

Chapter One of "For Sophia's Heart" by Lyn Cote

WISCONSIN • APRIL 1898

Gannon looked up. The fragrance of lavender wafted around the slender young woman as she navigated the narrow passenger-car aisle toward him. Her high cheekbones gave her face an exotic cast.

The train rumbled into motion again. She lurched against his shoulder, then straightened. "Pardon, sir," she said with an accent. He felt her grip the back of his bench, obviously trying to become accustomed to the rocking motion of the train.

His gaze took in her white shirtwaist and black skirt, her raven hair and straw hat. Her stylish outfit didn't fit with the modest old-fashioned valise she carried in one hand and the worn violin case tucked under her arm. Under eyebrows arched like a swallow's wings, her deep brown eyes looked intelligent but cautious, just like Annie's so often had. He made himself smile and nod, but that sad drawing-down sensation, which thoughts of his sister always brought, dragged at his insides.

A child two rows in front of Gannon shrieked again and began crying. The noise set Gannon's teeth on edge. Since the train trip started, the little pair, brother and sister, had fought, howled, and whined. All the while, the mother had rocked a discontented baby.

Usually he'd have moved to another car, but the train had become crowded; in addition, on this trip everything seemed to hit him harder, stronger than usual. He wasn't just riding the train back to the university in Chicago as he had so many times in the past three years. Today he was beginning his venture beyond everyday life. His destination could change—or even end—his life.

Glancing back over her shoulder the way she'd come, the young woman reversed course and went forward to the two long bench seats which faced each other. Her back to Gannon, she took the vacant seat facing the distracted mother. Brave woman, Gannon thought.

"Hello," she greeted the mother. "What lovely boy and girl you have. They are yours, yes?"

The frazzled mother looked ready to disown the pair, but managed to nod. The baby in her arms began squalling again.

Reaching across the space between them, the young woman stroked the little girl's blonde hair. "What sunny hair you have."

The youngster stopped shoving her brother and stared up at the woman. "What's that?" The child pointed at the violin case the young woman held on her lap.

"This is violin. You like music?"

Both children nodded vigorously.

"I play music for you?"

Both children bobbed their heads again.

"I play if you lay head on your mother's lap." Looking to their mother for approval, she motioned the little boy to lie next to his mother. "And you, little girl, lay head on my lap."

After receiving her mother's nod, the girl came to her. Unbelievably, the ragamuffins obeyed.

Chatting softly in what Gannon thought must be a Slavic accent, the young woman lifted out her violin, plucked strings, tightened knobs, then rested the instrument on her shoulder.

Mellow strains of what sounded like a lullaby floated over the rattling of the train. The melody sounded familiar. Was it Hungarian or Russian?

Soon, the two children napped, the infant stilled, and the distracted mother sighed.

The older man beside Gannon breathed, "Thank heaven."

Gannon suspected most of the other passengers agreed with this sentiment. What a thoughtful girl, kind just like our Annie.

But the violin player's suntanned face and gloveless hands marked her as less than well-to-do—despite the fashionable cut of her clothing. Perhaps the outfit had been a gift from a friend? No doubt this young woman was an immigrant, one of the many flocking to America.

In Gannon's mind, his mother's voice decried this influx of foreigners: "Uneducated Slavs with no background in democracy have no place in America." He wished his mother could have witnessed this young woman's style, sensitivity, and kindness. He frowned. Where was she headed all by herself?

The train rattled and shook as it picked up more speed. Gannon closed his eyes. The young woman's music continued, soulful and melodic. She had a gift. But her music did more than soothe and entertain. It gave him something to concentrate on, something to push away the thoughts of the future he didn't want to deal with right now.

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Startled back to consciousness on the hard bench, Gannon wondered what had awakened him in the murky darkness of night.

A woman's shriek, " No! Please!" though muffled, gave him his answer. He tensed and scanned the dim interior of the train car.

By the moonlight flickering through the windows, Gannon glimpsed a large man sitting ahead on one of the forward benches. He had trapped a poor woman beside him in an awkward embrace. "Girlie, just give us a little kiss," the man coaxed.

"Help!" she gasped.

It was the young woman with the violin!

Gannon sprang to his feet and lunged down the aisle to her. He grabbed the man's shoulder. But the ox shook him off. Gannon stumbled, righted himself. He threw his arms around the man's thick neck and hauled up on his windpipe from behind.

The man tried to twist and break Gannon's hold.

Exerting all his strength, Gannon managed to drag him off the bench and toward the door at the end of the car.

The conductor opened the door from outside. "What's the problem?"

"Masher," Gannon gritted out. "Accosting a young woman."

"Bring him out here. We're slowing down—"

"Let me go!" the ox growled. "Let me go!"

"We certainly will," the conductor agreed in an amiable tone. "Step outside. We'll let you go right here."

Gannon wrestled the man out onto the small walkway between the cars. The train had slowed on its way through a town. Cool wind in his face, Gannon saw the glimmer of town lights.

"Now!" the conductor yelled over the clacking of wheels on the rails. "Let him go!"

Gannon obeyed and the big man rattled down the metal steps and staggered onto the wooden platform. Landing hard, he roared a curse after them.

"Here's his bag." The man who'd been sitting beside Gannon came from behind. Gannon took the bag and tossed it onto the platform as the train sped up, leaving the town lights behind.

The conductor led them into the car back to the young woman. She sat alone now. The mother and children had gotten off at a stop before dark. "Are you all right, miss?"

She wept into her handkerchief without looking up.

The older man who'd brought the suitcase passed around Gannon and returned to his seat.

"Miss?" The conductor bent forward. "We've put that lout off the train. You have nothing to fear now."

Though she nodded, she didn't stop crying.

The conductor looked to Gannon. "Why don't you sit beside her for a moment until she can calm herself? I have to go through the other cars again, make sure everything's all right there, too."

Gannon nodded and sat down beside the young woman, ransacking his mind for a way to soothe her. Maybe if he distracted her? He dug into his pocket for his watch. Pulling it out by its chain, he snapped open the watchcase, revealing a miniature photograph inside. He offered it to her. "My sister."

Reaching into his other pocket, he took out a match, struck it, and held it over the miniature so she could see it better.

She accepted the watch and held it. "Your sister?"

"Yes, Annie. She died seven months ago. You remind me of her." Why had he said that?

"I'm so sorry you lost sister." She still sniffled into the handkerchief.

He nodded and took the pocket watch back.

"You have just one sister?"

"No, here's my whole family." He flipped a catch at the watch rim and displayed another photograph. Looking at the faces of his father, mother, and two younger brothers, Gannon recalled his father's prayer over him at the train station: "Protect our son and let him bring honor to our country, to you. ..." Each word stung like a yellow jacket. Would he bring honor ... or more sorrow? He blocked this thought from his mind.

"You're safe now," he told the young woman beside him. "No one will hurt you."

"May I ask question?"

"Certainly." He slipped his watch back into his pocket.

"You dress like rich man, but you are strong." She touched his arm. "You have muscles."

He chuckled. "I'm an upperclassman at the University of Chicago during the school term, but my father, a lumber-man, has me work as a lumberjack in the summers. He says it's good for a young man."

"He is right. I glad you are strong. I thank you very much. That man frightened me."

"I'm sorry. Anyone could see you are a decent girl."

She drew in breath. "Some men don't. . . respect women."

He moved to stand.

She touched his sleeve. "You sit beside Sophia? We talk, yes?"

How could he say no? Besides, comforting her steadied him, gave him someone other than himself to consider. He settled back into the seat. "You're Sophia? I'm Gannon, Gannon Moore."

"Sophia Theresa Schiffler. Please to meet you, Mr. Moore," she whispered. "Tell me about family please?"

He understood she didn't want to sit quietly with her thoughts any more than he did. Her soft voice pricked his sympathy, too. An innocent girl, she probably felt more jittery than he did after tussling with that oaf. "There's not much to say really. Tell me about yours, Sophia."

"We come from old country when I am a girl. Here my papa works on farm, cow farm . . . dairy," she whispered back.

Trying to sound sympathetic, he asked, "Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"I have two sisters from my mother and four brothers from my second mother."

"You mean your stepmother?" The creaking train swayed around a curve in the rails. He wondered if he would get any more sleep tonight.

"Yes, I forget word. Stepmother."

The moonlight reflected on her large, luminous eyes. She was a woman men would notice. Why was she traveling alone? "So they are your stepbrothers then?"

She nodded.

"I enjoyed your music earlier. What were you playing?"

"Some Smetana. Brahms's 'Hungarian Dances.' A little Tchaikovsky."

Gannon stared at her. "You're trained? You don't play by ear?"

"No. No. My mother's family has been musicians in Ljubljana for generations. This is my grandfather's violin."

Gannon wondered what his mother would say to this revelation. Having a Slavic accent didn't mean that a person was as uneducated as his mother might think. "Where is Ljubljana?"

"It's in Slovenia in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, near northern Italy." Sophia smiled. "I read music better than English."

He gave her a smile in return. "I definitely read English better than music. My mother made me take a year of piano. Torture."

Lowering her chin, she shook her head at him. The moonlight flashed on and off her face, giving him a flickering view of her. In spite of her gentle humor, her face looked shadowed, sad.

He couldn't keep from asking, "Where are you headed so far from home, Sophia?"

"I go to Chicago." She clenched her hands in her lap.

"Are you going to visit relatives?"

"No." She pursed her lips.

Wondering at her suddenly stiff tone, he waited, then asked, "Are you going for a job?"

She shook her head, her chin drooping. She sighed. "I go to be married."

Why did her reply bring back that drawing-down feeling inside him again? Something occurred to him as peculiar.

She was going to be married? All by herself? "Why didn't your family come with you?"

"Papa can't leave work. Mother can't leave children. I go alone." She looked away.

"What's your husband-to-be's name?"

"Mr. Paul Ramos."

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Her sudden terseness baffled Gannon. He wondered why this young woman didn't add any information to her intended's name. Even though her circumstances were more modest, all the brides he'd ever talked to couldn't stop describing their wedding dress, the flowers, the groom, and on and on. "How did you meet Mr. Ramos?"

Sophia gazed down at her hands folded in her lap. She took a deep breath. "I never meet Mr. Paul Ramos."