

The  
**UNFAITHFUL  
WOMAN**



**M.L. Lexi**

LOVE WILL GUIDE YOU HOME

# The Unfaithful Woman

M.L. Lexi

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“The Unfaithful Woman” ebook Edition

Published by M.L. Lexi

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# One

FROM BEHIND THE damask curtains of her living room, Anastasia watched the fire-red Ferrari race up the curved driveway. The unique famed roar of its engine pulsed, then went silent when it came to an abrupt stop next to the flowing fountain. A smile played across Anastasia's face. Only one person could be behind the wheel of the high-powered sports car.

How Tristan had come to be there when Anastasia hadn't worked up the nerve to call him to tell him about Minnie's funeral was anyone's guess. The last time they'd spoken, Tristan told her they should go their separate ways and disappeared from her life. In the past three decades, except for their two-week encounter and the dutiful attendance to her parents' funerals, Tristan slipped out of Anastasia's life as quickly as he came into it.

Anastasia felt a pressure in her chest, heavy and tight when the tangles of emotions long buried rushed at her. Tristan always managed to stir her insides without much effort.

The cold, steely glint in Anastasia's hazel eyes softened the moment she saw Tristan squeeze his six-foot frame out of the tight-fitting Ferrari. It felt like an eternity since she'd last seen him, yet the moment she did, the memories unspooled in her mind as if they'd happened yesterday.

Tristan Ferguson was her first love, the boy she'd shared her first kiss with. Tristan was the idealistic teenager who'd asked for her hand in marriage then disappeared from her life. Now here he was, after all these years looking tall, tanned, and as gorgeous as she remembered. D&G sunglasses perched on his nose the wind blowing through the long, honey-brown hair, Tristan looked like the subject in one of his famous paintings.

Anastasia watched Tristan slide the dark sunglasses off and flick blue eyes over the green rolling hills that stretched for acres to woods celebrating summer. The gardens that wound around the house were a rainbow of colors from lilac, roses, bleeding hearts, and rhododendrons in full bloom.

Tristan smelled it now, the familiar scents of horse and manure, and he looked over to the paddocks. His lips slowly curved when the mare whickered, big brown eyes aimed at him. His pulse picked up at the muffled thunder of hooves lifting off the earth as they raced around. There was no sound like it on earth, he thought. It had been a long time since he'd been around horses. God, he missed it.

Tristan's smile widened as the memories came flooding back. Stillbrook Estate was where he grew up, the place of his boyhood, and even after steering clear for decades, Tristan still considered it home.

On the stretch of grassed land, in the turn-of-the-century home, with its large picture windows and tall column entrance, was where Tristan had spent many memorable days. He and Anastasia had played and spent every waking minute together on that land. They'd mucked stalls in the stables, spent summer days swimming in the pool. Mill Pond was where they'd fished for trout. On sunny days, alongside Anastasia at the reins of her horse Bandit and he on Sparky, they'd ridden over the roll of land. Afterward, under the shade of the willow tree, he'd read to her.

In his artistic leaning phase, under the willow tree, with Anastasia watching on, Tristan flipped through the art books he frequently checked out from the local library. Tristan read about oils, impressionism, expressionism, and every ism there was. He absorbed the information like a sponge does water. Those books had steered him to the canvas, and in time, art became his passion and his chosen career.

Stillbrook always brought back good memories, but in the decades passed, Tristan had set foot on the land he considered home twice. The first time was for James' funeral when, at the young age of seventy-two, the unexpected heart attack took him in his sleep. The second time was one year later, for Caroline's funeral, who, after her thirty-seven years of marriage to James, Tristan believed she died of a broken heart. Now, he was here for Minnie's funeral.

Filling his lungs with air scented with earth and pine, Tristan rounded the car and picked up his overnight bag from the passenger seat. The tote was all he needed on this visit. He wasn't planning an extended stay this time, either. He was scheduled to fly out the day after the Minnie-bration—leave it up to Anastasia to come up with the cookie idea—to make an appearance at his art exhibit in Florence.

Bag in hand, Tristan walked up the stone walkway flanked with tulips dripping with color. At the tall, mahogany doors, Tristan hesitated for a beat, debating whether to use his key. In the end, he decided to ring the doorbell.

Stillbrook hadn't been his home for too long. It was now Anastasia's, Colin's, and the twin's home.

On the second bell chime, the door swung open, and there she stood as if frozen in time.

*ANASTASIA STUDIED THE TIMID EIGHT-YEAR-OLD boy with eyes as blue as the sky. He was way tall, Anastasia thought, and the short, sandy-blond hair was way neat. He had long eyelashes above the large eyes and rosy cheeks. His T-shirt and blue jeans were way too clean. He wasn't anything like the messy, dirty boys from school.*

*The tall woman holding his hand tilted her eyes down to Anastasia. Her smiling eyes looked like luminous black pools in a flawless face that might have been carved out of polished onyx. Her hair, dark as her skin, was rolled into a bun, making her look taller. She had an exceptionally long, thin neck, like a giraffe's Anastasia thought where a canary-yellow bauble necklace that matched her summer dress hung. Her arms and wrists were slim but elegant. She looked like the Nubian Queen Anastasia had seen in a book in her father's library.*

*"Who are you?" Anastasia studied Minnie, a frank and cagey stare out of brown eyes.*

*"This here is Tristan Ferguson, and I'm Minnie Williams, your new maid. And you must be Anastasia," Minnie said.*

*"How do you know my name?" Anastasia blew a bubble of gum as pink as her lips.*

*"I'm a friend of your father's," Minnie told the petite girl with the delicately upturned nose dotted with freckles.*

*Anastasia brushed the cloud of chestnut hair around the pretty, heart-shaped face back. "Daddy has a lot of friends. He says that when you own a large law firm, everyone wants to be your friend."*

*"Is that so?" Minnie stifled a chuckle. "I like your dress. It's frilly and flowy, and yellow like mine."*

*"I like yours too. Daddy never told me about a new maid with a shy boy. You going to live here?" Anastasia eyed the suitcases.*

*"You are an inquisitive one." Minnie smiled a quick flash that deepened the lines time had etched on her face. "Yes, I'm going to live here."*

*"Him too?" Anastasia's eyes latched onto Tristan.*

*"He is." Minnie slung an arm around the young boy entrusted to her through death. "We travel together. You could say we're a package deal."*

*Anastasia shrugged her shoulders. "Did the cat get his tongue? That's what Mama says when I don't answer her back."*

*"He's just a bit shy. Aren't you, Tristan? But something tells me, Anastasia, that in time, you'll draw all that shyness out of him." Minnie gave Anastasia a wink.*

*"I can do that. I'm six and three-quarters years old. How old are you?"*

*"Well, go on, boy tell Anastasia."*

*"I'm eight." Tristan's voice was quiet and flat.*

*"I bet you can't pronounce my name." Anastasia's defying tone prodded.*

*"Can too." Tristan shot back indignantly.*

*"Prove it. Go on, say it."*

*"Ana ... Anas ... ummm ... Tassie."*

*Anastasia's giggle sounded remarkably girlish. "I told you."*

*"I can't say it because it's a stupid name."*

*Anastasia crossed her arms. "Nuh-uh, it's a princess's name."*

*"Sure, it is. Anyway, you look like a Tassie to me," Tristan's lips proudly spread when she smiled.*

*"I like it. You can call me Tassie. Do you want to play? I have lots of toys in my bedroom. I'll share them with you."*

*Tristan lifted his eyes to Minnie. "Can I go play with Tassie, Auntie Minnie?"*

*Minnie smiled at the pleading eyes, staring up at her. It was the first time since his parent's death he'd expressed an interest in anything. "Of course you can, honey."*

*"Well, come on, follow me," Anastasia said, and Tristan did.*

*Since that day, Tristan followed Anastasia everywhere, becoming inseparable best friends, sharing everything.*

"HI," TRISTAN'S EYES HELD ONTO ANASTASIA'S.

She wore jeans, tight and faded, a flowing teal blouse, tucked at the waist, and patent ballet flats at her feet. Her long, chestnut hair spilled around the unpainted face seemingly untouched by time. It had been years since he last saw her, but she was as beautiful as the picture he'd taken and carried with him all this time.

"Hi." Anastasia stepped back and let him in. "Nice ride. It suits you."

Tristan's lips curved into a smug grin. "The fiery-red is me," he said, setting his carry-on down on polished tiled.

"I was leaning more toward the midlife crises message it screams out." Anastasia let out a quick smirk.

“If I recall, you’re only two years younger than me.” Following her into the living room, Tristan headed straight for the bar. “And by the way, I’m three years away from fifty, which is the official mid-life crisis age.”

“There’s an official age?” Anastasia fell back into the soft leather of the long sectional, which had replaced the Victorian couch.

“There is for me. I see you’ve remodeled. I like the modern look. It’s very ... you.” Tristan eyed the glass, leather, and chrome that filled the room. “Brandy, still your drink?” Rounding the bar, he caught sight of the large vase filled with freshly picked roses. He remembered how, at first bloom, she’d fill every vase in the house with fresh daisies from the gardens.

“Yes, but we only have cognac.” Brandy’s not a woman’s drink. From now on, you drink cognac, Colin told her when they’d married and replaced brandy bottles with Remy Martin. “Isn’t it too early for a drink? It’s only ten in the morning.”

“It’s four in the afternoon where I’m from.” Tristan poured two glasses and walked them, and the bottle, to the sofa. “You look great, Tassie.” He shook off the pain he felt in his heart when she reached for the handed glass, and her wedding band doused him in reality.

“You do too, but as a painter, shouldn’t you espouse the poor starving artist look?” Over the sexy soccer player one, she held back saying.

“Why should I? I’m neither starving nor poor. I sold my last painting to Oprah for half a million dollars. Before that, the Clintons bought my *The Art of Politics* for as much.”

“You’ve come a long way.” Anastasia watched Tristan walk to the baby grand when he caught sight of the collection of photographs. “Olivia and Jimmy are eighteen now.”

“I know.” Tristan cast an eye over the framed photographs, and the ache went into him fast.

Aside from the black-framed glasses, Olivia was the spitting image of her mother. Dark, intelligent eyes, long, chestnut hair, ivory skin, and a daintily upturned nose. As her twin, Jimmy looked much like Olivia, with a masculine allure. Seeing the photographs stung deeply, and Tristan downed the cognac in one swallow to soothe the pain.

Tristan imagined the joy of being a father. Marriage and fatherhood hadn’t been in the cards for him. The only woman he loved slipped through his fingers, and he’d never married and made a family. It wasn’t by design. It was just how things had worked out for him. So instead, Tristan had focused his time and

energy on his career. Just as well, becoming a worldwide renowned artist had taken a lot of time and energy.

“You haven’t seen the twins since Mama’s funeral.” Anastasia crossed one leg beneath her.

Tristan’s eyes never left the photograph as he refilled his glass with a double shot. “It’s best that way.”

“In case you were wondering, they’re in London right now, getting themselves settled into their residence at Oxford.”

“Oxford?” Tristan arched a brow. “Impressive.”

“Jimmy is planning to study law. Olivia is also, with a minor in art. Although I have a feeling, it will in time become her major.” Anastasia studied Tristan over the rim of her glass. She was pleased to see the smile of approval on his face. That Olivia had a proclivity for something, he was so passionate about undoubtedly pleased Tristan.

“Good genes in those kids.”

The comment made her smile. “They take after their parents.”

“Mmm-hmm.” Tristan tipped the glass to his lips, drank deeply.

“They’re staying at the Royal London Hotel for a couple of days before they settle into their dorms. Then they’ll be off on a tour of Europe. It’s their graduation gift. They left last week before Minnie left us. When they found out, they were devastated. They wanted to take the next flight out, but I told them what Minnie would want for them is to focus on making memories rather than thinking of death.”

Tristan nodded. “That’s exactly what she’d have said.”

“Colin’s with them.” Anastasia crossed one slender leg over another, drawing his eyes. Those legs were still as long and as toned as he remembered. “He flew out with the twins. We were supposed to go together, but when Minnie took a turn for the worse, I stayed behind.” Anastasia lied.

*“THE DOCTOR SAYS HER CANCER HAS metastasized, Colin. He says Minnie has weeks, if not days left.” Anastasia dabbed a tissue at her teary eyes.*

*A stoic Colin continued to stack folded shirts and pants into his suitcase. When Anastasia reiterated the diagnosis, Colin’s only response was a succinct, “And?”*

*Anastasia stared at him with disbelief. When she pointed out they couldn’t leave Minnie at the end of her life, and they’d need to postpone their trip, Colin angrily shot the idea down. Flinging rolled socks into his suitcase like projectiles,*

*Colin made it clear he and the children were not putting their life on hold for a dying maid.*

*Anastasia shot Colin a shocked look. Minnie was family. She was a part of the family, had been an integral part of Anastasia's life since she was a child. Minnie raised her, raised the twins. But Colin was adamant. He and the children weren't sticking around for death to fetch Minnie. They were leaving in the morning—with or without her.*

*"I don't care if you stay behind." I prefer it if you did. "But my children and I will not lower ourselves to cater to a common maid." Colin waved a hand in Anastasia's face to silence her. "End of discussion. Now, make yourself useful and help the twins pack and, Anastasia, not a word about Minnie to them."*

"COLIN'S GETTING THEM SETTLED IN. HE won't be back for a week," Anastasia added, watching Tristan dip his hand into his shirt pocket for the pack of cigarettes. "Sorry, you can't smoke in the house. Colin doesn't like the smell."

"Colin doesn't like much, does he?" Tristan tucked the pack back into his pocket. "Does he know I'm staying here?"

"Of course."

Tristan's eyebrows shot up at the blatant lie. "Really?"

"Really. Will you stay the week, Tristan?" Anastasia watched him considering and assuming he was leaning toward turning her down said, "I want you to stay. I miss talking to you. I miss having you around. I miss you, Tristan."

"I fly out the day after tomorrow. I have an art exhibition to attend..."

"In Florence, at the prestigious *Le Gallerie Degli Uffizi*. Yes, I keep track of you, Tristan," she said when his brow winged.

"Yes, well, I need to be there."

"Colin's not here, Tristan. You don't need to run away. This is your home as much as it's mine. It's our home."

"It's not, Tassie. It's your home, your husband's, Jimmy, and Olivia's. It's your family's home."

Something in the way he spoke the words made Anastasia's stomach knot. She reached for his hand, tightening it to keep him from walking away. "We're your family, Tristan."

At the feel of her warm hand on his, it felt as if she touched his past.

*“WHEN I GET OLD ENOUGH, AND you do too, I’m going to marry you, Tassie,” Tristan looked deep into her eyes.*

*“Okay.” Anastasia beamed.*

*Tristan reached into his pocket, and drawing the Cracker Jack prize ring slid it on Anastasia’s finger. “As long as you wear it, Tassie, you’re my girl.”*

*Anastasia held it up to the sunlight to admire. The plastic diamond sparkled in the light, and she thought she’d never seen anything so beautiful. She promised Tristan she’d never take it off.*

*Anastasia was eight, and he was ten when they swore on the promise, but that wasn’t how it worked out. At eighteen, Tristan went off to school in Milan to study art. Five years later, when Tristan was due to return home, he found out Anastasia had married Colin Wilder and built a new life for herself—without him.*

*Something crumbled inside Tristan, but he had no one to blame but himself. He should have never left Anastasia. Absence didn’t make the heart grow fonder, he thought. It drove the woman you loved to seek comfort in the arms of another man. It made the woman you wanted to spend the rest of your life with slip away and into Colin’s arms.*

*The heartache Tristan felt was like a sharp knife cutting deep and clean, and he planned to fly back and win Anastasia back. He’d made it as far as the boarding gate when he realized disrupting Anastasia’s life was selfish of him and vowed to remain in Milan.*

*Tristan pledged then never again to set foot at Stillbrook.*

“DID YOU HEAR WHAT I SAID, Tristan?” Anastasia’s voice brought him back.

“Yeah, you got my room ready for me and lunch is at noon and dinner is at six. No doubt more of Colin’s rules,” Tristan said, slamming his empty glass on the bar counter.

“Don’t be like that.”

“Well, am I lying?”

Anastasia dismissed the jab. “I’m sorry about Minnie, Tristan. I know she was like a mother to you.”

Emotions swam into Tristan’s eyes. Minnie had been his rock, his protector. Without a second thought, she selflessly assumed the role of mother and father when his parents died. Were it not for Minnie, Tristan would have ended up in foster care, living with strangers, bounced through an imperfect system. Tristan’s

life would have been much different from the caring, loving one he'd had were it not for Minnie. Minnie made him the man he was today.

And he'd repaid her by leaving, absolved himself from the guilt of deserting her with the random call home. He called Anastasia weekly, and when told she wasn't available to take the call, he'd default to speaking to Minnie, but both knew she hadn't been his primary reason for calling.

Tristan hoped Minnie understood he couldn't come back to Stillbrook because he couldn't stomach the idea of coming back to the home he no longer considered his. He'd rather die than see the only woman he'd ever loved sliding into the arms and bed of another man. No matter the reasons, the excuses Tristan made didn't justify leaving Minnie. She'd sacrificed her life for him. Minnie had given up everything for him and opened her heart to him. Everything Tristan had, who he was, he owed to Minnie, and now it was too late for him to make it up to her.

He'd carry the guilt for the rest of his life.

Anastasia drew herself off the couch, walked to Tristan. "I wish you would come back more often than for funerals. I've missed you, Tristan." Anastasia took a step forward. Tristan took one back. She always managed to draw feelings from him with few words.

"Me too."

"I want you to stay." Anastasia stirred more than old memories.

It wasn't a good idea to stay under the same roof with her. Anastasia was a married woman, a mother. She had a family, and he was an intruder now. "All right, but only for a couple of days. After the funeral, I'm leaving," Tristan said without a second thought.

Anastasia considered it a small victory. "Up to you, but you can stay for as long as you want. You must be tired from the long flight. Get settled in. Maybe take a shower to wash the day off. You know the way."

"I do." Tristan's hand on the doorknob, he stopped. "Do you want to go for a run? I'm wound up from the flight. The run will relax me. We can run to the pond and back."

Anastasia's eyes lit with a smile. "Like old times," she said, thinking it wasn't going to be an ordinary couple of days.

## Two

AS THEY HAD so many times in their teens, in synchronized movement, Anastasia and Tristan ran along their usual trail. They ran past the pool, the tennis court, and the stables. Horses and foals whinnied high when they crossed the grassy pasture where they grazed. Above a hot sun burned down on their skin, and the scent of summer and fresh air filled their lungs.

Sprinting across the green fields toward the pond, Tristan recognized much of the life around him. Wild purple loosestrife dotted the land. Red maples stood out stark amongst the green firs and white spruces that speared to the sky. In a blue sky, Canada geese and quacking mallards flitted freely and aimlessly. Tristan saw a lone deer nibbling on sumac foliage.

A few times, Anastasia purposely let Tristan pass her so she could eye the tight butt and the long hard lines of his body. Tristan may have been nearing mid-life, but the way he looked in those shorts and the body fitting T-shirt made her heart flutter. The rush of desire for Tristan, one she'd never felt for Colin, made Anastasia's glands do a joyful jig.

In the hour Tristan had been there, he'd stirred emotions and roused an intensely sexual desire she hadn't felt in her twenty-four years of marriage. Colin had never reached as deeply inside her heart and soul as Tristan could with a simple stare, a smile. Colin had never roused in her the emotions Tristan could, and she'd tried to let him in. God, she'd tried, but she couldn't.

Anastasia hated herself for it. She was sure Colin sensed it, and it was why he was so cold and distant. But the heart was fickle, and as much as Anastasia wanted to, she couldn't muster herself to love Colin as he deserved. Her heart belonged to Tristan, always had always would, and she'd carried the guilt all her married life.

"You still can't keep up with me," Tristan said when they reached Mill Pond.

Taking the offered water bottle from Tristan, Anastasia sat on the pond's bank. Still, water mirrored the sprinkling sunlight. Tall reeds danced in a soft

wind. Against the twitter of birds, the quack of ducks and croaking frogs sounded off. Tree canopies all around them whispered secrets as they had every time they'd spent time there.

"I wanted to pump your ego, Mr. Nearing-Mid-Life," she said, although there was nothing mid-life in the way the broad shoulders and toned chest looked in the white T-shirt tacked down with perspiration like a second skin.

Tristan crouched down next to her. The lingering scent of her sweat and perfume intensified by the rush of heat was intoxicating. "You're not going to let up on that, are you?"

"Nope." Anastasia slid her cap off. The damp hair clinging to her forehead, her face glistening with a layer of moisture added a spark of exotic beauty, and Tristan could only stare. "Okay, almost fifty's not so bad," she admitted when she thought his expression turned thoughtful.

"It is when two-thirds of your life is gone, and you still have so much to do." Tristan watched Anastasia dip her bare feet into the water, making waves of rippling circles spread wide.

"How much more do you need to accomplish? You're a renowned artist who sells his art to Oprah and the Clintons. You've had your art exhibited at the Vatican Museum, the *Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna* in Rome, and the *Musée d'Orsay* in Paris. I'd say that's a huge accomplishment."

*I'm almost fifty, and I don't have the woman I love by my side or the family I've always wanted.* "There's always more one can do." Tristan's eyes followed the family of mallards wading their way around the pond. "We should have brought our fishing rods."

"We should have. Do you remember the first time I brought you here to fish?"

"I know that's code for 'remember the time you fell in reeling that huge fish that turned out to be a...'"

"One-inch minnow, and you pulled me in with you." Anastasia cut him off.

Tristan fell back on his elbows, let the sun pour over his stubbled face. "Well, you always did want to do everything together."

The slash of dark eyebrows rose. "Mmm, well, it wasn't until after I, your latching pest, taught you how to fish that you caught 'the big one.'"

Tristan flicked blue eyes her way. "My comment wasn't a complaint. I liked you always being around me."

Anastasia kned his leg. "You did, did you?"

Tristan tugged at her ponytail. "I did, and I was a city boy, not a bumpkin like you. Until I came to live at Stillbrook, I'd never set foot outside of the city. The closest I came to a fish was on display at the market."

“I never held that against you, and eventually, you caught the one you wanted, didn’t you?”

Tristan looked deep into the eyes swimming in emotion. “I did. It was my biggest catch of all.”

“Then, why did you let it go, Tristan?” Anastasia said, the memory flooding through her.

*ANASTASIA FELT THE BOTTOM DROP OUT from under her when Tristan told her he was leaving for Milan before summer’s end to study art. “But Milan is so far away.”*

*Tristan sunk the end of his fishing rod into wet soil and turned his focus on Anastasia. “It’s the perfect place to study art. Even Auntie Caroline thinks so. She’s the one who suggested it.”*

*“Mama just wants to separate us. She says at eighteen, you’re a man with high-spirited hormones, whatever that means, and I’m a silly, impressionable sixteen-year-old girl.”*

*“You’re not a silly girl to me.” Tristan wiped Anastasia’s cheeks dry when the tears started to flow.*

*“You’ll find yourself an Italian girl that’ll take care of your spirited hormones, and you’ll forget about me.” Tears ripped through her words.*

*“Why would you say something like that? I’m not going to find myself a girl. Do you know why?” Tristan slid his fingers under her chin, lifted the tear-stained face to his until they were eye to eye. “Because I love you, Tassie.”*

*“You love me like a sister.” Anastasia tried to jerk her face away when he took her chin in his hand.*

*“Look at me, Tassie.” Tristan pressed. Softening, she raised eyes to Tristan. “I love you like the woman I’m going to one day marry.” Tristan’s eyes deepened with an explosion of emotions that made her believe every word. “I promised you long ago I would one day marry you, and I will.” Tristan kept his blue eyes on the hazel ones.*

*Under the willow tree where they’d spent so many hours together talking, telling each other secrets, Tristan ran his hands through Anastasia’s hair and drew her close to share in their first kiss. Chaining his arms around her, he lowered his mouth to hers. When their lips came together, neither was prepared for the eruption of sensations and emotions. Anastasia thought she heard birds singing, and the leaves on the trees whisper in the crisp warm wind.*

*Heart pounding, pulses racing Tristan deepened the kiss. He kissed her lovingly, with a tenderness that reached into her heart and burst it open to let him in. His lips were persistent but gentle. Hers were as soft as the summer breeze that carried the scent of lilac and grass all around them. The kiss sweet and loving filled their hearts with the love both wanted to make real for so long.*

*"I love you so much, Tassie."*

*"I love you too, Tristan."*

*The staggering jolt from those words left Tristan breathless. "Will you wait for me, Tassie? I'll be gone for five years. I know it's a long time, but I need to do this for us, Tassie. I need to secure a future that will allow me to take care of you in the lifestyle you're used to."*

*"You know I don't care about that. I just want to be with you, but," Anastasia reached up to stroke a fingertip over his cheek, "I'd wait centuries for you."*

"WHY, TRISTAN, WHY WOULD YOU LET it go?" Anastasia's metaphorical words wrapped tight around Tristan's heart until it hurt.

"I had to. It had made a life here, and I couldn't disrupt it. I couldn't tear it away from its home. It belonged here, in this pond, in this water." Tristan hoped his coded message was the explanation she searched for.

"You could have..." Anastasia pursed her lips and pushed to her feet, but Tristan caught her arm and held her down.

"By the time I was ready to come back, you were married. I didn't even know you were seeing anyone."

"You would have known if you'd written or called me as you promised." Anastasia spat with anger, the tears burning behind her eyes.

Tristan chased after Anastasia when she started to walk away. "I did write, Tassie. I wrote hundreds of letters. I called many times."

The hurt Anastasia carried with her all these years spilled out, and she pulled away. "You're lying."

Tristan reached for her hand, pulled her back into him. "I'm not. I wrote to you every week for five years."

"Sure, you did." The hurt in her eyes cut him.

"I did, Tassie. I called you, but each time your mother or Auntie Minnie told me you were out or busy or something. It was always something until I demanded Auntie Minnie tell me the truth, and that's when she told me you were seeing Colin and I should understand and allow you to cultivate your relationship with him."

Anastasia whirled on him. “You’re lying. Why would Minnie do that? She knew how I felt about you. She knew I only dated Colin to appease my mother.”

“I don’t know why she did it, but I was so far away, and we hadn’t seen each other for so long I figured you’d moved on. The last thing I’d do is to stand in the way of your happiness. I’ve only wanted love and happiness to fill your life, so I stepped back.” Anastasia could hear the sincerity in his tone, see it in his eyes, and the sickness rose in her. “I never imagined you’d marry Colin.”

Her heart slammed into her ribs. Anastasia closed her eyes, covered her face with her hands. She’d married Colin because she thought Tristan had abandoned her, and she wanted to hurt him as much as she hurt.

“I’ve never loved anyone else. It’s always been you, Tassie. It’s always been you I’ve wanted.” Tristan’s fingertips traced lightly over the cheeks stained with tears.

Anastasia pressed her face to his chest. “I’ve never loved anyone else. It’s always been you I’ve wanted.” Anticipating the question, she said, “I felt hurt and so alone. I felt cast aside, and Colin was there to soothe the pain. I thought you’d abandoned me.” Anastasia fell to the grassy ground. Resting her chin on her knees, she wept. Tristan sat next to her, rocking her as she wept. Cried out, Anastasia looked at him. “I went to Milan to look for you.”

“You did?”

“You weren’t there, and no one at the Galleria residence knew you.”

“I lived at the Leonardo da Vinci residence.” Tristan pushed her hair back so he could see her face. “Why did you go to the Galleria?”

“It was the address on the only letter I got from you while you were in Milan.”

*SITTING ON THE TINY BALCONY OF his studio apartment overlooking Milan’s skyline, Tristan took in the view. In the distance, the Cathedral, one of Milan’s most iconic landmarks, bloomed brightly. He wished Anastasia was there to share it with him. Desperately missing her, he reached for pen and paper.*

*Dear Tassie,*

*I’ve just settled into my dorm, and the first thing I wanted to do was write to tell you how*

*much I miss you. I thought of you the entire flight, and in my thoughts, I held you in my arms and kissed your lips a thousand times.*

*I wish you were here with me, so I wouldn't feel as lonely as I do. So I can tell you how much my heart overflows with love for you.*

*I'll visit you every day in my thoughts and dreams. Promise me, Tassie, you will too.*

*I told you I'd never ask you to promise me you shouldn't give your heart to anyone else while I'm away, but I take it back. I want you to promise me, Tassie, that you won't give your heart to anyone else while I'm away. I can't bear it if you did. I can't stand the thought of you in the arms of another man sharing his bed. Promise me, Tassie, you'll wait for me because my heart is yours today and forever.*

*My heart will always beat for only you, Tassie.*

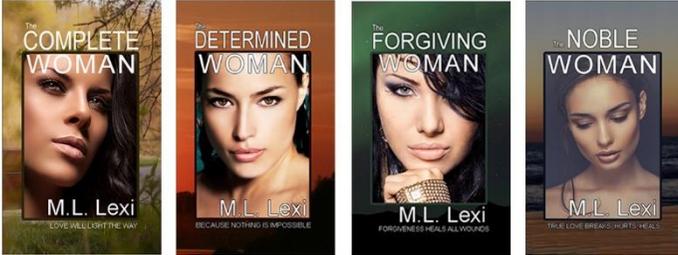
*Tristan*

“I MOVED FROM THE GALLERIA RESIDENCES after the first semester. Auntie Caroline got me an apartment at the Leonardo da Vinci residence. It was closer to school.”

“I didn't know, and Mama never said.” Anastasia tilted eyes up to follow the hawk, wings majestically spread, sailing overhead. “I never told Mama I was going to find you. She would have talked me out of it. Colin was in my life then, and she liked him so much. In her eyes, he saved me from the depression and the

hurt you caused. Anyway, when I didn't find you, I felt lost. I felt las if I was in a maze with no exit. I wandered the streets of Milan for days looking for you, but I never found you. Angry, deflated, and hurt, I returned home, and vowed to write you off from my life forever."

## Coming Soon



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