



ANDREA BOLTER

The Italian's
Runaway
Princess

MILLS & BOON
True Love

Andrea Bolter

The Italian's Runaway Princess

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Is life outside the palace walls everything she dreamed of? When billionaire Gio Grassi rescues a beautiful stranger on the streets of Florence he never imagined she'd be royalty! Princess Luciana's vivacity intrigues him. With her arranged royal wedding only weeks away, can this chance encounter change their lives forever?

Is life outside the palace walls...
...everything she dreamed of?

When billionaire Gio Grassi rescued a beautiful stranger on the streets of Florence, he never imagined she'd be royalty! Princess Luciana's innocence compels Gio to protect her, and her vivacity intrigues him. But Gio's been betrayed before and he can't let it happen again. With Luciana's arranged royal wedding only weeks away, can this chance encounter change the course of these two lives—forever?

ANDREA BOLTER has always been fascinated by matters of the heart. In fact she's the one her girlfriends turn to for advice with their love-lives. A city mouse, she lives in Los Angeles with her husband and daughter. She loves travel, rock 'n' roll, sitting in cafés and watching romantic comedies she's already seen a hundred times. Say hi at andreabolter.com.

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THE ITALIAN'S RUNAWAY PRINCESS

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For Ellen

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

HER ROYAL HIGHNESS Princess Luciana de la Isla de Izerote finally inhaled the warm air of Florence, Italy. The secret journey from her home, an island near the coast of Spain, had been difficult. At last she was under the Tuscan sun, the yellow glow much different from the seascape she was used to. But the liberation she expected to feel as she took her first breath of freedom was hardly as she'd hoped.

As a matter of fact, Luciana was starting to feel afraid being alone. She was short of breath from walking too fast away from the encounter at the jewelry store, where she had been unsuccessful in converting a palace ruby into a typical tourist's spending money. Worse still, three teenage boys seemed to be following her. Swiveling her head enough to take a look at them behind her, she saw they were scruffy and wore shabby T-shirts and track pants. These unexpected companions made her entire escape plan seem not only reckless, but like it was about to become dangerous.

"*Bambolina*, let us see your necklace," one of the boys called out as they closed the distance between themselves and the princess. "We'll buy your jewel."

Luciana hastened her pace. She'd arrived in Florence to have an adventure before she lived the rest of her life in royal duty. The escapade didn't include being chased by thugs who might be trying to steal the jewelry she'd brought with her to sell as a way to finance her trip, given that she had no actual money of her own. The princess quickened to almost a run as her hand clutched the ruby pendant that hung from a heavy chain. Her sense of direction turned all around, she didn't even know where she was headed.

The boys behind her may or may not have seen that she had other pieces of jewelry in the purse that hung from a long leather strap on one of her shoulders, crossing her body and slapping against her at the opposite hip as she rushed away from them. She might have been able to run faster had she not also been toting a wheeled suitcase that contained her belongings for her three weeks as a Florentine tourist. After which time, she'd return to Izerote. And to her obligations, including her arranged marriage to King Agustin de la Isla de Menocita, the widower thirty years her senior from a neighboring island.

Princess Luciana had thought about this getaway for a long time, plotting exactly how she'd make her way to Florence and how she'd finance the travels. What she hadn't counted on was how problematic it would be to sell jewelry. Having had no experience, she didn't know that the shops would require paperwork and authentication.

After she'd made it from the island to her first stop in Barcelona, she'd needed the first installment of cash for the train tickets to Florence and to buy some food. One jeweler had directed her to another of less repute, and he to another still, until she'd sold an amethyst cocktail ring for far less than its worth.

She knew little about city streets, having spent most of her life behind the palace walls of Izerote. Leaving only to attend official engagements and social functions accompanied by palace security, she was always safely sequestered in private cars, boats and planes. That was exactly why she'd come to Florence, the place she'd fallen in love with through art, books and movies. To experience being a simple tourist, to wander here and there without an itinerary or bodyguards, was to be a once-in-a-lifetime dream.

Having trouble selling the jewelry and now being followed just after she'd arrived was turning it into a nightmare.

"Bella." One of the boys hurried even closer to her, his use of the endearment for *beautiful* sounding like a snake's hiss that terrified her.

"Signorina. *Carina. Tesoro...*" Another bounced around to the other side of her, trying every name he could think of to get her to stop and address him directly.

With a yank on her suitcase, she began to run faster, heart racing. She thought about calling out for help to the first person she saw, but she didn't want to attract attention to herself. Her tiny island country was not well-known to most the world, but nonetheless, if questioned, she was a princess and it would appear odd that she was alone on the streets of central Florence. No one knew she was here, and she wanted to keep it that way.

Turning a corner, the boys chased after her and one pulled on the strap of her purse.

"Stop. Leave me alone," Luciana cried out and broke free.

A part of her fully expected her father King Mario's security team to have outwitted her already, to know exactly where she was and to direct unseen bodyguards to arrive at any moment to whisk her back to Izerote without letting her have the grand escapade she'd planned. With these boys harassing her, she almost wished they would.

Thinking quickly, she worked in front of her stomach to block the boys' view as she removed the rest of the jewels from her purse and held them tightly in her free hand. If they managed to steal her purse, at least they would find it empty.

"You give us that purse, right now," one of the boys jeered in a threatening tone.

"Get away from me," Luciana shouted. She looked to see if anyone else was behind her, her suitcase wobbling. As she turned back around, she tripped over something on the ground and crashed right into...

The broad shoulders and chest of a man. Specifically, her face slammed directly into the center of the man's muscular chest. As she approximated where her nose hit into him, she estimated just how tall a man he was. Six foot three, at least. Her head involuntarily turned a bit sideways so that her cheek could replace her nose as she pressed against him. Because that exact spot was solid, warm, smelled like clean laundry, and she quite liked it. Although she knew she needed to bend her neck back in order to see the face of the man she'd crushed into, something in her resisted the idea and she simply wanted to nuzzle her face into his rock-hard chest for the foreseeable future.

"Hello," a voice from somewhere inside the man's body crawled into her. "Do you need help?" His very deep timbre completely enveloped her in muscles and sounds. He could be yet another foe, but it didn't feel that way.

One thing she knew for sure was that it was not the chest of King Agustin de la Isla de Menocita, the man she was to marry in three weeks. Not only was King Agustin much smaller in stature than the man she pressed into, her fiancé spoke in a voice high and clipped. Nothing like the smooth-as-cappuccino voice of the man her cheek was touching.

“These boys are trying to steal my purse.” Princess Luciana spoke into the good-smelling man’s chest, knowing that he’d be able to hear her even though her mouth was far lower than his ear. She clutched her jewels so tightly that her fingernails cut into her palms.

His response was to do what every fiber in her being had actually hoped he would since she bumped into him. He placed both of his long arms around her and pulled her into a tight hold, encircling her in the most complete way. “*Mia amata*—” he used the words of a lover “—you’re so late. I was running to the train station to find you.”

Realizing that he was pretending to be with her as a way to shake off these would-be criminals, Luciana knew enough to play along. “I stopped at the jewelry store.”

“Can I do something for you gentlemen?” The pretend lover turned his attention to the thugs. The boys seemed to be taking stock of the situation now that the good-smelling man had arrived on the scene. Without answering, they lingered awhile longer. “I repeat, can I do something for you?” the man with the gigantic strong arms around the princess shouted in a voice menacing enough to scare them.

Luciana craned her neck so that she could look up to see the man’s face. As if the mere feel of his chest and tone of his voice wasn’t enough, she now stared at one of the most handsome men she had ever seen.

Pale skin served to draw extra attention to the sparkling light blue eyes. He had high cheekbones, a full red mouth and a head full of beautiful golden curls, like a subject in a painting from the Renaissance, an era when Florence was abuzz with intellectual, scientific and creative discovery. A time in history that was one of the reasons Luciana had wanted to explore this important city.

“Oh, no, signore,” said one of the boys behind her.

“We were taking a walk on this lovely day,” another singsonged.

Only after they scattered away did the man with the lavish blond curls let go of Luciana. They looked directly into each other’s eyes for the first time. She thought she might have been struck by a bolt of lightning, but the sunny skies rendered that unlikely.

The blue-eyed man then began to disentangle the long purse strap that had become twisted around Luciana’s arm after the boys tried to pull it away from her. The strap was so mangled it became a puzzle to unravel it, and he gave his full attention to the task. Finally, he gingerly placed the strap back on her shoulder and the purse fell naturally across her opposite hip as intended.

The care this total stranger was extending to her was surprising. And also a first for Princess Luciana. Commoners were not permitted to touch her, except on occasions of handshakes during official processions through the streets or when meeting military heroes, and under close supervision. But certainly nothing involving a gorgeous man with enormous hands putting his arms around her or arranging a purse onto her body.

Only then did Luciana remember what she held in her still tightly closed fist. “Oh, my gosh, I’d forgotten that I’d been holding my jewels all of this time. I thought surely those boys were going to tear my purse off me, so I grabbed the contents.”

“Why are you carrying such valuables in a flimsy purse on a city street?”

“It’s a long story.”

The princess opened her purse and placed her jewels in a zipped pocket inside. As the man with the gigantic hands said, it was absurd that she’d let the few palace jewels, which she had chosen as sacrificial lambs to buy her this voyage of freedom, be tossed around in a thin pouch of leather not properly protected. That was only one of the possibly crazy decisions she had made.

There was no turning back now.

“Thank you.” She bowed her head to the Renaissance painting of a man on the street. “You saved me from danger and harm.”

“That’s me. A regular Prince Charming.”

Her Royal Highness Princess Luciana de la Isla de Izerote had never wished harder that words were true.

* * *

“May I show you to your destination?” asked the handsome savior after the thugs were long gone from view.

“All right,” Luciana answered although she didn’t know what her destination was. Which, as she was zooming to Italy through Spain and France on high-speed trains, felt like a marvelous relief. To be able to go wherever she wanted, whenever she wanted. Not to be bound by a schedule or accompanied by an entourage. Now, the unfamiliarity of all that liberty had her frightened.

“By the way, I’m Gio. Giovanni Grassi. And you are...?” He took hold of Luciana’s suitcase handle and gave it a tug.

“Luci...” She left it at that, the nickname her mother used to call her when she was a small child. A name she hadn’t heard in years. It was fitting that she thought of her mother now, who had died without ever fulfilling her own quest for the bit of autonomy that Luciana hoped to have.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Luci.”

She wasn’t sure that she should be letting this man she didn’t know pull her suitcase. What if he ran away with it? Or what if he was luring her into some kind of trap so that he could steal her jewels for himself?

Princess Luciana sensed that he meant well. After all, no one had forced him to come to her aid as he did. And she couldn’t just continue standing on the street now that those threatening boys had been chased off. She’d lost all sense of direction, not that she knew where she was going in the first place. Had she been able to sell the ruby, she would have returned to the train station to look for a tourist bureau that could help her find accommodations. That could still be her plan. But now she wasn’t comfortable walking alone with the jewels.

So they began forward, Gio’s grip on her suitcase keeping its wheels cooperating under his control. Princess Luciana caught a reflection of herself in the glass of a shop window. In the commotion of her arrival, her failure at the jewelry store near the train station and the threat from those boys, she’d completely forgotten that she wore a wig in disguise. While Izerote was not a famous island and her monarchy had not made her a recognizable face throughout the world, she knew there was a good chance that her father would send someone looking for her. Even though she had left him a note promising to return in three weeks to marry King Agustin as planned. If the cloak she donned could help throw any operatives of King Mario’s off her track, it was well worthwhile. Plus, she liked the idea of having a new appearance.

Gone were the long girlish locks of hair that spent many evenings as a showplace for the family tiaras. Now the thick brown strands that fell halfway down her back were bound and tucked under a blond wig she’d bought in Barcelona. The wig was cut into a lob, a term the princess knew from idly flipping through fashion magazines was the hip description for a long bob.

The surprisingly realistic-looking hairstyle fell in sleek sheets to the tops of her shoulders where it curled under just a bit. Every move she made caused the lob to give a slight swish that Luciana found chic. The hair made her feel like a woman on the go. Which was quite unlike the fussy preplanned existence she had always known. Although her *let’s see what happens* attitude, so out of character, had almost led her into hazard.

“Where to, signorina?”

The scare of those boys had been an immediate awakening to the perils she needed to look out for, and she didn’t know what she should tell Gio Grassi. Yes, his beautiful crystal-blue eyes seemed trustworthy, but outward appearances told her nothing.

Nonetheless, she had to start somewhere.

“I don’t know, Gio. I find myself arriving in Florence with less money than I had planned. Would you know of a reasonably priced hotel?”

“No, actually, I’m sorry I don’t. I grew up here in Florence but I’ve spent many years traveling for business. I no longer know the city.”

Disappointment rung through her. Barcelona had been quite an eye-opener once she discovered that the jeweler to whom she had intended to sell the first of her lot was unwilling to buy what Luciana referred to as her *estate pieces* without proof of ownership and certifications. She’d made up a story about the jewels belonging to her recently deceased grandmother.

At her begging, that jeweler put her in touch with another jeweler who refused her and sent her to yet another, this one located in a downtrodden part of town. He gave her far less than she had estimated for the first piece. She knew now that this trip would have to be on more of a budget than she’d originally envisioned.

That didn’t matter. At least she was here.

“I’ll need to sell more of my jewels.”

“More of them? Does that mean you have already sold some?”

Yes, but she didn’t need to tell that to Gio.

“I had tried at a shop near the train station. That’s where those boys began following me.”

“Florence is a big city with people both opulent and poor, honest and not. You should watch out at every turn.”

Luciana was already learning that the hard way. But as they turned a corner into a piazza, a public square, her troubles receded and the widest of smiles swept across her face. Here it was. The Florence she’d seen in movies and travel websites, and read about in books. Firenze, the central city of Tuscany, with its centuries of trade and finance, art and medicine, religion and politics.

People moved across the piazza in every different direction. Fashionable girls giggled as they snapped selfies of themselves. A tour group of older travelers dutifully stopped so that their guide could point out landmarks. Four men stood in front of a shop arguing, their loud voices and hand gestures marking them as uniquely Italian. A flock of children chased pigeons, their overjoyed faces bursting with surprise every time one of the birds made an unexpected escape. Two lovers sat close on a bench while they shared a fresh orange, the woman holding the peel in her hand.

Every which way, people wove in between each other to get to where they were going. It was everything the princess had imagined it would be, alive and magnificent under the autumn of the Tuscan sky. She placed her hand over her mouth as she took it all in.

This was what Luciana came to see. To be a part of this city that had always held her fascination, if only for a stolen moment of her lifetime. She drew in a slow breath. The air wasn’t as thick and pure as it was in pristine Izerote. Florence had a particular fragrance, one she suspected it had for centuries.

It smelled like free will.

Which she had never inhaled before.

As if the panorama of all these people and their doings and their businesses and their architecture and their dogs wasn’t enough, Luciana stood witnessing it in the company of a chivalrous, and she had to acknowledge gorgeous, Italian man.

For the first time she took notice of what Giovanni Grassi was wearing. A tweed blazer with a pink button-down shirt and tan tie, jeans with a brown belt and brown oxford shoes. All of impeccable quality. He looked perhaps like a young professor, the type schoolgirls would giggle around but loved to gape at as he explained the important trigonometry equation on a chalkboard behind him. Reluctant hottie. That was the moniker the celebrity websites used for his type.

Hottie, for sure. Reluctant, she didn’t know yet.

“Ah yes, Firenze,” Gio chimed in. “There’s nowhere like it in the world. Some things change, others remain the same as they have for centuries.”

Nothing ever changed in Izerote, Luciana reflected. It lagged far behind the rest of the world in technology and culture and commerce. Her father, King Mario, and his father before him were not

forward-thinking rulers like some royal families were. The price they'd paid for the lack of progress was steep, as many residents or their adult children were leaving the island.

However, Princess Luciana was not in Florence to solve the issues of her island, although she didn't doubt that in this great city of thought and industry many dilemmas of the world had been debated.

"Here's my situation, Gio," Luciana started, not knowing what to do about her predicament. One way or another, this trip would come to an end. Either she'd have her three weeks here before she returned to Izerote to marry King Agustin and produce his heirs. Or her father would send someone to hunt after her and her visit would be cut short. Either way, now was all there was, so she had better make every second count. "I have no money. That's why I need to sell some of my jewels, in order to pay for a hotel room."

"Sell your jewels. That sounds so positively archaic. You may have noticed this is *modern day* where people pay for goods and services with credit cards or through apps on their phone," he said with a cute chuckle that sent a tingle down her spine. What a strange reaction she was having to this total stranger.

She couldn't explain to him that while she did carry credit cards, she couldn't use them because they were traceable. That's why she needed to obtain cash for the trip. "I know, it does sound rather medieval."

"Have you traveled forward in time? What era are you from?"

"You have no idea how right you are."

"Are you running from something?"

"You could say that."

"A mystery woman."

"You could say that, too."

"All right, Signorina Luci, if that's really your name. For how long do you need a hotel room?"

"Three weeks," she answered with ease. Because it was exactly three weeks and one day until she was to marry. Three weeks. That's how long she hoped to stay in Florence. If she had her druthers, she'd stay until the last possible minute and arrive back in Izerote just in time to be pinned into her wedding gown. The gown that had already been chosen for her, a chaste lacy puffball with a high neck and long sleeves that was as tight and confining as her impending marriage. Nothing like what she'd wear if the choice was up to her. If, for example, she was to be getting married of her own volition to a tall attractive man with sparkling blue eyes and golden curly hair.

"Three weeks," he repeated. "And how much do you expect to garner from the sale of those jewels?"

Nowhere near what she thought she might, Luciana mused. So, realistically, considering the price she'd fetched in Barcelona, she quoted Gio a figure. Still unsure if she should be confiding her financial woes to him.

"Twenty-one nights..."

"Twenty-one," she confirmed knowing that she wouldn't need a hotel room in Florence on the twenty-second, after her wedding. She winced at the thought of her wedding night and what would be expected of her from King Agustin, a widower who presumably had more experience in the matrimonial bed than she did. Hopefully he'd be patient and compassionate toward her when the time came.

"Then here is how much you'd have to spend each day." Gio performed a mental calculation and gave her a number that was far less than the rate of the hotels she had been looking at online.

"Do you think I could get a hotel room for that price? It doesn't need to be fancy, only clean."

"Luci, for that money I don't think you could find anything suitable, clean or safe."

He glanced at his watch.

It wasn't right to detain this man any longer, despite the fear that was returning in her.

"I'll figure something out. Thank you again for your assistance."

"You're quite welcome. Enjoy Florence," Gio said and then turned to walk away.

Prompted by his departure, a couple of tears smarted Luciana's eyes as she blinked them back. Which was ridiculous. She'd come to experience Florence alone. Gio had simply lent a hand to a damsel in distress. He was a stranger, now on his merry way as was appropriate.

After a few steps, he stopped and pivoted back.

"What are you planning to do?"

"I don't know. If you could point me in the direction of the train station, I'll go back there."

"I can try to find you a hotel. Let's get off the street. Come with me."

"Oh. No. I'll be fine."

He furrowed his brow. "Very well, then. Goodbye, Luci."

"Goodbye."

But when he walked away again, anxiety gripped Luciana's chest. Those boys had really scared her. And not having the cash she needed was a huge problem. She hadn't pictured herself alone and lost on the street.

"Gio," she blurted out, quickly catching up with him. "Thank you. I would appreciate your help."

* * *

Gio stopped in front of a large building with double doors made of oak, each bearing a brass doorknob. Although the structure was hundreds of years old, the fob entry system was proof it had been updated. When the tiny red light on the mechanism turned to green, Gio opened the door and held it wide for Luci to enter. Pulling her suitcase in with him, he then closed the door behind him. He led her through the stone tunnel passageway that kept the inner property well secluded from the busy streets of Florence.

The tunnel was a short distance, allowing Gio to see the sunshine that met it at the other end. He and his brother, Dante, used to play all sorts of games in this tunnel when they were kids.

"Where are we?" Luci asked with understandable trepidation.

"My home," Gio said as they came into the light of the central courtyard.

"Your home?" Luci began to take in the surroundings.

"My family's home. No one is here right now, but yes, this is where I grew up."

Up until a few days ago, Gio hadn't been home in many months. As the president of research, development and project management for his family's company, Grasstech, the world's largest manufacturer of computer components, Gio spent his life traveling among the company's operations centers all over the world. He touched down in Florence for crucial in-person meetings or for family occasions, but was then soon boarding a plane to his next destination.

"This is so beautiful," Luci exclaimed as she did a slow 360-degree turnaround in the inner courtyard of the villa compound.

"It's been in our family for six generations."

Indeed, Villa Grassi was a special place. It wasn't a showy high-tech complex befitting the Grassi family's standing in the computer science world. Instead the property retained its old-world charms, thanks to Gio's mother, although with plenty of modern conveniences. The villa comprised several stone buildings, all painted in a mustardy yellow color accented by the red terra-cotta roofs and wood trim.

"You live here?" Luci asked, still taking in the details of the central garden.

Mamma mia, but this young woman was pretty. Not just pretty, really, although Gio struggled for the right word to describe her. *Soulful*, maybe. There was depth in her light brown eyes. They were eyes with questions, eyes that longed. The dark, thick eyebrows that crowned those lovely pools served to set off their radiance even more. The sleek blond hair read as stylish, not that Gio knew much about fashion. Her petite frame was dressed with polish in her black skirt and gray blazer.

Why did this upscale-looking young woman have only jewels and no money? Something was quite off here, which Gio found suspicious. He would forever keep up his guard after the disastrous mistake he'd made in Hong Kong by trusting the wrong person. People weren't always who they said they were.

It seemed all but impossible that this woman in front of him could have somehow staged the incident with the boys on the street so that she could bump into him. That she had known where he was coming from and where he was headed. However, he'd learned the hard way that some people would say or do anything to get what they were after. Danger came in all shapes and sizes.

"I didn't understand what you said. Do you live here?"

"Not since childhood," he answered, still sizing her up. "But now I am home, so it seems."

The two-story main house anchored the buildings. Five steps led to the front door, constructed of the same oak as the door to the street. He looked up to the second-floor window that was his boyhood bedroom. Like all the windows, the sill was adorned with boxes holding plants in bright reds, oranges and yellows befitting the fall season. Beside it was the window in his brother Dante's bedroom. Late at night they'd tie up sheets to hold on to and swing into each other's bedrooms like Tarzan. Gio smiled at the antics of his daredevil brother, who hadn't changed a bit even as an adult.

In the courtyard, a cast-stone fountain gurgled with water, surrounded by the benches where his grandparents used to spend their afternoons. His grandfather would good-naturedly yell at Gio and Dante to slow down as they played their racing games in the tunnel. Their grandmother, content to sit for hours with her needlework, would ply the boys with blood orange juice from their fruit trees to drink, the color of which was still Gio's favorite hue in the world.

"We use the cottages now." Gio pointed to the two outbuildings beside the house, both of which had entrances that faced the courtyard.

"You said *we*. Who is *we*?"

"My brother, Dante, and I. And other relatives who come to stay. My parents still live in the big house when they're here, but we have a vineyard and winery in the countryside where they spend most of their time now that they've retired." His father had built Grasstech from a small purveyor of computer central processing units, known as CPU chips, into the multibillion-dollar conglomerate it was today. "Dante is working with our affiliates in India, now that..."

Gio was glad he stopped himself. Luci didn't need to know that Dante had failed at helming the company, which was why Gio had returned to Florence to do just that. Oversharing information had gotten him into trouble in the past, some of which he still needed to find a way to clean up.

In the silence of stopping himself, he focused on Luci's attentive face. There was something utterly enchanting about her, with that long stately neck and those curious eyes. She was much shorter than he had noticed at first. Of course, with him so tall, almost everyone was petite to him. Her bowed pink lips complemented her porcelain skin. Her posture was so straight and that throat so graceful she could pass for a noblewoman or a young duchess. Yet she had an inner spunk that made the thought of her as a stuffy royal thoroughly implausible.

Good heavens! Women should be the last thing on Gio's mind now that he'd returned home with a to-do list a mile long. And it was a woman who had got the company into trouble in the first place. He would be staying far away from them.

"That's the Duomo!" Luci pointed to the top of the dome visible in the distance past the villa walls. Florence's cathedral was one of the most identifiable sights in the city.

"Have you been inside?"

Her enthusiasm was contagious.

"No. I'm looking forward to seeing it. This is my first time in Florence. You rescued me just as I arrived."

A little wiggle traveled between his shoulder blades when she said the word *rescued*.

Now that he had, in fact, rescued her, what was he going to do with her? He'd find her a hotel. But some of Grasstech's investors were in town for dinner and he needed to get dressed, so it had to be quick. He wasn't looking forward to all their chitchat that bored him to tears. Nothing of substance was ever discussed at these things. Plus they'd all be bringing their stodgy spouses. The wives would ask why a nice young man like him didn't have a wife or a girlfriend.

With enough on his mind already, Luci's problems couldn't become his. Yet she'd been so shaken by those nasty boys following her, she finally accepted his offer of help.

She readjusted her purse on her shoulder, the one that contained her jewels. "May I ask you, Gio, would there be *any* hotel at *any* price that you could recommend for the night? I'll have to reevaluate my budget, but I do need somewhere for tonight."

He could give it a try. Pulling his phone out of his jacket pocket, he punched in a hotel search, hoping he'd recognize the names of some that were reputable.

"Yes," he spoke after calling one. "Do you have any rooms available for tonight? I see. *Grazie.*"

He phoned another. "Have you a room tonight? No? *Grazie.*" After three more, his patience was up.

"That's all right, Gio," Luci said, although the quaver in her voice belied her words. "I'll find somewhere."

With her obvious lack of street savvy? What if some other criminals tried to take advantage of her like the boys did with the jewelry? He might not know this vulnerable young woman, but a gentleman was a gentleman and he could not send her away alone.

"Why don't you stay here tonight?" Gio voiced the thought that had been bubbling up, despite raising caution. "I'm staying in this one." He pointed to one of the side-by-side cottages. "Why don't you sleep in the other?" He hoped that suggestion wouldn't prove to be a mistake, but he couldn't think of what else to do. He'd station her here, and the staff at his office could help get her situated tomorrow.

"Oh, no, I couldn't." Luci quickly shook her head with a side-to-side motion. "It wouldn't be right."

He put his hand over his heart in mock insult. "What do you take me for? I assure you I offer only to fulfill my quota of rescuing beautiful maidens from the mean streets of Florence."

Was he *flirting* with her?

"How are you doing so far?"

"I'm desperately behind. You'd be helping me out."

She looked at him with a bite to her lip. He knew she was deciding on his merits versus his potential risks.

"I'll only consent if you let me repay you in some way."

The idea quickly fell from his lips. "I have a very dull dinner with some investors to attend tonight. They will have no doubt chosen the poshest restaurant in Florence with a continental menu that manages to avoid anything authentically Italian. They'll pick an impressive bottle of wine chosen for its price and torture the sommelier as they swirl it around in their glasses pretending to know something about the vintage. They'll discuss the weather and the latest political scandal in Italy, and it will make watching paint dry sound compelling. Would you like to join me?"

"With an invitation like that, how could I possibly refuse?" Luci answered with a huge smile that shot straight into Gio's heart. He returned the grin.

Once he'd extended the invitation to dinner, it suddenly sounded like a marvelous idea. She was far more interesting than the blah-blah-blah he'd have to exchange with the investors. Rightly, they'd save any substantial conversation for boardroom conferences.

Why shouldn't he have a pleasant evening with an attractive woman? He knew he'd never take it any further than that. It was just dinner. And bringing her with him was better than leaving her alone on his property tonight. He'd get her out of the villa in the morning.

“It’s set then? Pick you up right here?” He gestured to the fountain.

“I have a cocktail-length dress. Will that be sufficient?”

“And obviously you can accessorize.” He pointed to the purse with all of the jewels. “You’ll be the toast of the town.”

“I hope not.” Luci’s eyes opened in alarm.

“I was only joking. See you at eight.”

CHAPTER TWO

“THANK YOU, VIGGO.” Gio acknowledged his driver as he parked the car in front of the villa. Viggo quickly got out of his seat and dashed around to the passenger side to open the door for Luciana and Gio. After Gio helped her out of the car, she straightened the skirt of the pale blue dress she’d worn to dinner with him and his investors.

It was her little secret that she’d chosen the dress to complement the color of her handsome companion’s eyes. Of course, the color of Her Royal Highness Princess Luciana’s dress for the evening was the least of her secrets. Nonetheless, with her cool blond wig, silver shoes and diamond earrings, she felt like a woman who had been on a real date with a real man, as opposed to a shielded virgin locked in a stone tower. Gio had quickly become part of her grand adventure.

“Do we have to go in?” Luciana touched Gio’s jacket sleeve as he reached in his pocket for his fob entry to the wooden exterior door.

“Would you like to walk?”

“I’d love to.”

Driving from the restaurant after the dinner, Luciana was agog as they drove past landmarks she wanted to visit while she was here. The incredible piazzas, historic churches, marketplaces, museums and neighborhoods she’d seen only as an armchair traveler in the solitude of her palace sitting room. While she’d traveled to many places in the world for ceremonies and royal engagements, she’d never seen them as a tourist, able to meander and linger, and appreciate anything that caught her fancy. She could hardly wait to get started.

“Let’s walk this way.” Gio gently placed his hand on the small of her back to direct her away from the villa door. Her awareness arched to meet his touch.

“Thank you for accompanying me to dinner. As I mentioned, I generally leave the finessing of investors to my brother, Dante, now that our father has retired.”

“And Dante was unable to attend tonight?”

“Dante is spending some time at our offices in Mumbai. We have restructured the company and I will now serve as CEO.”

“What did you do before?”

“Product development. Which is where my heart is. You’d find me happier trying to make an AGP bus that can carry graphics faster than anything else on the market than you would seeing me in a conference room.”

“AGP?”

“Accelerated graphics port.”

“Of course,” she joked. “How would I not know that?”

“But now I’ll do what needs to be done for the company. Actually, I welcome the opportunity to do things my way. To get them right.”

“Are things not right?”

“Look at those two.” Gio pointed to two dogs on leashes across the street that barked at and sniffed each other with great interest.

Ah, Luci noted, she had asked too snoopy a question about Gio’s work and he’d changed the subject. Her inner Princess Luciana should have known better than to pry, in spite of her curiosity to know more about him.

She hoped to recover with, “Your investors were a lovely group of people. I saw photos on many a smartphone of grandchildren performing in school plays and rosebushes that had yielded prizewinners.”

The princess was only too used to smiling and taking interest in the lives of total strangers. In fairness, she was always quite honored that people she met wanted to share details about their lives with her. Meeting people was one of the things she did like about royal life. But not as much as she liked this, walking in the open air with Gio, and not a handler or schedule in sight.

“Enough about me,” he said as they continued after watching the dogs perform mating rituals. “What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a teacher,” Luciana fibbed. That was what she would be if she could. Royal duties combined with her father’s outdated ways kept her ambition from coming to fruition. “I spend most of my days talking to four-year-olds.”

“A teacher? I never would have figured you for that.”

“Why not?”

“You’re very—” he searched for the right word “—elegant. The way you handled yourself at dinner was distinguished. Well, there we go when we stereotype or pigeonhole anyone. My apologies.”

If he only knew. How badly she didn’t want to always have to be elegant. How her father raised her in a very old-fashioned monarchy she didn’t question, where Luciana had been groomed her whole life to make appearances. To never share anything of herself, her hopes, her likes. To be only in the service of the crown. While she led a life of luxury and privilege for which she was grateful, her heart ached for more.

Perhaps she’d be content if the man she was to marry wasn’t so much older and who, in the handful of meetings she’d had with him, hadn’t talked to her as if she were already his possession. Maybe her life would be sublime if she was to wed a bold and good-humored man like say, just for example, Gio.

She blushed at her own thought as she noted the shadows the night sky cast onto Gio’s defined cheekbones.

“*Bellissima*, what is a teacher doing traveling alone with only a bag full of jewels to pay her way?”

As she had learned in her years of training, restraint was always the best policy, so rather than answer him, she occupied herself taking in the light of the moon and how it played against not only Gio’s face but also the architecture of this great ancient city.

“Where are you from, Luci?” Gio pressed.

“Spain,” she simplified.

She had a flush of concern that she was out late at night in a foreign country with a man she’d only just met. Half of her considered the potential danger, but the other half wanted to throw caution to the wind and grab as many experiences as she could out of this trip to Florence. Including this unexpected interlude with a beguiling man.

“Your Italian is flawless.”

“I studied for many years.”

Indeed, Princess Luciana had always been fascinated with Italian history, art and literature, especially the Renaissance period when Florence was the center of Europe. It was a thrill to finally use the language she had practiced so diligently. While she had been to Rome for royal occasions and adored it, the City of Lilies had always held her interest.

About a year ago, her father, King Mario, had informed her that she would be marrying widower King Agustin of the neighboring island Menocita. She didn’t protest, always wanting to please her father after her mother had died.

Izerote was racked with problems. Because theirs was a tiny country with limited development, unemployment had become a crisis. As the current generation had grown, many households sent their

offspring away for higher education or to seek jobs in Spain or the rest of the world. Without careers on the island for future generations, the population would continue to shrink.

On Menocita, King Agustin's father had brought tourism to their shores. Exclusive resorts along with family-friendly water sports and vacation rentals had turned the island into a year-round paradise that created thousands of jobs for the inhabitants. After King Agustin's wife died, he'd decided to find another island to merge with to create the same tourism and bring larger prosperity to his family name. When the proposal of marriage to his daughter came to King Mario, he could not refuse. In turn, Princess Luciana could not let her father or her subjects down, so she had no option but to agree to it.

Yes, a future she wouldn't have chosen for herself was looming. But at least she'd always have this. Florence. This journey of self-discovery and of making a single dream come true.

Luciana did feel badly that she had left her father a note saying only that she would return to Izerote to marry King Agustin, but that she was going to do this one thing before she did. She had previously begged him to let her, just once, leave the island without attendants, limousines and security details. It was a liberty she needed to know, if even for a short time. It was something she longed for, a wanderlust she wasn't able to silence. King Mario, an overly protective man especially after her mother was killed in a car accident in Madrid, denied her. And not wanting to cause him anymore grief, she acquiesced—until she could no longer.

She thought back to the trip to Paris King Mario did plan for Luciana and a cousin her age. When they were there, clothing stores were closed to the public so that they could shop alone, never paying for anything. When the girls walked down the boulevards, bodyguards trailed only a few paces behind. An entire hotel floor was rented despite their needing only two rooms. They visited a museum after midnight, fully staffed for just the two of them. While Luciana did appreciate her father's efforts, it was hardly what she'd had in mind.

With the wedding imminent, Princess Luciana's heart, her soul, the very essence of her being, insisted that she break away from the protocol that had been drilled into her. And drove her to do something completely for herself, as reckless as it was. So, she escaped the palace walls and her role as the perfect daughter and princess, leaving no hint of where she was going. She bought no tickets for her transportation, brought along no phone where her location could be traced. As drastic a step as it was to take palace jewels to sell, she hadn't been able to think of another way.

Three weeks that belonged only to her wasn't so very much to ask for.

After her walk with Gio and their return to his villa, Luciana was tired. She'd face the issues of the jewels and finding a suitable place to stay tomorrow. For tonight, she was eternally grateful for his generosity.

They lingered at the halfway point between her guest cottage and his.

"I can't thank you enough for this."

"My pleasure, Luci. Thank you for accompanying me to the dinner." He crossed an arm over his waist and bowed forward to her in an exaggerated posture of formality that might have been funny if she was a different person.

* * *

"Did you sleep well?" Gio called up to Luci as she stepped out onto the small Juliet balcony of the guest cottage, wrapping her hands around the wrought iron railing. Properly known as a *balconet*, it wasn't large enough for a chair or table. It was meant for enjoying the view of the courtyard below and to peer out beyond the villa's walls. When Shakespeare included the architectural feature in his romantic tragedy, the nickname stuck.

It took considerable effort for Gio to pretend not to notice how the transparent fabric of the flowing white nightgown Luci wore hid nothing of her lovely curves underneath. But the sudden twitch in his core told the truth.

He placed the pot of coffee he was holding onto the small glass table near the fountain. “Would you like to join me for breakfast?”

“How magical to wake up and smell all of these flowers,” Luci said with a sweeping arm surveying the courtyard’s garden. “The lavender is so sweet.”

The same view was available from Gio’s bedroom, as the two cottages were identical. He had risen early and let himself into the main house to find some breakfast.

He glanced up to Luci again. It was actually nothing short of surreal that a beautiful woman stood on the balcony of his guesthouse in Florence, albeit that her status there was temporary. Surreal even that he was back home, as most of his adult life thus far had been spent living away. The idea of staying in one place might take some getting used to. “Come down and have some coffee.”

Luci accepted the bid with, “Just give me a few minutes to get dressed.”

An unfamiliar voice inside Gio wanted to beg her to come down as she was, so fetching did she look in her cotton gauze. But decorum won out.

Always buried in work, he had not been alone with a woman in quite a while. In spite of the fact that this unexpected maiden with the blond hair and the big brown eyes had landed in his lap yesterday, this was a very important morning. Which was why he’d chosen to wake at dawn, go for a run, shower and dress, all the while leaving himself enough time to have a relaxed breakfast.

Today was his first official day as CEO of Grasstech.

He stepped into his cottage to gather a laptop and some briefings he had been looking over and brought them out to the courtyard so he was ready to leave after breakfast. The two cottages were small but sufficient with a sitting room on the first floor, and a bedroom and bathroom upstairs. They were decorated in yellow, black and gold with expensive, but simple, furnishings. Gio’s mother had told him that she’d recently redone the guest quarters and looked forward to his seeing them. Later, he’d ring her at the vineyard to offer his compliments.

Such coziness was unfamiliar to him. President of research, development and project management, Gio Grassi was accustomed to traversing the world, and preferred the anonymity of hotels. Sleek, modern hotel rooms looked no different to him whether he was in Cape Town or Seoul or Dallas. Hotels perfectly suited the life he had been leading. Everything at his disposal and on his own time clock.

When he was lost in concentration on a new project it could be hours, sometimes even days, that would pass while he was surrounded by computer parts and algorithms. He lived immersed in a technological world most people had no understanding of. Where he laid his head to rest was of little concern to him. Until now, when his entire lifestyle was about to change.

Gio hopped up the five steps from the courtyard to the main house to fetch the rolls and fruit the housekeeper had left for him. When he brought them to the outdoor table, Luci was coming out her front door, suitcase and purse in tow. In the morning sun, her eyes caught glints of light.

“Is something wrong?” she asked in reaction to his expression.

“Please, sit.” He pulled out a chair for her to take her place at the table.

After coffee was poured and rolls were bitten into, Luci asked, “You’re going to the Grasstech office today?”

“Yes. I’ve got to go be the boss man now,” Gio said with a titter belying his mixed feelings on the transition. On one hand he was relieved to be taking full control of Grasstech and knew he would fine-tune operations and move the company even further forward. Yet the other side of him rather dreaded becoming the face of the empire. He’d made a mistake that had cost the company dearly and he had a lot of mopping up to do. In trusting his ex-girlfriend, Francesca, there were now leaked company secrets to contend with and a press ready to bring that information public.

“Thank you so much for your hospitality. I’ll leave right after breakfast, so don’t let me add to your troubles.”

“Have we settled where you are going?” he asked with a quick glance at his watch. As strangely intriguing as this domestic scene was, he had a million other things on his mind. He wouldn't be finding out who this lovely Luci in front of him truly was. Not only didn't he have time for a woman in his life, he couldn't buy the story that she was a teacher. There was more going on with her than met the eye, and that was something he hadn't any business getting involved in.

“That's kind of you to consider my lodging something *we* are concerned about, but I'll figure it out on my own.”

“Of course.” But he couldn't leave it at that. Her mysterious identity notwithstanding, Gio's mother had taught him to be chivalrous, and after hearing yesterday about Luci's budget issues he wasn't going to have her traipsing alone around Florence looking for a cheap hotel that might not be safe.

“I'll have someone at my office look into hotels for you.” The sooner he squared her safely away, the less he'd fret about it later.

“I couldn't impose like that.”

“It's no imposition.”

“Thank you but...it wouldn't be...”

If he let her go, he'd be distracted all day worrying if she was okay. And he needed his concentration today. “Why don't you go out and see some sights? We'll meet later and I can complain to you about my workday.”

A giggle escaped from her, which brought a lovable little blush to her cheeks.

She had been an utterly flawless dinner date last night, charming his investors by laughing at their unfunny jokes and asking questions about their families to get them talking about themselves. Gio despised making small talk. Luci, who had appeared poised and almost regal in her blue silk dress, knew exactly how to field the evening, which took the pressure off him. He could return the favor. After that, she'd be out of his life and on with her holiday.

“It's settled, then. Why don't you leave your luggage here?” Gio stood and gathered up his things, having been alerted on his phone that his driver was here. “Where can my driver drop you?”

“I'll just wander out on my own.”

He escorted her to the street. “See you here at six.”

Gio's driver, Viggo, delivered him to the street-level glass doors of the Grasstech headquarters. The family kept a much larger campus of offices outside the city, but this central Florence location was where the company's important decisions were still made. Gio passed through to the main reception area where a few employees were congregating.

“Hello, Mr. Grassi,” one greeted.

“Good morning, sir,” another followed.

“Welcome, Mr. Grassi.”

While he generally interacted with everyone he met on a first-name basis, he quite approved of the employees here addressing him formally at first. It was important to establish sole authority immediately.

That had been part of the problem with his brother in the top seat. While he admired Dante as being more of a people person than he was—his brother had become a sort of brand ambassador for their company—Gio doubted he elicited much respect among the staff. Because, unfortunately, Dante spent more time being photographed with a different woman on his arm each evening at social functions than he did overseeing the company's operations. Whereas Gio understood the ins and outs of Grasstech's stronghold in the tech world and had specific plans on how to increase their dominance against the competition.

While Dante had been happy to use the press to his advantage, the media were actually Gio's first challenge of the day.

As he made his way down the corridor to the corner office that was originally his father's, Gio was aware of a pretty assistant in step beside him. Although she was an attractive young woman, Gio found his mind immediately flashed back to Luci's gracious smile as she engaged the older ladies last night with a discussion of favorite holiday memories. Something about Luci had gotten under his skin. Which he needed to put a stop to right away. The last thing he wanted to be embroiled with was a woman, especially now that deceitful Francesca was the cause of his most pressing problem.

"What can I get you, Mr. Grassi?" the assistant asked as she escorted him into his office.

"A large bottle of cold water. And send in Samuele, thank you."

"Yes, sir."

"*Mio amico.*" Samuele di Nofri greeted Gio with a bear hug and affirmation of their lifelong friendship. The older man was Grasstech's director of operations and had been working with the company since the day Gio's father conceived of it. "Finally, we have you back in Firenze."

"Sit." Gio gestured to one of the leather chairs that faced his sleek steel desk.

"It was like yesterday that you were a boy, sitting at one of those desktop computers we used to keep here." Samuele pointed to a wall where a row of clunky old computers used to be lined up. Before everyone had laptops that weighed less than a cup of coffee. "Six years old and you would sit for hours writing code."

"Technology has come a long way since then."

"*Grazie al cielo.*" Samuele kissed two fingers and lifted them to the sky.

"Although then, we didn't worry as much about security and hacking. Now look what I caused the company to have to deal with."

"It happens."

Yes, Gio's early proclivity for computers had led him to eventually receive multiple degrees from Stanford University in California's Silicon Valley. Then after years of apprenticeship in Tokyo, he emerged as one of the world's most respected component designers.

What Gio's education and experience hadn't taught him was how to look out for Francesca and her kind. With her eight-foot-long legs and her crimson red lips, she was a skilled and practiced seductress. She had set her sights on the workaholic techie Grassi brother and had not relented until she'd got what she wanted. Which was not his heart.

No, what Francesca wanted were secrets about Grasstech's new memory modules that were destined to take drop-in compatibility wider than the industry had seen before. So while Gio was conceiving, designing, testing and troubleshooting, Francesca had done what she did best.

Francesca Nefando, who had been hired to run analytic reports, was actually a world-class hacker. In a tight skirt and high heels.

"Fine, Samuele, you say it happens." Gio grimaced at the memory of the day he found out his proprietary DIMMs, dual inline memory modules, were being developed by a rival company with information only an insider could know. Samuele's kindly eyes tried to offer some comfort. "But now that the industry press has found out, Grasstech could look weak in the field."

"That's why the board of directors tell me that they want you to issue a statement to the media. Because you are taking over as the CEO, they see this as an opportunity to solidify your name as the trailblazer of the company. That alone will help deflect the breach."

"Me? We have public relations people for this."

"Yes. But put it in your own words, Gio. It will sound authentic and announce your personal style of leadership."

He watched Samuele's mouth form words, but Gio was having a hard time actually listening. Because his blood was boiling thinking back to the strategy Francesca had designed to seduce him. Once he'd begun to trust her, she'd started to ask questions that required long nights of huddling together over a laptop in bed, her auburn hair almost sickly sweet from the gardenia-scented shampoo she used.

Francesca had taught him a lesson he would never forget. He would never let anyone get that close to him again. But, weirdly, his thoughts meandered back to Luci this morning, so seemingly harmless as she stood on the balcony in her nightgown.

“What should I say in the press release? That I let a woman get the best of me?”

“No, Gio. Mull it over. You’ll come up with something.”

“Samuele, before you go. Can you look for a room at a decent hotel for about three weeks?”

Samuele regarded him quizzically.

“One of our investors isn’t happy with where he’s staying.”

Gio took a deep breath. He had a full schedule and a multibillion-dollar company to run. So why was he already looking forward to seeing Luci again tonight?

* * *

“Drop us here,” Gio instructed Viggo as the car approached the Piazza della Signoria. It had been ages since the piazza had been his destination. If he’d seen it at all during the past few years, it had been because he was merely crossing through to get to a meeting at an office or restaurant. Viggo let him and Luci out of the back seat.

Gio had decided to take her out. They’d have dinner in one of the *osterias* whose piazza-facing patios would still be warm enough in the autumn evening.

“Oh, my gosh.” Luci brought her hand over her mouth in genuine reverence as she took in the piazza. He could appreciate her sentiment, as it was one of Florence’s most dramatic sights. In fact, historically, it had been the meeting place for all of Tuscany.

“There’s the Fontana di Neptuno!” The marble-and-bronze Fountain of Neptune. “I’ve seen it in pictures so many times, I can’t believe I’m finally here.”

Luci’s enthusiasm lightened Gio’s mood after a long hard day of putting out administrative fire after fire in the remains of mistakes that Dante had made while he was at the helm. Mostly, though, he was still strategizing about the Francesca fiasco and its aftermath.

Still, he reiterated to himself that one of his goals when returning to Florence was to slow his pace a little and to enjoy relaxing pursuits. He worked too much; even his father thought so. A night out on the town with pretty Luci was just what the doctor ordered. Even though he had sworn never to get close to a woman again, it was only one evening. Okay, there was last night, too, but it was not as if he was going to devote his life to her.

Although when he presented a bent elbow for her to slip her arm through, he felt an unfamiliar lump at the bottom of his throat when she did so.

“Here is one of the fake *Davids*.” She pointed to the replica of Michelangelo’s masterpiece. “The original used to stand in this place but was moved to the Galleria dell’Accademia to protect it.”

“You’ll want to visit there.”

“There’s another replica of *David* in the Piazzale Michelangelo. The views of the city are supposed to be astounding from there.”

“They are.”

“And this is the Loggia dei Lanzi.” The outdoor gallery of sculptures in the piazza.

“You’ve certainly studied up on the city. That way is the Uffizi Gallery—” he pointed a finger “—which, of course, you’ll want to explore.” One of the world’s finest museums.

“Oh, yes.” Her squeeze on his arm sent pricks of energy through his muscles.

“I can find a professional guide for you if you’d like.”

“No. Thanks. I spend too much time already with guides and companions as it is.”

“I take it you mean the children you teach? That’s a cute way of describing them.”

“Right.” Luci’s voice rose. “It does seem like they are the ones leading the way most of the time.”

At the restaurant he'd chosen, Gio asked the hostess to seat them outside facing the piazza. It was about as fine a night as could be with the dusk and the statues, Luci's face aglow with the breadth of it all.

"We'll have the prosciutto with melon, the mushroom risotto and the grilled *branzino*," he instructed the waiter. Gio was hungry so he ordered for them without consulting the menu.

"Is that all right?" He turned to Luci.

"Yes. Thank you for asking."

"And we'll have a bottle of the Pallovana Frascati," Gio finished the order.

After the waiter returned with the Frascati, Luci asked, "You haven't told me anything about your first day yet. How did everything go?"

As they sipped their wine and took advantage of the superlative people-watching their vantage point on the piazza offered, he filled her in on reacquainting himself with staff and about some restructuring he was intending.

"My biggest problem is how to handle the information about a hack we experienced recently when the design for a product was obtained and sold to a competitor." The information about the hack was to soon be public knowledge, so he wasn't disclosing any secrets by talking to Luci about it.

"Has it been in the news?"

"Not officially. I know there's talk in the industry."

"Will you speak to the press about it?" That was exactly what Samuele had been urging this morning.

"I suppose I ought to before trade gossips do."

"So, should you issue a press statement?"

The waiter delivered plates with paper-thin slices of pink prosciutto draped across wedges of ripe orange melon.

"*Grazie*." Gio acknowledged the arrival and returned his attention to Luci.

"It was my own personal security that was weak in order for the hack to have happened. I gave clearance to someone I shouldn't have." Gio didn't want to tell Luci about Francesca specifically, so he kept it general.

"You don't want the company to appear compromised in the press," Luci said with her fork dangling in the air.

"Exactly. I'd like to think it was a grave mistake on my part but that, in general, our safeguards are very good. Nothing like that had ever happened before and hopefully never will again."

"Do you have any new products that are about to launch?"

"Why do you ask?" The question came out sharply. But here it was. This young lady who called herself a teacher from Spain could be, right under his nose, trying to get proprietary information from him under the guise of dinner conversation. That was how these charmers worked, wasn't it?

"I'm sorry, did I offend you?"

"Are you interested in computer science?" he baited, paying attention to every word.

"Not especially." She took a sip of her wine. "I was going to make a suggestion about your press release. Pardon me if I was being intrusive."

"Go on." He rubbed his chin as he continued to study her.

"What if you wrote a statement that wasn't strictly about the hack but was a *state of the company* address now that you've taken over? Then you can mention the leak and what security measures you're putting in place. But sandwich it in between news about the company's latest accomplishments."

"That's a great suggestion," Gio exclaimed. He thought immediately of the achievements he would like to announce, and that in the context of a report on the company they wouldn't come across as showboating. Indeed, his new peripheral component interconnect, PCI, was revolutionary.

Gio toasted Luci. As they clinked their wineglasses together it was as if they touched each other, a powerful sensation that traveled from his fingertips all the way up his arm to his heart.

They made it through the next two courses of their meal talking a mile a minute. Luci asked so many interesting questions about computers and listened patiently to techie mumbo jumbo that she surely didn't understand. Gio didn't reveal anything about his designs, and by the time dinner was over, his spy theory had lost steam. Luci was wonderful company.

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