

The
INVINCIBLE
WOMAN



BOOK THREE OF THE FARFALLA FAMILY SAGA

The Invincible Woman

M.L. Lexi

The last installment of The Determined Woman Series.

Titles by M.L. Lexi



The Determined Woman Series



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Prologue

REALITY STRUCK AND it all came out.

The betrayal, lying, and plotting that was a part of Antonia Trevi's life like a second skin caused her life to come crashing down like a Jenga tower when the one block that held it together was removed. In a matter of minutes, Antonia—known to her friends as Toni—found herself stripped of everything that had meaning in her life.

Toni had betrayed Bianca, her employer and the only person who believed in her. As a result, Toni lost the job she loved and excelled at. Toni lost the love of the only friends and family she knew. Worse than that, Toni deceived Christian, the only man who gave her unconditional love and expected nothing in return but her love.

Toni's response was to run away, far away from everyone she hurt.

Toni fled to Milan, the only home she knew to welcome her. Putting an ocean between her and the web of lies she concocted was the only plausible conclusion to the situation she created.

Toni couldn't face Christian. It was difficult for Toni to confess her betrayal to Christian's sister, Bianca, but more daunting was revealing to Christian who she truly was. Telling Christian the shameful things Toni did and revealing the humiliation that was her life was something Toni couldn't bring herself to do. The pain of the revelation

was all-encompassing, and Toni wouldn't hurt Christian. Toni wouldn't allow Christian to inherit her trauma.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder, and her absence weighs on him, and he sets off to find her.

When Christian finds Toni, the dam bursts, and she tells him the sordid truth of who she was, what she did, and the lies she had told. With reluctance, Toni revealed she was the type of woman who engaged in relationships with men—many, many men—to extort money from them. Toni told Christian she was a woman who engaged in sexual affairs with older men to satisfy her mother's need for money. Toni conceded she was the type of woman whose questionable past didn't blend with his impeccable upbringing.

Christian held up a silencing hand, but Toni pushed on. “No, Christian. I must tell you everything.”

“I have no interest in your past. I'm only interested in the here and now,” Christian said.

“You need to care, Christian. My sullied past is unsuited to meld with your unblemished life. A secret like mine is corrosive. It will come between us, your family, Bianca. I must tell you everything about me, and you must decide if you still feel the same about me afterward. I will understand if you do not.”

Part I

The Beginning

People, like a wisp of smoke, change with the shifting winds of time.

—M.L. Lexi

Chapter 1

WITH A FACE that knew more than most thirty-six-year-olds should, Toni told Christian her story. Hunched in his seat, Christian focused on listening to every word of Toni's surreal account of her life.

"And that is who I am, Christian. Now, do you understand why I ran away?" Toni stared at Christian.

Eyes fixed wide, Christian looked intently beyond him. Under the spill of a bright summer sun, the piazza teemed with tourists, cameras around their necks, and cell phones clicked to memorialize Milan's beauty. People sat around the edge of the circular fountain spewing water, soaking the sun, enjoying a gelato, or relaxing before resuming sightseeing. Boutiques of famous designers and cafés fringing the piazza burst at the seams with patrons.

Toni looked away to avoid the eyes that stared at her. "I am sorry to disappoint you this way, Christian, but I must tell you everything about me before you decide you want to be with me." Toni waved the black and white liveried waiter on when he came to the table and levelled her blue eyes at Christian. "My lifestyle, the one I have led until recently, for lack of knowing any different, is not something I want to introduce into your life. Unlike me, you have the perfect wholesome life and a loving family. I could not taint.... I know you say you are only interested in the here and now, but our past life creeps up when you least expect it and...."

Christian held a hand, palm out, to silence Toni.

In ordinary blue jeans and a white shirt, sleeves rolled to his elbows, no one would guess Christian to be the son of renowned fashion magnate Isabella Farfalla and Antonio Sabatini, the man known as the Canadian coffee king. Christian was tall like his father, Antonio. Much like Antonio, Christian was fit with an athletic body. His jet-black curls cascaded around a chiselled face with a dark stubble contrasting the sea-blue eyes.

“Give me a moment, please,” Christian said, needing time to break down the information Toni dropped on his lap.

Closed-mouth, his mind rolling, Christian thought, contemplated, debated.

Christian looked at Toni. Her exceedingly blonde hair floated in shining waves around her beautiful face with large blue eyes, a full mouth painted fire-red, and skin with the outdoor colour look. The tauntingly sweet scent of her perfume reached deep into Christian and lingered there.

How does a man get past knowing the woman he loved, the woman he believed to be perfect, was pimped by her mother to support her extravagant lifestyle? How was Christian to move on from the revelation the woman he wanted to share his bed with had made it a practice of bedding rich men to extort them for money? Christ! How was he to get past the knowledge that the woman he wanted to marry had slept with as many men as she said she had?

It wasn't as if Christian was setting a double standard for Toni because she was a woman. Christian had no right to do so. Christian had as many women in his life as Toni had men. The difference was he hadn't targeted them for the sole purpose of blackmailing them. Compared to Toni, Christian spoiled the women in his life, and although his ultimate goal was sex, he was honest with them and treated them respectfully.

Situational ethics, he supposed that was.

Christian's dumbfounded face gave him away, and Toni made a noncommittal sound at the realization that their time had passed. Feeling immensely sad at the thought, Toni pushed back from the table and stood.

"I love you, Toni." Christian faltered. There was a moment of silence. Every woman's eyes in the café were on Christian. He could choose any of them, but his heart was Toni's, wholly and unconditionally. "I love you," Christian repeated.

"No, Christian, you do not. You cannot. You are a lovely man who does not deserve someone with a past like mine. I wish you nothing but love and happiness to fill your life. You deserve it." A solitary tear sprang from her eye and started down her face when she leaned down to touch her lips with his.

Christian reached for her hand to hold her back. "I do love you, and you're the only person who will fill my life with love and happiness."

Through a dim haze of confusion, Toni stared at him. "What are you saying, Christian?"

Christian indicated to Toni to sit in the chair she vacated. Toni sat.

"Everything you've told me is difficult to ... process. It isn't easy to understand or accept a mother would do that to their child. How could she do that to you?" Christian raked edgy fingers through his hair.

Toni saw the bitterness and the anger that too often filled her take Christian over as it did her. It was a terrible burden for her to carry all these years, and now she imposed those feelings on the man she loved. Toni contaminated Christian's idyllic life, the only man who filled her life with love and treated her with kindness, with the imperfections that filled hers.

Christian's hand closed over Toni's when she started to tap her fingers on the tabletop as if playing the piano—a calming tactic she adopted long ago.

“I haven’t been a saint either. Bianca is always keen to point out that I have pollinated half of the world’s female population,” Christian said.

On impulse, Toni lifted a single honey-brown eyebrow. “That is certainly ... something, but you cannot compare the two, Christian.”

“Meaning to say, I haven’t idly sat around saving myself for the special woman.”

Shaking her head, Toni sighed heavily. “Christian, it is not the same thing. I...”

Christian cut in. “I only have one question. When you’ve been with me, did you do and say what you have for your mother, or did it come from you?”

“It came from me,” she said swiftly, almost inaudibly. “I feel shame. I have always felt nothing but shame for my actions, but not with you, Christian.”

Christian slid his fingers under her chin, turning her face to meet his. “I believe you, and you shouldn’t feel ashamed or blame yourself. You trusted someone you love, someone who was your support system, and they used you and steered you in the wrong direction.” Christian swiped the tears of hurt, regret, and betrayal that flowed heavily down Toni’s cheeks with his thumb. “Know that I would never do you wrong. I’d never hurt you or make you cry. I’d go to the ends of this earth for you.”

“Me too, Christian, but my past life is not something you introduce to people like you or your family.”

“I want to be with you, and I think you want to be with me.”

“I do, but...”

Christian abruptly bit off the rest of Toni’s sentence. “I want you in my life. I want you in my bed at night. I want to wake up next to you every morning of my life. I want you to marry me, Toni.” The tears came in sobs now, and Toni gasped for breath. “I asked her to marry me,”

Christian explained when those sitting at nearby tables turned with concerned eyes to look at Toni.

A slow smile spread across the French woman's face at the adjacent table. "Then you must do it properly. You must get down on one knee and ask her. *Allez. Allez.*" She made a rolling hand gesture to speed him along.

The café patio fell silent, and all eyes turned to Christian when he knelt and looked into Toni's eyes. "Toni Trevi, will you allow me to share your life and dreams? Will you make me a part of your days and nights? Will you make me the happiest man alive and marry me?" Christian removed his pinky ring and held it out to Toni.

The French woman's friend made a rolling motion with her forefinger to encourage Toni.

Toni shot up from her chair and into Christian's arms. "Yes. Yes, I will marry you."

AMID THE EXCITEMENT OF THE CLAPPING and cheering crowd, Toni failed to see her mother's eyes narrowed to thin slits, watching the blissful event unfold from the sideline. She watched one of the wealthiest and most eligible bachelors slide the ring on her daughter's finger. Michaela thought it was probably worth more than her tiny apartment.

Toni would be living her fairy tale dream all because of her. She'd introduced her daughter to Christian. She had concocted the scheme that led to Toni becoming his bed warmer. Toni's talents, honed from her schooling, took it from there.

She taught her daughter everything she knew, and Toni was betraying her. The resentment of betrayal from the daughter she'd cared for on her own since birth bubbled into seething anger in Michaela. It pushed Michaela to the edge, and everything throbbed at once.

After everything Michaela did for her daughter and the sacrifices she'd made, this was how Toni repaid her.

First, Toni turns her back on Michaela and goes home to live with that sorry excuse of a man she now calls Papa and his family. Michaela blamed Isabella for her daughter's duplicity. After all, Isabella put her worthless ex-husband, Joe Smith, who never saw anything through to the end, in touch with Toni. Michaela was sure Joe and his family had filled Toni's head with lies that drove her to refuse to take her calls.

Michaela damned Isabella and Joe.

Toni was her daughter, and Michaela wouldn't make her forget it anytime soon.