

The GUILTY
WOMAN

M.L. Lexi

GUILT COMES IN MANY FORMS

The Guilty Woman

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Coming Soon

THE UNFAITHFUL WOMAN

THE COMPLETE WOMAN

THE DETERMINED WOMAN

THE FORGIVING WOMAN

THE NOBLE WOMAN

“The Guilty Woman” ebook Edition

Published by M.L. Lexi

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Prologue

March 1948

THE AIR WAS raw and thick with death.

A river of blood, still red and fresh, flowed from the man's smashed skull soaking and spreading on the ivory carpet like a Rorschach inkblot. Sofas, chairs, tables, and walls were splashed red. Pearl buttons from Francesca's silk blouse lay scattered in the pool of red, looking up like lifeless eyes, staring, judging, condemning. The coffee table Francesca had fallen back on when she'd managed to escape his grip lay upturned. Shards of crystal and glass from shattered tumblers and bottle sparkled like diamonds on polished wood.

The scene before her belonged in a horror movie, not in her living room, Francesca thought as she violently threw up her dinner.

For Francesca's sake, when the sickening smell of warm blood slammed into Father Matthew's gut, he didn't let emotion slip into his eyes or his voice. He'd keep the nerves kicking in his gut like sharp fists making the sour waves of nausea rise in his stomach at bay. With a calm, Father Matthew didn't feel he set the blood-covered candleholder in his hand on the end table before lowering two fingers to the man's neck.

"He's dead," Father Matthew, confirmed when he didn't feel a pulse and wiping his bloodstained hands on his cassock, reached into his pocket for his stole. Kissing it, he draped it around his neck. "*In Nomine Patris*," Father Matthew said, piously crossing himself and launching into prayer.

Watching the ritual performed over the lifeless body, made the taste of sickness claw at Francesca's throat again. She swallowed hard to prevent herself from heaving whatever she had left in her stomach as she stared at her bloody, trembling hands.

"*Deus animae meae miserere.*" Father Matthew begged God to have mercy on his soul before blessing the body and rising to his feet. "It'll be all right, Francesca."

Reeling from the violence she had endured moments ago under the dead man's hands, Francesca's voice trembled when she said, "How's this going to be all right? This is never going to be all right. He's dead on my living room floor." Francesca's eyes shifted to the lifeless body, willing it to come to life. When it didn't, she was glad he lay face down. As much as she believed his demise was the outcome he deserved, Francesca couldn't look into the eyes of death. "What am I going to do?" She let her head drop weakly and let the tears flow.

"It'll be all right, Francesca. I'll be right by your side." Shock flew into Father Matthew's eyes when the face that carried the night's violence rose to meet his. Her face was swollen and raw. Her left eye was puffed shut. There was a deep gash on her cheek where the ringed hand-delivered the fisted punches, and her lip was split open. Blood ran down from both. "You're hurt."

"I'm fine." Francesca pushed away the hand Father Matthew raised to her face with the defiance of a humiliated woman. "What am I going to do?" she asked again, this time her voice sounded defeated.

"Don't worry. I'll sort it." Father Matthew crossed to the telephone. The blood-soaked hem of his cassock painted the floor like a Pollock painting. "Leave everything to me. I'm going to call the police now."

Bolting to her feet, Francesca stepped over the body and crossed to Father Matthew. "You're not calling anyone," she said, tearing the handset from his hand and setting it back in its cradle.

"We need to call the police Francesca." Father Matthew tried to reason.

"No, we don't. We'll take care of it ourselves." The smell of warm blood all at once filled Francesca's lungs, and she began to tremble.

Father Matthew walked a shaky Francesca back to the only unstained chair in the room. When he'd coaxed her into it, he sank to his knees beside her. "Take a deep, calming breath. Do it. Now," he ordered. He watched her breathe in deep, exhale, and repeat when his rolling hand encouraged her to do so. "We can't take care of this ourselves. We have to get the police involved."

Feeling steadier, Francesca forced herself to set emotion aside and set her lawyerly, logical mind to think. Mulling the facts in her head, she said, "Go ahead and call the police, but I don't want you here when they show up. I'm going to plead self-defense, and I don't want you involved in any of this."

"No, Francesca, I'll admit to the attack. I'll confess my sins to the police." Father Matthew looked down at the motionless body. The gouge in the back of his skull had welled with blood. Father Matthew couldn't begin to imagine the

blades of pain the blows to the head inflicted. “God forgive me,” he murmured under his breath.

“But...”

“You will say nothing. Do you hear me, Francesca?” Father Matthew firmed his lips in determination. “Nothing.”

“I have to. It’s my house. It’s my husband lying dead on the floor.”

“You don’t have to say a word. I’ll confess, turn myself in. I’ll tell them exactly what happened. He was viciously beating you, and I jumped in to stop him. And...” He raised a hand to silence her when she started to speak. “I need to confess, Francesca. Understood?”

The initial shakes had passed, and Francesca laid her throbbing head back against the chair for a moment to let herself think. “All right, but as your lawyer, you do as I say. Understood?”

Nodding Father Matthew murmured *Deus animae meae miserere*.

One

May 1939

SETTLING INTO THE lounge chair after her swim to dry up under the rays of a bright sun, Francesca caught sight of him. Sliding her sunglasses down her nose to get a better view of the gorgeous specimen working on the gardens hemming the pool, she fixed hazel eyes on him.

He was tall, six-plus by her estimation. His long, black hair billowed in the unseasonably warm wind. The white T-shirt he wore was tacked down to his lean body with sweat like a second skin. Francesca could see the chord of arm muscle tighten as he dug the shovel deep into the dark earth.

He looked nothing like the boys she met at the country club. Those boys were all so perfect: perfect hair, perfect wardrobe, perfect education, and ideal lineage. Francesca hated perfect. Too often, perfect was used to mask a moral code that shook you down to the foundation.

Francesca's eyes locked on the tight butt straining against faded jeans when he bent over to set the purple catmint into turned soil. Intently, Francesca watched as he pressed earth around the plant with boots that had seen many foot miles, and then mulched it. Francesca didn't know who the gardening Adonis was, but she set her mind on finding out.

TOMMY HAD SEEN FRANCESCA MINUTES BEFORE she saw him. He'd watched her since she dove into the pool, and followed her when she stepped out after swimming fifteen laps—he'd counted it off. Her body and hair glistened from the dampness. Tommy's eyes never left Francesca as she finger-combed the long, chestnut ropes of wet hair back from her face. When Francesca stretched her long, wet body on the lounge chair to let the sun paint her dark, Tommy became spellbound. She was perfect. He appreciated perfect.

From that moment, Tommy's probing eyes switched to full-on staring. How could he not? The way the tiny bikini hugged the curvy body oiled in cocoa butter warranted admiration and appreciation.

Tommy had worshiped the female body since his sixteenth birthday when he got his first sexual experience compliments of Backseat-Becky Burnett. Two years his senior, Backseat-Becky in the backseat of her VW bug showed Tommy how gratifying the female body could be. It had been a tight squeeze in the small car for the five-eleven Tommy, but Becky's flexible cheerleading body was accommodating that night and to his delight for the rest of the summer.

Francesca wasn't the Backseat-Becky type, not by any stretch of the imagination, and he was definitely diving into unknown waters with her. Still, Tommy determined to get to know her.

FRANCESCA SET HER SUNGLASSES BACK ON her nose and sank to the depths of the lounge chair. "I see you hired new help, Mr. Scott."

"Not new help, Miss Thompson. It's my son Tommy. He normally manages the garden center for me, but today I'm short-handed." Mr. Scott wielded the garden shears like a swordsman over the box hedges. "Hard to find dedicated gardeners nowadays. Kids don't want to dig their hands into worm riddled earth..."

While Mr. Scott rambled on about the lazy youth of today, Francesca mulled the name in her head. Tommy was such an understated name for the hell-with-you looking rebel, Francesca decided. No matter, because whether he was named Tommy or Blaze, what woman didn't appreciate a rebellious looking man? The fact he was gorgeous was the icing on the cake.

"It's hot today, don't you agree, Mr. Scott?" Francesca watched him rake the trimmings into a green pile.

"Can't disagree with you there, Miss Thompson."

"Would you and your son like a cold glass of lemonade? Mrs. O'Sullivan made a fresh pitcher this morning."

Mr. Scott removed the plaid flat-cap and wiped the film of sweat from the sun-weathered face with his sleeve. "If it's no trouble, I wouldn't say no to that, Miss Thompson, and I'm sure Tommy wouldn't either."

"No trouble at all, Mr. Scott. I'll be right back." Francesca bolted to her feet and slipping into her cover-up, dashed up the flagstone path, across the terrace, and into the kitchen. Moments later, she returned with a tray stocked with a

pitcher of ice-cold lemonade, two glasses, and a plate of Mrs. O'Sullivan's oatmeal cookies. Setting the tray on the teak table, she poured into two glasses, handed one to Mr. Scott. "Feel free to enjoy Mrs. O's cookies."

"I wouldn't say no to one of Mrs. O'Sullivan's cookies. They're the best I've tasted." Mr. Scott flicked love-struck eyes toward the kitchen window.

If only Mrs. O'Sullivan could see how enamored the man was with her, Francesca thought. "You should tell her, Mr. Scott. She never tires of being told what a good baker she is. In the meantime, I'm going to take a glass of lemonade and cookies to your son." Francesca called over her shoulder, dashing across the lawn.

Wet blades of grass glinted in an emerald carpet that stretched to the grove of pines, maples, and linden trees fanning out for miles on the south side of the property. The smell of damp earth lingering from last night's rain hung in the air along with the scents of summer.

Francesca cleared her throat. "Umm ... I, ah, thought you could use something cold to drink." Up close, Francesca could see Tommy Scott's eyes were the color of a stormy sea. He had a scar along his jawline, which she romanticized as the mark of a bar fight he'd started and won hands-down. Damp, black hair stuck to his forehead and neck. Gorgeous with a touch of rugged and danger, Francesca thought. "It's umm ... lemonade, and ah, these are oatmeal cookies. Freshly made. This morning. By Mrs. O'Sullivan," she stammered. She never stammered, but the smell of sweat, earth, and man slid into her and scrambled her brain. Take deep, relaxed breaths, Francesca.

"How did you know lemonade and oatmeal cookies were my favorites?"

"I didn't."

Accepting the glass, Tommy raised it to her before tipping it back. "And who are you, princess?"

The cockiness in his voice was meant to set Francesca's teeth on edge, but instead, Francesca curved her mouth into an alluring smile that arched to Tommy's groin. "My name is Francesca Thompson. My family and friends call me, Frankie."

Tommy speared the shovel deep into the soil and reached for a couple of cookies. "Francesca suits better."

She gave him a side-eye look. "Why?"

Tommy bit into one cookie and crumpling the rest sprinkled it on the grass. Within seconds, a flock of starlings swooped down from the trees to feast. "Francesca sounds exotic, European, sexy."

Pecking at every morsel of the crumbled cookie, the starlings set off in flight, and the sound of the gurgling creek, which meandered across the Thompson Estate, replaced their tweets.

“I am all that.” Francesca’s smiling brandy-colored eyes met Tommy’s.

She had the look of money, lady-of-the-manor appearance, Tommy thought. Her long, chestnut hair, dry now, fluttered in the wind around a delicate face, with high cheekbones, a pert nose and a wide mouth with lips meant to be kissed. Francesca smelled of chlorine, and Tommy thought it was the best scent going.

“Do you eat, princess?”

“Of course, I eat. What type of simple question is that, Mr. Scott?” Francesca’s voice flowed with the graceful sound of wealth.

Blue eyes steady on brown eyes, Tommy pulled out the pack of cigarettes from his T-shirt sleeve and plugged one into his mouth. “It’s Tommy, Mr. Scott is my father,” he corrected automatically. “Girls like you rarely eat. It’s all about the figure and looks,” he said although he couldn’t help but appreciate both on her.

The wind took Francesca’s hair then, and Tommy thought she looked like a siren surfacing from the ocean water. “Well, Tommy, I’ll have you know I do eat. Substantial amounts of food,” she added as an afterthought.

With a cocked brow, Tommy scanned the long, lithe body beneath the sheer cover-up. “Sure, you do.”

“I do. I’ve been blessed with a good metabolism, and when it doesn’t kick in, I run and swim. I was also a cheerleader in school.”

Her long, muscular legs had the lean lines of a runner, Tommy concluded exhaling a thick plume of smoke. “Of course you were, princess.”

“You look like you played football in school.”

“I would have if they hadn’t expelled me senior year.”

“Hmm, so you are a bad-boy.” Francesca turned to walk toward the creek’s bank hemmed in tall, willowy cattails. She didn’t bother to gesture Tommy to follow. Francesca knew he would. Men, in her opinion, weren’t difficult to figure out. They were what she categorized as visual-thinkers. Showing, rather than telling, got them to do what you wanted.

“I think of myself more as misguided.” Drawing in smoke, Tommy expelled it in a thin white cloud as he trailed her. “You have quite the spread here.” Tommy’s eyes roved across the twenty-acre estate.

A thick green carpet of rolling hills hemmed the long stretch of hundred-year-old trees. To the east, the colonial home with its pillared entrance,

whitewashed walls, and the vast expanse of windows wrapped in wrought iron balconies stood tall against a blue sky. The estate boasted comforts Tommy could only dream of: a pool, a gazebo, a tennis court, a paddock, and stables that came complete with the best riding horses.

"I like it. I prefer the isolation and quiet to the frenzied downtown life. My father is the total opposite. He prefers the choked streets and the hustle and bustle of city life. During the week, because he works long hours, and because I figure he 'entertains,'" Francesca air quoted the word, "He stays at our downtown condo. He's been doing so since shortly after my mom passed away five years ago," she said, unsure why she'd told him so much.

"I'm sorry about your mom. Does it bother you that your father 'entertains'?"

"It used to." Francesca tilted her face to the burning sun and went silent, and Tommy deduced they'd exhausted the topic. "Do you ride? Horses, I mean." She sat on the nurse log of a red maple next to the creek, picked at its bark.

"Do I look like the horse riding type, princess?" Tommy picked at the bark along with her.

Francesca shook her head. "I can teach you if you like."

Tommy breathed out smoke. "Maybe I'll let you."

"You know your father's smitten with our Mrs. O'Sullivan." From the surprised look on Tommy's face, Francesca surmised this was news to him. "I think it's adorable. The only problem is Mrs. O is oblivious to how he feels. I think she needs a bit of nudging. You don't mind if I nudge, do you?"

Tommy wasn't sure how to react to that piece of information, and mulling the thought over, he remained silent. His mother had passed eleven years ago. Tommy was ten, since then, there had been no woman in his father's life or their home, and he wasn't ready for anyone to step in anytime soon. Francesca left him pondering the notion that maybe his father was ready to embrace a companion.

Tommy had kept his father busy since his mother's death. In his rebellious youth, Tommy had caused his father many sleepless nights. He'd only come to his senses a couple of years ago when he'd spent five days in a juvenile detention center. His time there had been a rude awakening for Tommy, but not more than when his father showed up to pick him up on his release, and all he said was: I've missed you, son. Let's get you home.

That was a turning point for Tommy, and from that day, he set off to change his ways. He voluntarily worked at his father's garden center dedicating long hours to learn the business from the ground up. To his father's surprise and

delight, Tommy did everything and anything asked, never giving lip or attitude—a rarity for Tommy.

“I think they’d make a cute couple.”

“Yes, they would, and you should nudge. I want Dad to be happy,” Tommy said, surprising himself.

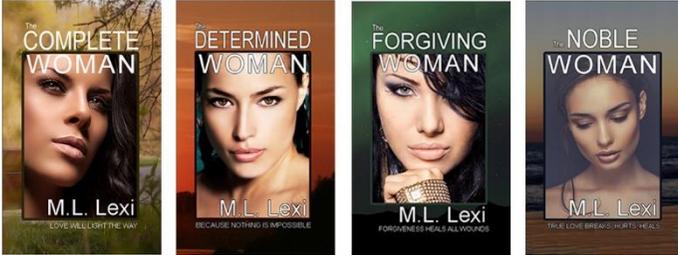
“Good. I will.” Francesca watched him tap cigarette ash. “You know those things will kill you.”

Drawing in a mouthful of smoke, Tommy said, “I’ve heard. So, how about dinner, princess?” In an unexpected gesture, Tommy played with the ends of her hair and was pleased when she let him. It was as soft as rose petals. “I can’t afford Winston’s. Nick’s Burgers is more in my budget, and I won’t be picking you up in the sporty Beemer you’re accustomed to, but in my work pick up. The words Scott’s Garden Center emblazoned on the door and the bed dirty from hauling soil.”

Francesca felt a twinge of guilt Tommy thought her to be such a snob and a tug of attraction at his sincerity. A quality so rare in the titled boys she’d grown up with, and whom her father looked to as prospective husbands.

“I love Nick’s,” Francesca said, although she’d never been, and looking over her shoulder as she walked away added, “Pick me up at seven.”

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