

The NAÏVE
WOMAN

M.L. Lexi

THE SEQUEL TO THE FEARLESS WOMAN

The Naïve Woman

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The sequel to *The Fearless Woman*

Also by M.L. Lexi



The Fearless Woman Series



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M.L. Lexi

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Prologue

ST. BONIFACE's auditorium was packed with proud parents and excited graduates in black gowns waiting for their names to be called to the stage to accept their diplomas. Cell phones held above people's heads recorded videos instantly posted to social media for the world to see.

Cassie Nash's long hair flowed in blonde waves from beneath her cap, and her pretty face was expertly painted for the occasion with muted shades of bronze above the green eyes and pink blush at the cheeks. Her wide, full lips were glossed in ruby-red lipstick.

At twenty-two, Cassie Nash was years older than St. Boniface's graduating class of twenty-seventeen, and her appreciation for the moment surpassed that of her teenage classmates. Taking the diploma Principal Jane handed Cassie, she tightly clamped her hand on the scroll, revelling in her triumph.

A D-student, the decision to drop out of school years earlier wasn't difficult for Cassie to make. Cassie's poor academic marks were part of the reason for quitting high school. Caring for her dying mother, Marilyn Nash, paying the bills, keeping a roof over their heads, and eating ranked higher on the decision-making scale.

Caring for Marilyn demanded all Cassie had in her. Cassie devoted all her time and energy to her mother, and everything else became secondary. Months later, on Marilyn Nash's death, seventeen-year-old Cassie was alone, broke,

and homeless. That was when Mrs. Pyre, Marilyn's boss at the Serenity Nursing Home, and the residents and staff unanimously agreed to take Cassie in. Everyone decided to keep silent about Cassie's moving into a spare room at the retirement home and keep her hidden from the corporate suits. Mrs. Pyre and everyone at the nursing home gave Cassie the support and love a broken, lonely young girl needed.

But all good things must come to an end, and it did for Cassie when corporate questioned why room 822 hadn't generated income for years. Corporate began pressuring Mrs. Pyre and the staff for answers. Mrs. Pyre and everyone at Serenity were family, and Cassie couldn't allow Corporate to threaten their livelihoods and impact the workplace they considered a second home.

Out of options, Cassie left Serenity, the place she considered home, and the people she called family and set off to find Bob Huntley, the man her mother revealed on her deathbed was her biological father.

Bob Huntley wasn't difficult to locate. Bob Huntley was Robert James Huntley Sr.'s only son. Renowned solicitor Robert James Huntley was the man who fought the cigarette companies on behalf of the people whose lives were affected by cancer and other serious ailments and won billions of dollars on their behalf. Robert James Huntley's story was spread on social media and the internet for all to read. Tracking Robert James Huntley's son Bob Huntley was simple for a seventeen-year-old computer-savvy girl.

Cassie's trepidation that Bob Huntley would turn her away was counterproductive. Bob warmly welcomed Cassie and let her into his life when she appeared at his front door. It did not take long for Cassie and Bob to become the family

they both lacked. Cassie and Bob enjoyed one another's company and took care of each other.

But all good things must come to an end, and a few months after their reunion, Bob was diagnosed with glioblastoma multiforme, a lethal brain tumour. Cassie once again found herself losing the only family she knew.

But family didn't have to be a blood connection. Family was those who were there for you when you needed them, the people you connected with. For Cassie, it was Olivia Falco, Bob's long-estranged wife.

"So, will you do it, Olivia? Will you raise my daughter as your own? Will you teach her how to be the type of woman you are? I want her to grow up to be as strong as you are. I want her to be the fearless woman you are." That was Bob's request on his deathbed, and Olivia didn't hesitate to say yes.

From the auditorium's stage, Cassie looked out to the audience and saw the people she now called family cheering. With a huge smile, Cassie waved her diploma in the air. Olivia and her partner, Dr. George Papadopoulos, rose to their feet and loudly clapped. Olivia's sister Lottie, her husband Ken, and their daughters, Juliette and Lexi, whooped as loud as they could. Then there were Sondra and Malcolm, friends extraordinaire, who loudly shouted their support.

Those people were Cassie's family now and as loyal a family as she knew.

After years of death and misery, there were no dark clouds in Cassie Nash's life, only sunshine. Cassie was enrolled in the nursing program in the fall, leading to her dream job. Caring for people is what she was good at and what she intended to do with her life.

But all good things must come to an end, and Cassie's newfound happy life would be upended by the aunt she never met, who believed Cassie was an impostor who wheedled her way into Bob's life and his will for the substantial inheritance she wasn't entitled to.

Part I

The Beginning

We construct our own version of the truth.

—M.L. Lexi

Chapter 1

THE SKY WAS summer blue, and brilliant sunshine fell over the land capped in green where deer, foxes, raccoons, and squirrels scampered. Clear water trickled through the brook, a soothing gurgle. Under the warm breeze, blue jays, sparrows, and orioles flitted through the air before landing on tree branches crowned with budding greenness to chirp in song.

Atop of the green stood the Georgian-style home with a red-brick façade, arched entrance with tall pilasters, and large picture windows. Pristine, sprawling gardens in glorious bloom flanked the home. The house was as impressive as the grounds, which included a paddock, a stable with horses, and a swimming pool. Steeped in history, the Huntley Estate was passed to the generations of Huntley sons until recently when Cassie Nash inherited it from her father, Bob Huntley, on his death.

Cassie lived at the estate with her newfound family, Olivia, George, and Oreo, a black and white Maltese Shih Tzu who thought of himself as human. As part of Cassie's pay-it-forward promise, Sondra and Malcolm lived rent-free in the guesthouse, two hundred yards to the left of the main house.

Olivia walked onto the patio and cleared her throat to get Cassie's attention, who looked miles away. "Freshly brewed," Olivia said, offering Cassie the coffee cup.

Olivia wore jeans, a white tapered shirt, and red patent moccasins. Her shoulder-length chestnut hair was clipped with a black claw. She wore no makeup, and her

Mediterranean olive skin, darkened by the summer sun, had a healthy glow.

Eyes the colour of moss looked up from her trance to Olivia. “Thank you.” Cassie wrapped her hands around the mug, watching the steam curl and dissipate into the hot morning air. Cassie looked summery in white shorts and a sunflower-yellow tank top. Her blonde hair fell around the youthful, tanned face. Her bare feet were propped on the padded rattan ottoman.

“I thought I’d take a break from writing. Are you interested in the company?” Olivia sat on the adjacent chair when Cassie nodded.

Olivia enjoyed this time of day when Sondra, Malcolm, and George were at work, and all was peaceful, calm, and still. Olivia loved each of those people from the depth of her heart, but sometimes, she needed to check her mind out of the moment to gather her thoughts before sitting down at her desk to write.

Olivia’s recently published eBook, *The Fearless Woman*, was getting less than the anticipated traction, but it was early days. She had scaled many mountains in her lifetime, and slow sales of her first book wouldn’t discourage her from fulfilling her writing dream and telling the many stories she had in her.

“You looked to be deep in thought.” Olivia mimicked Cassie and stretched her legs, setting her feet on the ottoman.

Cassie quietly stared into the dark liquid in her coffee cup momentarily. “Just thinking about stuff.”

“Care to share? I’m a good listener.” Olivia’s eyes followed a pair of hawks majestically sail across the sky and disappear among the thicket of tall pine trees.

“I was thinking of Daddy. We used to sit here in the afternoons. Him with a glass of Johnny Walker, me with a cup of coffee and a cigarette, and take in the view and talk.

We had a lot to catch up on.” Cassie took a sip of her coffee because it was in her hand.

“Yes, I imagined you did.” Olivia took a swig of the coffee in her hand.

“During one of those afternoons, he told me about his illness and you. He told me what he did to you and George. How he came between the two of you because of the shallow, petty man he was, talked you into marrying him, and then proceeded to mistreat you all through your marriage.” Cassie lifted her gaze to meet Olivia’s eyes. “Daddy was very sorry he hurt you.”

Olivia nodded with great understanding. “He made his amends. Because of Bob, George and I came together after all these years.”

Cassie gave Olivia a pointed look. “You love George very much.”

The comment conjured up pleasant thoughts that put a big smile on Olivia’s face. “I do. George was my first love. We were good friends in high school before I fell in love with him. In my opinion, that is the best form of relationship evolution. Connecting with George after all these years and resurrecting those feelings and knowing they’re as strong as they were in our teens is,” Olivia searched for the right word and came up with, “glorious.”

Cassie saw the depth of emotion swaying into Olivia’s eyes as she spoke and envied her. She hoped to one day feel the love for a man Olivia felt for George. Cassie was young, and there was time to meet her knight in shining armour. Right now, there were more significant concerns crowding her mind.

“But I don’t think thoughts of George and me was what filled your thoughts when I came out,” Olivia said.

Cassie shook her head. “Thinking about Daddy led me to think of Aunt Michelle.”

Olivia’s grip on the handle of her cup closed tighter. “What about Michelle?”

“She’s the only family I have left, you know?” Cassie glanced sideways at Olivia, then away when she saw her face turn serious.

Olivia hadn’t kept her dislike for Michelle Huntley a secret the times Cassie brought her up, and the ireful glint in Olivia’s eyes told Cassie today was no exception.

“George, Sondra, Malcolm, Oreo, and I are your family, Cassie. You don’t need Michelle in your life to complete you.” Olivia jumped in to say when Cassie started to open her mouth to finish her thought.

By the elm tree, Oreo rose on his hind legs and barked at the squirrel clinging to its trunk, staring him in the eye and daring him to follow. Oreo did not follow. It wasn’t how he rolled. Instead, Oreo did what he did best, he plopped his butt on the grass and gazed soberly at his nemesis.

Cassie put her coffee cup on the table between her and Olivia’s chair. “I know, and I love all of you, but Aunt Michelle is....”

“Not the type of person your father was. At least not the person he was toward the end of his life.” Impending death affects the human psyche in extraordinary ways, Olivia thought. “Michelle is,”—a ginormous bitch without a conscience—“a strong woman, made from Huntley stock.”

Cassie gave Olivia a curious look. “So am I, and I’m not mean or hard, am I?”

Olivia’s hand closed over Cassie’s. “Of course, you’re not, honey, but your DNA is half your sweet mother’s, and you weren’t bred from birth to be a Huntley as Michelle was.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Cassie’s eyes were calm, but her voice was laced with passion.

“All I’m saying, honey, is that you don’t know Michelle as I do. She’s not a nice person.”

“I know she’s my aunt, and her sons, William and Harry, are my cousins.” Despite her troubled thoughts,

Cassie's lips curved into a soft smile when Oreo charged onto the patio and straight to her. "Tired of that teasing squirrel, are we?"

Oreo barked, jumped onto Cassie's lap, and settled in for head scratches.

"I don't even exist anymore for him, do I? If you recall, mister, you carry my surname," said Olivia. Oreo yawned at her. "Thank you for that."

"He's just tired." Cassie took Oreo's face in her hands. "He's had a busy morning, haven't you?"

Oreo's tongue lolled out in a canine grin, and Cassie rubbed his ears and gave his fluffy head well-deserved scratches.

"Yes, eating, soaking sun on the patio, and provoking head scratches is exhausting," Olivia said.

Cassie let out a soft smile and fell silent for a few seconds. "I want to meet Aunt Michelle, her husband Jackson, and my cousins William and Harry."

"I see." Olivia remained stone-faced, her eyes focused straight ahead at the roll of green that stretched as far as the eye could see.

Only months ago, Cassie was homeless, and now the magnificent home she lived in and the twenty acres of land before her were hers, along with the fifteen million dollars Bob left her in his will. And Michelle Huntley wanted to take it all from Cassie.

By Michelle's reasoning, Cassie had wheedled her way into Bob's life and talked him into believing she was his daughter. Michelle made it clear in her emails to Olivia that she didn't believe Cassie was a Huntley, let alone Bob's daughter. Her boys were Huntley through and through, and the Huntley Estate and the millions Bob left Cassie belonged to them.

Chapter 2

FROM THE OPEN bathroom door, steam mushroomed in a white cloud into the bedroom. The sweet smell of George's Irish Spring soap scented the air. "I think it's time to tell Cassie about the threatening emails you've received from Michelle over the past few months, Livy." George shut the water off and reached for the towel on the bar. "You've managed to keep Michelle in check, which has greatly impressed me. From the tenor of her emails, the woman sounds like a she-devil."

"She is that and more." Olivia removed the mounds of pillows on the bed.

Outside was a dark background with a bright, round moon. In the beams of moonlight, shadows lurked, and the night sounds filled the stillness.

"As formidable as you've become, you and I know you can't hold her off forever. Sooner or later, Michelle will make good on her threat to strip Cassie of everything Bob willed her." George wrapped the towel around his hips and walked to the vanity. He wiped the steamed mirror with his hand until he saw his reflection.

"I know, and the property and money aren't even the issue. It's not as if she will end up homeless again. I still have my house. We can move back when the lease for the tenants occupying it expires." She transferred the pillows to the bench at the foot of the bed.

"And I still have mine," George reminded Olivia.

"I'm mostly concerned about Cassie getting hurt and disappointed by the adults in the room. Not to mention,

become jaded by the selfishness of the people you look to as a family.”

“We’re her family.”

“We are, but with Bob’s death, Cassie feels disconnected and seems to need a familial connection.” Olivia stopped to think how she’d feel if she didn’t have her sister Lottie when her mother and father died. Olivia could sympathize with Cassie, but Michelle was not the type of family a lost girl in search of familial bonds needed to turn to. “Cassie’s too young for so much heartache. She’s naïve and has created this fairy tale notion of Auntie Michelle in her head.” Olivia air-quoted the words. “Cassie will be devastated when she finds out the truth about the woman Michelle is and what she wants to do to her.” Goddamn entitled Huntley’s.

The bedroom was as large as the ground floor of the childhood home Olivia left when Cassie asked her to move in with her at the Huntley Estate. When she and George moved in, Olivia made changes to the bedroom to make it homey and hers. A light tan colour to make the space warm and airy and blend with the brown striped marble stone with the embedded rectangular gas fireplace, the room’s focal point, replaced the burgundy walls. The floor was dark maple, and white lace curtains that billowed in the light breeze flowing into the room replaced burgundy damask. The bed was king-size with the most costly memory foam mattress Olivia found—one of the few luxuries she treated herself to with the millions Bob left her.

“The truth often hurts, but Cassie needs to know the woman she’s determined to call aunt is committed to stripping her of her inheritance and hurting her as much as possible.” George picked up the razor to trim the day’s stubble.

Olivia stopped folding the bedcover to the foot of the bed and bit the inside of her cheek while she rolled the idea of telling Cassie all through her head.

Michelle's emails to Olivia had become more threatening in the past few months. Olivia fought back and managed to stave off Michelle, but as George said, the lawsuit was an inevitable reality that would come sooner than later. Cassie had to be told.

But Cassie had only now found happiness, and Olivia wanted her to enjoy the moment for as long as she could. Telling Cassie her aunt planned to contest the will to seize everything she inherited from Bob wasn't the type of news a young girl who had recently buried her father and, not long before her mother, needed.

"Of course you're right, but..."

"No buts, Livy. It's time Cassie's told what you know. Especially as she's intent on getting to know Michelle, Cassie needs to know what she's up against." George splashed a light layer of aftershave on his face. "Better to know the truth now, from you, than have her find out through serendipity."

"I'll think about it."

Understanding that was code for "we've exhausted the topic," George closed the conversation with a perfunctory, "You do that."

Olivia knew George was right, but she knew he wouldn't push her. The woman was as stubborn as a mule when she set her mind, and no amount of urging would move her. Then, a strong backbone was one of the traits George loved about the new Olivia.

"Are you coming out here any time soon? I have a bottle of champagne on ice that needs popping." Olivia dabbed *Signorina* perfume on the back of her earlobes, neck, and wrists. She smoothed the white lace babydoll, a gift from Sondra because Olivia was a prude, and a man needed eye candy to rev his motor.

Olivia twisted and turned in front of the dresser mirror. Olivia liked what she saw. She had lost ten of the thirty excess pounds she'd put on over the years. At fifty-five,

losing weight was more challenging than she remembered. There were light smile lines at the corners of her mouth and gentle crow's feet at her eyes, and she touched her face with concealer and pink lip-gloss. Her hair was a shiny chestnut, thanks to a very talented hairdresser.

"I'm coming." George slid on the pink boxers with the words **HOT FOR YOU** in bold black letters on the front—a birthday gift from Sondra.

George looked at himself in the vanity mirror with a slow, curving lip. Only Sondra dared to give a man such an outlandish undergarment, but George had to admit they had come in handy to convey his thoughts when the mood struck.

George stepped out of the bathroom wearing nothing but the boxers. Crossing his arms, he leaned a shoulder against the doorframe. "You hot for me?"

His pale body could use the sun, but as Mount Sinai Hospital's Chief of Neurology, George's schedule didn't permit the leisure time to sunbathe. His short dark hair was slicked back, still damp from his shower. His freshly trimmed stubble traced a strong jawline. Medium height, George was as fit as a man in his mid-fifties could be. And he was all hers.

Olivia snorted a laugh. "Always," she said, walking toward him. She smelled gently of her perfume and looked like a hot virgin in the short, lacy nightgown. And she made the room brighter, George thought. "Are you hot for me?"

"I am so hot for you." George gave her a mischievous smile that made her smile, and when she did, his heart did a quick gallop.

In a low, breathy voice, Heart's Alone flowed from the iPad. The only light in the room came from the Tiffany lamps on the night tables on either side of the bed and beams from the bold and big moon glowing outside the window.

Olivia pulled back from the embrace and looked George in the eyes. "I'll talk to Cassie when the time is right. I promise."

George levelled his dark eyes on Olivia's sea-blue eyes. "I know Cassie is like a daughter to you. She is to me as well. Whatever you decide, I'm here for you. If you want to take Michelle down, I'll support you on that, too."

"I know you will, but I must do this my way."

"I know you do. All I'm saying..."

Olivia brushed her lips to George's to silence him. "You know how you only told me about your institutionalized wife and that you're still married and would have to remain so out of guilt for her condition only when you were ready? I need to do this when I'm ready."

George's brow winged. "Fine." Resistance was futile, and he was hot for her. "You know I love you, Livy,"

"I do, and ditto. Let's stop talking about Michelle and pop that champagne open."

"Let's leave the champagne on ice and move on to more interesting things," George said, his eyes shining with eagerness.

"Why, Dr. Papadopoulos, without as much as a physical, you made a perfect assessment of my condition," Olivia said, reaching for his hand and leading him to the bed.