

Along the Garden Path

PART ONE

By Darby Patterson©

She sat alone at the table in the dimly lit cafe. As usual, she had a book opened and a pen and a tablet of lined paper in front of her. Slowly, the other tables were beginning to fill up with mostly couples who had come, like Gina, to listen to the mellow and expert guitarist that played every Thursday night.

She didn't mind sitting alone anymore. It was a natural state of being. One she'd grown accustomed to and one which would allow him to freely approach her when the time was finally right. That could be any night, such as tonight, so Gina had dressed carefully as she always did on Thursdays, and poured herbal after-bath-splash over her shoulders and neck. Her silky and thin fawn colored hair was pulled softly back and held in place with barrette of silk flowers. She'd pinched her cheeks to a pink blush and used no lipstick or mascara or eye shadow. Gary,

she knew, would like a natural girl. One who had no need to paint her face or use cosmetics to conceal the person she was inside. That was just one of the many special things about Gary - he was sensitive, aware. Not at all like the other men Gina had known.

True, Gina had not personally met Gary, face to face. But she knew him, nonetheless. After six months of Thursdays, sitting in the cafe and listening to him play, hearing his fluid voice sing songs about gentle love, she knew him well. Her favorite song was the one in which he described how their life would be together, "with two cats in the yard, life used to be so hard, now everything is easy `cause of you ..."

Gina savored each note and word that issued from his lips. Here was a man who treasured the things that really mattered in life. The purity of each morning, the kiss of the sun on bare skin, the simple existence of animals and plants. "Our house is a very, very fine house ...".

He saw beyond the obvious, and clear through the phony and hypocritical facade of most people. Gary was capable of understanding her and, by now, was probably already in love with her.

Since February, Gina had been sitting at one of the tables, inconspicuously taking notes with a gold-tipped fountain pen while he sang. The waiter who brought her refills of herbal tea thought Gina was doing homework from the philosophy book that lay open in front of her. But that was only a prop.

From the night's notes, Gina would compose poetry. Beautiful words she knew Gary would understand and appreciate. In the back of her mind, she hoped he would one day sing

some of those words in a song he'd write just for her. She sent him the poems she'd written. Once every week or two she'd mail an envelope sealed with violet wax to the P.O. box on the business cards Gary left at the cashier's stand in the cafe. Of course, she never signed the poems.

Once, her heart nearly stopped when Gary sang an original piece and one phrase echoed her poetry. "The breeze blows your voice to me and leaves dance beneath the trees - like an autumn night you steal my summer soul ..." and so on. It was a sign.

Most of the other people in the audience chatted while Gary sang. Some of the sillier girls, probably from the nearby city college, giggled and talked about him. They flashed him glossy smiles painted with peach and apricot lipsticks and batted their flashing eyes framed with powders and liners and thickened lashes. From the stage, Gary acknowledged their attentions with a shy grin, but, being a professional, he went no further. Gina knew they were definitely not his type.

She endured the silliness of the other girls and exercised patience. Patience was her greatest virtue. She figured she had very little to thank her mother for, but the ability to wait and bide her time had been one of the few gifts she'd gotten from her childhood. That, and the house with its sprawling land and wild garden. Gary would love her house because it was very much like the one he sang about; "Such a cozy room, the windows are illuminated." She smiled picturing the parlor in her house.

Gina was surprised when she'd found out the house was hers. She'd had no idea how those things worked and really never thought about what she'd do once mother was gone from her life. It had worked out remarkably well. She'd immediately thrown out all the nick-knacks

and fringe, all the garish tourcherie lights and mini blinds. She pulled up the plush champagne carpet and exposed the old hard wood floor. At a swap meet, she sold all the brass and glass tables, velvet upholstered dining chairs, molded plastic TV trays and generally anything that revealed her mother's taste for the cheap and counterfeit.

Now, the tiny one bedroom house on the three-acre lot that backed up to the shopping center where the bookstore was located, looked nothing like her mother. Gina draped lace around the windows for curtains and installed old fashioned shades with satin rope pulls. The couch was plush green velvet with a high back and wide arms. She'd covered up the holes where the cotton filling was pushing through, with a crocheted blanket. Small rugs were displayed on the floor and an old rug from Pakistan covered the path she walked from the front door to the kitchen.

All the furniture was vintage or antique. Found at rummage sales or salvaged from someone else's trash heap. But, the furnishings were lost to the eye amid the constant display of flowers that adorned each shelf, window sill, table and surface in Gina's house. No matter what the season, Gina picked and arranged dozens of bouquets of flowers that compelled the outdoors to enter each room and dominate with color and smells.

There were vases filled with roses and carnations, runuculas, daisies, tall and elegant Queen of the Nile blooms and a circular bed where a tall cactus stood like a monolith, surrounded by succulents that bloomed with color in the early summer. What never appeared indoors were the Bird of Paradise flowers. Though Gina had a small plot of the colorful and dramatic single flowers, she never cut them. The sharply pointed petals and almost artificial

beauty of the blooms reminded Gina of her mother.

The great display of color was easy to harvest for most of the acreage - the last, large plot in the urban zone - bloomed with a riot of flowers. The perimeter of tall oleander bushes obscured the garden beds that appeared planted without regard for order or landscape design. Like a patchwork quilt, spring daffodils sprung up next to a bed of baby's breath. Large rows of perennials produced nearly constant blooms in a rotation according to the season. Although the entire yard was planted in a seemingly helter-skelter fashion, it was, nonetheless, brilliant, beautiful and purposeful.

Gina walked along the winding dirt paths among the beds of flowers and gathered fresh bouquets. She was sometimes followed by one of many cats that adopted her garden as a sanctuary from the asphalt and traffic that bordered the property. She had taken great care to protect the cats, not only from the surrounding urban dangers, but from accidents that might happen in her own yard. She learned her lesson when the sleek black female she'd named Virtue had been poisoned from eating some of the special herbs in her garden. Now, the fertile bed was covered with clear plastic, draped on a wire frame. Not only were the cats safe, the makeshift greenhouse produced herbs all year long. She'd buried Virtue near her house and planted a scarlet fucia over the grave. It produced a profusion of flowers in spring and each Easter, Gina cut a single bough, brought it inside and put it in a crystal vase on the kitchen table.

In summer and early fall, butterflies danced over her head and hummingbirds dined on the nectar of the blossoms that turned the entire yard into a fragrant rainbow.

At first, people were curious about the little house and large garden. Some tried to talk

with Gina and get her to show them around. That was when Gina had a six-foot high, chain link fence installed. At first it had been a necessary eyesore, but by now all the ugly metal was overtaken by climbing ivy, wisteria and other vines. Her privacy was nearly complete, except for the persistent agents who continued to leave business cards wedged into her wooden front gate. Gina had no intention of selling her property. Not at any price though some had been bold enough to scrawl seven-figure offers on the backs of their cards. Gina could never leave, of course. Her history and her future were forever intertwined with all that lived and died and been renewed in her garden.

The house was not worth much. It was old and showing the signs of time and neglect. Gina was a far better gardener than carpenter and she'd given up trying to repair eaves infected with dry-rot or the roof that leaked with each winter's rain. She knew something would have to be done in the near future, but she'd been loathe to let strangers past the gate from their world into hers. At any rate, she figured that Gary would know what to do once he came there to live with her.

Until then, she concentrated on improvements that camouflaged the deteriorating structure. Most of this she accomplished with the cacophony of flowers and other decorations that covered up imperfections.

On the walls were old photos, black and white, hand tinted pictures of people from the turn of the century in the days before televisions and computers had invaded homes. Antique frames held similar family portraits on the mantle over the fireplace. They were not photos of Gina's family. She had no idea who the people were and didn't really care. On one wall, she'd

hung an old guitar with the graceful hummingbird artfully embossed on the finger guard. It was waiting for Gary's touch. Of course, she'd make room for more of his things which, she was sure, would fit the decor she'd carefully nurtured.

In a silver bowl tucked behind two photos framed in old silver, were several business cards from the persistent realtors. Gina kept them because she realized (though she didn't care) that they represented monetary value. That reminder was important because money was something her mother was forever looking for in the men who came to the house. It made Gina laugh to realize the money had been there all along, under their feet.

Gary began his set with a ballad. Gina felt a physical warming that started in the small of her back and traveled through her belly and into her chest. It was pleasant and she smiled at him. Each Thursday he'd acknowledge her at least once - look right at her and return the warm smile. After so many weeks, he couldn't help but notice her constancy.

Two women walked in and noisily took the table next to Gina's. Once their paper bags were settled, the women proceeded to discuss the menu and waved down the server with a rude shout that drowned out Gary's music. Gina glared at them. One was blond, the other a brunette. Both were wearing heavy make up and designer clothes. The large shopping bags sported the Nordstrom's label. They laughed too loudly and put their heads together to tell some hushed secret. Gina didn't like them, particularly the blond with her hair piled on top of her head, dark roots showing around the hairline. The woman looked like someone Gina knew, but couldn't immediately place. The blue eye shadow, the crimson lips, the plum blusher carried high on the cheek bones. All that makeup was meant to cover something the woman was hiding. No purity,

no innocence.

Gina's mother had tried to convince her to wear makeup. She used to give Gina sample bottles she'd picked up in department stores and once, after drinking a few glasses of clear liquid, had made Gina sit down in front of a vanity mirror for a make-up session. Her mom's latest boyfriend sat on the bed and watched, clutching a half empty bottle and smoking an unfiltered cigarette. Gina couldn't remember how old she'd been, but she knew the other girls at her school had not begun to paint their faces and the experience felt vaguely forbidden. Mother had been in a fine mood, however, and Gina didn't protest as creams and liquids and pencils touched her soft skin and tickled. Gina's eyes, her mother had said, were her best feature. Eye make up would take attention away from other, less attractive features such as her too large nose and thin lips.

It had seemed like hours that she'd sat on the stool in front of the oval mirror. Finally, a stranger's image stared back at her. A little girl with a woman's face, lips drenched in bright red and eyes set in hazy shadows. Her mother had piled Gina's hair on top of her head, exposing an ivory neck that didn't blend with the painted portrait in the mirror.

"Don't she look great?" her mother said to the boyfriend. "That's my lil' girl there. Gonna be a man killer after she gets a figure, just like her mom, huh, sweetie." She leaned back to admire her work and sipped her drink from the kitchen glass. A slow smile crawled across her face and she turned to the man on the bed. "Now don't you go gettin' any ideas, hear? Under all that paint, she's still lil' plain Jane." She laughed and drank some more.

The man thought it was funny too and as Gina tried to ease out of the room, he caught her by the arm and pulled her to him. The boyfriend smelled bad and his breath was rank with

smoke. He set the bottle on the end table and picked up the guitar that had been lying on the bed beside him. He liked to strum the guitar and follow Gina's mother around the house singing songs about love. Sometimes it was fun, but the singing usually turned ugly as he got louder and the words became silly words that Gina didn't fully understand.

The boyfriend always wore blue denim shirts, jeans and pointed cowboy boots with silver decorating the toes. There was a shock of greasy blond hair that fell over his forehead and Gina's mom was forever brushing it out of his eyes.

"Honey, you do look good. Don't let your mom fool you," he said through a haze of cigarette smoke. "See, honey, she's jus' afraid of a lil' younger woman." He opened his mouth wider and spit out a laugh that became a cough. Gina noticed the man's teeth were dark and crooked and that his breath smelled dirty. He twisted her small body and slid an arm around her waist, so Gina couldn't get away. He pulled her in close while he took another long drink from the tall, clear bottle on the bed stand.

"Why mama, she's just an armful," he said to Gina's mother. "Come on over here, sugar. I got *two* good arms."

Gina's mom laughed from her throat and sauntered over to the bed. The boyfriend shifted Gina over to his side in order to wrap his free arm around her mother. "Now you, you sugar, are more than a handful," he said and buried his face in the folds of the robe Gina's mom was wearing.

The nuzzling and guttural noises continued. Her mom laughed and squealed at first, petting his rough beard with her hand. Gina knew what the beard felt like because he sometimes

gave her a little kiss on the cheek and followed up by rubbing his chin against her soft skin. It was like a nasty cactus plant. Painful and ugly. She could not understand why her mom would want to touch such a face.

Gina struggled to get away. "Where you think you're goin' lil' missy with the ruby red lips?" he taunted, holding her more tightly. "You ain't goin anywhere. You already got a date."

The boyfriend pulled both Gina and her mom down on the bed with him. The couple laughed in unison, although Gina could find nothing funny at all. He whispered some words she couldn't hear and her mom reached down and unbuckled the man's belt. "Gonna give you a lesson now that you look so grown up," she said with a thick tongue. "You jus' watch. "

Gina closed her eyes. Horrid sounds began to fill the bedroom, but the boyfriend didn't let her go. In fact he grabbed her tighter in places she hated being touched. Gina tensed every bone in her body and covered her ears with her hands. The moaning finally stopped and when Gina looked, her mother had fallen asleep, her long hair spread across the man's lap. The boyfriend turned his head and showed his blackened teeth. "Gonna take a quick five," he said, breathing the breath of a serpent into Gina's face. "Then we'll see if you learned anything."

All that memory came back to Gina as she looked at the women, particularly the one with the upswept hair. Suddenly, she could not keep the image of her mother from superimposing itself on the stranger's face. Gina stared into her cup of tea and felt the steam rise, cleansing her. Purging. They were gone now. All of them, Gina said to herself. All the boyfriends with their rough hands and rougher ways. Her mother, with her weakness and colored fingernails. Her paint and satin robes. Her laugh that bubbled like a bottle of shaken beer.

"Life used to be so hard," she silently sang to herself and returned her attention to Gary. Of course, life was not like the song. Everything was not "easy." But it was no longer ugly. She had her garden and its special places that produced great beauty. From the barren earth, she'd nurtured splendor and camouflaged a dark past. She could bring the beauty inside to exorcise the demons that had once lived there.

Gina had enough money to easily get by and had no desire for material things. Her main expense was replacing plants and buying new varieties for her garden that flourished throughout the year. There were also gardening supplies, cat food, minor tools and other such modest acquisitions. Everything was going to work out fine, she assured herself. Patience was her friend. She'd even named her favorite, white, long haired cat, Patience.

"It wonderful stuff. You put it on over your make up and the lines under your eyes just go away," the woman with upswept hair was saying to her friend. Though their heads were close together like conspirators, her voice was shrill and easily carried to Gina's table. "It's thirty bucks a jar, but hell, that's cheaper than plastic surgery, although I think that's already on my calendar." The other woman laughed and said, "Here's to middle age and the miracles of modern medicine." The pair touched their wine glasses together in a toast.

Gina wasn't interested in their conversation and resented how they so easily ignored the music. Gary was playing a fiery instrumental now, one born of the tormented spirit of pure flamenco. He knocked his thumb on the front of the guitar, rapping out an urgent rhythm behind the allegro notes he picked with his fingers. Mercifully, the women stopped their chattering.

Gina was inspired to write some words about a "pounding heart" and the "anguished cry"

of a woman about to be swallowed by the sea. She felt the partnership with Gary even more acutely in these moments when his music moved her to write.

He kept his eyes focused on his right hand that picked the strings with blinding speed and his head cocked to one side, pulling the neck of the guitar close to his ear. Gary was pure concentration and intensity. His music pierced the banal reality of cafe culture and swept it away to the Iberian Peninsula with a timeless, ageless melodic heartbeat. Gina was drawn away from her notebook and compelled to watch as tiny beads of sweat appeared on Gary's brow. She felt a warming through her body that spread like slow honey. It was a dangerous feeling, she knew, but she let it flow until it was no longer bearable and then ended it by poking the end of the fountain pen into the palm of her hand, drawing a spot of blood.

Back in control, she glanced over at the women - prisoners too, of Gary's passion. The upswept blond cupped her hand over the other woman's arm as if to keep herself from being carried aloft by the music. To the ear it sounded like two, perhaps three, guitarists were playing the counter melodies and rhythms.

The piece crescendoed to an end, the complex melody punctuated with hard, rapid raps against the guitar. For a long moment there was silence, as if the audience could still hear the notes ringing, weaving a story of torment and romance. Then, there was an eruption of applause which Gary acknowledged by slowly raising his head and gazing at the small crowd with a shy smile. It is how he must look when he wakes up in the morning, Gina thought.

This was the end of his first set and Gary would say a few modest words, inviting people

to drop a dollar or two in the jar that stood on the edge of the raised platform where he performed. This was obviously hard for him and Gina ached for Gary every time he had to make the pitch for money. When he was with her, of course he wouldn't have to do that anymore.

It was also a time when he surveyed his audience and Gina had caught his eye more than once. It was always exciting to think about.

The women came back to life and the blond laughed loudly when her friend said something tasteless about "taking a cold shower." "Honey, I prefer hot showers," she answered, "if you know what I mean."

Gary glanced across the floor and paused when he spotted Gina in her usual spot. She sent him a silent message in that split second, as she always did. But his eyes were drawn away too quickly by the peel of the blonde woman's laughter and Gina felt cheated, angry at them.

As he leaned down and tucked his guitar into its case, the women chattered to each other in hushed voices. Gina heard only a few words here and there. Words like "hunk," and "I'd like to get my hands on..." They were clearly the kind of women that Gina would never be. Could never be.

Gary rose from the wooden stool and looked in Gina's direction. Her heart nearly stopped as he stepped down from the stage and walked her way. She felt the pounding in her chest, like the intense raps from the heels of a flamenco dancer. All thoughts and words fled from her mind and a dizziness filled her head as Gary neared her table. The blue and gold pen slipped from her fingers, and her palms grew wet with perspiration. Her eyes could not leave his face and finally she was looking directly up at him, her mouth slightly open as if to say something, although no

words were available to her.

He paused and smiled. "Hi, how ya doin? Thanks for coming again. I appreciate it," he said to her before taking two more steps and sitting down at the women's' table.

For a time, Gina neither heard nor saw anything. She was frozen in body and spirit, unable to move or think or react. Slowly, the cafe crept back into her consciousness and the conversation grated against her senses. "Baby, I've been tellin' my friend Cheryl here all about you," the upsweep was saying. Gary was grinning.

"I hope you didn't tell her any of my trade secrets, did you?" he answered.

"Those are just between you and me and the Polaroid camera," the blond giggled.

Gina continued to feel dizzy. She tried to grab control of pieces of herself that were spinning out of her body, into dark space. She tried to cast out the conversation but seemed to reel in the worst of it. "Cheryl wants to play, honey." The upsweep now had nuzzled in closer to Gary and was making little tracks up the front of his shirt with her viscous red nails.

"Did you tell Cheryl that there's a players' fee?" Gary intoned, looking now at Cheryl.

"I hear you're a good investment," she responded. "I'll take it out of my entertainment budget."

As suddenly as it had settled upon her, the dizziness stopped and Gina was visited by profound clarity. She heard all the words of the trio dealing at the next table and all the conversations of everyone in the cafe. She felt all the pain, silliness, discomfort, sorrow, giddiness of the collective patrons and saw all of them for who they were. A calm settled and Gina followed the negotiations for Gary's attentions. She wasn't surprised or horrified when they

began to use forbidden words that Gina hadn't heard since Mama's last boyfriend whispered them to her. It was all settled and she knew that Gary needed rescuing. He needed to be where he belonged. With Gina.

"Well, ladies. Got to get back to work," Gary was saying. "Don't forget to drop a little something in the jar when you leave."

"How about the address to my condo and a key?" Cheryl teased.

"Hey, watch it. Who discovered this stud anyway?" The blond warned. "This is a three-way partnership. Right baby?"

"For the right kind of money, I can partner anyway you want," Gary joked. "Gotta run." He stood at the table and discretely brushed himself against the blonde's arm. "Man of steel," she winked to Cheryl.

Gina knew she had to save Gary fast. It wouldn't keep until next week and, for once, he was so close by. If she were to wait until after the final set, she'd have to approach him. Maybe be one among many who wanted to talk with the guitarist. People might notice her and she couldn't allow that.

"Excuse me?" she said as Gary walked past her table. He turned and looked down at her.

"Ya?"

"Um, I wanted to tell you that, well, I really like your playing." she stammered.

"Ya, I notice you're here a lot," he answered. "Listen, I'd like to talk, but I gotta get back."

"I just want to tell you that I have something you might want," she said, hoping he didn't think for a moment that she was at all like those women next to her. "It's a guitar. A rare guitar.

A 1962 Gibson Hummingbird."

"Where'd you get that?" he asked, obviously impressed. "That's worth a few grand."

"I know. About six, to be exact," she said, growing in confidence. "It was left to me by an uncle and I don't play. I don't really need it and I've been thinking that I'd like you to have it."

"Have it, like in for free?" He said with a smile crawling across his face.

"That's what I mean," she said, satisfied. "You're so talented and I'd know the instrument is going to a really worthy person. My uncle would have liked that."

"Man, what can I say?"

"You don't have to say anything," she added. "Just come over to my house and get it."

"Great! Anytime! You name it," he said and leaned a hand on her table.

Gina picked up her pen and then put it back on the table. "Actually, I don't have to write it down. It's just on the other side of this shopping center. The only house left in the whole area. There's lots of tall oleander and vines around it. Real easy to find. How about this Sunday afternoon at, say 2 o'clock?"

"Sound's perfect. Hey, thanks a lot ... I didn't even get your name."

"It's Gina – for Angelina," she smiled. " And, you're welcome."

He turned and strutted back to the platform where he picked up his guitar and began another set. He started with an upbeat piece that, Gina laughed, probably reflected his recent set of personal triumphs.

She scribbled on her writing pad, loops and more loops that became flowers. She thought about how Gary had so quickly believed she would simply give him such a valuable guitar. But,

arrogant people were like that. Like showy hybrids with no scent that bloomed and died within the span of only a few days.

She gathered up her writing materials, set the cup on its saucer and dropped the used tea bag inside. There was no longer a need to stay in the cafe. The music had lost its allure. And, there were things to be done in preparation for Gary's visit. She'd polish the guitar, straighten the house, put fresh bouquets throughout and carefully set the low coffee table where they'd have tea together. Then, perhaps, she'd let Gary touch the guitar.

Gina had everything she'd need. The special herb was growing in the garden. This she'd add to the flavorful tea blend that was her very own recipe. The one her mother and that last boyfriend had liked so much. "Make us a pot of that tea of yours, Gina baby," her mom would say. "Just leave it on the floor outside my bedroom door like a good girl."

Gina wrapped a shawl around her shoulders and stepped out into the waning evening light that reflected softly on the blacktop of the parking lot. Block upon block of asphalt, she thought, and contrasted that with her oasis of flowers. Her sanctuary where mama and the boyfriend would never harm her again, where they were lovely in the springtime. She closed her eyes and left the warm air drift over her face. What kind of flower was Gary, she pondered. Beautiful on the outside, passionate, precious, but fragile. A flower that bloomed quickly and then, just as quickly, faded and died. "A rose," she said aloud. "A blue Angel Face Rose." Unlike many blue varieties, it was fragrant and Gina thought she'd put a small bouquet on the table next to her brass bed. There, she could wake up to the sweet scent of Gary. She began to plan where he would grow in her garden.

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