

The

FORGIVING

WOMAN



M.L. Lexi

FORGIVENESS HEALS ALL WOUNDS

The Forgiving Woman

M.L. Lexi

Titles by M.L. Lexi

THE GUILTY WOMAN
THE UNFAITHFUL WOMAN

Coming Soon

THE BLIND WOMAN
THE COMPLETE WOMAN
THE DETERMINED WOMAN
THE NOBLE WOMAN

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“The Forgiving Woman” eBook Edition

Published by M.L. Lexi

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Prologue

October 1970

SARINA INSTINCTIVELY SENSED, she was going to die.

Writhing in pain, the perspiration beading thick on her forehead as she was rushed to the operating theater Sarina sensed it wasn't going to be the routine caesarean they'd told her it would be.

She was twenty-three and she was going to die, and so was her baby.

How did it come to this?

For the past nine months, she'd done everything to ensure her baby's wellbeing. She'd eaten the right foods, religiously taken her vitamins. She'd exercised and kept her stress to a minimum.

How had it come to this?

On every visit to Dr. Berkeley, Sarina had brought up the questions, the concerns, the fears of a young, nervous, first-time mother-to-be. Each time she'd asked the questions, Dr. Berkeley had assured her everything was as perfect as it could be. Dr. Berkeley told Sarina—with a confidence that left no room for uncertainty—she was fit and healthy. He'd assured her she would face no problems giving birth to the nine-pound baby she was carrying.

Dr. Berkeley had repeatedly assured Sarina everything was fine.

Now, as whitewashed walls rushed past her and the sharp tang of antiseptic, despair, and illness that tinted the hospital hallways latched onto her like the long, bony fingers of death, Sarina dismissed everything Dr. Berkeley had told her as utter bullshit.

Sarina tasted death in the bile rising in her throat.

With the new wave of pain from the surging contractions rolling in one after the other with vicious intensity, Sarina's unearthly, keening cries like those of an animal in deep distress reverberated throughout the brightly lit hallway.

"Is everything all right?" Sarina's face was so pale she seemed almost translucent.

"We have to get you to the operating room, Sarina." The stethoscope looped around Molly's neck, shimmered against her blindingly white nurse's uniform. "Can I call anyone for you, family, friends—the father."

"There's no one. It's just my baby and me, and you didn't answer my question." Sarina sounded more forceful than she intended, but the pain was too much to bear now.

Reaching for Sarina's hand, Molly's olive-black eyes curved into a consoling smile. "You're fine, Sarina. You're in excellent hands. Dr. Berkeley is the best." Crepe-soled shoes silent against linoleum ran alongside the gurney.

"Is my baby okay?" Sarina's anxious face contorted in agony.

"Exhale through your mouth," Molly instructed when Sarina's hand tightened around hers as the next contraction hit hard. "That's it, Sarina allow the air to flow in and out. Your baby's fine. She just seems to like being in your belly

a bit too much, and we need to coax her out,” she said, with a dimpled grin.

A wondrous joy quickly replaced all Sarina’s pain, and eyes swamped with love looked up to Molly. “She? My baby’s a she?”

Molly pivoted her gaze away from the spreading bloodstained sheets to Sarina. “Oops! Me and my big mouth. Guess I spoiled the surprise for you.” Molly hoped to inject hope into the moment.

A girl! Sarina was laughing now. All the pain she’d endured the past twelve hours was forgotten. She was having a daughter. Sarina let her mind wander to imagine holding the tiny bundle in her arms, who was about to change her life forever. It was as exciting as it was scary, and still, she couldn’t imagine loving anyone as much as she already loved the life in her.

The joyful moment was short-lived when Sarina braced herself on her elbows and threw her head back when the fresh wave of unspeakable pain rolled through her.

Tired, she was so tired and so weak.

“Breathe, Sarina, breathe,” Molly prompted, he-heeing along with her. “Look at me. Focus on me.”

Inhaling through her nose and exhaling through her mouth Sarina recalled the Lamaze teacher telling the class breathing helps to cope with the pain. Proper breathing helps to relieve the discomfort and the anxiety brought on by labor, she’d told the class, and at that moment, Sarina thought what a load of—

“Oh, sweet Jesus,” Sarina cried out, followed with a string of oaths she wasn’t aware she was familiar with.

Sarina was never under the illusion giving birth was going to be easy, but she never imagined it was going to be

as difficult as this. Now, they were rushing her into surgery. Childbirth suddenly made the twenty-three years of her arduous life seem like a walk in the park, Sarina thought, casting her thoughts back in time.

FACE-TO-FACE WITH ONE THAT matched her own, Sarina watched her mother gasping for breath when the stabbing pain from the cancer ravaging her insides swamped her. Tears burned behind Sarina's eyes as she listened to her mama tell her she had days to live.

In a soothing voice, between hitched breaths, her mama explained that when she went to heaven, Sarina was to go live with Aunt Olga. For her mama's sake, Sarina remained composed when panic grabbed her by the throat. Sarina didn't want to live under the same roof with stony-faced Tia Olga. The thought of having to live with the religious, zealot aunt whose answer to everything was prayer, who believed in absolute damnation for a sinful soul and that no one was free of sin, made Sarina want to cry. For her mama's sake, Sarina held the tears back.

One week after their conversation, her mama died, and at the age of ten, with her grief locked deep inside her, Sarina moved into Tia Olga's home. She went from a home where music, song, and love existed to a home where happiness and emotions were a foreign notion. A home where once she became a teenager, the fear of God's wrath bearing down to cleanse her sexually craving body and sinful mind of all impurities was her reality.

Sarina wasn't sure what impurities were, but she was made to pray—always pray—to cleanse her soul from them.

She was made to pray for everything she did and every sexual thought she had—and she had a lot of them.

Sarina was thrilled when she turned eighteen, and Tia Olga pawned her off as a maid to Señor Ryder. Although Tia Olga took all her wages, Sarina didn't care. Señor Ryder's home was a happy home filled with music and song as hers once was. Señor Ryder was kind and generous, and through him, Sarina discovered what love was.

When they started to share a bed, Sarina sensed Dean at forty-two—almost twice her age—was too old for her, but without anyone to talk to and never been taught the finer points of the male-female relationship, intuiting was all she had. Tia Olga had never discussed such matters with her, and when Sarina so much as looked at a boy, she'd harp about their evil ways. Stay away from boys, she'd say. Boys become men, and men are the spawn of the devil. Their only interest in women is for carnal gratification and nothing else.

Being with Dean felt good, not only when their bodies came together, but when he told her, he loved her. And when Dean showered Sarina with affection, she believed it was sincere not conjured to get carnal gratification from her. No one had ever said the beautiful things Dean said to her or been so caring and gentle. Until Dean, Sarina hadn't known what affection from a man felt like, and those feelings made her feel nice. Really nice. That couldn't be wrong, Sarina decided.

Emotions swimming into her eyes, Sarina vowed her daughter's soul would never need cleansing. Her beautiful daughter would be cherished. Her beautiful daughter would always be loved.

“BREATHE, SARINA, BREATHE,” SHE HEARD MOLLY say as they wheeled her through the large steel doors that opened wide and seemed to swallow her whole.

In the operating theater, nurses crowded Sarina as they prepped her for surgery. Sarina was attached to a beeping machine with green lines. An I.V. was inserted into her vein as Molly put in a dreadful tube called a catheter into a place she didn't know could be penetrated. Sarina's eyes went saucer-wide at the needle that looked to be a foot long.

“It's an epidural. This will hurt a bit at first, but afterward, you won't feel pain.” Molly explained.

As Molly stabbed her spine with the goddamn awful needle, Sarina focused her gaze past the glass window where Dr. Berkeley was getting suited with a surgical gown, mask, and gloves.

“Fetal distress. Let's get to work,” Dr. Berkeley said in a matter-of-fact tone to his surgical team when he stepped into the operating theater. Although there were no alarming looks or words exchanged, Sarina felt a sinking feeling at the pit of her stomach.

“Is my baby going to be okay, Dr. Berk...?” Sarina succumbed to the anesthesia before she could finish her question.

In the operating theater, the atmosphere was uneasy but disciplined. Vivaldi flowed through the speaker as Dr. Berkeley, with hands as steady as set cement, made the lengthy incision. The baby was nestled low in Sarina's uterus, and Dr. Berkeley's fingers moved agilely. Calling out instructions, acknowledgments were made by the attending nurses as Dr. Berkeley went about bringing Sarina's baby into the world.

“The baby’s heartbeat is strong and regular,” Dr. Berkeley said, to the relief and delight of everyone in the room, and minutes later, Luna was brought into the world without incident.

One of the nurses took Luna and proceeded to suction mucus from her tiny lungs. Within seconds Luna’s first piercing cry filled the room with the melodic sound of life.

Eleven-forty-five p.m., October twenty-fifth of nineteen-seventy was the day Luna came into the world. October twenty-fifth of nineteen-seventy was the day Luna began to live a lie perpetrated by those closest to her.

Part I

Fate

We don't meet people by accident.
They are meant to cross our path for a reason.

—Unknown

One

October 1984

AT FOURTEEN, LUNA Lopez was gangly and awkward. Her long black hair was stringy, her green eyes were set in a pale, thin face, and she was slender to the point of looking boyish.

Luna's life was as ordinary as she was as her friends were as her life was. She lived with her mom and dad in a tiny two-bedroom, red brick home on Sycamore Street, which verged on the prestigious enclave of Royal Hill—the dividing line between the have-all and have-not.

Royal Hill was everything Sycamore wasn't: privileged, wealthy, and overflowing with enviable excesses. Regardless of its downfalls, Sycamore Street was where children freely rode their bikes past majestic hardwoods with verdant crowns and compact Victorian homes with wooden porches and tidy front lawns.

After school and on weekends, Luna worked with Sarina and her father, Teo, at Maid For You, the janitorial business he operated from a modest, damp, low ceiling office in the basement of their home. Luna did anything and everything necessary from going out on cleaning jobs to organizing the office and cold calling to drum up business.

The have-all of Vaughan Secondary derided Luna for working as a janitor, but she rose above the petty insults. She was happy to contribute to the small company her father had built from the ground up. Luna was exceptionally proud of the fact the elite residents of Royal Hill—whose trust didn't come easily—sought out Teo Lopez's services for his trustworthy reputation. Teo proudly boasted his roster of clients, comprised of doctors, judges, lawyers, and captains of industry, didn't allow just anyone into their homes.

Luna was Teo's pride and joy. It wasn't because Luna was his only child or because she was a well-mannered, grounded, considerate, smart girl, but because Teo had fallen in love with her, the moment Sarina set the tiny bundle in his arms. Since that day, Luna became the apple of Teo's eye.

Teo never hesitated to spoil his little girl. And why not? She's our only child and my princess, he'd say to Sarina when she chastised him for doing so.

Luna did well in school and was liked by the have-not. She never set out to become a popular girl, but in her first year at Vaughan Secondary, her winning personality and willingness to help the underdog made her one overnight.

That Luna was popular with the have-not didn't sit well with Britney Melville-Berkeley. Although she looked down on the have-not, for the past three years of high school, Britney had worked hard to cultivate her popularity. That hadn't come easy for Britney, a self-centered, narcissistic, mean-girl who repelled as strongly as a magnet attracted. Britney, however, learned early on wealth could buy anything, and dangling hers like a carrot

in front of the proverbial donkey got her the popularity she craved.

A have-all from Royal Hill, Britney flaunted her lavish home with the tall columns, high ceilings, and indoor heated pool overlooking the lush ravine. When the mood struck, Britney flew those deemed worthy of her inner circle to exotic destinations in one of her grandfather's planes. At every turn, Britney was quick to inject into the conversation that her father was the renowned Dr. Berkeley, the OB/GYN who'd delivered almost every baby on Sycamore and Royal Hill, including her nemesis—Luna Lopez.

Dr. Berkeley, a kind-hearted, compassionate, dedicated professional, had one flaw. He loved the good life, liked it enough to sell his soul to the devil, or more accurately for money. It was why he'd married Tara Melville, daughter of Reince Melville, the media tycoon. Tara—pronounced Taaa-ra for the added touch of snootiness—came with a famous surname and wealth that made Dr. Berkeley's seem like pocket change. That blinded Dr. Berkeley to Tara's many character flaws, and until they came to live under the same roof, did Dr. Berkeley come to realize what a cold, heartless, arrogant woman she was. Worse, it wasn't until then he came to learn first-hand how venomous Tara's tongue was and how it never sat idle.

As much as Dr. Berkeley detested Tara and her vile tongue, he loved her money and the lifestyle it afforded him more. Wealth, like Tara's, carried a price, Dr. Berkeley reasoned, and he resigned himself to enduring her toxic personality and flapping tongue. Everyone had a cross to bear, and Tara's was Dr. Berkeley's. His only

regret was that the apple hadn't fallen far from the tree, and Britney was following her mother's example.

Like her mother, Britney was a conniving, condescending snob, never shying away from flaunting her prominent name or wealth, demanding the respect, she didn't deserve. The young, flaxen-haired viper was a spoiled rich, entitled girl with a mean streak who'd do anything to get what she wanted. It was why Dr. Berkeley insisted Britney attend Vaughan Secondary with the have-not.

Tara hated the notion of her only daughter mingling with the underclass from Sycamore and often told her husband so. Dr. Berkeley, however, believed Britney needed the grounding Vaughan and its working-class students offered. A grounding Britney wasn't going to get at home from her mother, and at Dr. Berkeley's insistence, she remained enrolled at Vaughan Secondary for the duration of her high school years.

Britney's resentment for being at a school she believed was beneath her station in life fueled a bitterness that swelled into resentment, and her outlet for her pent up anger became Luna.

No one came to know Britney's malicious side better than Luna. Britney came at Luna when she could, where she could. However, she could. Britney became obsessed with Luna's undeserving popularity and her likeability, which she failed to understand. Luna lived on Sycamore Street for God's sake. Her father, a simple janitor, and her mother, a mere medical secretary, were both on her father's payroll. It stuck in Britney's craw that was it not for the Melville-Berkeley's, Luna's family wouldn't survive.

Britney's anger toward Luna intensified when she reasoned that a Melville-Berkeley was supposed to be the center of attention, not some low class deplorable from Sycamore Street.

Britney's litany of assaults on Luna began from the time she asked Lance to ask Luna out on a date, and then made sure her entourage showed up at the local pizza hangout to witness Luna being stood up.

"Hello, Luna. Are you expecting someone?" Slinking up to Luna's table, Britney said loud enough to get everyone's attention.

"Umm ... yeah. I'm, ah, waiting on my date," Luna stammered when she felt all eyes flicked to her.

"And who would the lucky guy be?" The disdain in Britney's blue eyes made Luna squirm in her seat.

"Ah, Lance." Luna followed Britney's eyes when they glanced over her shoulder.

"Lance, Luna here claims you have a date with her tonight," Britney called out over the din of the Saturday night crowd. "Give him a second to pull his tongue out of Tiffany's mouth to answer." Britney's sarcastic tone made the entourage of blonde Barbies, and everyone in the restaurant burst into laughter.

Swallowing the bitter taste of humiliation, Luna ran out of the restaurant in tears, the snickers from everyone following her out like a homing missile.

More humiliating events followed since that night until Luna decided she wasn't going to take it anymore.

"I'm not as pretty or as rich as Britney. I don't wear designer clothes or drive a Mercedes to school, but I don't deserve to be mistreated this way. Like daddy says, bullies are cowards with small brains, and you shouldn't

be afraid of them. You should be outsmarting them. And that's exactly what you're going to do," Luna told her reflection in the mirror with conviction.

As of that moment, outsmarting Britney became Luna's mission.

"Luna, that's a beautiful shirt," Britney called down from the second-floor stairwell as students made their way to their next class.

Luna's eyes rolled upwards. "Thank you, Britney."

"I owned one just like it before my mother gave it to your father the day she hired him to clean out our basement." Britney's voice thundered through the thronged staircase.

"Yeah, your mother told him your raisin size titties couldn't fill the shirt as well as I could," was Luna's timely response.

The rupture of raucous laughter made Britney's eyes blaze red, and Luna basked in the wave of satisfaction.

There was the time Britney threatened every boy at the yearly Halloween bash from asking Luna to dance. After an hour of sitting in the bleachers, Luna decided to get up on the dance floor and contort her body in the craziest ways. Gapes and derision followed, but it didn't take long for everyone to see how much fun Luna was having, and every lonesome girl and boy followed suit. With her perfectly coiffed entourage in tow, Britney huffed her way past crazy Luna and out of the gymnasium.

Britney's epic mean girl prank fail came when she stuck her foot out as Luna came out of the library. With books stacked eight high in her arms, Britney tripped Luna and sent her straight into Tom Grady's arms as he came around the bend.

“I’m sorry about that, Tom. She’s such a spaz.” Britney sneered at Luna, sidling up to Tom with adoring eyes.

“Only because you tripped her.” Tom’s voice carried the elite sound of Royal Hill. “Are you all right?”

Luna lifted her eyes to meet the sultry, blue ones aimed at her. They were bluer than gossip claimed, and he was taller than she expected—six-foot by her estimation. The shock of scraggly, blonde hair made you want to rake your fingers through it. The dimpled cheeks and that cleft chin set in a finely chiseled jaw made you want to bite into him, top the good looks with a muscular, athletic body, and the entire package was very Robert Redfordish. Luna could see why every girl in school swooned over the popular quarterback.

Luna waited for a beat for the roaring in her ears and the tug-of-war playing out in the pit of her belly to ease before saying, “I’m ... I’m fine, thank you,” although her expression radiated nothing of the sort.

“You’ll have to excuse Britney. She can’t help being anything but a bitch,” Tom said, captivated by the green, wide-eyed, shocked expression Luna shot Britney. “Don’t worry. She knows she’s a bitch.”

Rattled by the way Tom eyed Luna, Britney gave him a tug of insistence. “Why are you being like this, baby? I didn’t do anything to her.”

“Uh-huh.” Never taking his eyes off Luna, Tom batted Britney away like an annoying fly. “Shoo, Britney.”

“I swear, Tom. I didn’t do anything. I can’t help it if these Sycamore girls have no poise. They have no clue how to femininely put one foot in front of the other.” Britney snarled with a haughty tone.

“There’s no such word, Britney. Now, ride off on your broom.” Tom’s remark garnered a snicker from Luna that got a scathing scowl from Britney.

“I have a free period now. Do you want to join me in the ravine, baby?” Britney slithered a moist tongue over her lips. “Baby, did you hear me?”

“I’m Tom Grady, by the way.” He bent down to pick up Luna’s books off the floor.

“I know.”

“And you would be?”

“Luna Lopez,” she said, taking the handed books.

Snubbing Britney’s seething eyes, Tom easily fell into the conversation. “Nice to meet you, Luna Lopez. That’s quite the stack.”

“I ... umm ... need to read up on a few subjects. This is my first year of high school, and the sciences have me baffled.”

“I may be able to help you. I’m in my fourth year and past this material,” he said, eyeing the book titles. “Why don’t I help you carry those to your locker, and on the way you can tell me what’s tripping you.”

“Umm ... you want to walk with me?”

Flashing her a dreamy dimpled smile, Tom took the stack of books from Luna’s arms. “Lead the way.”

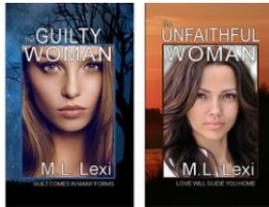
“All right,” Luna said, feeling a satisfying tug deep in her belly she’d never felt before.

“You get back here, Tom. Tom, I’m warning you. If you don’t get back here now, you can forget about meeting me in the ravine ever again.” Britney’s voice trembled with rage.

“What exactly happens in the ravine?” Luna naïvely asked, unaware of how attractive her innocence made her to Tom.

“Nothing of importance.”

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