

The
DETERMINED
WOMAN



M.L. Lexi

BECAUSE NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE

The Determined Woman

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“The Determined Woman” eBook Edition

Published by M.L. Lexi

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To my readers, for your support in helping
to make my writing dream a reality.
Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

Nothing is impossible to a determined woman.

—Louise May Alcott

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Prologue

Spring 2007

THAT ONE ACT set everything in motion, and the consequences were still reverberating all these years later. Now, things Isabella thought would remain inside her forever had to be told.

On a long breath, she dropped her weary body into the plush leather of the Kensington recliner. The golden liquid in her glass sloshed dangerously close to the rim. Resting her head against the chair, she squeezed her eyes shut and struggled for calm.

Isabella wasn't under the delusion this moment would never come. She only hoped it wouldn't, but the repercussions of a single vile act could go on and on for years and touch many lives. As hard as Isabella tried to keep the painful experience from reaching her family, the time had come when it would.

Isabella's expression shifted as her daughter's angrily lobbed questions came to her—again.

How could you do this to me, to daddy?

How could you lie all these years, and with such ease, Mother? What else have you been lying about?

Do you know how betrayed and broken I feel knowing the person I love and trust most in this world has lied to me my entire life?

My whole life has been a lie.

The anger hot and pulsing in Bianca's voice as she came at Isabella with the questions, accusations, and hate, her response was to run away—far away from her daughter. Escaping, shrouding herself from everything, and everyone was what she needed, and in the darkness of night, Isabella made the two-hour drive to her northern retreat.

No matter how long Isabella had mentally prepared for when the moment came, when it did, it felt like a detonating hand grenade to her system. The shameful, ugly secret she'd kept buried in the deep recesses of her mind for the twenty-three years of her daughter's life, her entire married life now had to be told.

Isabella was bone-tired, but as much as she needed to lay her head down, her racing mind wouldn't allow sleep to come. She did the next best thing. Isabella fueled herself with the remaining brandy in her glass.

Swooping to the bar, she slopped brandy into her glass then crossed to the window. The first light from a rising sun peeked from between the treetops. Isabella cast eyes to the natural, unspoiled surroundings of Lake Rosseau. Spring was beginning to show her face in the small Canadian town, and fields and forests framing the lake were steeped in the budding green heralding the season. Canada geese migrating from their winter sojourn filled a vivid blue sky.

In the deafening silence, her father's words rushed at her.

Secrets are like walls, Isabella. They will protect you and those around you from the pain they can inflict and the harm they can spawn, but only temporarily because no matter how shocking or terrible those secrets are, eventually, they always come out.

Hers now had.

The warmth of the living room suddenly felt stifling, and Isabella stepped out onto the terrace. The air against her face, cool and moist, carried the pungent peaty smell of damp earth and dew from the previous week's rains. The sounds of dawn were all around. Within the shelter of trees that sprang up majestically toward the sky, a soft wind rustled through their leaves. Birds joined in the chorus of birdsong, and creatures stirred.

The soothing and utopian panorama she escaped to when she needed recharging from her busy life today did nothing to calm her restless mind. Today, her heart ached too much. It ached for her daughter and unsuspecting family. Resurrecting the long-hidden event from her past was going to cause deep hurt.

She prayed her daughter, husband, and son would understand and forgive her. At the thought, they may not, a frightful chill cut deep, and Isabella wrapped her hands around her shivering body.

"How could I have been so careless?" she thought, eyeing the envelope—the cause of all her problems—sitting on the coffee table. Twice she'd attempted to read its contents but hadn't found the courage to do so.

She should have locked the goddamn thing in her office safe when her assistant handed it to her, but there were so many distractions. The ringing telephone, the tantrum from her Vice-President of Sales complaining about late shipments, and her secretary's urging words to get to the boardroom for the meeting she was running late for had her dismissing the envelope. Although Isabella thrived on such chaos, the contents of the envelope, which was about to change her family's life, had her mind distracted, and she rushed off to her meeting, leaving it on her desk for Bianca to find.

Isabella couldn't fault her daughter for the screaming match she'd incited or the accusatory and hurtful words Bianca hurled when she so much as handed her the DNA report she'd requested without her knowledge.

Guilt compressed in a tight ball in the pit of Isabella's stomach.

The should-haves whirled in Isabella's head. She should have done this or that, but it was too little too late, and her impulse was to run to avoid Bianca's demands for answers, for the truth.

Not that she blamed her daughter. If she were in Bianca's shoes, she too would have demanded an explanation, answers. She, also, would have flung the hateful words Bianca hurled like daggers aimed to wound because she and her daughter were alike. The thought, however, didn't lessen the fact Bianca's hurtful words cut Isabella deeply.

You're my mother, the person I trust unconditionally, and now you're nothing but a lying, deceiving— I will never trust you again, Mom, and I couldn't hate you more right now if I wanted to. I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.

Isabella hadn't known a hurt like that of a child telling their mother she hated her.

Her daughter's words echoing in her ears with the intensity they were meant to, Isabella imagined the depth of Bianca's pain, the feeling of betrayal when she read the report.

No one escaped the past, Isabella thought. A shiver cut through her like a serrated knife, and she wrapped her arms around her body for warmth. Closing her eyes, she opened herself to the memories and the lie at the heart of it all.

Part I

Resolve

When you come to the end of your rope
tie a knot and hang on.

—Franklin D. Roosevelt

One

January 1982

THE STOMACH CANCER detected during the routine check-up seven months ago had metastasized. It was a word Isabella didn't fully understand its implications but sensed it wasn't an outcome her father deserved.

Six weeks from the diagnosis, with his wife, Maria, and daughter, Isabella, by his side, Angelo Farfalla drew his last breath. He was forty-one. As painful as it was to watch her father die, seeing him at peace and pain-free was soberly gratifying.

On a February winter day, under a dark sky with a cold, howling wind seeping deep into your bones, Angelo was laid to rest. Isabella and Maria flanked by Angelo's brother Gianni, his wife Nina, and their daughter Michaela filled the front row as Father Lenny recited prayers. Looking solemn and respectful, friends and neighbours gathered around the family.

Angelo Farfalla was a loving husband, father, good brother, and a caring friend. He and Isabella made so many plans. They were going to visit the major fashion houses in Italy, Paris, and New York. They planned to attend every major fashion show, and when the time came, they'd work together to turn the modest tailor shop that bore Angelo's name into a renowned fashion house.

Growing up watching her father work in his small tailor shop gave Isabella a taste of tailoring. With a strong taste in her system, Isabella knew what she wanted for herself at a young age.

A mixture of love and pride illuminated Angelo's face when she told him she wanted to follow in his footsteps and learn all she could from him. From that moment, her father centred his dreams and hopes on Isabella, but she didn't mind. She wanted to take over the business and carry his legacy as much as he wanted her to.

Isabella was nine when she became his apprentice. Every day after school, she rushed to her father's tailor shop and, like a sponge, soaked every detail of what he taught her. She hung onto every word he uttered. Isabella couldn't have asked for a better teacher or mentor, and he couldn't have asked for a better student.

Angelo taught Isabella about textiles, fabric grains, and bias. He tutored her on running, basting, buttonhole, and every type of stitch there was. Angelo taught Isabella everything he knew about the craft of tailoring. Intently, she watched her father trace the lines onto the fabric with tailor's beeswax, which turned into the patterns he'd assemble into the custom-made suits he proudly tagged with a FARFALLA TAILORS label.

"Sewing is one of the most ancient of the textile arts," Angelo told Isabella. "Beautiful things can come from a bolt of fabric. Let your imagination flow, Isabella."

Those words set Isabella's mind rolling. She didn't just want to make beautiful clothes. Isabella wanted to create garments that made women feel feminine, extraordinary. To design clothes, women sought out and bragged about wearing. Isabella wanted to become a household name.

“And one day, you will, Isabella. You’re very talented,” Angelo assured.

“When will that be, Daddy?”

“I’ll let you know, princess. Until then, everything that’s in me will be yours. You will be bigger and better than I could ever be because you’re smarter than I am. You’ve inherited the entrepreneurial gene and an aptitude for business from your old man.”

They had so many plans, but as fate would have it, at the age of twenty-two, Isabella watched her father’s casket lowered into a darkness he’d never come back from.

After the funeral, people filed to pay their last respects. Many commented on how beautiful the service was and offered words of sympathy and their unconditional support.

Until that moment, Isabella hadn’t felt more alone.

FROM THE SHELTER OF TREES A pair of eyes fixated on Isabella. Firing up a cigarette, they watched her every move, studied her, and surveyed her face. It had been months since they’d come upon her, but she looked as beautiful as always.

Eyes the colour of aged bourbon were sad and solemn today. Her mouth was wide and full. Her long dark hair tumbled in waves around an unpainted face as delicate as silk. She wasn’t one to flaunt her striking beauty, but she didn’t have to, he thought approvingly.

A warmth came over him when he watched Isabella gnaw that lovely lower lip in the way she tended to do when she was nervous or deep in thought. She’d done that since he could remember.

For a moment, he thought Isabella flicked wary eyes in his direction, but with a tug of relief, dismissed the notion

when her cousin Michaela reached for her hand and walked her to the car.

He pitched the cigarette at the grass and hid from view. Isabella never saw or sensed the eyes that remained on her until she left for home.

Two

ISABELLA'S EYES ROLLED over the stack of overdue bills, then flicked to the bankbook balance. The \$59.25 wasn't going to cut it, and she pushed the bankbook and bills aside when the sense of helplessness overtook her.

As much as Isabella wanted to save the shop, she couldn't hold on to it much longer. The mounting bills and debt collectors were more than she could deal with. She had no option but to close the doors to her father's tailor shop and give up her dream. Struggling against twin urges of defeat and failure, every bone in her body felt weighted by the most dreadful fatigue.

Isabella looked around the small shop, borne out of her father's sweat and sacrifice. Stacked on the wood shelves bought at the Goodwill were dozens of neatly folded bolts of fabric ready to be shaped into beautiful garments. The second-hand sewing machine sat idle and tape measures, scissors, rulers, and iron, cluttered the workbench. Linoleum grayed from use matched the wall colour. It wasn't much, but it was her father's life work, and she hoped it would be his legacy.

Angelo had worked hard, sacrificed, and given so much of himself to his business, hoping one day it would fulfill Isabella's long-sought dream of becoming the next Versace

or Chanel. After years of sweat and sacrifice, it came down to one option, shutting the shop and her dream down.

It wasn't fair.

Life wasn't fair.

Isabella lay her head down on crossed arms and let the tears of despair flow.

“What have I told you about crying?”

Isabella knuckled tears from her eyes to clear her vision. “Daddy?” She closed her eyes, opened them. There he was. “Jesus, I need to get some sleep.”

“You do, princess. You're looking tired and thin. I want you to take care of yourself. You're all your mother has. Promise me you will, Isabella.” Smoke flowed from the cigarette in Angelo's mouth upward in a lazy curl.

Isabella stared at her father. He looked real and healthy. His eyes were the sapphire-blue she remembered from his healthy days and full of life.

“It's me, princess.” Angelo walked toward Isabella, bringing with him the smell of Old Spice and cigarette smoke. “Promise me, Isabella, you'll look after yourself. You're mother needs you.”

“That's rich coming from you. You know those things killed you. How many times did we beg you to stop smoking?” Isabella tossed back with the bottled-up anger she'd carried since burying him.

“I deserve that.”

“It's too late for that now,” she said when he moved to crush out the cigarette. “I don't think they can kill you again.”

Angelo let out a booming laugh. “I always did appreciate your sense of humour.”

“I miss you, Daddy.”

“I miss you too, princess. I’m sorry for leaving you and your mother. I should have taken better care of myself.”

“Yes, you should have.”

“You want to take the shop over and make it your own as we planned.”

“I do, but...” Isabella let the sentence hang. She couldn’t tell him the shop he’d worked so hard to establish was on the verge of bankruptcy. Isabella wouldn’t tell him the mounds of bills made it so most days she felt like a salmon swimming upstream through a current of despair.

“No excuses. Don’t be afraid to reach for the stars, princess. You have your dream to fulfill. One we planned for since you were a little girl.” Angelo held up a cigarette. When Isabella shrugged her shoulders, he lit it with the Bic lighter he dug from his pants pocket.

“But, Daddy...”

“Reach for the stars, princess. Fulfill your vision, but do it for yourself, not me.”

Isabella rolled teary eyes to her father. “I can’t do this for you or me.”

“Of course you can, and you will make a name for yourself, not for me.” Gazing into Isabella’s eyes, Angelo plugged the cigarette into his mouth, inhaled. “What is it?”

“We’re broke, Daddy,” Isabella reluctantly admitted.

“Princess, we’ve always been broke.” Angelo exhaled a long plume of white smoke, watched it curl upward until it faded. “You’re too young to be taking on so much responsibility, but you’re way more clever and capable than I was. You have brains and talent, Isabella. You can do this. Believe in yourself, and everything will fall in place.”

“Hello.” The man’s voice brought Isabella out of her slumber.

“Can’t you see the closed sign on the door?” Isabella groggily shot out with a mixture of irritation and annoyance.

“I’m sorry to bother you.”

“Well, you are, and I said we’re closed,” Isabella barked before her angry tone waned.

His eyes were the colour of sea and sky with long, thick lashes. His hair, peppered with snowflakes, was a mane of jet-black waves that framed a compelling face with a wide mouth curved into a warm smile. A fashionable stubble added a sexy touch, and aside from the slightly crooked nose, he was perfect.

“My name is Antonio Sabatini. I’m your landlord.”

His allure faded. “If you’re looking for money, take a number, Mr. Saba-whatever.” Isabella’s rasping tone netted a raised brow.

The irritated eyes that stared at him were hazel, flecked with specks of orange. Sexy, he thought. “Antonio works. May I speak to Mrs. Farfalla?”

“No. Talk to me.” Isabella snarled, unable to control the bitter edge to her tone.

She was a cranky one, but easy on the eyes, Antonio thought. Hair, the colour of mink, was smoothly pulled back to accent a delicate face devoid of make-up—as he liked his women. Her mouth was full and pink. She was five or six inches shorter than his six-foot frame, and although she wore a baggy sweatshirt and sweat pants, he figured the body beneath it was lean and curvy. He wondered how she’d escaped his attention until then.

“I wanted to talk to you about...”

“I know what you want to talk to me about. We owe you back rent. And like I said, take a number.” Isabella’s voice punched like a fist. Whether he heard it or not, he took no

notice. The anger lighting the large, hazel eyes had him entranced.

“Not having a good day?” Antonio’s dimples flashed with charm.

“Pfft, a day I can handle. I’m not having a good life,” Isabella said with a sarcastic half-laugh as he sized the full bottom lip and determined it was perfect for nibbling. “Stop staring at me,” she snapped.

“I’m sorry I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable,” Antonio said when he saw her nervous hand move closer to the iron, which he didn’t doubt she wouldn’t hesitate to lob at him. Fire and beauty, with an indefinable hint of sensuality in a woman, were admirable qualities in his book. “And I’m sorry about not having a good life, but I promise you it does get better.”

The kind-hearted flow of his words pulled at Isabella. “It’s me who’s sorry. Mrs. Farfalla is my mom. I’m Isabella.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Isabella.” Antonio took the offered hand to pump and held it for longer than he should when his heart bumped and hammered hard at her touch.

“How can I help you?” Isabella said, prying her hand free.

“I did want to talk to you about the rent.”

The knot in Isabella’s stomach knit tight. “I don’t have your money right now, but I promise...”

“I’m not here to collect.” Isabella kept puzzled eyes levelled on the spellbinding blue ones. “I know you’re going through a difficult time, and I stopped in to tell you not to worry about the rent. You can take all the time you need.” Antonio watched her raise a quizzical brow. “I’ve been in your shoes, and I know right now, you don’t need the additional pressure of making rent.”

Something powerful and raw in his tone, in the eyes so compassionately gazing at her, made it difficult for Isabella to hold her composure. To his utter terror, she let the tears flow.

“I’m sorry. I ... didn’t mean to... Oh, jeez. I didn’t mean to upset you. Honestly,” Antonio stammered with the panicked feeling that consumes a man at the sight of a crying woman. Her heart-wrenching tears pulled at his heartstrings, and he wound his way around the table to wrap arms around her. “Please, please don’t cry.”

“I’m sorry.” Isabella pulled loose from his hold.

“Do you feel better?” Antonio’s fingers skimmed over her cheeks to dry tears. “My mom always said a good cry made her feel better.”

“Yes, thank you.” Feeling conscious of their closeness, Isabella took a few steps back. “I’m so embarrassed.”

“If anyone should be embarrassed, it’s me. My charismatic personality is supposed to appeal to your female sensibilities, not have you in tears.”

Isabella smiled at that. “Your charismatic personality doesn’t need fine-tuning. It’s that out of everyone who’s offered a helping hand, you’re the only one who’s meant it.”

Her vulnerability, her softness, the teary eyes, tugged at Antonio. He slid his fingers under her chin, lifted her face to meet his. “And I mean it. You take as long as you need.”

The gesture spoke volumes, and the hopelessness and misery that filled Isabella for months faded. The stranger she’d just met with a simple act of kindness restored her faith in humanity. “Thank you.”

“Your father was a good man. He was always kind to me, and I’d like to repay the favour. If you or your mother

needs anything, you come to see me. Day or night, you can find me at The Café.”

“Thank you and I promise I’ll have your money to you as soon as possible.”

“I know you will. In case you don’t, I know where you live.” Antonio’s comment netted him a brittle smile. “That’s better. I guess it’s been a rough few months for you.” She nodded, tucking the errant strand of hair behind her ear, and as hard as Antonio tried not to stare, he found he couldn’t take his eyes off her. “It’ll get better. I promise.”

When? Isabella wondered but gave him a faint smile and a nod.

Antonio scanned his watch. “I’m sorry, but I need to get back to the cafe. Here’s where you can reach me.” He penned his number on a piece of paper. “And, Isabella, keep smiling. You look great when you do.”

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