Penetration testing takes on new meaning when cyber meets Harlequin

Enlarge / You had me at “cyber.”

reader comments

72 with 57 posters participating, including story author

Share this story

This week, my wife and favorite librarian Paula brought home a new acquisition specially for me: *An Innocent to Tame the Italian*, a recent book from the Harlequin Presents imprint. Author Tara Pammi’s previous books—which include *Sicilian’s Bride for a Price* and *Sheikh’s Baby of Revenge*—share a somewhat politically incorrect *leitmotif* of foreign sexual intrigue. If you’re wondering: no, romance novels are generally not my speed.

But the back-of-the-book tease for this work declared otherwise:

> *For brooding tech billionaire Massimo Brunetti, a cyberattack on his company is unacceptable. After tracking down the savvy Manhattan hacker, he’s stunned to find gorgeous genius Natalie Crosetto. Yet naive Nat isn’t the saboteur. To uncover who she’s protecting, Massimo returns to Italy—with Nat playing his fake fiancée! But this untamable Italian might have met his match in innocent Nat, who challenges him… and tempts him beyond reason!*

“You had me at cyber,” I told Paula.

I quickly dove into a deep literary and technical analysis of this entirely plausible *infosex* drama. The book opens with Massimo working in his combination laboratory and server farm; we know it’s ironclad because of the required thumbprint and biometrics scan, but we also know it’s classy because it’s in an old wine cellar beneath his family villa outside Milan. Plus, he has three screens, so you know he’s a serious cybersecurity hacker man. (*Editor’s note: Maybe we should check on Ron Amadeo‘s secret identity?*)

While in his compu-cellar, Massimo rages at the discovery of someone slipping past his firewalls not once, but twice! Even though nothing was stolen, he immediately tracks down the interloper to a “cyber-club” in Brooklyn. Jacket fact-check: Brooklyn is not Manhattan. We’ll let that bit slide.

Apparently, the hacker was so eager to get into Massimo’s files again that OPSEC was totally abandoned. This makes it easy for Massimo to track her to a falling-down hacker haven. Nat was doing a favor for some other mysterious Italian dude with unknown motives. Threatened with charges under the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, she suddenly finds herself being essentially kidnapped by Mossimo back to Italy on his private plane.

> *Six chapters in. I am convinced that this book was written by a Harlequin Markov bot.*
>
> *— Sean Gallagher. (@thepacketrat) July 3, 2019*

Nat is a 20-something who lives a poverty-driven boho life. Massimo—who is Mr. Cyber—is, in her eyes, a “sleek, lean, sex-on-legs stud” who looks nothing like the stereotypical tech billionaire. And the chemistry between them ignites as he drags her back to his server room and tells her to do some… penetration testing.

She demurs.

> *“I need a lot of tools and I use open source tech. And get this… some twisted creative genius named it after a Hindu demon hunter.” [We’re guessing this is a reference to Kali Linux] “I need Wi-Fi adaptors that can go into monitor mode and inject packets for penetration testing, a Bluetooth device to monitor traffic, a separate device to install—”*
>
> *“I have everything you need. If you dare, take me on, Natalie?”*
>
> *On a wild impulse, Natalie threw her arms around him and took his mouth in a rough kiss…*

Yeah, that would be my reaction too, girl. Talk Kali to me.

From there, things go a bit sideways. There is a seduction that gets interrupted by a worm followed by even further cyber-posturing, but eventually Nat sets her eyes on the real prize: becoming the actual Mrs. Massimo.

Despite its failings, *An Innocent* is an inspiration to everyone who has written hacker slash-fiction and torrid text messages. If this whole journalism thing goes south for me, I’ll be reaching out to Harlequin to launch my own series, *Forbidden Encounters with a Fancy Bear*.

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1531583