

They rode back to Race's house, with Nina marveling at how much better the world looked through contact lenses.

"I guess that makes sense," Race commented, "because you look so much better with contact lenses." Nina blushed.

David was still sitting on the stoop, his customary position in good weather when Race wasn't home. It was as if his life revolved around school and Race. In between, he just switched himself off.

"Hi, David," Nina greeted him.

"Hey, David. Nina and I are going up to my room to watch *Little Shop of Horrors*. Want to come watch with us?"

That fleeting smile flickered across David's lips and he rose to follow them. Race inserted the DVD into the player and they watched half the movie before his mother called them down for supper. At the table, the Jasons commented on how pretty Nina's eyes were without the glasses and Race whispered, "I told you so." Nina looked down and blushed.

It was while watching the movie that it dawned on Nina who Race's father reminded her of. He bore a strong resemblance to Rick Moranis, not as Seymour, but as the brilliant scientist in *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*. Howard Jason was a little on the short side, and carried a few pounds over his ideal weight. Like his son, he had short, jet-black hair, black plastic frame glasses, and always wore a smile. Nina knew that he worked in middle management at a large insurance company, which at one time had put him below the Ryans in financial status. When Bill Ryan had lost his job, Howard Jason had offered him any assistance he needed, including an open-ended, interest-free loan to help him continue to meet the mortgage payments. Bill Ryan had turned down the generous offer, unwilling to place such a burden on his friend. A new family now lived next door with two young children. Race and Nina babysat for them occasionally.

Even in the past, Nina and Race had spent more time at his house than hers, because he had the computer with the high-speed Internet connection, the electronic keyboard, guitar, and enormous CD and video collection. Now, because Nina's apartment was not conveniently located near the school, and also Race suspected because she was ashamed of where they now lived, they only met at the Jasons. Race believed that Nina's parents were saddened by it, because in the past the Ryans had always been generous hosts. Now Race kept dropping hints to Nina that he would be perfectly comfortable meeting in her apartment. He hoped that soon she would take him up on it.

"I really love this movie," Nina commented, when they had finished watching it. "It's got horror, romance, and comedy."

“I never would have believed that Rick Moranis could sing,” Race said. “The guy’s full of talent. At least he doesn’t hide his.”

“Are you referring to someone in particular?” Nina asked.

“If the shoe fits.”

“What exactly am I hiding?”

“Nina, I’ve heard you sing. There’s no reason why you can’t try out for a part in the play. You have a good voice.”

“Compared to Nancy?” she asked rhetorically.

“I can’t make that comparison. Nancy isn’t afraid to let her voice out. You always hold back. If you just let go for once, you might surprise yourself.”

“I can barely speak in front of people, much less sing.”

“But in a play, the lights are low. You don’t even see the audience,” Race pointed out. “Let’s try an experiment. I’m going to turn down all the lights. There. Now I’m going to play *Suddenly Seymour* and I want to hear you sing without holding back.”

“Did you forget that Seymour starts singing first?”

“Just do Audrey’s part.”

“No fair. If I’m gonna sing Audrey, then you sing Seymour.”

“Okay, if that’s what you want.”

Race sat down at his electric piano and played a quick introduction. Then in a surprisingly mellow voice, he began singing.

*“Lift up your head. Wash off your mascara.
Here, take my Kleenex, wipe that lipstick away.
Show me your face, clean as the mornin’
I know things were bad, but now they’re okay
Suddenly Seymour is standin’ beside you
You don’t need no makeup, don’t have to pretend
Suddenly Seymour is here to provide you
Sweet understanding, Seymour’s your friend”*

Hesitantly, Nina began singing in a quavery voice that gained strength as she went on.

*“Nobody ever treated me kindly
Daddy left early, Mama was poor
I’d meet a man and I’d follow him blindly.
He’d snap his fingers, Me, I’d say “sure.”
Suddenly Seymour is standin’ beside me.
He don’t give me orders. He don’t condescend.*

*Suddenly Seymour is here to provide me
Sweet understanding. Seymour's my friend"*

Race chimed in with his lines.

*Tell me this feelin'll last till forever
Tell me the bad times are clean washed away"*

Nina responded in a voice so sweet and pure, it made Race's heart beat faster.

*"Please understand that it's still strange and fright'nin'
For losers like I've been it's so hard to say
Suddenly Seymour, He purified me
Suddenly Seymour, He showed me I can
Learn how to be more. The girl that's inside me
With sweet understanding, With sweet understanding,
With sweet understanding,
Seymour's my man!"*

Race jumped in with the harmony.

*"Suddenly Seymour, He purified you
Suddenly Seymour Yes, you can
Learn how to be more The girl that's inside you
With sweet understanding, With sweet understanding,
With sweet understanding,
Seymour's your man!"*

For a few moments, there was nothing but silence. Then David began applauding. "That was beautiful," he said, and for a rare moment there was real emotion in his voice.

"I told you," Race said, "you've been holding back."

"So have you," Nina pointed out.

"This isn't about me. I already get too much class attention. I have enough to do with my stories and debates. It's time you got some of the spotlight. It's your turn to shine."

"Against Nancy Davis?"

"Sure, Nancy has a fantastic voice, but she's too powerful and too loud. Her singing always seems to say, 'listen to how great I am'. Audrey is a timid sort of girl. Audrey needs a sweet, pure voice like yours."

"What if I make a fool of myself in front of the whole class?"

"That could never happen. Only three things can happen here. One, you get the part of Audrey. Two, you get a different part. Three, you don't get any part, and you're no worse off than before you started. There's no downside here."

“I don’t think I can do it.”

“Why don’t you just think about it? You have a few days.”

“Okay, I’ll think about it,” Nina promised.

“Look at the time, it’s almost time for U.S. Best Junior Division.”

“I’m glad they brought that show back. It’s my favorite.”

“Mine too.”

Last year a television station had begun a series of reality shows called U.S. Best. Contestants were chosen to sing in talent competitions. In addition to the fees they earned while they remained on the show, finalists often ended up with commercials and recording contracts. Then in the spring, the producers came up with a new twist, the Junior Division. Children up to age sixteen would compete in singing and dancing contests. The top five would be selected to form a pop group. The show had become a sensation, and one of the hottest topics discussed at school. Students chose favorites and bet on who would win. Race and Nina had made a point to never miss an episode. Race even videotaped each one.

“One day some of these kids will be big stars,” he predicted. “Then these tapes will be a collector’s item.”

Nina had quickly chosen her favorite, a statuesque blonde beauty named Lynette Tabor. Race had insisted he could not choose a favorite because they were all so good.

“Not even Lisa Raines?” Nina had teased.

“Why Lisa Raines?”

“Because she looks so much like your not-so-secret crush, Nancy Davis.”

“Hey, Nancy is gorgeous, but that’s only on the outside. Lisa does look a lot like her. And there are certain similarities in their style. When the others sing, they’re either saying ‘This is a beautiful song and I love it’ or they’re saying ‘I hope you like the way I’m doing it.’ Lisa and Nancy come off like ‘I’m good and I know it.’ Only Nancy’s attitude adds ‘and if you can’t see that, you’re an idiot.’ At least Lisa knows how to go soft on the soft parts.”

“But you’ve got to have a favorite you’re rooting for.”

“I’ll wait until I’ve heard them all.”

The day came when the final contestant, Tammy Lynn Petrie, was introduced. They aired a video of her interview where she talked of being raised in a family of five children in a two bedroom apartment in Georgia, learning to play guitar from her father and learning how to sing from both parents. Strumming a guitar, she proceeded to sing Emmy Lou Harris’s *Quarter Moon In A Ten Cent Town*.

“She’s amazing,” Race had commented. “She sounds just like Emmy Lou Harris. I think I’ve found my favorite.”

“Just because she imitates Emmy Lou Harris?”

“Not just that. The others are all either blonde or brunette. She has a unique look, with her long honey-colored hair, striking blue eyes, the cute little sprinkle of freckles. The others are all wearing designer clothing and you can tell they spent hours at the beauty parlor. She looks like she just combed her hair and stepped on stage in her school clothes. The others all had professional training. They were groomed for this. She is completely self-taught. She doesn't sing like a performer. She sings like it comes from her heart.”

Later, when the first four winners were chosen, Nina remembered how uncannily Race had predicted who would win. He had gone on to say that it was like trying to decide who was the best composer, Brahms, Bach, Mozart or Beethoven. The kids were all so great and each one had some special aspect. He was surprised that the show's producers didn't seem to know how to make the most of it.

“How would you do it differently?” Nina had asked.

“Well first, I would give each kid a nickname. You know how wrestlers always bill themselves as ‘the killer’ or ‘the tornado?’ I would give each kid a nickname so they get like brand recognition.” Holding an imaginary microphone, he imitated the show's host. “And now you're in for a rare treat as our very own Golden Girl, Lynette Tabor, gives us her own special rendition of The Rose.”

“And what nicknames would you give the others?”

“Well, I don't have one for all of them but Cheri Blossom would be Country Cutie.” Cheri was a nine year old with long blonde hair and an accent that reminded him of a pint-sized Dolly Parton. “Shayna McHale,” he continued, naming an eleven year blue-eyed old blonde with a winsome smile, “would be the Pixie or the Fairy Princess. Tammy Lynn Petrie would be the Georgia Peach.”

Nina nodded. “The nicknames fit. What about Lisa Raines?”

“What goes through your mind when you watch her?”

“She's a witch. I mean that in a good way. She throws around her long black hair and stares with her deep eyes and has this smirk on her lips. It's like she's putting a spell on the audience. You want her nickname to be the witch?”

“No, the Siren. Like in Greek mythology. The gorgeous women with the enchanting voices that caused sailors to throw themselves into the sea.”

“Well, if the audience could understand that you weren't referring to a burglar alarm, the name would fit. Anything else you would change?”

“Yes, the material. In her first performance, Shayna sang *Mr. Postman* and brought the house down. Since then all they've given her are these moldy oldies written for forty-year-old

male singers. Who in their right mind would ask a cute eleven-year-old girl to sing Barry Manilow? She needs cute and perky. And Lisa has the most incredible, powerful voice, so why do they give her the kind of song she could do with half her vocal chords tied behind her back? I would give her something more challenging.”

“Now that you mention it, I think you’re right.”

Each time the show aired, three children were asked to stand up and one of them was selected to join the group. Race commented that the kids were really good sports, congratulating the winner, and fighting hard to conceal their own disappointment. He also thought it was cruel to make two children stand and then announce they didn’t win. So far, the winners chosen were the two sisters, Teri and Cheri Blossom, Lisa Raines and Matthew Peters, a young boy black boy.

Nina remembered the night the final winner, Gabrielle Black, was announced. She was disappointed her favorite, Lynette had not been selected, and Race appeared devastated that Tammy Lynn Petrie had lost. The remaining children tried to be brave but Shayna McHale couldn’t hold back the tears.

Race was almost crying himself when he said, “This really stinks. She’s been up there singing her heart out for the last few months and now they’ve tossed her aside like last week’s newspaper. It really isn’t fair. She’s so talented. They all are. They should find a way to keep them all on the show. I don’t think I can watch this anymore.”

Nina tried to argue that in real life there are disappointments and the children should be prepared to face them. Race said that was like abusive parents hitting their kids to prepare them for future beatings. Just because there will be inevitable disappointments didn’t mean that adults had to go out of their way to hurt children’s feelings. When adults went on job interviews, the interviewer didn’t announce the results in front of thousands of people. The ten children should all be kept on the show and compete for cash prizes. If the producers didn’t understand that, the show would be a flop, he had predicted. Within two weeks, the show had been cancelled due to a precipitous drop in the ratings.

Now, as the familiar theme of U.S. Best Junior Division emerged from the TV set, Brant Harview, the show’s host, took the stage. He explained that the show was returning to the air with a whole new format. The five children who were not chosen the last time had formed a second group. Now each group, and individuals in each, would compete for prizes. Additional challengers would also be brought in.

“Hey, they stole your idea!” Nina exclaimed.

“Maybe I should sue them,” Race joked.

“To start off our new season, we’re going to have each of our contestants perform for

you, starting with the youngest. Introducing our very own Country Cutie, here's Cheri Blossom."

As the audience applauded, the tiny, pigtailed blonde took the stage and launched into a spirited rendition of Dolly Parton's *Two Doors Down*.

"Hey, Race, I think they bugged your bedroom."

"I'll have to sweep for those bugs later. You think maybe they picked up your singing, and you're about to get an invitation to join the show?"

When Brant introduced Shayna McHale as the Fairy Princess, and she began singing Abba's *Take A Chance On Me*, Nina almost lost it.

"This is just incredible!" she shouted. "I think they *did* bug your room."

"It's not that incredible," Race explained. "The ideas I came up with were just so obvious, I couldn't understand why they didn't see it themselves. The question isn't how they thought of it, but what took them so long."

When the show ended at eight thirty, the friends said good night and Nina biked home. As she drifted off to sleep that night, she was tired and happy. So much had happened and it was only the first day of the term. This promised to be a very good year.

The next morning, when Nina stopped at Race's house to pick him up, he was disappointed to see she was wearing her glasses.

"What happened to the contacts?" he asked.

"I had a lot of trouble getting them on," she explained.

"Does that mean you'll wear them tomorrow?"

"I guess so."

"Nina, you promised to cooperate. If you're not even going to try, you forfeit the bet."

"Okay, I promise to wear them tomorrow."

"Let's get moving. We have a stop to make."

They made a detour to a Dunkin Donuts and pick up a box of a dozen assorted.

"All right, we're still early," Race told Nina. "There's Parvin."

"Do you think she's pretty?"

"Parvin? Probably. With that cocoa skin and the long black hair, she's certainly exotic. And those big black eyes remind me of Bambi. But she's too serious. Maybe if she smiled more. Hey, Parvin," he called out, "you promised you could you help us get rid of six donuts."

Parvin shook her head. Her ten year old brother began jabbering at her. The other siblings joined in and a heated discussion followed.

"Why would you give us donuts?" Parvin asked suspiciously.

"The store gave us six free," Race explained. "It seemed silly not to take them, and it's silly to throw them away. If you want them, they're yours."

“What do I have to do?”

“Eat them!”

Nina held out the box. Parvin reached out for it and then hesitated. Race could see her siblings holding their breath in anticipation, wondering what her decision would be. He found himself holding his breath as well. Finally, Parvin accepted the box.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“You’re very welcome,” Nina replied.

Race did his best not to look at them as they shared the donuts. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw how Parvin wrapped two of them in napkins, intending to take them home to her younger siblings. He noted the look of sheer pleasure on the faces of the children. He couldn’t imagine finding so much joy in a simple donut, something most people took for granted. And he realized that he had been correct. Parvin was beautiful when she smiled. The Patel children thanked them and walked cheerfully away.

“We still have four donuts to give away,” Nina reminded Race.

“We’ll give one to Bill, Frank and Miriam. Who do we give the last one to?”

“Does it really make a difference? Look, Race, you did a really nice thing today. But it’s not going to solve any problems. You can’t be buying a dozen donuts every day, and even if you could, it’s not going to change their situation.”

“I didn’t set out to change their situation in one day. I accomplished exactly what I planned to - we broke the ice. Now we just have to capitalize on what we started.”

“And was that what you did with me? Break the ice in order to capitalize on what you started? Are you going to start buying me stuff, like makeup, clothing, and expensive jewelry?”

“Would you like me to?”

“No way!”

“Then I won’t.”

“Well, maybe just the expensive jewelry,” she said, smiling.

“Don’t worry, Nina. There’s only so much I can do to make you see what you are. You have to take the next step. You have to stop hiding your light. It’s your turn to shine.”

“I know, you keep saying that. But that doesn’t change who I am.”

“You know what they say, ‘You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make her drink.’”

“Are you calling me a horse?”

“If the horseshoe fits, wear it,” Race replied, smirking, the mischievous twinkle in his eyes. “You know that’s not what I meant. Can I ask you something?”

“You can always ask. Doesn’t mean I’ll answer.”

“I don’t think our relationship is at the expensive jewelry stage yet. Could we start a little

smaller?”

“You want to split the last donut?”

“Come on, think a little bigger than that. Would you like to take a field trip with me to Victoria’s Secret?”

“Would you like to wear this donut on your head?”

They distributed the other three donuts in class. An unusual morning followed, unusual in that Nancy and Sam avoided them. The lunchroom was crowded when they entered. After selecting their food, Nina followed Race across the room to the Loser’s Table next to the trash bin at the entrance.

“Why are eating here?” Nina asked. “We may not be the most popular kids in school, but we’re not losers.”

“There’s someone I want to meet,” Race answered, taking a seat at the end of the table, across from Weird Girl.

Nina sat down hesitantly next to him. The girl glared at them, suspicion and a hint of anger in her heavily darkened eyes. Beneath the garish mascara, it was hard to tell what she really looked like. Nina guessed that she was reasonably pretty, though her face was marred by some acne scars. She was also a bit overweight. Since it appeared that her lunch consisted of a container of chocolate milk and a package of twinkies, it wasn’t hard to guess why.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Race said casually, “but the only seats available were with the riffraff and the obnoxious kids, and we didn’t want to sit there.” When she made no reply, he continued, “I’m Race Jason. This is Nina Ryan.” After a few moments of silence, Race added with a smile, “This is the part where you say your name.”

“What do you care?”

“Hmmm, that’s quite a mouthful. Do your friends call you What for short?”

Despite herself, a smile flickered quickly across her face. “Tori Sloan.”

“That’s certainly an improvement over What. So how’d you manage to get a reserved seat at this exclusive table?”

“Maybe because this is the worst table in the room,” she answered. “Right near the trash.”

“It’s also right near the door,” Race pointed out. “Easy in and easy out. If there’s some big emergency, like the principal about to make an announcement, you can clear out quickly before everyone tramples each other in a rush for the exit.”

Another smile flickered across her face. This one lasted a little longer than the first.

“You and Nina have a lot in common,” Race continued. “You’re both former Academy students. I never managed to make it into those hallowed halls.”

Tori showed no reaction. She went back to unwrapping her twinkies. Race and Nina finished their lunch, while engaging in an inconsequential conversation about their classes. When the bell rang, signaling the end of lunch, Race turned back to Tori.

“Thank you for sharing your table and for the scintillating conversation,” he said. “You made some interesting observations. Tonight I will do some research and tomorrow I will attempt to refute your premise concerning the meaning of the universe.”

“Uh..later,” Tori said, with surprise on her face.

As they exited the lunch room, Nina caught Tori’s reflection in the window of the cafeteria door. She still had the look of surprise on her face, but also a wide smile.

“What was that all about?” she asked Race.

“Since it’s obvious that we won’t be accepted by the so-called upper class,” he answered, “not that I particularly care, it only makes sense that we expand our circle of friends among the other students.”

“You want *that* girl to be our friend?” Nina asked.

“Why not?”

“Because she’s weird!”

“Says who?”

“Says everybody! Look at how she’s dressed! Look at how she does her hair and face!”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Normal girls don’t go out of their way to make themselves look ugly.”

“You mean normal girls don’t wear nerdy glasses instead of contacts, oversize t-shirts, baggy jeans, and a baseball cap to cover their beautiful hair?”

“Come on! That’s different!”

“Is it? Nina, you and Tori are both hiding from the world. She’s just doing it a little more flamboyantly.”

“And that’s what makes her weird.”

“But a little less weird now that we’ve met her, right?”

“Maybe a little,” Nina admitted.

“So we’ve broken the ice. Give it some time.”

Mr. Whitaker did not let the napkin-wrapped donut he found on his desk, go by without comment.

“If this is an attempt to bribe me, I have to know who placed it here and what they expect for it,” he said. “And if this is an attempt to poison me, I should let you know that I left the whole year’s assignments in my will. I bequeath to you all, enough homework to keep you busy until you graduate. So before I dispose of this donut orally, does anyone have anything to tell

me?” He glanced in Race’s direction. Race returned the stare with his own expression of innocence.

After class, as the students filed out of the room, the teacher thanked Race.

“For what?” Race asked.

“For your thoughtful contribution to the class, or should I say, to the teacher?” Mr. Whitaker answered with a smile.

“Back to the mall?” Nina asked outside.

“No, now it’s time for something completely different,” Race answered mysteriously. “And it’s in the direction of your house. Remember our babysitter Shauntay?”

“Sure, I’ve seen her around the neighborhood.”

“Guess what she’s been up to?”

He led her to a house a few blocks away from her apartment. At the side door, he pressed a bell. Nina read the sign, “Beauty by Shauntay by appointment only.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t.”

“Shauntay just finished Beauty School,” Race explained. “She’s still new, so she hasn’t built up a clientele. You’ll be helping her out.”

“But we don’t have an appointment.”

“I called her. She’s not very busy this afternoon.”

The door opened and an attractive black woman in her early twenties faced them. Her dark hair hung down her shoulders like a raven waterfall and elaborate braids framed her face.

“Hi, Race. Nice to see you again, Nina. I always knew you would turn out cute. Come on in, Honey.”

She took Nina’s arm and ushered her inside. A short flight of stairs led to a basement that had been remodeled into a beauty salon, complete with beautician’s chairs and hair dryers. Two middle-aged women, one black and one white, were chatting while have their nails done, waiting for their hair to dry. Shauntay led the way, keeping up a steady patter. Before Nina could even voice her protests, she was already seated in the beautician’s chair.

“Now you’ve got great skin, honey. You’re not going to need much at all. The natural look is all you need. Too bad because I’d really like to make some money and sell you some of this beauty stuff I got, but I’m not going to sell you something you don’t need. And those blue eyes, why I know women who’d kill for eyes like those, so take good care of them. No, all you need is a hair treatment and more flattering clothes. I don’t do clothes. I can give you some tips if you want but it all boils down to one thing: girl clothes. That jeans-and-t-shirt look is fine for kids, and maybe it even works when you’re 18 and there’s no hiding what you got. But when you’re in the in-between stage, it’s important to wear clothes that say who you are. Now let’s see

what you're hiding under that cap."

Shauntay paused in her monologue to remove Nina's cap. A mane of strawberry-gold hair fell to Nina's shoulders.

"I do declare, I found the pot of gold that was under the rainbow! With hair this gorgeous, why are you hiding it? And it's got great body. Most girls shove their hair under a cap, when they take the cap off it looks like they've got a dead animal on their heads. You've got to stop hiding it. If you don't let the sun see it once in a while, it's going to get dark and turn a mousey brown color. You know there are women who'd pay a fortune for hair like yours. I see I'm not going to have to do much here. Just a little styling. Any particular way you want it?"

Nina had been waiting for a break in the flow of chatter and now that it came, it took her by surprise. She finally mustered the courage to ask, "How much is this going to cost?"

Shauntay laughed. "Don't you worry. Didn't Race tell you? We made a deal. I just opened up here and I could use some advertising. When I finish with you, folks will be coming up and asking you who did that beautiful job. You just send them here, okay?"

"Come on, no one works for free."

"Did I say it was free? You didn't let me finish."

"Then how much is it?"

"Well, what are you looking for? Because if you want the Bo Derek, with all those braids and beads, it's going to cost. Anyway, that look is so yesterday."

"I really don't know. What would you suggest?"

Shauntay smiled. "That's the ticket. Leave it up to the expert. I didn't go to Beauty School for nothing. If I read you right, you're not the type to fuss with your hair. You don't want something you're gonna have to dry and set and spend a lot of time with, right? So I'm gonna give you something that suits you and won't take much effort to maintain. You just sit back and let me handle it, okay?"

"But what will it cost?"

"How does ten dollars sound?"

"It sounds very cheap."

"It's my grand opening offer to new customers. Now just sit back and relax."

An hour later, Nina's strawberry hair had new body and a new look. Race couldn't take his eyes off her. The change was dramatic.

"See, what did I tell you?" Shauntay said. "A real natural beauty."

"Boy, will my old girlfriend be jealous when she sees this one," Race remarked.

"Too bad I can't take all the credit for it," Shauntay said. "Don't forget, girl's clothes. And tell your friends to see me."

“I will,” Nina promised.

They stepped outside and Nina began pushing her new hairstyle under her cap.

“What are you doing?” Race asked.

“I need time to get used to it.”

In Race’s room, Nina let down her hair and said, “You know, you never called me your girlfriend in public before.”

“Well, what should I call you? You’re a girl and you’re my friend. My best friend, in fact. I thought we went through this already.”

“Between us. Not with other people.”

“What difference does it make.”

“Because to other people, girlfriend implies a lot more than that.”

“Then maybe that’s the implication I intended to convey.”

“Oh, Race,” Nina sighed. “We’ve been close friends for so long. I don’t want anything to spoil our friendship. This is a big step.”

“It’s the natural step we should be thinking about.”

“And have you thought about it, really?”

“Yes, I have. I love you, Nina.”

“Race, you’re my best friend. You’re the brother I don’t have. I do love you. But I don’t know if I’m ready to consider you my boyfriend. I’m not ready to commit to that. It’s not you. With everything going on, I’m just not ready to commit to anything right now.”

“You don’t have to commit to anything. Let’s just agree to it until and if something else happens.”

“But that will only make it worse,” she pointed out. “Because one of us might expect more than the other is prepared for.”

“Are you thinking of someone else? Sam Burke, perhaps?”

“Come on, like you don’t moon over Nancy Davis. Sure, Sam’s good looking and athletic and all, but there’s more to a relationship than physical attraction. Oh God, I’m sorry, I don’t mean that you’re not.”

“I know what you mean,” Race said quietly.

“I’m sorry, Race. Forget I said that, I take it back.”

“No, I’m glad it came out. At least I won’t have any false expectations.”

“I didn’t say it could never happen. I just said I’m not ready now. We have the rest of our lives. Look, it’s been a long day. I’m going home and we’ll talk about this tomorrow, okay?”

“I don’t see that there’s much left to discuss.”

“Please, Race.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll see you tomorrow. And whatever happens, I’ll always be your best friend.”

The next day, Race was disappointed when Nina showed up in her glasses and cap, all evidence of the previous day’s makeover gone.

“Sorry, Race. I just feel more comfortable this way.”

“Then I win the bet by forfeit.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“It’s not what I want. But it seems to be what you want.”

“You know, I listened to that Emmy Lou Harris CD last night,” Nina changed the subject. “She’s real good but it doesn’t sound like that tape you were playing.”

“That tape was an earlier recording made before she got big enough for a studio.”

“I think I liked the tape better. It was more natural, like she was sitting in her living room, singing for a small audience. I’d like to hear it again.”

“Let me dig through my tapes and locate it.”

Something unusual occurred. There was an awkward silence of several seconds until Nina broke it.

“Race,” Nina began gently, “we never finished our discussion of last night.”

“I said there’s nothing to talk about. I know how I feel about you. I love you. I’m not afraid to say it. If I didn’t know it would embarrass you, I would shout it so that everyone could hear. It’s too late to take it back and anyway, I’m not going to. But if you’re not ready, that’s fine. I won’t bring it up again. I’ll wait for you to decide. I hope you’ll eventually feel the same way. If not, well, it’s going to hurt but I’ll live. All I ask is that you tell me as soon as you decide one way or the other. Until then, it’s enough that you’re my friend. I just want you to be happy.”

“Oh, Race,” Nina said, tears stinging her eyes. “You do make me happy. But there’s just so much going on in my life right now, I can’t think about it yet...”

“Like I said,” Race cut her off, “there’s nothing more to discuss. I’m sorry I brought it up yesterday. Let’s try to forget I said it, and let’s go back to the way things were.”

After school, Nina turned to Race and asked, “What are we doing today?”

“It’s a beautiful day,” Race said. “It won’t stay that way for long. I’m sure there’s a soccer game in the park. Why don’t you play?”

“Then what are you going to do?”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ve got some work to do on my web site. I’ve got a story to write for Mr. Whitaker. I’ll be fine. Go win a game for me. I’ll be cheering you on.”

“Race, are you sure?”

“Absolutely. Go have a great time.”

“So that’s the way it is, Race?” Sam’s mocking voice came from behind them. “Your boyfriend is off to play soccer and you’re going to be a cheerleader?”

“Sam, you’re horrid!” Nina shouted. “You know exactly why Race can’t play.”

“Then maybe it’s time to change your nickname to something else,” Sam said. “Since you’re never going to win a race.”

“There are other races besides running,” Nina pointed out. “Race can beat you in any contest that involves intellect.”

“Oh, really? Like what?” Sam was now playing to the crowd of students that had gathered to witness the altercation.

“How about I challenge you to an IQ test?” Race asked. “I’ll even spot you a hundred points.”

“Well, then Sam’s sure to win because you can’t do better than a hundred,” Nancy said.

“I guess we have to forgive Nancy,” Race said. “To her a hundred is such an impossible goal, she can’t conceive that there are even bigger numbers. Nancy, are you a pessimist or an optimist?”

“What’s the difference?”

“Do you see your head as half empty or half full?” As everyone laughed and Nancy flushed, Race turned back to Sam. “Hey, Sam, how about a urine test? If you start studying now, a month from now you might know more than my urine.”

As the others laughed again, Sam seized Race by his shirt and cocked his fist when Nina grabbed his arm. Sam remembered Race’s disability and lowered his arm.

“Good thing you have your boyfriend to protect you,” Sam spit out. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“Thanks for that,” Race said to Nina. “But next time let me handle it. You don’t do either of us a favor when you fight my battles for me.”

“But you’re always sticking up for me.”

“That’s different. Guys are supposed to stick up for girls.”

“Why is that? You’re the one who could get hurt if he hits you in the head.” After Race’s accident, he had been warned to avoid any activities that had the possibility of head injury.

“First of all, I don’t think I’m in as much danger as everyone thinks. Second, Sam wouldn’t hit me. He might threaten it, but he wouldn’t do it.”

“Why not?”

“He’s already in enough trouble. I don’t think he needs any more. Now go win your game. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

When Nina showed up on Friday morning still wearing the glasses and cap, Race was a

little annoyed.

“Hey, Pretty Ballerina, did you win your soccer game yesterday?” he asked.

“As a matter of fact, we did, by two goals,” Nina answered proudly.

“Good. That means that there’s at least one thing you do where you don’t go out of your way to fail. Too bad it’s the least important.”

“Race, what are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about how you don’t give yourself a chance to succeed. Last year Mr. Whitaker showed you that you can speak in public. This past week, you found out you’re pretty and can sing. Why do you refuse to show it?”

“Maybe I’m just more comfortable this way.”

“But that doesn’t make sense. When you play soccer, you play to win. When you study for a test or hand in an assignment, you aim for a hundred. Why is it that when it comes to you personally, you don’t do your best? Some day you’ll be out of school and you’re going to have to face life. It won’t make a difference how many soccer games you won and whether you got a hundred or a ninety on your history test. The most important thing will be how you present yourself. Will you walk into a job interview looking poised and confident or will you show up in a t-shirt and jeans, afraid to speak up? I’ve said it before, you have a lot to offer. Why are you hiding it?”

“Maybe I don’t have as much faith in myself as you do.”

“Then have faith in me when I tell you to have confidence in yourself.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“Nina, you owe me fifty dollars.”

“I don’t know where I’ll get the money, but I’ll pay you back for the lenses.”

“You don’t owe me for the lenses, they were a gift. You owe me for the bet you’re forfeiting.”

“So I’ll pay you for that.”

“That’s not what I wanted to hear.”

“You sound angry.”

“I am angry. You know, years ago when my grandmother, my dad’s mom was still alive, she bought me a sweater. I thought it was hideous but I didn’t want to hurt her feelings, so I just said thanks. Then I gave it away to Goodwill. One day she noticed it was chilly and suggested I wear the sweater. I couldn’t come up with a good excuse and she finally found out. She was hurt. I didn’t understand it. It wasn’t like she made the sweater. Why couldn’t she understand that just because we don’t have the same taste in clothes didn’t mean that I didn’t appreciate the thought.”

“What’s your point?”

“I bought you those contact lenses as a gift. But you never wear them. Since unlike my sweater, I know you liked them, I can only guess that the reason you don’t wear them is because you don’t like me.”

“Oh, Race, that’s not true.”

“Or you don’t like me as much as you did when I bought them.”

“That’s not it at all.”

“Well, I can’t think of any other reason why you would reject my gift.”

“I’m not rejecting it.”

“Well, since I don’t see you wearing them, I am personally insulted.”

“Okay, I’ll practice over the weekend,” Nina promised. “Just don’t be mad at me, please.”

“Nina, I could never be mad at you.” Race smiled and Nina saw that familiar mischievous glint in his eyes.

“Oh my God! You were just playing me.”

“Doesn’t matter. You made a promise and you always keep your promises.”