a kid it was considered macho to have your girlfriend’s marks on you.”

“I think you left a few of your own on me.” She showed him.

“Oh, Nina, I’m sorry. Does it hurt?” he asked seriously.

“No, of course not.” She put her arms around his neck and demonstrated her good health.

“I guess we both played pretty rough,” he admitted.

“Hmm.” They kissed again. “Let’s get ready or we’ll be late meeting Gingie. It’s nearly seven o’clock.”

“Shower first,” Luke said, taking her hand.

Nina’s eyes widened. “Together?”

“Why not?”

Nina’s cheeks reddened.

“Nina, after all the things we’ve done together, I can’t believe you’re still capable of embarrassment. Don’t you remember what you did a few hours ago, you shameless woman?”

“Well, yes...”

“You’ll wash me, I’ll wash you. Strictly business.”

It wasn’t quite that simple, but they were washed and dressed an hour later.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Trying to make the rest of me go with this crazy outfit. I feel a tad overdressed.” She was adding dramatic highlights to her eyes and cheekbones and letting her hair go a bit wilder than usual.

“You look great,” he assured her.

In fact, Nina’s metallic dress and accessories were almost mild in comparison to Gingie’s outfit which was glittering, flamboyant, brightly dyed, and wildly styled—very much like Gingie herself. Luke had described her to Nina as unconventional and lovable. That was a laughable understatement, both adjectives being woefully inadequate to describe the blond singer. Gingie had reached the top of her profession, evidence of a lot of talent and hard work, yet she seemed extraordinarily lacking in mundane traits such as common sense, practicality, and logic. As Luke had predicted, Nina was amazed and astonished by Gingie all through dinner. She also realized almost immediately why Gingie was such a valued friend in Luke’s life, since Nina was also drawn to the woman’s honest warmth and generosity.

Gingie’s date that evening was a shy, quiet, almost mousy young man named Sandy who scarcely said two words to Nina the whole night. Luke informed her with dancing eyes, when they had a moment alone

together, that Sandy was one of the hottest, most controversial acts in rock, best known for the blatantly sexual songs which frequently got him banned.

"You can't be serious," Nina said.

"Absolutely," Luke assured her. "This week he's number one in the album, single and dance charts with a song called *Steam Me Up*."

"You must be kidding." She stole a peek at Sandy, who was helping Gingie on with her coat; shaped like an octopus, the garment had eight arms, and Gingie was having trouble figuring out which two she was supposed to use.

"Does Sandy ever talk to anyone besides Gingie?" Nina asked Luke.

"Not often."

"He's so shy..."

"Apparently his stage persona is *only* a stage persona. He may be the heartthrob of millions, but in person he's too shy to even ask a woman out for a date. So Gingie takes him everywhere."

"So they're not—"

"No, Gingie just sort of babysits him. They met somehow, and she just took him under her wing. He's pretty attached to her now."

"I can understand why. It would be hard not to like her. Why doesn't she encourage him to grow up, though?"

"She does." Luke grinned wryly and shook his head. "I suppose he's a little confused right now. It's a tough business. If I were nineteen years old and had gone from obscurity to instant stardom in six months' time, I'd be pretty confused, too."

Nina took Luke's hand as they walked outside to hail a cab and wait for Gingie to untangle herself.

"Are there any normal people in your business, Luke?" Nina asked uncertainly.

"There's me."

"Is that the best you can offer?"

He grinned at her. "Are you implying I'm abnormal?"

"Heaven forbid."

"Come on, Nina, are you trying to pretend no one in opera is a little eccentric, a little bizarre, or just plain weird?"

"It's just not ... like this," she finished, looking at the two rock stars who finally emerged from the restaurant, one so shy he wouldn't speak to anyone but the other, who was dressed like an octopus.

"Yes, I see your point," Luke admitted dryly. "But you have to admit it's fun."

"It has its ups and downs."

"I hope this is one of the ups," Luke whispered and kissed her softly.

They spent five minutes maneuvering Gingie's outfit into the cab without hurting anyone. When they finally arrived at the large reception hall where Luke's record company was hosting the celebrity-packed event, the party was going full swing.

Rock music blared from an expensive stereo system. Nina could appreciate the festive atmosphere as guests danced, ate, drank, and talked. The room had been decorated with musical awards and with posters of all the singers and musicians under contract to the company.

A giant poster of Luke gazed at the room with lazy sensuality, while Gingie was shown on the opposite wall with both arms thrown over her head. Sandy's poster dominated an entire wall, showing the shy boy in the most graphically sexual pose Nina had ever had the misfortune to see photographed.

"Luke, how do you feel when you see a larger than life poster of yourself staring at you all evening?" Nina asked curiously.

He shrugged. "It used to be unnerving. Now I just ignore it."

Sandy looked at his own poster as indifferently as if it were someone else—which, in a sense, it was.

Gingie, on the other hand, complained loudly about hers. "I hate that picture! They know I hate that picture! They put it up there just to annoy me!"

"Gingie and the company have some slight misunderstandings," Luke explained to Nina.

"Irreconcilable differences," Gingie said emphatically.

"Why did you come?" Nina asked her.

"Sandy had to come," Gingie said simply. Sandy slipped his arm through Gingie's and looked as if he fully intended to hang on to her until he could go home. Luke went to get them all something to drink.

"This is green," Nina pointed out when he handed her a glass a few minutes later.

"I think it's got crème de menthe in it," he said. "They insisted we try it."

Nina took a sip and grimaced. "It tastes more like avocado."

"Really?" exclaimed Gingie. "Here, let's swap. You can have mine. It's just puce colored."

Nina took Gingie's drink and watched with amazement as Gingie sipped the green mixture and declared it to be delicious.

"I'm glad you came, Nina," Gingie said. "I already know your astrological sign and your ex-husband's name, but this is the first time we've had a chance to talk."

"You read that stuff?" Luke asked incredulously.

"When I saw the headline *Luke Swain Slugs Reporter* I couldn't resist. And Luke, I thought you were mellowing in your old age."

"Nina manages to sharpen the smooth edges," Luke said wryly.

Nina put down her puce-colored drink with a sigh of defeat. "If you'll excuse me, I'm going to see if I can get anything as mundane as a club soda."

“I’ll come with you,” Luke said instantly.

“Don’t be silly. I can find the bar without help. You sit and have fun with Gingie ... and Sandy.”

She made her way to the bar and found that a simple club soda was obtainable with a little firm insistence. And after a considerable wait. She noticed several people whose faces matched those on the posters; she also noticed that they were all being served well ahead of her.

She decided not to let it bother her. That kind of VIP treatment was a reality of fame. Several people jostled her, trying to get closer to the famous people nearby. Well, yes, a party like this was bound to attract a lot of hangers-on who could wangle an invitation, she reflected. She couldn’t, after all, pretend that her world didn’t also have its share of hangers-on.

“Say, aren’t you Nina Gnagnarelli, the opera star?”

“Robin!” Nina exclaimed when she recognized Luke’s blond drummer. “Did you just get here?”

“About twenty minutes ago.” He eyed her revealing outfit. “I came alone, so if you want to dump that rock singer you came with...”

“Careful, he’ll hear you, and he knows I like blonds,” she said with a smile.

Nina’s club soda finally arrived, and she and Robin made their way back to Luke and Gingie ... and Sandy.

“He’s so quiet, I keep forgetting he’s around,” Nina confided to Robin. “Ouch!” she added as someone stepped on her. More people had arrived, adding to the crush of bodies. There were two TV news cameras in the room, a number of journalists, and quite a few photographers. As Nina pushed past men who were thinner than her and women who were taller than her, loud rock music blared through the speakers, adding to the general chaos of sight and sound.

“Where’s Luke?” Nina asked when she found Gingie.

“He got snared by some company executive who dragged him off to talk about...” Gingie waved her hand vaguely “...business, I guess.”

Robin and Gingie said hello and exchanged some goodnatured banter about her current relations with the record company.

“So how did you meet Luke?” Gingie asked Nina loudly over the music.

“It was fate,” Nina said dramatically. She gave a censored account of their first meeting.

“That sounds like Luke,” said Gingie, laughing. “For a man who writes beautiful songs, he sure doesn’t do much sweet-talking in person.”

“How did you meet him?”

“Working. Years ago. He and this one—” she jerked a thumb at Robin “—were playing in Michigan, where I got my start. They came to see me one night. Their recognition of my brilliant talent and enormous sex appeal was the original basis of our friendship.” Robin rolled his eyes. “Luke encouraged me to go out on the road. We became close after we both moved to New York. Just two young, broke Midwesterners in the Big Apple.”

“It’s hard to imagine you both unknown, poor, and struggling.”

“Oh, we were all of that and more. I was desperately ambitious. Luke was, too. But it affected him differently. He had doubts about a lot of things, but even when he couldn’t get bookings or contracts, he just kept on going, never discouraged. He always believed that what he had to offer was worthwhile and that sooner or later someone would listen.”

“And I did listen,” said a familiar voice. They all turned to see Kate Hammer. “I’m almost surprised they let you in the door, Gingie, considering your relationship with the company.”

“They knew I wouldn’t come without Gingie,” said Sandy firmly. Nina looked at him in surprise. It was the most she’d ever heard him say.

“Hello, Nina.” Kate gave Nina another bone-crushing handshake. “You don’t look like yourself.”

Nina laughed. “We’re experimenting. I’m meant to look like a rock star’s girlfriend tonight. Next week Luke will have to look like a gentleman.”

“I’ll buy tickets to that,” said Robin.

“I’ll *sell* tickets to that,” said Kate.

“I’m beginning to understand why Luke says you’re such a great manager, Kate,” said Nina.

“With all due modesty, yes, I am,” said Kate. “Which is why I’m going to give Gingie a bit of advice.” Gingie grimaced. “There’s a reporter out there who wants to talk to you, Gingie. She’s a good journalist from a responsible rock review. I think that if you said a few conciliatory things about the company while you’re a guest at the party, it would go a long way toward softening their attitude toward you.”

Gingie groaned and argued, but Kate finally convinced her. She pulled her arm out of Sandy’s grip and stood up.

“Watch him for me,” she said to Nina and left.

Nina took Gingie’s place next to Sandy and smiled at him encouragingly. Red as a beet, Sandy smiled back shyly. She chatted with Kate and Robin, who told her funny stories about Luke’s early days. Kate talked about how, when she began managing them, she had dragged Luke kicking and screaming to a French men’s hairstylist to refine his image.

“He kept insisting that only women went into that sort of place. His sister cut his hair till the day I met him.” Kate laughed. “You should have heard him howl when the stylist tried to put hair spray on his hair.”

Kate and Robin finally excused themselves to go greet some other musicians. Nina was left alone with Sandy. Although the boy was about as entertaining as a tree stump, Nina was growing to rather like him. Amidst all the flamboyance, noise, and pretentious chatter going on around them, she found something appealing in his simple bashfulness. She also admired his doglike loyalty to Gingie. Anyhow, who needed conversation? Just watching events around her was enough.

Greedy eyes and grabbing hands seemed to be everywhere. She knew that whereas opera singers usually had long careers with a gradual rise to success and often worked well into their autumn years, rock stars often had short careers of meteoric success and humiliatingly fast downfalls. That was a lot of pressure to live with, and it showed in many faces. Luke was notable for his longevity in the field. But then, he was also notable for real talent and craftsmanship as a performer and composer, for his ability to improve and grow, and for his reliability and stability. In fact, Luke was notable for a lot of pretty remarkable qualities, Nina thought proudly.

How on earth did such a direct, forthright, moral man like Luke deal with this life-style? she wondered. Of course, Luke had always been very ambitious; he wanted to write and sing, and he would deal with the devil himself to do that. But could she deal with all of this as part of his regular working life?

“Sandy! Here you are! We’ve all been looking for you!” A plump, middle-aged man laughed with false heartiness and crowded Nina as he sat down next to her. When he turned away to call someone else over, Nina said to Sandy, “Who is he?”

Sandy frowned. “I’m not sure. Promoter, I think”

Within moments, a dozen or more people descended on them. Sandy was good at being unnoticeable, but now the paparazzi had found him at last. Nina cringed inwardly, wishing they hadn’t been discovered. She guessed that Sandy felt the same way, since he edged nearer to her like a frightened puppy. She patted his hand reassuringly and tried to take control of the situation, wishing Luke were there. Or even Gingie. She was definitely out of her milieu.

Everyone barraged Sandy with eager questions. Naturally, that produced no results, so they started questioning Nina, as well. Using all of her social skills, Nina got other people to talk about themselves, thus giving her a little breathing space. The self-important ramblings of most of the group irritated her, as did the increased bodily contact of the man sitting next to her. He kept leaning closer and closer, his arm slung along the back of the seat, his breath fanning her face. Finally, he put his hand on her thigh. She started as if she’d been burned. The man looked at her with glinting eyes. Nina pointedly removed his hand from her leg. Sandy slipped his arm through hers and pulled her closer.

“Don’t touch her,” Sandy said firmly.

The boy might not talk much, but quality was more important than quantity. When it counted most, Sandy knew how to choose his words well.

“Excuse me,” said the pudgy man, with dripping sarcasm. “I didn’t realize she was attached for the evening.”

Nina was furious now. She was not accustomed to being talked about as if she weren’t there, and she was definitely not accustomed to being mistaken for the sort of woman who “attached” herself to a celebrity for an evening.

“I’m not attached to him. I just don’t appreciate you handling me,” she said icily.

“Come on, honey, lighten up. You be nice to me, and I’ll be nice to you.”

A girl with enormous quantities of purple hair interrupted the scene. “Hey, I’ve seen you before, haven’t I?”

“I don’t think so,” said Nina.

“Yes, I have. You’re Luke Swain’s girlfriend, aren’t you?”

Nina didn’t particularly like the word “girlfriend” to begin with, but in this context it somehow made her sound like some rock groupie sleeping with Luke for the privilege of being seen with him.

The pudgy man next to her looked at her sharply. “So you’re Luke’s?” he mused.

“Do you know him?” Nina asked coldly.

“I’ve seen him around.”

“Meaning you don’t,” Nina finished.

“I’d heard there was a new girl,” said a smug young man with a nasal voice. “Interesting.”

Nina had all she could stand of sleazy innuendo and repulsive people. Without a word to the others she stood up, took Sandy’s hand, and led him away. She could hear people snicker and make snide remarks as they walked away.

What on earth was she doing here? This was the antithesis of everything she enjoyed, this loud music, tasteless, decor and bad company. She could never adjust to this.

“Could we go find Gingie now?” Sandy asked plaintively.

“Yes, of course,” said Nina.

By now everyone had recognized Sandy, and they had an exhausting time pushing through the crowd of eager wellwishers as they searched for Gingie.

They found her, at last, having a noisy and vituperative fight with a representative of the record company. A reporter eagerly scribbled down everything they said while someone took photos. Sandy and Nina finally dragged Gingie away from the fray while an interested crowd watched.

“So much for mending your fences,” said Nina dryly.

“I had good intentions. Really,” Gingie insisted. “He just incensed me.”

“Can we go now?” pleaded Sandy.

“Yes. Absolutely. Do you want to come with us, Nina?” asked Gingie.

“No. I’d better find Luke. He’d worry if I just disappeared.”

It took her a long time to find Luke, and she was feeling much worse for the wear when she did. He was deeply embroiled in conversation with Kate and a man in a conservative suit. There were so many people in the way Nina could hardly see Luke, but he was obviously arguing, and he looked unhappy about something.

There must have been fifty people between Nina and Luke, many of them just standing there, hoping to meet him, hoping to touch him, trying to catch what he said to Kate and the other man.

Luke was an extraordinary man and knowing him was a privilege, but something about this idolization of him appalled and disgusted her. She was a woman involved with a difficult and demanding man. Tonight, however, she realized that to everyone except their personal friends, she was just some pretty girl who’d found her way into a rock star’s bed.

That shouldn’t matter to her, but she found it did. The opinion of strangers shouldn’t count, but the pressure of Luke’s public life made it impossible to ignore.

Nina nearly sobbed with frustration as she pushed past people who glared at her or made snide comments. Several simply ignored her requests to let her pass. By the time she reached Luke she felt ready to cry, but she didn’t want to make a scene and embarrass them both.

“Nina!” Luke put his arm around her and drew her close. Nina closed her eyes and relaxed against him,

burrowing into his sheltering warmth. Luke and the other two people finished their conversation. Nina only heard bits and pieces. Something about a tour. Luke didn't want to do it. Kate and the other man thought he should. Nina didn't care. She just wanted to get out of here. She told him so as soon as there was a chance.

He looked at her strained, unhappy face and agreed immediately. Kate reminded him hesitantly that there were several speeches scheduled at midnight, and Luke had promised to say a few words.

He sighed. "Can't someone else do it?"

"I think," Kate said carefully, "it would be a show of good faith if you did it, Luke."

Luke looked back at Nina and ran his hand through his hair in frustration. Nina made her decision then. She would never come between Luke and his work, just as she would never let him come between her and hers. But she wasn't staying at this party another minute.

"It's okay," she said calmly. "You stay. I'll take a cab home."

"No."

"Be sensible, Luke."

He sighed again. "I'll come outside with you"

The street, although not empty, seemed blissfully peaceful after the party. Luke took her arm and led her away from the building, trying to get away from prying eyes and interested stares.

"I'm sorry I left you alone like that, honey. I never intended to. I meant to stay right by your side all night. But I had to talk to someone from the company, then Kate and my tour manager cornered me...." He rubbed a hand over his tired face. "And I don't need to ask to know that you had a lousy time and you're upset."

"I ... it..." Nina sighed, too. "It was awful for me."

"I'm sorry. It's my fault."

"No, it's not," she said firmly. "I'm a grown woman. You can't stick to my side like glue every time we're with people in your business. Surely the whole point of tonight was to see if I can handle this sort of thing, and we can find that out better if I'm on my own."

"And can you?" he asked huskily.

Tears clouded Nina's eyes. "I don't know," she said after a long moment.

He was agitated now. "I should never have brought you here. It was a stupid idea."

"No, it wasn't," she argued tearfully.

"We're never going to another one of these parties, either of us."

"It's not the party." Nina tried to pull herself together enough to explain. "Whether you go to parties or not, you're still Luke Swain. You're still a public idol, you record music and give concerts and have fans all over the world. Reporters and photographers still follow you, women still throw themselves at you, and everyone wants a piece of you. And I just ... hate it," she finished softly.

Luke looked absolutely miserable, and she hated herself, too, for that. But she had to be honest with him; he never settled for less.

“We can’t talk here,” Nina said at last. “I should go home”

“All right. As soon as I’m done here, I’ll come over and we’ll talk—”

“No.” Nina steeled herself against the look of alarm on his face. “I really need to be alone tonight to think about this. I don’t want to say things I don’t mean or haven’t thought over.”

“Nina—”

“Please.”

She could see his internal struggle before he finally said, “Okay. I’ll come over tomorrow—No, I can’t, dammit! We’re taping a video at the studios. Tomorrow night, then.”

“No, I’m singing.”

They looked at each other in frustration, their incompatible schedules somehow emphasizing the hopelessness of their situation.

“Day after tomorrow,” he said.

“I’ll be waiting at home for you.”

He hailed a cab for her. She didn’t look at him. He didn’t touch her. He seemed like a stranger. What an anticlimax, she thought.

He opened the taxi door for her, a habit she had insisted upon. She got inside. He gave the driver her address.

“Nina?” It was dark. She could hardly see his face.

“Yes?” A pause.

“Don’t let it go.” He shut the door and watched the taxi drive off.

Nina spent a miserable, restless night trying to put everything into perspective. She had tried to end her relationship with Luke before it began, seeing heartache in their future. Now it was too late to walk away.

She was in love with him.

She was almost angry at him for that. She had tried to be careful and sensible, and he hadn’t let her. She’d tried to maintain her distance, and he kept pulling her closer. There was no way she could simply walk away now; a part of her would be left behind with him forever. But how could she handle staying with him?

She had been shocked after they were mobbed outside a concert by his fans, positive she wanted no part of his world. Although the incident was frightening, it had assumed its proper perspective after a while and now the memory was a source of laughter between them.

However, she hadn’t really learned to deal with the publicity that surrounded him, the demands on his time and energy, the unorthodox people in his business, or the fans who disrupted every day of his life.

Why did it keep getting harder instead of easier?

Sheer exhaustion, mental and physical, finally took its toll. Nina fell into a restless slumber and slept till midafternoon. She woke up groggy and cranky. She still felt confused and indecisive.

She was glad to go to work that night. She loved the high ceilings, dark corners, and resonance of the theater. She loved the swelling, soul-searing sounds of Verdi, the professional competence and courtesy of her colleagues, the warm enthusiasm of the audience. She could have stayed onstage all night, letting her love of singing shield her from the fear and frustrations of the day; but the performance ended, and it was time to return to reality.

She was in her dressing room, wearing a thick bathrobe and removing her make-up when she heard a knock against her open door. She looked up.

“Jesse!” she exclaimed. “You didn’t tell me you were coming!”

The old saxophonist and his wife Rebecca entered the small room. Both of them were smiling, and Jesse carried a bouquet of flowers for Nina.

“We wanted to surprise you. We haven’t seen you for weeks.”

At that point, Giorgio Bellanti stopped by Nina’s dressing room and she introduced everybody.

“Nina’s friends are my friends,” Giorgio boomed enthusiastically, crushing Nina against his side.

An immediate rapport developed between Giorgio and Jesse, who talked animatedly until Rebecca reminded them that Nina would probably like to finish changing.

“Of course!” cried Giorgio. “We will all go out for pasta, yes?”

Jesse agreed immediately and suggested they stop by a little jazz club he knew, as long as they were out.

“If you don’t mind,” Nina said hesitantly, “I think I’ll just go home. I’m awfully tired.”

“She works much too hard,” Giorgio said in a fatherly tone.

Nina smiled weakly as he said goodnight and escorted Rebecca out of the room. Jesse turned and looked at Nina with concern.

“You all right?” .

She nodded.

“Is that no-account Kansas boy treating you right?”

“Yes, of course.” She smiled wryly and added, “In his fashion.”

“I don’t want to pry ... but I’m a good listener.”

Nina sighed and sat down. “Oh, Jesse. You know what his life is like. And it affects everyone who’s close to him.”

“I know. I’m not one for giving advice, Nina, so I won’t tell you that it’s the sort of thing you really can learn to ignore if you two love each other enough. I won’t even tell you that he’s a fine person who protects what’s most important to him.”

“Thanks, Jesse. Anything else you don’t want to tell me?”

“Just that thirty-five years ago Rebecca had some of the same doubts you’re having now. When she’s angry at me, she likes to pretend she still hasn’t made up her mind,” he added with a grin.

Nina smiled, too. “Good night, Jesse.”

She went home alone for another restless night. She missed Luke.

Their initial meeting in her apartment the next day was awkward, as if he, too, were unsure of what their current status was.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi”

“Coffee?”

“No.”

“Tea?”

“No.”

“Perrier?”

“You know I hate that stuff. Stop it.”

They watched each other uneasily for a few tense moments.

“Are you going to ask me to leave nicely?” he asked in a low voice.

“No, of course not.” Her eyes filled with tears. She loved him so much.

“Hold me,” he said huskily.

She lurched into his arms and they clung to each other like two weary swimmers clinging to a lifeline. He kissed her hair.

“That’s better,” he whispered. “You were a million miles away.”

“So were you. Let’s sit down.”

After a while Nina told him about her experiences at the party, her embarrassment, her revulsion.

“It was all so depressing. It made me feel ... cheap.”

Luke looked disgusted, too. “That’s why I wanted to stay right by your side. The business is full of people like that, but I’ve become awfully good at keeping them away. I don’t work with anybody like that, and I don’t let anybody like that get close to me.”

“I really like Gingie and Robin ... and Sandy,” Nina admitted.

“I do, too, honey. They’re great people. But it wouldn’t be honest if I just introduced you to my friends and let you think everyone in the business is just like them. We’ll always have to deal with the other kind, sooner or later; I just didn’t mean for you to face it alone. I had no idea I’d be cornered by men in

three-piece suits.”

“It’s just as well, Luke. You can’t protect me forever.”

“I want to.”

“Well, you can’t. It’s not even a good idea to try.” She lay her head back against the couch. “I see you as a man. It’s very unnerving to see the rest of the world treating you as an idol. Sometimes it’s funny, but other times it almost scares me.”

“Sometimes it scares me, too. That’s why I need you, Nina. I need someone in my life who sees me as just a man. When we close the door at night, I don’t have an image or a reputation anymore. I’m just me.” He smiled wryly. “And no one since my father has been as good as you at pointing out all my human flaws.”

“I don’t mean to be horrible to you. You just bring it out in me.” He kissed her hand. After a long pause, she asked carefully, “Were other women before me adoring and uncritical?”

“Sometimes. Not always.”

“Were there a lot of them?”

“I’m thirty-three; what do you think?”

“I think that last night someone referred to me as ‘the new girl,’ as if you go through women fast. I think that my family reads in gossip columns that you’re a real ladies’ man. I think that I’ve seen women throw themselves at you since the day we met.”

He sighed heavily. “I’m not going to try to justify my past to anyone, Nina. I admit I had a pretty wild youth; I was lonely and restless, and the lifestyle has a lot of pressures. I can honestly say, though, that I’ve never done anything I’m ashamed of and that my work has always come first.”

“Were you seeing someone when we met?”

“No.”

“You had a date.”

“I used to have a lot of dates. There was no one special. And I didn’t want to see anyone else after the first time I saw you.” He studied her for a long moment before saying carefully, “I think I can guess what you’re going through. I know I’d find it difficult to deal with if you were...”

“A sex symbol?” she supplied.

“I’m *not* a sex symbol. Let’s just say, if the situation were reversed, I’d feel insecure sometimes, particularly if I’d suffered through a divorce like yours.”

“Exactly,” Nina said unhappily.

“Well, there’s no reason for you to feel insecure about me,” he said firmly. “How can I convince you?”

You can tell me you love me, she thought longingly. You can tell me I may not be the first, but I’m definitely the last. But she said nothing; those words would only have value if he uttered them without prompting or pressure.

Instead she smiled reassuringly at him. "I'm just feeling a lot of pressure, I guess. I know you're not a ... philanderer."

He put his arm around her and sighed in frustration. "I wish there was some way to keep all the pressure away from you, but short of giving up my career and becoming a hermit, I don't know how."

She smiled wryly. "I don't think you've got the right temperament to be a hermit. Anyhow, I'd never ask you to give up your work; you love it too much, just as I love mine. I'd hate myself if I came between you and your career. But how do you handle it all?"

He shrugged. "It took a while to learn. I guess that's why Sandy is so ... peculiar. The whole business is pretty shocking at first; at least I had ten years of learning to take hard knocks before I started living in the public eye. It helped a lot.

"When it comes to publicity, I cooperate with responsible journalists and I ignore the rest. It used to hurt to see ridiculous things about myself in print, but I finally decided not to care what anyone besides my family and friends thought. As for shallow, clinging, back-stabbing people in the business, I ignore them, too. They don't matter, and any time spent on them is time taken away from the people and things that do matter."

She curled up against him, wishing she were as tough and resilient as he. But she had not spent ten years preparing to be a rock star's lover, and the pressure was taking its toll on her confidence.

Nina was still feeling too fragile to risk any more blatant reminders that he was *Luke Swain*, so they decided to stay home that evening so they could just be an ordinary man and woman together. Why couldn't he have been an opera singer?

Nina smiled to herself as she thought of Luke singing Verdi. Actually Wagner would suit him better, she thought. She could hear him shouting at Kate on the phone in her bedroom. The stereo in the living room was playing an opera that was on possible offer to Nina, so she couldn't make out what he was saying. Finally the shouting ceased, although he stayed on the phone for another ten minutes. She glanced up as he came out of the bedroom.

"How does Kate put up with you?" she asked.

"The same way you do. Only you get some fringe benefits that she doesn't." He leaned over the back of the sofa and nuzzled her neck.

"Stop that. I told you I wanted to look at this score tonight."

He flopped down at the other end of the couch and leaned back to watch her. His unwavering stare began to distract her after a while.

"Why are you staring at me?"

"Just trying to picture you old and gray."

"If you keep hanging around, that should be in about three months' time."

"You're going to be a beautiful old woman. Mean, but beautiful."

"Shh, this is the best part." The soprano's voice swelled passionately on the stereo. Nina gripped the score in her hands and closed her eyes. "I'd kill to sing that," she said decisively when it was over. The room was silent now. "What do you think?" She tried to raise just one eyebrow at Luke and failed

miserably.

“You still can’t do that, can you? It goes like this.” He showed her.

“You have an unfair advantage.”

“I think you’ll knock ‘em dead, honey.”

“If I get the role.” She sighed. “Nothing’s definite yet. Want to hear the other side?”

“Speaking of singing, there’s something I have to tell you...”

“The other side’s even better.”

“I’ve been meaning to mention it for a while...”

“I wonder if Giorgio will want to work in New York next fall?”

“Nina, are you listening?”

“Hmm?”

Luke threw a pillow at her.

“Hey, that’s my trick!” she exclaimed. “No fair! You find your own—”

He threw two more pillows at her.

“They’re *my* pillows,” she pointed out. “Watch out for that painting! What are you doing?” She shrieked with laughter as he tackled her like a football player. They both fell among the scattered pillows.

“Could a pro have done it better?” he asked cheekily.

“You outweigh me,” she reminded him.

“So I do. No broken bones I hope?” His hands roamed over her.

“That’s not a bone, Luke,” she chided and wriggled away from him. She had learned some time ago he was ticklish and used this to her advantage now.

“Hey! No fair! You promised you wouldn’t.”

“I never did! You put those words in my mouth.” She tickled his ribs.

Soon she was rolling around on the floor with him, scuffling, laughing, and teasing. Nina’s lovely and delicate possessions were all at risk.

“Watch out!” she cried between laughter and kisses as he tugged her skirt off. “Mind the coffee table! Don’t break that vase! Oh, Luke, careful of that lamp!” She gasped suddenly. “Ooooh, can you do that again?”

“What, this?”

“Yes, that. That’s...” Frantically eager to touch his flesh, she slipped his shirt off his shoulders, caressing him, touching him, teasing him.

“Does that tickle?” she asked wickedly.

“Mmm, yes.”

“What are you doing?”

“Do you like it?”

“Do it a little lower.”

“You move up,” he teased.

The apartment could hardly have been said to be silent, but for a few minutes they ceased speaking.

Then suddenly: “Don’t knock that over!”

In exasperation, he muttered against her skin, “You didn’t exactly have this sort of thing in mind when you decorated this room, did you?”

“No, that’s why I thought...”

“Thought what?”

She couldn’t concentrate. He was doing things to her she had never imagined anyone would do to her.

“I thought ... we could go ... into the bed—ohh...” Nina moaned loudly and stopped trying to speak.

“Do you know, I think this might actually be illegal in some states,” Luke whispered.

Nina was well past caring. And whatever Luke had wanted to discuss was forgotten for the time being.

It was much later, when he was showing her how to make tuna noodle casserole, that he brought up the subject again.

“There’s no easy way to tell you, Nina. I have to go away. I didn’t mention it because I was hoping I could get out of it.”

“Where are you going? When are you going?”

“The West Coast. We’re leaving next week.”

“Next week? How long will you be gone?”

“Six weeks.”

“Six weeks?” Her eyes were wide. He’d be gone for six weeks. A month and a half. “You’ll be gone for the holidays?”

He nodded. “I’m sorry, Nina. I can’t change it. I tried.”

Realization dawned. “That’s what all these fights with Kate have been about?”

“Yeah.” He sighed unhappily. “I have a bunch of TV appearances during the holidays that have been contracted for ages and a series of big concerts all up and down the West Coast from now till the end of January. We’ve argued about it for weeks, but Kate’s right. Professionally and financially, I can’t afford to back out. It would cost a fortune and give me a reputation for unreliability.”

“I understand.”

“Kate kept saying you would.” He spooned some casserole onto her plate. Nina stared at it.

“I think I’ve just lost my appetite.”

“I’ll call you every day. Twice a day. Maybe you could fly out—”

“I can’t. We’re starting rehearsals for *Così fan tutte* in a few days. I can’t go anywhere.”

“Oh.”

Why now? she thought miserably.

She looked up and saw the concern in his eyes. He’d tried to get out of it and couldn’t; it wasn’t fair to make this any harder for him. How many times had she threatened to walk out on him when they first got involved? How many times since then had she expressed doubts about their future together? He always seemed so confident, but he needed reassurance, too.

She did her best to look calm and positive. “It’s all right. Really. We knew we’d have to deal with this sooner or later. We’re both out of town a lot. We’ll have to learn to adjust.”

“I know,” he agreed. “I just wanted to put it off till this spring or summer. I didn’t want to be apart for so long right now. It’s ... too soon,” he finished lamely.

“It’s ... not good timing,” she admitted, “but we have no choice.”

“No.”

They sat in glum silence for a while. Finally Nina put some casserole on his plate.

“I’m not hungry,” he said.

“Eat up. You’ll need lots of energy,” she informed him.

“Oh?” he asked, interest sparking in his eyes.

“Hmm. I intend to see that you get a lot of exercise your last few days in town.”

“In that case,” he said, pushing her plate toward her, “you’d better eat up, too.”

She stared at her plate. “There’s something I should have mentioned the first four times you showed me how to make this.”

“What’s that?”

“I *hate* tuna noodle casserole.”

Eleven

The days that followed were enormously hectic as Luke made many of the preparations he would have already made if he hadn’t been so reluctant to leave. His expression was strained from the long days he spent with the band and tired from the long nights he spent with Nina.

Amidst the ecstatic splendor of those passionate nights, Nina answered Luke’s hungry embraces with

fierce desperation. She felt a sense of impending disaster that she couldn't shake. She was afraid to share it with Luke; he already was under so much pressure, she couldn't bear to tell him how much she dreaded the coming weeks.

Pull yourself together, she thought sternly. After all, what was she afraid of? Her life would go on as usual. She had her work, her friends, and her family. She would miss Luke terribly, but he had gone away before and would go again. She, herself, had spent many long months away from Philippe after she married him, at a time in her life when she was much younger and more dependent.

That was perhaps the source of her nervous tension. Her first marriage had had none of the obvious difficulties of her relationship with Luke, and yet it had failed. Two people couldn't hold a marriage together when they were seldom even in the same city. Faced with a choice between her marriage and her career, hadn't she, consciously or unconsciously, chosen her career? The divorce several years later had been inevitable.

Now she and Luke were facing that same reality; and Luke had already said that his work always came first in his life.

Of course, there was no comparison between Luke and Philippe. Luke was a complex, honest, mature man; Philippe had been rather shallow, silly, and selfish. There was also no comparison between Nina's relationship with Luke and her marriage to Philippe. As a girl she had idolized Philippe; as a woman she had maintained a marriage with him that was little more than a business arrangement.

However, she was in love with Luke. She had certainly never idolized him; she frequently found him the most aggravating man on earth. She knew him, flaws and virtues and ambiguities, for what he was. And she loved him. She had fought this feeling and fought him. She had never again wanted to be as publicly humiliated as she was after her divorce, and Luke's life was very public. Now her fears seemed laughable; Luke had crept into her very soul, had filled her heart and mind and body with his essence. Public humiliation seemed a rather minor worry compared to having her heart and soul torn out of her body.

In the dark night, with Luke's strong arms wrapped around her, his hot mouth pillaging hers, his hard body invading hers thrust after thrust, the two of them bound together, taut and trembling, she longed to tell him what he had done to her, how he had changed her. She longed to whisper the words "I love you" against his seeking lips, to lose her gift in those searching eyes. But she was afraid to give any more, afraid to take any more; already she was unsure of where he ended and she began. She was afraid she'd never be whole again when it was all over.

And so she returned his kisses and his passion with a quiet desperation that he sensed but couldn't soothe, not even in the long nights when he drove her to exhaustion, then slept with his arms wrapped around her and his weight pressing her into the mattress.

Nina's days were as hectic as Luke's, limiting their time together, increasing her sense of urgency. Suddenly it was their last moment together. Luke had come over to Nina's apartment to say goodbye in private. They had agreed she wouldn't go to the airport with him where someone might photograph "their passionate farewell embrace."

He would be gone for six long weeks. Nina wrapped herself around him.

"My God, woman, you're like an octopus," he complained.

"Hold me," she insisted.

“Okay,” he said nobly. After a while his hands started to roam over her body. They stopped abruptly on her wide snakeskin belt. “Is this new?” he asked suspiciously.

“Yes. Luke, don’t tell me you’re a snake lover, too. Endless mutual discovery is one thing, but this is getting absurd.”

“How can you possibly, in good conscience, wear—”

“And to think I thought I would miss you! You won’t see me for six weeks. Can’t you talk about anything more romantic than the immorality of my wardrobe?”

“Don’t overfeed my fish. They got fat last time I was away.”

“What do I see in you, I wonder?”

“Lazy sensuality?”

Nina’s phone rang. She answered it.

“Yes, Robin, he’s still here. Okay, calm down. Yes, tell Kate I’ll make him leave. Have a good trip. See you in the New Year. Oh, and keep an eye on him for me, Robin. He’s arrogant, unpredictable, and hot-tempered, but he’s the best I’ve got.” She put down the receiver. “You have to go,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

Luke looked at her for a painful moment, trying to memorize every detail—even the snakeskin belt. Nina flung herself into Luke’s arms. He held her so tightly she could scarcely breathe.

“Tighter,” she whispered.

They kissed longingly.

“I’ll call every day,” he whispered.

“Don’t make promises. Just call me when you can.”

He kissed her again. “Think of me,” he breathed against her lips. They pulled apart roughly. He opened the door to leave. “Oh, and Nina?”

“Yes?”

“For God’s sake, don’t redecorate my apartment while I’m gone.”

A pillow sailed through the air as he closed the door.

He telephoned her that night from Los Angeles.

“Hi, it’s Luke.”

“Luke who?”

“I could catch the next flight back to refresh your memory.”

“My memories are shocking enough as it is. Stay in LA and get rich enough to take me to Les Précieuses every night.

“I always thought women were supposed to get all mushy when their lovers went away,” Luke

complained.

“A common male fantasy.” She heard music, laughter, and shouting in the background. “Where are you? What’s going on?”

“That’s just Kate and the guys and a bunch of other people celebrating California sunshine. Work starts tomorrow.”

Nina smiled wickedly and said in a gooey, mushy voice, “Oh, darling, sweetheart, Luke, tell me how much you miss me.”

“There are a lot of people here,” he said uncomfortably.

“Don’t you wish I were there with you?”

“Most of the time. The rest of the time I want to shake you till your teeth rattle.”

Nina laughed, knowing full well he spoke the truth. They talked for ten minutes about nothing in particular. Nina hugged the phone to her after she hung up. Really, everything would be all right.

Since she knew this would not be the last time they were apart for a lengthy period, Nina concentrated on developing a positive way of living while he was gone rather than moping like a lovesick teenager until he came home.

Luckily, her work was absorbing and fulfilling. With the holidays coming up fast there was even more work with Christmas celebrations and charity concerts. She kept her social life active with friends and family. It was amazing to think she had more or less occupied herself this way her entire adult life without thinking anything could be missing.

Luke was absent, but the added dimension of her life was still there in her love and longing for him, in her expanded views and feelings. She found ways to keep him close to her though he was thousands of miles away. She played his albums whenever she was at home. She took his car out to cautiously practice her driving. Although she was never sentimental enough to practice cooking while he was away, she did try reading books she knew he loved. And, of course, there were his telephone calls.

He didn’t call every day; his schedule was too erratic and she was seldom home, anyhow. She had the phone number of where he was based in LA, but he was jumping around the West Coast so much she could never reach him. Sometimes he might call her twice in a day; other times she might go four days without hearing from him. Even so, they were running up quite a phone bill.

Her phone was ringing off the hook as she came home one day. It must be Luke—even his ring was impatient and demanding. She had forgotten to leave her answering machine on.

“Hello?” she said into the receiver.

“Where the hell have you been? I’ve been worried sick! I’ve been trying to reach you since yesterday afternoon!”

“Hello, darling. Fine, thanks, and you?” Nina said mildly.

A sullen pause. Then: “Hi.”

“I went out to Westchester to see Angela and Maria in their school play and spent the night at Michael and Nancy’s house.”

“Oh.”

“Where did you suppose I was? I told you how busy things have been.”

“I’ve been imagining the worst. I guess I got carried away. I pictured you lying under the wheels of a car or stabbed through the heart in an alley somewhere.”

“That *is* a bit carried away, Luke.”

“I didn’t want to call your mom and make her hysterical, too, in case it turned out to be nothing”

She smiled fondly. “Luke, as you once pointed out, I’ve been crossing the street my whole life without your help. There’s no reason to suppose life with you has addled my brain so much I can’t function anymore.”

“I know. I just ... worry about you, I guess.”

“That’s nice,” she said softly.

“I think about you a lot out here.”

“I think about you, too.”

There was a long frustrated silence between them.

“Nina...”

“What?”

“...Nothing. I mean ... I wish you were here.”

“I know.”

“I want to see you and touch you. I want—”

“You’d better not tell me what else you want to do or I won’t be able to sleep tonight,” she said huskily, feeling the now familiar wildness welling up inside of her.

Luke told Nina he probably wouldn’t be able to call her again until Christmas Day at her parents’ house since he would be moving around a lot in the next few days.

Christmas Eve at the Gnagnarelli house was always exciting and chaotic. The children gave the house that special air of excitement, but the adult Gnagnarellis were also pretty enthusiastic.

“Mark, stop squeezing the packages!”

“Aw, Mom, I just—”

“You, too, Joe. Aren’t you both about twenty years too old to be behaving this way?” Julia ended on a shriek as Matthew picked her up and carried her under the mistletoe. Nina was still hanging it up, balancing precariously on a step ladder.

“Give me a kiss, Mom,” teased Matthew.

“Grandma! Grandma!” cried a small child, roughly shoving his Uncle Matt out of the way. “Grandpa’s cheating at checkers again! He’s winning all the cookies! Make him play fair!”

Nina watched Nancy and Michael as they desperately tried to find a satisfactory hiding place for all the children's presents from Santa Claus. Then Nina was obliged to explain to Angela and Maria why they couldn't have brandy in their egg nog like she did. After Stefano convinced Julia to try out the mistletoe, the doorbell rang, sending most of her family rushing to the front door.

It was a man with a large, special delivery package from Luke in California, addressed to them all. Nina was surprised. She had bought him a gift—a beautiful Italian leather jacket—but she was keeping it until he returned. She was hoping she could talk him into accepting it. Naturally she wanted to open the package right away, but her four brothers kept it out of reach and evily insisted she wait till morning like the rest of the children.

Luke called late Christmas Day. All the Gnagnarellis were gathered in the living room as Stefano beat them one by one at his new electronic football game.

"I thought those things were meant for kids," said Matthew.

"I guess that's why Mom got it for Pop," Nina said.

When the phone rang she knew, as she always did, that it was Luke calling.

"Merry Christmas, honey!"

"Merry Christmas!" she shouted above the noise.

"Did you like them?"

"We loved them! We're all wearing them now"

Luke had sent a boxful of custom-designed T-shirts. Each of their individual names was printed on the back. On the front in bold letters the name "Gnagnarelli" appeared, and under it was printed: "Nya-nya-rel-i." She and her whole family had been thrilled. Everyone had put on the brightly colored shirts and worn them all day. Nina told Luke.

"I'm glad," he said.

"I've got your present with me," Nina explained. "I want to see your face when I give it to you."

"Oh?" He sounded suspicious.

"Just keep an open mind."

"I'm not sure I like the sound of this."

"Luke..."

"Yes?"

Nina didn't want to bellow her feelings over the phone in front of her whole family, but she had to tell him.

"I've had all sorts of presents in my life, including jewels and furs, but this one was my favorite ever."

"I have another for you. Not jewels or furs—you have enough of one and too many of the other. This one is special. I want you to watch me on TV New Year's Eve. You'll get it then."

“What is it?”

“I’m not telling. Watch the show.”

“Is this your subtle way of forcing me to sit through more rock ‘n’ roll?”

“Caught red-handed.”

“I’ll watch it.”

“I’ll be thinking of you,” he said.

“I—uh—” She noticed her nieces staring avidly at her.

“Yes, darling?” he teased. “Aren’t you going to tell me you miss me and long for me night after night in your lonely bed?”

“Right. What you said,” she said uncomfortably and hung up.

The following week was packed with rehearsals, performances, and holiday gatherings, but Nina didn’t forget her promise to Luke.

Giorgio Bellanti invited Nina, along with Jesse and Rebecca Harmon, to his house for New Year’s Eve. After a late supper, they turned on the TV. The program was a review of the year’s pop hits and a preview of music coming out in the New Year. There was a live interview with Luke, during which the interviewer congratulated him on the outstanding success of *A Wilder Name* and asked about his plans for the following year. Luke said he didn’t want to tour again for a while.

Nina noticed how tired he looked; she must tell him, next time he called, to eat right and get more sleep. The interviewer, a man with rather overstyled hair, pressed Luke for more information about his opera star girlfriend. Why wasn’t she with him in California? And was it true they might be splitting up soon? Nina wondered how a total stranger could manage to insinuate so many unpleasant things about her in just a few sentences. To her relief, Luke politely refused to comment. When the interview was over, the interviewer told the viewing audience that he was pleased and proud to announce the premier showing of Luke’s latest video *Once Bit Is Twice Shy*.

Nina jumped out of her seat, a surprised and excited smile lighting her face. “That sneak! All that taping, all those long days and late nights at the studio! He never told me it was for this!”

“Pretty good surprise, yes, Nina?” said Giorgio jovially. Giorgio’s immense family crowded around the TV set to enjoy the video with Nina.

The video was rather funny and terribly sexy. Above all, it had Luke’s personality stamped all over it—bold, daring, original. It wasn’t her usual cup of tea, but no operatic aria or Elizabethan sonnet could have pleased Nina as much as the cheeky, jazzy rock song Luke Swain had written for her.

“He’s a genius!” cried Giorgio amiably. “You are a lucky woman, Nina!”

Nina felt tears welling up in her eyes. More than anything she wanted to reach across nearly three thousand miles to hold Luke and tell him how much his gift meant to her.

When the video was over, everyone cheered and congratulated Nina in Italian and English, as if she herself had created that video. Jesse and Rebecca beamed like proud parents.

“And to think I introduced them.” Jesse sighed.

“You did not,” Rebecca objected.

“Well, they met because of me,” Jesse protested.

“They did not. They met because of the music awards ceremony,” Rebecca insisted.

“Well, if it hadn’t been for me—”

“Hush up, it’s nearly midnight,” Rebecca admonished.

They all counted off the last seconds of the old year and loudly rang in the new one. Nina would have given anything to be with Luke at that moment. She closed her eyes and concentrated very hard, hoping he would know she was thinking of him.

She went home early, hoping Luke would call her there since she didn’t know where to reach him. Nina thought she would burst with happiness if she tried to keep her feelings bottled up inside any longer. She’d been a fool to be afraid of the future, to think anything could go wrong between them. She loved him so much, she had to let him know. When he called, she would tell him she loved him with all her heart and soul.

She waited up late, but he didn’t call. She was disappointed, but it was understandable. There was a three-hour time difference; he was probably afraid of waking her. And he was the man of the hour tonight; he probably couldn’t even get a moment alone to call her. It didn’t matter. She’d tell him tomorrow.

In bed, Nina hugged her pillow sleepily—a very poor substitute for what she wanted to be hugging—and watched dawn paint the sky with vivid amber streaks. It was bitterly cold outside, but her heart was overflowing with warmth. Love swept through her like a life-giving river. Her future seemed full of promise on this first day of January, usually the bleakest of months.

Twelve

“What’s wrong?” Luke asked. His voice sounded hollow and far away.

“Nothing,” Nina said dully.

“Come on, Nina, I know that tone of voice; something’s bothering you,” he prodded.

Although she’d gotten messages from him on her answering machine for the past four days, this was the first time he’d been able to reach her since New Year’s. She couldn’t reach him either since he’d been even busier, traveling, performing, interviewing, traveling. He sounded exhausted and ill-tempered.

“I’m just tired,” Nina said.

“This is like pulling teeth,” he said irritably.

She really hadn’t intended to tell him. It was her problem, and she didn’t want to make him feel guilty. But he was pushing her again. “All right. You want to know what’s wrong? I’ll tell you what’s wrong. What’s wrong is that two days ago, in front of my entire family, Maria and Angela came up to me with some tabloid that had a big, clear, frontpage picture of you out on the town with some red-headed actress.”

There was a long pause before he said uneasily, “Nina, you don’t honestly think I’m seeing someone

else, do you?"

"No, of course not. But my nieces were all upset, and my family was embarrassed, and I kept trying to explain that it's just hype. I felt even more ridiculous than when I tried to explain my divorce to them." She sighed heavily. "It was awful."

"Oh, Nina, I'm sorry," he said sincerely. "Robin and I went to a charity concert with this actress and her husband. I should have realized ... I just stopped worrying about nonsense like that a long time ago."

Nina felt so frustrated. "Honestly, Luke, why can't you get yourself photographed with a man for a change?"

"I think that would cause more scandal than this, Nina," he said dryly.

"Oh. Yes. I suppose so." She sighed again. "I just don't understand why they have to do this to us"

"I suppose it sells copies. Are your father and brothers ready to kill me?"

"No, of course not. They want to believe me. They're just worried about me. Especially since my divorce."

"Nina, honey, I'm so sorry about making things awkward with your family. I'll be more careful."

"How?" she asked glumly. "Are you going to make sure you never come within thirty feet of another woman besides me and Kate?"

"Well, I wasn't thinking of anything quite so drastic," he admitted.

They talked for a few more minutes. Nina finally hung up feeling restless and dissatisfied. Then she realized she'd never even mentioned the *Once Bit Is Twice Shy* video to him. He must be feeling hurt about that. She'd also forgotten to tell him she had to go to Boston for a concert and wouldn't be back until the following week.

"Damn!" she said, throwing a pillow across the room. She didn't even know where he had been calling from.

Climbing to the top of the opera world was starting to look very easy compared to falling in love with Luke Swain.

She and Giorgio enjoyed singing in Boston, and they tried half a dozen Italian restaurants during their stay there. Nina kept trying to reach Luke at the Los Angeles number, knowing all the while that it was useless; hadn't he said he would be in Northern California all week? But Nina was growing more and more dissatisfied with the unresolved issues between them. She was filled with a sense of urgency. She had to talk to him, and soon.

Her final day in Boston was marred by two things. First, a radio interviewer who'd asked to interview her about her career had the unmitigated gall to ask her about Luke on live radio. Then she received a scathing review in a local Boston paper. This particular reviewer had never given Nina a good review; he belonged to an old school of opera and often criticized Nina for sacrificing pure musicality to interpretation.

Today's review, however, while never descending into an open personal attack, icily suggested that Nina had allowed her well-publicized association with rock 'n' roll music to influence her classical training and completely jeopardize any musical integrity that she might have once possessed.

Nina felt sick with embarrassment. She had received bad reviews before, but this was the first time someone had ever suggested she shouldn't even be singing classical music. Giorgio kept assuring her in broken English that the review was absurd, a cheap shot, an unwarranted personal attack from a narrow-minded tone-deaf has-been. Nevertheless, it shook Nina's professional confidence as few things ever had.

Luke, of course, didn't know about it. Nina was ambivalent about her own reasons for deciding not to even mention the incident to him. There was nothing he could do about it, after all, and she didn't want him to feel responsible for what had happened. On the other hand, she was also aware of a deeper feeling of anger toward him, of misdirected frustration building up inside her. If it weren't for him, things like this really wouldn't be happening to her, a little voice persisted in saying.

Where *was* he, anyhow? She'd been back for a whole day, and he still hadn't called.

When he finally did call, it was to deliver bad news.

"You won't like it," he warned.

"What?" she asked wearily.

"I've agreed to extend the tour by ten days."

"Oh."

"But Kate and I have agreed—"

"It's okay. You don't have to explain," she interrupted coldly.

"Fine," he snapped.

Nina bit her lip. She knew he was tired and cranky, he had said as much. How could she talk to him when they were both at the end of their rope?

They finished the conversation brusquely. Nina hung up feeling agitated and nervous. She should have been calmer. Of course his career had to come first. That was understandable. Hadn't hers always come first?

But why couldn't *she* come first? she thought angrily. She needed him right now. She was feeling all the pressure of a relationship with him and none of the joy. For four weeks she hadn't seen him and had scarcely spoken to him. He wasn't there to support her when people questioned her about him or to hold her when people attacked her unfairly. He was enjoying the good life out in California while she was holding the fort back in New York, trying to convince her family she wasn't making the biggest mistake of her life, parrying questions about their private life, and suffering unjustified professional criticism. And now *he* was having such a good time he was extending his tour by ten days. How could he be so thoughtless?

Stop it, stop it, stop it, she told herself sternly. He doesn't know how hard it is for me.

Of course, he knows.

He doesn't. Or maybe he does, but he knows I have got to learn to deal with it.

Typical. You wouldn't have to deal with it if it weren't for him, would you?

"Enough!" she said aloud. Her lonely bedroom was absolutely silent. She must be going crazy.

“Oh, Luke, Luke, Luke,” she sobbed softly. “I need ... you.”

The following evening Nina saw Luke briefly interviewed on TV as he was going in to do a concert. She didn't hear what he said. Her eyes were fixed on the beautiful, badly dressed blonde he had his arm around. The woman snuggled up to him, looking happy and proud. As she and Luke walked away from the reporters, Nina could see him cock his right eyebrow at the woman as she whispered into his ear. He laughed and kissed her cheek.

Nina stared at the TV screen as Luke faded from sight and the announcer showed off his excellent dental work.

Stay calm, she told herself. Don't get any ridiculous ideas. You know Luke. He wouldn't do something like that to you. He's not some mindless guitar player that hops into bed with every groupie that happens along.

It's probably an old friend or something. I'll call him to tell him I love him and miss him, and I'll ask who she is. I'll admit that seeing her with him made me uncomfortable. That's perfectly normal.

“Who the hell is she?” Nina asked the TV.

Luke hadn't even begun the concert yet. He probably wouldn't be back home for at least four more hours. She glanced at the clock. That would make it three o'clock in the morning, New York time. She had to rehearse in the morning. No, she would just call him at the Los Angeles number the following day like a sensible adult person.

At five o'clock in the morning Nina was still restlessly tossing and turning. So much for a good night's sleep, she thought sourly. Groggy and disoriented, she picked up the phone. It would be 2:00 a.m. in LA. Surely he would be in.

“Hello?” A woman answered. It was definitely not Kate. Stay calm, Nina thought, just ask him. It's nothing.

“Hi, is Luke there?”

“Well, yes. He's in the shower now. And then we're going to bed. Could you call back tomorrow?”

He's in the shower. We're going to bed. Nina sat down without realizing it.

“I want to talk to him now,” she said as calmly as she could.

“Well ... is it an emergency? He said he doesn't want to be disturbed tonight. It's sort of special,” the girl said hesitantly.

“God forbid I should *disturb* the two of you,” Nina said scathingly.

“Well, if you—”

“Just tell him I called, will you?”

“Who is this?”

“Nina.” She hung up the receiver very neatly. Then, with a violence that astonished her, she swept it and everything else off her bedside table.

Nina stared at the scattered objects on the floor.

“What a mess,” she said.

She wanted to kill him. Him and his foul temper and his uncouth profession and his dreadful taste! Had she put up with him, shared her life with him, loved him all this time so he could blithely hop into the sack with some blond California rock groupie the first time they were apart for a few weeks? She burned with hurt and betrayal.

Nina pounded her pillow as hard as she could, ironically noting that it was not the first time she had wished her pillow were Luke. Nina buried her face against it and sobbed miserably. Wasn't life hard enough without Luke Swain? How could he have done this to her?

Oh, Nina, maybe he hasn't really done anything, she thought, trying to be fair, trying to calm her shattered nerves.

After all, she had called to find out who that woman was, and then she hadn't even asked. Admittedly, circumstances looked bad, but she shouldn't just condemn him without asking who the woman was and what she was doing there. She had given Philippe a chance to explain before she divorced him. Of course, Philippe hadn't had an explanation that any wife could reasonably accept.

Maybe this girl was Luke's masseuse or his secretary or his maid or his bodyguard.

Come off it, Nina, don't be so naïve. He's a rock star.

Stop it. He's Luke. He doesn't betray his friends. Especially not me. He's the most honest person I know.

“I'm becoming schizophrenic,” she said in disgust. “I need a break.”

He was bound to call back. What would she do then? Tell him she had had enough of scandal and gossip and groupies and long-haired guitar players? Tell him she was going back to her tame, elegant world of good manners, well-dressed men and imported wine? Tell him he'd better have a damn good explanation for that silly woman being in his room in the middle of the night?

She lay there till dawn waiting for him to call. He didn't. She felt a deep, aching disappointment. Exhaustion finally took over and she dozed.

Her alarm woke her barely an hour later. She finally realized why the phone hadn't rung all night. It had been lying on the floor, off the hook, since she had knocked it over. She tripped on it as she got out of bed.

“I'm really losing my grip,” she muttered as she headed toward the shower. “I need a long vacation from all this.”

She did not, however, put the receiver back on the hook. She needed time to think before she talked to him. He had such a forceful personality, he could talk her into almost anything. She was falling to pieces under the pressure; whatever she did now had to be a rational decision, which she made alone. Would she stay with him and work it out, or would she leave him for a tamer life?

She had a grueling eight-hour rehearsal ahead of her, which would require all her energy and concentration. She would do that, she would come home to sort out her feelings as best she could, and then she would call Luke. A clear, simple plan of action.

She was absolutely useless at rehearsal that day. Exhausted and unhappy, Nina couldn't concentrate or focus her physical energy. Halfway through the morning the director told her to go home and stay in bed

until she felt better. She tried to argue, but he wouldn't hear of it.

She returned to her empty, silent apartment. The phone was still lying on the floor. She put the receiver on the hook and lay down on the living room couch.

She fell asleep for four hours, dreaming the whole time of Luke, erotic, confusing, frustrating dreams that mirrored her anxiety and insecurity. She woke at last, slowly coming out of her slumber, taking a long time to separate reality from her dreams.

With her rehearsal canceled and no performance that night, Nina indulged in the first real chance for serious reflection she'd had since the world had started caving in on her.

She lay on her couch in the fading light and thought about Luke. Thinking of who and what he really was, she slowly realized that last night had simply been a symptom of extreme stress. Luke wasn't like her ex-husband. He wasn't like any other man in the world. And while he might be the sexiest man alive, if he had a strange woman in his room in the middle of the night and asked not to be disturbed by anyone, it wasn't because he was "cheating" on Nina. He had too much integrity to betray her trust like that, she was sure of it.

It was probably some poor unsuspecting girl he cornered to lecture about wildlife preservation or political equality, or maybe an old friend who wanted to talk to him. Of course, she'd still ask him. She would also ask him, for her sake, to exercise a little forethought from now on.

Nina's state of physical and mental exhaustion had somehow reduced her problem to its bare essentials. Usually other people's problems looked so simple, while her own seemed terribly complex. But right now everything looked very clear.

She loved Luke. She wanted him more than anything. She'd risk everything to be with him. Was she really going to let a lot of overzealous fans, obnoxious photographers, rude reporters, silly scandal mongers, and shallow hangers-on come between her and her needs? Did they matter more than Luke? Or more than her?

She hadn't had ten years to develop a thick skin and tough attitude, but she had Luke now to help her learn. She knew how damaging those outside influences could be. Was she such a wimp that she would let them ruin the happiness she had with Luke?

It would be nice if she and Luke could live in a vacuum, the way they had in Jesse's upstate cabin, with just each other and long days of peace and quiet; but they couldn't. Neither of them was made for peace and quiet and obscurity. And if either of them had wanted a quiet life, they certainly wouldn't have chosen each other.

Nina examined the changes in herself with astonishment. Luke had stirred up her soul, stripped away the sheen and the gloss, taught her to want probing, provoking, deep communication with a man. She had led a tame life full of underlying restlessness. He had changed all that and given her a wilder name. Now she could never become the cool, composed, remote, lonely woman she might have become otherwise. He filled her, he drained her, he used her up and gave everything he had in return. They would always be very different people, that wouldn't change; yet they would always be a part of each other.

So did she really care what a lot of strangers in the scandal sheets thought about her, or what snide reviewers said about her, or how many of her meals were interrupted by rock fans?

She didn't care. She knew her family would continue to have their doubts for a while, but they'd learn. They liked him; they might never grow to love him—he was *such* an aggravating man—but they would

grow to trust him as she did. And if they didn't, it wasn't her problem, anymore. She loved him.

Nina felt enormously satisfied. She felt happy enough to dance down Lexington Avenue and strong enough to pick up her whole apartment building.

So why didn't he call? She had put the phone back together. Did he expect her to sit around all night waiting for him to call? Didn't he realize how many important things she had to tell him?

If only she could see him. If only she could hop a plane to LA. But she couldn't. She had to rehearse. She just couldn't pick up and—

"That's it," Nina said. She jumped off the couch and ran into the bedroom. She grabbed an overnight case and opened her closet.

She would go anyhow. She could fly out tonight and come back tomorrow night. She'd miss one whole day of rehearsal, the first ever. Tough. She wanted to come first in Luke's life; how could she ask that of him if he didn't come first in her life? She had to show him how much he meant to her. So let the opera company fire her. Tough.

"Well, maybe that's a little rash. Maybe I'll call in sick from the airport," she decided.

She piled things carelessly into her overnight bag and slammed the lid shut. She had to get to Luke, to hold him, to tell him, to love him...

She grabbed her mink coat and carried everything into the living room. She looked inside her purse to make sure she had enough cash with her.

The doorbell rang.

She put on her coat. Whoever it was, she was going to get rid of them. She was leaving *now*.

She opened the door.

"Luke!" she exclaimed. He looked terrible. His eyes were bloodshot, his hair was rumpled, he was pale, and he needed a shave. Nina's first words to the man she loved were not the ones she had planned. "You look awful!"

He frowned at her mink coat. "Why are you wearing that coat?" he demanded irritably. "You know I hate that coat!"

"Oh, Luke!" She threw herself into his arms, nearly strangling him with her enthusiasm and smothering him with kisses.

Somehow, with their arms wrapped around each other and their mouths melded together, they managed to get inside the apartment and slam the door shut. Nina pressed her body against his, feeling him stir against her, the sudden hardening of his body telling her more graphically than any words how lonely he had been without her.

"Stop it," he said at last, his voice husky and his breathing ragged.

"What?" she asked breathlessly.

"Stop it. Go sit over there. I want to talk to you," he said as sternly as he could.

"But I was just on my way—"

“I don’t care *where* you were going! This is more important.”

“But I—”

“You’re not going anywhere until we’ve settled this!”

“I—okay.”

“I spent all night trying to reach you and all day making connecting flights to get here!”

“Oh, Luke—”

“I have to be back in LA tomorrow night.”

“Don’t you have to perform—”

“Never mind that! I got your message last night, Nina, and I can just imagine what sorts of horrible thoughts have been running through your mind since then.”

“I—”

“I’m not going to get offended or hurt. No, that’s not true. I’m hurt like all hell! Why didn’t you talk to me before you hung up and assumed the worst?”

“Well—”

“No, I didn’t mean to say that. I mean ... I know that your divorce made it difficult for you to trust anyone. I’m not a patient man, Nina, but I’ve tried to be understanding about this because I love you—”

“You what?” she interrupted, her eyes wide.

“Will you please stop interrupting me! This is hard enough as it is! What the hell time is it here, anyhow?” he said irritably. “The least, the very least you could have done, after all we’ve been through together, was to talk to me about this before you flew off the handle. Is that too much to ask?”

“No.”

“No?” That seemed to take the wind out of his sails for a moment. “Well ... Anyhow, I don’t care what we have to do, but we are *not* going through this again! I’ll give up concerts, cut my hair, grow a beard, and make a living writing tunes for dog food commercials, but I’m not giving you up! And that’s final!”

“Luke, I really don’t want you to do all those things.”

“Well, that’s tough! Because ... You don’t?”

“No. Beards itch. I’m pretty used to your hair by now. And I don’t really see a future for you in dog food.”

He plopped into a chair, totally deflated. “Then what the hell *do* you want from me?” he pleaded.

“You could repeat what you said earlier.”

“What?”

“Three little words.”

He looked blank for a moment. "I love you?" he said incredulously. He scowled. "Nina, I've been up for nearly forty-eight hours. I flew thousands of miles today. I made every airline employee from here to LA hate me. I wrestled with an old lady at JFK to get the first taxi cab into the city. I spent hours planning what to say to you, although I've forgotten it all. Can't you at least concentrate for a minute?"

Nina laughed. He looked bemused. She slid onto his lap, curled up against him and put her arms around him.

"Luke, you've told me you hate my wardrobe and my apartment. You've criticized my manners, my politics, my favorite music, my lack of domestic skills, and my temper. Why, in the midst of all those tender endearments—" she kissed him softly "—why have you never said you love me?"

"Nina," he said in exasperation.

"Luke."

"Nina, I'm a rock singer. Trust me when I say that's the most overused, misused, abused expression in the English language. I mean, really, how many men have tried a line like that on you?"

"Love isn't just a cheap line, Luke."

"No, of course it's not. It's everything we've been doing together. My God, do you honestly think I would go through this kind of aggravation for anybody else? You're the only person in the world who could get me to go to the opera, or to Saks Fifth Avenue, or to some of the awful restaurants you like. Do you think I'd taste raw fish for anybody else?"

Nina rolled her eyes.

He took her hand in his. His voice dropped, becoming softer and more serious. "Why do you think I chased you and chased you, despite all the times you tried to brush me off? Why do you think I tried to cancel an entire concert tour to be with you? Why do you think I wanted to meet your family and your friends? Why do you think I wanted to honestly show you what my life is like? Why do you think I lie awake night after night worrying that you'll get sick and tired of being Luke Swain's 'girlfriend' and leave me?"

"Oh, Luke."

He scowled. "You can't be that dense, Nina."

She scowled back. "Well, I am. Why didn't you say something like this before? Do you think it's been easy for me to be in love with the most sought-after man in America?"

His hands slid into her hair and he tilted her head back to look into her eyes. "Well," he admitted sheepishly, "you didn't say anything, either."

"You're one stubborn man," she said critically.

"Just scared. Well, maybe a little stubborn. But every time I turned around you were trying to shove me away or saying you could never adjust to my life. It's easy for you to say 'most sought-after man in America.' That doesn't amount to much when a guy falls in love with a woman who thinks it can never work out."

"I feel so guilty about that. I'll make it up to you"

“It’ll take years,” he warned, “forty or fifty of them, at least.”

“I don’t have any other plans.”

“I thought you were on your way out the door.”

“I was headed for the airport. Next flight to LA.”

His right eyebrow shot up. She nodded. He grinned. “Looks like we both had the same idea, for once.”

“Hmm.” She kissed him, expecting him to share her next idea.

“Wait a minute. About that girl—”

“Hmm?” Something about his jaw had always fascinated her. But his neck was pretty interesting, too.

“She’s my sister.”

That surprised her. “Your sister? You didn’t tell me your sister was visiting you!”

“I meant to, but we—”

“We let communications break down.”

“Yes. She thinks you’ve driven me crazy.” He looked at her. “She’s right.”

“I should have guessed it was your sister. She dresses just like you.” She patted his cheek. “I’ll take her shopping when she comes to visit you in New York.” He scowled again, and she kissed him lightly before saying, “I never got a chance to thank you for my Christmas present. The video, I mean. That really *is* the best present ever. Remember when you said that at least if I ever complimented you, you would know I meant it? Well, I loved it; I think you’re a genius.”

“That’s it, butter me up.” He rested his forehead against hers and closed his eyes. “When you didn’t say anything, I was afraid you didn’t like it. Or maybe you didn’t even want it.”

“I loved it. I love you.” They kissed again. Nina started to unbutton his shirt. “You have to leave tomorrow?”

He nodded.

“I wish you hadn’t extended the tour by ten days,” she murmured.

“I made a deal with Kate. She said if I would stay there a little longer, I wouldn’t have to go back this year. I could stay here with you.”

She kissed him to thank him, but her eyes were concerned when she pulled away. “I told you I don’t ever want to come between you and your career.”

“Well, that’s tough, because you come first now.”

“I don’t want you to give up live concerts,” she insisted.

“Actually, I don’t intend to. But I’m not going away for two months at a time anymore, let alone six or ten months. My touring days are over. I want to stay home with my wife.”

“Well, that’s good news,” she said, snuggling closer to him. “And I’ll just work in New York. No more

seasons abroad. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough. As for all the fans and photographers..." he began hesitantly.

"Oh, don't worry about them. I can handle them," she said confidently.

"You can?" he asked uncertainly.

"Sure. I can handle *you*, can't I? Anyhow, you were right, for once. Time spent worrying about that is time taken away from things that matter."

"Honey, I've hinted a couple of times about getting married, and you haven't—"

"Darling, you hint with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer."

"Nina," he said in exasperation. Then, more calmly, "Nina, I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I'm a sucker for punishment. Will you?"

"Of course I'll marry you. But I won't change my name."

"I wish you would. Nina Gnagnarelli is going to be awfully hard to fit into a love song."

"Names don't come much wilder than that," she said proudly.

"We could get married right after the tour's over," he said eagerly. "Something small and quiet. Just—"

"Oh, come on, Luke. Do you honestly think anyone in *my* family can have a small and quiet wedding?"

"Well..."

"I think we should have a *huge* wedding. Lots of pasta and ice cream and champagne and classical music—"

"Rock."

"We'll talk about the wedding later," she said diplomatically and pressed a kiss into his palm.

"Okay."

"But about where we'll live—"

"Instead of you trying to get used to my place, which you're too stubborn to do, or me trying to get used to your place, which would make me a nervous wreck—Ouch!" he exclaimed as she bit his hand.

"I think we should find a place we both like," she said while he nursed his hand theatrically.

"For once we agree on something."

"On the East Side," she added.

"Oh, Nina, no—"

"And I'm bringing all my furs and paintings and vases with me as my dowry," she added evilly.

"Then the least you can do is live on the West Side."

They scowled at each other in mutual consternation for a moment. Then Nina smiled tenderly at him.

“I think,” she said, rising slowly to her feet, “that we can talk about these details when we have more time to spare. Surely there must be something more important we can take care of right now.”

“I think so.” He stood up. “I’ve missed you,” he said huskily.

Her eyes flickered down his body and a wicked smile lit her face. “So I see.”

“Come here.” He shrugged out of his jacket and finished unbuttoning his shirt. “We’ve got twenty-four hours; how many times do you think we can—”

“Don’t you want to save some energy for your concert tomorrow night?”

“I’ll sleep on the plane.”

“You’ll pass *out* on the plane if we spend the next twenty-four hours ... making up.”

“I know it sounds strenuous, but ... it’s been an awfully long time, hasn’t it?” he said softly.

“Hmm...”

He shrugged out of his shirt, and his hands went to his belt buckle. He hesitated. “This is that part you do best,” he said hopefully.

Nina grinned. “By all means. But come into the bedroom first. If we do things your way, we won’t even have the strength to crawl there later.”

For once Luke agreed without argument.

About the Author

Laura Leone is the award-winning author of more than a dozen romance novels. Under her real name, Laura Resnick, she is also the Campbell Award-winning author of more than thirty science fiction/fantasy short stories, as well as several epic fantasy novels. In addition, she is the author of *A Blonde In Africa*, a non-fiction account of the eight months she spent traveling across Africa. You can find her on the Web at: <http://www.sff.net/people/laresnick>.

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