

Scarlet Fire Blues

By Michael Danese

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The lights were bright on that Friday evening in rural Pennsylvania. Two powerhouse high school football teams were battling it out on the turf. The smell of the pep rally bonfire from the night before was still thick in the air, mingled with the aroma of hotdogs and popcorn. The band played the fight song as the cheerleaders twirled. The grandstands creaked and groaned under the weight of the over-capacity crowd.

Over the loudspeaker the announcer rang out, “It’s third and eight with the ball on the 22-yard line.”

A gray-haired chuffy guy dressed head to toe in the colors of the home team pulled his transistor radio close to his ear. The radio sportscaster said, “With the score of 21-17, a field goal is no help for the home team. With only 17 seconds on the clock, the defense is set for a pass play. Here we go! The quarterback is under center and gets the ball. He immediately fades back and surveys his receivers. He pumps, and, it’s a fake! He hands the ball off to the halfback who bulls his way through the line off tackle. He leaps cleanly over the head of the linebacker as the safeties collide into each other before he squirts into the endzone! We win! Nick the Quick does it again!”

The band played louder, and the cheerleaders did their victory cheer. The teams met on the field and shook hands as the crowd roared.

Ninety minutes later, Nick and Diane were laying in a field. Nick asked her, like he always did, if it’s still Nick and Diane forever. She smiled and nodded.

Going back, it has always been Nick and Diane. They were neighbors as children. When they were young there was the usual teasing and chasing, but as they got older something special developed. They became friends, then best friends. They complemented each other well. Diane was an extrovert, to put it mildly, while Nick was quiet and shy. He was big and strong; she was petite.

Nick is about six-foot one and muscular, with longish brown hair parted in the middle. Just like every other guy in their 1979 yearbook. Diane is about five-foot six, with blue eyes, freckles, and long red hair, parted in the middle, just like all the other girls in the yearbook.

Diane found that at an early age that she loved to sing – in school, church, wherever. She taught herself how to play guitar and even wrote some songs. In her mind she was destined to be a star.

Nick didn’t aspire beyond staying in town, marrying Diane, and having some kids. He only had eyes for Diane, but she was blinded by the stars in her eyes. He didn’t even want to play football, but she encouraged him to “make something of himself” and capitalize on his God-given talent. For her, he tried out for the team and quickly became a key to their success.

Diane, a cheerleader, and Nick were voted homecoming king and queen. Diane loved the attention, Nick, not so much. He also didn’t appreciate all of the guys eyeing Diane in her glittering dress, although he was in awe of the way she sparkled.

As they lay there in the grass, Diane asked him about college. She knew that State was interested in giving Nick a scholarship. Nick hemmed and hawed. "I don't need to go to college. I want to start a business here in town. Besides, my brother Jim, and Sparky (his best friend) would miss me, and I would miss them."

"It's only a two-hour drive, much closer than those other out-of-state colleges that are interested in signing you. You can get a free college education, then you can start your business with a degree," she insisted.

He could never really argue with her, especially when she was right. He reluctantly agreed.

After they graduated high school, Diane began singing in the few bars in town. Things were going well, and she developed a small following. After a show one night, a man spoke to her and offered a three-night job at a club in Philadelphia. As anyone who knew her would have expected, she was over the moon.

"Why do you need to go there?" Nick pleaded. "You know how dangerous that city is! Besides, the people here *really like* your singing!"

Of course, she made the trip. She loved every second of appearing on that larger stage, hearing her guitar and voice on the superior sound system, and the crowd liked her, too. She played a few covers, including Linda Ronstadt's version of "Blue Bayou," Janis Joplin's "Piece of my Heart," and "Dreams" by Fleetwood Mac, mixed in with some originals in her 30-minute set. The audience seemed to like her mix of pop, blues, and country.

On the third night an older man approached her and told her the words that she was dying to hear. "You have that certain something, a deeply rooted talent, and with your looks, you could be a star, you *will* be a star, and I'm just the one to make it happen!" She was speechless. She took his card and promised to call.

The next day she was bubbling over telling Nick. He quickly tried to burst her bubble. "Come on, Di! How many of those cards do you think he gives out in a night? He sees a pretty girl and thinks he can promise her anything just to get her in bed!"

Diane, furious, slapped him across the face.

"I'm sorry, I mean, of course you are a great talent. I just don't want you to blindly trust the first guy that tells you that!" What Nick was really saying was that he didn't want to lose her.

She hugged him and told him she was sorry for slapping him. "I wasn't born yesterday! I can take care of myself!" Then she added, "Don't forget, Nick and Diane forever."

The next day, she got out the card and called. "Mr. Martino, this is Diane..."

"Call me Sal, yes, let's meet soon."

Sal set her up to sing at a club in the city and he took some time to really study her. It turned out that he really was a talent agent who could make things happen. He gave her a few suggestions on hair, wardrobe and makeup. After a few weeks he offered her a contract and a relocation plan to move to Nashville. He also arranged for her to meet with an A&R agent from a record company.

Nick was brokenhearted, but didn't want to stand in her way -- as if he could. He was off to State and put all his effort into football. Even as a freshman, he excelled on the elite college team,

setting a record for rushing by a freshman. He pictured Diane's face cheering him on, and that was all that he needed.

They talked often on the phone. Diane told him about how Sal...

"So now it's *Sal*, not Mr. Martino," he sniped snively.

"Stop it Nick, just listen! Sal formed a band for me. I have a guitar player, a banjo player, a pedal steel guitar player, bass, drums, and keyboard! And, he is billing me as *Scarlet Fire!*"

"Isn't that name a bit ... risqué?" asked Nick.

"Really, Nick, you have to stop it! This is showbiz! I can't wait for you to hear us!"

"Nick and Diane forever, right?"

"Always, Nicky, always."

Scarlet Fire's first single, *Small Town Girl*, shot up the country charts. The next one, *Cheerleader in a Pick-Up Truck*, went to number one.

She appeared on several country music TV shows, including a Christmas special with Johnny Cash. She also played at the Grand Ole Opry. Nick always made sure to catch her TV appearances, and he listened to her Opry show on the radio. Sure, he missed her, but he was thrilled for her success. But he was sad as he saw their future together slipping away.

The phone calls became less frequent. Football was all-encompassing for Nick, as a singing career was for Diane. She was on tour, but the first time she played close to Nick, he couldn't make it because of a game. The next time was in the spring, and he was finally able to see her show.

He went with his brother, Jim, and Sparky. Scarlet Fire was truly dazzling, as much as Nick hated to admit it. The crowd called for more and she played two encores. After the show she was thrilled to see her old friends. She nearly knocked Nick over with her exuberant hug.

Soon Sal came over and Diane introduced them. Sal commented that he knew all about him and his football career.

After some small talk, Sal pulled Nick aside and whispered, "She isn't the same girl you knew, she's a *star* now. She ain't ever coming back to that broke down town of yours. She's done with the likes of losers like you. She can have any guy she wants, and does!"

Nick punched him squarely in the jaw and sent him flying. He grabbed Diane by the hand and pulled her out the door.

"Nick! What were you thinking?!" she yelled.

"No one can talk about you like that, you ain't a piece of meat for him to sell! Come on, pack your things and come home!"

"Oh, Nick, I can't do that, I have a contract! Maybe it's best if you and the boys just call it a night. I'll call you soon."

As Nick walked away angrily as Diane ran back into the club's dressing room and tried to explain to Sal, but he was furious. Sal had just hung up the phone where he told his booker to avoid Pennsylvania from now on.

He took her in his arms as she struggled to free herself, “Listen, you work for *me*, and you’ll do whatever I want, or I *will* send you packing!”

He began to kiss her neck as she tried to pull away. “Settle down now, you know how this is going to go.” She held back tears as he unbuttoned her blouse as she surrendered to him.

Nick went back to school and practiced hard.

Diane tried to avoid Sal whenever possible. She had grown accustomed to being on the road with the band. She loved performing for her fans. Every night ended with a party where there was a lot of drinking and drugs. She ended up drinking herself to sleep every night, sometimes through tears. She often asked herself if it was all worth it.

After a few months, Sal noticed that she was putting on some weight and blamed the drinking. He asked the bass player to let her try some coke. At first she refused, but he convinced her that it will help to keep her weight down for the fans. Soon enough, she stopped drinking, but the blow took over her life.

Nick was a standout in college, earning several awards and breaking records. State went undefeated two years in a row. Yes, their defense was punishing, but much of the scoring was due to Nick the Quick. In his senior year he was a finalist for the Heisman Trophy. Diane was thrilled for him and called to congratulate him. He was so happy to hear from her. He asked when she would be back his way, but she didn’t have an answer. He didn’t win the trophy, but the phone call was worth it for him.

His team played for the national championship. Nick tore up the field, but they lost in the final seconds. He was very proud of his team. They were his brothers, his family. As a future with Diane faded, a future in football seemed more desirable.

Nick was drafted in the first round by the Baltimore Colts. In his first game he set a rushing record for a rookie. Diane watched it on TV and beamed with pride.

Sal walked in while she was watching. “Is that the gorilla who punched me? What a Neanderthal!” She told him to get out of her room, but he had other ideas. When she heard that the next game was going to be on Monday Night Football, she tried to get Sal to arrange her schedule so she could watch it.

“Nothing doing! You’ve got a job to do! You can read about it in the papers,” he snarled.

During the second series of that Monday night game, a linebacker hit Nick with a cheap shot squarely in the back. The defender was ejected from the game, but Nick was down hard. The trainers and doctors hovered over Nick for what seemed like an eternity. Dandy Don Meredith and Howard Cosell were running out of things to say on the TV broadcast. Finally, Nick was carted off the field. He gave the traditional “thumbs up” to signal that all was well. But it wasn’t. He was admitted to the hospital while the doctors went to work on his back.

Diane saw the news later that night and was terrified. She called all of the hospitals in the city but couldn’t find out anything. As a last resort, she called Nick’s brother while crying.

Nick’s mother answered instead, and she was quite bitter towards Diane. “This is all your fault!” the upset mother said angrily. “He never even wanted to play football, but *you* pushed him into it! He lived and died for any attention from you. You know that whenever he saw you, his eyes lit up, but the only things in your eyes were stars, and seeing your name in lights on a marquee!

This is *all on you!* You stay away from him! You've caused enough trouble already!" she said as she slammed down the phone.

Diane went to the band, who knew she was upset and still carried a torch for Nick. They were aware of the terrible injury. The entire country knew about it.

The guitar player hugged her. He took her aside and offered her a line of white powder on a small mirror. She said she was jumpy enough and didn't want any coke. He said that it wasn't coke. She snorted her first two lines of heroin that night.

I guess you could say that on that Monday night, Diane and Nick both turned a corner.

Nick was in the news for the next several days, until the media found another darling to exploit. After several surgeries, Nick learned that he was destined to spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair. Of course, Nick accepted this like everything else, with a positive attitude.

Jim and Sparky were there to take him home from the hospital. He refused to be pushed in his chair. "I've been training my whole life for this!" Nick joked. "Didn't you hear, I have tremendous upper body strength!" he said smiling.

Nick returned to his hometown. He had a little money, not much, but enough to buy the hardware store on Main Street. He hired Jim and Sparky to help him run it. He was happy there. Everyone that came in knew him from his illustrious football career, and some even asked for autographs. On the walls were framed newspapers about his high school state championship, his college exploits, and even a headline from his first professional game. Also, in a corner, were a few clippings about Scarlet Fire.

Occasionally a patron would ask if he had heard from Diane. He would usually say no, but that he hears she is doing well.

Diane was actually not doing well. She followed a downward spiral of heroin addiction. Sal eventually tired of her and replaced her in the band, and she lost touch with the musicians that were her only family these past few years.

She hit rock bottom when she got arrested for shoplifting in Nashville. Luckily for her, the policeman who picked her up was a fan. He offered her a way out. Rehab or jail. She entered rehab and, as tough as it was, she stuck it out and decided to pursue a different life and stay straight.

Unfortunately, her contract with Sal was pretty typical. She got to be famous, he got to be rich, so she didn't have a cent to her name. She took a bus to her hometown and looked up Nick. Eventually she found the courage to enter the hardware store.

Nick was behind the counter waiting on a customer. He had had a ramp installed so his chair was high enough to easily see over the cash register. The customer stepped aside, and he saw Diane. His face lit up and he nearly exploded. "Well, what do we have here? Nashville royalty right here in my store! You are certainly a site for sore eyes! I always knew that you would walk in my door someday. Yes, this is a special day!"

He rolled down the ramp and went over to her. He pulled her down to sit on his lap and they hugged. "Could you ever forgive me?" she asked.

"For what? Following your dream? I'm just thrilled to see you! How long are you in town?"

“I’m never leaving again,” she said.

“Nick and Diane forever?” he asked.

“Forever and ever!” she said as tears streamed down her face.

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