

The
**PERSEVERING
WOMAN**



M.L. Lexi

THE SEQUEL TO THE DETERMINED WOMAN

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Book two of The Determined Woman Series

Prologue

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THE PROCESSION OF cars following the black hearse into St. Paul's Presbyterian Cemetery was thirty long. Slowly, the cars made their way through the cemetery to Mrs. Emily Johnstone's final resting place. A few minutes in, the hearse stopped before the mausoleum Isabella had built for Mrs. Johnstone's last resting place.

The mausoleum, constructed of white marble, stood tall amongst the headstones jutting from the snow-covered ground. Above the entrance door, a hand-carved angel strummed a gold lyre. On opposite sides of the door, colourful orchids speared from tall white urns. It was a grand structure, but Isabella Farfalla believed it was what Mrs. Johnstone deserved.

Mrs. Johnstone was much more to Isabella than the bank manager, who decades ago gave a young, naïve girl the opportunity of a lifetime. Emily Johnstone was a friend and mentor. Because of Emily Johnstone, Isabella owned and managed the worldwide renowned billion-dollar Isabella Farfalla Fashion empire.

Because of Mrs. Johnstone, the fashion-conscious sought Isabella's designer clothes, handbags, shoes, accessories, and perfumes. Mrs. Johnstone's foresight had made it possible for celebrities, the elite, and royalty to want to be seen in Isabella Farfalla's original design. Isabella's elegant, graceful designs had walked down the red carpet, appeared on various theatrical stages, and worn at galas, Hollywood award shows, first ladies, and

royalty. Isabella's designs and gold butterfly logo were as recognizable as Gucci's interlocked "G" s and Chanel's bold interlaced "C" s.

As much as Isabella's husband, Antonio Sabatini, and Sal Mesi, her biological father—who appeared in her life decades later—ultimately had a hand in her success, Emily Johnstone believed in Isabella enough to approve the loan that helped launch her company.

Opening the car door, Isabella stepped out. The air was crisp, and cooler air prevailed, but the drizzle of snow that fell melted under the late morning's bright sun.

Filling her lungs with air, Isabella raised the collar of her coat. Her long, glossy mink hair was a dark contrast against the cream-coloured mohair coat. She wore black knee-high boots with a high spiked heel and pointed toes. Isabella's brown, red-rimmed hazel eyes were shaded behind dark Farfalla sunglasses. At sixty-five, her olive skin remained mainly untouched by the many hardships she'd faced. Maybe more than most had dealt with, but perseverance made Isabella come out a survivor in the end.

Closed doors led to open ones was Isabella's philosophy. That creed helped Isabella overcome homelessness after her father's death at the unfair young age of forty-one left her with mounting bills. Isabella's philosophy helped her survive bankruptcy, betrayal, blackmail, and the stalker who ultimately traumatized her and stole her dignity and life.

For twenty-one difficult years, Isabella doubted her daughter's origin, and the doubt remained at the heart of her marriage for as long. Keeping the secret internalized and keeping it from Antonio, her husband, was the hardest thing Isabella had done.

When the truth emerged twenty-one years into their marriage, Antonio declined to read the DNA report and unquestioningly accepted Bianca as his daughter. Antonio stuck by Isabella then, and four decades later, he was still by her side, his love for her as ardent as ever.

Closing the car door behind him, Antonio reached for Isabella's hand and held it tight. Isabella looked over at him. He'd aged like a fine Italian wine. Hovering on his seventieth birthday, he was still as handsome as when she met him.

Antonio's hair, dashingly grayed at the temples, crowned the handsome face with the sea-blue eyes she fell in love with. He wore a navy tweed coat over a black silk suit with a white shirt, burgundy tie, and brown Mesi derby shoes. Isabella smiled. As striking as he looked, Antonio was never comfortable out of his customary jeans and a cotton shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows.

After Antonio successfully launched The Café franchise across Canada, Isabella tried to talk him out of the cotton shirt and jeans and into a more professional look. Isabella failed miserably and just as well because she did not mind admiring the six-three-frame fit in those snug jeans.

"Are you all right?" Antonio reached for Isabella's hand and held it tightly.

"I already miss her," Isabella said softly. "It feels as if it's the end of an era."

"Yes, but in all fairness, and no disrespect to Emily, she was ninety-two," said Antonio.

"Dad's ninety-three, and Mama's not far behind." Isabella watched Bianca and Lorenzo attempt to corral their daughters, Rosanna, ten and Serena, seven, from running off when they exited their car with little success.

“Youthful energy,” Antonio sighed with a smile. “Your father and mother, *amore*, much like Emily, are a force to be reckoned with. For God’s sake, Emily outlived three husbands. As for your parents, they still have enough energy to keep up with those two girls and all their great-grandchildren.”

“Are you going to leave the girls lying in the snow?” Isabella said to her daughter on her approach. Bianca wore a gray coat, tapered black pants and laced-up ankle boots.

“They’ll get tired soon enough and join us.” Bianca shouldered her handbag, brushed the chestnut hair that tumbled in waves around her face and straightened the sunglasses, shading the blue eyes so much like her father’s. “Lorenzo will deal with them. He has the patience of a sloth.”

We do marry our parents, Isabella thought, watching Lorenzo patiently handle the girl as Antonio would.

“But never mind the girls, Mom. Are you all right? You weren’t doing well at the church.”

Isabella brought her hand to Bianca’s cheek. “I’m fine, honey. Cold, but fine.”

Bianca watched her father’s arm tighten around her mother’s waist in a circle of comfort and warmth. Here was love, Bianca thought. Her father would move mountains for her mother if she asked him. Bianca hoped she and Lorenzo would be as in love and devoted to one another after decades of marriage as her parents were.

“She was such a lovely woman—tough as nails but lovely. She taught me loads. I will miss Mrs. Johnstone, and the girls will miss their second Nana.” Bianca turned to watch her girls lay down on the snow to make snow

angels while Lorenzo watched on. “Christ, I have to put a stop to this. They’re getting their coats wet and dirty.”

Isabella caught Bianca’s arm before she turned to go. “Leave them, honey. Emily wouldn’t mind one bit. If anything, she’d encourage the laughter and fun they’re having, as her family does. See what I mean?”

Bianca, Antonio, and Isabella watched Mrs. Johnstone’s gaggle of great-great-grandchildren, encouraged by their parents, lay down next to Rosanna and Serena with them watching on.

Over the giggles and laughter of the children making snow angels, Christian walked up and did precisely what Isabella predicted of her thirty-eight-year-old son. He lay next to Rosanna and Serena in the snow.

Bianca’s slash of dark eyebrows rose. “He needs to get himself a wife.”

Isabella nodded. “Yes, he does.” Isabella looked at Antonio then. His eyes were bright and smiling. “You need to speak to him.”

“Yeah. Sure. I will.” Antonio agreed when Isabella narrowed her eyes. “Your parents are here,” he said to change the conversation.

Isabella waved Salvatore and Maria over. “Let’s get to it. Bianca, honey, round the troops and have everyone head to the mausoleum. Emily was a stickler for punctuality in life, and we’re not about to start to disappoint her now.”

THERE WERE SO MANY PEOPLE THERE. It was easy for an outsider to blend into the group, but she stayed well behind. Some of those in attendance flew in from around the world to attend Emily Johnstone’s funeral.

Unlike what she'd been told, Emily Johnstone wasn't a hated woman. Emily Johnstone was very much loved.

Blue Eyes scanned the group. Isabella and her clan, the Sabatinis and the Mesis, were there. It was rumoured Isabella paid fifty thousand dollars to build the mausoleum where the stiff was to be buried.

Blue Eyes hated rich people. Blue Eyes' fingers lightly tapped the tree as if striking piano keys to deal with the mounting resentment eating her insides.

Blue Eyes saw the famous runway model Kat LeBlanc, now Kat LeBlanc-Mesi, who, thanks to Isabella, went from working as a receptionist for Emily Johnstone to the runway. From there, it was a matter of time before Kat got her hooks into Isabella's bastard brother, Carlo Mesi, and became one of the wealthiest women in Europe.

Kat risked her perfect modelling figure to give Carlo the twin sons to carry his legacy. It was a paltry gesture for what she got in return, thought Blue Eyes.

Blue Eyes saw the old man, Salvatore Mesi, Isabella's biological father, who had started the company Carlo had taken over. His wife Maria, Isabella's biological mother, whom Salvatore left knocked up, stood by him. The only reason Blue Eyes could think of for the old woman to take Salvatore back after abandoning her when she was pregnant with Isabella had to be for his money. What respectable woman takes back a man who disappears overnight and reappears decades later?

Blue Eyes flicked her attention to Christian when he approached the hunky Lorenzo Romano. Lorenzo wasn't just an excellent designer, but he was a whole lot of gorgeous. Blue Eyes was sure she could fulfill his wildest fantasies in bed better than his pretentious, haughty wife

Bianca could. Blue Eyes let her mind wander for fifteen seconds before forcing herself to focus. Christian was the man she'd flown across an ocean to meet, not Lorenzo.

The long, dark curls, the broad shoulders, the fashionable stubble, and those blue eyes had her swooning. Christian looked better in person than in the photographs she had seen on tabloid covers and pages. She could see why he was labelled the most desirable bachelor.

Sexy good looks were a plus, but that didn't interest her as much as his bank account. Christian Sabatini was worth millions, and that very much interested her.

Part I

The Beginning

The only remedy is to tackle the problem head-on.

—M.L. Lexi

One

THE WEIGHT OF Bianca's shock palpable, Isabella waited while her daughter processed what she'd said.

Bianca's hair, pulled back in a French twist with strands framing her face, underscored the large blue eyes and full lips. Her skin had the look of outdoor colour, and she wore muted makeup. She had on a lilac dress with a wide skirt and thick waist. The black stilettos added four inches to her five-five height. There was a white gold chain around her neck from which an enviable diamond hung. At her ears, she wore studs and on her left hand was the white gold wedding band with a blindingly large sapphire.

"Me? CEO?" Bianca's voice was barely a whisper as if she were afraid to speak the words aloud and make them unreal.

Like her mother, Bianca was the essence of grace and elegance. But then Bianca had spent her entire life rooted in the fashion industry and learned everything there was to know about style from the best—her mother.

Isabella and Antonio watched their dumbfounded daughter rise from the sofa in one fluid motion. On rubbery legs, in stunned silence, Bianca paced the shiny marble floor veined with gray to the fireplace fashioned out of the same stone.

The living room was scented by the scent of pine from the Christmas tree her mother traditionally left standing until the first week of January, along with the burning

maple logs from the fireplace. Two large red poinsettias sat on the console table behind the long, mustard-coloured sofa.

Walls were washed in shades of blood orange and tangerine. A collection of family portraits hung on one wall. Artifacts and eclectic art from Isabella's and Antonio's worldwide travels sat on white lacquer shelves and pedestals. Through the tall double-plated glass wall, you could see the roll of land surrounding their home, now blanketed in white snow. A floating moon on the horizon shadowed the grove of pines surrounding the estate.

Bianca grabbed a maple log from the stack next to the fireplace and tossed it into the fading fire. The crackle of flame and wood filled the thunderous silence in the room.

Since Bianca was a girl, she'd dreamed of this moment. She pushed herself to excel in school to get here. She studied marketing, design, and management to prove her worth to her mother, who, in Bianca's eyes, naturally excelled at everything.

And Bianca didn't oppose her mother when she insisted she work her way from the ground up as everyone else had to at her company. Bianca did it because she believed learning every aspect of the company would make her a better leader when she stepped into her mother's giant shoes. But as much as Bianca hoped for this day to come, for as long as she'd prepared for it, the shock struck her like a hand grenade to her system.

When she turned to face her mother sitting on the sofa beside Antonio, Bianca stared at her. Impeccably dressed as Isabella always was, she looked smart in the red dress that hugged her slim body. Unlike her fashionable mother, her father opted for simplicity over fashion and wore faded

jeans and a white shirt. Both sipped whiskey from the baccarat lowball glass Christian poured for them.

Bianca started to open her mouth but closed it again and sat when Isabella motioned her to the chair next to Lorenzo.

“As I was saying, your father and I would like you to take over the company’s operation,” Isabella said.

That brought on a longer, more stunned silence.

Bianca levelled her gaze on Isabella. “The entire Isabella Farfalla Fashion Company?” Bianca replied, her voice laced with a tremor of emotion.

“Yes. You’ll be in charge of the operation of the local manufacturing, the overseas factories, and the global stores.” Isabella waved her empty glass at Christian, who took it from her and moved to refresh her drink. “You will also take over the supervision of the head office here in Toronto and the satellite offices in New York, London, and Paris.”

Bianca flicked baffled eyes to Lorenzo sitting beside her in the button-tufted, plush chair with a smile on his face.

“Do you know what you’re saying, Mom? You said you’d only retire when you were six feet under. Is this an emotional reaction to Mrs. Johnstone’s funeral? It’s been only a day since we buried her,” Bianca said after swallowing the glass of brandy Christian handed her.

Isabella’s slash of dark eyebrows rose. “When have you known me to make rash decisions, especially concerning my business? Your father and I have been discussing this for months. You’ve been preparing for this moment your entire life, Bianca. You have the passion, the knowledge, and the determination to lead this company into the future. I believe you’re ready. The question is, are you up to it?” Isabella’s gaze remained steady on her daughter.

Lorenzo squeezed Bianca's hand, a silent gesture of support and unwavering belief. "You were born for this, amore," he murmured, his dark eyes filled with admiration.

The spark that ignited in Bianca's eyes replaced the initial shock with a surge of determination she jumped in to say, "I was, wasn't I? Yes. Yes. Yes, I'm ready for this, Mom."

"Your mother said you would be, and she's never wrong," Antonio said. "I'm turning seventy soon."

"That's not for two years, Daddy."

Antonio continued. "Time is passing us by quickly, and seventy will come sooner than later. I want to slow down—some. I've been working since my teens, and it's time to step back. I've already set my exit plan in motion. A press release will be made in the coming week announcing the sale of The Café."

"To the Brazilian conglomerate. Christian said you and him finalized the deal to sell your company to them." Bianca held her glass out to Christian as he sat down.

"What am I, the bartender around here? Just because you're two years older doesn't give you the right to boss me around." Christian was the spitting image of his father, but jeans and a white cotton shirt weren't his style. Christian wore a blue cashmere sweater over a silk burgundy shirt and black pleated gabardine pants. His hair was trimmed, as was the dark stubble around the square jaw.

"Shut up and pour," Bianca ordered with the tone of an older sister.

Isabella rolled her eyes. "Children, please. You'd think you weren't adults."

"I will pour it for you, amore." Lorenzo pushed to his feet and walked the brandy and whiskey bottle on the

console table to the sitting area in his typically calm demeanour.

Lorenzo wore tapered jeans, a buttoned-down black shirt with the sleeves halfway rolled up, and black loafers. His thick wave of curls hung to his shoulders and was as dark as his forever-smiling eyes. His stubble was neatly trimmed.

Following Lorenzo with her eyes as he topped everyone's glass, Isabella thought he was so much like Antonio at his age. In addition to his handsome good looks, Lorenzo was a calm bastion of nerves, unlike Bianca, who was wired very much like she was. Bianca was high-strung and restless. As Bianca's opposite, Lorenzo was what she needed in her life to keep her calm and grounded.

"Drink it, amore. It will calm you." Lorenzo's voice flowed musically with the Italian inflection that never left him after years of living in Toronto.

"Do as your husband says, Bianca. He knows best," Isabella commented, giving Lorenzo a wink as he topped Bianca's glass.

"As I was saying," Antonio interjected. "The sale of The Café will be announced next week, and the deal will close by year's end. That will free a lot of my time to do what I should be doing at my age."

"And what's that, Daddy?" Bianca sent the brandy streaming down her throat.

"Traveling for pleasure, not business, and enjoying the properties your mother and I have acquired around the world throughout our hardworking life, which to date we have had little chance to enjoy." Antonio flashed sharp blue eyes at Isabella before he reached for her hand. "And I'd like to do it with your mother, so she needs to free up her time by handing the reigns to you, Bianca."

“Out of the fifteen hundred The Café stores, we’re keeping one hundred—the maximum the Brazilian’s allowed. We will manage them until Rosanna and Serena turn twenty-five when each will receive twenty-five stores. And....” Christian paused momentarily, “My children each will get twenty-five.”

Bianca lifted a single dark eyebrow. “Well, you have pollinated half of the earth’s female population. I’m sure you can dig up two kids from somewhere.”

Antonio and Lorenzo hooted a laugh while Isabella sighed and cast her eyes to the heavens. “Stop it, you two. Christian will marry and produce grandchildren. Won’t you, honey?”

“If I must.” Christian aimed his eyes beyond the glass wall.

The snow was coming down in a thick sheet of white. Tree branches were heavy with it, and under a full moon, the land was shrouded in a silvery haze. In the distance, Christian thought he saw a couple of deer foraging for their dinner.

“You must. Honey, you’re thirty-eight, and it’s time to settle down. After years of bachelorhood, even George Clooney realized the error of his ways and settled down to make a family. Your father and I aren’t getting any younger, and I don’t want to leave this earth with the worry that you’ll be alone.”

“Christ, Mom, you have many years yet, and you know there are a lot of benefits to being single. I don’t have to put up with women like her.” Christian jutted his chin at his sister Bianca and then turned to Lorenzo. “I salute your resilience, brother-in-law. You, my man, are made of steel.” Christian lifted his glass in a half-salute.

A wise man, Lorenzo neither acknowledged nor reacted to Christian's comment.

"There are a lot of benefits to sharing your life with someone who's always by your side and who shares your dreams. Someone you can talk to about anything, a life partner who believes in everything you do and is there to pick you up when you're down." Antonio closed a hand over Isabella's.

"Et tu, Brutus. What happened to male solidarity, Dad?" Christian took a long pull of his whiskey.

"Son, like Lorenzo, I know better than to turn against my wife." Antonio gave Lorenzo a side-eye look. "Nodding, smiling, and listening are techniques you might consider polishing. If you were married, you'd know that."

Isabella patted Antonio's hand. "That, amore, is the perfect answer." Isabella turned her eyes to her son. "Christian, promise me you'll at least consider settling down."

"I will, Mom." Christian leaned in to peck Isabella on the cheek. "Now, why don't you finish telling Bianca your plan? I'm sure she's anxious to know about her new role, which I one hundred percent approve." Christian slanted a look over Isabella's shoulder at his father and winked.

"All right, let's move on," Isabella said, and Antonio's mouth tipped up at the corners at his crafty son. Shifting the conversation was a refined skill Christian had employed with proficiency since childhood. The boy was, without a doubt, his son. "I'd like Lorenzo to assume the fashion designer and creative director role for Farfalla's."

"I cannot do that, Isabella. You are Farfalla's the brand and the designer everyone wants."

"You can and will. Honey, you're as good as me, maybe better. I'll deny that outside of this room."

“I do not believe that, and you do not have to deny it because it is not the truth. You have taught me everything I know.” Lorenzo’s words, tinged with sincerity, made Isabella choke.

Isabella reached for Lorenzo’s hand. “Honey, you’re like a son to me, and I want no one for the job but you. Make me proud.”

Lorenzo’s eyes filled with emotion, and shrugging in resignation said, “I will try my best, Isabella. Thank you for the opportunity.”

“With you as my fashion designer, Bianca as the CEO, and Christian as the CFO, Antonio and I leave the company in good hands. Don’t we, honey?” Isabella turned to Antonio, who nodded in tacit agreement.

“You do, Mom. I promise we’ll make you proud. I’ll make you proud.” Bianca threw her arms around her mother. “I will ensure the company continues to be your legacy, and we’ll make it as successful as you have for future generations.”

“It’s all I ask, baby,” Isabella said.

The emotional moment between the mother and daughter was interrupted by the arrival of Romeo, a white-coated Maltese with round, dark eyes and floppy ears, who barked as he ran into the room. Rosanna chased after him while Serena casually strolled behind her sister.

Both girls wore plaid pinafores with a white turtleneck sweater and black tights. They had a curly spill of chestnut hair around their faces with blue eyes. At one year, Serena’s senior, Rosanna, was inches taller and had inherited her mother’s rambunctious personality. Serena was her father’s daughter, and mellow was her nature.

“Nana says, ‘everyone to the table. Dinner’s on.’ Me, Serena, and Gramps are starving,” Rosanna announced, her large blue eyes gleaming with authority.

“She and Consuelo made pizza and lasagna. I helped. For dessert, we’re having those ice cream balls I love,” Serena said with reverence.

“They’re called *tartuffo*. Dinner tonight consists of everything the girls love.” Maria stood arched in the doorway.

Maria wore a frilly, white apron that said *Grandma Rules In The Kitchen*. Her silver hair, tied into a thick braid, hung down to her waist. Her cheeks were pink with heat. There were delicate lines at her mouth and eyes that came with age—she was, after all, an octogenarian. Maria was petite, but her indomitable character and personality were titanic.

“Have you completed your business?” Maria aimed dusky eyes at Isabella.

Isabella nodded. “We have, Mama.”

“Everyone happy?” Maria looked around the room, knowing what was discussed.

Although Isabella ran her business on her terms, she often asked her mother for advice. Maria knew that Isabella had already decided to pass her company on to the next generation. What Isabella needed was reinforcement, and she got it. Maria wholeheartedly approved and encouraged Isabella’s decision to move on and devote time to herself and her husband.

As much as Isabella loved her job and the company she built from the tailor shop her father left nearly bankrupt, four decades of fourteen-hour-seven-day workweeks took its toll physically and mentally on a person. The stress

alone was enough to kill most, and Maria approved of Isabella stepping back to enjoy a life of leisure.

“We are thrilled, Gran.” Bianca’s lips ripe with the smile she hadn’t been able to wipe off her face, she pecked Maria. “I’m going to be the CEO.”

“Congratulations. You’ll do a fine job, honey.” Maria turned to Christian and pinched his cheek.” So when can I expect those beautiful great-grandchildren?”

“Not you too, Gran.”

“I’m not a spring chicken. I have limited time left, and I’d like to meet them before God takes me,” Maria said.

“You are a spring chicken to me, Gran. A gorgeous one at that.” Christian pecked Maria on the cheek and chained his arm through hers. “Come on, everyone. Gran wants us at the dinner table and gets what she wants. So move it.”

Antonio’s bemused eyebrow raised. The boy had derailed the conversation of great-grandchildren. A smooth operator was his son.

“We have to wait on Kat and Carlo,” Isabella said.

“They’ve just pulled into the driveway with Gail and Marco and their brood,” Maria said. “The family’s all here. So, as Christian said, get your butts to the table. Antonio, honey, fetch a few bottles of wine from the wine cellar. Tonight, we celebrate the baton transfer from the current generation to the next, to Farfalla’s future.”

Two

CHRISTIAN OPENED THE DOOR TO Bianca's corner office and walked in. The room was brightly lit, with sunlight from the striking sun shining in a clear, blue sky. Out the corner glass walls, tall high-rise apartment buildings that had been built in the past twenty-five years to revive the downtown Toronto waterfront filled the landscape.

Isabella acquired the red-brick ten-story building on a dime from the former employer she drove into bankruptcy and worked with developers to transform the depressed commercial zone into a sprawling green urban space. Isabella surpassed her expectations. There were now walking and biking trails that blended with green spaces. The area boasted upscale bars, cafes and restaurants with outdoor patios. An IMAX theatre, a bike shop, and supermarkets that sold organic-only produce catered to the young professionals with disposable income who now populated the area.

It was urban renewal where young professionals wanted to live and be seen.

Bianca looked up from the financial statements in her hands at her brother. He wore black pants and a maroon silk shirt open at the neck. His thick curls had the windswept look he was known for, and his fashionable stubble was neatly trimmed.

“You could knock,” Bianca said, sighing. She wore a tapered black jacket with thin lapels against a cream-coloured silk shirt and slim ankle pants. Her hair was bound into a smooth ponytail, and a black bow held it at the nape of her neck.

“Why? I didn’t knock when Mom occupied this office, and she’s more worthy of a knock than you,” Christian said, walking to Bianca’s desk.

Christian smelled the sweet scent of Amore that painted the air. Amore was Isabella’s first venture into the perfume market and became her bestselling, and it was Bianca’s favourite. Bianca didn’t go a day without dabbing it on.

Bianca had changed little in the large corner office with a panoramic view of Lake Ontario and everything that had filled it for the past four decades. The art that hung on the steel-gray painted walls were framed pencil sketches of Isabella’s first ten designs, which launched her career. The wood floor was the trademark chocolate-brown found at the Farfalla stores worldwide.

The desk was concave, with a high-gloss ebony top and sides and white leather sides. The executive chair, guest chairs, sofa, and matching chairs in the sitting area were plush, white Italian leather with polished nickel armrests. The coffee table was glossed walnut, as was the floating credenza against the wall.

Contemporary elegance was Isabella’s style, and Bianca keenly embraced it.

“How’s the making of your mini-mes coming along?” Bianca crossed to the credenza and picked up the pot of coffee resting on the hot plate. “All I ask is that none of the prospective concubine or incubator, whatever you want to call her, be from the office. I have too much to deal with

right now to take on the aftermath of your jilted office romance.”

Christian fell back into the soft leather of the guest chair. “Don’t joke about that.”

“I’m not. No fraternizing with the employees.” Bianca’s voice was firm.

“Message received.” Christian nodded when Bianca waved a mug at him. “Can you see me settling down with one woman?”

“No, I can’t, but it will happen. You just haven’t met the right woman yet.”

“I’ve met hundreds, maybe thousands....”

“Easy there, tiger.”

“Well, I have met a lot of women and haven’t met *her*. You really think she’s still out there, and how will I know when I meet her?”

Bianca poured coffee into two white mugs with the word *Farfalla* in gold neon script printed across them. “For your sake, I hope you do. Mom’s not letting up until she sees you married and giving her grandchildren.”

“Yeah, don’t I know it.” Christian exhaled a long breath. “How will I know if and when I meet her?”

“You’ll know.” Bianca thought of the knock-out punch to the stomach she felt when she first saw Lorenzo. “The realization she’s the one will come at you like a hand grenade to your system,” Bianca added cream and sweetener to the coffee and wandered back to Christian. “Here, drink fast. I have more pressing matters to deal with than your love life. I need to prepare for my meeting with the bankers this afternoon to extend our loan and request another two hundred and fifty million dollars to finance the Asia expansion. No pressure.”

“You’re ready for it. I gave you the numbers I worked out and the paperwork you must present to the bankers.” Christian sipped on the steaming coffee.

Bianca slid into the chair behind the desk. “You forget I inherited Mom’s handicap for numbers, and all that finance gobbledegook makes me crazy. Add the pressure of proving myself a worthy replacement for Mom to those tight-ass bankers to get the financing we need.”

“You got this. You have a business management degree from the best school, among the many other degrees. Put them to work.”

Contemplatively, Bianca sipped at her coffee. “Mom had none of that higher education, and look what she accomplished. You’re either born with the entrepreneurial gene or not.”

“And you’re the product of two of the best entrepreneur minds I know,” Christian assured Bianca. “Cut yourself some slack. Besides, Dad will be in the meeting with you.”

Bianca blew out a breath. “He cancelled a few minutes ago, citing some ridiculous excuse, which I translated to mean he wants me to go at this alone to prove I can do it.”

“That is Dad’s MO.” Seeing the unease in his sister’s eyes, Christian said, “Do you want me to come with?”

“Would you, Christian? I’ve memorized your data and financial statements. I think I can do this, but I’d feel more confident with you there.”

“All you needed to do was ask.”

Bianca’s stomach stopped rolling, and the knots in her stomach loosened. Knowing she could still rely on her baby brother as she had since they were children was a comfort. “Thank you, Christian.”

“You’ll have to learn to ask for help, Bianca. Knowing your limitations is a sign of being a good leader. No one is

impervious to limitations, and knowing when to ask for help makes or breaks you,” Christian told her.

Bianca held her coffee cup in both hands and stared at Christian over the rim. “Since when did you become so wise?”

“I’ve always been wise. You just haven’t noticed.”

Bianca made a little snorting laugh. “The meeting is at three in the boardroom. I’ll have my assistant, Joshua, email you the names of the attendees. It’s a roster of the usual banking suspects.”

“I’ll look for the email and be there with my giant brain.”

The snorted laugh was louder this time. “I never asked you how you feel about Mom giving me control of the company. Do you mind that she did?” Bianca asked after a short silence.

Blue eyes on blue eyes, Christian shook his head. “Why would I? You do all the work, and I still get half of this company.”

She smiled at her brother’s sensible response. “Well, yeah, there is that.”

“I told you I have a big brain. Besides, I’m a numbers geek who is more suited to work in the background. I’m too pretty to be getting the stress wrinkles on this face your position brings on.”

Bianca’s mouth lifted at one corner. “I wish I was as confident as you. I’m starting to doubt myself, as everyone around here is. I don’t know if I’m as capable as Mom of leading this company.”

Christian waved a hand in dismissal. “Ignore the skeptics. It’s easy to sit on the sideline and critique.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Bianca set her cup on the desk. “I’ve wanted this for so long. I studied for this, prepared for it, and now that I’m here, I’m doubting myself. The staff

doesn't think I can do it. I see it in their eyes, hear it in their murmurs.”

Christian studied his sister's defeated face. Bianca, the woman who was as tough as nails, allowing personal feelings and gossip to play havoc in her head, was a first. It was a vulnerable side of her rarely seen, and Christian needed to quash it if Bianca was to succeed at her first undertaking. Failure to secure the loan wasn't an option. It would psychologically impact her state of mind, and shaking it wouldn't be easy.

“Since when do you let what people think to colour your judgement? You, the woman whose motto is ‘fuck ‘em all.’ All you need to know is that Mom and Dad have the confidence in you to do this, and they're rarely wrong. I can assure you that those who doubt you do because they know they cannot sit behind that desk and lead.” Christian set the coffee mug on her desk and pushed to his feet. “I have the confidence in you that Mom and Dad do.”

Bianca shrugged, but her poised gesture told him his words had restored her confidence. “Thanks, Christian.”

“Anytime. I need to ensure my investment in the company remains profitable.” Christian flashed her a full-on smile as he started to walk out of the office.

“Hey. What did you come in here for anyway?”

Christian stopped at the door. “Oh, yeah. I almost forgot. There's a reporter, Antonia Trenti, or maybe it was Trevi. Madeleine's message wasn't clear. She said the woman had a heavy Italian accent. This Antonia claims to be a reporter with Fashionista magazine, and she wants a meeting.”

Bianca shook her head. “I've never heard of it or her. She may be a so-called influencer trying to get attention. Have Madelaine pass the info on to marketing. Let them vet and deal with her.”

“Okay,” he glanced at his watch. I have to get back to the grind.” Christian opened Bianca’s office door and walked through it.

“Don’t forget, three in the boardroom,” Bianca called after him and returned to reviewing the paperwork for her first major meeting.

Getting the financing from the Bank of Commerce was tantamount to ensuring the company’s expansion and the livelihood of the employees who depended on it. Feeling the pressure clamp down on her shoulders like a vice, Bianca forced her brain to shut down the worry and focused on the paperwork in her hands.

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