

Naples, Present Day



Falcon stood in the shadowed courtyard of the Naples Conservatory.

She left the building right on schedule. She had arrived early and stopped by the *panetteria* to pick up breakfast. She preferred the sweet rolls. When she left the music school, it was near dark.

Her schedule of classes wasn't that bad. It was the time she spent practicing alone in whatever unoccupied classroom she could find that kept her there all day. She was dedicated, and very beautiful.

She had bumped into him in the hall two days ago on her way to class, '*Scusi, Signore.*' He did not know which was more shocking; the sound of her rich contralto or those huge liquid gold eyes, a striking contrast to the midnight waterfall rippling down her back.

He had purposely stepped in her path that day to confront her about the Stradivarius she carried. When he got a better look at her, he smiled '*Perdonami,*' and let her pass. Her lithe form glided down the hall.

If this goddess is a thief, she won't have to take anything from me. I'll give her whatever she wants, and more.

Although he allowed her to see him just that once, he had been watching her ever since. He did not know her name yet, but he called her Angel. Her unusual eyes made her seem like a fairy. Her fluid grace only enhanced the impression of an ethereal wood sprite.

The warm breeze lifting her summer print skirt silenced those thoughts.

Damned if he was not holding his breath waiting for the end of those legs before the gentle curve of her hips.

She crossed the darkening *piazza* and her full breasts danced under the white camisole top, making his mouth water. She was on her way home now.

She was staying at the *Casa di Città* on *Piazza Avellino* and now so was he. The apartment, a few avenues away from the Conservatory, was in the cultural Greco-Roman district, where the buildings themselves looked like archaeological finds.

Falcon emerged from the cluster of fig trees in the courtyard. He stopped when a man exited a side door off the Conservatory. The man started walking behind Angel.

Turning toward the fountain in the courtyard, he gave the man a head start. He fell in step behind the man, who carried no books, no instrument. *Is he a teacher, or a lover?*

No, not a lover. The man didn't even call out to the girl. He did not know her.

Falcon strolled along, looking into shop windows he passed. The man ignored a streetlight,

but Falcon stopped, making sure no one followed him. With an idle shift from side to side, he waited for a car to cross the intersection.

Across the street, a teenager sat on the steps of a closed shop. He'd been there for the last few days. The car stopped at the curb in front of the teenager.

Someone should pick him up.

He would not jeopardize his cover for drug trafficking. He would leave that to the local *polizia*.

The light changed and Falcon crossed the street, satisfied that the man following Angel was alone.

They were walking through the ancient Roman marketplace, which was deserted now. When the girl got closer to the church built on the site of an old temple, the man began to close the distance between them.

Falcon shook his head as she reached the church corner. She never noticed the man who was just a few feet behind her now. When the man pushed her into the gloom around the church corner, they were lost from his sight. The girl screamed.

Sprinting, he rounded the corner. About ten feet away, the man was trying to wrestle the violin case from her against the wall.

Falcon pulled out his gun and aimed. "Let her go."

The man turned toward him, and the girl pulled at his ear. The man bent, holding his stomach. He made an inarticulate sound before running away along the side of the building into the darkness.

Falcon darted past the girl and followed the man into the shadows.

What the hell?

Something flitted overhead, darker than the darkness in which he now stood alone. He pointed the Glock upward even as a figure walked up the side of the building. It looked like a black cloud but more solid than it should be.

Before he could get off a shot, the darkness disappeared over the side of the roof.

Staring at the dead end in front of him, Falcon put his gun away. No doors or windows on either side.

Where is the guy? Must be a hidden door somewhere, he'd check it out later.

Falcon turned back toward the girl. Beyond her, across the street, the man he had been chasing got into a car.

"No way," he murmured as the car sped off. No way could the man have gotten past him in the alley.

The girl had both arms wrapped around the violin case in front of her. She was leaning against the church wall, crying.

A street lamp flickered on above them, belatedly bathing the passage in revealing light. She did not seem to realize that he was there.

"Did he hurt you, *Signorina*?"

She looked up. He lifted his gaze from her heaving chest.

"*Grazie*," she whispered, wiping her face with the back of her hand. She shook her head. "I am fine."

"You should not be walking alone at night." The harsh reprimand in his voice surprised him. She was very young. Her tears wrought such vulnerability that he softened his tone when he came to stand in front of her. "Do you know that man?"

"No, I have never seen him before. But...he knew me."

“What did he say to you?”

She looked down at the violin.

He stared at her until she looked up. *Ah, she has just found her story.* It was in her eyes, and it was not the truth. The fear in her eyes told him that story would never change.

“He didn’t say anything, but the way he looked at me...”

Her chest heaved again. He almost smiled; she was having a hard time with this lie.

She stared at him. “You are from the Conservatory. I saw you the other day.”

“Antonio Russo, Tony to my friends.” She did not hesitate to shake his hand, and he did smile then. She might be lying to him but at least she did not see him as a threat. She continued to stare at him. She must want more. “I’m taking classes at the Conservatory,” he added. “I play piano.”

“Oh yes, I’ve seen you in *Signor Gattano’s* class.”

He had signed up for the class because it was right next door to hers. So, she had noticed him, too. He smiled wider.

“*Signorina*, I could call you *Bella*, but that would not satisfy my curiosity.”

She lowered her eyelashes over cheeks flushed the color of the terracotta tiles on his mother’s sunlit patio in Tuscany. She tanned well for one so light. He almost lifted his hand to touch her cheek. There would be little satisfaction in knowing her name now that her skin was singing a siren’s song to him.

“My name is Angelina Natale.”

“Ah. You are an angel, after all. I have not seen you around here for very long. Did you just fall from heaven?”

He watched her full lips while the sound of earthy laughter, though shaky, amped up the adrenaline coursing through his veins. A vision of her lying naked beneath him, her golden eyes glazed in passion, teased him.

“I am from England. I’m here for the symphony.” Her Italian was excellent.

“Angelina Natale, I would be honored if you would let me escort you home.”

She put the violin case under one arm. “I would like that.”

There was blood on her closed fist.

He moved closer. “Are you hurt?”

She moved her hand behind the folds of her skirt and backed into the wall.

He waited, leaning his hand against the wall above her head, inhaling her perfume. A beguiling combination of...amber, apples and musk. The scent suited her, organic, delicious. He wanted to lift her skirt right now and take her against this wall, those long legs wrapped around him.

Angelina examined the buttons on his shirt that were in such close proximity. Stepping away from him would be cowardly, and he would guess she was made of sterner stuff. When she looked up it was with the defiance he expected from a cornered tigress.

He held her gaze, reaching behind to bring her fist out from the folds of her skirt.

The bloody gold in the center of her palm was a heavy medium-sized loop engraved with a stylized dragon. She had pulled it from the man’s ear and he had not made a sound.

“A memento?” He whispered in English close to her lips.

“I don’t want it. You can have it,” she answered in her native tongue. *Now, that was the truth.* Her British accent was tinged with a weary sadness. He wanted to pick her up against his chest and carry her home.

She had courage. Even while his mind worked to figure out what her role was in the mystery

of the Stradivarius, he admired that.

He couldn't leave her alone now. Not on a street where men escaped him when cornered in an alley and black clouds slid up church walls.

"Are you hungry?" Their lips were inches apart and he wanted to kiss her, but that would have to come later.

"I forgot about lunch. I had *caffè* at four. I'm starving," the beautiful tigress admitted.