

Chapter 1 – Niccola Amato

Her concert was perfect. No one on earth can play a violin the way she does. She had sold out the two-thousand-plus seats of the Santa Fe Opera on a Thursday evening. I wondered if she would remember me. They say you never forget your first and I know I have not forgotten her. I watched her in the mirror behind the bar. She looked around then walked toward me.

She sat down beside me and ordered a dirty martini. “I’ll pay for that,” a tall, muscular fellow with a heavy beard tossed his American Express card onto the bar.

She picked it up and handed it back to him. “I’m very capable of buying my own drinks,” she said. “I do not want any company.”

“But maybe I do,” he grunted tossing his card back onto the counter.

I picked up the card and sent it sailing into the people on the crowded dance floor. “The lady doesn’t desire your company,” I said spinning my stool around to face him. “You should move on.”

“You going to make me blondie” he snorted.

I pulled open my blazer just enough to give him a look at my Glock. “If I have to.”

“I don’t want any trouble,” he said holding his hands up in the air and backing away from us.

I covered my gun and returned to my glass of wine.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

I nodded without looking at her. The bartender placed her drink in front of her and she pulled a card from her purse to pay him. She finished her drink and refused his offer of another.

“Do you know of a good restaurant nearby?” She asked me.

Everything in me screamed, “Say no.”

If I turned to face her I would be ripping a Band-Aid off my heart. “Two blocks down, there’s a great Italian restaurant.”

She gripped my wrist. “Reed?”

I turned to face her. “Hello Niccola.”

“Reed Redman. I can’t believe it’s you. What are you doing in Santa Fe?”

“I live here.”

“It’s been so long,” she muttered. “Have you eaten dinner?”

“No, I just watched your concert and stopped for a drink on my way home.”

“Please, have dinner with me?”

“I don’t . . .”

“Please, Reed. I’ve missed you more than I can say.”

I tossed a twenty on the counter for my drink, caught her hand, and led her outside into the cool night air.

I eyed her stiletto heels and hailed a cab. I gave the driver the name of the restaurant and leaned back in the seat. She slipped her arm through mine and hugged it.

“You watched my concert?” She beamed.

I nodded, not telling her I had flown all over the world to watch her concerts.

“What did you think?”

“I think you have improved tremendously,” I teased. “You are much better than that seventeen-year-old child prodigy I once knew.”

She giggled and hugged my arm tighter. “You always made me laugh,” she said. “No, you always made me happy.”

The cab pulled to the curb and the driver held out his hand for payment. I handed him a twenty and opened the door. I extended my hand to her so she could steady herself getting out of the car.

“I love your heels.” I grinned.

“They’re miserable.” She laughed. “I hate them, but they are sexy.”

“I can vouch for that.”

She slid her arm through mine again and leaned on me heavily. “Are they killing you?” I asked.

“More than you will ever know.”

The hostess seated us in a secluded booth. The dim lights and soft music were romantic and relaxing. “They think we are lovers,” Niccola whispered in my ear, her mouth so close I could feel her breath against my cheek. I didn’t reply.

The server headed toward our table. “Do you still like the same wine?” I asked.

“I do.”

I ordered wine for us and asked our server what she recommended.

“Veal scallopini with mushrooms is our signature dish,” she suggested. “Very good.”

“May we share an order,” Niccola asked.

“Of course,” the server replied. “May I suggest our arancini as an appetizer? They are to die for.”

“Why not?” I replied remembering how Niccola had loved the little stuffed rice balls when we were teens.

The server returned with our wine. Niccola kicked off her heels, relaxed against the back of the booth, and put her feet in my lap.

She watched me from beneath heavy lashes. “You used to massage my feet after my concerts,” she reminded me.

“I used to massage all of you,” I shot back at her. “That was a lifetime ago. You’re married now.”

She nodded but didn’t remove her feet. I found myself unconsciously rubbing her arches. Her soft moans made my heart rate increase.

“I noticed you aren’t wearing your wedding band.” I said as casually as I could.

“The metal sometimes interferes with my fingering.”

I grinned mischievously and she blushed but ignored my childishness.

“The metal occasionally strikes the strings, and I can’t afford even a rare mistake.” She suppressed a smile.

“To you and your incredible music,” I toasted her after the server left our table.

“Tonight, I fell in love with your music all over again,” I said. “That violin and your talent are a marriage made in heaven. I’ve never heard an instrument sound like that. The warm mellow tones and resonance are breathtaking. Your performance was absolutely perfect.”

“I am so fortunate that Mr. Bransom is allowing me to play his Stradivarius,” she noted. “The quality of the instrument allows me to get the sound I strive for—the sound that soothes my soul.”

“It is a magnificent instrument. I read about it. It was made in 1717 and you call it Gabriel. I’m curious, what kind of security do you have in place for a violin that is valued at twelve-million dollars?”

“The security is amazing. If I told you about it, I’d have to kill you.” She laughed. “You have always been my biggest fan, Reed. I love that about you. You appreciate the same fine music that I do. But enough about me tell me about your life. Have you married?”

“No. I travel a lot. Few women will tolerate that. I’m surprised your husband doesn’t tour with you.”

“He can’t leave his business for very long. You know how it is when the boss is away.”

“Yes. I do. Are there children in your future?”

“No!” she exclaimed. “I do not have time for children.”

“I honestly love other people’s children, but I have no desire for one of my own,” I admitted.

“I read that your detective agency is doing great things.”

“We try.”

“And that you have offices in several states now including New York.”

I nodded. My business wasn't something I wanted to discuss with her. I was certain she had no idea she was one of my biggest clients and she was one of the reasons we had just opened an office in London.

I encouraged her to talk about herself, eager to know all there was to know about her. Was she pleased with her career and fame? Did she still think about opening a music school to encourage teens to play the violin? Was she happy with her marriage?

"I have been so blessed in my musical career," she said, "but I'm not getting any younger and touring is more exhausting every year. I want to open a music studio, but my husband says I'd get bored."

"I doubt music will ever bore you," I said. "I do worry you will burn out. You tour constantly."

She smiled sweetly. "You worry about me. So, you do think about me?"

"More than I should," I admitted.

We laughed talking about our childhood and our wins and losses in life. "How is your father?" she asked.

"More bitter than ever and he still hates me. Blames me for destroying his career and I guess I did."

"You didn't do it alone," she reminisced. "Although you bore the brunt of the outrage, I believe I was equally to blame."

"That's water under the bridge. Let's not discuss it."

"I'm sorry your father got blamed for what happened between you and me, but I don't regret us," she declared.

"How long will you be in town?" I asked, changing the subject because I never wanted to get sucked back down that black rabbit hole again.

"I have a couple of weeks to rest before I fly to Italy to kick off my tour overseas. I plan to stay in Santa Fe the entire time. I'm adding a new piece for my Rome performance, and I must practice endlessly to perfect it."

“This is a great time of year to be in my fair city. You should take a few days to relax and rejuvenate.”

“I would welcome a beautiful, blonde tour guide,” she cut her eyes at me and wrinkled her nose in that cute way that made my heart stutter.

Tell her you are busy, my brain screamed, but my mouth said, “I think I know a woman who fits that description and I’m certain she could clear her calendar for a few days to guide you.”

“I would love that.” She bowed her head slightly and looked up at me through long lashes that haunted my dreams.

“Last call for drinks,” the server approached our table.

I slipped my card on the table. “Just the check, please.”

Where are you staying, Nikki?”

She smiled. “No one has called me that in a very long time.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“Don’t be sorry. I love the way you say it. Nikki! It sounds so carefree and happy.”

“I truly hope you are happy, Nikki,” I said sincerely.

“Right now, I am the happiest girl in the world.” She sighed.

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“Where are you staying?” I asked again as we stood on the curb waiting for a cab.

“Inn of the Governors in downtown Santa Fe.”

“I’m familiar with it. It’s a nice property.”

After waiting twenty minutes, I suggested we walk back to the restaurant and get my car. “I’d be delighted to drive you to your hotel.”

“I’ve taken enough of your time,” she said.

“I don’t think you have a choice. I don’t see a cab anywhere.” I pointed out. “But those heels will kill you.” I grabbed her hand and pulled her back inside the restaurant. I

spoke with the manager who agreed to drive us the five blocks to the cantina to get my car.

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“What time will you pick me up in the morning?” She asked when I pulled my vehicle beneath the portico.

“Why don’t you call me when you get up. I know you are tired and need to rest. Sleep late and give me a call when you are ready to venture out. We can have brunch, or a late lunch then do touristy things. You are right in the center of our arts district. I must take you to see Mother. She will be thrilled to see you.”

“I would love that. You have always been so thoughtful,” she smiled then brushed my lips with hers. “Do you want to come in for a nightcap?”

“No!” I said too quickly. “I don’t think that is a good idea. I’ll see you tomorrow. Sweet dreams.”

I watched her until she was safely inside the hotel lobby then drove the three blocks from her hotel to the building that housed my loft apartment and the headquarters of my security agency.

##

I won’t lie. I am pleased with where I am in my life. The only thing that has always been missing is Niccola Amato.

My father was the colonel of the Los Alamos Demolition Range and Nikki’s father was his commanding officer, Major General Robert Amato.

When Major General Amato and his family were assigned to the army base, my father was the commanding officer below him. They became close friends, and our families spent a lot of time together socially. Nikki and I attended the base school and were always there for each other. We shared our darkest secrets and our worst fears.

Amato had two goals in life: he would become a general and his daughter Niccola would become the world's greatest violinist. He would let nothing stand in their way, not even friendship. He went on to become a general. Thanks to Nikki and me and our little indiscretion celebrating high school graduation, my father was transferred to the White Sands Missile Range Army Base in Otero, NM, to serve out his days until retirement as lesser officers were promoted over him.

My mother listened to his constant ranting against me until she packed up our belongings and moved us to Santa Fe. I have no interaction with my father to this day.

A popular Santa Fe artist, my mother earned enough to support us, and I went to college on scholarships and the money I earned from part-time jobs. With a major in computer science and a minor in cyber security, I went to work for the Santa Fe Police Department. While I loved law enforcement work, I was frustrated by the politics involved and started thinking of other outlets for my talents.

My second year on the job the daughter of one of our wealthiest citizens was kidnapped by her nanny and held for a ten-million-dollar ransom.

As the deadline approached to make the payment, my lieutenant suspected the nanny, but had no proof and no idea where the girl was being held.

I may have bent the rules to hack some personal computers and phones to locate the girl which resulted in my immediate dismissal from the force.

The girl's father learned what had happened and approached me to find his child. He offered a million-dollar reward to anyone who could provide the location of his daughter and was more than willing to pay it to me. I provided the address where the girl was held captive, and he sent in a team of security operatives to save her.

That series of events set me on the path of my life's work, and I opened a detective and security agency in

downtown Santa Fe. Using the funds from the reward, I purchased an old building that had been condemned. The owners wanted to unload it at a good price that left me enough money to bring it up to code.

I was able to build eight loft apartments on the second floor of the building and spaces for offices and shops on the ground level. As I said earlier, the only thing missing from my life was Nikki Amato.

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