

*Redeemed*

Sample

Chapter 11

Antonio was glad that Kimberly had chosen a short skirt to show off her shapely long legs. He enjoyed watching guys look her up and down as they were shown to a table near the window.

They studied the menus for a few moments.

She lowered her menu.

He said, "You are breathtaking. You know that, don't you?"

"If you say so," she said. "Remember. This dinner is on me. Please order for both of us. I'll take care of the check," she said.

"May I start you with some wine?" the waiter asked.

"Give us a minute, please, with the wine list," Antonio said.

"Of course." The waiter stood patiently.

"Please bring us a bottle of Chianti Classico and an order of Margherita Flatbread."

"Of course," the waiter said.

"Have you ever had Chianti Classico?" Antonio asked.

"I haven't. Is it special?" Kimberly asked.

"It's very good wine from the Chianti region in Tuscany. Each bottle bears the seal of the black rooster. We have family in the wine business in Tuscany," Antonio said.

The waiter presented the wine bottle. Antonio pointed to the black rooster seal. They went through the elaborate ritual of tasting.

When the wine was deemed acceptable and the waiter had filled their glasses, Antonio said, "To getting to know each other better."

They raised their glasses and smiled at each other.

When the waiter returned Antonio said, "We'll have the Peking duck and Caesar salads."

"Excellent," the waiter said as he collected the menus.

Kimberly looked out the window at the twinkly skyline.

"What is it that you love about this city?" Antonio asked.

"Oh, it's hard to pick out just a few things. I love the fast pace and the tall buildings and the bright, bright lights. I don't mind the honking cabs. It's just part of the deal," she said.

Antonio studied her.

She said, "It is true, though, that I have fallen in love with Brooklyn. The trees, the friendly neighborhoods, the quiet streets. The Da Costa diner customers. I can see why your parents consider them friends and neighbors, not just customers."

"I admire your eclectic tastes, Kimberly. Your eyes sparkle in the lights of Manhattan, and you are at home on the quiet streets of Brooklyn, as well."

He paused. "Do you think that you could fall in love with a Brooklyn boy who has only one leg and uncertain prospects?" he asked.

Surprised by the question, Kimberly hesitated a second or two. "It's possible that I already have," she said.

He held her eyes and reached across the table for her hand.

"When Gina came in with the letter saying you were in the hospital and hoping to be out of a wheelchair before coming home, I was very sad. I had never even seen a picture of you, but I created my own. I could see a crippled, broken person. A victim of war. That was not the man who enjoyed surprising his parents at the diner this summer. That was not the man I may have started falling in love with," she said.

He squeezed her hand and asked, "What do you want out of life? You must be about 30 now. Right?"

"Oh, I turned 30 last February. I guess it's not too soon to get my priorities straight," she said.

"And what are your priorities?" he asked, still holding her hand across the table.

"I used to think my career was my top priority. I gave it everything I had for a long time, and it didn't leave much room for anything else," she said.

"No room for a man?" he asked.

"Oh, I've had relationships here and there, but nothing ever worked out," she said.

"Because you didn't want them to work out, perhaps?" he asked.

"None of them seemed more important than my work," she said.

"And, what about now? Do you still feel like a relationship is not as important as your work?" he asked.

"Well, my current job, as much as I love the diner, is no comparison to the work that I was glued to in the past. But, I think I know what you are asking," she said.

She smiled and looked at him for a long moment.

"Antonio, I do care for you, but I think we should take it slow," she said. "We've both been through a lot of life changes lately," she said.

"I agree. I still have a lot of hard rehab and getting a prosthetic leg ahead of me," he said.

Kimberly said, "And, I still have a lot of sorting out to do. I am working in Brooklyn and living in Manhattan. That's a pretty crazy situation. I need to find an apartment in Brooklyn and move out of my expensive Manhattan place. I've been putting it off. I guess I hate to admit that my financial services career is probably gone forever. The truth is I need to trade the bright lights and noisy streets of Manhattan for the peace of tree-lined neighborhoods in Brooklyn."

Antonio said, "You'll have a lot of space to sort it out without me hanging around to influence your decisions. Tomorrow I am leaving for the VA hospital in Albany. I've got my paperwork straight with them and they have promised me a new leg."

"So soon?" she asked. "I didn't think you would be leaving so soon."

He signaled for the waiter and said, "Well, that's a relief. I'm glad you aren't in a hurry to see me go."

She reached for the check. He covered her hand, “You didn’t think that I was really going to let you pay for dinner, did you?” he asked.

She frowned.

“My Mamma raised me better than that,” he said.

They took a detour through Times Square. Kimberly spotted the Naked Cowboy and smiled.

Antonio said, “What? You are flirting with the Naked Cowboy?”

“No, I am smiling because I’m remembering my mother’s reaction to him last winter. He was standing there between two young women, posing for a picture. I assured her that he was pretty harmless and she said, ‘That does not look harmless to me.’ Then she looked back at him, not once, but twice. Antonio shared Kimberly’s laughter.

He said, “I hate to think about what my Mamma would say. I hope she never sees The Naked Cowboy.”

They walked to the subway station just off Times Square. He kissed her deeply before letting her go down the stairs. “I don’t know how long I will be at the VA hospital. Please take care of my Mamma and my girl while I am gone,” he said. She smiled and said, “I will.”

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