

The
**RESOLUTE
WOMAN**



M.L. Lexi

OWN YOUR DESTINY. DON'T LET IT OWN YOU.

The Resolute Woman

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Titles by M.L. Lexi

The Blind Woman
The Deceitful Woman
The Forgiving Woman
The Grieving Woman
The Guilty Woman
The Loyal Woman
The Noble Woman
The Unfaithful Woman

The Farfalla Family Saga

The Determined Woman
The Persevering Woman
The Invincible Woman

The Fearless Woman Series

The Fearless Woman
The Naïve Woman

One

IT WAS SIX thirty in the morning, and the world was silent outside. The spring day was flush with an eastern sun that shone brightly through the sliding door glass and bounced off the shiny, cream-coloured tiles. The kitchen, with smooth oak cupboards, quartz countertops, and stainless steel appliances, smelled of baking muffins.

Eighty-year-old Edith Morgan nicknamed Buzzy for her sharp wit on the comedy stage, had already spent an hour baking. Now, with a jazzy tune flowing from the radio sitting on the countertop, Buzzy flitted about washing bowls and putting away the ingredients she had used to make this morning's blueberry muffins.

Buzzy wore her trademark brown Capri pants and a loose teal shirt. She wore gold at her neck, ears, and wrist and a wedding ring on her finger.

At eighty years old, Edith Morgan was relatively unlined and youthful-looking. She was tall and slim with a commanding presence. She had a cascade of short silver hair. Her gray eyes, undimmed by the years, sparkled with the vibrancy and sharp wit that had been her hallmark. The few wrinkles etched around her eyes and mouth were not signs of age but were the delicate brush strokes of the rich and exciting life she led.

On her bed by the sliding door, Carol Burnett, the two-year-old white and tan Pomeranian, lay still. Carol Burnett's head was on her front paws, and she avidly watched the two

squirrels scurry across the fence. Carol Burnett wore a stylish, floral silk Armani scarf around her neck today.

Buzzy's tenant, Maxine Bassett, leaning on the edge of exhaustion, stumbled into the kitchen and sat at the table. Maxine wore pyjama pants, a pink cotton T-shirt, and black ankle socks. Her dark hair had a roll-out-of-bed dishevelled look with strands sticking out in different directions. Maxine's shoulders slumped, and her once vibrant blue eyes carried the weight of countless sleepless nights.

"That goddamn dog kept me awake for most of the night. They let him out to the backyard, or his outhouse, at eleven thirty p.m., at one seventeen, and three thirty-one in the fucking morning. And as if that was not enough, they let him out at six-goddamn a.m." Maxine's voice was raw with fatigue. "Are you listening to me, Buzzy? Buzzy," Maxine screamed loud enough to get Buzzy's attention.

Buzzy removed her noise-cancelling headphones. "Sorry, dear. Did you say something?"

Maxine reiterated everything she had said with added profanity and summed it up with a frustrated breath.

"Are you sure it's wise to swear as much as you are? One day, you will forget you're not talking to me and let that salty, immoral city language loose on your pious mother and cause her an aneurysm." Buzzy set two cups of coffee, creamed and sugared, on the table with a thump when she noticed Maxine dozing off.

"Christ, Buzzy." Maxine raised her head, resting on the folded hands on the table with a jolt. "Was that necessary?"

Buzzy sat. "That's rather specific timing you tossed out."

The memory of their conversation swam back slowly to Maxine's clouded mind. "Were you not listening? The goddamn dog wakes me up every time he barks, and I have

trouble getting back to sleep, so I've decided to keep a log. How do you manage to get a good night's sleep?"

"I wear them to bed. You should get a set. They're not as uncomfortable as they look and filter out most of the noise."

"One, they're expensive. I don't have Buzzy money. I'm a kindergarten teacher. Remember?" Maxine took a swig of the coffee in her hand for the much-needed caffeine shot. "Two, why should I be forced to wear headphones to maintain my peace of mind at home."

Buzzy nodded in understanding and thought better than to interrupt Maxine's agitated rant when she rose to pace the room.

"You're the landlord. You should speak to our entitled, selfish, inconsiderate neighbours about it and tell them to get the dog to shut the fuck up before I commit a deadly crime. I don't mind the moron dog barking during the day, within reason, but Christ, on a fucking tricycle, they can't think that the dog barking at all hours of the night and early morning is reasonable." Maxine's frayed nerves from months of putting up with the dog's incessant barking were unmistakable in her furious tone.

Maxine's booming voice had Carol Burnett's ears piqued with interest. Quick disinterest had Carol Burnett turning her attention back to the fir "licking squirrels.

"I have spoken to them," Buzzy said. "You have also, and in very colourful language if I recall, to no avail. If Becca and Miles, whom you were very friendly with when they moved in, didn't listen to your animated, very loud, profanity-laced rant, what would you have me do?"

Buzzy rose, walked to the stove when it dinged and shut the oven off.

"You're the homeowner. You carry more weight than I, a lowly basement renter. They will listen to you." Maxine

watched Buzzy transfer the muffin tin from the oven onto the cooling racks. “That goddamn dog is not a seven-pound yapper like Carol Burnett. He weighs seventy pounds, and his bark goes through brick and my skull. I can’t take it anymore, Buzzy. If you don’t do anything, I’ll have to hand in my notice to terminate my tenancy.”

Buzzy stared at Maxine for a moment before her mouth twitched with amusement. “You and I know you’re not doing that.”

Maxine sucked in air and hissed it out. “No. No, I’m not, but only because you’re too generous with my rent, and I couldn’t afford to live elsewhere. “

Buzzy’s comfortable wealth could afford her a sprawling estate, but she chose to live in the red brick bungalow on Strathmore Avenue. The tiny house was Buzzy’s and her husband’s, Mortimer, bought when they were first married and struggled to make ends meet.

Buzzy had renovated the one-hundred-year-old house in the neighbourhood with tall trees, green lawns, and a colourful array of floral gardens with a modern open look. There were windows all around to let the sunshine in. Sleek dark wood floors replaced the fading linoleum. Abstract art hung from tan painted walls. The furniture was soft Italian leather, and the tables were polished maple.

Sheer happenstance or perhaps providence led Maxine to Edith Morgan’s advertisement for the apartment she had for rent. To Maxine’s delight, the apartment was a cozy haven, offering all the comforts a single girl needed: a bathroom, small bedroom, kitchenette, and sitting area. There was a washer and dryer in the room that doubled as a closet. The smell of cut wood and paint still hung in the air. The tile floor shone, and the countertops gleamed. Beyond its newness, the

apartment was furnished and reasonably priced, a plus for Maxine, who did not have a dime to her name.

Maxine found her home in Buzzy's basement apartment and a substitute mother and friend in Buzzy.

"What would you have me do?" Buzzy plated two blueberry muffins and brought them to the table.

Standing at the sliding door beside where Carol Burnett lay, Maxine looked up to the sky. She was happy to see dark clouds heavy with water on the horizon. She hated driving to work in the rain, but the dog was not let out to the backyard on rainy days. She would get a day's respite and hopefully some sleep tonight.

"Call Animal Control and submit a complaint. Talk to Miles and Becca's parents when they visit." Maxine sat at the chair she had vacated when Buzzy signalled her to sit.

"Oh, honey, you're such an idealist. Where do you think they learned their entitled behaviour? I'll call Animal Control later today, but everyone knows they're the least effective governmental department. Their specialty is scraping dead raccoons and skunks off the road. Anything beyond that requires applying thought and logic, which is short in supply where Animal Control is concerned. They'll tell me the dog has every right to bark as long as it's not incessantly and often."

"But it is incessant and often," Maxine snarled.

"You need to calm down, dear. Being young does not guarantee that you won't experience a coronary event." Buzzy sat. "Animal control will always put the animal's well-being above that of humans. Eat the muffin. It's warm. As you like it."

"I can't get a good night's rest. I'm exhausted. I can't concentrate. I'm always irritated, stressed, and anxious. It's not fair to my kids. Christ! It's not fair to my sanity."

Frustration edged into Maxine's voice. "I'm cratering here, Buzzy."

"I'll speak to Becca and Miles again." Buzzy tossed a few pieces of muffin to Carol Burnett when she strolled over. "But you know what they're going to say."

"Yeah. 'The idiot dog is a dog,'" Maxine pronounced it dwog as Becca did. "'And dogs bark and have to go potty when they must, regardless of the time of day or night. I miss Rose and Henry. They were great neighbours, quiet and uneventful. I wish they never sold the house to Becca and Miles. I wish I had the money to buy the house when they put it up for sale.'" Maxine refreshed her cup of coffee, and Buzzy's when she held up her cup. "Their parents must be so proud of the self-centred and inconsiderate people they've raised."

"They are. They've raised them to their image. And isn't that what you said to them during your last outburst?" Buzzy tossed Carol Burnett another piece of muffin and waved her back to her staring spot.

Maxine nodded. "They both stared at me with the same dumb fuck look their idiot dog does."

"The dog's name is Bobo, and let's not blame him for his parents' stupidity."

Maxine rolled her eyes dramatically. "I know that. He's still an idiot."

"You really hate that dog," Buzzy said.

"I don't hate the dog. Maxine rested her head on her updrawn knees. "The dog is collateral damage to the detestable, thoughtless owners who believe the world revolves around them and to hell with their neighbours."

Maxine's lips curved into a pleased smile when the clouds opened, and the rain fell thickly. Bobo would not go out to roam on wet soil in the backyard. Fingers crossed, the

rain would persist all day as the weather network predicted, and Maxine would get a good night's sleep tonight.

A run to burn the calories of the second celebratory blueberry muffin Maxine planned to have was in store.

Part I

The Beginning

One simple act can lead to a marked change in your entire existence.

—M.L. Lexi

Two

MAXINE SWAPPED HER pyjama pants for gray leggings, a pink tank top, and a hooded jacket and set off on her run under the wall of rain that came down from dark skies. The harder the fall of rain, the better, Maxine thought, hoping to wind her anxiety and anger down before heading off to work.

“The girl is wound too tightly.” Buzzy stood at the window with Carol Burnett cradled in her arms and watched Maxine push through the rain. “Imagine the best option she has to relieve her tension is exercise. What the girl needs is a good man and a good lay.”

Carol Burnett yapped her agreement.

Maxine Basset was too responsible, and that made for an average life.

Maxine Basset was a twenty-six-year-old kindergarten teacher who never missed a workday. Buzzy boasted that Maxine was the ideal tenant: quiet, pleasant, headache-free, and she paid her rent on time.

Maxine did not come home drunk. She did not bring home strays, which women her age tend to pick up at bars for one-night stands. Maxine was more concerned with her personal growth than sexual gratification. Fit and flexible Maxine, at her sexual peak, had gone years without sharing a bed with a man.

“Maxine is a lovely girl, but she is as persnickety with her love life as her daily goings-on. She renews her driver’s license months before its due date to give herself what she calls system failure time. But then, which one of us doesn’t have our quirks? Hmmm?” Buzzy raised her brows to stress the point to Carol Burnett, who she had set on the sofa

cushion beside her. “Beyond that, in the four years she’s been my tenant, we haven’t seen a man in her apartment. She’s one frustrated young lady.”

Carol Burnett lapped her muzzle once and yawned.

“It’s not as if she can’t attract a man. She’s a good-looking girl.” Buzzy ran a hand over Carol Burnett’s fur as the rain pattered on the windows

Maxine was medium-height, with striking blue eyes concealed behind the thick lenses of her black-rimmed glasses. Her mouth was wide and generous, her cheekbones high on an oval face darkly tanned under the spring sun, and her nose had aristocratic markings. She was lean and athletic due to the five-mile runs she did three times weekly.

“Maxine could leave an impression on a man if she saw herself as anything other than ordinary and made an effort, but she doesn’t bother to do so.”

Carol Burnett let out a bark.

“Yes, I know she won’t listen to us, Carol Burnett.” Buzzy reached for the television converter and tuned it to the news.

Rain, murder, and mayhem were the news of the day.

“She wears those reserved outfits: buttoned-up shirts, knee-length skirts, conservative dresses, and loafers. Grant it they’re befitting a teacher of young, impressionable students. Still, she doesn’t have to dress like that after hours. She also doesn’t have to wear muted makeup. Imagine how great she would look if she upgraded from the simple touch of rouge on her cheeks, pink gloss on the lips, and a dusting of bronze eye shadow bought at the local Dollar Store. God, if I had her stunning looks, I would milk it until dry.”

Saving money above her appearance was high on Maxine’s list, and Buzzy could not change her mind.

Buzzy could not talk Maxine into having her long, wavy, charcoal-dark hair cut and styled by a professional rather than those butchers at the local hair-hacking shop. Maxine would instead tie her hair into a ponytail.

Maxine ate the same lunch daily: ham and cheese on white toast with tomato and lettuce. She did not add mayo, as it added too many calories. Maxine had a banana for her morning break and a delicious red apple during her afternoon break. The rare time Maxine treated herself, she substituted a multi-grain bar for the apple.

“Predictability and restraint are Maxine’s middle names. She holds out for the perfect man and has been man-less forever, it seems. For Christ’s sake, she drinks tap water, not coffee, not because it’s healthy but because it’s cheaper. One positive, I guess, is that she’s accumulated an impressive amount of money in her Buy-a-Home account over the past four years. It won’t be long before she has her down payment for her dream home. I know because I’ve seen her scheduled deposits on the Excel file she keeps on her laptop computer. Really, Maxine, even your password, m-a-x-i-n-e, is predictable,” Buzzy said to Carol Burnett, who had slid into sleep.

Maxine drove a second-hand Honda, which had too much mileage and required frequent maintenance, but the insurance was reasonable, and the car got her from point A to point B—most days.

Maxine loved her job and the children who, year after year, fell under her care, but when she got home, reality slapped her in the face. She was average and boring. Her life was average and boring.

“Maxine needs a change to her uninspiring life. It’s why she’s so tightly wound, and you and I, Carol Burnett, will be instrumental in that change.” Carol Burnett’s response was a loud snore. “Sure, I’ll do the leg work, and I’ll get to it now,” Buzzy said, picking up the telephone and making the necessary calls.

I’s had to be dotted, and T’s crossed.