

DARK CRESCENDO



Lucille Naroian

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At the highly publicized funeral of her famous pianist husband, Joanna Reed Dalton unexpectedly sees her former lover, Nick Jordan, and is overwhelmed with yearning and unanswered questions.

Joanna's father, Boston physician Dr. Carlton Reed, hated Nick, a common construction worker, and tried to keep him from Joanna. Nick disappeared, seeming to give up on Joanna when she foolishly agreed to marry her Julliard piano instructor, Steven Dalton. During the entire three years of her loveless marriage to Steven, Joanna has longed for Nick - and now he's back in her life. But will he stay when Joanna's father tries to keep them apart once again?

Nick's obviously after something, but Joanna's not sure if it's romance or revenge. The truth of the past builds in a dark crescendo of danger and heartache that can't possibly end well - or can it? The final notes will ring true, heralding the death of a lost love, or a new beginning.

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by

Lucille Naroian

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~AUTHOR ACKNOWLEDGMENT~

This book is dedicated to my late mother, who filled my life with love and happiness, and whose unfailing belief in my dreams helped them to come true.

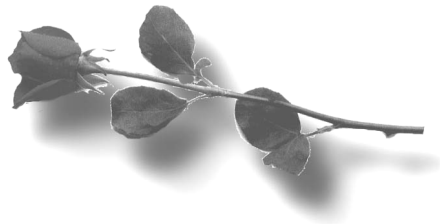
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by Lucille Naroian

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CHAPTER ONE

The peal of a lone church bell cut sharply into the early winter morning as a heavy rain fell on the throng of mourners filing into limousines outside the Church of the Good Shepherd.

In the candle-lit sanctuary, Joanna Reed Dalton stood tall and composed, her left hand resting lightly on her father's arm. Not once throughout the long, somber ritual did her clear blue eyes lift from the mahogany casket containing the remains of her husband, Steven Dalton.

To her friends, professional acquaintances, and the hundreds of fans who had come to pay their last respects to the world-renowned pianist and composer, the young widow's demeanor held all the restrained grief and dignity one expected from the mate of an Olympian god. However, no one, not even her father, knew the extent of blessed relief the maestro's untimely death had brought her.

* * * * *

When the service concluded, a slender, gray-

haired sexton swung open the heavy wooden doors in the back of the church. Rain-swept wind rushed in, jolting Joanna to the reality of her surroundings. Shivering from the cold, she allowed her father, Dr. Carlton Reed, to pull her closer to him while the pallbearers slowly guided the bier down the wide granite steps and into the back of the hearse.

In the darkened, now empty church, Joanna and her father quickly made their way to the vestibule. Just as they approached the last pew, the bulky figure of a man stepped out of the gray shadows, blocking their passage. Gasping audibly, Joanna's eyes widened in shock at the sight of Nick Jordan, just as handsome and virile as she remembered. Her heart pounded wildly in her chest as his smoldering gaze caught and held hers. For one brief moment, it was as if the last three years without him had never been. He watched her intently, studying her surprised reaction to his unexpected appearance. Unable to sustain her composure, she felt her whole body go limp against her father.

"Son of a bitch," her father muttered, pulling Joanna close.

Nick moved in, his expression venomous as he glared at him. Her father scowled, his face flushed with fury. Joanna glanced from Nick to her father, wondering what was going on between them. Without a word, her father abruptly pulled her past Nick and guided her from the church toward the waiting limousine.

Unable to stop herself, she glanced furtively over her shoulder to catch a last glimpse of the man she'd given up three years ago, to marry the man she was now burying. But Nick was nowhere to be seen, and all that was left for her was the casket carrying the remains of the man now gone from her life - forever. The overwhelming pain of loss squeezed her chest, making her gasp before she finally turned and got into the limousine.

After putting up with Steven for what seemed an eternity, his death meant nothing to her ... except freedom. It was the pain of giving up *Nick* and being without him that cut through her heart like a knife every time she thought about him. And seeing him now made the shock even harder to bear. She expected time to ease the intensity of her feelings for him, but it didn't. Sitting next to her father in the back seat of the limo, she could barely contain her tears.

The winter rain pounded heavily on the funeral procession as the line of black cars rolled at a slow, even pace on the three-mile journey to the cemetery. Biting her quivering lower lip, Joanna settled her body against the limousine door, glancing out the rain-blurred window to avoid a possible confrontation with her father. Right now, she was in no mood to talk to him, nor did she want him to see her tear-stained face. She knew she couldn't fool him into believing she was crying for her dead husband.

Without a word, her father dropped his handkerchief onto her lap. She lifted it to her face, then

darted a quick glance at him. His dark eyes blazed, but he remained silent, refusing to answer her unspoken question. Someday she would get him to tell her why, after so many years, Nick Jordan still had the power to arouse such fierce emotion within him. Someday ... but not now.

She turned back to the tinted window and concentrated on the rivulets of rain streaming down, blurring the world outside. Inevitably, her thoughts returned to Nick. She wondered again where he'd been, and what he'd been doing for the last three years - and why he'd showed up at her husband's funeral. After Steven's accident, her housekeeper Louisa had mentioned offhandedly that she'd heard Nick was back in Boston again. But Joanna had been too wrapped up in the confusion of Steven's death to pursue the issue then. Now she wondered ... was Nick married, with a couple of kids? Perhaps divorced? Could he still be interested in her? Maybe that's why he'd showed up at the church - to try once again to rekindle their relationship.

She bit her lower lip hard to stop that torturous line of thought. How could he still be interested in her, when she'd been married three years to another man, especially given the tone of their last meeting? She hadn't heard from him or seen him since that night - until today. Sighing heavily, she told herself now was not the time for thoughts like that. She had a husband to bury. Later, after this was all over, she could lose herself in the familiar fantasy of being with Nick

Jordan once again. Only this time perhaps her forbidden private fantasy could actually become reality...

* * * * *

The wind howled around the car, driving the rain down on the mourners hastily making their way to the green canvas canopy, beneath which rested the flower-laden coffin. When Joanna's limousine stopped at the base of the gravesite, an usher quickly pulled open her door, struggling to steady a large black umbrella against the gale-force wind. Slowly Joanna glanced over her shoulder, casting a sorrowful look at her father scanning the rolling hills of the cemetery. For a moment her grief for the dead was genuine. As a young teenager, she had come with her father to this very place to bury her mother.

Her father lifted his collar to shield his face from the pounding rain, then stepped beneath the umbrella. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, offering protective support as they made their way to the gravesite.

Just as he had eleven years before, her uncle, Monsignor Daniel Reed, awaited them beneath the scant shelter of the canopy. Only now she was not a young girl of fourteen experiencing the trauma of losing her mother, but a woman of twenty-five, a celebrity in her own right, who had come to bury her husband.

With head bowed, Joanna glanced tearfully at him, quickly remembering how the tall, yet gentle priest had tried repeatedly to persuade her to cancel her wedding to Steven, positive she had not given full thought to the difficulties in dealing with a temperamental celebrity twice her age. Little did he know it was his brother - her own father - who had pressured her to marry the famous Steven Dalton and abandon the man she truly loved.

"Come, Joanna," her uncle said softly. He lowered his head and placed a light kiss on her forehead, then pulled her closer and whispered something, but she was too distracted to acknowledge what he said as she scanned the crowd again, hoping to catch a glimpse of Nick. Unable to spot him, she chastised herself for her girlish and inappropriate foolishness. Dutifully she fixed her eyes on the spread of roses that flanked the coffin as her uncle moved away and addressed those gathered for the service. She tried unsuccessfully to concentrate on the scripture her uncle was reading. Her eyes kept wandering, seeking out Nick Jordan, but seeing only an unrecognizable mass of mourners.

Just as the brief service came to an end, a piercing streak of lightning illuminated the dark sky, followed by a loud clap of thunder that jolted Joanna so severely, she almost pitched forward onto the casket. She wanted to run and hide the way she always did as a child whenever a thunderstorm loomed overhead, but she was rooted to the wet ground.

Within seconds, a group of hysterical girls began pushing their way through the crowd, nearly knocking Joanna down as they clawed at the casket, grabbing for a floral souvenir. Overcome with panic, Joanna turned to flee from the unruly mob, but a hand clutched the back of her black lace mantilla, ripping it from her head and nearly taking a lock of her dampened hair with it. She screamed in terror as she and her father became caught in the mob now surrounding them. Clamoring voices, together with the sound of clicking cameras, filled Joanna's ears as scores of reporters and television crewmen recorded the *mêlée*.

"Get me out of here! Please!" she cried, pressing her hands to her ears as she buried her face in her father's chest. The crowd refused to set her free, continuing to paw her, some thrusting cameras in her face. The cemetery was now a scene of pushing, clawing, scurrilous combatants caught up in a bizarre contest to touch her and strip the casket of its blanket of roses.

Joanna pushed through the mob, frantically seeking the security of the limousine. Just as she reached for the handle, the door flew open, and the chauffeur pushed her inside. Joanna fell onto the seat, sobbing hysterically, her disheveled hair matted against her face. Her father followed swiftly behind, locking the door angrily against the crowd. "Quickly, Jason!" he ordered, drawing Joanna into his arms.



CHAPTER TWO

Weaving in and out of the heavy downtown traffic, the chauffeur finally turned onto a quiet narrow lane and brought the car to a halt before the understated elegant edifice of a three-storied brick townhouse on Beacon Hill. Joanna considered it home; though, due to her and Steven's concert schedules, she spent less than six months a year there. Once inside the house, Joanna passed through the foyer and entered the spacious living room. Automatically kicking off her shoes, she flung her sopping-wet coat onto the white leather sofa that dominated the room.

"Really, Joanna," her father admonished, snatching up the dripping garment. "You ought to be more careful with the upholstery."

His chiding remark riled her, and she spun around in a rage. "Is that all you can say after what we've just been through? That I'll damage the furniture? To hell with the leather! To hell with everything! Those people at the cemetery acted as if they'd gone mad, groping and grabbing at the flowers - and clawing at *me* - like a pack of wild hyenas! Not to mention the press with their microphones and

cameras. They turned Steven's funeral into a three-ring circus! I'm so furious, I could turn this room inside out. And *you* – you just–"

"Just *what*, Joanna?" Her father shot her a look, then moved swiftly past her.

She juttred her hands in the air. "You just shrug things off, no matter how awful they are!" She wanted to point out how coldhearted he sometimes could be, but figured there wasn't much use. He had been a brilliant surgeon who had to deal with success or disappointment on a daily basis, with the power of life or death in his gifted hands. Now, as head of the hospital's cardiac unit and commanding a seat on the board of directors, he held a different kind of power, but certainly his days were filled with strife and daily crises. She couldn't really blame him for developing the knack for distancing himself from the emotional fallout of things that happened around him.

Her father nodded his head but said nothing, indicating he understood her frustration and anger all too well. He went to her and gently gathered her in his arms. "Yes, it was terrible," he whispered, stroking her damp hair. "It was frightening, damn frightening. But you must remember that Steven was no ordinary man, and you, his widow, are no ordinary woman. Like it or not, what happened today was news, and the reporters were only doing their jobs. As for the crowd, well..."

Placing a tender kiss on her forehead, he affectionately lifted a strand of wet hair from her

brow. "Why don't you take a nice relaxing bath, and I'll get Louisa to make some tea." He looked around inquisitively. "By the way, where is Louisa? And why wasn't she at the funeral?"

"She left early this morning," Joanna said as she slipped from his arms and walked toward the fireplace. "I asked her why she wouldn't be at the funeral, but she merely shrugged me off and said she had something more important to do."

After lighting a fire in the hearth, Joanna stepped back and began running her fingers through her matted hair, allowing her blond locks to loosen, separate, and cascade about her shoulders in damp and heavy ringlets. Her father stood at the bar, his back to her. His broad shoulders drooped slightly, the way they always did when he was tired. For Joanna, it was an indication his guard was down, and now was the moment to strike. "You knew there was tension between Louisa and Steven, didn't you?" she accused as he mixed a tall glass with scotch and water.

He hesitated, then admitted, "Yes."

"Then surely you know how long it had been going on."

He huffed impatiently. "Really, Joanna, must we play games with each other?"

"How long, Father?" she persisted. "I want to hear you say you knew *exactly* what was going on in this household since the first day Steven and I moved in here."

He gulped his drink and turned away from her,

obviously irritated. "I don't know why you keep harping on this subject, Joanna. What went on between you and your husband during your marriage is, frankly, none of my business!"

"It damn well is!" she bellowed. "You've spent a lot of time and energy seeing to it that my whole life is your business!"

"Joanna—"

The phone in the study rang, saving him from having to make an admission Joanna knew he'd rather avoid. He was very careful to skirt around the issue of Steven's many personal faults and indiscretions, as if purposely overlooking them would make them somehow not real.

Joanna cast her father a parting glare as she headed into the adjoining study to answer the phone. It didn't occur to her until she reached the desk that she might not want to answer any phone calls at this time. The ringing stopped. But it didn't stop the ringing in her memory. A ringing phone had brought all this to a head four days ago. A ringing phone had actually contributed to her husband's death.

She placed her chilled fingertips against her warm forehead as she looked at Steven's dark and quiet cell phone lying in the clear plastic zipper bag, along with his wallet, both collected from the wreckage. He'd been on the phone, talking to *that woman*, on his way to the airport to see *their daughter*, when his car had skidded off the rain-slicked road and slammed into the guardrail, killing him instantly.

With her chin trembling, she reached out and snatched up the bag, ripping it open to extract the phone. She flipped it open and turned it on. The low-battery warning beep went off as she scrolled through the menu icons to find his stored messages. There it was ... the message that had sent him tearing out of the house to get to the airport. *Steven, our daughter lies in critical condition in hospital. Terrible pool accident. Please come quickly. Love always, Yvonne.*

Joanna skewed her face in a scowl, thinking of Yvonne Martell, the famous mezzo-soprano opera star, who'd been Steven's secret lover for more than twenty years. She was also the mother of their seventeen-year-old daughter, who had been lying comatose in a California hospital. In an odd twist of fate, the woman who loved Steven Dalton had also contributed to his death.

Joanna flipped the phone closed and absently set it aside on the grand wooden desk where Steven liked to gather his paperwork and organize his thoughts with a pot of steaming tea. He'd also sit there for hours, talking privately on his phone to his beloved Yvonne.

Tears rolled uncontrollably down Joanna's face. When the call came, Steven had screamed at her to book the quickest flight to Los Angeles as he packed a few things. She'd been busy on the phone, trying to secure a seat for him on a seven o'clock flight, when he'd rushed out the door without so much as a goodbye. That was the last time she'd seen her

husband alive.

She glanced out the darkened rain-streaked window behind the desk. The rain continued to pound outside, as if it intended to drown the whole world along with her sorrow ... sorrow for Steven's frustration and anger ... sorrow for the three years they'd wasted together, pretending for a fickle and unforgiving public that they were a happily married couple. And sorrow for what might have been, what could have been, and most of all, what *should* have been, had she made choices based on her heart instead of what others told her was the 'right thing to do.' She sucked in a shaky, sobbing breath as fresh tears slid down her cheeks.

The last time she'd seen Nick was at her and Steven's prenuptial party. It had been raining just like this. He was hurt and angry over her decision to marry Steven, and his sudden appearance that night had been as unexpected and unsettling as it had been today at Steven's funeral. She closed her eyes, reliving that night, going over the details in her mind ... details that she'd memorized like a recital piece. She could picture the sights, sounds, and scents as if she were actually there...

* * * * *

The elaborate chandeliers overhead cast glittering lights over the Plaza Hotel's grand ballroom. The delicious odors of expertly prepared food laid out in a

dazzling display wafted through the air to entice the small crowd of formally dressed guests mingling about. Steven had carefully selected each and every person to attend and celebrate their upcoming union. As Joanna gazed across the small crowd of well-dressed guests, she realized nearly everyone was somehow connected with Steven professionally. Few of them were friends of hers, and that said something sad about her and her life. Among the guests was, of course, Joanna's father, a steady presence to oversee the festivities and ensure that everything went smoothly. He was never far from Steven's side, as if he were Steven's self-appointed private counselor and mentor.

Joanna had never looked lovelier, with her thick, honey-colored hair piled high on her head in a mass of ringlets dotted with seed pearls. Matching pearls adorned the strapless bodice of her ice-blue gown that accentuated her tall, slender form perfectly, and brought out the cool blue of her eyes. She pretended not to notice the admiring glances as she genially moved from one conversation to the next in her role as honored hostess. But, she couldn't say that she felt happy, despite the occasion being celebrated - her upcoming wedding. A dark void inside her reminded her constantly that happiness was not in the cards for her future. She'd spent the last four years punishing whatever piano keyboard was in front of her, as she tried without complete and lasting success to please the harsh taskmaster who would soon be her husband.

And before that, it had been her father she'd tried to please in exchange for affection and approval. She couldn't be sure which of them was the more exacting director of her life, but she knew she'd never again experience a moment of freedom and happiness, as she had when she was with Nick Jordan.

She quickly squashed all thoughts of the man who'd brought joy to her life and then slipped away like a thief in the night. Glancing in Steven's direction, she found him assuming his usual role as instructor, performer, and center of attention. His suave and cultured air, combined with fair hair and incredible good looks, gave him an overconfidence that could be stifling to those around him. He was certainly respected and revered, and his admiring fans loved him, but he was not necessarily liked by those who knew him well. Despite the fact that he was twenty years Joanna's senior, they were visually a perfect match – according to her father. Steven's ashen-blond hair, so pale that it appeared silver in the sunlight, blended into his smooth ivory complexion. But his piercing gray eyes hid secrets ... secrets about which Joanna had only vague suspicions at the time...

The guests had persuaded Steven and Joanna to honor them with a private duet. Steven had immediately agreed, and hesitantly Joanna had complied. Once they had taken their places at the twin pianos on the ballroom's dais, a hush fell over the group as the melodious strains of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* filled the room. Joanna's hands had

trembled slightly as they passed over the keys, and although technically she had made no error, her timing had been slightly off, and twice she failed to strike the notes with clarity.

Steven had caught the blunder both times, and, out of the corner of her eye, Joanna could see he was furious with her. She watched the color in his cheeks change from crimson to arctic white, intensifying her nervousness while his long, slim fingers glided precisely and effortlessly over the keys. Whenever her eyes encountered his, she stirred uncomfortably, hoping he would smile and put her at ease. Instead, the muscles in his face grew taut, and the arctic coldness in his eyes sent a chill down her spine.

Their audience, held spellbound by the haunting refrains of the melody, had been unaware of what was transpiring between them. So often Joanna had played the sonata with ease and self-assuredness, the melody seemed to end as quickly as it had begun. When the final notes were struck, cries of *Bravo! Encore! Encore!* exploded in the room. Steven, scanning the awestruck audience, came to his feet and took Joanna by the hand. Suddenly, his fingers tightened cruelly around hers, hinting at the greater harm he wished to do her. She heaved a dramatic sigh in an effort to calm herself.

When the ovation failed to subside, Steven took the microphone in his free hand and gallantly gestured toward Joanna. Refusing to look at him, the tears stinging at the back of her eyes, she continued to bow and smile at their guests. But inside, she wanted

to run from the room, so completely overcome by the mixed feelings of humiliation and anger at his overreaction to a less than perfect performance. Dutifully, she had stood by his side as Steven spoke. "Ladies and gentlemen ... friends ... we wish to thank you kindly for your warm response, but I'm afraid the hour is late, and my bride-to-be is a bit weary. Isn't that right, darling?" The last word, said in a caressing tone, was belied by the mocking smile fixed on his lips. Taking her slight nod as agreement, he slipped his arm around her waist in a gesture of devotion for all the guests to see, then escorted her down the steps and onto the ballroom floor. Ordinarily she would have responded in kind to his flippant remark, but she had no desire to do battle with him in public, and it had taken all her self-control to murmur a polite *thank you* and *goodnight* to their departing guests. Her father, the last to leave, kissed her goodnight and left.

Alone with Steven, and no longer able to control her anger, she shouted, "What the hell's the matter with you?"

"There's nothing wrong with *me*, my love," he replied through clenched teeth. He turned his back on her and headed for the stage. He was purposely punishing and humiliating her for two undetectable flaws in her performance that no one else had even noticed. After stepping up onto the stage directly under the light, Steven turned. His face was beet red. He studied her for a moment, then demanded, "Get up here. Now!"

Joanna had had enough of his moods and theatrics. She'd put up with it while they were on tour, but she wasn't about to endure it now. "No. I'm tired. I just want to go home!"

"I said, *get up here!*" he commanded, pounding his fist on the side of the piano.

Joanna jumped, startled. "What the hell is your problem *this time?*"

He ignored her question and merely said, "I want you to sit at the piano and play the *Moonlight Sonata* for me. Only this time, I expect it to be played the way I taught you!"

Joanna looked at his eyes, wild and fiery, and thought he surely had gone mad. Not wanting to provoke him further, she forced a smile and said, "All right, Steven, if that's what you want. But, won't you play it with me?" Choking on her words, certain he would refuse, she stared wide-eyed with surprise when his mouth turned slightly upward at the corners.

Forcing herself to meet Steven's stare, she waited breathlessly until he finally spoke. "Very well. Come in on the count of three."

She slowly approached the dais and settled herself at the piano, suddenly feeling as if she were trapped in some weird Twilight Zone episode, or maybe a nightmare from Hell. Over the course of their last tour together, Steven had become like a stranger, not the man she had come to know and admire. At one point, she'd convinced herself she could actually grow to love him, after he'd wooed her and proposed

marriage. When, after the repeated urging of her father, she'd actually accepted Steven's proposal, he inexplicably changed his behavior toward her, as if the very idea of marrying her repulsed him. His fury and contempt, combined with her pre-marital jitters, made her fear that marrying a man with such a horrific temper would be a disastrous mistake, despite her father's insistence that Steven was likely the best choice of a marriage partner she would ever run across. And she couldn't debate that sage advice, after Nick Jordan had disappeared from her life without so much as a goodbye. His unexplained absence - after she'd called hospitals and done everything she could think of to track him down - still hurt her to the core. She felt abandoned ... and used. But still, his love seemed so genuine, so real. How could he make love to her with such tender ferocity, and profess his love to her over and over - and then just walk away?

She shut thoughts of Nick from her mind and concentrated on Steven's subtle signal to begin. Together they played as one, and this time Joanna met Steven note for note, without hesitancy or error. As they approached the final bars of the sonata, she noticed that the muscles in his face had begun to relax, and the color in his cheeks had returned to normal. Closing her eyes, she breathed easier, assured her perfect performance would mend the discord between them. The melody ended on a soft, sweet note, with Joanna's eyes meeting Steven's as their hands lifted slightly above the keyboard.

The slow and deliberate clapping of hands shattered the quiet in the empty ballroom.

"Who the hell...?" Steven shot up from his piano just as a man in a rain-soaked trench coat walked toward them.

Joanna gasped. "Nick!"

Steven's eyes flashed first to Joanna and then to the intruder. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Why don't you ask the lady who I am, Mr. Dalton?" Nick turned to Joanna. "She and I are far from strangers, aren't we *Miss Reed*?"

Joanna winced as Steven stepped toward her. He made no move to touch her, but went to the end of the stage and flipped the switch, throwing the ballroom into a blaze of multicolored lights.

Nick stepped up onto the luminous stage, then casually slid down on the seat next to Joanna. "Jordan's the name," he practically crooned. Joanna didn't move, but merely lifted her gown and pushed it aside to keep it from getting wet.

"Am I supposed to explode in a jealous rage just because you know my fiancée, Mr. Jordan?" Steven laughed, folding his arms across his chest as he leaned against the piano.

Turning toward Joanna, Nick slipped his strong, hard fingers over hers. She sat spellbound, unable to remove her hands from beneath his grip. "Your party was announced on the social page of today's paper," he said softly. "I had hoped you'd come to your senses and realize the horrendous mistake you'd be making

by marrying this clown. I can't believe you put up with his bullshit tonight."

"Now, just a minute, Jordan!" Steven lunged to the edge of the piano.

"Shut up, Dalton!" Nick glared venomously at Steven. "Your phony charm doesn't impress me. You're nothing but a bully and a coldhearted bastard. You don't love Joanna. You couldn't possibly, and torment her the way you did tonight."

"Stop it, Nick!" Joanna pleaded. "It's not what you think. Steven meant no harm. It's just that—"

"It's just that he doesn't give a damn about you, and you know it." Nick looked her in the eyes, and she turned away, unable to face him as wild thoughts rushed through her mind. Where had he been for the last six months? Why hadn't he tried to contact her, at least to let her know he was all right?

"I'm surprised at you," he said in an accusing tone. "The fun-loving blond spitfire I know would never let herself be abused by a cocky bastard like this." His gaze traveled insolently down her body. "No. He certainly doesn't love you, and you don't love him either. I *know* you don't."

"Is that a fact, Jordan?" Steven quipped, his handsome features twisted in a smirk. "And what makes you so sure?"

"This." Nick unfastened the buttons on his coat. Joanna looked at Steven, as surprised as he appeared to be. Over the pounding in her ears, she heard Nick announce clearly, "Here's my proof!" She watched in

disbelief as Nick unfolded two large copies of sheet music, badly crumpled with frayed edges. He placed them on the rest above the keyboard.

"That's it?" Steven queried, looking down at Nick with smiling eyes as he pointed to the papers with his long, elegant fingers. "Two pieces of sheet music? Surely this must be a joke." He chuckled smugly.

Joanna sprang to her feet, the scarf of her chiffon gown brushing against Nick's flushed cheek. "Where did you get these?" she cried out, yanking the papers from the piano and blushing under the cold surveillance of both men.

"Don't you remember?" Nick chided. "You wrote this song for me when you were still living in the dorm at Juilliard. Although you never finished it, I wanted it. I still want it." His voice was rough and dry as he reached for the music Joanna now held tightly to her breast. "But, most of all, *I still want you!* It's not too late to get away from this madman, Joanna. Come with me - right now!"

Her fingers parted at his touch, the sensation sending a tingle throughout her body. She didn't quite understand what was happening to her, but a feeling of sensuous frailness enveloped her.

Here before her stood two men - two very different men. One, a wealthy, famous musician who was about to make her his bride. The other, a common laborer, strong and powerful, who had professed - and showed - his desire for her above all others, and

had come to win her back. Six months before, Nick had disappeared from her life without explanation, with no contact, leaving her powerless to do anything about it. Her father victoriously announced that Nick's behavior proved what a cowardly scoundrel he was – a man she should be glad was finally out of her life. She still suspected her father had somehow been behind Nick's disappearance, and she regretted her weakness in not standing up to him and confronting him about it. But Dr. Carlton Reed had always been a strong-willed, controlling man. And, for some reason, he couldn't stand the idea of Joanna being with Nick.

"Nick," she said softly, her eyes lowered in embarrassment, "You disappeared without a word. I tried to contact you, to find you, but you seemed to have dropped off the face of the earth! At one point, I thought ... something terrible ... had happened." She swallowed back the sudden urge to cry. Trembling, she sighed and tried to smooth her ragged emotions. "After six months, what else was I to think, but—"

"You're absolutely right," he admitted, closing his eyes for a moment. "I lost my job and couldn't find work..." He opened his eyes and stared hard at her. "But, things are better now. I'm here, and I desperately want you back." He slipped the papers back inside his coat pocket. "I was a bloody fool to ever let your father convince me I wasn't good enough for you."

"W-What?"

"I'm over that now. I'm back here, back home, to stay. And I want you to come with me, away from this

pompous jerk who's old enough to be your father."

"Nick what did you say my father--"

"He called me trash, scum of the earth. He said there'd never be room in your life for someone as common as me. He had me convinced I'd never be able to give you the lifestyle you deserved, that I'd just drag you down with me. At the time, I was unemployed and couldn't find another job. The hardest part of it all was that I couldn't tell you - I was too ashamed. I was down on myself, and I started to believe what your father said - that I was worthless and that you deserved better. I actually thought I would be doing you a favor by letting your father pick your future husband - this fine and cultured professor here." Nick snorted. "I can see now how foolish I was to let anything your father said get to me."

Joanna sank to her seat. "Oh, Nick..." She sighed, eyeing him anxiously. "Why did you come here tonight - of all nights - with the scribblings of a starry-eyed girl?" She felt stupid for ever thinking she could write music of any consequence. She could play the piano, but she was no composer. And she certainly didn't have the experience to know what was best for her future. Her father had reminded her of that constantly, ever since she was a child. He'd kept repeating over and over that she was just as flighty and prone to silliness as her mother - and she knew how things turned out for *her*. A passionate woman who loved to have fun, her mother had enjoyed their little tea parties and taking her shopping. But

gradually she changed. She argued more with Joanna's father, she cried constantly. She became fearful, accusing him of trying to poison her. And finally, she'd ended up institutionalized, dying alone in a psycho ward, ranting about her husband killing the only man she'd dared to truly love...

Joanna shook her head. She couldn't allow herself to end up the same way. She needed to follow a prescribed regimen of order and control. Those few months of wild abandon that she'd enjoyed with Nick were not how life really was. Her father had sternly reminded her that hard work, her nose to the grindstone, would keep her grounded in reality – and keep her sane. Work, her career, and responsibility would give her a sense of accomplishment and prevent her from going off the deep end, like her mother had. And he was also quick to point out that a man who'd love and leave her, as Nick had, would do it again.

Tears streamed down her face, and her words oozed as she whispered, "I-I can't, Nick. I've already promised to—"

"To what? To sacrifice yourself at the altar of this self-proclaimed god? Look at him, Joanna! Take a really good look at him! He's nothing but a vampire in a tuxedo. Give him six months, and he'll suck the life right out of you." He stopped and sighed deeply. Although he was talking to Joanna, he cast a mean look in Steven's direction. "Get rid of the guilt, sweetheart. You don't have to do anything you don't

want to do. You love *me*, and we both know it! I can see it in your eyes."

She turned away, shaking her head and swiping at her eyes. "You don't know ... you don't understand. I *need* to do what's right, what's best for..."

"Do what's best for *us*, Joanna!" Nick grabbed her by the shoulders and forced her to face him. "I know right now I can't provide you with the fancy, expensive home and cars that you're accustomed to. And maybe I never will be able to. But what matters is that I love you. *I'll always love you!* And that's more than the famous Steven Dalton can ever say."

He pulled her close, not roughly, but tenderly, as though she were fragile and might break under his strong hands. When he pressed his cheek against hers, they both sighed heavily. His touch was strong and forceful, yet comforting, and she thrilled inwardly, knowing he had come to her in spite of everything and everyone. He loved her ... and, for one precious moment, nothing else seemed to matter.

It was Steven who finally broke the long, unending silence. Surprisingly, his voice was quiet and controlled. "Go with him, Joanna, if that's what you really think is best. I won't stop you. However, I don't intend to stand here and be a witness to this melodrama any longer." Grabbing his coat, he stepped down from the stage. "I'm going home," he said, his voice devoid of emotion. "Kindly afford me the common courtesy of a phone call when you get home tonight. I'm sure that Mr. Jordan will see that you get

there safely. If the wedding is to be canceled, then it will need my immediate attention." He was out the door before Joanna was able to absorb the impact of what had just happened.

"Smart man, that Dalton," Nick said, grinning. His voice sounded confident and self-assured as he added, "He knows when he's been beat."

Tears clouded her eyes. "He hasn't been beaten, Nick. He knows I'm going to go through with this wedding. I have to. I can't cancel out. If I did, the fallout would be devastating. You don't understand, and I can't explain it to you right now. So let me go. I have to stop him!"

He turned his head away for a moment to collect himself, then turned back and faced her. The sad expression in his warm brown eyes was enough to make her heart break. "I'm beginning to get the picture," he said, softly. "It's your father, isn't it? He's the man I should be dealing with."

Joanna's tears slid uncontrollably down her cheeks as she watched Nick walk out of her life for the second - and last time.

* * * * *

Swiping at the tears dampening her face, Joanna shook herself free of that painful memory. Nick had been right. Her father had everything to do with it. He'd seen to it, from the time she was a child, that she had no confidence, no self-esteem. She lived in a

constant state of fear. She'd driven Nick away in fear ... fear that she couldn't handle happiness ... fear that she couldn't live life without her father's constant guidance and approval ... fear that if she chose a happy life married to a man she loved, the prize would be failure and disaster. She couldn't handle that - at least not then.

But now, after three years of living the lie of a marriage in name only, of surviving constant loneliness and mental abuse from a cruel man who hated the very sight of her ... now she realized she was a lot stronger than her father gave her credit for being. She had lived without Nick for three long, tortuous years, and now she was *free*. Free to live life her way, good or bad. Free to love the only man she'd ever wanted.

She straightened and turned toward the study door standing ajar, affording her an unhindered view of her father in the living room. She watched him fix a drink and take a long, leisurely swallow. He sighed with apparent satisfaction, seeming content with himself, as usual. He suffered no fears or self-doubts. Everything he did was done with surety of purpose and conviction.

Nodding to herself, she moved forward to confront him. It was time to take his lead and operate with the same self-confidence. It was time for him to pay for the hurt and misery he'd made his family endure, as far back as she could remember. But most of all, it was time for the worm to turn.

