

THE STONES SPEAK



BOOKS BY NANCY KING

NOVELS

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THE STONES SPEAK

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For Andrew Adelman

and

Suzan Hall



“And the day came when the risk it took to remain tight inside
the bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.”

Anaïs Nin

1

It was 1959. Naomi had been teaching junior high school gym for a year, dreading the seemingly impossible task of trying to interest girls who despised everything about the class, from putting on their gym uniform, to learning sports they loathed, to having to take showers, dress, and put on makeup in less than five minutes. When she saw the ad in the local paper, she couldn't react quickly enough.

Looking for dancers who can learn folkdance patterns quickly. No salary, but travel in Europe with expenses and room and board provided.

Naomi had been saving her money, and she could dance. Perfect—the way to see Europe, as she'd been longing to do, without having to travel alone. She immediately called the number in the paper but was so disconcerted by the sexy male voice on the other end of the line she couldn't think what to ask.

“Auditions on Saturday,” he said. She said she'd come. He gave her the address.

Without thinking about possible consequences, she turned down the summer job she had worked so hard to get, and applied for a passport. Only after she mailed the letter did it occur to her that the folkdance man might not hire her. Then she'd be out of a job, luck, and money.

The place for the audition turned out to be an unimposing two-family house, which surprised her. She had imagined the audition would be

held in a studio or commercial office. The furniture in the living room was moved to one side, the rug rolled up. The handsome man with the sexy voice greeted her at the door looking like an ad for Esquire. Eric's white shirtsleeves were rolled up to his elbows, and the buttons were opened far enough to reveal the blond hair on his chest. His blue eyes bored into her, checking her out as if she were a blind date rather than a prospective employee. Naomi felt overwhelmed and anxious, and excited.

"How many other people are coming to audition?" she asked.

"You're the last one," he said, his seductive voice as smooth as dark chocolate.

Naomi began to doubt the wisdom of applying for a job that meant traveling with a man she hardly knew. Never before had she acted so quickly and so rashly. Further unnerved when he asked if she had a boyfriend, she was so taken aback she lied. "Yes."

Only when he put on Israeli music did she begin to relax. He was a good dancer and it was easy to give herself up to the pleasure of moving with him. At first the dances were relatively easy. Always able to pick up steps pretty quickly, she began to enjoy herself. But then he switched to tricky Balkan music, with steps that were fast and complicated. Even though she managed to keep up, when the music ended she was sure she wasn't good enough for his troupe.

Eric told her she wasn't bad. As he talked, he kept looking her up and down. She almost told him she'd changed her mind. "How many languages do you speak?" he asked.

"I had three years of high school Spanish and two of French."

He laughed. "I can say boy, girl, forward, backward, stop, go, hello, and good-bye in all the languages we'll need. For the rest of the instruction, I just say 'people' and demonstrate what I want them to do. That works for folks in every country. I show the dancers what to do and then they follow our lead, doing the steps we do. By the way, you got a valid passport?"

"I just applied for one. So, how many of us are going?"

“Two. You and me. We’re all I can afford. I’m leaving on Tuesday to teach at a conference. I’ll meet you in Vienna, in the lobby of the Hotel Schott, on the twenty-fifth of June. You’ll need to bring at least two circle skirts, some white blouses, and shoes to dance in that don’t scuff wood floors.”

Business finished, he put his arm around her, said good-bye, and ushered her out the door before she could ask any questions. As she walked to the bus stop, Naomi wondered how she was going to tell her parents she was about to spend the summer with a strange man, no matter that he was a folkdance teacher and it was a job. She could still feel the touch of his arm as it massaged her back.

Even after she finished teaching on the twenty-third of June and headed home to her parents and friends in New York City, she was still trying to figure out how to explain her sudden recklessness. Any thoughts about postponing the discussion were shattered when her mother gave her an application for a summer job at a school for delinquent children. Normally, this was the kind of job that would have interested Naomi. Not willing to lie, and not able to tell the truth, that she would be traveling with a strange man, she told her parents that she had taken a job teaching folkdance in Europe. She made it sound as if she would be part of a group. Forestalling all questions, she told them how excited she was to have the opportunity to travel in Europe, teach, and meet people rather than simply go as a tourist. She hoped her enthusiasm masked her anxiety.

The night she flew to Amsterdam there was a horrible storm that only increased her nervousness, especially when the soldier next to her kept muttering that he hoped the plane would crash. Naomi was so startled she asked why he wanted to die. “I’m from Alabama, Ma’am. Being stationed in Iceland is more cold and ice than I can bear.” The conversation was so surreal she stopped worrying. After landing in Austria, she found the train to Vienna, crossed borders and time zones, and arrived at the hotel around ten in the morning, too tired to worry about how she would meet Eric, too exhausted to feel anything except the sheets of the bed.

She awoke a few hours later, still tired. Through the fog in her brain, she saw a man and a woman standing at the foot of her bed, their arms entwined. A male voice was chirping, “Wake up, Sunshine, time to rise and dance.”

Naomi yelled in surprise. “What? How did you get into my room?”

Eric laughed. “Mona works here.”

“What time is it?”

“Six-thirty. In exactly one hour and twenty-seven minutes we’re expected to lead an evening session for Mona’s folkdance group. Get up.”

That was easier said than done. Her head ached and her brain kept asking, *Where am I?*

Even though she didn’t speak German and didn’t know the dances, a pasted-on smile, limp wrists that let the man do the leading, and feet that knew how to waltz got her through the evening without making a fool of herself. But when she looked at Eric and Mona, dancing as if they were one body, Naomi wondered why Eric had invited her to join him. She felt sure she was not a good enough dancer to be teaching anyone. Afterward, while sitting with them in a restaurant thick with smoke, flowing beer, and language she couldn’t understand, the next ten weeks loomed large and difficult.

As people started to leave the restaurant, Eric gave Naomi directions to her hotel and then took off with Mona, holding her close to him. Naomi stood there, not sure if it was safe to walk the dozen blocks so late at night. She had remembered to take a card with the hotel’s address and phone number in case she got lost, but who would she ask? In what language? Naomi felt abandoned. Not seeing any taxis, she began to walk, hoping she was going the right way.

Suddenly, a motorcycle roared to a stop beside her and a man she vaguely remembered from folkdancing asked in broken English, “Vant ride?” Naomi didn’t like his looks but quickly decided that riding with him was the lesser of two evils. She showed him the hotel card. He nodded, helping her onto the seat. She reluctantly put her arms around his

waist but all hesitation about holding on to him vanished as they zoomed off. She clutched his body as if they were lovers.

When they arrived at the hotel she held out her hand and said, “*Danke shein*,” hoping it sounded like thank you in German. The man ignored her hand and hugged her. Naomi didn’t respond and managed to free herself, thanking him again. When he followed her into the hotel, she felt afraid. At the elevator, when it was clear he intended to go with her to her room, she shook her head and said, “No.” He ignored this and followed her into the elevator. She waited until the doors were almost closed, then rushed out and ran to the desk clerk, who was dozing in a chair. She hoped he understood English. “Excuse me, I need help.”

The clerk stood up just as the motorcyclist came from behind and put his arms around Naomi. She tried to get away, but he held her too tightly. Not knowing how much English either man spoke, she said to the clerk, “I want to go to my room. I don’t want this man to come with me. Help me!”

The clerk looked at the man, who was a head taller than he was, shrugged, and sat back down. Naomi wrenched herself away, ran into the elevator, and pushed the button to close the doors. They shut just as the man caught up with her. He banged on the doors, hard. Just to be safe, in case the other elevator arrived before she got to her room, Naomi pressed the button for the wrong floor and then walked down the stairs to her room. It was a long time before she felt safe enough to sleep.

The next morning she arrived at the train station early and narrowly avoided bumping into Eric, who was kissing the tears on Mona’s face. When she saw Naomi, Mona pulled away from him and picked up her purse.

“Aren’t you coming with us?” asked Naomi, trying to hide her embarrassment.

“No, I have to work,” said Mona.

Eric looked at his watch and said to Naomi, “Let’s get going; our seats aren’t reserved.” He reached for Mona, but she had moved away from him. Her eyes were focused on Naomi, who turned toward Eric,

unable to bear the look of agony on Mona's face. Naomi picked up her suitcase, gratified that she'd had the presence of mind to pack lightly, and walked slowly toward the ticket counter thinking that Eric would soon follow.

Instead, Eric shrugged, waved to Mona, and walked briskly to the information center, never looking to see if Naomi was following him. Naomi felt uncomfortable, beginning to sense that Eric expected her to pay attention to where he was and to act accordingly.

Shortly after the train started moving, he put his arm around her and pulled her to him. "I've been looking forward to being with you."

Naomi moved away. "What about you and Mona?"

"We're friends. Nothing special. Now how about you and me getting to know each other." When Naomi got up and sat down on the seat opposite him, he said, "You signed on to work with me, remember?" As the train lurched to a start, Eric grabbed her, holding her too tightly, forcing his tongue deep into her mouth.

Her mind said no. Her body said yes. Although Naomi responded, she felt disgusted with herself. When the conductor came in to check their tickets, she left and walked to the bathroom, promising herself she would set better boundaries. She wanted to teach folkdancing, not take the place of someone else's lover.

To save money spent on hotels, Eric convinced her to share a bedroom, telling her they would split any money left over from the courses after he had paid their expenses. All the rooms had twin beds, and she kept him away from her the first few nights by telling him she had her period, even though he was quick to say it didn't bother him. She was so busy fending him off that she didn't think to refuse when he asked for her passport so he could buy their tickets. When she asked for it back, numerous times after that, he always had a sensible-sounding reason to keep it.

Since they taught mostly at night, their days were free. Naomi had thought she'd be able to walk around the old towns, visit museums, and get a sense of each place, but Eric had other ideas. Claiming he didn't want her to get into trouble, he refused to let her out of his sight. He had

no interest in museums and galleries, so every time Naomi tried to go, he found a way to stop her.

Naomi began to feel that she was Eric's prisoner. His notion of relationship, such as it was, had everything to do with her meeting his needs and nothing to do with what she wanted or needed. On their last night in Geneva he jumped into her bed and crashed on top of her. She fought him off as best she could, but he was strong and determined. Afterward, she felt like a whore who'd been paid too little to give too much. When she was sure he was asleep, she pushed him off of her, got up, and searched for her passport. Cold sweat poured down her face as she rummaged through his suitcase and camera bag and toilet kit. He had obviously taken pains to hide it. After not being able to find it she lay down in his bed, wondering how she was going to recover her passport and leave him.

During the summer before her senior year in college, Naomi had slept with her boyfriend of three years. Afterward, she wondered what all the fuss was about. They'd slept together a few more times before Naomi finally had the courage to ask him to take more time. He declared her frigid and broke off the relationship. Naomi considered herself sort of a virgin because she felt there had to be more to sex than what she'd experienced. Her encounter with Eric only deepened her worry that maybe her boyfriend had been right.

The next morning, when Eric came to the bed in which Naomi was sleeping, she leapt up, ran into the bathroom, and locked the door. In the shower she tried to figure out how to get away from him, but she didn't know their itinerary, he had her passport, and she didn't have much money. During breakfast he said, "I don't know what's bothering you, but figure it out fast. We're a team, remember?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, stunned.

"You don't think I asked you to come along for your dancing ability, do you?"

"Yes, I do" she said.

"Think again," he said with a sneer.

Naomi wondered how she could ever have found him attractive. Even worse, she couldn't imagine how she would survive being with him for two more months. From that point on, she watched and waited, letting him have what he wanted. The quicker it started, the sooner it ended. She searched the groups they taught, looking for possible allies, but his reputation preceded him. People flocked to his dance sessions—his voice as seductive with a hundred people as with one.

Her apparent surrender eased his watchfulness. One morning, at a railroad station in Italy, she noticed he was busy making last-minute arrangements, so she said in what she hoped was a casual tone of voice, "Why don't I buy the tickets to Rome? You've got enough to take care of."

Eric handed Naomi the money and their passports. She walked to the ticket counter trying to look relaxed, as if this day were no different from any other. After buying their tickets, she waited until their train was announced and then rushed back to join him. Eric was furious. "Where were you? The train's already here. We need to board right now."

"The line was really long. Let's put our stuff on and then I'll give you the tickets and passports." Naomi held her breath while he nodded, picked up his suitcase, and walked up the steps. Just as the train started to leave, Naomi threw him his passport and ticket and jumped off. Even as she watched the train disappear, she couldn't stop shaking. Though she had no idea where to go or what to do, her relief at being free of Eric was so great she couldn't worry about what to do next.

As she was trying to calm herself, an elderly nun spoke to her in Spanish, asking if Naomi could show her the platform for the train to Madrid. Naomi took this as a sign, exchanged her ticket for Rome to one to Barcelona, and helped the nun find her seat. It was only when she crossed the border into Spain that Naomi felt able to breathe. Yet before she had a chance to relax and feel free, she had her first confrontation with the Guardia Civil, Franco's personal police force.

The Guardia Civil were everywhere, rifles slung over their shoulders, checking suitcases for contraband. One man who tried to convince

the soldiers that his hidden *Playboy* magazines were literature ended up being dragged away. The magazines, of course, were picked up by a grinning Guardia, who then dumped the contents of a woman's cosmetics bag on the floor. When they asked her what "this" was, she picked up her diaphragm, still in its case, and had the presence of mind to say, "It's for a skin condition." The Guardia shrugged, signaled for her to pick up her belongings, and turned their attention on Naomi.

"Do you declare anything?" She shook her head "no." Ignoring her protestations, they turned her suitcase upside down, but the blonde standing next to her distracted them so they let Naomi go. She gathered up her things and hurried out to the street.