

The
**GRIEVING
WOMAN**



M.L. Lexi

LOVE IS THE LIGHTHOUSE OF THE SOUL

The Grieving Woman

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Published by M.L. Lexi

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One

Fall 2002

TODAY WAS THE day.

For weeks, Coco plotted, planned, and lied to make today happen. Now that the day was here, she was regretting it. There are doors that, once opened, can't be closed again.

Tapping the cell phone alarm off, Coco rubbed exhaustion out of her eyes. She hadn't had a decent night's sleep in weeks, and last night was no exception. Sitting up in bed, Coco brought her knees up, pressed her face into them and took a moment to gather her thoughts. As much as she'd mentally prepared for today, she wasn't ready. She felt the knot of nerves in her stomach wind tight.

Coco took a deep inhale. "What have I gotten myself into, Fredo?" Fredo looked at her, brown eyes dripping with affection. She rubbed his ears and kissed his head. "You're a great listener. If only you could talk." She pushed her tired body out of bed, walked to the bathroom, and stepped under the spray of hot water to wash the tension away.

It didn't help.

Coco's hair and body wrapped in Egyptian cotton, she walked past the luxurious creams pioneered by the Swiss dermatologists she worshipped and touted their benefit to her fans for years.

The daily hour-long skin hydrating ritual she'd religiously performed since she could remember seemed futile now. The same went for the five-mile runs to keep her tall body trim and shapely and everything she took to heart to keep her vanity and ego gratified.

Perfection was her trademark, her brand, had been since her teens. Now "was," was the operative word. Everything Coco valued seemed trivial now, but when you were handed life-altering news, priorities changed.

Taking a slow, contemplative look at herself in the mirror, Coco saw the rich green eyes the camera loved shadowed with worry, but she wouldn't bother with make-up. Coco wouldn't bother blow-drying the mink-coloured hair featured in the L'Oréal commercials women envied and spent thousands of dollars to mimic.

Towel drying her hair, Coco haphazardly bundled it into a wet ponytail and walked to her closet. Eyeing the hundreds of designer outfits and shoes she'd collected over the years, she opted for the Dolce & Gabbana jeans, a Chanel silk blouse, and the Manolo Blahnik black patent flats. Some of her glamorous image had to be upheld, she thought.

"Come on, Fredo, let's go get me some caffeine and you breakfast." Coco shrugged into her leather jacket and opened the front door. The air that hit her had a fall chill to it.

Stepping onto her front steps, she hugged her back for warmth and filled her lungs with cool air. It was six a.m., and the world was hushed with dawn, dreamlike. Coco feasted on the green, rolling hills that spread to the horizon. She thought that in her trek around the globe, she'd never seen anything more beautiful.

In the east, framing the landscape, a round, yellow sun arising for the day lit the outgoing dark sky. Trees clad in scarlet and gold painted the escarpment. High above her, Canada geese flew in V formation, their honks amplified by the peaceful silence.

Following the stone path that led to the resort, fallen leaves thickly carpeting the ground crunched at her feet. Coco smelled fall in the soft wind that ruffled the lingering leaves on trees that rose majestically toward the sky.

Fredo dashed ahead of Coco, and she watched him chase after a squirrel who easily outmaneuvered him by jutting up an elm tree.

“Come on, Fredo. Both you and I know you’re not climbing that tree,” Coco called out. Seeing the logic in that, Fredo gave the squired one last “we’ll meet again” stare and darted toward Coco.

The walk from her home to the resort was a short ten minutes but invigorating.

Reaching the resort’s back terrace, she climbed the stairs. Chairs were tilted against the round teak tables to ensure rain drained off, their padding stored for the winter. The colourful pumpkin-orange umbrellas, which shaded their occupants from the sun in the summer months, were collapsed and secured.

Coco waved at the four guests adventurous enough to be up this early. They warmed up in hoodies, tights, and running shoes to get their daily run in before the hiking trail filled up. Most of the resort’s guests found comfort in the warmth of their beds until late morning and preferred to enjoy breakfast in the indoor dining room in front of the crackling fire in the hearth.

“Straight to the laundry room for your breakfast, Fredo. Don’t you dare go into the kitchen and get in Chef’s way, or you’ll become today’s lunch special,” she said before opening the door.

In the pristine kitchen, Chef and her crew were busy with the breakfast preparation. Blenders whirred, juicers squeezed, freshly picked eggs sizzled in pans and knives chopped. The air was scented with baking bread, brewing Toraja Sulawesi coffee, and everything healthy the guests of Covington Spa expected during their ten-thousand-dollar three-day stay.

As steep as the price was, there was an eight-month wait for the privileged and bragging rights for the stay. That had come about from Coco’s marketing ingenuity.

Those privileged enough to land on Covington Spa’s guest list ranged from dignitaries to high-profile celebrities

looking for a few days away from the spotlight. The spa provided guests anonymity, peace and quiet away from the flashing lights, the paparazzi, and fans for the duration of their stay.

Skirting Chef whom Coco didn't dare disturb with idle morning greetings or chitchat—one of Chef's kitchen rules you observed if you cherished your hearing—she crossed to the coffeemaker. Coco reached for the pot resting on the hot plate and filled her cup with steaming, black coffee. In complete silence, Coco walked past Chef through the sliding doors and onto the terrace.

Sipping coffee, Coco felt the wave of fatigue wash over her. She hadn't slept a wink in anticipation of what was coming. Since concocting the plan to deceive Emma and Mary into the reunion at the spa, Coco's nerves were wound as tight as a spring. Her heart hitched at the deception, but there was no way around it.

She'd made the wrong choice for what she thought was the right reason. The consequence of that mistake forced her to fade overnight from her two best friends' lives.

She hadn't contacted them in ten years, and that was deliberate, but she needed them now because those she'd considered friends, when push came to shove, turned out to be profiteers. The people in her life were in it to exploit her for who she was and her money.

Mary and Emma never would. They were stay-with friends. The type she could turn to no matter the hurt she'd caused.

There was pain, a terrible pain radiating out from Coco's chest, and she rubbed the heel of her hand against her breastbone to smooth it out. Blinking back the tears, she prayed things went her way today. Emma and Mary were the only friends she had left and her last recourse.

DR. MARY CARTER-TYRELL WASN'T UP for the spa weekend her husband, unexpectedly, surprised her with.

She'd rather spend the three days at a medical conference furthering her intellect to benefit her intellect and patients rather than her vanity. Not to mention, the one-hour she spent driving to the luxurious spa was time from her life she'd never get back.

Her husband, however, thought otherwise and threatened divorce unless Mary took the weekend respite seriously.

"Pfft, as if you'll find anyone better than me," Mary pointed out to her husband of fifteen years.

"I won't. It's why I need you to take care of yourself. You need the time off. You're wound tight right now, Mary. If you don't do it for yourself, do it for me. I don't want my wife suffering a myocardial infarction."

Mary's frown turned to a grin. Her husband knew medical speak made her heart flutter, and she conceded. "Fine. I'll go."

Adam pressed his mouth to hers. "Good. The relaxing spa weekend will keep hypertension at bay and ensure your systolic and diastolic rates remain at ideal levels."

At that, Mary threw back her head and laughed.

FROM THE GRAVEL DRIVE, EMMA LOOKED around. The gentle roll of green hills dotted with wild purple Salvia. The pageant of autumn colour painted the trees bordering the property and the gardens hemming the house.

The air was ripe with the sounds and scents of rural life. Emma smelled pine, hay, horses, and the freshness brought on by green country living. She heard the bubbling brook, the neighing of horses, the song of cicadas, the call of birds, and the quack of ducks. High above her, she watched the hawk, wings spread wide, as he glided in a staggeringly blue sky.

Emma was a city girl at heart, but she couldn't escape relishing the comforting, rural sounds.

Emma's eyes turned to the rustic but dignified, two-story brick house. Late morning sunlight gleamed off the tall windows accented by white shutters. There were colourful Muskoka chairs and a swing at each end of the wrap-around porch with a heritage railing. From the tongue & groove porch ceiling, hanging flower baskets overflowing with trailing lobelia and pansies dripped with colour. Purple, lemon yellow, and watermelon red chrysanthemums along the flagstone path winked up at the sun.

Emma could see a whitewashed barn encased by a wood fence just as she'd seen in the movies. She heard the muffled sounds of laughter from women mounting horses followed by thudding hooves on dirt.

A directional sign TO SPA pointed to a newer, modern-looking building of poured concrete, steel and glass. Through the sparkling glass, Emma could see an indoor pool with its glistening blue water. Loungers were filled with women lounging the day away. A whirlpool with a visibly rising hot mist overflowed with chatty women sipping tropical drinks with tiny colourful umbrellas.

Signs directed guests to a gym and a hot yoga studio. A salon offered hand and stone massages, mani and pedis, facials, and hairstyling. All the pampering to melt away tension was there for Emma to take advantage of for three glorious days.

Emma felt her tightly wound knot of nerves loosen.

Covington Spa, the chi-chi poo-poo health resort ninety minutes north of her downtown Toronto home that she'd never heard of, was what she needed.

The weekend getaway, courtesy of AZ Travel, which she'd never heard of and at first thought it to be a hoax, couldn't have come at a better time. Emma didn't remember entering any contest. Still, she wasn't about to pass up the luxurious spa weekend retreat. Life wasn't on

her side—it never seemed to be—and she deserved a bit of pampering.

With her canvass carry-on in hand, Emma walked up the walkway and stepped onto the porch. Walking around, the brown-haired Chihuahua sprawled at the top of the steps, eyeing her with a raised eye, her hand dropped to the brass handle. She pushed the front door open. The warmth that came at her was as comforting as the homey interior she stepped into.

Sunlight spearing from the large window above the entry door dappled the lobby's flagstone floor. Wood-beamed ceilings roofed the tall foyer. Reclaimed pine flooring, the colour of honey, sparkled. The floating, winding staircase led to the guest rooms on the second floor. In the fireplace fashioned of river rock, bursts of sparks crackled maple wood and scented the air.

Checking in at the front desk, Emma was welcomed and directed to the living room to wait until her deluxe room was readied. With the thought of the luxurious holiday floating on the brain, Emma walked into the cozy living room with long, plush couches, comfortable side chairs, and thick rugs.

She came to a stop when she saw them. Momentarily frozen and dazed, it took Emma a moment to process.

Aside from the shooting sparks and hissing fire from the hearth, the only sound Emma heard was her unsteady breathing. It had been years since, without explanation, they'd disappeared from her life.

Coco looked every bit the glamorous celebrity she'd become and Mary, the respectable doctor she was. In worn jeans and a T-shirt, Emma supposed she looked every bit the unassuming cashier she was. Emma never felt as if she fit into their swank lifestyle, and today was no exception.

"Hi, Emma." Coco put a smile on her face, walked to her, and embraced her. Surprise coursing through her

system, Emma didn't reciprocate. "Welcome to Covington Spa."

It took Emma a second to associate the Covington name. "You own this spa."

"Yes," Coco said. Her eyes levelled with Emma's now she added, "The free weekend getaway was a ruse to get you here."

"A ruse?" Emma stared blankly at Coco. "Why?"

"I'm wondering the same thing. Why did you feel the need to get Emma and me here on false pretense, Coco?" Mary returned stiffly.

Coco didn't make eye contact and said nothing, but dodging, after all, was her M.O., Mary thought. Instead, Mary and Emma watched Coco swoop to the bar and slop brandy into her glass. The shaking hand that made the ice in her glass rattle when she tossed the drink back made something cold skitter up Mary's back while Emma felt the pleasure of her luxurious weekend dim.

Part I

The Beginning

There is reason and purpose to many of the unforeseen events that crowd our lives.

—M.L. Lexi

Two

Fall 1972

THE ENTIRE SIXTH-grade classroom flicked eyes to the door when it swung open, and the plump, eleven-year-old stepped in. She wore a washed-out oversized red sweater, faded, baggy jeans, and scuffed Mary Jane flats. Her cheeks were flushed red with cold. Her Goodwill purchased plaid jacket was two sizes too big. When she removed her wool hat, her short, chestnut bob sprang to static attention.

Tamping back a smile, Mrs. Ellingham silenced the snickering children. When silence reigned, Mrs. Ellingham introduced Emma to the class as a transfer student from Holy Cross and signalled her to take the empty desk between Jane and Mary.

Feeling the thirty pair of eyes burning into her as she made the interminable walk to her desk, Emma caught her foot on Bobby's outstretched foot. Stumbling forward, Emma's lunch bag flew out of her hands before she fell hard against the tiled floor.

The snickers and laughter amplified and bounced in her head like a tennis ball. It felt like the taunts Emma endured for months at Holy Cross, which her mother hoped she'd escape by transferring to All Saints.

"A new start with new friends," her mother told her, and Emma now wondered if it was possible.

The glacial blue eyes that lifted from the tile floor to Mary's coal-black eyes were wounded and vulnerable. Mary responded to their plea. "Be quiet, all of you," Mary snapped at her cackling classmates. Sprinting to her feet, she helped Emma to hers.

"What's going on back there?" Mrs. Ellingham turned away from the blackboard to face the class, gone quiet.

"Just helping Emma to her desk, Mrs. Ellingham," Mary said as Jane gathered the spilled contents of Emma's lunch bag off the floor. "I'm Mary. This is Jane, my best friend."

"It's Coco." Jane's words came out slowly to ensure they sunk into Mary's head. "Try to remember. A brain the size of the universe, but she can't remember my name."

"Right," Mary said, rolling eyes to the sky. "She's suddenly decided to call herself Coco. Anyway, anyone bothers you, come to me. I'll deal with them." Mary circled a warning gaze around the room.

Not one to be left behind, Jane asserted, "Us, Mary. Us," she said, aiming a warning glare at Bobby and making him choke on the snorted giggle.

That was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. A new start with new friends, Emma thought.

Maybe her mother was right after all.

JANE, MARY, AND EMMA WERE AS different as three girls could be.

Mary was the smart one. She was medium height and lithe. The long-lashed charcoal-black eyes set in a heart-shaped face underscored intelligence. An only child of blue-collar parents, she had a caring, nurturing nature, which destined her to take care of the world.

Emma was the ordinary one. The baby fat she'd been unable to shed depleted her confidence and sense of worth. It defined her. She was the eldest of five. Her mother and father met at Bob's Supermarket, where they'd worked since their teens. As a deli counter slicer and produce stocker, they barely made ends meet.

Unlike Mary and Coco, Emma had few dreams and aspirations. She was a below-average student and awkward, but her heart was made of gold and as big as the universe.

Jane, or Coco as she now insisted on being called, was an average student, but she wasn't an ordinary girl. Coco was outgoing with a larger-than-life personality and beauty pageant good looks.

Her almond-shaped eyes were a rich green. She was tall, and at eleven years old, her body hinted at the stunning woman she was to become.

Coco's parents were killed in a car accident, leaving her an orphan as a toddler. She'd bounced from relative to relative until Aunt Abby rescued her. Aunt Abby—her mother's sister—took her in the day after she buried her miserable, drunken, children-hating husband of twenty years. With the miserable SOB dead and the life insurance windfall from the policy she took out behind his back deposited into her account, Aunt Abby filled her house with Coco's youthful laughter.

Coco became Aunt Abby's world, and she spoiled the girl whom she considered a daughter. Aunt Abby gave Coco the best money could buy. She gave Coco the liberties she never had growing up in a strict religious home.

Coco was taught to pursue her dreams no matter what barriers were put in her way. Aunt Abby drilled into Coco that the idea men were the intelligent, dominant sex was a myth propagated by men who realized women could easily gain power over them with sex.

When Coco's body burst from its teenage cocoon into womanhood, with the wisdom of experience and age, Aunt Abby saw what Coco couldn't.

Coco was a beautiful child, and she was becoming a stunning woman. The type of stunning men tripped over to be seen with. Her shiny, dark curls were as silky as her creamy, smooth skin. Long lashes haloed the jade-green eyes. Her legs were long and slender, and her sprouting breasts were perky and ample.

Secure in her awakening femininity, Coco handled herself with dramatic flair. Aunt Abby felt it was time to further her protégé's education on the art of male manipulation.

No man would manipulate or use her niece as her husband had her. Coco would not play subservient to any man, as the women in her family were taught. She wouldn't repeat her mama's mistakes. Coco would be her own woman and get what she wanted on her terms.

"A woman can get a man to do anything she wants. You are a woman and control the tide of your life as well as any man." Aunt Abby preached like a religious mantra. "I came by that information too late. Don't repeat my mistake," Aunt Abby said often enough until it was etched in Coco's memory.

Coco thrived being centre stage, and acting gave her that, and she told her aunt so. Coco confessed that her first taste of performing, at seven when she played Mary in the school Christmas play, stayed with her. But it didn't

become a life's ambition until she saw Casablanca on the big screen.

The moment Ingrid Bergman sauntered onto the screen looking bigger than life, it was when Coco decided to become an actor. To grace the screen like Ingrid Bergman was what she needed to do.

Coco signed her name on a napkin and handed it to her aunt. "That will be worth a lot one day," she said with the determined look that told Aunt Abby it would be so.

As different as Coco was from Emma and Mary, as contrasting as their personalities were, and as much as they butted heads, it didn't colour their tight bond. The girls vowed they'd be best friends for life and stand by each other no matter what.

Emma, Mary, and Coco celebrated birthdays together. Holidays were spent at one another's house, and their families became intertwined. They spent weekends doing what girls do: talk about boys, mall shopping, pick out one another's clothes, do one another's hair, and learn the finer points of makeup application.

As the years passed, their friendship blossomed, as did their personalities—Coco's mainly.

Coco's beauty, her outgoing and charismatic persona made her the envy of every girl and the desire of every boy. It fueled her ego. Her need to be the center of attention intensified, as did her expectations. The world revolved around her.

Coco didn't understand Mary and Emma's practical nature or *laissez-faire* attitude. Mary's indifference to her appearance boggled Coco. There were days Mary wore the same outfit two days straight.

As for Emma's deliberate dismissal of her appearance, well, that bewildered Coco, who religiously dedicated an hour every morning getting ready for school and an hour at night on a moisturizing regimen.

At an early age, Aunt Abby drilled into Coco appearance equalled the level of success you attained and the quality of men you attracted.

And Coco certainly couldn't understand Mary's commitment to her studies. When did you have any use for science or complicated maths? Adding dollars and cents was simple enough.

But the culmination of a friendship that started years ago was set in stone and more important than anything. For the sake of friendship, Coco overlooked Mary and Emma's flaws.

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