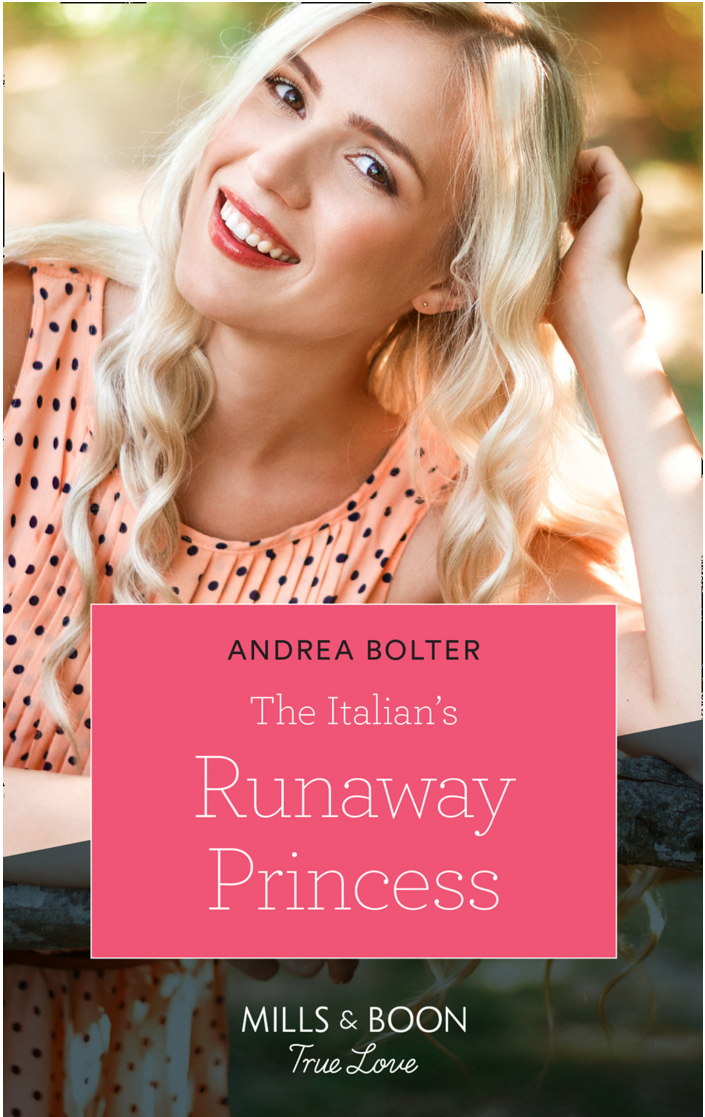

ANDREA BOLTER

The Italian's Runaway Princess

MILLS & BOON
True Love

Andrea Bolter

The Italian's Runaway Princess

Серия «Mills & Boon True Love»

Аннотация

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?

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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

Andrea Bolter

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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 processionals 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.”

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