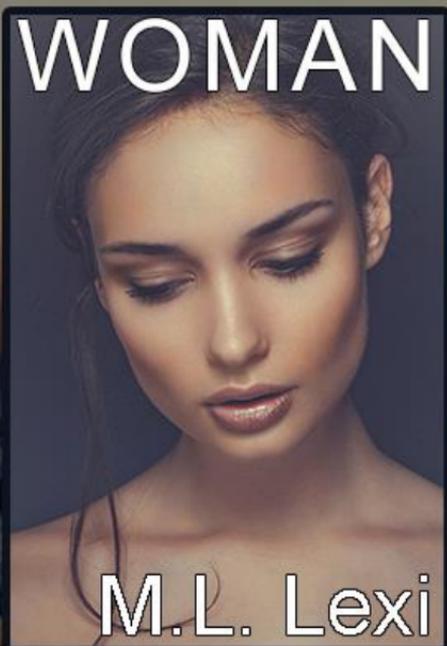


The NOBLE
WOMAN



M.L. Lexi

TRUE LOVE BREAKS, HURTS, HEALS

The Noble Woman

M.L. Lexi

“The Noble Woman” eBook Edition

Published by M.L. Lexi

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History repeats itself, but in such cunning disguise that we never detect the resemblance until the damage is done.

—Sydney J. Harris

Prologue

The Year 1882

AS ROSA GAVE her heart and body to the man she loved, she accepted she would never see him again. Gianni sailed in the morning for France to marry Contessa Beatrice. That the man she loved more than life itself married another out of love for her, she supposed, was some form of consolation.

Unlike Gianni, Rosa was a realist and understood they were from different worlds. The harsh reality that had touched Rosa's life made her see everything in black and white, not through the rosy-coloured glasses Gianni did.

Their families were as different as the sun and moon and clashed like oil and water. His was blue blood through and through. Hers lived off and for the land. There was a line, and Gianni's family would never allow her to cross it. His royal blood would never meld with that of a simple Sicilian farm girl, no matter how fiercely he defied his parents. They would make sure of that.

"I want to make love with you, I do, but this is not a good idea, *amore?*" Gianni said, in the erudite Italian of the aristocrat.

Before he could turn away, she reached for his arm to stop him. "Tonight's our last night together. I'll never see you again, and I want to be with you," Rosa murmured in the farmworker's coarse Italian.

Gianni's shoulder-length black curls spilled over the handsome face with dreamy blue eyes. "Please don't cry, *amore.*" He pressed his face to hers and felt her tear land on his cheek.

"You don't have to do this. You shouldn't do this." He brushed the loose strands of hair from her face.

She was so beautiful, he thought, looking into the jade-green eyes set in a delicate face with skin the colour of burnt honey.

“I want to.” Rosa looked at him with eyes that held innocence and optimism until he came into her life.

In the silence she left, the sea whispered secrets, and crickets sang a symphony. Soft beams of sunlight seeped through the old deserted house’s cracks on the cliff overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. In the flash of white, dust drifted in the air like snowflakes. There was a tattered rug on the wide-planked floor. Walls, once buttery yellow, were washed-out. Frayed lace curtains billowed at the living room window. Colourful bougainvillea dripping from the paint-flaked pergola above them billowed in a soft summer breeze that brought the scents of sea and brine.

It was their secret meeting place where they met under cover of night and spoke of dreams and love.

“As much as it pains me to say, you need to remain true for the ... man you will in time ... marry.” Gianni swallowed the bitter taste of the words. “I don’t want to dishonour you.”

Here was love, she thought, feeling the deepest sense of intimacy she’d felt for him, due in part to his selflessness, and in part, to the feel of his body pressed to hers. “I never want to forget you. I never want you to forget me.”

“I’ll never forget you. Nothing and no one will ever stop me from loving you,” he vowed, brushing his lips over her mouth. “And I have our memories. They have a physical, almost realistic quality to them. They will be with me forever. And I have the stars,” he said, for the nights they were apart, he looked up to see her beautiful face in them.

“Promise me you will never forget me because I will never forget you.” Eyes glistening with tears were full of love for him.

“I promise.” “You’re my one true love. I could never forget you.”

“Then love me tonight, Gianni.” Her eyes swam when she lifted them to his face.

His heart wept for her for him. “I love you too much to dishonour you, *amore*.”

Rosa reached for his hand, brought it to rest on her heart. He felt her heartbeat against his hand and his beat with hers. "I have never needed your love as much as I need it now."

Gianni pulled her closer, let his fingers trail a slow line down the front of her bodice to untie lace. Eyes on her, Gianni slipped the linen dress and chemise away, inch by inch, revealing soft, sensual curves.

His mouth brushed over her shoulders and neck to her lips. Untying the white kerchief around her head, Gianni loosened the long braid and let her dark hair tumble in waves over the milky white shoulders to her breasts.

With one long measuring survey, his eyes took in the long lines, the soft curves. "You are so beautiful. More so than what I had pictured in my fantasies these past six months."

"You thought of me like this?"

"Often. After all, I am a man, but I would never..."

"And I'm a woman." Taking his hands, Rosa pulled Gianni down onto the tattered rug. "Make it special, Gianni. Make it memorable."

Even as he felt something inside him breaking, in the abandoned house where they often hid from the judgemental world that didn't approve of their relationship, Gianni played his mouth over hers. Lingering, he took his time, as much for himself as for her.

His mouth and fingers set off to explore that which would be his only for tonight. He filled her with sensations that set her body aflame and brought her to heights she'd remember forever. Gianni made love with her for the first and the last time.

The pain throbbed in him like a deep, infected wound.

Afterward, her scent, mixed with his floating around them, Gianni held her as the tears flowed down her cheeks. "Please don't cry."

"I don't mean to, but you touching me in this way, I ... I never imagine it would feel as wonderful and beautiful. I didn't think I could love you more than I already do."

Gianni's fingers brushed over her tear-stained cheeks. Sensing the struggle brewing inside her, he looked into her eyes. "I'm sorry for hurting you as I am. I don't want you to

be sad. I want you to be happy and for your life to be full of love and joy. You must find a man who will do so.”

More tears spilled from her wounded eyes. “I love you, Gianni. I love you so much.”

Gianni held Rosa as she cried out her sadness until drained and exhausted she slipped into sleep.

Watching Rosa looking peaceful in sleep, Gianni felt so small beside her. He was a coward. He wasn't half the man to the woman she was.

How could he leave her behind to marry another? Rosa was his world, his life, his air. At the thought of the life he was about to embark without her, he felt adrift, anchorless in a deep, dark ocean. Gianni hoped she'd remember tonight with fond affection.

Gianni regretted being who he was. He hated his family for putting Rosa through everything they had. He resented them for hurting her as they had and keeping them apart. As much as he hated to leave her, it was the only way to put things right because staying would cause her more pain.

Grieving for both, Gianni touched his lips to Rosa's, filled himself with her taste, her scent. Crying silent tears, he took her picture into his heart. “You are the best of me. I love you, Rosa. I always will,” he whispered, setting the envelope by her side.

His cape swirling in the wind as he galloped off into the shadowed night, Gianni never looked back.

ROSA NEVER SAW OR HEARD FROM Gianni again, but she wouldn't soon forget him, for the contents of the envelope changed her life in unimaginable ways. And unbeknownst to her, it would do the same one hundred years later.

Part I

The Beginning

One ordinary encounter can lead
to a life of extraordinary things.

—M.L. Lexi

One

One Hundred Years Later

UNDER CLEAR BLUE skies and the warmth of a January, Sicilian sun, the Alitalia flight landed at the Fontanarossa Airport. The last time Alessandra visited Sicily was at the age of six with her parents. Yet, twenty years later, when the Airbus' wheels connected with the runway, she felt an immediate sense of belonging—a sense of home.

It was just what she needed.

Eyes rolling with the carousel as the luggage trickled out, Alessandra spotted the first suitcase. A large, strong hand from behind reached out, fingers wrapped around the handle over hers.

“Let me help you with that.” He pulled the case off the carousel with ease and set it down at her feet.

He was even more handsome under the bright lights of the terminal. His short chestnut hair was neatly combed back. Dark, thick lashes haloed large, glacial-blue eyes set in a face with a strong jaw. His nose was too large for his face, but that seductive pouty mouth and bewitching dimples made up for it.

“Any more?” he asked, pulling his Samsonite off the belt.

Alessandra pointed to the duffel bag spinning toward them. “Thank you,” she said when he pulled it off the belt.

His brain staggered under the green gaze she flashed his way. “It’s the least I can do for such a pleasant flight companion. This is my card. My contact information is on there. I’m at your service.”

Alessandra read the card. "Let's hope not, Daniel DiBlassio, Attorney at Law." The smile she flashed left him staring at her.

"My office is not far from where you're staying if you need anything, anything at all, I'm a phone call away." Daniel signalled for a porter. "I'd offer you a ride, but you said your aunt's friend is picking you up."

"Yes, so, I better get going. It was nice meeting you, Daniel DiBlassio."

"It was nice meeting you, Alessandra Cuomo." Their hands met, and Daniel held it longer than she expected.

"Well, goodbye," she said reluctantly, taking her hand back.

When Alessandra turned to walk away, Daniel's blue eyes weaved with her as she wound her way through the crowded terminal with the porter in tow. Daniel watched Alessandra hoping she'd turn for one last look before blending into the crowd. When Alessandra finally glanced over her shoulder, Daniel was gone.

As much as she wasn't in the mood for company or talking, Alessandra had to admit she'd enjoyed Daniel's company during the flight. Aside from Aunt Sofia, he'd been her first human contact since her world turned upside down. Daniel helped if only temporarily, to forget. He'd helped her cast aside the debilitating guilt and remorse that had consumed her for months.

And Alessandra couldn't deny he was easy on the eyes. The fit of denim against the tight butt was enough to make a girl giddy. Best of all, he hadn't looked at her with the flirtatious gaze of a man hoping to score a quick roll in bed. As long as it had been since she'd seen that look cast her way or had a man's hands on her, now wasn't the time. To bring anyone into the hell that was her life wasn't fair.

Erasing all thought of Daniel from her mind, Alessandra absently tucked his business card in her jeans pocket and focused on locating her ride.

For the first time, she caught sight of her surroundings. Fontanarossa, the sixth most trafficked airport in Italy, was modern, designed, as everything in Italy was, aesthetically beautiful. Lustrous marble floors and polished steel gave the interior a contemporary look. Its distinctive façade, pyramid-shaped white steel beams and glass, wrapped the building in a layer of transparency and allowed streams of gold from a glowing sun to shower the terminal in bright light.

Alessandra remembered Daniel saying that the allies seized the airport during World War II—the first built in the region—to use as a military airfield. It was hard for her to imagine such a beautiful, harmonious space had a part in so much destruction.

Alessandra wound her way past the woman dressed in black, waving a handkerchief in the air, then lowering it to wipe the tears away. She and the porter skirted the family in saying their goodbyes to the newlyweds setting off on their honeymoon.

Dodging clusters of people and luggage crowding the terminal, she caught sight of the man with the large, doe eyes holding up the placard with her name. He was inches shorter than she was, and his face was weathered by sun and age, had lines that dug deeply.

“Hello, I’m Alessandra Cuomo,” Alessandra said, over the announcements for incoming and outgoing flights drifting from speakers overhead.

“I can see you are Sofia’s *nipotina*,” he said, eyeing her over.

The last time he’d seen her, she barely reached his waist, but there was no doubt she was a Cuomo. She bore the traits handed down through the generations of Cuomo women. The spill of chestnut hair, the prettily sculpted nose, and the almond-shaped green eyes sprinkled with orange were so much like her *nonna*. The wide mouth and full lips could be used as a man-luring weapon, although

she'd rarely used it for that purpose. Cuomo women didn't flaunt their beauty for male trapping. Never, no how, no way.

The one trait he couldn't attribute to genetics was Alessandra's height. She was taller than the generations of Cuomo women before her.

"Yes. I'm Sofia's niece. And you must be *Signore Battista*?"

He nodded. "I am Francesco, just Francesco." Removing his checkered cap, the rough, calloused hand that tilled the land for decades reached for Alessandra's offered hand. "Your *Zia* Sofia, umm, how you say?" Francesco searched his memory for the English translation. "Your auntie, she ask me to pick you up and take you to Villa Cuomo."

Alessandra's lips curled into a soft smile. "Thank you. It's very kind of you."

"Anything for the ah..." Francesco scratched through the puffs of white hair, "the granddaughter of *Signora* Cuomo. She a good friend."

Alessandra's eyes darted away from the red, bulbous nose that took up a great deal of his face. "Your English is better than my Italian."

Francesco's eyes bracketed with deep lines, pulling the thick eyebrows along. "Me and my Maria live in London for five years. We learn English there, but we don't speak it for a long time after we come back to Sicily. You have to be *molto* patient with us."

"I'll be patient if you promise to be patient with my broken Italian."

Francesco flashed her a tooth-gapped smile. "*Va bene, andiamo.*"

Alessandra's luggage loaded into the trunk of Francesco's Fiat, he helped her in before he rounded the hood and took his seat behind the wheel. With the expertise of an F1 driver, Francesco maneuvered his car through the

maze of double-parked cars. Within minutes, he joined the traffic flow that took them onto the highway that ribboned along the coastline.

As the vista opened up, Alessandra caught sight of the rolls of thickly carpeted green hills where goats, sheep, cows, and horses grazed behind split-rail fences under a sun-washed sky. They drove past centuries-old towns. Stone farmhouses and sunbaked homes with flower-strewn balconies lined narrow cobbled streets brimming with children who played with abandoned pleasure.

Green hills dropped off to white sand and the Mediterranean Sea's rich blueness, its waters deepening in colour in the horizon as it melded with the sky as one. Sandwiched between sand beaches, jagged walls of dark stone stretched for miles.

Everything she saw came together to form the quilt of her new home. A spear of the much-needed comfort she'd searched for months arrowed straight to Alessandra's heart.

Awestruck by the beauty coming at her and the history that spoke to her, she remembered her father's stories.

Sicily was home to thousands of small towns, each with its character, food, and unique dialect. The island benefited from the rich culture deposited by many powerful races as the Greek, Roman, German, Norman, and Spaniard, who'd invaded its shores and inhabited it since the eighth century B.C. Alessandra saw their influence in the Baroque and gothic architecture.

Where the road bordered on the wide crescent of beach, Alessandra saw the ribbon of white foam rolling and tumbling along the shore. She imagined that sun worshippers crowded its white sand to soak in the sun's rays during the summer months.

Winding the car through the snaking road, in charming broken English and with great pride, Francesco recounted the island's history. Alessandra absorbed everything

Francesco said and felt a sense of pride and communion with her ancestry.

These were her roots, and she made a mental note to get to know as much as possible about her temporary home.

To Alessandra's disappointment, the fifty-minute drive flew by quickly. Before she knew, Francesco's Fiat bumped down Villa Cuomo's cobbled driveway.

Throwing the car in park, Francesco killed the engine. "Welcome to Villa Cuomo, your new home."

Alessandra was about to tell Francesco her stay was a temporary one when the sight of the small stone home snuggled at the end of the driveway drew her attention.

Francesco retrieved the luggage. "You expect a bigger house, si?" he said, noting the confusion on her face.

"Sort of. I mean, Aunt Sofia called it a villa."

"It was a villa, more *grande*. How you say?"

"Bigger."

"*Si*, bigger, but part of the house go," he burst fingers in the air, "in the war. Your *nonna*, she fills that area with trees and flowers to make things happy." Francesco waved toward the garden where weeds overran the lavender and lilac trees, and white, red, and pink bougainvillea overran the trellis in need of repair.

At the center of the garden, the fountain where water once flowed from the vase at the mermaid's hands sat idle. The stone basin beneath sat dry and choked with browning leaves. Alessandra made a mental note to make it functional at the first opportunity.

"Your *nonno* and *nonna* never get around to fixing the house. First, no money, then children and no money, then it become too late and your *nonna* alone."

Alessandra met the older man's eyes, and a moment of complete understanding and respect passed between them. The thought her relatives had the misfortune to experience the devastation of war firsthand was as foreign as the day felt long. Still, Alessandra's admiration for their

determination and perseverance to come out survivors was boundless.

The Cuomos were survivors, had been for generations, her father told her. They didn't allow the darkness that touched them to define who they were. The garden was a clear symbol of their courage to press on with their lives.

A newfound resolve engulfed Alessandra, and she felt emboldened. For the first time in months, the prospect of a brighter future felt within reach. All the things that placed her in the world stolen from her felt attainable again.

"It can be pretty again. You make it pretty," Francesco said.

"Yes, I'll make it look pretty." Alessandra eyed the eighteenth-century home.

Towering green olive trees shaded the north side of the house from the burning sun and wind. A small balcony wrapped with an iron balustrade with hand-carved leaves jutted from above the front door. Knee-high, terra-cotta pots pitched against it spilled over with cheerful geraniums. Alessandra pictured her *Nonna* Teresa tending them.

The home's limestone façade was sunbaked golden. A heavy wooden door looked as old as the home it guarded. A pathway next to the house sloped to the field that spread for miles and burst with rows and rows of grapevines.

"Under there, you find the key." Francesco pointed to the mat on the stoop.

Alessandra fished the key, and setting it in the brass lock, opened the door to creaks and groans from hinges pleading for oil. Alessandra made a mental note.

The interior of the home was quaint and clean. Although bearing the scars from years of use, walls were washed in taupe and the tiled floor sparkled. Sunlight speared from the picture window lighting the room bright. A black, wrought iron staircase wound up to the second floor, and the kitchen was beyond the living room.

Antique oak furniture, older than her, was polished to a gleam. The couch and chair, upholstered in charcoal damask, were draped in a white and brown hand-crocheted throw.

Above the sofa, oil paintings of gardens and seascapes in bright colours that crowded the wall caught Alessandra's attention. The canvasses, a wash of bold and vibrant colours, were eight by ten inches in simple wooden frames. One depicted the home and land around Villa Cuomo. Others portrayed grapevines, while another was of a moonlit garden vibrant with colour.

The exquisite oil painting of a stately villa surrounded by acres of land boasting thousands of grapevines caught Alessandra's eye. It was the larger canvass of the bunch. Skirting the estate were miles of golden sand that verged on blue water. Inscribed at the bottom right-hand corner were the words *Mea Domus, Est Tua*. She made a mental note to find out what the Latin caption meant. Running her fingers over them, she felt as if she was touching the past—her past.

"Your *nonna*, she paint." Francesco managed a smile when he caught Alessandra eyeing the framed oils.

"She was very skillful with a brush," Alessandra said, wishing she'd inherited her grandmother's creative flare.

"Your *nonna*, she love to paint, and she very good, but I tell her she no Leonardo." Francesco's voice drifted from the top of the stairs.

"You mean, da Vinci?" Alessandra traced a finger over the paintings and felt a connection.

Francesco called out from the bedroom. "*Si*, he my favourite painter." Heels clattered against steel when he started down the stairs. "Your luggage is in your *nonna*'s bedroom. La prima porta, ummm..."

"Yes, first door," she jumped in when he went thoughtful.

Francesco nodded. “You relax, and I pick you up in three hours, at nine. My Maria, she make you dinner.”

Alessandra’s eyes formed into an apologetic smile. “I’ve troubled you enough for today, Francesco. Right now, all I want is to take a hot shower and get to bed. There is hot running water in the house, isn’t there?”

“You have hot water, gas, electricity. See?” He flipped the switch on the lamp, making it bloom with light.

“I’m sorry about dinner, but it’s been a long day.” Alessandra stifled a yawn.

“Is no trouble. My Maria, she love to cook. Best food in Sicily.” Francesco brought the tips of his fingers to his lips and burst them into an air kiss. “We marry forty-five years, and I still no tired of her food or her.” He winked.

The sweet smile on his face and devotion in his eyes stirred memories of her parents. They’d shared the same sentiment for thirty years. In a few months, they would have celebrated their thirty-first.

“If you get hungry, my Maria buy you lots of food. You find in the kitchen. I go now, but I come back tomorrow morning. Cook and shop. It’s all my Maria do.” Francesco mumbled to himself, closing the door behind him.

Alessandra’s eyes scanned the small, century’s old home where generations of her family were born, triumphed war, endured famine, celebrated life, loved, and ultimately mourned death.

Feeling the centuries of history around her, she said, “It’s perfect, absolutely perfect.”

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