

Our Italian Summer

Chapter One

Francesca

“No, I said the deadline is Wednesday. That gives you two days to give me a decent hook or I’m pulling you off the account.”

I ignored the glint of resentment in the young man’s green eyes, wondering if he thought his charm and good looks trumped talent. In many places, they did. But not in my company.

I gave him credit for smothering the emotion immediately and forcing a smile. “Got it. I’ll get it done.”

I nodded. “I know you will.”

He left my office with his shoulders squared, and I wondered what would eventually triumph—pride or the drive for success. He was young and had promise, so I hoped the latter for him. Pride was good in some cases, but working on a team to retain high-powered advertising accounts required the ability to do what it took, whether it was working with someone you didn’t care for or swallowing the innate instinct to push back at the boss you hated.

Of course, he didn’t hate me. At least not yet. It was hard to take orders from a woman who was blind to looks, charisma, or flattery. I’d learned that lesson early—and ran my F&F Advertising with a ruthless efficiency and cold-mannered sharpness that made me one of the best in the business. I’d even managed to snag a spot on the Top Ten Women to Watch in Business list from *Fortune* magazine.

Too bad I had no time to enjoy it.

I glanced at my watch, my mind furiously clicking over the day’s crammed schedule. I’d have to work

late again, but it'd be worth it once I nailed this new account. I headed to the conference room for a meeting with my team, my sensible low-heeled shoes clicking on the hardwood floor. Layla and Kate were already perched at the polished table, laptops fired up and endless papers strewn around.

“Morning, boss,” Kate said, motioning toward the chair next to her. “Figured we'd be eating lunch in again, so I had Jessica get your usual.”

“Thanks.” I took a sip of my Voss water as I sat beside them. I lived on water and grilled chicken salads, which was the easiest fuel to shove into my body on limited time. “Where's Adam?”

“Running late,” Layla said, shooting me a smile. “But I don't think we need him for the brainstorming session. Better to get his feedback on the social media after we have a few solid concepts.”

“True. He didn't look too thrilled with our new product.”

Kate quirked a brow. “He's been begging to sell something sexier than kids' lemonade.”

Layla snorted. “I told him anyone can sell sex—it's not even a challenge. If he makes this work, he's a genius.”

I laughed. “You always did know how to motivate him, Layla.”

My valued art director preened. “Plenty of practice in the ranks of hell. At least it was good for something.”

Layla had graduated at the top of her class and planned to take Manhattan by storm. Unfortunately, like me, she ended up with a slew of crap jobs, and being a black woman in the industry meant encountering prejudices to overcome. We'd worked together for a few years before I ventured out to create my own company, and I knew she'd be the perfect art director for F&F Advertising.

I trusted her with both my business and my personal shit. It was the best decision I ever made.

Kate was my advertising manager and my other right hand. She wore tailored designer suits, and her blond hair was pulled back tight in a chignon, emphasizing her classic bone structure. I had to admit, when I first met Kate, I thought she was too beautiful and quiet to be successful in such a cutthroat business, but she soon proved me wrong and now I never discriminate based on looks. I made sure I hired a diverse, multicultural team, treated them like royalty, and offered enough incentives for promotion. It proved a good

move, since I had low turnover and a core of hard-won talent.

Lately, I'd been thinking of offering them both a full partnership. My little boutique company was finally on the verge of exploding, and I needed people I trusted by my side. I had been intent on not bringing in partners, but now I saw if I wanted to really grow, it was time I took the leap. Plus, I considered these women friends. They'd proven their loyalty, and we worked well together.

But that tiny sliver of doubt still crept through me. I'd gotten here by relying on my own drive, talent, and gut instincts to give clients what they need, twenty-four seven. I was the final say on everything for my company. Giving up that type of control made my skin prickle, like I was about to break out into hives. I'd heard horror stories of being pushed out by once-trusted partners and overruled on important decisions by lack of majority. What if Kate and Layla decided to team up and I found myself odd woman out? Power sometimes had a funny effect on relationships. Did I really want to take such a chance? Even with these women I trusted and called friends?

I needed more time to think it through. Until then, I'd just push forward.

I shook my head and refocused. "Let's get to work. We only have two weeks until the presentation. I've been looking over all the reports from the research department and there's a few things we need to zone in on."

Layla jumped in. "Lexi's Lemonade is organic. That's the main buzzword."

"Exactly. Statistics show kids drive popular drink sales by pushing their parents to buy. We need to find a way to bridge the gap and get the children to beg mom to buy it."

"And the moms need to feel good about giving in," Kate added.

I brought up a picture of the label on my screen and tapped it with my fingernail. "Packaging is huge. The recycled box is earth-friendly and colorful. It needs to compete on the shelves with Capri Sun, Honest Kids, and the endless others. We need to find a unique inroad."

"At least it tastes good," Layla said. She pursed her red-painted lips. "Can you believe Kool-Aid still sells a shitload? Man, I loved that stuff growing up. And what a mascot. Genius."

"Hmm, but I don't think we want a mascot for this product," I said. "We need to gain children's

attention with the ad, then slam it home that there's low sugar and no preservatives. The double hook."

"Shock value?" Layla threw out.

I nodded. "Possible, but not too much. I think funny."

Kate cocked her head. "Kids nowadays are low to shock value with YouTube and video games. I agree, funny may be the way to go."

Layla groaned and opened up her email. "I'll get Sara started on kids' comedy and what generates the most sales."

"Good, let's start throwing everything in the pot for possible scenarios," I said. The rush of adrenaline warmed my blood as the challenge of a new creative account settled in. This was what I lived for, the elusive hunt for the perfect hook to please a client and sell the product. It never got old.

We started brainstorming and my phone vibrated. Glancing quickly at the screen, I noticed my mother had called twice without leaving a voice mail. I held back a groan. Typical. If I didn't pick up, she just kept calling and refused to leave a message. Soon, a text came through.

Frannie, please call me. I have an important question.

Impatience flickered. She was always calling me with endless questions, from how to work the television remote to what movie to rent at Redbox to whether I'd seen the latest and greatest health scare in the news. Once, she'd called half a dozen times to tell me she had a thirty percent coupon at Kohl's and didn't want it to expire.

She'd never really respected my work or how far I'd come, still treating me like I had a disposable job that allowed me to leave when I wanted, relax on weekends, or delegate my work when I wished. Her constant refrains echoed through my mind.

I don't understand. Aren't you the boss? Why can't you take some time off?

I grabbed my phone and typed out a text. **Busy now. Call you later.**

I got back to work and shortly thereafter Adam came in. His curly brown hair was a bit mussed, and sweat gleamed on his forehead. "We have a problem," he announced, crashing down into the chair.

"You decided you're too fancy to work on branding Lexi's Lemonade," Layla teased, used to Adam's

dramatics. The man was a bit over-the-top but a genius when it came to creating click-worthy social media campaigns.

“No. The IG ad for Dallas Jeans is tanking.” He slid his iPad down the table with it opened to the screen. “Consumers hate it. We need a rebrand.”

My heart rate rammed into a full gallop. I had no time for any failures that weren’t scheduled. “It’s still brand-new,” I said, glancing down at the ad. “Maybe we need some organic growth first.”

Adam shook his head. “Not with this. It’s only going to get worse. I have a few suggestions on what to tweak, Frannie. I know you’re busy so I can work with Layla and get it handled.”

“No problem,” Layla said. “I can make the time.”

I hesitated. I was already overworked and overscheduled. I should just let Adam and Layla take care of it, but the Dallas Jeans ad was something I’d helped create. If it bombed, I needed to be involved in fixing it. “No, I can work with you.”

Kate blinked. “What about Lexi’s Lemonade? We don’t want to get behind. It may be better to let them handle it, Frannie.”

I squared my shoulders. “I know the client best, including Perry’s preferences. I’ll stay late a few nights and knock it out.”

Kate and Layla shared a glance but held their tongues. They’d been pushing for more control, advising me to hire more people and for me to work lead on fewer clients. I knew they were trying to help and that they craved more responsibility, but I still had an uneasy feeling that if I stepped back too much, they’d eventually decide they didn’t need me.

I tamped down on the tiny flicker of fear coursing through my bloodstream. That annoying, buzzing voice whispering the million ways I could fail. My entire reputation was based on running F&F Advertising and thriving at every level. I’d finally managed to secure some national-brand clients and needed to show they’d made the right decision in placing their dollars with a smaller firm.

Why did it feel like the entire world was waiting for me to fail? Successful women were still looked upon as dangerous, and one big mistake was gleefully gossiped about, with news of it spreading like

wildfire.

I cleared my throat and took a deep breath. “Now, let’s get to work,” I said firmly.

They didn’t protest.

Hours later, I collapsed in my office and buzzed Jessica. “Any messages?” I asked.

She rattled off a few I could put off until tomorrow. “Your mother called twice. Said you’d promised to call her back.”

I groaned, rubbing my temples. “I forgot, thanks. Go on home. Thanks for staying.”

“No problem. Have a good night, Frannie.”

My stomach growled. I reached inside my desk drawer and nibbled on a Kind bar. Better get it over with. I dialed her number.

“Hi, Mom. Everything okay?”

“You never called me back.” Her voice held a slight sting designed to instill guilt. It worked. “You weren’t at Allegra’s track meet.”

Shit.

My daughter’s schedule was as jam-packed as mine, with tennis matches and races across the county. I’d missed the last few and swore I’d be there for the invitational. Her time was stellar and she had a good chance at getting a scholarship for both her running and her grades. This meet had been key. “I’m sorry,” I said with a sigh. “We had a crisis here at work, and I literally just got to my office. Why didn’t she call or text me?”

“Because she wanted you to remember on your own.”

The whiplash of guilt stung deeper. Another test I’d failed. How could I be a rock star at my job and such a loser at home? “What was her time?”

“I forgot but I wrote it down for you. She beat her record in the eight hundred and got a medal for first in the fifteen hundred.”

Pride flashed through me. “That’s amazing. Is she there with you?”

“No, she went home on her own. But I wanted to invite you both to dinner this week. Allegra wants to try out a new dish and we’ve had no family time together. How about Wednesday?”

I closed my eyes, resenting the requests she threw at me. She had nothing on her schedule and assumed I should jump at any invitation. “I can’t, Mom. I’ve got a hell of a week coming up with this new campaign, and I need to work late.”

An impatient sigh huffed over the line. My nerves prickled with annoyance. “Again? This is a difficult year for Allegra, and she needs you home, at least for dinner. Plus, I can’t freeze the grass-fed beef since it’s been in the refrigerator and I got it specifically for you. It’s expensive.”

“Then make it for yourself, Mom. It has less hormones so it’s better for your health.”

Mom snorted. “I’m too old to care what I eat anymore. Why can’t you come home and eat like a normal person, then go back to the office? At least we’ll have some time with you.”

I ground my teeth, remembered my last dentist appointment, and tried to relax my jaw. My mother had spent her entire life catering to Dad and me, creating domestic chores like a lifeline. And though she always said aloud she was proud of my success, deep down I wondered. Instead of trying to support me through my struggles as a single mother, she turned to her skills as a master guilt-trip artist and exposed all my own crippling doubts. Did she resent my choice to become a career woman? To raise Allegra without a father figure? Or did she wonder what type of life she would’ve had if she embraced more than the four walls of her home?

I’d never know. We rarely got into deep conversations. It was easier to stick to mundane topics and trick ourselves into believing we had a connection—the sacred mother-daughter bond that movies love to exploit in sickening, shallow sweetness. I preferred the truth, even though it sometimes tasted bitter.

“I just can’t. I have endless things to do, and little time.”

“One day you may find there’s no time left, Francesca. And that you gave work more power over you than it should have.”

It always came back to this—I’d never win, no matter what I did or how hard I tried. We viewed the world differently, and she had no interest in trying to understand me. For too many years, I longed for an

acceptance that never came, until I swore I'd stop looking for her approval. The hurt that sprouted from my mother's words was more humiliating than anything.

And still I couldn't stop leaping to my own defense. "I'm sorry if I own and run a profitable, successful company and can't get home for dinner. I'm sorry I'm such a disappointment to your high standards."

"Stop using that tone and putting words in my mouth!"

Oh God, we were going to fight again. And it would take up too much energy and precious time. I drew in a deep breath and focused on keeping calm. "Do you want me to text Allegra and see if she can join you for dinner? I was going to tell her she can invite friends over and order pizza, but maybe she'd like to visit."

I tried to ignore the disappointment in her tone, reminding myself she didn't have a million balls in the air to juggle other than dinner. "I'll text her. You're busy."

I managed to hold my tongue. "Thanks."

"What about Sunday? Surely you have a few hours to be with us on the Lord's day. There's something I need to discuss with you and it's important."

I hadn't been to church since I was fourteen, when I finally declared my independence and refused to go anymore. "Fine, I'll come Sunday."

"Good. Make sure you congratulate Allegra when you see her. She worked hard for that trophy."

The direct hit caused me to wince. She acted like I didn't know how to treat my own daughter. "Of course."

We said goodbye and hung up.

I sagged over my desk. Tension knotted my stomach and squeezed my lungs, compressing my breath. No, I would not allow this to happen again. The last attack must have been a freak occurrence. Too much stress, too little sleep, too many cups of coffee. I had a thousand excuses for the crippling anxiety that had washed through my body last week and drove me to my knees, fighting for breath. Thank God it had happened when I was alone in my office, where it would remain a secret. But even now, just the thought of another breakdown clenched my muscles in fear.

I closed my eyes, fighting to slow my rapid heartbeat. For a few frantic moments I couldn't breathe, and I tried not to lose it, but then the air hit my lungs and I gulped it down gratefully.

What was happening to me lately? I'd always thrived in stressful situations, but maybe the Lexi's Lemonade account was bothering me more than I thought. Maybe after I put in the necessary hours and secured the campaign, I'd stop having these ridiculous attacks.

Yes, I'd just control it for now. Lately my nights were spent staring up at the ceiling and worrying. My body had begun to rebel, and I had no time for it. Next month, I'd see a doctor and get fixed up. It would all be fine.

I grabbed a bottle of water and took a few sips while my mother's words still churned in my brain. She'd be the first one to crow *I told you so* if she knew about my anxiety attacks and would probably cite my refusal to spend time on my health and appearance as the cause instead of old-fashioned work.

Even at seventy-five, my mother was beautiful, with firm, smooth skin in a gorgeous olive color, thick hair that had once been coal black but had turned to gray, and a trim, lean build that never seemed to thicken, even with her advanced years. She took pride in her appearance and was always tugging at my hair or begging me to wear makeup.

I'd inherited none of my mother's fine traits. My hair was pin straight and limp, so I'd begun wearing it short early on, with a shaggy, fashionable cut. Even my attempts at highlighting failed at coaxing the dirty blond strands to sparkle, but I invested in a top-notch stylist so at least the color had some depth. My eyes were plain brown. Not brown with gold specks, or an inky depth to give them more mystery. Just mud brown.

Mostly, I didn't care. I realized early on that not having my mother's beauty was an advantage. I had good skin and bone structure, thank God, enough to achieve a passable pretty. Since I was average height and weight, not too curvy or too skinny, I was able to dress in a wide variety of ways depending on the person I chose to reflect. I wasn't beautiful enough to cause men concern or women jealousy, and not unattractive enough to feel awkward. I built on my advantages young, learning what to accent and what to tone down, from my wardrobe to my speech, until I'd perfected the look of a female executive going places.

Marriage had never been on my radar, not when meaningful, exciting work, money, and travel were at stake.

Dad would have understood. Would have cheered from the sidelines to see his only daughter reach the pinnacle of success in this cutthroat business. He'd always been driven to succeed like me and spent most of his hours building his own business. Dad moved from general construction to building homes, until he'd created a small team and cultivated a stellar reputation. He used to tell me to stay on budget and stay on time and clients would pour in.

Mom consistently complained about Dad's absence and long work hours, but she was the only one who didn't understand. I knew he wanted to give me better opportunities. He introduced me to a glimpse of a world with no borders if I was smart enough and driven enough to leap for it. He used to tell me I was just like him—born with stars in my eyes and wandering feet, always looking for more. He never tried to curb my dreams or make me feel like I wanted too much. He understood.

God, I missed him. His death was a bitter loss I still lingered on, especially late at night when there was no one there to soothe the doubts. The heart attack had taken him hard and fast, but the worst of the grief was the knowledge that he'd never been able to hold his granddaughter. He would've doted on Allegra.

The thought made me reach for my phone to call my daughter.

When she didn't answer, I knew she was mad at me.

I'd broken another promise.

The familiar guilt slammed through me, but I took the punch like a seasoned boxer, already comfortable with the thousands of ways I'd failed at being a mother. It was so much easier when she was a baby. Sure, the lack of sleep and endless exhaustion sucked, but coming home to her precious giggles and obvious adoration made up for all of it. I was able to give her what she needed most of the time. A bottle. A blanket. Changing her diaper. Playing. Food. It was like a checklist to follow that guaranteed a high degree of success and boundless love.

Now?

I couldn't remember the last time she didn't look at me with utter naked resentment. As if I'd personally done everything I could to ruin her life. No matter what I tried—discipline, being her friend, ignoring her

dark moods, offering advice—it was all wrong. And not just a little. Every day my failure was evident in her venom-dripping voice or the cold judgment in her big brown eyes, which had once offered reverence.

She'd always been extremely close with my mother and liked to visit or cook dinner over there. Maybe some extra time with my mother was good for Allegra, especially since I'd been working so much lately. Allegra wouldn't be pressured or pushed or grilled—my mother didn't believe in that. At least, not for her granddaughter. She loved to fuss and spoil and pamper, and Allegra adored every moment.

I had to stop worrying about everything so much. I was in a good place, and it had happened under my own drive, discipline, and hard work. Allegra would eventually see all my successes and be proud when she got older. Looking back, she'd finally realize she had more opportunities to make a difference in the world because I pushed both of us.

I refused to have regrets about my choices.

And I refused to fail.